

## A Sermon for Chrismal Mass

The Rt. Rev. C. Wallis Ohl

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It is indeed an honor to be among you, not only today, but for however long God calls us to serve tighter in this diocese of the Episcopal Church in Fort Worth. Because this is the first time that I have been afforded the opportunity of celebrating and preaching primarily to the ordained leadership of the diocese, it occurs to me that this a prime moment for beginning to offer to you a theology of both leadership and ecclesiology which informs my work among you.

First, I want to begin with a little history. Some 40+ years ago I served for a time as a clerk in a battalion chaplain's office at Quantico,, Virginia. In those days, the Marine Corps did not assign a job designator –we called it an MOS-to those serving chaplains. Mostly chaplains' clerks were the "birds" that no one could do anything with, so they were sent to work for the chaplain. I was chosen for the job by an Episcopal chaplain who was desirous of having a clerk who could at least type some and preferably spell "Episcopal." One of the Chaplains for whom I worked was a Russian Orthodox chaplain. Specifically, he belonged to the Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Catholic Church of North and South America. Chaplain Radasky introduced me to much of the theology and culture of the Eastern Orthodox Church, especially the culture of icons. He was a bit of an expert, even among Orthodox clergy, and he wanted his clerk to share his interest. I learned just a bit about icons being windows to heaven-transparencies that drew the temporal and spiritual worlds together.

Some years after I was ordained, I served with a bishop who began to use the metaphor of icon to speak of the work of deacons. Bishop Cox was fond of referring to deacons as icons of servanthood, who, unlike priests, whose primary work was within the community of believers –in-house ministry as he would say, deacons were called to work primarily with those who stood apart from the center of the community-in other words, out-house ministry.

I began to think about the metaphor of icons as it related to the other orders of ministry and what the primary focus of priests and bishops was/is. It took me some time to do the theological work, which I am sure most of you have also done, but I want to share with you my understanding of how each of us who is ordained is called to be an icon for the world.

Let me return to deacons. Servanthood is the primary task. A deacon who functions only within the community is not living into the vocation of a servant. The service for which almost all of our deacons is called is outside the "church ghetto." The deacon is to stand with one foot in the community of faith and one foot in the community of need. Deacons are by their very nature prophetic symbols living in our midst. By proclaiming the Gospel in the worship, the deacon is mirroring what they are doing in the "outside world." By leading the prayers of the people, the deacon calls us, the community with resources, to hear and respond to the needs of the world. By setting and cleaning up the dishes at

the table, the deacon reminds us of the calling to be servant at all times. By dismissing us into the world the deacon is sending out a rallying call for us all to go out and do what we can to meet the needs we find in our world. The deacon is not to be our outreach minister, but rather the deacon calls us to follow and become involved in servant ministry. I want to stress, the deacon calls all of us to live lives of servanthood.

Priests are icons of story-telling and blessing. Priests are called to study the story of salvation in order to be able to share not only the biblical story of God's saving work, but also called to grasp how that story is our life story as well. The priest, in preaching, challenges us to make God's story visible in our daily lives. St. Francis of Assisi understood this: remember, he challenged his brothers, preach always and use words when necessary. As the story is told and retold in the celebration of Baptism, Eucharist, Anointing of the sick, and every other sacramental act that we participate in, we are making a broken world whole. In the culture of the Dine – the Navajo- the singer (some call them medicine men and women) retells a part of the creation story, using visual representations (sand paintings) to bring one who is not whole into a place of health and, as the Dine say, walking in beauty. This is precisely what we are doing when we recall the events of the night before our Lord Jesus died in instituting the meal we variously call the Last Supper, the Mass, Communion. We are telling a part of the salvation story in order that the community might connect their individual stories with the great story of God.

The primary task of priests is to bless. A priest blesses the water of baptism to birth new Christians. The priest blesses the ordinary food of bread and wine to nourish souls. The priest blesses significant moments in the lives of the members of the community to signify God's presence, God's blessing. How many of us have birthday and anniversary blessings on Sundays? How many offer blessings for travel? And ever so many other blessings for the community are part of our weekly lives. Since we are so good at blessings in church, we are frequently asked to bless food when we are present at homes for a meal. Again I want to stress, the priest is not the only story-teller or bless-er; they are the ones who show us all how to tell the story and to bless.

Bishops are icons of bridge-building. One of the medieval terms for a bishop was *pontifex* – Latin for bridge-builder. Bridges are necessary to connect the congregations of the diocese. The bishop is the bridge between the diocese and the surrounding dioceses within the metropolitan structure and beyond in the worldwide Church. Bishops are also the visible bridge between the past, the present and the future, from the age of Apostles toward eternity. The function of oversight can never be far from one of the bridges the bishop is building without becoming despotic.

All of the icons serve to call the community to minister. We who are ordained are not the only ones who minister; this is the theology of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, both in the Catechism and in the Baptismal Covenant, expressed both implicitly and explicitly. When we are living our ordination vows at the best we are calling the whole Body of Christ, the *laos*, all of the baptized to do in their daily lives what we are modeling by functioning as deacons, priests and bishops. I am not the only overseer in this diocese. I am an icon of bridge-building in order that all of the community may become bridge-builders for Christ in their families, at work or school, at play. Priests are not the only story tellers or bless-ers. Priests show the community how to become Christians who live their lives telling the story of

God's saving grace in their own lives and blessing as many people as possible in every situation of life. Deacons are not the only servants; were that so we would have far less impact on our towns and cities. We are to become transparencies –icons-between the ideal of the heavenly courts where Christ serves, blesses, and builds bridges perfectly and the imperfect world in which we find ourselves.

One last thought. Minister is both a noun and a verb. For too many centuries English has used the noun to refer to those who were in orders, separating us from the "great unwashed" laity. When we look at the New Testament record, we can see that such an idea is far from how our Lord and his earliest followers understood their lives. St. Paul's lists of gifts of the Spirit are not for clergy but for the whole body, or as he specifically states in Ephesians chapter 4, to equip the saints – and that is all of us Christians-for the work of ministry for building up the Body of Christ. When we see ourselves as THE minister, we have arrogated to ourselves that which is for the community. Our task is constantly to call all around us to be icons of Christ himself. Within the church setting, we have the opportunity to model the various ministries and to learn new visions of possibilities in order to exercise our gifts wherever we are called to be. This is what true leadership is about. Jesus shows us that by following Him, we learn to lead. By growing in His life, we are able to help those around us to grow. By being loved, we are able to love more fully.

Following the renewal of vows, I invite you to come forward, one at a time for an anointing of hands. This invitation is for everyone here. Anointing is an outward sign of both a blessing and a commissioning. Throughout Scripture, anointing sets apart one to a task. I will pray that your hands will become the hands of Jesus to carry out His work in whatever way He has called you. We are indeed a blessed people; may our hands carry that blessing to a broken, needy world that craves the good news of God's love, made visible by our hands.