

DEACONS SERVE THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Pope John Paul II

Audience of October 5, 1993.

1. In addition to presbyters there is another category of ministers in the Church with specific tasks and charisma, as the Council of Trent recalls when it discusses the sacrament of Orders: "In the Catholic Church there is a hierarchy established by divine ordinance, which includes Bishops, presbyters and ministers" (DS 1776). The New Testament books already attest to the presence of ministers, "<deacons>", who gradually form a distinct category from the "presbyter" and "Episcopi". One need only recall that Paul addressed his greeting <to the Bishops and ministers> of Philippi (cf. Phil 1 :1). The First Letter to Timothy lists the qualities that <deacons> should have with the recommendation that they be tested before they are entrusted with their functions: they must be dignified and honest, faithful in marriage, and must manage their children and households well, "holding fast to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience" (cf. 1 Tm 3:8-13)

The deacon had role in the early Church

The Acts of the Apostles (6:1-6) speak of seven "ministers" for service at table. Although the question of a sacramental ordination of <deacons> is not clear from the text, a long tradition has interpreted the episode as the first evidence of the institution of deacons. By the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, the deacon's place, at least in some Churches, is already well established as a rank in the ministerial hierarchy.

2. Important witness is given particularly by St. Ignatius of Antioch, according to whom the Christian community lives under the authority of a <Bishop>, surrounded by presbyters and deacons: "There is only one Eucharist, one body of the Lord, one chalice, one altar, just as there is only one Bishop with the college of <presbyters> and <deacons>, fellow servants" (<Ad Philad.>, 4, 1). In Ignatius' letters deacons are always mentioned as a lower rank in the ministerial hierarchy: a deacon is praised for "being subject to the Bishop as to the grace of God, and to the presbyter as to the law of Jesus Christ" (<Ad Magnes.>, 2). However, Ignatius underscores the greatness of the deacon's ministry, because he is "the minister of Jesus Christ who was in the Father's presence before all ages and was revealed at the end times" (<Ad Magnes.>, 6, 1). As "ministers of the mysteries of Jesus Christ", deacons must "in every way be pleasing to all" (<Ad Trall.>, 2, 3). When Ignatius urges Christians to obey the Bishop and the priests, he adds: "Respect the deacons as God's commandment" (<Ad Smyrn.>. 8, 1).

We find other witnesses in St. Polycarp of Smyrna (<Ad Phil.>, 5, 2), St. Justin (<Apol.>, I, 65, 5; 67; 5), Tertullian (<De Bapt.>, 17, 1), St Cyprian (<Epist.> 15 and 16), and later in St Augustine (<De cat. rud.>, I, c. 1, 1).

3. In the early centuries the deacon carried out liturgical functions. In the Eucharistic celebration he read or chanted the Epistle and the Gospel; he brought the offerings of the

faithful to the celebrant; he distributed Communion and brought it to those absent; he was responsible for the orderliness of the ceremonies and at the end dismissed the assembly. In addition, he prepared catechumens for Baptism, instructed them and assisted the priest in administering this sacrament. In certain circumstances he himself baptized and preached. He also shared in the administration of ecclesiastical property; he had care of the poor, widows, orphans and helped prisoners.

In Tradition there are witnesses to the distinction between the deacon's functions and those of the priest. For example, St. Hippolytus states (second to third century) that the deacon is ordained "not to the priesthood, but for service to the Bishop, to do what he commands" (<SCh> 11, p. 39, cf. <Constitutiones Aegypt.>, III 2: ed. Funk, <Didascalia>, p. 103, <Statuta Ecclesiae Ant.>, 37-41: Mansi 3, 954). Actually, according to the Church's mind and practice, the diaconate belongs to the sacrament of Orders, but is not part of the priesthood and does not entail functions proper to priests.

4. With the passage of time, as we know, the presbyterate in the West assumed almost exclusive importance in relation to the diaconate, which in fact was reduced to being merely a step on the way to the priesthood. This is not the place to retrace the historical process and explain the reasons for these changes: it is rather a question of pointing out that on the basis of ancient teaching, the awareness of the diaconate's importance for the Church became greater and greater in theological and pastoral circles, as did the appropriateness of reestablishing it as an Order and permanent state of life. Pope Pius XII also made reference to this in his address to the Second World Congress of the Lay Apostolate (5 October 1957), when he stated that, although the idea of reintroducing the diaconate as a function distinct from the priesthood was not yet ripe at the time, nevertheless it could become such and that in any case the diaconate was to be put in the context of the hierarchical ministry determined by the most ancient tradition (cf. <Discorsi e radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII>, vol. XIX, p. 458).

Permanent diaconate was re-established by Vatican II

The time was ripe at the Second Vatican Council, which considered the proposals of the preceding years and decided on its re-establishment (cf. <Lumen gentium>, n. 29).

It was Pope Paul VI who later implemented the decision, determining the complete canonical and liturgical discipline for this Order (cf. <Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem>: 18 June 1967; <Pontificalis Romani recognitio>: 17 June 1968; <Ad pascendum>: 15 August 1972).

5. There were two main reasons for the theologians' proposals and the conciliar and papal decisions. First of all, it was considered fitting that certain charitable services, guaranteed in a stable way by laymen conscious of being called to the Church's Gospel mission, should be concretely expressed in a form recognized by virtue of an official consecration. It was also necessary to provide for the scarcity of priests, as well as to assist them with many responsibilities not directly connected to their pastoral ministry. Some saw the permanent

diaconate as a sort of bridge between pastors and the faithful.

Clearly, the Holy Spirit, who has the leading role in the Church's life, was mysteriously working through these reasons connected with historical circumstances and pastoral perspectives, bringing about a new realization of the complete picture of the hierarchy, traditionally composed of Bishops, priests and deacons. Thus a new revitalization of Christian communities was fostered making them more like those founded by the Apostles and flourishing in the early centuries, always under the impulse of the Paraclete, as the Acts of the Apostles attest.

6. A deeply felt need in the decision to re-establish the permanent diaconate was and is that of a greater and more direct presence of Church ministers in the various spheres of the family, work, school etc., in addition to existing pastoral structures. Among other things, this fact explains why the Council, while not totally rejecting the idea of celibacy for deacons permitted this Order to be conferred on "mature married men". It was a prudent realistic approach, chosen for reasons that can be easily understood by anyone familiar with different people's ages and concrete situations according to the level of maturity reached. For the same reason it was then decided, in applying the Council's provisions, that the diaconate would be conferred on married men under certain conditions: they would be at least 35 years of age and have their wife's consent, be of good character and reputation, and receive an adequate doctrinal and pastoral preparation given either by institutes or priests specially chosen for this purpose (cf. Paul VI, <Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem>, nn. 11-15: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1381- 1385).

Those who aspire to the diaconate need formation

7. It should be noted, however, that the Council maintained the ideal of a diaconate open to younger men who would devote themselves totally to the Lord, with the commitment of celibacy as well. It is a life of "evangelical perfection", which can be understood, chosen and loved by generous men who want to serve the kingdom of God in the world, without entering the priesthood to which they do not feel called, but nevertheless receiving a consecration that guarantees and institutionalizes their special service to the Church through the conferral of sacramental grace. These men are not lacking today. Certain provisions were given for them: for ordination to the diaconate they must be at least 25 years of age and receive formation for at least three years in a special institute, "where they are tested, trained to live a truly evangelical life and prepared to carry out effectively their own specific functions", (cf. *ibid.*, nn 5-9: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1375-1379). These provisions show the importance the Church puts on the diaconate and her desire that this ordination occur after due consideration and on a sound basis. But they are also a sign of the ancient yet ever new ideal of dedicating oneself to the kingdom of God, which the Church takes from the Gospel and raises as a banner particularly before young people in our time too.

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

I extend a warm welcome to the new students of the Pontifical Scots College in Rome. As you begin your studies for the priesthood may you grow in love of Christ and build your

lives ever more fully upon the saving grace which you will administer to his people through the sacraments and the preaching of the Gospel. My special greeting also goes to the priests from the North American College taking part in the Institute for Continuing Theological Education. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors I cordially invoke the grace and peace of Jesus Christ.