

RETREAT FOR DIACONAL CANDIDATES 2000

WELCOME TALK

I want to pose some questions to you at this first meeting, and then to draw some things to your attention while you prepare to answer them. We are here for the duration of a few precious days. There are all sorts of attitudes and expectations, even anxieties and apprehensions among us. But I feel we should make an effort to answer these first questions:

- What is the purpose of a retreat?
- What is the Church's aim in *this* retreat, which is a canonical requirement for Candidates for Orders?
- Have *you* an agenda in this retreat – as an individual, as a couple, or as a member of the whole group? Or are you simply waiting to see what will be done to you?

I can offer you the broad lines of an answer to the first question, starting with a demurrer of the name *retreat*, which implies an act of flight. We aren't here because we're running away, but because we're *searching*. A retreat is a stepping-aside from the ordinary demands of our life, in order to find perspectives we can't see from ground-level in the everyday, to enlarge the dimensions of our view: to see a *wider* reality than the confines of our own lives contain, to see *further ahead* than we usually demand, and, from this privileged viewpoint, to look *more deeply* into the meaning of the everyday, and perhaps to make contact with things – either old or new - which we are used to omitting from our account of the world. Thus our retreat essentially refers forward to our going home at the end with a new mind.

If the course of preparation has had any value at all, it will have been in leading you to a new mind about your faith, about the God who speaks to you and the Christ he has sent to be with you, and the Spirit who dwells within you. If you have sat through it all having your ideas confirmed it will have been useless. The making of a new mind is work that is never finished until we have the mind of Christ; and I hope none of you will claim so high a distinction for yourself.

We can make these general thoughts more specific as we try to answer the second question, *what is the Church's thinking in ordering this retreat? What sort of new mind do we need?* To help us to answer that, we can look around us, come to terms with our surroundings, and get a sense of the people we are with.

We have come away *to a monastery*, and much the greatest monastery in these islands. Nearly a hundred Benedictine monks call this place their home, though not all of them actually live here. The rule of life composed by Saint Benedict is something with which we shall be more familiar by the time we leave; but it is a thing of great beauty and simplicity, justice and humanity. To live by this rule is to live a balanced and full life, which is open to the practice of holiness and virtue, ordered to the growth and conversion which we call the Christian life. So, although the monks we shall meet are living a very different sort of life from us, we shall share their values and ideals, and draw strength from them; we shall also be sharing, as fully as

we possibly can, the liturgy of the monastery. In this liturgy we shall feel the heartbeat of the praying Church, and in returning faithfully to the work of God in the Church several times each day, we shall consistently recall our attention and our heart to the Scripture and the words of teaching and prayer which belong to the Church. Let the gentle music of the psalms, and the constant response of their moving, from side to side of the church, sing to you of the giving and receiving of God's word, now speaking, now listening.

We have come *together*, and in this shared period we are certainly being called to a new depth of *commitment to one another*. The Deacons form a kind of college in the Diocese, which is close to the Bishop and to the priests in differing ways. It is important that you should sense that collegial community, which is much deeper and more vital than a mere proximity of people doing similar things. I am sure I don't need to remind you about the people you are with: that they are, like you, what Paul calls "people who are interested in the highest ideals". It is, in that sense, a special privilege to be here with you, and we should remember how much we can offer to one another, and resolve to do this generously and with trust. This retreat experience is one which asks you to advance, from mutual friendship in times of adversity, to a deep and sacramental bonding within the Body of Christ itself. You are invited, within this short time, to be generous and open in sharing your needs and strengths, your fears and hopes. You are invited to help one another to understand the unity to which you believe Christ has called you. We remember those who have not been able to come with us, and keep them in our prayers.

The retreat is more than a time for the candidates to think about their ordinations. It is a time to deepen the community between husband and wife in the matter of this ordained ministry. One of you is to be ordained: but both of you will be involved, one way or another, in what flows from the ordination. It isn't like a man getting a new job. He is taking on a whole new way of relating. It isn't a thing that can be done without the consent and support of the woman he loves. I would guess that one of the things that may happen this week is that you get a new and newly-shared sense of the Church, which will make the whole area more personal and, in the best sense, more familiar.

That is why we invite all of you to share the retreat, and to make of this most personal area of preparation for orders a time that you share as husband and wife. It has proved to be hard, mostly for practical reasons, to make the business of study a shared one; but I believe this part of the programme should be. Whether or not you have family at home, it is of inestimable value that you should share these days of reflection and communion. I am delighted that you have been able to come.

On a practical level, I would like to see each day having its due proportion of prayer, listening, and resting: of work, discussion, and sharing: and of recreation, community, and friendship.

Prayer begins with the sequence from Matins to Morning Prayer, which are two different celebrations separated by a quiet time, and everything stops for the Conventual Mass. We shall be summoned to Vespers before supper. Compline, the closing prayer of the day, will be a moveable feast: but whatever happens in the evenings must take account of the early hour of Matins.

I hope to give you something important to think about each morning, and you are invited to spend time alone or as husband and wife to do this thinking and praying. You may all like to come together before mass to share thoughts or experiences with others, or to report difficulties or impasses. Few of us could claim to be used to this

kind of intensity of praying and thinking. That is why we have come away from our accustomed busyness. Let's get the benefit, and not waste this unique time.

Retreats, in my opinion, shouldn't be *too* full of talk or tasks, and there should be an element of holiday about them. After lunch, if the weather is fine enough, there is a whole Holy Land about us which you may or may not have visited, and I would like to show you some of its spiritual treasure. Otherwise, there are good walks in the territory of the Abbey itself, or you may feel the need simply to stay in and rest, or read. Please treat the time after lunch as truly "free".

As the light lowers, you are invited to meet for some scriptural reading, perhaps with an eye on the way in which the Liturgy of Advent impinges on what we are about in this special week. After supper we can compare notes, have general discussions about our thoughts for the future, or just open a quiet bottle or two. Calm descends on the Abbey at Compline, and that brings to mind a simple practical matter about silence and peace. We are all out of our home environment, and there is a tendency to prolong the chat over coffee, to fall in with those taking a meditative walk, and to turn everything into a community experience. Well, no community is so painfully close as a monastery; but it only survives because of the intense respect for one another's needs; we need silence and solitude in order to think and pray. We have to make those precious commodities available during the prescribed times. So if you have an intense need for conversation, don't interrupt anyone who is being quiet: come and talk to me!

On a particular note: if a *candidate for orders* wishes to speak to a confessor, I shall be pleased to find them a member of the Ampleforth community – it wouldn't be proper for me to become a confessor to people about whom I am still asked to make judgments. This doesn't apply to anyone else.