

HOMILY FOR THE DEACONS' CONFERENCE

STRAWBERRY HILL

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THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI.

"Ite missa est": the dismissal proclaimed at the end of Mass by the deacon – at least when the priest (and even the occasional bishop) doesn't forget to let him!

Of course, this proclamation doesn't really state that the Mass is ended, rather that what we've celebrated in the Church isn't confined by the walls of any building. No, the Eucharist is carried "outside" through the mission given to us all.

What is this mission? It is the very mission of Christ. From every Mass we are sent out to bear - actually to be - the loving presence of Jesus into the world. But how, in particular, do deacons participate in this mission which flows from our sharing in the body and blood of Christ? *Corpus Christi* is a fitting celebration at which to reflect further on this question.

I'd like to do so with the help of three moments of the *Corpus Christi* celebration which Pope Benedict XVI highlights in a homily for this Feast, and will also draw significantly on *Deus Caritas Est* and *Sacramentum Caritatis*. The three moments the Pope highlights are: gathering around the altar of the Lord to be together in his presence; then walking with the Lord in the Eucharistic procession; and thirdly, kneeling before the Lord in adoration at the Eucharistic blessing

However, to appreciate comprehensively the meaning of today's feast for the Diaconate we must still hold present last Sunday's Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity. For the Eucharistic mystery, the Sacrament of Charity, is fundamentally a Trinitarian mystery proceeding from Love itself.

When Jesus tells us "I am the living bread", he also tells us that he is sent by the living Father. He is the true bread from Heaven which the Father gives; the bread that gives life to the world. He is the Son sent by the Father, who, by the Holy Spirit, assumed our flesh and blood. In that same Spirit, Jesus offered himself lovingly on the Cross to the Father and the Father raised Him up in the Spirit. Sent by Jesus, the glorified Lord seated at the Father's right hand, it is the Holy Spirit who *gathers us around the altar of the Lord to be together in his presence*. Indeed, it is by the working of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine are substantially changed into the body of Christ broken for us and the blood of Christ poured out for us, so that in Christ we may have eternal life - raised up to share in the Communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Drawn into the intimacy of this Communion we are also bound to our brothers and sisters in faith. Our communion with the body and blood of Christ means that, though we are many, we are one body. I am drawn out of myself to become one with the Lord and thus one with all who receive him. Yet – and this is so important - this being gathered together as one around the altar of the Lord is in no way a clique.

Our being taken up into Trinitarian love is at the same time a being turned outwards towards the whole of humanity. Our Eucharistic communion must pass over into the actual practice of love for others - no matter who they are. For the Father not only gives us the Son in the Eucharist, but in the power of the Holy Spirit sends us out to walk with the Lord. We are to be *a wonderful procession carrying the one we have received to others*. Our charitable activity always flows from the Eucharist and makes us radiant manifestations of divine *agape*. For when, by our charity, we live the Eucharistic mystery others see the Trinity! Yes, the mission of the Incarnate Son continues in and through us.

However, we continue the Son's mission, carry him to others, only because he walks with us, leads us, carries us. The Eucharistic procession reminds us that the Lord is with us every step of the way, renewing our strength. No matter how many the obstacles we encounter we can travel the path of charity because it proceeds out from the Mass itself.

This indissoluble bond between the Eucharist and charitable activity means that charitable activity is essential to the Church's nature and mission. It's as necessary as the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. These three presuppose each other and are inseparable. The Church cannot neglect her ministry of charity any more that she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.

No surprise, then, that at the very beginning of the Church the Apostles were concerned that everyone in the community had

what was required for a dignified life. Nor that in the earliest centuries of the Church, bishops – the successors to the Apostles - had the primary responsibility for ensuring that the offerings presented at Mass were used to support those in need. This responsibility for overseeing charitable activity remains at the core of Episcopal ministry. When I was ordained bishop I resolved “to show kindness and compassion in the name of the Lord to the poor, and to strangers and to all who are in need”. And the Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops reminds me that the duty of charity is incumbent upon each bishop in his diocese.

How am I to fulfil this mission faithfully? The answer, you know, is the Greek word used to name the Church’s service of charity - *diakonia*.

The Apostles chose seven men full of the Spirit to ensure that there was a well ordered love of neighbour. And at your ordination you drew strength from the gift of the Holy Spirit to help your bishop as ministers of the word, altar *and of charity*. By the consecration which binds you more closely to the altar, you are to perform works of charity in the name of the bishop after the example of those the apostles chose. You have a privileged vocation of assisting your bishop to be a faithful missionary of charity. This is why there is a special bond between the deacon and his bishop, more so that between the deacon and the parish to which he is appointed. Deacons, in history, are closely associated with the bishop, especially in the ministry of charity. I think we have a great deal to learn about this. Moreover, by your ministry of charity

you incarnate the Word you preach and shape your way of life according to the example of Christ, whose body and blood you give to the people.

At this time, as a church, we are striving to find new ways of strengthening our work of charity. There was a recent conference of representatives from many Catholic charities who gathered here to explore how we may more effectively live *Caritas*. There, too, I stressed the links between the Eucharist and practical charity. I hope that this feast of *Corpus Christi* may inspire us to reflect more fully on the particular role of deacons in this mission which is intrinsic to the Body of Christ.

But better than talk more about it, let's *kneel before the Lord in adoration*. In prayer before the Blessed Sacrament the significance of our ministry of charity unfolds. We bow down in awe and wonder before the God who first bent over us, like the Good Samaritan, to heal our wounds; we receive the blessing of he who stooped down to wash our dirty feet; who emptied himself on the cross to fill us with heavenly riches, with God's life. In adoration of the Blessed Sacrament we contemplate (to look forward to Fridays feast) the Sacred Heart of Jesus broken wide open so that in that Heart all may find a home. In the Eucharist the human heart of Jesus still beats with Trinitarian love. Immersed in this love our human hearts are formed by divine love, harmonised with the love of Christ. *Cor ad cor loquiter*; and so we discover ever more fully the meaning of the diaconal proclamation: "*Ite missa est.*"