

THE DEACON HAS MANY PASTORAL FUNCTIONS

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Pope John-Paul II

The Second Vatican Council determined the place deacons have in the Church's ministerial hierarchy in accordance with the most ancient tradition: "At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed 'not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service.' For strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the bishop and his group of priests they serve in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God" (LG 29). The formula "not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry" is taken from a text of Hippolytus' Apostolic Tradition, and the Council sets it against a broader horizon. In this ancient text, the "ministry" is specified as a "service to the bishop"; the Council stresses the service to the People of God. Actually, this basic meaning of the deacon's service was asserted at the beginning by St. Ignatius of Antioch, who called deacons the "ministers of God's Church," recommending that for this reason they should be pleasing to everyone (cf. Ad Trall., 2, 3). Down the centuries, in addition to being the bishop's helper, the deacon was also considered to be at the service of the Christian community.

In order to be allowed to carry out their functions, deacons receive before ordination the ministries of lector and acolyte. The conferral of these two ministries shows the essential twofold orientation of the deacon's functions, as Paul VI explains in his Apostolic Letter *Ad Pascendum* (1972):

"It is especially fitting that the ministries of lector and acolyte should be entrusted to those who, as candidates for the order of diaconate or priesthood, desire to devote themselves to God and to the Church in a special way. For the Church, which 'does not cease to take the bread of life from the table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ and offer it to the faithful,' considers it to be very opportune that both by study and by gradual exercise of the ministry of the word and of the altar candidates for sacred Orders should through intimate contact understand and reflect upon the double aspect of the priestly office" (Ench. Vat., IV, 1781).

This orientation is valid not only for the role of priests, but also for that of deacons.

It should be kept in mind that before Vatican II the lectorate and acolytate were considered minor Orders. In a letter to a bishop in 252, Pope Cornelius listed the seven ranks in the Church of Rome [1] : priests, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes, exorcists, lectors and porters. In the tradition of the Latin Church three were considered major Orders: those of the priest, deacon and subdeacon; four were minor Orders: those of the acolyte, exorcist, lector and porter. This arrangement of the ecclesiastical structure was due to the needs of Christian communities over the centuries and was determined by the Church's authority.

When the permanent diaconate was re-established, this structure was changed. As to the sacramental framework, it was restored to the three Orders of divine institution: the diaconate, presbyterate and episcopate. In fact, in his Apostolic Letter on ministries in the Latin Church (1972), Pope Paul VI suppressed tonsure, which

marked the entrance into the clerical state, and the subdiaconate, whose functions were given to lectors and acolytes. He kept the lectorate and the acolytate; however, they were no longer considered Orders, but ministries conferred by installation rather than by ordination. These ministries must be received by candidates to the diaconate and presbyterate, and are also open to laymen in the Church who want to assume only the responsibilities corresponding to them: the lectorate, as the office of reading the Word of God in the liturgical assembly, except for the Gospel, carrying out certain roles (such as leading the singing and instructing the faithful); and the acolytate, instituted to help the deacon and to minister to the priest [2] .

The Second Vatican Council lists the deacon's liturgical and pastoral functions: "to administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, to officiate at funeral and burial services" (LG 29).

Pope Paul VI laid down in addition that the deacon, "in the name of the parish priest or bishop, could legitimately lead dispersed Christian communities" (SDO 22, 10: Ench. Vat., II, 1392). This is a missionary function to be carried out in territories, surroundings, social contexts and groups where a priest is lacking or not easily available. Especially in those places where no priest is available to celebrate the Eucharist, the deacon gathers and leads the community in a celebration of the Word with the distribution of the sacred species duly reserved. This is a supply function which the deacon fulfills by ecclesial mandate when it is a case of providing for the shortage of priests. This substitution, which can never be complete, reminds communities lacking priests of the urgent need to pray for priestly vocations and to do their utmost to encourage them as something good both for the Church and for themselves. The deacon too should foster this prayer.

Again, according to the Council, the functions assigned to the deacon can in no way diminish the role of lay people called and willing to cooperate in the apostolate with the hierarchy. On the contrary, the deacon's tasks include that of "promoting and sustaining the apostolic activities of the laity." To the extent that he is present and more involved than the priest in secular environments and structures, he should feel encouraged to foster closeness between the ordained ministry and lay activities, in common service to the kingdom of God.

The deacon has a charitable function as well, which also entails an appropriate service in the administration of property and in the Church's charitable works. In this area, the function of deacons is: "on behalf of the hierarchy, to exercise the duties of charity and administration in addition to social work" [3] .

In this regard, the Council recommends to deacons what stems from the oldest tradition of Christian communities: "Dedicated to duties of charity and of administration, let deacons be mindful of the admonition of blessed Polycarp: 'Be merciful, diligent, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all'" (LG 29; cf. Ad Phil., 5, 2).

According to the Council, the diaconate seems of particular value in the young churches. This is why the decree *Ad Gentes* establishes:

"Where episcopal conferences deem it opportune, the order of the diaconate should be restored as a permanent state of life according to the norms of the Constitution

Lumen Gentium. For there are men who actually carry out the functions of the deacon's office, either preaching the Word of God as catechists, or presiding over scattered Christian communities in the name of the pastor and the bishop, or practicing charity in social or relief work. It is only right to strengthen them by the imposition of hands which has come down from the apostles, and to bind them more closely to the altar, that they may carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate" (AG 16).

It is known that wherever missionary activity has led to the formation of new Christian communities, catechists often play an essential role. In many places they lead the community, instruct it, and encourage it to pray. The Order of the diaconate can confirm them in the mission they are exercising, through a more official consecration and a mandate that is more expressly granted by the authority of the Church through the conferral of a sacrament. In this sacrament, in addition to a sharing in the grace of Christ the Redeemer poured out in the Church through the Holy Spirit, the source of every apostolate, an indelible character is received which in a special way configures the Christian to Christ, "who made himself the 'deacon' or servant of all" (CCC, n. 1570).

[1] Â cf. Eusebius, Hist. Eccl., VI, 43: PG 20, 622

[2] Â cf. Ministeria quaedam, V, VI: Ench. Vat., IV, 1762-1763

[3] Â Paul VI, SDO 22, 9: Ench. Vat., II, 1392