Peace be with you! How might we understand the significance of the diaconal ordination in light of Lent? I think we need not go any further than your Dalmatic vestment. It is in the shape of the cross. Literally when you are clothed with the Dalmatic you willingly cloth yourself with the cross of Jesus Christ. You do this in order to imitate Christ’s humble service to others. You do this so that no corner of our world, indeed, no corner of creation can escape the power of God’s salvific love. You do so in order to imitate Jesus.

What does this look like in daily life? Permit me to recall my first trip to Pajacuarán, Mexico nearly 8 years ago. I had just ordained Fr. Lalo Barragan a priest for the Diocese of Yakima and now I was in the town he left while a young teenager before making his way with his family here to the Yakima Valley. The town threw a parade with confetti. Fireworks greeted us as we entered the large Church on the town square. We celebrated a beautiful chanted Mass – “Canta Misa” – and then we had a reception.

As we finished the meal, a group of dancers came out. They were all dressed like Judas. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week, our daily Gospel readings always focus on Judas. To commemorate Holy Week, this town has the custom of dancers dressing as Judas and performing in the town plaza in front of the Church each day of Holy Week.

Indeed, because they are so talented, whenever anyone comes in from out of town, the town leaders haul out the “Judas Dancers” for a performance. It doesn’t matter what time of year or what occasion. The leaders had the Judas Dancers dance for Fr. Lalo Barragan’s reception dinner after his “Canta Misa.” So, there they were dancing in front of me, rhythmically shaking their little bags of silver coins. I must admit that I wondered to myself: “What kind of pagan ritual is this?”

Suddenly one of the dancers opened his bag of silver. He insisted that I put real pesos into his bag. Humorously I thought to myself: “I am the bishop! I am the one who runs the collection baskets!” But he wouldn’t leave until I put money into his bag. Eventually, I pulled out my pesos and handed them over. The dancers then continued to dance another twenty minutes.

What is the meaning of this folkloric and religious custom? Scripture scholar and theologian Fleming Rutledge in her book “Crucifixion” suggests that there is a power to the cross we underestimate in our spiritual lives. She recalls the exchange between St. Anselm and his student Boso. Young Boso doesn’t simply ask why Jesus had to die. Deeply troubled by vivid descriptions of his passion and death, young Boso wanted to know why Jesus had to die tortured to death. Why was he bruised and beaten? Why was he left hanging so that the weight of his body meant
he would slowly suffocate to death? Why was he left naked on the cross so that the scent of his blood would attract vultures? Why did Jesus have to die this way, young Boso wanted to know.

The answer St. Anselm gave is very telling: “You have not considered the gravity of sin.” In other words, in this bloody and horrific death on the cross by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we have the assurance that no pain, no suffering, no torture, and no horrific death goes unnoticed by God. There is not one corner of creation that escapes the salvific power of the cross. Jesus even descends into hell. We pray this truth every Sunday in the Creed. This is why Holy Week even the great betrayer Judas might be able to dance.

This is not to say that no one is in hell. Nor is this meant to say that we can take our salvation for granted. Rather, the gesture of the Judas Dance is meant to emphasize that not even the powers of hell can prevent Jesus Christ from saving us if our hearts are open.

You, the newly ordained permanent deacons, by have the Dalmatic in the shape of the cross will take on this mission of Christ. As ministers of charity, your mission is to take the power of Christ’s cross to the most peripheral and abandoned parts of our world. It is a tall order and a steep command.

How can you do this? By staying close to the Gospel of Jesus Christ which I will hand to you today. Meditate on the Word of God. Pray with the Word of God. Be absorbed by the Word of God.

“God’s word offers different facets according to the capacity of the listener,” notes the fourth century deacon St. Ephrem the Syrian. “…and the Lord has portrayed his message in many colors so that whoever gazes upon it can see it in what suits him.” The deacon Saint Ephrem goes on to note: “The word of God is a tree of life that offers us blessed fruit from each of its branches. It is like that rock which was struck open in the wilderness, from which all were offered spiritual drink.”

This is what our parishioners look for you to do. They need you to bear the cross of Christ as a witness and an example to them. They need you to bring the spiritual food and drink that is the Word of God. With the Judas Dancers of Pajacuarán, they want to know the possibility that God can come into the darkest corners of their lives. As you put on the Dalmatic climb onto the cross of Christ. Peace be with you!