

DEACONS ARE CALLED TO LIFE OF HOLINESS

Pope John Paul II

Catechesis at the General Audience of October 20, 1993

1. Among the catechetical topics on the diaconate the one about the spirit of the diaconate is particularly important and attractive, for it concerns and involves all who receive this sacrament in order to carry out its functions in a Gospel perspective. This is the way that leads its ministers to Christian perfection and allows them to give truly effective service (<diaconia>) in the Church, so as "to build up the Body of Christ" (Eph 4:12).

Here is the source of diaconal spirituality, which is rooted in what the Second Vatican Council calls the "sacramental grace of the diaconate" (<Ad gentes>, n. 16). In addition to being a valuable help in carrying out various tasks, it deeply affects the deacon's heart, spurring him to offer, to give his whole self to serving the kingdom of God in the Church. As the very word "diaconate" indicates, what characterizes the interior mind and will of the one who receives the sacrament is the <spirit of service>. In the diaconate an effort is made to carry out what Jesus stated about his mission: "The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve—to give his life in ransom for many" (Mk 10:45; Mt 20:28).

Doubtless Jesus addressed these words to the Twelve whom he chose for the priesthood, to make them understand that, although endowed with authority conferred by him, they should act as he did, <as servants>. The advice applies, then, to all ministers of Christ; however, it has particular meaning for deacons, for whom the stress is placed explicitly on this service by virtue of their ordination. Although they do not exercise the pastoral authority of priests, in carrying out all their functions their particular aim is to show an intention to serve. If their ministry is consistent with this spirit, they shed greater light on that identifying feature of Christ's face: service. They are not only "servants of God", but also of their brothers and sisters.

Candidates for diaconate must be ready to serve

2. This teaching of the spiritual life is of Gospel origin and entered the earliest Christian tradition as that ancient third-century text called the <Didascalia Apostolorum> confirms. In it deacons are encouraged to take their inspiration from the Gospel incident of the washing of feet: "If the Lord did this", it says, "then you deacons should not hesitate to do it for the sick and infirm, since you are workers of the truth, who have put on Christ" (XVI, 36: Connolly ea., 1904, p. 151). The diaconate commits one to following Jesus with this attitude of humble service, which is expressed not only in works of charity but shapes and embraces one's whole way of thinking and acting.

This perspective explains the condition set by the document <Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem> for admitting young men to formation as deacons: "Only those young men should be enrolled to train for the diaconate who have shown a natural inclination for service to the hierarchy and the Christian community" (n. 8: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1378). The

"<natural inclination>" should not be understood in the sense of a simple spontaneity of natural dispositions, however much this too is a presupposition to be considered. It is rather an inclination of nature inspired by grace, with a spirit of service that conforms human behavior to Christ's. The sacrament of the diaconate develops this inclination: it makes the subject share more closely in Christ's spirit of service and imbues the will with a special grace, so that in all his actions he will be motivated by a <new inclination> to serve his brothers and sisters.

This service should first of all take the form of helping the Bishop and the priest, both in liturgical worship and the apostolate. It scarcely needs remarking here that anyone whose dominant attitude was one of challenging or opposing authority could not properly carry out the functions of a deacon. The diaconate can only be conferred on those who believe in the value of the Bishop's and priest's pastoral mission and in the Holy Spirit's assistance guiding them in their actions and their decisions. In particular it must again be said that the deacon should "profess reverence and obedience to the Bishop" (ibid., n. 30: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1400).

However, the deacon's service is also directed to his own Christian community and to the whole Church, to which he must foster a deep attachment, because of her mission and divine institution.

3. The Second Vatican Council also speaks of the <duties> and the <obligations> that deacons assume by virtue of their own sharing in the mission and grace of the high priesthood: "while waiting upon the mysteries of Christ and the Church, they should keep themselves free from every vice, should please God and give a good example to all in everything (cf. 1 Tm 3:8-10 and 12-13)" (<Lumen gentium>, n. 41). Theirs, then, is a duty of witness, which embraces not only their service and apostolate but also their whole life.

In the document <Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem>, cited above, Paul VI called attention to this responsibility and the obligations it entails: "Deacons serve the mysteries of Christ and the Church, and must abstain from any vice, strive to please God, and be 'ready for any good work' for the salvation of men. Therefore, because of their reception of this Order, they should far excel others in their liturgical lives, in devotion to prayer, in the divine ministry, in obedience, charity and chastity" (n. 25: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1395).

With particular regard to chastity young men who are ordained deacons commit themselves to observing celibacy and to leading a life of more intense union with Christ. Here too, even those who are older and "have received ordination... may not, in accordance with traditional Church discipline, enter into marriage" (ibid., n. 16: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1386).

4. In order to fulfill these obligations and, even more deeply, to respond to the spiritual demands of the diaconate with the help of sacramental grace, the exercises of the spiritual life must be practiced, as described in Paul VI's Apostolic Letter; they should: 1) apply themselves to reading carefully and to meditating attentively on the word of God, 2) attend Mass frequently—even daily if possible—receive the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist and visit it out of devotion; 3) purify their souls frequently through the sacrament of

Penance, having prepared for it worthily through a daily examination of conscience; 4) show a deep, filial love and veneration for the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God (cf. *ibid.*, n. 26: <Enchiridion Vaticanum, II, 1396).

Ongoing formation also required of deacons

Moreover, Pope Paul VI adds: "It is very fitting for permanent deacons to recite daily at least some part of the Divine Office—to be specified by the Episcopal Conference" (*ibid.*, n. 27: <Enchiridion Vaticanum,> II, 1397). The Episcopal Conferences are also responsible for establishing more detailed norms for the lives of deacons in accordance with the circumstances of time and place.

Lastly, whoever receives the diaconate is obliged to ongoing doctrinal formation, which continually improves and updates that required before ordination: "Deacons should not slacken in their studies particularly of sacred doctrine, they should carefully read the Scriptures; they should devote themselves to ecclesiastical studies in such a way that they can correctly explain Catholic doctrine to others and day by day become better fitted to train and strengthen the souls of the faithful. With this in mind, deacons should be called to regular meetings at which matters concerning their life and sacred ministry will be treated" (*ibid.*, n. 29: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1399).

5. The catechesis I have given on the diaconate, in order to complete the picture of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, thus highlights what is most important in this Order, as in those of the presbyterate and the Episcopate: a specific spiritual participation in the priesthood of Christ and the commitment to a life in conformity to him by, the action of the Holy Spirit. I cannot conclude without recalling that deacons too, like priests and Bishops, who are committed to following Christ in the way of service, share most especially in his redeeming sacrifice, according to the principle Jesus formulated when speaking to the Twelve about the Son of Man, who came "to serve—to give his life <in ransom for many>" (Mk 10:45). Deacons, therefore, are called to participate in the mystery of the cross, to share in the Church's sufferings, to endure the hostility she encounters, in union with Christ the Redeemer. It is this painful aspect of the deacon's service that makes it most fruitful.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I am pleased to greet the ecumenical pilgrimage group of clergy and laity from Cornwall, England. May your visit to Rome deepen your commitment to promoting understanding and unity among all Christ's followers. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark and the Faroe Islands, Indonesia, Korea, Thailand and the United States of America, I cordially invoke the grace and peace of Christ.