

HOMILY SUNDAY EASTER 05 (Homily 02)

“Serving Widows and Serving the Word”

(Acts 6:1-7; 1 Pt 2:4-9; Jn 14:1-12)

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Brother Walter Demong is a humble seventy-five year old Oblate brother living at Mazonod Residence in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. After a dedicated career managing a herd of prize-winning dairy cows at the former St. Charles Scholasticate near Battleford, he spent some years doing maintenance and providing hospitality at Queen’s House of Retreats and Renewal in Saskatoon. Since 1990, after a short stint as part of the Emmaus House youth ministry in Saskatoon, he has served the Oblate retirement community at Mazonod, doing maintenance, providing hospitality and deeply involved in social justice work in the city of Saskatoon. His life is rooted in prayer and the Eucharist, then flows out all day in selfless service to others. He is a model of one who lives out on a daily basis the message of the readings for today, this fourth Sunday of Easter.

That message is a clear call to prayer and service, to faith and love, to believing in Jesus and expressing that belief through selfless service. We are to serve the Word, and also to serve widows.

In the first reading, these two essential dimensions of the Christian life are seen almost as two opposing tensions. The apostles want to spend more time in prayer and serving the word, so they choose seven worthy candidates and ordain them to the ministry of service, which today we call the diaconate. The diaconal ministry flows from this reading, including within it a social justice thrust that is integral to the life of the Church.

That ministry, being renewed in many dioceses today, is not meant to be seen as a replacement for priests, but as a truly legitimate service of answering the practical needs of the poor and disadvantaged of our day. The widows of Jesus’ time were the most vulnerable segment of that society, in the greatest need, and the Church responded to their need with a special ministry.

The widows of the Gospel can be symbolic for the needs of many of our day. According to Carmen Diston in the *Living With Christ* for today, that would include those denied land rights and access to clean water, victims of human trafficking, sexual abuse, war and violence, religious intolerance and persecution, and even the earth and the air as they groan under ecological exploitation. There is a great need for the diaconal ministry in our day.

In contrast to the first reading, both the Gospel and the second reading treat these two dimensions of Christian life, prayer and service, as integrated realities. In the sense that we all share in the priesthood of the faithful by baptism and are all priests, so too by baptism we are all deacons, called to both prayer and service.

It all starts with faith. In the Gospel Jesus asks us to believe in him as one with the Father. The only way a Christian disciple can go to the Father is through Jesus who is the way to the Father because he is the truth and the life. To accept Jesus who is the perfect revelation of the Father, is to receive the life he shares with the Father. Because he is Incarnate and because he is Son near the Father's heart, he can share the life of God with us.

Then Jesus goes on to say that if we believe in him as one with the Father, we will do even greater works than him. Faith must express itself in works, in service. John Marsh, in his commentary on this passage, provides a profound insight into this reality.

“The Christian life of communion with Jesus has two consequences. One, they will do *greater works* because Jesus has left behind the limitations of the Incarnation and can now act more freely and does ‘works’ through believers in and through his Spirit. Thus the faith and love of the disciples makes visible the invisible presence of the glorified Lord.

Second, more *effective prayer*. A petition made in the ‘name of Jesus’ is inspired by this deep communion with him and is offered under the impulse of a deep faith in him. The disciple who thus prays will take on, in the Spirit, the thoughts and feelings of Jesus and become one with him in desire. His or her prayer becomes a participation in Jesus’ own prayer of communion with the Father, penetrated by the Spirit, free from egoism and full of assurance.”

The second reading echoes this bringing together of service and prayer. St. Peter invites us first to believe more deeply in Jesus as the living cornerstone serving as the foundation of a spiritual house, or the Church. Then we, its members, will offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God and proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

The Great Commandment Jesus gave us is another way of expressing the same truth. We are to love God with our whole being, and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. These two sentences summarize the whole bible, which is why Jesus could say that on these two commandments hung all the law and the prophets.

The vertical arm is love of God, faith, prayer, serving the word. The horizontal arm is service, love of others, answering the needs of the widows of our day. All we need do to live out today's readings is keep this Great Commandment. And that is what Brother Walter does on a daily basis, with no fanfare and no need for recognition, a true disciple of Jesus.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a profound act of faith in Jesus as the way to the Father, and also a deep commitment to express that faith through loving service.

May we respond to these readings with even stronger faith in Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life, and an even more earnest effort to serve the needs of all. Let us pray that we may truly serve both the Word and the Widows of our day.