

Ministry of lectors, acolytes not mere functions, but acts of faith

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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*18th Saturday in Ordinary Time
Rite of Installation of Lectors and Acolytes
St. Cecilia Catholic Church
Harvey, ND*

Once again, “how good it is, Lord, that we are here.” It is a joy for me to be with all you, my dear sons, and to be with members of your families, who have joined us today for this celebration. We are deeply grateful for the support of those who stand with us as we strive to be of service to Christ and his Church.

Two saints come to mind as we celebrate this liturgy today. First there is St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, also known as St. Edith Stein. Edith Stein was born into a Jewish family, a brilliant young woman who for a time had no particular religious feeling or faith in her life. She was a renowned philosopher and seemed to have found her place in the academic world. But at a certain point, the whisper of God caught her attention. She began to search, and soon discovered the love of Jesus, the Son of God. She became a Catholic and even a Carmelite nun. But the Nazi persecutions had begun, and her life was endangered. Eventually, Sr. Teresa Benedicta was arrested and transported to Auschwitz, where she died with many others. She had accepted this willingly, and offered her life as an oblation for her people, the Jewish people. Pope St. John Paul II called her “a martyr for love.”

St. John Paul II himself is the other saint I think of today. Like Edith Stein, he was a scholar, and a philosopher. But unlike her, he was never without faith. From a very early age, he grew up and lived the Catholic faith of his family and homeland. And eventually he entered the seminary and was ordained to the priesthood. Like Edith Stein, he suffered under the brutality of Nazism, but lived to see its collapse. I think we know the rest of his story pretty well. But it was as Pope that John Paul recognized the journey of sanctity of Edith Stein and the great witness she offers to our world. And he offered his own witness, his own personal oblation. He gave himself as an offering to God in service to the Church, and as its supreme pastor. He suffered for the Church, and through his faith and perseverance was able to move mountains.

Both Teresa Benedicta and John Paul II faced the cold hardness and brutality of tyranny and faithlessness. They each had very different paths, but they both found holiness and even sainthood in the living out of their faith even to the end. And they each have inspired the rest of us, who sometimes waver in our own faith and perhaps falter at the challenges we face along the way. We have to admit that Edith Stein and Karol Wojtyla faced far greater trials than we do, and so they show us the truth of what Jesus said: “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

My sons, several of you today will receive the ministries of lector and acolyte. As lectors, you will be entrusted with proclaiming the word of God and even teaching the faith to your brothers and sisters. You will be invited to an even deeper contemplation of that saving Word, so that you might know Him and be able to offer to others the One whom you know as your Lord. And as acolytes, you will be entrusted with the care of the altar and distribution of the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. In this sacramental ministry, you will give to the faithful the greatest treasure we have, the real presence, the sacramental presence of the Son of God, who gave himself to us and who gave his life for us. And of course, these ministries move you a step further along on your journey towards Holy Orders, the path towards the priesthood.

I ask you, my brothers, to take to heart the ministries that you receive today. Realize that these are not mere functions, but they are acts of faith. Any atheist can read the Bible to a crowd of people or hand out the Eucharist. It takes no great skill or intelligence. But to do so with faith, that is the challenge. Delve deeply into the fathomless riches of the Word of God so that you can speak his word with reverence and love, so that you can communicate to others the intense love that he has for them. And immerse yourselves too in the love of God incarnate in the holy Eucharist. Enter into the temple of his real presence by communion and adoration, so that you might convey to all the faithful the awesome beauty of what we hold in our hands and in our hearts.

Edith Stein and Karol Wojtyla were people of great intelligence and even genius. But they each recognized their own littleness before the greatness of God, and they each allowed the love of God to completely overtake them. And each of them, in very different ways, became a witness to Jesus Christ in the world, helping countless others to encounter him and know his saving grace. As lectors and acolytes, indeed, as candidates for the holy priesthood, you must also be a witness to that same Christ. What you do now must be a response of love to the loving initiative of the One who called you, and filled with that love, you are to share it with others. Whether proclaiming the holy Word of God or giving Holy Communion to the faithful, be a transparent vessel of Christ, and show to all your brothers and sisters the joy that comes from following Jesus. And finally, be witnesses of steadfast and enduring faith, as St. Teresa Benedicta and St. John Paul II were. May God bless you as you bring him to others.