**Homily to Deacons and Wives**

**Deacon Retreat, October 23-26, 2014**

One of my fondest memories is that of Pope John Paul I. Papa Luciani, as we called him. You recall he was elected pope in late August, 1978 and died 33 days later in his sleep. My memories are fond ones because I was living in Rome at the time, and I saw his election, served at his Mass of Installation, and attended his funeral. What we are seeing in Pope Francis we would have seen in Pope John Paul I had he lived longer.

In his writings, which were just recently translated into English and can be read in the book, *A* *Passionate Adventure*, he once described the Church as “an anvil” against which the world hammers. Hammers beat on metal which lay on anvils, he reflected. The metal forms, is shaped and tempered but the anvil never breaks. Rather the hammers break eventually. Anvils are strong, tempered, and solid. In order for a piece of metal to be forged, shaped, tempered and made usable, it has to have an anvil below it to take the blows otherwise it remains a useless formless piece of metal.

Might I suggest that we, who are called to the diaconate, by extension, are to be “anvils” upon which people are formed, tempered and take shape as followers of Christ?

My friends, perhaps we as deacons, are to be the anvils upon which many will find support and strength as life presses upon them. Perhaps we are to be tempered in order to give ourselves in this way to the People of God, to give ourselves in sacrifice to those on the peripheries of life and the Church who are struck, hammered by their concerns and hurts and angers and difficulties. Perhaps this is our vocation, at least in part, i.e., to bring about as we hear in today’s first reading, unity in the bond of peace in our Church by putting ourselves out there where the fire is hottest, where the concerns most evident, where the people are most in need.

We are called to ascend into the glory of God by our willingness to descend into the realities of the human condition and suffer a kind of spiritual martyrdom. We are called to a radical identification with the people of God.

Jesus has told us today in the Gospel that in doing this we are not to give in to infighting and become litigious. In our first reading today, St. Paul tells us that we are one Body, we have one Spirit, we have one hope to which we strive, one Faith, one Baptism. There is one God and Father of us all. We hear that it is the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace which makes the Church strong.

God is one, and we by virtue of our common baptism and our adopted status as sons and daughters of God, we are called to that divine unity and unanimity.

O, the heights to which we are called in Christ Jesus our Lord and the depths to which we must descend as deacons in our service to humanity, indeed to a type of spiritual martyrdom that dispossesses us of all trappings of power and glory so that the Church may be one, as God is one.

St. Paul’s call to unity is a serious matter. Our Lord prayed for it repeatedly in John’s Gospel.

*“Make them one, as we are one,” Jesus prayed.*

*“Make my joy complete by your unanimity,” wrote St. Paul.*

As deacons cannot claim to work for unity and peace when we wage war, or cast judgment, or condemn those on the edges of society and Church. Rather, as deacons, we must be present to just those people. We must be that anvil, absorbing the blows they experience so they may be formed and shaped and tempered into God’s holy people.

Pope John Paul I’s father told him when he was a young boy that if he wanted to be a priest and wanted his paternal blessing, then he needed to always keep forefront in his mind and intentions the needs of the poor man and woman. Luciani made that promise and kept it. I would like to ask all of us gathered here this morning, to do the same, to keep the needs of the poor in our communities forefront in our minds, intentions, prayers and ministerial efforts to be present to them and to absorb with them the blows of life.

If we do this, we will imitate Jesus, who from the heights of his divinity descended into the depths of humanity only to rise again to glory, a glory to which he calls each and every one of us.