

ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΟΣ STEWARD

Talk on the Fifth Day, after breakfast

I thought long and hard about what word we should consider on our last day. The one I chose may be a good link with our wending our way homeward: οικονομος is related to οικος, *house*, and νομος, *law; house*, not only in the sense of 12 Gasworks Terrace, but in the sense of *family, dynasty* (as in *House of David*), and even *race* (as in *House of Jacob, House of Israel*).

οικονομια means *management*, or in more homely terms *housekeeping* (it gives us our word *economy*); and we can connect the theme together with the rest of our retreat by translating it with the Latin word *administration*, which links it with the λειτουργια, or specific *ministry*, which we have already considered. The bursar of a religious house in France is called *econome*; the bursar of a Jesuit house is called a *minister*. Today's word is what English Bibles translate as *steward*.

Every Christian community is based on the general concept of a house. In a monastery everyone has his own share in the economy of the community: or to put it into New Testament language, every member of the κοινωνια has his own λειτουργια. In the parish, we should not allow this nature of the community as a *household* or *family* to fall out of view – however large the parish may be, it succeeds or fails in the measure to which it offers a *home* for all who live in it and belong to it. Like the prodigal father, we may not find the children all wanting to live with us; but the possibility must be there for them. That is where the οικονομος comes in. Jesus tells a parable (Lk 12:42ff):

What sort of οικονομος, then, is *faithful* and wise enough for the master to place him over his household, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Happy that δουλος if his master's arrival finds him at this employment. I tell you truly, he will place him over everything he owns. But as for the δουλος who says to himself, *My master is taking his time coming*, and sets about beating the menservants and the maids, and eating and drinking and getting drunk, his master will come on a day he does not expect and at an hour he does not know. The master will cut him off and send him to the same fate as the *unfaithful*.

Faithfulness and wisdom are the aims of our Lord's question. The wisdom of a steward is his keeping in mind the proper meaning of his ministry, in every circumstance, so that *all* those who share the household of God can find in him a perfect representation of the will of the master – and Luke's word for *the master* is ο κυριος, the Lord. This means that *wisdom* can be coupled with *fidelity*, or *keeping faith* with what Christ has commanded us to be. We have a new way of being faithful after we are ordained: and correspondingly a new way of failing, a new category of sin. For what the deacon does can spoil the home for other members of the family, and responsibility for that would indeed be a heavy thing to bear.

We have already noticed the modern proclivity of parishioners to feel free about the place where they go to Church, and their tendency to relate the choice to the qualities of the priest to whom they have to listen on Sunday. It may be regrettable, but it is surely a true fact. And if it is true of the priest, it will also be true of the deacon. We have to be sure that both priest and deacon are so committed to the unity of the οἶκος that they will rejoice in each other's presence, and especially in their differences because, having two ministers, the possibility of more people *being fed at the appointed time* becomes very real. The people who are wont to be put off by the priest's overbearing and intrusive verbosity will be relieved and charmed by the brevity and clarity of the deacon. Those who cannot bear the deacon's cheesy smile will take comfort in the impassive countenance of the priest. But this depends on the correct keeping of the house. Should the priest fall to beating the deacon, or the deacon to beating the priest, the worth of both of them will be lost to the household as a whole, and the Lord's coming will be a time to fear. To illuminate this, we need to follow our accustomed principle, and return to listen to the κυριος. If the Lord is the Lord, the servants will be in their proper places too.

Let me draw to the attention of your holinesses the beginning of the third chapter of the letter to the Hebrews.

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All of you who are holy brothers and sisters, and have had the same heavenly call, should turn your minds to Jesus, the Apostle and the High Priest of our profession of faith. He was *trustworthy* to the one who appointed him, just like Moses, who remained trustworthy in all his οἶκος; but he deserves a greater glory than Moses, just as the builder of the house is more honoured than the house itself. Every house has its builder, of course; but God is the builder of all that exists. It is true that Moses was trustworthy¹ in the household of God, but in the role of a servant – acting as a witness to things yet to be revealed. But Christ is trustworthy over the household, in the role of the Son. We are his household, as long as we fearlessly maintain the hope in which we glory.

The word for *trustworthiness* in this passage is the same as the word for *fidelity* in the gospel parable of the steward. Moses was a *trustworthy servant* in the household, but Jesus was the builder of that household, even in the Old Testament. He is *faithful* not as a servant, but as the Son, and therefore he is set over the whole of it, as Jesus said the faithful steward would be *set over all that the Lord possesses*. It is typical that what Jesus promises of a *faithful servant* should come to be applied to himself.

So we should freely draw a direct line from these reflections to the way in which the New Testament speaks of the glorification of Christ (1 Cor 15:27ff):

After this will come the end, when he will hand over the kingdom to God the Father, having abolished every principality, every ruling force, and power; for he is to reign as king until he has made his enemies his footstool; and the last of the enemies to be destroyed is death, for he has put all things under his feet...when everything has been subjected to him,

¹ πιστος θεραπος

then the Son himself will be subjected to the One who has subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all.

In the Church, those who are called to be stewards must reproduce this same pattern in their own lives, remembering that they are participants in the *subjecting* of the errant Creation beneath the rule of the Son of God, who himself becomes the theatre of the redemption: it is in his cross and resurrection that Jesus *inherits* the Father's house. This whole mystery is transacted within the living, and dying, and risen *body* of Jesus. In him we see our nature being brought under perfect obedience to the Father, and his willing service, *coming to do not his own will, but the will of the One who sent him*, is the essential condition for our *fidelity* in turn. Jesus is never fiercer or more forthright in the whole Gospel, than when Peter contradicts the Way of the Cross (Mk 8:33f)

Get behind me, Satan! For the way you think is not the way of God, but the way of humanity.

Deacons-to-be, well-intentioned avoidance of the Cross is the surest way to wreck God's plan, and we do no service to God, to Christ, to the Church, or to our brothers and sisters in God's family if our human "kindness" stands between them and entrance onto the Way of the Cross. We are prone to mistake the nature of love. We still believe that it is a soft feeling towards others, or another; it is not. It is a *decision*, and it is a decision that we must disinterestedly make for their good; we do not really love them until we want them to come "safely" into the Way of the Cross, where they can find their way, dying and rising, to life in its fulness.

Continuing that thought, we can consider the real meaning of *the food* and *its proper time* in the work of the steward. There is a special receiving of the Eucharist that we call Viaticum, food for the Way; it is so called because it is the presumed *Last Holy Communion*. Perhaps we could consider a wider form of feeding, and a wider Viaticum, which might refer to any sustaining of those who travel in the Way of Christ, any encouragement we can give to help people to *think as God thinks, rather than simply as humans*. The steward of the household feeds the whole community, and whatever he gives them sustains the whole community. Where is that meditation leading us? Surely into a very exalted place: listen carefully!

Jesus says that he *is* the Bread of Life. It was an epiphany, a huge revelatory insight, that led the Fourth Evangelist to append to the sermon on bread the Eucharistic words from the Last Supper, *the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world*. This made a direct link between the coming of Christ (as true bread from heaven), and his departure to the Father (as true bread for his house and family). The value of this realization is underlined by the Church's fidelity to his last command, *Do this in memory of Me*. This faithfulness is surely the height of our stewardship of the things of the household, the apogee of our feeding of the family. That it should be framed in the actual *laying-down of Jesus' life* gives us the final terminus of our thoughts in this pre-ordination retreat.

When you candidates are called to lie down before the altar of the Cathedral, where the whole Church will unite in the most solemn prayer for your being chosen to serve the community of our Diocese, you must enter onto a lifetime of obedience where the will of God, as Jesus accepted it and taught it to us, must be the first motive of your "thoughts and words and deeds". Your obedience is no vague conferral of titles or sentimental moral feeling. It is a rigorous belonging to the truth of the Sacraments and the teaching of the faith, the Gospel of Christ and the pattern of his dying and rising. You will see in the needs of your own parish, our own Diocese, the household of the Lord crying for its bread: *Lord, give us that bread always*. You have to take on

the listening role, to recognize the needs, and to see your way to answering them. There will be endless help, and you will not make the mistake of trying to fulfil the needs with human solutions, which will deny the Lord who carried the Cross for you. We are not called to be ecclesiastical weight-lifters. Jesus' command is, as always, accompanied by a promise:

Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy, and my burden light.

Jesus' stern rebuke of Peter rests on his sureness that the Father is involved, not only in the decision that the Cross should be carried, but also in the carrying of it. Jesus himself said of the passion:

The time...has come already when you will all be scattered, each going his own way and leaving me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. I have told you all this so that you may find peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but be brave: I have conquered the world. (Jn 16:32f)

If you think back to the days when you were laying down the great lines of your life – particularly the time when you were making the decisions about marriage, about family, and about the principles of home life, you will remember how you didn't only commit the things you already had to hand – the youth, strength, and vision, the money in the bank, the resources you could see. You were also committing the things you didn't have: the experience, the credit, the earnings of the future, your work and persistence, sometimes endurance. I believe that the moment of ordination has to be similarly open to the future, a moment where you prepare to be taught and led into your stewardship by the Master.

Returning to the Letter to the Hebrews, we remember that Moses is said to act as a *witness to things which had yet to be revealed*. We too make promises about realities we cannot yet define –when we marry, as when we are ordained. I think that the glory of the married state is the marvellous way in which promises can be kept, and thus lead people, through situations they might never have chosen, to a depth of love and belonging beyond their power to create or will. If you drew boundaries, set conditions, accepted limitations to the meaning of your promises, it would not have been a real marriage, as the Church understands it. In the same way your feeding of the family of God must not draw the boundaries of the household of God according to human understanding, but leave room for the mind of Christ, so much greater than ours. This will always mean a renewal of our mind, the learning of wider terms of reference.

You are taking part in a new transformation in the life of the Church, whose significance for the future can neither be weighed nor limited. We are moving into a situation where there are married clergy. I do not say, however, that we are *creating* this new situation. Our theology of vocation will not allow us to see things in that light. We should say that God is creating something new, and that we are privileged to participate in his work. The wives of our deacons are caught up into this reality, and will play their own part in its coming to birth. I can't begin to say what effect all this will have. But nor can I draw any limitation to it. I can tell when someone is trying to do that, and I'm quite sure that it is a wrong thing to do. If the ordination of deacons is something for the whole household of faith, then it will have an effect in the lives of all the members of the Christian family. The first to be considered must be their wives. I think that the discovery of the will of the Father is something you

must do together, remembering all that we have said about the forming of the mind of Christ, the putting-aside of merely human impulses and motives, and the discernment of the true household of God.

Whatever else has come across from this series of reflections, I hope there will be a sense of anticipation, even of excitement, at what the future will hold. We should not receive ordination into our lives as a heavy burden, designed to crush us with responsibilities and duties. If we had to forge our own credentials and make our own letters of credit, it would be daunting. You would have to look forward to a life of deception, pretending to virtues you don't have, preaching what you don't practice. That is an image of horror.

Instead, we should consider that we are receiving gifts into our life, even into the life of our home, our married life. They are not the sort the world gives, which involve us in heavy bills for insurance and burglar alarms. They are the sort which, once we have understood them, put us into positive relationship with every member of the household of faith. We should set up the power to give generously from what Christ gives us, to make room for ever more and greater gifts.

Let the last word about the gift of this Holy Order come from the Lord (Lk 6:38):

Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap; because the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back.