Herald of Christ

Homily for the Ordination to the Transitional Diaconate of Michael Kelly for the Diocese of Yakima, May 15th 2020
Jeremiah 1:4-9; Acts 8:26-40; John 15:9-17

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you!

In a few short moments we will witness a very moving liturgical gesture. I will hand the Book of the Gospels to the newly ordained Deacon Michael Kelly and speak these words:

Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become.
Believe what you read,
teach what you believe,
and practice what you teach.

Those first lines, “Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you have become,” lead straight to the opening reading from the prophet Jeremiah. In these opening lines the Lord speaks words of comfort to young Jeremiah as he is sent out to be “…a prophet to the nations.” “I do not know how to speak,” Jeremiah protests. “I am too young.”

As I pondered this passage that Michael specifically chose for his ordination, I could not help but recall a sensitive inquiry Michael made about a year ago. He knew he was the youngest man in many, many, many years that we had ever ordained. He told me he wanted to be ordained. But he also wanted me to know that he was willing to wait a year if I thought he was too young.

I told him no. I told him that I did not think he was too young. In selecting this passage, Michael, I know you can see my reason. My reason is not because I think it will be easy for you to be young and newly ordained. You will face the same stresses and
temptations of every newly ordained. But I know you trust the Lord. I know that as a result you are unafraid. I know that you will trust the Lord to deliver you. Neither your talent, nor your intelligence, nor your personality will be sufficient. Your personal qualities will not deliver you. Indeed, pride comes into our life when we depend on these as our foundation. By centering your witness on young Jeremiah and his utter and total reliance on the Lord from his early youth, you open yourself to the power of those words I will speak as I hand you the Book of the Gospels:

Receive the Gospel of Christ,
Whose herald you have become.

Permit me to pivot to the rest of the mandate I will proclaim as I hand you the Book of the Gospels:

Believe what you read,
teach what you believe,
and practice what you teach.

Note the verbs here: believe, read, teach and practice. Not only did I not consider you too young. I did not consider you too young to go to Mexico even though you were barely 18. Many of you know the famous exchange I had with Michael after finishing his second year of philosophy at Mt. Angel Seminary. I asked Michael if he would like to go to Mexico for third philosophy. He responded, “Bishop, I would love to go to Mexico to study philosophy but I don’t speak Spanish.” I corrected his answer. The answer is “Bishop, I would love to go to Mexico to study philosophy, but I don’t speak Spanish, yet.”

Just before Christmas break that year, Michael called me on the phone. He was in a modern philosophy class studying thinkers who were neither “modern” nor “philosophers.” Mexico had just instituted the state exams for each department. The exams Michael would be taking had no relationship to the free-flowing lectures he was receiving in class. Creatively he went on-line and started listening to podcasts in English of modern philosophers starting with William of Occam. “Did you and Fr. Felipe ever consider that I might not pass a philosophy class due to my language limitations?”

“Yes.” I responded. “We did consider that possibility.” There was a long silence. Then Michael asked what we thought would happen to him if he didn’t pass philosophy. I told him, “We thought it would be good for your humility.” Another pause. Then we both laughed.

Yet is this not the foundational humility we encounter in this passage from the Acts of the Apostles? The apostle Philip, prompted by the Spirit, heads down the coastal road near the seaport of Gaza. He runs into an Ethiopian treasurer returning on pilgrimage from Jerusalem, reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asks the Ethiopian, “Do you really understand what you are reading?” Then comes the humble response of the high Ethiopian official, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?”

This response of the Ethiopian to Phillip points, not so much to pedagogy but attitude: humble service to the Gospel. The Ethiopian humbly admits he does not understand. And this passage from the Acts of the Apostles purposely maintains that humility by not indicating the pedagogy or techniques or dazzling line of reasoning Philip may have used as he taught the Ethiopian pilgrim either.
Yet this passage allows us to peer into the earliest moments of the Universal Church. In doing so we catch a glimpse of our own call to hand off the Gospel. As a result, we know historically speaking that Africa is home to one of the oldest branches of Christianity.

Even those cities we hear mentioned in this passage from the Acts of the Apostles, Gaza and Jerusalem, suggest the true power of this Book of the Gospels. Today we know Jerusalem not only as a city with ancient walls, but a city of modern walls dividing Jews and Arabs. Likewise, Gaza remains in the headlines today as a major seaport of the Palestinian Authority, but a city walled off from its neighbor, the modern state of Israel.

Certainly, the Ethiopian pilgrim that Philip encounters near Gaza travels in the midst of a brutal Roman occupation. Yet the power of the Gospels flows from a different power. The source of this power is in the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord, yesterday, today and forever. The presence of the Risen Christ that walks through the locked doors of the upper room at Pentecost is the same presence that surmounts the walls and divisions the mighty and the powerful build today.

Read. Believe. Teach. Practice. We do not have the physical power to conquer the forces of darkness today any more than did Philip and his first brother disciples. But with the Lord’s Rising we learn to overcome the obstacles of the world through the power of love.

“This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.” Love lies at the heart of this liturgical gesture when I hand off to you the Book of the Gospels. We conquer the world with love and in doing so, as the Gospel of John suggests, we become true friends. We become ministers of the Gospel extending the Lord’s friendship to all, dissolving the wall of separation between people of every race, language, culture and way of life.

Your time picking fruit with migrant workers, your time working with migrant children in work camps, your time mastering Spanish in Mexico, your time grappling with the tensions of races, languages and cultures in our own parishes here in the Diocese of Yakima, touch the deep motivation behind the ministry of the deacon as a herald of the Gospel of Christ.

Indeed, several weeks ago, I asked you whether, like many of your seminary friends, you wanted to delay your ordination due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not at all, you responded. It’s for times like these that we are ordained. Precisely the right answer. Precisely why we hand you this Book of the Gospels so that, just as Jesus sends his disciples to bear fruit, you may do the same.

Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach.

The Diocese of Yakima rejoices in the ordination to the Transitional Diaconate of
Michael Jeffrey Kelly.

Michael was born August 27th, 1996, to Jeff and Amy Kelly. He is the third child and
first son of 7 siblings.

Born in Colorado, the family moved first back to Montana, the birthplace of Jeff and
Amy, and then to Washington state in 2000. As a member of a Catholic Family, Michael began
to make his faith his own as he attended Saint John the Baptist parish in Covington, Washington.
The Kelly Family relocated to Kennewick in 2011, and it was in this year that Michael began to
consider the priesthood, at the suggestion of Msgr. Perron Auve, pastor of the Parish of the Holy
Spirit in Kennewick. Michael received the sacrament of confirmation in 2013 at the hands of
Bishop Joseph Tyson. His confirmation sponsor was Mike Gaulke.

Having completed the Running Start program, Michael graduated from Columbia Basin
Community College with an Associate in Arts degree and a Highschool diploma in May 2014. In
that same month he was accepted into seminary. In August of 2014 he began his studies at Mt.
Angel College Seminary in Oregon. During the course of his studies, he was sent to study at El
Seminario Hispano de Santa Maria de Guadalupe in Mexico City and Mundelein Seminary in
Chicago.

The stole that Deacon Mike Gaulke will put over Michael’s shoulder after the moment of
ordination was made by his aunt, Rhonda Good.

Please keep him in your prayers as he enters his final year of preparation for ordination to
the Priesthood of Jesus Christ.