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Baptism and the Ministry

Of Deacons

by

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Baptism and the Ministry of Deacons

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*The Rt. Rev. Richard F. Grein is retired Bishop of New York, a past member of the NAAD Board of Directors, and formerly Bishop of Kansas at the time this homily was given. This essay was presented as the homily at the solemn Eucharist which closed the international conference of NAAD in Kansas City, MO, June 6, 1987. It was originally published in the Fall 1987 Diakoneo, the Newsletter of NAAD under the title, **Homily by Richard of Kansas.***

The blessing over the water in the baptismal rite contains within it three images of water taken from our Great Story. The first image comes from the creation story where water is part of the process of creation, chaos becoming cosmos. The second image comes from the Book of Exodus where water is part of the great journey into freedom. The third image comes from our Lord's own baptism, where water is the sign of vocation.

Let me remind you of the words:

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John, and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ.....

Creation, journey, vocation.

Our readings this day come appropriately enough from the proper for All Baptized Christians, and that presents our major theme, the ministry of the baptized. Given this theme, I would like to connect those images taken out of our baptismal rite with the ministry of deacons, to see how in this tapestry of images we might in some serendipitous way come to new insights as to the role of deacons as it relates to the ministry of the baptized.

We begin then with creation. *Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Imagine if you will, water as chaos, the deep and mysterious stuff of potential creation. The Spirit of God hovers over it, and God gives permission for creation with those words, Let there be. And as creation comes forth out of that water, the benediction, and it was good. God calls forth water out of chaos and blesses it.*

Now let us think of our own lives as that water in this image. If there's one thing I know about people, it is that they are deep and mysterious—like the water. Most of the time I do not even extend myself, and I live with myself. We are, as Paul Tillich said,

more of a question than an answer. And so we stand in the universe, questioning: Who am I? How am I related to God? What is the purpose of life? What is good? What is evil? Where are we in the journey of life? And, who are you, O my God? Our lives are deep and mysterious, questioning.

But I also want to point out the enormous potential symbolized by water in the creation story. This is also part of our mystery. As human beings we also have great potential. It would probably take any one of us several lifetimes to even begin to touch the potential within us. Rarely does anyone even come close to using up the possibilities within life. And I know that all of you seated in this congregation have more gifts and talents left in you than you can possibly imagine. We are like that water from which God calls forth all kinds of creation. I know that everyone in this church has a greater capacity for truth, virtue, beauty, wisdom than you have yet realized. John Macquarrie points to that capacity when he says we are not so much human beings as we are human becoming. We are beings in process, a process that lasts until the moment of death. In this process of becoming, God seeks to call us forth into our humanity.

There is, then, hovering over the deep of our lives, that same Spirit of God that hovered over the deep on the first day of creation. These lines from D. H. Lawrence express for me this image of the Holy Spirit. He said about us, *Thou shalt fight it as the flower fighteth upwards through the stones, to flower in the sun at last, for the yearning of the Lord streameth as a sun even upon the stones.*

God yearns for us. The Spirit yearns for us. God yearns that we might be revealed as his children bearing his image. In Chartres Cathedral there is a portal over which there are a series of very small statues. One of them is a carving with Adam and God, in which Adam is facing in the same direction as God, but he is partially hidden as though he were just beginning to evolve from nothingness. It is called, *Adam dans la pensée de Dieu*, Adam in the thought, Adam in the mind of God. God conceiving Adam. As one looks at the faces—we see they are the same. God yearns for us—giving in each life his glory that he might see himself in his creation. So there is in life this constant calling forth into becoming—a movement from chaos to creation—into the image of God himself.

Now what in the world does that have to do with deacons? Everything! Something that the Eastern Church has continued to emphasize, and the Western Church needs to reclaim in its liturgy, is the notion that it is the people that are consecrated at the Eucharist, not just the bread and wine. The epiclesis calls the Holy Spirit down upon the people. We, the church, are becoming the body of Christ every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

In the eucharistic liturgy the deacon gathers up the gifts of the people to be offered. In this act is signified the great cosmic liturgy of all creation, for the gifts represent the people who are to be consecrated, a sign of our becoming in Christ—the new creation won by his cross and resurrection. The deacon's role is to gather up potential out of the people of God, that enormous capacity, to be laid upon the altar that the words may be spoken over it, *Come down, O Holy Spirit. ... Sanctify us also....*

But our creation is not done by fiat, by pronouncement. God does not simply say, *Be*. He says, *Let there be*—he gives us permission to become. So that we must cooperate in our own creation. God has created us in freedom, and thus by freedom we participate in the process of becoming. Yet before this can happen we must be set free from captivity.

That brings us to our second image. *Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise.* Here is one of the foundational stories of the Great Story. It is a story about God leading his people to freedom. The passion and the resurrection are part and parcel of the same foundational story. It is part of the purpose of God who creates us to free us from bondage. Remember how in the gospel according to Luke, Jesus inaugurates his ministry by preaching in his home town synagogue. The text he chooses is from Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release for the captives, the opening of the sight of the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.* God seeks to set us free, and we need to be set free. Yet at the same time we resist it.

In the story of the Exodus after Israel had been taken out of Egypt, out of slavery, through the water toward the promise, no sooner had the water closed behind them when they found themselves not in the land of promise, but in the wilderness. The wilderness is an ambiguous place, like real life. Sometimes it's astonishingly beautiful, and sometimes it's terrible. You never know what's going to happen there. Real life is when you make the best kind of plan, and then everything falls apart. Real life is being faced with tough choices. And, having fate mess up your plans. The wilderness is a place where God teaches us about freedom. Freedom is not something we can save up as if we had only so much to use during our lives. Freedom is something we only have at the time of decision. So thus to avoid decision is to avoid freedom. God takes us into the wilderness to learn about freedom. Remember, that is where he gave the Law. He said, I will be your God, you be my people. Here are the rules, choose. Choose life or choose death. It's not unlike marriage. I say no to all others so I can say yes to one. In this way we give definition to our lives. We set limits, make boundaries. Every yes, every no, gives shape to our lives.

The wilderness is the womb of the prophets who call us to righteousness, who demand from us change of heart and integrity. The wilderness is the place where Jesus goes after his baptism to wrestle with his identity. *If you are the Son of God, now what? What kind of Messiah will you be?* The wilderness is the place of decision.

But, Israelites hated the wilderness and its demands of obedience and decision. They much preferred slavery. They did not want to go forward toward the promise, but back to Egypt where matters were settled. Freedom is an uncomfortable burden.

Forward always means the future. That, too is an unsettled, unknown place, even if God does make promises. The future is where we die. Better to live in slavery—there is a certainty about slavery.

And so God is constantly trying to pull us through the wilderness toward the promise—and freedom.

What does the deacon have to do with this? The deacon is the bearer of hope, the gospel. The deacon places before us that Great Story, the good news, that it might comfort us in hope and draw us forward in life. The gospel calls us into action—into exercise of freedom.

It is the deacon who gathers up the intercessions of the church for the world and pricks our conscience in a prophetic way. The deacon brings into our lives these things which are a necessity to us—the gospel, the prayers for the church and the world. In this they both comfort and disturb our lives by holding before us both promise and duty. In this they bear to us that which is necessary to help us go on a journey through the wilderness. Because without the good news, without the prophetic message, we cease going forward into freedom.

In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ... What a burden he must have felt. Suddenly the realization that he was the beloved of God, and with that identity came the great responsibility of being a man for others. That is a very great burden. If I am the Son of God, then what? The cross comes into view right there at baptism. The business of beloved humanity, is humanity.

Remember those wonderful lines in **A Christmas Carol** when Marley comes to Scrooge at night. They speak of business, and Marley says with great remorse, *Business? Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business. Charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.*

To be a Christian means to bear that burden. Our business is humanity. Jesus says to us, *If you would be my disciple, deny yourself, take up the cross, follow me. For if you try to save your life you will lose it. But, if you lose your life for my sake and the gospel, you will save it.*

Here we touch upon the great mystery that the universe is created by sacrifice—by offering. Think about it. If your life is oriented toward self. If one thinks only of I want, I need. If we are only concerned about taking, but not giving, what happens to that potential within us? If we never offer the capacity for good to others, do we not bury it? Do we not smother the gifts God has placed within us? Do they not die?

But, Jesus says to us, *If you lose your life for my sake and the gospel, then you will live.* If we give ourselves, offer our lives, then we live.

This should not be thought of as a system of reward and punishment. Rather, it is the way of creation—of human becoming. It is what Paul meant when he said, *In dying, behold we live.*

Not long ago I was reading about a cave in Iraq called Shanidar. It's an interesting place because in that cave have been found the burial ground of some Neanderthal people who lived fifty or a hundred thousand years ago. There are signs in that place of religious burial. People are buried there in a certain position with flowers all around them. There's one grave that is of particular interest—a man about forty years of age, a ripe old age for the Neanderthals. It appears he was wounded at the age of twenty, probably in a landslide where he was blinded and lost an arm. For twenty years his

Neanderthal brothers and sisters took care of him, nurtured and fed and clothed him. When he died they buried him there in that place and put around him flowers, grape, yellow groundsel, hollyhocks and yarrow.

The men who described that scene said that with the coming of compassion, the true human being is born. When I read that, I had to pause and think. Now I know that Neanderthal did not get up one morning and say, now on the timeline of history it is time for me to become compassionate. Neanderthal discovered that he was compassionate in the act of being compassionate. Neanderthal discovered his potential for loving by giving love to another. Neanderthal was thus created by giving the gift of his life to another.

That is the mystery. You cannot discover yourself in the closet in some abstract way. You only discover yourself in the activity of offering yourself to other people. How do I know I am honest unless I have given my honesty to others? How do I know myself? Only because I give myself to others. It is in the act of sacrificing our lives to other people that we discover who we are. In this the Spirit of God calls us into becoming—he creates us in his own image.

What does this have to do with deacons? That which is consecrated on the altar, the deacon distributes. That which is in the process of becoming through consecration, which the Spirit has blessed, the deacon takes into the world. That is to say that all these things that we do in liturgy are part of the great cosmic liturgy and the image for us is the process of human becoming. In this liturgy the deacon has a special role to play for the ministry of the baptized. Proclamation, intercession, the gathering of the gifts, the setting of the table and the consecration of the offerings, and taking those consecrated lives into the world are all part of the deacon's work which the church desperately needs.

On this day, then we thank you, almighty God, for the gift of water. And, we thank you, almighty God, for the gift of deacons in the life of the church.+++



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