

A common confusion seen in all corners of the Church concerns the status and identity of the deacon in relation to the priesthood and the laity.

Making sense of the ministry of the deacon

By Rex H. Pilger, Jr.

■ In the parish of my deacon assignment, I am given the opportunity to preach the homily on the order of one or two Masses per month. On occasion, I've had more than one parishioner thank me for the homily but then express a somewhat disconcerting opinion, which goes something like this: "You know, you deacons are so much more in touch with the 'real world'; priests should be married like you are, so they could understand what the 'world' is like and relate to us better." Rather than become engaged in prolonged debate, I quickly (but politely) disagree, with the practicalities first: most U.S. parishes are in no position to financially support a married priest and his family. More importantly, however, I do a quick catechesis, in the form of a rhetorical question: Would we rather have a priest who "knows and lives" the everyday struggles of married and family life or a priest who really knows our God? My preference is the latter; I want a man whose priesthood exemplifies the inti-

macy of his sacrificial Eucharistic identity, *in persona Christi*, and as dedicated "bridegroom" to his "bride," the parish. (Of course, it's not what I want, but what the Church calls for.) I conclude by saying that the ministries of priest and deacon are fundamentally different, even though the former incorporates the latter in more than a transitional way. I also may note that deacons need not be married. If I had more time in such an encounter, I would elaborate with the following kind of analysis of the ministry of the deacon:

Church Declarations

With the restoration of the permanent diaconate after Vatican Council II, the subsequent experience of the restored order—by deacons themselves, their pastors and bishops, and the parishes of their ministry—provides motivation for reflection on the significance of the ministry for the Church of the new century. Vatican II and post-conciliar documents have



defined and progressively elaborated on the nature and functions of the order, particularly in relation to the episcopacy and priesthood. In addition to the two other degrees of Orders, relation of the diaconate to the laity is worthy of reflection, also. Until Vatican II, the primary focus of the sacrament of Holy Orders was the priesthood, especially as it related to Eucharist, and secondarily to Penance and Extreme Unction (Anointing of the Sick). The episcopate was largely seen as administrative, and the diaconate as transitional to the priesthood. Beginning with the Council, and through subsequent documents, the Church progressively emphasizes the threefold hierarchy of Orders: episcopacy, priesthood, and diaconate:

Bishops enjoy the fullness of the sacrament of orders and both presbyters and deacons are dependent upon them in the exercise of their authority. For the presbyters are the prudent fellow workers of the episcopal order and are themselves consecrated as true priests of the New Testament, just as deacons are ordained for the ministry and serve the people of God in communion with the bishop and his presbytery.¹

For strengthened by sacramental grace, in com-

munion with the bishop and his group of priests [deacons,] serve in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God.²

...the second Ecumenical Vatican Council . . . after concerning itself with the bishops and the priests . . . praised also the third rank of sacred orders, explaining its dignity and enumerating its functions.³

The sacrament of apostolic ministry comprises three degrees. Indeed “the divinely instituted ecclesiastical ministry is exercised in different degrees by those who even from ancient times have been called bishops, priests and deacons.”⁴

Functionally and by identity, “[b]ishops enjoy the fullness of the sacrament of orders,”⁵ including the consummate power to ordain and the ordinary power to confirm, as well as the *munera* (assigned service, function, duty) of the priesthood and diaconate. Similarly, the priesthood includes preeminent power to preside over the Eucharist (confecting the sacred species), administer absolution, and anoint the sick, as well as provide pastoral care of the parish. The diaconate, the third rank of the hierarchy, includes the ordinary ministry of the sacrament of Baptism, proclamation of the Gospel, assistance at the altar, receipt of wedding vows, burial of the dead, distribution of the sacred species, viaticum to the dying, and minister of charity to the poor, along with teaching, preaching, and presiding over prayer and Scripture services. These ministries are summarized under the threefold commission of the deacon: “With regard to deacons, ‘strengthened by sacramental grace they are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in the service (*diakonia*) of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity.’”⁶

In his first Encyclical, Benedict XVI writes, “As the years went by and the Church spread further afield, the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word . . .”⁷ (Emphasis added.) In the previous para-

graph, he notes the ministry of the Seven (Acts 6), together with the example of Lawrence, deacon and martyr of Rome. The ministry of deacon—Word, altar, charity—is, then, the fundamental ministry (prophetic, priestly, and kingly) of the Church, with the priest and bishop possessing the deeper ministerial and pastoral responsibilities, especially Eucharist, *in persona Christi*.⁸

Deacons are by virtue of ordination, clerics:

Ministers of lesser rank are also sharers in the mission and grace of the Supreme Priest. In the first place among these ministers are deacons, who, in as much as they are dispensers of Christ's mysteries and servants of the Church, should keep themselves free from every vice and stand before men as personifications of goodness and friends of God. *Clerics*, who are called by the Lord and are set aside as His portion in order to prepare themselves for the various ministerial offices under the watchful eye of spiritual shepherds, are bound to bring their hearts and minds into accord with this special election (which is theirs). They will accomplish this by their constancy in prayer, by their burning love, and by their unremitting recollection of whatever is true, just and of good repute. They will accomplish all this for the glory and honor of God.⁹

The Diaconate brings with it a series of rights and duties as foreseen by canons 273-283 of the *Code of Canon Law* with regard to clerics in general and deacons in particular. . . . From the point of view of discipline, with diaconal ordination, the deacon is incardinated into a particular Church or personal prelature to whose service he has been admitted, or else, as a *cleric*, into a religious institute of consecrated life or a clerical society of apostolic life.¹⁰

The correspondence of the three-fold ministry of the deacon—Word, altar, charity—with the fundamental ministry of the Church is illuminative. For, the laity share in the ministry of the Church, as well:

[The laity] are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the **priestly, prophetic, and kingly** functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.¹¹

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the Church concerns the status and identity of the deacon in relation to the priesthood and the laity. It is not uncommon to see the misnomer “lay deacon” applied, in not only secular publications, but occasionally even diocesan newspapers. Deacons themselves may describe their role as having “one foot in the clerical world and the other in the lay,” clearly conflicting with the documents cited above. In many dioceses in the United States, deacons, who are nevertheless clerics, are discouraged by their bishops (certainly within their rights by Canon Law) and/or pastors from wearing clerical attire while formally ministering; conversely, where permitted or even encouraged, many deacons still resist donning a clerical shirt for ministry.

If we consider some other attributes of the deacon, in light of the three-fold ministry of deacon and Church, perhaps this might motivate better understanding of the diaconate.

Insofar as it is a grade of holy orders, the diaconate imprints a *character* and communicates a specific *sacramental grace*. The diaconal character is the configurative and distinguishing sign indelibly impressed in the soul, which *configures the one ordained to Christ*, who made himself the deacon or *servant of all*. It brings with it a specific sacramental grace, which is strength, *vigor specialis*, a gift for living the new reality wrought by the sacrament.¹²

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The *spirituality of service* is a spirituality of the whole Church, insofar as the whole Church, in the same way as Mary, is the “handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:28), at the service of the salvation of the world. And so that the whole Church may better live out this spirituality of service, the Lord gives her a *living and personal sign* of his very being as servant . . . In fact, with sacred ordination, he is constituted a *living icon of Christ the servant* within the Church.¹³

Experience of deacons

In parts of the United States where the permanent diaconate has not been restored, anecdotal accounts indicate that there are two primary motivations discouraging restoration: fear of negative effects on priestly vocations and lay ministry. A typical question, heard in such dioceses (and many parishes in dioceses with the diaconate, too) might be, “Why do we need deacons? Laypeople can do whatever needs to be done.”

The answer to the preceding question might be expressed in particular, practical dimensions of diaconal ministry. In the Roman Rite, deacons, together with bishops and priests, are ordinary ministers of Baptism. And, it is through the initial sacrament that the call of Christ the Servant comes: the baptized are called to serve God and neighbor. It is through *diakonia* that the minister of Baptism—bishop, priest, deacon, or even, in emergency, a layperson—communicates the call.

At the beginning of Mass, the deacon may lead the assembly in penitence—pleading the mercy of Christ on his people—the (non-sacramental) forgiveness of sins (although the new General Instruction to the Roman Missal appears to reserve this to the priest¹⁴). At the altar, the deacon visibly serves, and, as he kneels from the Epiclesis through the first elevation of the chalice,¹⁵ leads the rest of the assembly in adoration as Christ becomes especially Real under the appearance of the gifts of bread and wine. (The deacon’s ordination also involved an epiclesis over the kneeling ordinand, the invocation of the Holy Spirit that strengthens the gifts received at Confirmation.) The deacon elevates and ministers the chalice, the Blood of the new Covenant, shed for the forgiveness of sins. He invites the Sign of Peace. And, finally, he may dismiss the faithful with the most appropriate commission: “Go in peace to love and **serve** the Lord.”

We deacons serve God and his people. As we serve, we image Christ, who “did not come to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28), and we serve Christ: “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). We communicate by Word and sacrament the call to serve, to all the baptized. And, what of the bishops who send us and the priests whom we assist? The commission of service is intrinsic to the ordination rites to the priesthood and episcopate. The dalmatic (the outer vestment peculiar to the deacon) is sometimes worn under the chasuble by the bishop. The Mandatum of Holy Thursday, symbolizing that he who leads must first serve, is performed by priest and bishop, divested of chasuble and stole. The primary ministry of the deacon is still very much present in the other two orders, but “hidden” within the mystery of Christ the High Priest. The deacon makes the image of Christ the Servant visible.

Where was *diakonia* during the centuries in which the permanent deacon was largely

absent? In each age the Spirit raised up *charismatic* leaders from out of the monasteries and from the secular priesthood and laity to provide the service ministry that is *diakonia*, largely through existing and new religious orders. Francis of Assisi, one of the few permanent deacons of the Middle Ages, is the exception that proves the rule. In our own time, *diakonia* is no longer restricted to the charitable religious orders, but is beginning to flower in the parishes (but how many seeds still need sowing?) It is the deacon who makes the call visible and, in collaboration with his bishop and priests, plants, waters, and nourishes. The service to which all are called through Baptism is manifest in the exercise of charisms, while, for the ordained, in effect the charisms are to be “ordinary”: they are *munera*. The Spirit is moving the parish in a new direction, and bishops are sending deacons to make visible the way.

The *munera* bestowed on the deacon: proclaiming, preaching, and teaching the Gospel, administering baptism, receiving wedding vows, burying the dead, custodian of the Most Blessed Sacrament, viaticum to the dying, care of the sick, and concern for the poor are still very much the responsibility of the priest and bishop. (The latter, of course, confers the *munera*.) Might it be said that when priest or bishop exercise any of these ministries, its exercise flows out of his own diaconal ordination?

Benedict XVI reminds us that *diakonia* is part of the essential commission of the Church. With the restoration of the permanent diaconate and its faithful exercise, *diakonia* is, once again, made sacramentally visible in

the Western Church. The priest is celebrant of the central mysteries of the Faith; the deacon (married or celibate) serves the mysteries and, leading the laity, bears them into the “real world.” ■

End Notes

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus* - Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops, 1965, no. 15.

² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* - Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 29.

³ Paul VI., *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* - General Norms for Restoring the Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church, 1967.

⁴ Congregation for Catholic Education and Congregation for the Clergy, Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons (BN), 1998, no. 1., citing Paul VI, Apostolic Letter - *Ad pascendum*, 534-538.

⁵ *Christus Dominus*, op. cit.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCE), n. 877.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, no. 22.

⁸ CCE, n. 875: “This fact presupposes ministers of grace, authorized and empowered by Christ. From him, bishops and priests receive the mission and faculty (“the sacred power”) to act *in persona Christi Capitis*...”

⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 41.

¹⁰ BN, no. 7, 8.

¹¹ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31.

¹² BN, no. 7, quoting CCE, no. 876, 877.

¹³ BN, no. 1.

¹⁴ General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM] (2002), no. 51.

¹⁵ GIRM, no. 179.

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