

"I Have Not Come to be Served, but to Serve"

A Reflection on 25 Years of the Ministry of the Diaconate in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis

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Introduction

"Lord, may your deacons excel in every virtue: in love and in holiness of life. May their conduct exemplify your commandments and lead your people to imitate their life. May they remain strong and steadfast in Christ, giving to the world a witness of conscience. May they imitate your son, who came not to be served but to serve. Let your deacons yield a harvest worthy of you ! "

-Prayer of consecration which is prayed over each deacon at ordination.

I would like to take the occasion of this pastoral letter to recognize the important contribution of 25 years of service by the Permanent Diaconate in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. When the ministry of the diaconate began under the direction of Archbishop Roach in 1973, no one could have envisioned 25 years later what an integral part in the tapestry of ministerial life it would become to the people of this Archdiocese. What began as a dream has truly become a pillar of service and witness to many.

In this context, I would like to address a number of issues related to the diaconate. First, I would like to offer a brief historical background on the diaconate, from the perspective of a little-known fact that connects the restoration of the permanent diaconate with the sufferings of the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. Second, I would like to address some of the misconceptions regarding the ministry of the diaconate in a question and answer format which I hope will serve as an educational aid especially for men who might consider the diaconate. And finally, I would like to say a few words about the future ministry of the diaconate in our Archdiocese.

A Ministry Born Out of Human Suffering

While it is true to say that the ministry of the diaconate originated within the burgeoning first century Church community, it is equally true to say that the modern diaconate originated in a less likely place - the Nazi concentration camp called Dachau.

Hidden beneath the overshadowing cloud of human suffering and murder is the story of a small group of Catholic priests who were detained in concentration camps during World War II. For many of these priests, their suffering evoked a spiritual awakening that took

place in the context of small discussion groups where ministry to people in this dehumanizing environment was frequently discussed.

Father Otto Pies, S.J., one of the priests imprisoned at Dachau, recounted in his article Cellblock 26- Experiences of the Priestly Life in Dachau, some of the horrific experiences through which he and other priests lived. In reporting about discussions that took place between the priests at Dachau, Father Pies also recalled asking 'whether or not it was time to act upon the nudges that were - apparently - being initiated by the Holy Spirit' and to permit the diaconate to be re-instituted in the Church.

In 1962, with Church leaders assembled at Vatican II to discuss possible changes within the Church, some of the priests and other survivors of Dachau posed their question. "Would it not be," they wrote, "a living testimony to the Church's concern for the temporal and supernatural needs of all people to have ordained deacons engaged in actual necessities of temporal life to the poor and suffering, bringing Christ both sacramentally and also in their committed care for the lowly and oppressed into places of neglect and destitution, of hunger and sickness?"

The participants of Vatican II responded in the affirmative. After the Second Vatican Council's deliberation over re-instituting the ministry of the permanent diaconate, Pope Paul VI restored this means of ordained service. What had begun as an inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of a

handful of faithful priests in the death camp of Dachau matured and became a means by which the ministry of the Church expanded and improved. Since the restoration of the diaconate, this ministry has blossomed and filled the entire Church with its sweet fragrance.

Words and Deeds

Today the presence of a deacon ministering to the people of God is certainly nothing out of the ordinary. Whether preaching at a Sunday liturgy or visiting the sick or elderly, the ministry of the diaconate has become an important part of the fabric of the Church's life. Although the diaconate has been active in this Archdiocese for 25 years, there still exists some uncertainty about the role of this important minister of God. Many people are confused about the role and identity of the deacon and how he interrelates with other ordained and non-ordained ministers in the church. Part of this uncertainty is due to the fact that prior to Vatican II, the Latin rite did not experience this kind of ministry for centuries. I have selected a number of frequently asked questions about the diaconate upon which I will endeavor to shed light.

Who can become a Deacon and How are they trained?

An applicant for the diaconate must be recommended by the pastor of his parish and must have been involved in parish ministry for at least five years. If married, the applicant must have been married a reasonable length of time and be in a stable marriage. The

applicant should be physically and emotionally healthy and free of any substance dependency. Deacons must be economically stable and self-sufficient. It is expected that diaconal responsibilities will be in addition to their secular responsibilities. If the applicant was not raised a Catholic, some time must have elapsed since his Baptism or full reception into the Catholic Church. Graduation from high school or the equivalent is usually expected.

Approximately 90 percent of all deacons serving in the Church are married. Thus, deacons are called to balance a variety of responsibilities including: the responsibility of husband and family life; his career and all of the related challenges and burdens; and finally the responsibilities of the service as deacon. According to The Catechism of the Catholic Church, deacons receive a special sacramental grace of strength through ordination. "With regard to deacons, 'strengthened by sacramental grace, they are dedicated to the people of God.. .in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity.'" (Catechism, 1588)

The documents of Vatican II state that the deacon "prepares for such a ministry by careful study of sacred Scripture, of tradition, of the liturgy and of the life of the church" (Dei Verbum). Within our Archdiocese, preparation for the diaconate consists of a three-year formation program. This formation program includes elements of human, spiritual, doctrinal and pastoral formation.

While candidates for the priesthood pass through a step in their preparation called the "transitional diaconate," the ministry of the permanent deacon is not a short-term responsibility, but a life-long vocation. Once ordained, Permanent Deacons are assigned by the local bishop to ministry positions within specific parishes and programs in need of assistance. (The deacon may indicate interest in a particular location and type of ministry).

What role does the deacon play?

Initially the role of the deacon in the diocese was confined narrowly to service to the people of God during liturgies. However, this view of a deacon's ministry is too confining. In fact, the terms "deacon" and "diaconate" come to us from the Greek word diakonia, meaning service or ministry. What these terms do not tell us are the wide boundaries within which deacons perform their works of service and ministry.

"The deacon is not a part-time employee or ecclesiastical official," John Paul II has stated, "but a minister of the Church. His is not a profession, but a mission." (Plenarium of the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, 1995)

The late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin summed up the role of the deacon this way, "When the deacon assists at the Eucharist - or when he serves in the soup line, the prison, or the hospital - he is meant to be an eloquent reminder to each of us of what we, too, should be doing, what we must continually strive to become, in accord with our own God-given gift." (The Call to Service, 1993)

Perhaps it is best to look back at Vatican II, during which the permanent diaconate was restored by Pope Paul VI. The Council documents tell us that the work of the deacon should generally fall into three categories: service of the Word; service of the altar; and service of charity. Let us look briefly at each one of these categories.

Service of the Word

During the Rite of Ordination, the bishop gives the Book of the Gospels to the deacon saying, "Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you have become." A deacon's service of the Word may include proclaiming the Gospel at liturgy, composing intercessions, teaching religious education, counseling, instructing catechumens, giving retreats, conducting parish renewal programs, and reaching out to inactive Catholics. In addition, deacons are given the charge of proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed through the tasks of daily living.

St. Francis of Assisi, who some scholars believe was an ordained deacon, frequently instructed his companions: "You must preach often and well, my brothers. However, use few words but do many personal acts !"

The Vatican Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons, states that deacons ought, in addition to official church activities, "...strive to transmit the Word in their professional lives, either explicitly or merely by their active presence in places where public opinion is formed and ethical norms are applied - such as the social services or organizations promoting the rights of the family or life."

Service of the altar

Most people are familiar with the service of deacons during Mass, including the preparation of the gifts and distribution of communion. However, deacons may also baptize children or adults, witness marriages, preside over wakes, funerals and burial services. Other duties may include presiding over the Liturgy of the Hours, exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and non sacramental reconciliation services. All these services "bring out how the diaconal ministry has its point of departure and arrival in the eucharist," rather than merely constituting a social service role, states the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education (Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons).

Service of Charity

This category is by far the most broad, encompassing almost any human need. Some of the more well known examples of this are visiting the sick or homebound, those residing in nursing facilities, prisons and hospitals. Other less known examples include work with the mentally ill, chemically dependent, immigrants and refugees. In addition, the work of social change in our society regarding abortion, euthanasia, racism, and other life and justice issues are all part of the works of charity performed by deacons.

The U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, in its official guidelines for the formation and ministry of deacons, states, "...the deacon is to inspire, promote and help coordinate the service that the whole Church must undertake in imitation of Christ. He has a special responsibility to identify to the Church those who are in need and particularly those who are without power or at the margins in our society....He thus becomes a representative figure in whom the Church reaches out to the needy and the needy challenge the Church."

Aren't deacons the same as married priests?

All Christians through baptism are consecrated and made holy. However, the Sacrament of Orders is conferred upon a select group for their unique mission. Like priests, deacons are consecrated for the work of the Church through the laying on of hands by a bishop.

The Revised Code of Canon Law explains it this way: "By divine institution some among the Christian faithful are constituted sacred ministers through the sacrament of orders by means of the indelible character with which they are marked; accordingly they are consecrated to shepherd the people of God, each in accord with his own grade of orders, by fulfilling in the person of Christ the Head the functions of teaching, sanctifying, and governing." (Canon 1008)

Through the Sacrament of Orders, the deacon is called by the people of God and the local bishop as a sign or sacrament of Jesus himself, who "came not to be served but to serve."

Pope John Paul II described the service role of the deacon in a 1987 speech in Detroit, Michigan, this way: "The Second Vatican Council explains that the service of the deacon is the church's service sacramentalized. Yours is not just one ministry among others, but is truly meant to be, as Pope Paul VI described it, a 'driving force' for the whole church's service role. You are meant to be living signs of the servanthood of Christ's Church."

Deacons are not called to replace the ministry of priests, nor was the diaconate re-instituted in response to a "priest shortage." Deacons may serve many of the same functions as a priest; however, they are called by the Church to complement the work of the priest, not to compete.

Looking Ahead

A 1996 study of the diaconate in the U.S. by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops states, "The primary challenges of the diaconate for the future are to broaden its ministries beyond its largely successful and increasingly indispensable adaptation to parish life and to emphasize more strongly that deacons, through ordination, are called to be model, animator, and facilitator of ministries of charity and justice within the local Church."

As Archbishop, I would like to expand upon this statement in three specific areas. First, one of my hopes for the future of the diaconate is that more men of color would come

forward and accept God's invitation to serve the Church as deacons. As the population of the Archdiocese becomes increasingly diverse, there is a greater need for deacons from the various ethnic groups. Language is only one element necessary for effective ministry to our non-white brothers and sisters. Ministry must also take into account cultural differences that are integral to the life of many people of color.

The second area of concern for the future of the diaconate involves the continuing struggle around life issues. More than ever, the Church need not only defend life at every stage, but promulgate Church teaching regarding life issues in a convincing manner so that the truth will permeate every element of society. My hope is that as the ministry of the diaconate grows, it will take a more active role in the all-important struggle to defend life.

I would like to say a final word about wives of deacons. Canon law requires that a married candidate for the permanent diaconate have the consent of his wife prior to the three-year preparation for ordination. My experience with the wives of our deacons is that the consent they give goes far and beyond any legal requirement. In a very real way, many of our deacons' wives share this ministry as active partners; they often complement the gifts of their husbands, thus offering more than one can give. From their participation in classes and support of the inconveniences of being married to a person on call to their own sharing in many forms of parish ministry, the wives of our deacons have provided a stellar model of ministry in the church, for which I am extremely grateful.

Finally, I want to say that the words used to write a pastoral letter of this kind fall far short of creating an image that accurately describes the ministry of the diaconate. It is difficult to imagine the last 25 years of ministry in our Archdiocese without this vital and vibrant ministry. Bishop Walter Kaspter, in the journal *Deacon Digest*, describes permanent deacons as "pioneers of a new 'civilization of love.'" For me, the restoration of the permanent diaconate is a profound example of how the Holy Spirit guides the Church to meet the growing needs of God's people.

May God continue to work mightily through the ministry of the permanent diaconate in the Archdiocese, especially as we face the many opportunities and challenges before us in the New Millennium.

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