

## THE REBIRTH OF THE DIACONATE IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

*Vatican news sources report that one of the proposals under discussion in the Central Preparatory Commission for the coming ecumenical council is the revival of the ancient office of deacon as a function independent of the priesthood to aid priests in their pastoral work. There have been numerous suggestions in recent years that the ancient functions of the deacon be restored, particularly in mission areas, to relieve priests of part of their work. The following article, a translation of a work which originally appeared in the July, 1961 issue of Una Sancta, a publication of the German Benedictines dedicated to restoring unity, contains just such a proposal with its supplementary arguments. We present it here, with the kind permission of Una Sancta, to provide our readers with a more intimate and authoritative knowledge of the approaching Second Vatican Council.*

While the Diaconate has been preserved as a ministry in the Eastern Churches, and especially the Orthodox Churches since the days of the apostles, it has become in the Roman Church a mere gate-way to the Priesthood. According to the designation of the Code of Canon Law, a man cannot be ordained a deacon at all unless he has the earnest intention of becoming a priest. The candidate receives the Diaconate ordination, but he does not exercise the ministry corresponding to this ordination, or if he does, it is only sporadically.

At his seminary or in his home parish, he discharges his office as deacon at the altar in mediating or levitical functions; he occasionally assists in the distribution of Holy Communion; perhaps someone might even hear him preach. Yet because the time between the ordinations to Diaconate and Priesthood is short, there can be only a few scattered occasions for fulfilling this ministry. In any case however, the Diaconate as a genuine ministry does not live in the consciousness of the faithful.

We beseech the Church then to revive the Diaconate as a ministry. We want nothing new; but we want to forge a link with the early Church. Still, on the other hand, we do not want a destitute restoration—i.e., a mere carbon-copy of a distinct historical set-up, even if there exists a some-

what similar situation—but we want a true rebirth, which leans back on the great structure built in the circumstances of the early Church, so that the Diaconate as an active ministry has a place in the needs and crises of our day.

### The Character of the Ministry of the Deacon

The ordination to the Diaconate represents the first step of ordination. That it has the sacramental character, it is true, is not defined dogma, but today it can be shown to be a certain and universal teaching (Rahner). The ministry of deacon is therefore a priestly ministry, even if the deacon is not a priest (who sacrifices) and it ought to become a genuine ministry again. A man could then become a deacon and remain one for life, without having the intention of becoming a priest. And it should become a genuine ministry in its own right once more because it *is* a genuine ministry of its own worth. Contrasted with the ministry of the priest, that of the deacon has its own special character, its own special sphere of activity, and therefore, its own special calling and its own grace of office.

The proper value of the Diaconate is essentially underscored by the striking thought that the ministry of priest and deacon are proportionately formed out of the fulness of the ministry of bishop. Two ministries have been formed; they each have their own signification, their own stamp (character). They are, therefore, two distinct ministries: the deacon is not a priest and, further, the deacon is not a 'miniature-priest,' not a 'narrowed-down-priest,' just as the priest is not a 'narrowed-down-bishop.'

Even if the ministry belonging to the Priesthood in its fullest extension, all the way to the very summit—to the servant of the servants of God—should be a service in the spirit of Him who has said of Himself, 'I have not come to be served, but to serve,' still, for all that, this humble service is also the characteristic of the ministry belonging to the deacon. One may say: the Diaconate is the particular serving-mode of the priestly existence. Development of an unwarped humility is not an easy thing. Humility is a manly virtue; it is the virtue of the Lord, who has set an example for us—'Learn of me. . . .' It is 'service mettle,' this spirit to serve, to *dicákoviev* [diakonein].

The idea that both ministries are formed out of the Episcopate does not contradict the traditional formulated rule of the Council of Trent (Session 23, Canon 6) concerning the order of precedence of the steps to the Priesthood. The ministry of the priest has a higher rank than that of the deacon. This is evident in the areas of law and liturgy: at least in general,

the more important functions are assigned to the priest, and the simpler ones to the deacon. The priest is the consecrator at the Holy Sacrifice; ordinarily, he is the dispenser of the sacraments; he administers the sacrament of Penance; he bestows solemn Baptism as well as the oils for the sick. The deacon is not a co-consecrator; he is the assistant to the priest at the altar, where both stand together in the '*Missa cum diacono*.' His fulfilling of service is forcefully expressed at the offering of the chalice (as is found today in the Pontifical Mass): the deacon, with one hand, holds the base of the chalice; with the other, the arm of the priest.

May we not say in the Western Church that the deacon is, together with the priest, the servant of the bishop? Thus for example: 1) in the preaching of the word of God, the deacon relates what the bishop teaches; he is, as was true in the early days of the Church, the right hand man of the bishop, the father of the poor, doing the works of love. 2) The active social work of charity directly distinguishes the ministry of the deacon in a special way and separates it from the ministry of the priest. 3) And finally, he is the servant of the Eucharist. When, at his ordination, the deacon is called '*comminister et cooperator corporis et sanguinis Domini*' the dignity of his ministry is thereby accentuated. Even when he stands at the lowest step of the priestly order of precedence, he exercises a holy ministry. How many sayings of the Fathers of the Church can be cited which point out the high significance of his work.

The deacon in the parish as well is not an 'under-worker' of the pastor, not a 'general servant'; and he is not charged with the care of souls by a private concession. He is an *ordained* helper in the care of souls, who can expect to be accepted by his pastor as a genuine partner. On the other hand, the deacon is unequivocally under the pastor, who decides the direction the care of souls will take and who distributes the work.

Yet despite this, there is a sphere of work which the deacon can and should independently and directly engage in—in the area of active social work of charity he is master. The deacon stands on his own in his ministry for his family and community, where he is under the central direction of the diocese. The Church could still stress this independence of the deacon through a personal gradation in the office itself: the parish-deacon as *primus inter pares* and the arch-deacon as the representative of the bishop.

Moreover, through all this, an even clearer rightful limitation of powers results, so that both the pastor and the deacon will thereby benefit. The clear legitimate rule is a protective caution and takes away even remotely possible differences. For any profitable success, the deacon needs definite

magnitude of social worth and also a right measure of independence. This clarification is surely a genuine object of interest, but it would be against the spirit of the Diaconate to overstress the matter.

Therefore, it can be said: 1) that the Lord has appointed his Priesthood to govern the whole of the Church; 2) that the Church (and not only in the Apostolic times) can from her nature give over the priestly ministry to specialized offices; 3) that she can also form a specialized office out of her fulness of power and can further give this portion to a definite person by means of a sacrament. The Church has made use of this power. If she has the freedom to create specialized offices, she also has the freedom to eliminate the special ministry of the deacon or to define another one; she also has the freedom to let it remain, but as a new ministry—as is appropriate for these days.

Besides, the Church should renew the Diaconate on the basis of *external* reasons. The need for priests, the difficult demand on the priest and in great part for work which does not genuinely belong to the priest, the danger of the suffocation of the world mission, the critical situation in Latin America—all these are indisputable facts which press the point home to give the priest the best possible assistant: the deacon.

And we cannot overlook the basic *internal* reasons which—independent of the critical situations—should move the Church to renew the Diaconate. Karl Rahner has completed a forceful list of such reasons: the ordination of the deacon is a sacrament; is it then tenable that the Church not allow a ministry to correspond permanently to that ordination, that for the good of the Church the special grace of office be commissioned but not the ministry? The hierarchy needs helpers who do not feel like second class workers, but who recognize their capability of shouldering sacred duties in distinct departments of the Church. The ministry of the deacon gives a man a life-long commission and he should on that account do it. 'The Church has functions which, above all in our time, cannot be carried out by the priest in a satisfactorily intensive manner, although they are integrally involved in the ministry and vital for the Church' (Rahner). And especially is all this exemplified in charity.

Congar says that the Church does not let the work of charity be entirely given over to the laity. The hierarchy and the ministry must make the Lord known through the work of love. If the priest cannot do this on account of his burdens, then it must fall to the deacon. If we are agreed that the Diaconate is a ministry of singular stamp, a genuine ministry, then it should be active in the Church. Why has the Church preserved the deacon-ordina-

tion through the centuries even in this day? Only as a foundation for piety? Or does she not wish to keep the possibility open for bringing back the old ministry? Has not the time come?

It is true that some duties belonging to the deacon could be fulfilled just as well by Secular Institutes, Lay Missionaries, and Catholic Action, but for a long time now, are not the members of the men's Secular Institute who are concerned with aid for the ministry, charity, and catechesis rather few? In France, there are the *Frères missionnaires des campagnes* and the *Auxiliaires du clergé* of which one is a Secular Institute and the other a Society. In Germany, there is still nothing like this. —And what about laity?

However worthwhile the help from a trained laity is for the trained priest, it still cannot supply that which the important and close-at-hand deacon can do. Further, that the laity perform all the work of the deacon, including the liturgical functions (the distribution of Holy Communion, the administering of solemn Baptism) stands completely in opposition to the wish of the Council of Trent: the functions which follow from ordination should be practiced by those ordained. This was so important to the Council that it desired rather to dispense the Minor Orders than to have the unordained perform these functions. And it also stands in opposition to the feelings of the laity themselves.

On the other hand, it must be stated: the priest must be relieved of work which does not primarily belong to his genuine call; he must be liberated from work which could be done just as well by a layman. Thus, as a rule, it makes no sense to put such work on the shoulders of the ordained deacon instead of the laity. Following this principle, it is also a matter of aversion if the layman is hindered in his ecclesiastical work because of the deacon.

### Celibacy or Marriage

In the discussion about the Diaconate, there has been stirring in the background the question whether the deacon should be bound to celibacy or not. From what has been said, let it be pointed out clearly that in the years to come there can be two ways of life possible for the deacon: the *celibate* deacon in the Secular Institute or in an association of an Order, which carries out charitable or catechetical duties with his help in the ministry (especially in the mission), and the *married* deacon in the world.

In France, there are in progress framework-attempts by the Secular Institutes and associations of Orders to dedicate themselves to necessary work for the care of souls, making it possible for non-priestly members to become

ordained deacons. It would be greatly welcomed if this desire be fulfilled. The celibacy of the deacon would flow from the fact that these institutions live according to the way of the Gospel. The Church may, nevertheless, give to the deacon in the world the possibility of marriage.

The celibacy of the priest rests not on a divine command; there is no necessary connection between the office of priest and celibacy. That the Church acknowledges marriage for the priest among Uniate Christians as a possible way of life, that she has long-sightedness in allowing exceptions under special circumstances (in that she bestows priestly ordination on converted Lutheran ministers) show that the juncture of the priestly office and celibacy is not grounded in the nature of the office.

Celibacy certainly belongs, in its very inception, to the way of life for the anchorite and the monk. And celibacy was well adapted to the high dignity of the priest; it suited him in a special way. Celibacy for the sake of heaven is objectively higher than marriage. Wherefore, it is reasonable and fitting that the priest realize the objectively higher order of perfection. The Western Church has extolled celibacy of the priest in Canon Law; nevertheless, this subject has not been exhausted in legal declarations. Virginity extends to deep mystical strata, and in the Roman Church, it is hallowed through ancient tradition. Only recently (at the Roman Synod), the Holy Father has declared again that the Church will hold fast to the celibate priesthood.

The priest should not belong to a human being, because he belongs to *all* men, who are entrusted to his pastoral care; the bishop is married to his diocese; the pastor is dedicated to his parish. For this reason he should not pour out his love on a woman and family; much more can he devote his time to God, much more can he be free for God and the Church. This freedom however is not to be understood in a material way: so that there is more time for the fulfillment of the vocation, so that there are fewer shackles and more detachments for ecclesiastical authority—but this freedom must be taken as an opportunity of giving undivided love to God and the Church.

Now, how does all this relate to the deacon? Is celibacy to be measured in the same way for him as for the priest? The deacon is the possessor of a priestly ministry as well; he also stands, even if only in a restricted sense, in the person of Christ. But between the ministry of the priest and that of the deacon there endures, as was said above, an objectively distinct gradation, to which the faithful will have a good reaction. Then, when virginity and marriage are represented as two objectively distinct levels of perfection,

would it then be proper to conclude that the priest, as possessor of the higher ministry, choose the higher grade of perfection (virginity), while marriage be metered out to the deacon?

The Eastern Churches realize this dichotomy on a higher level: they exact celibacy only from the bishop, as the possessor of the full priestly power, while in the case of the priest (and also for the deacon) they allow marriage before the bestowal of Orders and its continuation thereafter. *A majori ad minus*, one can there conceive of the offering of celibacy to the deacon in the Western Church.

In this question of marriage, one who can see nothing but a concession to human weakness will be able to comprehend the proposal only with difficulty. But the idea of marriage is consummated in the image of the love of Christ for His Church and as a Sacrament; if he keeps before his eyes the positive constructive value of marriage, he sees in the possibility of marriage for the deacon something of the first rank—a calling to the deacon to set an example of Christian marriage for the community, and especially in these days of marital devastation. Then it cannot be difficult to affirm the idea of the compatibility of the ministry of the deacon and matrimony.

However one takes a stand in this matter, he finds himself with the question of celibacy in the area of suitability, so that the Church in her decision is basically free—theoretically in the case of the priest and practically in the case of the deacon.

With the priest, we in the Roman Church are faced with an old honorable tradition; with the deacon, we are faced only with a tradition of ordination, not of ministry. When celibacy is now demanded of the deacon, it is in prospect of the fact that he will become a priest. But even this would be different in the case of an independent deacon; he wants to remain a deacon for life. And here the Church in no way is hindered by tradition.

If therefore the Church is free in her decision, then we are faced with the decisive question: will so many celibate deacons be found that these desired results can come about? The recognition becomes clearer that we will not have enough celibate deacons. And especially is this of concern for the missions and Latin America, where the lack of priests is undoubtedly basically due to celibacy. Here only can the institution of the married deacon reach the goal.

But also in the old Christian countries, we find ourselves, as more and more is conceded, alone with the celibate deacon, but not as a help on a large scale. But if in the long run a genuine improvement of the ministry

is guaranteed only by the married deacon, still the Church will not disregard the celibacy of the deacon, but will foster it. Furthermore, as in the case of the priest, she is authorized to fix a uniform ruling, i.e., she need not demand universal celibacy of the deacon.

If the Church still insists upon the celibacy of the deacon, then much of her manpower is lost. Are there no married men who have indicative priestly-ministerial talents and ability which they have received from God? Does God invest many young men with talents without at the same time giving them special graces for a chaste life? There is a question here of persons who perhaps have never thought of becoming a priest because they knew they were not called to it, but would nevertheless willingly serve God and the Church as married deacons. It is a question of new forces. The men in the deacon-circle are a proof that there are such men. Can the Church today give up all claim to these powers? Finally, the Diaconate should certainly be no accommodation for ex-Theology students, even though many of them could remain as good deacons, maintaining their service to the Church. It is God who gives the different vocations; we do not need to engage in propaganda for the sake of the deacon by ruling out the possibility of marriage.

Above all the practical considerations, may the salient thoughts that follow be a solution to this problem of celibacy and marriage. The celibacy of the priest and the marriage of the deacon both represent, each in its own way, the bond of Christ and the Church: the unmarried bishop and priest in the loving offering to diocese and parish and the deacon in the loving surrender to his wife, in whom he may love the Church (even as his wife should love and see Christ in him). Is there not present, both in celibacy and in marriage, a visible sign of the marriage of Christ with His Church? Cannot we rightfully say that both, on different levels, are authorized expressions of the Priesthood of Christ? The Church would thus join in her Priesthood the positive sides of both forms of life.

The life of the deacon will be a life of sacrifice as well. The sacrifice of the deacon for the most part is different from that of the priest; but the sacrifices at hand will not be trifling ones, as they are not in the case of the priest. There is no need to fear therefore, that if marriage is permissible for the deacon, his magnanimous calling will somehow be degraded. It has been sufficiently said that the realization of our interest in no way implies a restriction or, for that matter, implies a danger to the celibacy of the priest. He who becomes a priest still remains bound to celibacy. The Western Church will not alter the condition of celibacy of her priests and

she will know how to state clearly in her profound teaching that no doubt could arise, whether on our part or on the part of the mission.

On the contrary, with reason and right, one can say: the Church can even more firmly hold fast to the celibacy of the priest if she creates the institution of the married deacon. Also, there would be no danger which would threaten to leave fewer priests to any noticeable extent. If a falling-off occurs, as a rule it is because of those who are not genuinely called to be priests. "The deacon will protect the world from unhappy priests" (D'Souza).

The problem is considered only superficially if the treatment is not of a thoroughly theoretical nature, but is rather colored by remote critical situations of the Church, such as her needs and sorrows. The rebirth of the Diaconate must be permitted, even if it displays, in this or that respect, a risk for the Church. No reform without risk! Only the greatness of the hoped-for success and the grade of urgency can impel the overwhelming quality of the risk. Time makes its demands; the need for the care of souls expands. Perhaps it is a dangerous thing in these circumstances to speak about the deacon in the year 2000. Many a bishop may sadly wait for the day when, in his diocese, the Diaconate will come to life. In that case, the Church could issue a legal framework which would certainly allow for special arrangements for local conditions; she could then allow any bishop or group of bishops to introduce the Diaconate in their dioceses. With this, the risk would be checked. But, in any case, it is essential that a beginning be made soon; for it is only then that we shall see, as Congar says, where the possible difficulties lie.

## **The Rebirth of the Deacon in the Sight of the Ecumenical Movement**

### *A. Relation to the Eastern Church*

1. Through the rebirth of the Diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church, we would again have the genuine ministry of the deacon, which the Eastern Church as well as the Orthodox have preserved through the centuries.

To be sure, the needs of the time (persecution and material difficulties) also lead us to this conclusion—that, in practice, the Diaconate has not much of its ancient significance; the Uniate Churches have widely adapted themselves to Western usage, and still the ministry as such exists with them. There would be a further communication between us if the ministry would revive on our side too.

2. The Roman Catholic Church, in prospect of the desired union with

the Orthodox Eastern Churches, will hardly be able to bring up the question of the celibacy of the priest in the Uniate Churches. On the condition that she create the institution of the married deacon, she would underline, in her own ranks, the recognition of this form of life for the priestly ministry in the lower orders, and thereby accentuate her positive support of the married priest of the Eastern Church.

3. And along liturgical lines, gratifying points of contact would develop. We admire in the Eastern Church the deep union of the people with the liturgy, which is expressed in an actually stirring participation of the faithful, an active partaking, which far surpasses the regimented practicalities in the liturgy as it exists in the Western Church, a partaking which is inconceivable without the deacon. How full of life do their prayers and hymns flow back and forth between priest and deacon on the one side and the people on the other. Thus grows the consciousness of the community that they are together with the priest and deacon, the holy people of God.

The rebirth of the Diaconate would also give something back to our liturgy from the devout solemnities of old: the deacon could come to the altar every day with the priest for the celebration of the holy mysteries. This lofty enactment would above all signify much for the mission.

And, if we hope for positive results from the Council on the question of the vernacular language, this question must be examined as well: is it not possible in the daily participation of the deacon in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice to let priests everywhere say a portion of specifically sacerdotal prayers in Latin, while the prayers and lessons which are addressed to the people, be assigned to the deacon in the language of the people? Thereby we would also come upon a liturgy of greater proximity to the people and one of mighty vivacity; the social consciousness would widen. Would not the deacon at the same time guide the people as a born commentator? (provided that such an assistant is not made superfluous through the coming liturgical reform, since, in that case, the ceremonies will become intelligible in themselves and the lines of the liturgy brought into proper focus).

#### *B. Relation to the Lutherans*

Through the renewal of the Diaconate, we would also see a joyous advance. Certainly our Lutheran brothers have no Office-priesthood in our sense of the term, although they say that, through the ordination of the minister and correspondingly through the vocation and eventual ordination of the deacon, he just as well receives a spiritual power. But for a hundred

years, they have been usefully employing the Diaconate; there is the deacon who lives a common life and there is the deacon who lives in the parish.

The Lutheran deacon is nevertheless not a possessor of a direct Church ministry; he is a member of a Brotherhood, which sends him into society. But the progress in the ministry of the Church is continual. The Lutheran Church acknowledges the service of the Brotherhood which is done for the community and ordains the deacon, inasmuch as his incumbent work demands. In the Lutheran Church there is a steering away from a one-man system; this permits the old ministries, including the Lector, to become active once more (cf. the efforts of the newspaper, *Das Hilfswerk*, at present *Das Diakonische Werk*, and the endeavors of the Michael-Brotherhood).

1. We do have the ordination of the deacon, but the ministry is not used. If the ministry is resurrected, we could, without doubt, learn from the more than a century's experience of the Lutheran Christians, especially with regard to the training and spiritual formation of the deacon. And even if the concept of fraternity does not meet our understanding of the ministry, which is founded upon ordination which in itself is efficacious, still it remains to be seen how far the educational ideas of brotherhood can be taken over. Stark parallels to the educational principles for the formation of the deacon are found in the Seminary of the Mission in Lisieux. The circle of friends for the renewal of the Diaconate expressly states that the concept of brotherhood can be realized.

Especially worthwhile is the education of the student-deacon in the matter of the choice of partner in marriage and with regard to marriage itself, as well as the spiritual formation of the bride and spouse of the deacon in the days of preparation and in the partaking of the life in the brotherhood.

2. In our consideration, the essential point would be missed were we not to examine the success of the Lutheran parsonages in the life of church and people. The results cannot be praised too much. There are with our Lutheran brothers numerous families of pastors, in which the call of the minister has been bequeathed from generation to generation, from father to son. Today approximately one-fourth of the rising generation of theologians has grown from the families of Lutheran ministers. These people, by means of the prototype of marriage and family, have accomplished great things for the church and people. The wife of the pastor is a helper to her husband, and where she cannot be, the marriage supports the vocation of the man. In a similar manner, this may be said also of the family of the Lutheran deacon.

Thus, in the face of all this, we stress the value of priestly celibacy and (certainly fully acquainted with human limitations and human failures and with what is of value in the marriage and family of the Lutheran pastors) we can see how the marriage and family of the deacon are of value for us.

Also we can hope that he would draw a noticeable number of recruits to the Diaconate. We trust that the marriage and family of the deacon would stand as an upright example before the eyes of society and especially of the youth of society.

Under such conditions, the rebirth of the Diaconate would most assuredly be recognized with joyous acceptance by our Lutheran brothers.

Whenever there is an approach of the separated Christian to the domains of discipline or liturgy or any other possible area, a building stone for the Ecumenical Movement is laid. The rebirth of the Diaconate can be a giant step on the way to mutual understanding.

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(translated by Joseph Albert Doshner, O.P.)

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE THEOLOGY OF ST. JOSEPH

**E**VERY FAMILY HAS ITS JOSEPH. Somewhere, if not in the present, at least in days gone by there was a man named Joseph. And every land and tongue has its word for Joseph: José, Giuseppe, Josef, Jozef. The name "Joseph" has been and remains a most popular name for all people and all ages. Its appeal is universal.

Two thousand years ago in Palestine, a small and insignificant land, there lived a Joseph who has become more widely known and more deeply loved than the very name which he bore. St. Joseph, husband of the Blessed Virgin and virgin father of Jesus, is now the official patron of the Universal Church.

Joseph has not always enjoyed this high official honor of the Church. For centuries he remained in the background of the Church's devotional life, just as he had lived in relative obscurity during his lifetime. The