



The Deacon: A Man Of Service

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Vatican City, September 29, 1964 (R.N.S.)—"Fathers of the Second Vatican Council have voted endorsement of a married diaconate by a wide majority. If promulgated by the Pope after ultimate passage by the Council, the diaconate would be open to older men already married."

Christian Service

After his forty day-forty night fast in the desert, Jesus refused to turn stones into bread and rebel against his loving Father, "... and behold, angels came and *ministered* to him." Unannounced, Jesus came to Peter's house and cured Peter's mother-in-law of her fever,

“ . . . and she rose and began *to wait* on them.” While Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his words, “Martha was busy about much *serving*.” The fact that these three Scripture passages show Jesus being waited on by women and angels is colorful enough in itself, yet their value here is verbal. The three words which in one form or another signify an obliging accomodation to the comfort of Jesus, are rooted in the Greek word *diakonein*, an uneventful term when confined to life in the kitchen, but a radiantly telling term when allowed to expand to the Christian life in the world. It is one thing to wait on tables, supply clothing, or attend a taskmaster, but quite another thing to give unconditional service to God and his holy people. To be available to discharge Christian work with a generous heart, to be on call to carry out in all freedom God’s commandments of love is to render a yeoman’s service; it is to live Christ.

The service which the angels, Martha, and Peter’s mother-in-law rendered Jesus is contrasted to that which Jesus rendered them—and to that service to which Jesus commissioned his followers to stretch forth their hands. The three texts cited above find up-dated counterparts in the following passages:

When it looked as though the moment for Jerusalem’s overthrow was at hand James and John forthrightly came to Jesus and asked him for glorious positions at his right and left hand. Upon the indignation of the ten, Jesus revealed his teaching on service:

You know that, among the gentiles, those who claim to bear rule lord it over them, and those who are great among them make the most of the power they have. With you it must be otherwise; whoever has a mind to be great among you, must be your *servant* and whoever has a mind to be first among you, must be your *slave*. So it is that the Son of Man did not come to have service done him; he came *to serve* others. . . .

While Mark records this saying of Jesus as Jesus and the twelve were on their way up to Jerusalem, Luke places it at the Last Supper:

And there was rivalry among them over the question, which of them was to be accounted the greatest. But he told them, The kings of the gentiles lord it over them, and those who bear rule over them win the name of benefactors. With you it is not to be so; no difference is to be made, among you, between the greatest and the youngest of all, between him who commands and him who serves. Tell me, which is greater, the man who sits at table, or the man who serves him? Surely the man who sits at table; yet I am here among you as your *servant*.

Mark and Luke contrast the despotism of pagan rulers to the service of Jesus; Matthew drives the thrust home.

The Scribes and Pharisees . . . have established themselves in the place from which Moses used to teach; do what they tell you . . . but do not imitate their actions. . . . Their heart is set on taking the chief places at table and the first seats in the synagogue and having their hands kissed in the market place. . . . Among you, the greatest is to be the *servant of all*.

John, instead of merely recording one of Jesus' sayings on service, presents him carrying out a parable in action. Much like Ezechiel when he acted out the seige of Jerusalem by placing an iron pan between his face and the not so holy city, Jesus existentially demonstrates what service means:

During supper, Jesus, well aware that the Father had entrusted every thing to him, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from the table, laid aside his garments, and taking a towel, tied it round him. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel.

Jesus wasn't content to deliver a speech; he trod the stage of the upper room and forcefully unfolded the apostolic scope of service. Jesus not only washed the feet of his disciples, but by undressing he assumed the role of a slave. To use an emphatic expression, he went all the way; he served perfectly:

Why then, if I have washed your feet, I who am the Master and the Lord, you in your turn ought to wash each other's feet.

The theological (and therefore real) significance of these words of Jesus is simply this: The men who were to carry on the Christ-life in official capacities after Jesus had left them had to realize the unmistakable bearing of that office. In short, all those who would be apostles had to become men of service, men of a *diaconia* which would transcend all offices: bishops to stewards. Even more, this official service would set the example for the Christian life in all its forms, hierarchial as well as lay, so much so that service would be synonymous with Christianity.

We know that Jesus set aside men to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. But he set them aside to bring others together in love, i.e., to perfect the saints (the Christians) "for a

work of ministry" until his body (the Church) is built up. This *diaconia* lovingly rendered by the hierarchy becomes the guide for the service of the laity. In Congar's words, "Between man and man, it is all a matter of exchange. God alone gives." Congar sees the set-up of superior and subordinate (by reason of authority and obedience) as valid only *within* the constitutive mark of Christianity itself, i.e., within the giving of loving service to mankind and of appreciative thanksgiving to God.

The Christian life, then, is a life of vibrant service, a whole-hearted *diaconia*. By that fact, every Christian is a deacon, i.e., a person of service. This is hardly a conclusion, but rather a beginning, because when the Christian life is linked with service, and the Church is seen to be built up by way of service, a theological commentary on this basic reality must beware of being univocal in its dogmatization. In the first place, if the Christian life is to be anatomized in its full structure and sounded in its perfect dynamism it must be seen as a sacramental presence and a sacramental activity. As Schillebeeckx sees the matter, the sacraments bridge the gap between Jesus, glorified at his Father's right hand, and the unglorified mass of humanity on earth. Further, it must be stated that it is of the essence of Christianity to be sacramental, in both its vertical relationship to the grace of God and in its horizontal thrust to the contact with human persons. Therefore, Christian service must be viewed as a part of sacramentality.

Since Jesus is the original sacrament, his Church in her entirety is his sacramental presence on earth. Her vital existence is maintained, nourished, and expanded by means of sacramental actions. Sacramental initiation into the Church by way of the seal of Baptism is an initiation of service; further the character of Confirmation enables the Christian to perform his baptismally given service in a mature, energetic way. By Baptism and Confirmation a Christian is born and is set upon his feet; he bears the mark of the *laos*, the people of God (in contrast to the heathen, the *goyim*) and is given a layman's apostolic commission. In addition, when a Christian receives the character of Holy Orders, he is initiated into an official state with a special apostolic commission. Christians who do not receive this sacramental seal remain in the ranks of the *laos* but this time in contrast not to the *goyim* but to the clerics, the *kleros*. It is

in virtue of this sacramental calling that the Church is organized into hierarchy and laity, each with its own sacramental service to render.

The Church as the mystical body of Christ is formed by two generative movements: a vertical motion brings mankind into direct contact with Jesus through grace and a horizontal motion expands his historic glorification down the centuries until he comes again. The historic Incarnation is made present at any given moment in time both by the gift of God and the service of the hierarchy commissioned by Jesus. The teaching of Jesus, the offering of his sacrifice, his rule over mankind, do not take place through individual illuminations, personal acting-out of sacrificial motions, and self-appointments, but rather through the hierarchically effective representations of Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and Ruler. Since the Church in her hierarchy is prophetic, priestly, and regal, the grace-life that is transmitted to the laity is by that fact prophetic, priestly, and regal as well. This does not mean, however, that the laity is solely ministered to by the hierarchy, but rather, that since each member has a function to perform, the laity, having received the ministrations of the hierarchy, ministers to the world.

The hierarchy, as defined by the Council of Trent, includes the bishop, the priest, and the deacon. All other members are essentially laymen. Finally, Christian service as it is offered by each member of the Church, (bishop, priest, deacon, layman,) takes on functional differences.

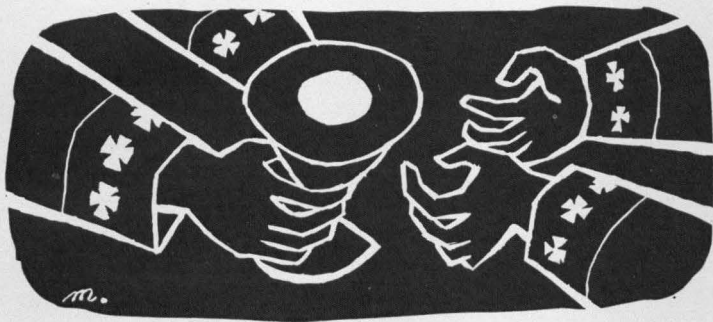
The Deacon's Service—Beginnings

Although it may seem unnecessary to ask whether the deacon should once again have a functioning place in the hierarchy, since the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council have already shown their desire to reactivate the ministering diaconate, still, the posing of the question helps us to know just who the deacon is, what his qualities must be, and what relation he bears to the Church.

It is important for the Church to look back to her early years: when she was being formed by Jesus' proclamation of the good news of salvation and by his election of the Twelve; when she was born from the side of Jesus on the cross; when she was sent into the world by the gift of the Holy Spirit. This retrospection reveals the Church's growth in the self-awareness of her nature and mission. The directly

instituted apostolic office reveals its functions being hierarchically graded into the high priesthood of the episcopate and into the priesthood and diaconate as participations in the bishop's office. The laity, also directly instituted, sees itself allowed to function towards the acquisition of holiness and as a witness of loving faith in the world, under the direction and example of the hierarchy.

In particular, Clement of Rome (96 a d.) in his letter to the Corinthians witnesses to the establishment of the diaconate. He sees special functions assigned to the bishop and a special office given to



the priest and an established rule of service for the layman, and indicates that a distinctive ministry falls to the deacons. He assigns to the bishop the function of overseer and to the deacon the function of faithful minister or helper. The *magisterium* belongs in a characteristic way to the bishop with the holy assistance of the priest; the *ministerium* is exercised in a specific way by the deacon. The deacon, then, is seen as a man of service; he is ordained to be of service to the laity under the guidance of the bishop.

The Church's meditative reflection on her early years recalls not only Clement in the west, but also Ignatius of Antioch in the east, to give testimony to the functioning deacon-office. Ignatius, in his letter to the Smyrneans, gives greeting to the man of God: the bishop, to the God-minded priests, to his fellow servants: the deacons, and to the rest of the community. In his letter to the Magnesians, Ignatius sees the bishop as presiding in the community in the place of God; he considers the priests as the council of apostles, and the deacons as entrusted with the ministry of Jesus.

Polycarp, a disciple of John the Apostle, demands that deacons

be men of justice in their service to the Church; they are to be more concerned with giving service than with seeking money. Other witnesses such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Apologies of Justin*, and the letters of Cyprian record the deacon as visiting the sick and the poor, as caring for the widows and orphans. In addition to these acts of expanded charity, the deacon is related as having a function in the liturgy. Ignatius, for example, calls the deacons "dispensers of the mysteries of Jesus Christ." Since the distribution of alms as a dilation of charity looks to the liturgy as its source of charity, the deacon is officially involved with the offering of gifts at the Eucharistic sacrifice and the allotment of gifts to the poor. The *Apostolic Constitutions* record that the deacon is to welcome the people into the church and direct them to their seats; at the offering of the people's gifts, the deacon is to assist at the altar. John Chrysostom announced at one time, "If anyone behave himself improperly, call the deacon!" Justin Martyr records that the deacons are commissioned to bring the Eucharistic gift to those who are not present at the liturgy-action. The deacon had care of the chalice and paten and of holy chrism. The singing of the Gospel was his special function on solemn occasions. He intoned the "Flectamus genua" at the orations and dismissed the congregation with the "Ite, missa est." If he could receive the epithet, "Cantor of David's Songs," he also was assigned to sing perhaps the most beautiful of all liturgical strains: the Easter-vigil-*Exultet*.

Moreover, the deacon is seen as a helper in the missionary activity of the bishop. The *Apostolic Constitutions* calls the deacon the eye and ear of the bishop. The deacon is a son to the bishop; he bears the bishop's messages to various communities; he visits the homes of the people and reports their needs to the bishop. The deacon is charged with the formation of the catechumens. And to areas where a shortage of priests afflicted the Church the deacon is sent to baptize.

In the tide of centuries, however, the deacon became moored to liturgical solemnities. A document of the seventh century proclaims God as the reward of those who do not leave the temple of the Lord by day or night, who are involved with the celebration of the sacred mysteries, and who bring the offerings to the altar. Further, in recent centuries the diaconate became a "milestone on the road to the priesthood," to use Horne's phrase.

Growth

No matter how interesting and valuable such a consideration of our early traditions is to us, we would be out of place to insist on an exact duplication of them in the present day. An argument like: "it was so then therefore it must be so now" does not allow for a Christianity which can cut across centuries with modification, adaptation, and development at this time or that, here and there. On the other hand, we would be equally erroneous to argue that because the diaconate had become a stepping-stone to the priesthood it must therefore remain so. This acceptance stunts the growth of the Church and, for all its good intentions to repel any frontal attack on discipline, itself makes an assault on what it defends.

The deacon as a man with a functioning office has been given new life because the times have called for him. In the first place, the Christian is existentially conscious of the fact that the liturgical act is not merely an intellectual commemoration, or a private devotion, but a vital community action in which each member of Christ's body both calls to mind, and experiences the mysteries of Christ's life. The restoration of the sacred liturgy by the Second Council of the Vatican has revealed the need for demarcation of function so that the layman and the cleric may know their part in the celebration. The assistance of the deacon in the liturgy will forge a bond between the priest and the people and will bridge their prayers of praise and petition.

Second, the shortage of priests in the world makes pastoral care a critical problem. Much of the priest's work toward parish-maturity and society-betterment is taken up with secondary concerns. The deacon will free the priest for preaching and counselling.

Third, the gulf which Horne notices between priests and people may be filled by the deacon, who would draw the attention of the people to a fuller Christian life by his charitable work in the parish, by his instruction of the children, and by his organization of parish activities.

Fourth, as Archbishop Ziade has noted in his observations at the Vatican Council, there are many missionary areas in which the priest is able to visit only once in long periods of time. A deacon stationed in these areas is of great assistance in providing the people with the word of God and the Holy Eucharist, reserved in his care.

Fifth, the married diaconate will be an effective sign of the sacramental holiness of marriage. A married deacon involved in the Eucharistic celebration by distributing the Lord's Body to the people is a living argument against the impious attitude of seeing something wrong between the reception of the Eucharist and marital love.

Identity

Who is this man who is called a deacon? The deacon is a Christian who has been sealed not only with the character and sign of Baptism and Confirmation but also with that of Holy Orders. He is then not a layman, but a member of the hierarchy. As such he has an official designation by Jesus with regard to the ministry of the sacraments and the service of the word. His service is authoritative with reference to the layman. He is a minister of the liturgy, a preacher of the word; he assists the priest in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice and solemn Baptism. He bears a responsibility toward the parish community. If he is a married man, he links in a special way the members of the community both to each other by his example of family-love and to the priest by his service at the altar.

He can bring the gift of love which finds its source in the liturgy into society; he can stand as a model to youth both by his example as a loving father, and by his zeal as a preacher of the word. To the deacon are held out immense possibilities of drawing back to the Church many workers who spend their energies divorced from her. He might be able to carry to fulfillment the good intentions of the worker-priests.

The deacon is to be a new man: formed out of earth of today's Church, prepared with specific training in Christian Doctrine and social work, ordained as the bishop imposes his right hand on the candidate's head and says: Receive the Holy Spirit for strength and resistance against satan and his temptations. The deacon is to be subject to the direction of the pastor in the care of the people. He will consider his strength the word of God; he will think of his task and burden as his loving mission to give courageous service to a world which is longing to find itself in the arms of God.

Let the deacon look to Stephen, the proto-martyr and proto-deacon, as a model of the fearless preacher. Let him look to Philip, who gave the Christian kerygma to the Ethiopian and baptized him.

Let the deacon keep Lawrence in mind as a worthy example of the deep fraternal love which must grow up between the priest and himself. Lawrence ran after Pope Sixtus, who was being taken away to be martyred, crying:

You have never offered the Holy Sacrifice without your minister. How have I displeased you? . . . Would you refuse him who has been your helper in distributing the Lord's Blood to be your companion in the sacrifice of your own blood?

Let the deacon redeem from oblivion the great bishop Martin of Tours, the soldier-saint, who shared his cloak with a beggar as his service to the poor. And of course there is Francis, who proclaimed, "Up to now I have been called Pietro Bernadone, but now I am the servant of God." He served by walking the roads of the world singing his songs of love and bringing goodness wherever he stopped and to whomever he encountered.

Yet there remains a man who gives the lion's share of service, who is the deacon or deacons, who calls others to follow him and gives them their commission to serve as deacons. The Lord Jesus still lives among us: on the one hand he is hungry, thirsty, naked, and in prison and he asks for service; on the other hand, he is full of power, rich in love and gives service.

The deacon called by Jesus and sent by him through his bishop into the world must bring service to that world, by discovering its needs and sounding the depths of its salvation. At least let the deacon have the freedom to grow in his newly born active service. Though perhaps he has come at the eleventh hour, still he has come, and the vineyard thirsts for his arrival.