

## DEACON HAS MANY PASTORAL FUNCTIONS

Pope John Paul II

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*At the General Audience on Wednesday, 13 October, 1993, the Holy Father continued his discussion of the diaconate, focusing this week on the deacon's role as a liturgical minister and as one who promotes the apostolate of the laity. The Pope's catechesis was the 74th in the series on the mystery of the Church and was given in Italian.*

1. The Second Vatican Council determines 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 to be found deacons, who receive the imposition of hands 'not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry'. For, strengthened by sacramental grace they are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the Bishop and his body of priests in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity" (<Lumen gentium>, n. 29). The formula "not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry" is taken from a text of Hippolytus' <Traditio Apostolica>, but 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 Tral.>, 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.

2. In order to be allowed to carry out their functions, deacons receive the ministries of <lector> and <acolyte> before ordination. 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" (<Enchiridion Vaticanum>, IV 1781). This orientation is valid not only for the role of priests, but also for that of deacons.

Deacons receive ministries of lector and acolyte first

3. 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 (cf. Eusebius, <Hist. Eccl.>, VI, 43: PG 20, 622): priests, deacons, sub-deacons, acolytes, exorcists, rectors and porters. In the tradition of the Latin Church three were considered major Orders: priesthood, diaconate and sub-diaconate; 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 reestablished this structure was changed and, as to the sacramental framework, 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 sub-diaconate whose functions were given to rectors 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, but 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, and 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 (cf. <Ministeria quaedam>, V, VI: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, IV, 1762-1763).

4. The Second Vatican Council lists the deacon's liturgical and pastoral functions: "to administer Baptism solemnly to reserve and distribute the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to take Viaticum to the dying, to read Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to administer sacramentals, and to preside at funeral services and burials" (<Lumen gentium>, n. 29).

Deacons should promote and sustain apostolic activities of laity

Pope Paul VI, in <Sacrum diaconatus ordinem> (n. 22 10: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1392j, laid down in addition that the deacon, "in the name of the parish priest or Bishop, could legitimately lead dispersed Christian communities". 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 fulfils by ecclesial mandate when it is the case of providing for the shortage of priests. But 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.

5. 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" (Paul VI, <Sacrum diaconatus ordinem>, n. 22,9: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1392).

In this regard, the Council makes a recommendation to deacons that stems from the oldest tradition of Christian communities: "Dedicated to works of charity and functions of administration deacons should recall the admonition of St. Polycarp: 'Let them be merciful, and zealous, and let them walk according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all'"<Lumen gentium>, n. 29 cf. <Ad Phil.>, 5,2, ed. Funk, I, p. 300).

6. Again according to the Council, the diaconate seems of particular value in the young Churches. This is why the Decree <Ad gentes> establishes: "Wherever it appears opportune to Episcopal Conferences, the diaconate should be restored as a permanent state of life, in accordance with the norms of the Constitution 'on the Church'. It would help those men who carry out the ministry of a deacon- preaching the Word of God as catechists, governing scattered Christian communities in the name of the Bishop or parish priest, or exercising charity in the performance of social or charitable works- if they were to be strengthened by the laying on of hands which has come down from the Apostles. They would be more closely bound to the altar and their ministry would be made more fruitful through the sacramental grace of the diaconate" (<Ad gentes>, n. 16).

It is known that wherever missionary activity has led to the creation of new Christian communities, catechists often play an essential role. In many places it is they who 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 by 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 a 'deacon', that is, the servant of all" (CCC, n. 1570).

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

I am pleased to welcome the choir of the Gamle Aker Church in Oslo, in Rome to study liturgical practice. Your visit has an important ecumenical dimension: may it contribute to bringing Lutherans and Catholics closer to that visible unity for which Christ prayed. My greetings and thanks also go to the native dance group from Zambia. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, Indonesia, Taiwan and the United States, I cordially invoke God's abundant blessings.

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