

My Brothers and Sisters,

All three of today's readings offer us insights into what it means to be church.

The reading from First Peter reminds us that we are the church. St. Peter uses the image of a spiritual house with Jesus as the cornerstone. St. Paul would add that the apostles are the church's foundation stones [Eph. 2:20]. We all know that the bricks of a house have to be interlaced and require mortar for the house to hold together. This suggests that all the members of the community need to be interconnected and bound together by the Holy Spirit. In fact, one author has suggested that a free-lance Christian, i.e., a Christian who does not belong to a church, is a contradiction in terms.

This passage also suggests that the Church as a community and Christians as individuals have a two-fold vocation. First, we are *"to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."* The most important of these, of course, is the Eucharist. At each Eucharist, we join ourselves to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, offering ourselves to God through, with, and in Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. We also offer spiritual sacrifices to God when we live a Christian life, especially when it is most difficult, and when we serve the needs of others, especially those less fortunate than ourselves.

Second, we are *"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."* As Christians, we are to proclaim by our lives, both words and actions, the Good News of Jesus Christ, thereby bringing the light of Christ to others.

Today's Gospel reminds us that we are a Christocentric church. Jesus said, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* The church must be centered on Jesus, and Jesus must be the center of our lives. We come to the church to come to Christ. The main work of the church is to bring Christ to the world and the world to Christ.

Also, in today's Gospel, Jesus said, *"In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places."* This suggests that the Church must be an open, welcoming community to everyone as we so often sing, "All are Welcome."

The reading from Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the beginning of the diaconate. As the Church grew, the Greeks complained that their widows were neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Apostles did not believe they should stop preaching to handle food distribution, so they asked the community to choose seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom they then ordained as the first deacons. The word *deacon* comes from *diaconia*, which means service.

The story contains at least two important lessons for the church today. First, as the Church grew, it had to adapt to changing circumstances and needs. Second, as we know from Acts, diaconal ministry quickly morphed into something more. Not very long after they were chosen, Stephen and Philip were preaching about Jesus.

My brothers and sisters, we have seen great adaptation in the church in the last seventy years. When I was young, priests did everything in the parish, and sisters taught in school. As a result of the Second Vatican Council, the church's continued growth, and the decline in the number of priests and sisters, all kinds of lay ministries have arisen. As the numbers of priests continue to decline and priests become older, parishioners will need to be asked and be willing to assume more responsibility for their parishes if parishes like ours are going to continue to survive and, even more, thrive.