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The Deacon: An Icon of Christ the Servant

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Diaconate laid bare

A few years ago, I was asked to sort the belongings of a priest who had died. In one neglected corner of his house was a pile of framed pictures, hidden under cloths and cobwebs. One particularly intrigued me. It was a DIY attempt at an 'icon', with a poster glued onto hardboard. Gold paint had been added, as well as an ornate fake silver frame. Almost the whole picture was obscured except for two faces. These were clearly Jesus and St Peter, holding a key. I stripped away the frame and some of the flaking paint, and laid bare a picture of Christ washing the feet of St Peter.

The diaconate may sometimes need the same treatment. We can so overlay the diaconal ministry with the equivalent of gold paint and ornate frames, especially in the liturgy, that we all too easily obscure the heart of the wonderful gift to the Church which we know the diaconate to be. We will see the full splendor of the diaconal ministry only if we find the 'washing of feet' beneath the trappings. In my view, the enduring value of the diaconate will only be truly recognized if we highlight the ministry of 'charity', the ministry of humble servant love, amidst the deacon's threefold ministry of word, liturgy and charity.

First service

Of course, all three ministries are about service. In each of them, the deacon is an icon of Christ the servant. Each is intimately connected with the others, and they cannot be separated. But one has primacy among the three – the ministry of charity. This needs fresh focus in thinking and practice if we are to convince priests and lay people alike that the diaconate is an essential gift from God to his Church, a gift without which the Church is not fully itself.

In the early Church, this primacy of the deacon's ministry of charity was clear. The deacon found and served Christ in the poor, the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the naked, the sick and imprisoned. He was often responsible to his bishop for the practical ordering of the Church's service of those in need.

Most documents since the restoration of the Permanent Diaconate have that same focus. Pope Paul VI saw the diaconate as 'a driving force for service.' Pope John Paul encouraged deacons to 'take their inspiration from the Gospel incident of the washing of the feet.'

In their first handbook on the restored diaconate, the Bishops of England and Wales stated that 'it is clear that the first ministry of the deacon is the ministry of charity.' The United States Bishops said the same: 'from the beginning, and particularly during the first centuries, the diaconate has been primarily a ministry of love and justice.... Action on behalf of social justice is thus an integral part of the deacon's ministry of love.' Should anyone think this is the quirky view of some wayward bishops, here are some key paragraphs from the Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons (Rome, 1998). Regarding the threefold munera or offices proper to the deacon, the document states:

The munus regendi is exercised in dedication to works of charity and assistance, and in the direction of communities or sectors of church life, especially as regards charitable activities. This is the ministry most characteristic of the deacon. (9)

So that the whole Church may better live out this spirituality of service, the Lord gives her a living and personal sign of his very being as servant. In a specific way, this is the spirituality of the deacon. In fact, with sacred ordination, he is constituted a living icon of Christ the servant within the Church. The leitmotiv of his spiritual life will therefore be service; his sanctification will consist in making himself a generous and faithful servant of God and people, especially the poor and most suffering... (11)

The element which most characterizes diaconal spirituality is the discovery of and sharing in the love of Christ the servant, who came not to be served but to serve. The candidate must therefore be helped progressively to acquire those attitudes which are specifically diaconal, though not exclusively so, such as simplicity of heart, total giving of self and disinterest for self, humble and helpful love for the brothers and sisters, especially the poorest, the suffering and the most needy, the choice of a life-style of sharing and poverty. (72)

Of course, it is not only deacons who are called to serve. Bishops, priests and the whole people of God are called to serve rather than be served. But the deacon has a distinctive role as a living and personal icon of that service, called to draw the whole Church into humble and loving service of the world in the name of Christ.

Ecumenical Googling

In preparation for this article, I conducted a 'Google' search for deacons on the internet. One website caught my attention immediately: the Anglican Diocese of Norwich, a local ecumenical partner and friend of our Diocese of East Anglia. This contains an excellent answer to the question 'What is a deacon?':

The ministry of a deacon is similar to, but different from, that of a priest or bishop. A deacon is ordained and missioned by Christ through the bishop to minister to the needy and the poor, and to be a minister of Word and Sacrament, working in obedience to his bishop and in close fraternal cooperation with priests. While all Christians are called to serve others, the deacon is a sacramental sign of this service and he solemnly promises to be a living example of such service to others.

Though all are servants by Baptism, the deacon is ordained as a sacramental sign of Christ the Servant. Deacons offer direct service to those in need, and help church members to discover their participation in the ministry of Christ. Service is the calling of the deacon, and he is ordained to be a facilitator and animator of the Church's call to serve in the world. The deacon 'is in the Church a specific sacramental sign of Christ the servant.'

What struck me most was the order of the three ministries: 'to minister to the needy and the poor, and to be a minister of Word and Sacrament.' For the deacon, this is – I strongly believe – the correct order. Far too often, the deacon's liturgical/sacramental ministry is put first, followed by the ministry of the word, with the ministry of charity coming a poor third. The deacon's ministry of charity can only have a real primacy if it is exercised as directly and practically as his ministries of Word and Sacrament. There has to be some element of 'hands on' service.

Truly iconic If we are to call deacons 'icons of Christ the Servant', we must be clear what we mean by an icon. All too often, what we pass off as 'icons' are pictures glued onto wood. This rightly horrifies our brothers and sisters in the Orthodox Church. A true icon is something painstakingly and prayerfully painted, with each stroke expressing something of the mystery of God and his saving love. An icon is a work of liturgical art and an invitation to prayer. We need to note the importance of each line, movement, expression and color, of every gesture of the hands and orientation of the eyes. All these things draw us into the mystery of what is portrayed so that we can enter into and participate in it. An icon is a way into a deeper reality, into the mystery of God.

A deacon is a living icon. That means each deacon is a work of art! Being an icon is not just about receiving a special 'blessing' at one's ordination. Every part of a deacon's daily life and ministry – his

marriage, family life and work, the way he reaches out to others and talks to them, even the way he looks at them – contributes to the gentle power of his 'icon hood'.

What is an icon for? To draw others into what it signifies and portrays. The specific role of a deacon is to draw the whole Church into humble service, into the Christ's washing of feet, into his humble ministry of love.

That means there should be no tension between encouraging the diaconate and encouraging the full participation of lay people in the mission of the Church. A deacon's ministry of charity is there to facilitate, enable, animate, encourage and empower the service of the whole Church community.

Call no-one on earth your servant...

One further point is vital before we can understand the deacon's role as icon of Christ the Servant. We must penetrate more deeply the mystery of Christ himself. Much is made sometimes of Jesus' command to call no-one on earth our father or teacher, because there is but one father in heaven, and one teacher, the Christ. Strangely, this is often directed exclusively at priests being called 'Father', whereas little is said about biological fathers, or teachers in our schools. But Jesus might also have said: 'Call no-one on earth your servant, because there is only one servant, and he is the Christ, the suffering servant of God.' In their diaconia, deacons do not replace Christ's service of God's people; they become icons of Christ the servant, seeking to draw others into full communion with Christ's service. That means a readiness to 'image' the humble servant of God portrayed in Isaiah 53, the suffering servant who came not to be served but to serve; the one who was despised and rejected, and led like a lamb to the slaughter; the servant master who washed the feet of his disciples, and who gave his life as a 'nothing' upon the cross. No talk of the deacon as 'icon' makes sense outside that setting.

Thank God for Pope Benedict

Something happened just before I prepared this article which answered my prayers for fresh thoughts: Pope Benedict's first encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*. This is essential reading for all, but for deacons in a special way. It is a deep reflection on love as the heart of God and the heart of the Christian life. Part 2 has special relevance for deacons. The Holy Father stresses again and again that the 'ministry of charity' – the service of love – is as essential to the church as the ministry of word and sacraments:

As the years went by and the Church spread further afield, the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word: love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.... (22)

The exercise of charity is an action of the Church as such, and that, like the ministry of Word and Sacrament, it too has been an essential part of her mission from the very beginning. (32)

If the ministry of love is truly to be at the heart of the life of the Church, it has to be ordered and structured. As Pope Benedict puts it, 'As a community, the Church must practice love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service of the community' (20). These passages give a firm foundation for the first emergence and recent restoration of the diaconate. Writing of the origin of the diaconal ministry in the choice of the seven in Acts 6.5-6, Pope Benedict writes:

...the social service which they were meant to provide was absolutely concrete, yet at the same time it was also a spiritual service; theirs was a truly spiritual office which carried out an essential responsibility of the Church, namely a well-ordered love of neighbor. With the formation of this group of seven, 'diaconia' – the ministry of charity exercised in a communitarian, orderly way – became part of the fundamental structure of the Church. (21)

If the ministry of charity is as essential to the Church as the ministry of word and sacrament, the same at very least will be true for the deacon. And even more so, as from the beginning the ministry of loving service (never separated from the ministry of Word and Sacrament) has been the primary ministry of the deacon.

Distinctively diaconal

The deacon is not called to be a social worker, a special calling in itself. But he is called to be visibly, tangibly and clearly a living icon of Christ, the washer of feet. This requires direct, concrete service, as direct and concrete as in his ministry of word and sacrament. The deacon is called to proclaim in his being and word and action God's good news to the poor.

Who are the poor? There are many forms of poverty – the poverty of sickness, of exclusion, of lack of knowledge, of littleness of faith. In his address to the deacons of Rome in February 2006, Pope Benedict highlighted 'new forms of poverty': many people have lost the meaning of life, or are faced with spiritual and cultural poverty. The deacon should address such poverty. But we should not so spiritualize the meaning of poverty that we forget the deacon's call to serve the materially poor with active love. Pope Benedict stressed that 'it is not enough to proclaim the faith only with words...' but rather it is 'necessary to accompany the proclamation of the Gospel with the concrete testimony of charity.'

There can be no full diaconal ministry without this. I am firmly convinced that only a strong reaffirmation of the primacy of the deacon's ministry of charity – not only in thinking but in practice – will ensure the long-term acceptance and future of the restored diaconate. Otherwise, it may suffer the same fate as the diaconate in the early Church, squeezed out between concern about undermining the identity of priests and lay worries about a new form of clericalism. This must be reflected more seriously in how we promote and discern vocations to the diaconate, and in how we form our future deacons.

The challenge is to focus on the distinctive identity of the deacon. He is not really there to fill in for absent priests, or take charge of priestess communities, nor do as much as possible of what the priest would normally do. The deacon's distinctive ministry is firmly rooted in being a sacramental sign of Christ the Servant and of Christ's church as communal servant of the world. The more this is the reality of diaconal ministry, the more will the diaconate be recognized and accepted as the driving force for the Church's service it was established to be.