

### *3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time*

Pope Francis has established this Third Sunday in Ordinary Time each year as the Sunday of the Word of God. We have on display today a volume of the beautiful St. John's Bible that our Knights of Columbus purchased for us, and I'll bless those who read the scriptures at Mass in the prayer of the faithful.

Earlier this month Pope Francis changed church law and allowed women to be instituted as lectors and acolytes. Women and girls have long had permission to read and to serve at Mass, but he's now allowing them into a category that has previously been reserved to men. For hundreds of years, when a seminarian prepared for the priesthood, he went through several ceremonies for which the bishop presided. First the seminarian received tonsure, a clipping of some of his hair; that made him a cleric in the Catholic Church. Then he received four minor orders: porter, lector, exorcist and acolyte. Then the bishop ordained him to three major orders: subdeacon, deacon and priest. Pope Saint Paul VI changed that in 1973. He eliminated tonsure, the minor orders and the subdiaconate, and he repurposed lector and acolyte as lay ministries required before ordination. A man now becomes a cleric only when he is ordained a deacon. Even though Pope Paul assigned these two ministries to lay people for the first time, he still restricted them to men. Consequently, most bishops instituted into lector and acolyte only candidates for the diaconate and seminarians preparing for priesthood.

Now a bishop may institute both laymen and laywomen into these two ministries. An instituted lector or acolyte is expected to demonstrate knowledge of their duties, a spiritual life that fosters their ministry, and a desire to serve in these ministries for life. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops will surely give us some guidance, but I anticipate not every reader will become an instituted lector, and not every server will become an instituted acolyte. But some, after discerning their call, will go through a period of formation, and the bishop will formally institute them in a public ceremony. When you consider that laymen and laywomen may now receive a title that for hundreds of years only clerics received, and for dozens of years only laymen received, you see progress in the church's thinking about how people may activate their baptismal call.

Some ask if this means that Pope Francis is allowing women into the diaconate. He has a commission studying it, but that is a separate matter. Lector and acolyte are lay ministries. The diaconate requires an ordination.

These events fittingly develop as we celebrate the Sunday of the Word of God with a gospel of Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James and John from their boats into discipleship. What did Jesus see in the way they cast their nets that day? What does Christ see in the way you cast your nets today?

All of us, whether in the sanctuary or in the pew, we all have a calling to worship God and to serve others. Some of you may discern a calling as lectors or acolytes, or to serve the church in some other way. Jesus somehow knew which disciples to call first; and they somehow knew this was the opportunity of a lifetime. The call to follow Christ may come on a boat, in a church, at school, at work, or asleep. If you discern that Christ sees something in you and is calling you to some opportunity, leave your nets in the boat and follow him.

Sunday, January 24, 2021