

Martyrdom and the Diaconate

by The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey Lee, Bishop of Chicago and former NAAD Board Member; a sermon preached at the ordination of Dn. Nancy Conrads and Dn. Charles "Sandy" Rex III, February 7, 2009

I have always loved the rood screen that stands in the chapel of the seminary I attended. It's a traditional, neo-gothic thing in dark wood. There's elaborate tracery carved into it and on top in the center, of course, stands the rood, the crucifix, flanked by Mary and John the Beloved Disciple, gazing up at Christ. There are two other saints standing nearby on opposite sides, flanking Mary and John and the cross: St. Vincent on the one side and, my favorite, St. Lawrence on the other. Both of these early 3rd and 4th century saints were deacons (on the rood screen they're dressed in dalmatics, the distinctive vestment of deacons) and they were both martyrs. The legend of St. Vincent has him suffering various tortures for the faith, from the rack to scourgings. And Lawrence ... well, the story of St. Lawrence is worth a little telling.



Bishop Lee

In the third century, the Roman emperor Valerian initiated a fierce persecution of Christians. While Romans had for a long time offered some public assistance to those in need, by the third century, the demands of wars and general social decline had taken their toll on public charity. The growing early church, however, was becoming widely known for *Here is the real* its care of the poor and those on the margins. *wealth of the church* Lawrence was one of the seven deacons of Rome with significant responsibility for the care of the needy. When the Emperor demanded that the deacons hand over what he could only assume was the vast wealth of the church that made all this possible, it is said that Lawrence gathered together the sick and lame, the poor and the homeless and presented them to the Emperor's soldiers. Here is the real wealth of the church, he said. For that impudence, he was martyred, and the tradition says it was on a gridiron. A later account of his martyrdom says

he even joked with his executioners: “You can turn me over now,” he said. “I’m done on this side.”

Well, I can only imagine what those woodcarvers in my seminary chapel thought they were presenting for the edification of generations of seminarians contemplating ordained service in the church. And you may be wondering pretty much the same thing about the bishop using an image of martyred deacons at the ordination of new deacons here this morning. Sandy and Nancy, I promise I don’t have your impending martyrdom in mind; I hope you’re around to serve for a long, long time. But martyrdom of a kind is at the heart of what we’re here for today. Martyrdom of several kinds stands close to the center of the Christian faith. Martyrdom, when it comes right down to it, is what we are all baptized into. The word martyr simply means witness. It means the kind of witnessing that goes way beyond words. It means putting your money where your mouth is. It means walking our talking, putting our faith into practice, making real in this world what God has already made true in us.

We ordain these two today to be walking, talking, sacramental signs of the One who made God’s love and care for the world real. Today is not about them and their splendid talents and gifts. Like Paul, they haven’t come here to proclaim themselves, that’s not what this ordination and the endless process that led to it are about. These deacons have **we’re asking you** made themselves available to the church and to the world to become **to lead us . . .** for us animating signs of the Lord Jesus Christ whose unconditional love for the lost and the least got him crucified. These deacons are to remind us constantly that we have all been claimed by Christ as members of his body in this world. We’re not ordaining these friends of ours to be servants of God so that we don’t have to be. Oh no. They’re being ordained to lead us deeper and deeper into the mystery of our own identity. Their job is to keep us stirred up, standing up, ready to get on with the business of seeking and serving Christ exactly where he promised to be – in the poor, in those on the margins of power in the world, in the unlovely and those who have no idea that they could every truly be loved. And the need for all that is greater than ever, isn’t it? Nancy and Sandy, we’re asking you to lead us. That’s why we’ll entrust to you the words of Jesus in the Book of Gospels, that’s why we’ll ask you to carry that candle at the Great Vigil of Easter, that’s why we ask you to lead and shape our public intercessions for the life of the world, that’s why your vestments have sleeves – so you can roll them up!

Last Thursday evening I took part in a rally and march against violence in Logan Square. Our own Church of the Advent and Nuestra Senora de las Americas were the sponsors of the event, but it was widely ecumenical, people of faith across denominational lines all gathered to witness for peace and against the violence that stalks the neighborhood. The police of the precinct were all there too. The Commander is a guy who has served in the Chicago Police Force for over thirty years and has seen a few things in his time – he’s very business-like and you might think a little, shall we say, gruff. But he lined up his officers before we began the walk and then asked me and the other clergy there to say a few words to them -- and then he asked us to bless them. “I always ask for a blessing on my officers,” he said. “They need to know that while they’re putting their lives on the line to keep us all safe, someone is looking out for them too.”

It reminded me of the astonishing picture Jesus paints in our gospel reading today of the God who has called us to put our lives on the line for one another and for the least of our sisters and brothers in this world. Jesus tells us that we’re to be servants who are equipped and ready to serve, looking for ways to make the love and mercy of God present and real, seeking and serving Christ, loving our neighbors as ourselves. Of course, we understand that. That’s what draws so many

of us to the particular vocation of ordained ministry – our hearts want to be ready, we want to serve. I know that is true for Sandy and Nancy and God bless you for it. And that's just the incredible point of what Jesus tells us. You don't just want to serve God; God wants to serve you. Blessed are those servants whom the Master finds ready when he comes; he will tighten up his belt and kneel down to wait on them. It's that scene at the last supper with his friends when Jesus takes off his outer robe, wraps a towel around his waist and like the lowest slave in the house washes their feet. Peter almost leaps back from the table, "Lord, what are you doing?! You're never going to wash me." And Jesus couldn't be clearer: "Peter, if you don't let me care for you, even if this intimacy embarrasses you, then you don't know who I am."

So Nancy, Sandy, all my friends, let us serve the Lord. Let us go out and find him in all those places he has promised to be and take care of his needs. Let's offer our lives even at the cost of them. But never forget that in our self-offering God is waiting to find us. In our service, God is looking to serve us. In our loving care for others the Lord Jesus is holding out his own wounded hands to embrace us. That in giving up our lives to Christ's service, we will find ourselves wrapped up in eternal life.