

Installation of Lectors

Homily: Rt Rev Bishop Masela

St Ignatius of Loyola compares the tactics that the evil spirit uses in planning the downfall of a soul to that of the leader or commander of an army who “encamps, explores the fortifications and defences of the stronghold, and attacks at the weakest point”. The Lord Jesus surely refers to this when he warns us against adopting a form of discipleship that lacks a strong personal bond with him and is only satisfied with calling him “Lord, Lord” and boasting about prophesying, casting out demons, and working miracles in his name. He emphasizes the need for those who want to follow him to build their lives on the strong foundation of his word. He compares the life of a true disciple to the work of a sensible person who builds a house on a foundation that is made of rock and is able to withstand the tactics of this army commander who is represented here by the rain that comes down, floods that rise, and gales that hurl themselves against that house which does not fall but remains firm. Failure to build one’s life on the foundation of Christ’s word, however, exposes one to the tactics and defeat of this commander because it is compared to the work of a stupid person who uses sand to build the foundation of the house, which cannot stand the test of time in terms of commitment to the faith. Jesus says: “What a fall”.

Those to be installed as Lectors today have all written letters to their Bishops stating that they are ready to undertake this ministry in the Church. The same thing will happen as they move through the various stages of priestly formation until they receive priestly ordination. Before installing them I would like to remind them of their role in the Church’s mission of preaching the Gospel to the whole world. They must always remember what is stated in the Rite of Installing Lectors: “In proclaiming God’s word to others, they must accept it themselves in obedience to the Holy Spirit, to meditate on it constantly, so that each day they will have a deeper love of the Scriptures, and in all they say and do show forth to the world our Saviour, Jesus Christ”.

This disposition of docility towards the word of God does not just develop overnight, nor is it given automatically through the rite of installation as Lector. It requires a long process of familiarizing oneself with the word of God, which begins with a response to the invitation of Christ to us: “Come and see”. This encounter with Christ as the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us touches and transforms us to an extent that we are able to declare our faith in him with the author of the first Letter of John: “We give testimony to that which we have heard, seen with our own eyes, watched, and touched with our own hands, the Word of life”.

Right at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee the Lord Jesus goes to the synagogue to teach and finds there a man possessed by an unclean spirit, which obeys his orders to come out of the man. The Evangelist Mark describes the reaction of the people to his teaching and his work. They say “Here is a teaching that is new and with authority behind it: he gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him” Mk1:27-28). His reputation began to spread so rapidly that many of those who were sick and possessed by devils were brought to

him and he cured them. The Gospel of today tells us about his reaction to the scene of the whole town crowding round the door of the house where he was staying: "In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there" (Mk 1:35). Even when Peter and the other seminarians tell him "everybody is looking for you", he does not give in to the temptation of being a crowd puller, but rather decides to move further on to continue with his ministry in the neighbouring country towns. This pattern of regularly leaving the crowds and his disciples behind in order to be alone with his Father is very much part and parcel of Jesus' public ministry and it is surely the secret behind the power and success of his teaching and work. United with his Father in prayer, he is strengthened and is able to avoid the traps of the evil one. Exposing oneself to the challenges and struggles of ministry without taking time to deepening one's relationship with God through regular prayer leads to burnout and a loss of morale. The commander of the army that I referred to earlier will have an opportunity to camp and explore the weak points in one's life and attack to bring the whole building down. The same can be said of a seminarian who is only concerned about the externals of priestly formation while ignoring the internal dispositions that need to be developed or cultivated through and intense prayer life.

Both the first reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah and the second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews reflect on the role of the word of God in our formation as proclaimers of the word and those who share it with others in homilies. The Letter to the Hebrews refers to the life and power of the word of God: "it is something alive and active" (Heb 4:12). It is able to cut us open and reveal what is normally hidden from our naked eye in order to challenge us to pay attention to it. It is not like the commander of the army who exposes our weaknesses for the sake of bringing the whole house down. The word exposes our weakness to help us to deal with them before the enemy can attack. The prophet Isaiah gives us the assurance about the ability and power of the word of God to do just this. It does not return to God empty without accomplishing the work it was sent to do.

And so we can continue with our work of installing our brothers here as Lectors with the knowledge that the time of their formation has indeed provided them with enough opportunities to encounter this word in the person of Christ and that they will allow this process to continue.