

The Vocation of Deacon

In the Catholic Moment

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Everyone has a vocation (from the Latin verb “vocare” - “to call”) in the Church, and all vocations in the Church have equal dignity and value in the eyes of God (Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 7). By virtue of our baptism, all of us are clothed in Christ, called to be holy and called to share in His universal mission as priests, prophets and kings (LG 31). Everyone in the Church, ordained and lay, have as a primary vocation to love God and our neighbor with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30). The Catechism reminds us that we are created in God’s image and the very meaning and purpose of life is to know and love Him and our neighbor (CCC 31). Loving our neighbor (Christian charity) means to serve others either spiritually or physically, with works of mercy.

Unfortunately, the meaning of vocation is often misunderstood by many in the Church given the intense focus in recent decades on vocations to the ministerial priesthood and consecrated life (note: generally “consecrated” are persons who are devoted as either hermits, virgins, nuns, sisters, monks or brothers pursuing celibacy, simplicity and obedience). This focus on priestly and consecrated vocations has been necessary to reverse a downturn in these vocations in recent decades.

However, there is another vocation in the Church besides priesthood, consecrated or lay life, which is often forgotten and misunderstood: the vocation of *deacon*. This ordained vocation is often misunderstood because there is a shortage of permanent deacons in many dioceses and insufficient catechesis regarding the order. In several dioceses deacons are asked to dress like laity, which makes their ministry presence much less noticeable. Moreover, because the order of deacon has been “hidden” for several centuries in seminaries (not directly present to the People of God), most people do not realize that the vocation is as old as the New Testament (1 Timothy 3, 8) and shares directly in the apostolic mission of the bishop as ordained clergy in the sacrament of holy orders.

As with any growing, complex organization, ancient Church’s leaders (the Apostles and later bishops) realized they needed trustworthy assistants obedient and ordained with the grace necessary to serve in ways other than priesthood. In the early Church these special assistants were bestowed the office of deacon (from the Greek word *diakonia* meaning “to serve”). Deacons were chosen following discernment and then ordained (the laying on of hands) to bestow the grace of holy orders (divine assistance to help them fulfill their unique office) along with sacred promises of obedience and fidelity to the bishop and the Church.

For the first 500+ years of the Church the diaconate flourished in its permanent and pastoral presence in the Church (sometimes referred to as the “golden age” of deacons). Deacons in the early Church fulfilled virtually all of the operational roles we would associate today with the only exception being priestly functions (celebrating the Eucharist). Unlike laity or consecrated,

deacons are more directly and sacramentally connected to the bishop through sacred promises made to him. Many of the Early Church Fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch, disciple of St. John, wrote in 110AD to the Church at Tralles about the indispensable theological importance of deacons in the Church:

“... let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ, and the bishop as Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Father, and the presbyters as the sanhedrin of God, and assembly of the apostles. Apart from these, there is no Church.”

During the early medieval era of the Church, however, the diaconate slowly evolved into a mere stepping stone to priesthood (a temporary, transitional diaconate). What had been a permanent and pastoral ministry for centuries in the Early Church became a more temporary order bestowed only for weeks or months prior to priestly ordination. The evolution of the diaconate into a more “transitional” order was due primarily to the demand for more priests following the Roman Emperor’s conversion and the explosion of Christianity. Bishops began to delegate more of their governing and oversight authority to priests. Deacons, because of their training and experience, became the logical targets for addressing a priestly vocation crisis.

Beginning with discussions at the Council of Trent in the 16th Century, and eventually culminating at the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the permanent and more pastoral nature of the diaconate was restored by the Bishops. The bishops determined that a diaconal presence was vital and necessary as had been realized in the first centuries of the Church. The restoration at the Second Vatican Council had much to do with revisiting the sacramental nature of the bishop in the Church, and the priests and deacons are his two arms, sharing in his apostolic mission, but in different ways. The Bishop is the “fullness” of priesthood and servanthood (diakonia), and priests and deacons share in the apostolic mission in a graduated way under his authority.

Deacons share in the apostolic mission of the bishop and are ordained, not unto priesthood, but unto a life of service in ministry as the bishop directs. Deacons are not wards of the Church, their diaconal ministry is offered without compensation, pay or benefits. There are some deacons who may be employed by the local Church (e.g., as a business manager) but this is separate and distinct from diaconal service and ministry they provide. The deacon’s service at altar during the Eucharist celebration is a sacramental reflection of Christ the Servant in the Church. A deacon is called to be an icon of Christ the Servant in the world, sent to help animate and remind all vocations of the need to engage in selfless service that proceeds from the Eucharistic celebration out into the world. Like Christ, deacons are called to “serve and not be served” and remind the faithful of this great mandate. This is why the Deacon is given the profound honor of announcing the dismissal of the Mass: “*go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.*”

If you have any interest in learning more about the ordained ministry of the permanent deacon, the discernment and formation process required, please contact Deacon Bill Reid, Coordinator of Vocations at deacons2b@gmail.com or at 317- 846-1992.

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