

**LECTURE FOR THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CLERGY BY
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*Follow Me (Mark 2:14):
Discipleship and Servant Leadership*¹

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To be with and to address the venerable Serbian Orthodox Clergy on the occasion of the 21st Church Assembly constitutes a great honor and a particular joy for me. This blessed occasion is further emphasized by the fact of the impressive and inspiring theme of the Assembly: Servant Leadership.

Servant Leadership is a theme exceedingly rich spiritually, which offers multiple aspects for study and contemplation. Among them there is the idea of discipleship as an indispensable component of a real Servant Leadership. So let me today deal with the specific idea of discipleship and present some fundamental comments on it, keeping always in mind its connection with Servant Leadership.

As we know, discipleship is a fundamental concept constantly recurring in the Gospels. A study of the idea of the discipleship in the New Testament could therefore be a fruitful endeavor. Since, however, there are obvious limitations in terms of space, there are also, by necessity, limitations in terms of the biblical texts which will be examined. Today, we will focus on the Gospel of Mark. The selection is neither accidental nor arbitrary. In

¹ This lecture is an edited version of a previously published text by the same author.

the Gospel of Mark we encounter one of the most rich and profound New Testament sources for a substantive discussion on discipleship.

1. Discipleship as a call by Christ

Discipleship begins as a call by the Lord Jesus Christ. It is an event, a condition, or a status, which is initiated by Christ himself. This is present very early in the Gospel of Mark. Already in the opening chapter of this gospel we encounter the first major instance: *Jesus passing along by the Sea of Galilee, saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men (δεῦτε ὀπίσω μου, καὶ ποιήσω ὑμᾶς γενέσθαι ἀλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων). And immediately they left their nets and followed him (Mark 1:16-18).*

This first call is coupled, without any break in the Markan narrative, to a second call: *And (Jesus) going a little farther he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother... And immediately he called them.... And they followed him (Mark 1:19-20).*

In Chapter two of his gospel, Mark offers one more characteristic case: *And as he (i.e. Jesus) passed on, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office and he said to him, "Follow me (Ἀκολουθεῖ μοι, Mark 2:13-14).*

The narrative in all these instances is extremely condense and reduced to a bare minimum. Thus it preserves only the very essential aspects. What is impressive here is the tremendous emphasis on Jesus' initiative. The call scene is introduced abruptly, with the simplest grammatical connection (the conjunction *and*) and with no anticipatory references of any kind. As a result, the discipleship emerges as a status which is created exclusively by Jesus and which starts by a personal calling issued by him. This calling is strongly underlined by the absence of any dialogue, and by the predominance of imperative verbal forms in the phrasing of the invitation (*δεῦτε ὀπίσω μου* Mark 1:17 and *ἀκολουθεῖ μοι* Mark 2:14). In the episode with Levi, the only word that Jesus addresses to him is the simple, sole, imperative *follow me*. The verbal content of the entire scene is exhausted in just this one and only word, a fact that brings to a bold relief the unique

significant of Jesus' invitation to discipleship. In fact, the invitations in both Mark 1:16-20 and Mark 2:14 look like commands rather than invitations, but the context indicated that this is merely a way of formulation which aims at emphasizing Jesus' initiative.

At the same time Mark reports in brief and terse terms the response of the disciples to the call: *and immediately they left their nets and they followed him* (Mark 1:18), *and they left their father Zebedee... and followed him* (Mark 1:20), *and he (Levi) rose and followed him* (Mark 2:14). In all cases the answer to the call is immediate and radical. This implies a decision of unusual magnitude, a personal commitment of the highest possible degree. We will return to this point later. Here one thing ought to be underscored, namely the suggestion offered by the text that the call to discipleship depends absolutely on Jesus and originates in him, but necessitates in turn a series of radical decisions on the part of the would-be disciple. Thus the call to discipleship activates the highest and strongest human capacities. Ultimately, however, the dominant theme is the call to follow Jesus, the dominant voice is the voice of Jesus inviting us to the status of discipleship.

2. Discipleship as a mission

In the Gospel of Mark, discipleship is also understood as mission. The call by Jesus to an advanced stage and form of discipleship is at the same time an appointment, a fundamental assignment, and a mission. Reading some particular pericopes in Mark 1 has immediately the impression that discipleship is a tremendous possibility for a mission, for a special kind of work, for a task and enterprise of outstanding quality.

One such basic pericope is the text describing the mission charge of the Twelve (Mark 3:13-19). This text starts off with a short solemn introduction, which presents again the idea of Jesus absolute authority in calling people to discipleship: *And he went up in the mountain, and called to him those whom he desired* (καὶ προσκαλεῖται οὓς ἤθελεν αὐτός).

Next comes the appointment or mission statement: *and he appointed twelve (whom also he called apostles), to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons* (Mark 3:14-15). The mission described in

the above passage comprises three fundamental elements. First, the people called to become the disciples *par excellence*, have as their first assignment to be with Jesus. This special aspect is frequently ignored when we discuss the various facets of mission according to the New Testament. To be with Jesus is an integral part of the reality of mission as present by Mark.

The second fundamental element revealed in Mark 3:14-15 is preaching. Proclaiming the Gospel as an indispensable part of a mission assignment. Discipleship here is understood as a commission to declare the truth of the Gospel. Mark does not qualify here what precisely this preaching means, he does not explain or describe. He limits himself to one word, one verb: to preach, to proclaim (κηρύσσειν). We know, however, that the same verb occurs in the fundamental programmatic passage Mark 1:14-15: *Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe in the Gospel.'* The content and the meaning of the term *to preach, to proclaim* in this instance serves well as an exegetical guide for the understanding of the same term in Mark 3:14. Thus, preaching as a mission means to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God, as well as the call to repentance and faith in the Gospel.

The third basic element revealed in the passage under study is the aspect of mission as an authority *to cast out demons* (Mark 3:15). The concept of discipleship in its fullness includes the particular assignment of engaging in a series of activities by which the demonic powers are cast out, neutralized, vanquished. This commission seems at first glance to address the issue of people being possessed by the demons. The mission, nonetheless, is much wider and deeper. The demonology of Mark is inextricably intertwined with his Christology and with his understanding of human existence under the bondage of evil, demonic powers and disease. Thus *the casting out of demons* becomes sort of a code phrase or a condensed statement which implies a huge number of diversified tasks. The common denominator in all these tasks is the liberation of the human existence from any demonic, evil, afflicting power.

The above presented aspects of discipleship as a mission may be strictly applicable initially to the twelve Apostles. Variations of it, however,

are to be found in the life of the Church throughout the past centuries and today.

3. Discipleship as a diakonia

Markan scholarship has long ago recognized the very unique place that the lengthy unit Mark 8:27-10:52 occupies in the Gospel of Mark. Christological statements of great importance occur within the unit, which has an easily detectable tripartite structure. A characteristic feature of this structure is the clear and elaborate teaching of Jesus on discipleship as *diakonia*, attached consistently to each of the three major Christological predictions on the passion (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Thus the teaching on discipleship acquires a more pronounced significance.

The predominant theme in this teaching is the idea of discipleship as service, as *diakonia*. According to the masterfully structured narrative in Mark 9, Jesus after announcing his imminent passion and death notices painfully that the disciples do not understand his saying. Even worse, while he is revealing his inexorably approaching death, they are discussing matters that disclose their personal ambitions and their craving for the highest possible rank (*they discussed with one another who was the greatest*, Mark 9:34). At this precise point Jesus reveals the amazing and radical truth concerning discipleship: *And he (Jesus) sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them, 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all'* (Εἰ τις θέλει πρῶτος εἶναι, ἔσται πάντων ἔσχατος και πάντων διάκονος, Mark 9:35).

The very nature of discipleship here is revealed through a drastic changing of perspective. The preoccupation with possessing the first place, the passion for high ranking positions are transformed into a willingness and a decision to be the last end to perform something absolutely needed, namely to serve other people. Discipleship within the community of Christ means a consuming passion for *diakonia*, a function of diligent and unfailing service. The vision now is not a vision of a position but of a function. The call to discipleship is not a call to a static position of honor, power and glory, but a call to a dynamic work of service, of *diakonia*, of care for other people.

This message of the Lord concerning the discipleship is so absolute that the formulation uses a terminology which does not leave any room for exceptions, excuses or reservations. Christ asks and directs his genuine disciple not only to be servant of the *other people*, but to be *servant of all* (πάντων διάκονος). The statement is astonishing in its radical, absolute and extreme demand, a fact which shows its paramount importance.

Jesus returns to the same subject after the third prediction of his passion and death (Mark 10:33-34). The scenario is similar to that of chapter 9. The disciples hear the sad forecast of the impending arrest and killing of their Master in Jerusalem. Yet they seem to be mentally deaf and blind. They do not understand Jesus. This time the statements of the Lord are more elaborate and explicit: *You know that those who are supposed to rule over the nations lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all* (Mark 10:42-44). The comparison with the rulers of the nations, i.e. with the political power, shows exactly what the nature of discipleship as service is. At the same time the categorical statements and the absolute way of their formulation reveal again the importance of the message, which they carry.

The teaching on discipleship as service in Mark 9:35 and 10:42-44 is not, primarily, a teaching on humility, although the element of humility is very strong and inherent in the two passages. First and foremost the emphasis is on service as care for the others, as love, as being aware of the needs of the community. The priority of diakonia emphasizes the basic fact that discipleship is not an opportunity for individualistic moral perfection but for a new orientation in life in which the others, the community become the center of attention and love. A new mentality is presupposed here; a drastically different *modus vivendi* is introduced which is diametrically opposed to the one prevailing in the society. Eventually, what we face in Mark 9:35 and 10:42-44 is a new anthropology, a transformed image of human existence as service.

A decisive evidence for the last point is offered at the end of the pericope Mark 10:42-44. At the conclusion of that passage, Jesus adds one more statement by which he lays the unique foundation for the primacy of

service, for the understanding of diakonia as the highest and noblest function and purpose of human existence. This is his own person, purpose and function; ultimately his incarnation: *“For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45).

Such a declaration makes diakonia or service an absolute characteristic of incarnation. Jesus as the perfect man is the *διακονος*, the servant. Thus *διακονος* becomes instantly an eminent and unique anthropological category, a fundamental model of existence in the realm of the Christian community. Discipleship as service constitutes the highest human state of existence, a state in which anthropology and Christology merge into an inseparable unity.

4. Discipleship as a knowledge of Christ

Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark is directly related to knowledge. Knowledge of the truth revealed by Christ, and knowledge of Christ himself, constitute an essential sign and attribute of true and whole discipleship.

This is a rather painful subject for Mark as it becomes apparent even to a hasty reader of his gospel. The disciples, and more precisely the closest disciples like the Twelve, are often depicted in this gospel as people who have a chronic difficulty to understand what Jesus says and does, who are exceedingly slow in advancing in knowledge of the truth disclosed constantly by Christ, and of Christ himself.

Hence they are rebuked by him in various instances for either not understanding or for misunderstanding in spite of the ample opportunities for the opposite.

At this point a few passages from the Gospel of Mark ought to be cited. The first comes from Mark 4, the well-known chapter of the parables. The disciples, after listening to a number of parables, ask Jesus concerning them (Mark 4:10). He then, after a statement about the mystery of the kingdom of God and the parabolic teaching, *‘said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable (i.e. the specific parable of the sower); how then will you*

understand all the parables?’ (Mark 4:13). The question, no doubt, discloses the deficient knowledge and the limited perceptiveness of the disciples.

The most significant example in terms of sharp language is to be found in Mark 8:17-21. There, Jesus addresses the disciples with a stern reprimand for their lack of understanding of his teaching. The passage is loaded with pertinent words which appear in sentences arranged in the form of successive questions: *Do you not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? Do you not yet understand?* (Mark 8:17-21). The series of questions is overwhelming, and the message which they convey is plain: Discipleship without understanding of what Christ is, does, and says, is simply unthinkable.

Discipleship means an advanced knowledge of Christ, an understanding of his person which is beyond common and average beliefs, opinions, rumors or vague ideas.

Such a deep and whole knowledge of Christ is not a static, ossified accumulation of pertinent information. Discipleship as a deep understanding of Christ is a dynamic and alive state of existence in continuous progress and in continuous alertness and vigilance. Jesus before his passion warns his disciples that their knowledge of who Christ is will be severely challenged and exposed to the danger of fatal error: *And Jesus began to say to them, ‘Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray.’* A few verses down Jesus repeats the warning, *And then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand* (Mark 13:21-3). Against such fierce onslaught of the powers of evil and error, only a strong deep and alive knowledge of Christ can successfully fight, persevere and remain victorious. This kind of knowledge is inseparable from any definition of true discipleship in Christ.

5. Discipleship as a total offering of one's self

In this final section of my presentation today, we arrive at the highest point of discipleship described in the Gospel of Mark: discipleship as a total offering of one's self with all the implications that such an offering entails.

Already in the beginning of his gospel, Mark introduces graphically the concept of a discipleship which requires radical existential decisions. In the scene of the call of the first four disciples, he succinctly observes that Simon and Andrew *immediately left their nets and followed him* (i.e. Jesus) (Mark 1:18), and that James and John left *their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him* (i.e. Jesus) (Mark 1:20). In this case, the four people, called by Jesus to become his disciples, abandon their profession, which was also the means of their living, and their immediate relatives. The same holds true for the call of Levi (Mark 2:14).

The drastic decisions and actions described in Mark 1:18-20 and Mark 2:14 are powerful expressions of what discipleship as total offering of one's self means. The aforementioned passages do not speak explicitly about the first disciples presenting themselves unconditionally to Christ. This idea, however, is unmistakably suggested by the magnitude and the radicality of their action. Profession and close relatives are normally part and parcel of one's self. Leaving them is relinquishing the most cherished and indispensable persons and things in life.

There is no real discipleship in Christ without a decision for a drastic disengagement from people and things extremely dear. When commenting on the episode of the rich man, Jesus leaves no room for doubt. In Peter's assertion that *we have left everything and followed you*, Jesus gives a very encouraging and reassuring answer which speaks about *leaving house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel* (Mark 10:29).

With the above solemn statements, preserved faithfully by the evangelist, we are deeply advanced in an understanding of the discipleship as a total offering of one's self. We reach the definitive formulation of the same idea in Mark 8:34-38 in the unique declaration by Jesus: *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For*

whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life?

This pericope, regardless of a variety of exegetical options for its particular components, establishes firmly the idea of a radical self-denial and a total offering of one's self to Christ as the true and indispensable mark of genuine discipleship. The extent of offering implied in Mark 8:34-38 reaches the ultimate limit which is death. The faithful disciple of Christ, if he wants to be sincere with his discipleship, must be ready for any self-sacrifice for the sake of Christ, even for a sacrifice of his own life. Here we encounter discipleship at its purest form.

The validating reference for such a radical position is to be found in Jesus himself. As depicted in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is the archetype of a total offering for the salvation of humankind. The predominance of the idea of the passion in Mark's narrative has to do with such an understanding of Christ. The key phrase in Mark 10:45 says it all: *The Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.* Offering his own life is a dominant Christological motif in Mark, which in turn becomes a dominant anthropological motif describing a central aspect of discipleship. At the same time the concept of service is emphasized and tied directly to the offering of life. Service and total offering are projected in the center of the scene as inseparable and indispensable characteristics of a discipleship in Christ.

6. Discipleship and priestly Servant Leadership

The five basic aspects on discipleship according to the Gospel of Mark which we have analyzed relate directly to the priesthood. The association between discipleship and priesthood, priesthood as Servant Leadership, is clear.

1.) Discipleship is a call by Jesus. So is priesthood, since priesthood is, in addition to other qualities, a genuine form of discipleship in Christ. The priest has been called personally by the Lord to follow him, to become his

disciple and apostle, to follow Him in the path of Servant Leadership established by Jesus (Mark 1:16-16; 1:19-20; 2:13-14). This biblical insight is vital. Whenever and wherever the basic New Testament concept of call by God to discipleship has been forgotten or put aside, the priestly consciousness and quality has deteriorated alarmingly.

2.) Discipleship is a mission and so is priesthood understood in terms of Servant Leadership because of the direct association between the two. This is mission with a twofold assignment: to preach the Gospel of the kingdom of God, and to liberate the human existence from any demonic, evil, or afflicting power (Mark 3:13-19; 6:7-13). Both aspects of such a God-assigned mission as a genuine expression of Servant Leadership should be emphasized because sometimes there is a danger of a “targetless” priesthood, or of a priesthood lost in a confusing non-serving activity.

3.) The nature of discipleship as diakonia opens up another magnificent perspective for the priesthood. Priesthood is service, diakonia both within and without the Church. The priest as a disciple and follower of the Lord has as his first and strongest ambition to excel in serving the people (Mark 9:35; 10:42-44). Thus he becomes a new anthropological model patterned after Christ (Mark 10:45), a new man for whom diakonia is not just one of many human expressions or virtues, but a whole way of life and a superb human achievement. This is true Servant Leadership! The significance of this idea is obvious if one considers the very strong tendencies for an egocentric lifestyle and for self-centered professional goals which are so pervasive in contemporary society.

4.) Discipleship and, consequently, priesthood is a continuous growth in knowing Christ; Christ himself and the fullness of truth revealed by him. The priest as a disciple of Jesus has to walk through a difficult road in order to acquire more and more illumination, in order to come to know better and deeper Christ the Son of God (Mark 8:17-21). The knowledge of Christ is an immense, open universe, the exploration of which should be a daily

challenge and delight for the priest. This knowledge constitutes a building block for true Servant Leadership. In an era, like ours, of chaotic information and of the prevalence of ideological confusion, to know Christ really and substantially becomes a matter of emergency for any honest priest and certainly a *sine qua non* for Servant Leadership.

5.) Priesthood as discipleship means a total offering of one's self to Jesus the Lord. In that sense the priest is not like other professionals. Priesthood is a total commitment which could necessitate even the offering of one's own life. Here is the real heart of Servant Leadership. Priesthood as discipleship means a readiness for sacrifice, a willingness for drastic and painful decisions for the sake of Christ, his Gospel, his Church (Mark 1:18-20; 2:14; 10:29). In the final analysis, Christ the Lord is the absolute priority for any genuine priest who wants to be a genuine disciple; a priority over one's possessions, relationships or even one's own life (Mark 8:34-38).

Such an absolute discipleship seems to be almost impossible to reach. We have, however, a comforting example, speaking to the point, in the case of a venerable saint and martyr of the Early Church, St. Ignatius of Antioch. Writing to the to the Romans on his way to martyrdom at the beginning of the second century A.D., he says, *Now I am beginning to be a disciple* (Νυν ἀρχομαι μαθητής εἶναι).

The last idea could be interpreted in a more general and comforting manner, namely in the sense that it is never too late to discover the dimension and richness of discipleship especially connected to any genuine and integral priesthood, aiming at Servant Leadership.

A priesthood characterized by a strong Christocentric discipleship the way St. Mark describes it, is a clear and unmistakable expression of Servant Leadership. This is the priesthood we have been honored to present in the world. A world inundated with all sorts of wrong leaderships. A world wounded and looking desperately to a genuine dynamic Servant Leadership. Such a leadership is for us as Clergy our inescapable mission and destiny in the present times.