

WORDS OF THE HOLY FATHER ON THE DIACONATE



ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI MEETING WITH THE PARISH PRIESTS AND THE CLERGY OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

*Hall of Blessings
Thursday, 7 February 2008*

During the meeting, the participants asked the Pope questions. Here follows the question of Deacon Giuseppe Corona and the Holy Father's answer.

Deacon Giuseppe Corona: *Holy Father, I would like first of all to express my gratitude and that of my brother deacons for the ministry that the Church so providentially has taken up again with the [Second Vatican] Council, a ministry that allows us to fully express our vocation. We are committed in a great variety of works that we carry out in vastly different environments: family, work, parish, society, also the missions of Africa and Latin America -- areas that you indicated for us in the [audience](#) you granted us on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the diaconate of the Diocese of Rome.*

Now our numbers have grown -- there are 108 of us. And we would like for you to indicate a pastoral initiative that could become a sign of a more incisive presence of the permanent diaconate in the city of Rome, as it happened in the first centuries of the Roman Church. In fact, sharing a significant, common objective, on one hand increases the cohesion of diaconal fraternity and on the other, would give greater visibility to our service in this city. We present you, Holy Father, the desire that you indicate to us an initiative that we can share in the way and the manner that you wish to specify. In the name of all the deacons, I greet you, Holy Father, with filial affection.

Pope Benedict XVI:

Thank you for this testimony as one of the more than 100 deacons of Rome. I would like to also express my joy and my gratitude for the Council, because it revived this important ministry in the universal Church. I should say that when I was archbishop of Munich, I didn't find perhaps more than three or four deacons, and I very much favored this ministry because it seemed to me to belong to the richness of the sacramental ministry in the Church. At the same time, it can equally be the link between the lay world, the professional world, and the world of the priestly ministry -- given that many deacons continue carrying out their professions and maintain their

positions -- important or those of a simple life -- while on Saturday and Sunday they work in the Church. In this way, you give witness in the world of today, as well as in the working world, of the presence of faith, of the sacramental ministry and the diaconal dimension of the sacrament of Orders. This seems very important to me: the visibility of the diaconal dimension.

Naturally as well, every priest continues being a deacon, and should always think of this dimension, because the Lord himself made himself our minister, our deacon. We can think of the gesture of the washing of the feet, with which he explicitly shows that the master, the Lord, acts as a deacon and wants those who follow him to be deacons, that they fulfill this role for humanity, to the point that they also help to wash the dirtied feet of the men entrusted to us. This dimension seems very important to me.

On this occasion, I bring to mind -- though it is perhaps not immediately inherent to the theme -- a simple experience that Paul VI noted. Each day of the Council, the Gospel was enthroned. And the Pontiff told those in charge of the ceremony that he would like one time to be the one who enthrones the Gospel. They told him no, this is the job of the deacons, not of the Pope. He wrote in his diary: But I am also a deacon, I continue being a deacon, and I would like to also exercise this ministry of the diaconate placing the word of God on its throne. Thus, this concerns all of us. Priests continue being deacons, and the deacons make explicit in the Church and in the world this diaconal dimension of our ministry. This liturgical enthroning of the word of God each day during the Council was always for us a gesture of great importance: It told us who was the true Lord of that assembly; it told us that the word of God was on the throne and that we exercise our ministry to listen and to interpret, to offer to the others this word. It is broadly significant for all that we do: enthroning in the world the word of God, the living word, Christ. May it really be him who governs our personal life and our life in the parishes.

Now, you have asked me a question that, I must say, goes a bit beyond my strengths: What would be the tasks proper to the deacons of Rome. I know that the cardinal vicar knows much better than I the real situations of the city and the diocesan community of Rome. I think that one characteristic of the ministry of the deacons is precisely the multiplicity of the diaconate's applications. In the International Theological Commission, a few years ago, we studied at length the diaconate in the history and also the present of the Church. And we discovered just that: There is not just one profile. What they should do varies, depending on the preparation of the persons and the situations in which they find themselves. There can be applications and activities that are very different, always in communion with the bishop and with the parish, naturally. In the various situations, various possibilities arise, also depending on the professional preparation that these deacons could have. They could be committed in the cultural sector, which is so important today, or they could have a voice and an important post in the educational realm. We are thinking this year precisely of the problem of education as central to our future, and the future of humanity.

Certainly the sector of charity was in Rome the original sector, because those called presbyters and deacons were centers of Christian charity. This was from the beginning in the city of Rome a fundamental area. In my encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I showed that not just preaching and the liturgy are essential for the Church and for the ministry of the Church, but rather equally important is the service of *caritas* -- in its multiple dimensions -- for the poor, the needy. Thus, I hope that all the time, in the whole diocese, even if in distinct situations, this continues being a fundamental dimension, and also a priority for the commitment of the deacons, even if not the only one, as is also shown in the early Church, where the seven deacons were chosen precisely to permit the apostles to dedicate themselves to prayer, liturgy and preaching. Also afterward,

Stephen found himself in the situation of having to preach to the Greeks, to the Jews who spoke Greek, and thus the field of preaching was amplified. He is conditioned, we could say, by the cultural situation, where he has a voice to make present in that sector the word of God. In that way, he makes more possible the universality of the Christian testimony, opening the doors to St. Paul who witnessed his stoning, and later, in a certain sense, was his successor in the universalization of the word of God. I don't know if the cardinal vicar would like to add something; I'm not as close to the concrete situations.

Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the Pope's vicar for the Diocese of Rome: Holy Father, I can just confirm, as you said, that also concretely in Rome, the deacons work in many sectors, for the most part, in parishes, where they concern themselves with the ministry of charity; but, for example, many are also involved in ministry to the family. Since almost all of the deacons are married, they offer marriage preparation, give follow-up to young couples, and things like that. They also offer a significant contribution to the ministry of health care; they help also in the vicariate -- where some of them work -- and as you heard, in missions. There is a certain missionary presence of deacons. I think that, naturally, in the numerical plane, the greatest commitment is in the parishes, but there also exist other sectors that are also opening, and precisely because of this, we now have more than a hundred permanent deacons.

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ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE PERMANENT DEACONS OF ROME

*Clementine Hall
Saturday, 18 February 2006*

Dear Roman Deacons,

I am particularly glad to meet you today on the 25th anniversary of the re-establishment of the permanent diaconate in the Diocese of Rome. I greet with affection the Cardinal Vicar, whom I thank for his words on behalf of you all. I also greet Bishop Vincenzo Apicella, until now in charge of the Diocesan Centre for the Permanent Diaconate, and Mons. Francesco Peracchi, Delegate of the Cardinal Vicar who has supervised your formation for years. I offer my most cordial welcome to each one of you and to your families.

In a famous passage from his Letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul says that Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (2: 7). He, Christ, is the example at which to look. In the Gospel, he told his disciples he had come “not to be served but to serve” (cf. Mt 20: 28). In particular, during the Last Supper, after having once again explained to the Apostles that he was among them “as one who serves” (Lk 22: 27), he made the humble gesture of washing the feet of the Twelve, a duty of slaves, setting an example so that his disciples might imitate him in service and in mutual love.

Union with Christ, to be cultivated through prayer, sacramental life and in particular, Eucharistic adoration, is of the greatest importance to your ministry, if it is truly to testify to God's love. Indeed, as I wrote in my Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, “Love can be ‘commanded’ because it has first been given” (n. 14).

Dear deacons, accept with joy and gratitude the love the Lord feels for you and pours out in your lives, and generously give to people what you have received as a free gift. The Church of Rome has a long tradition of service to the city's poor. In these years new forms of poverty have emerged.

Indeed, many people have lost the meaning of life and do not possess a truth upon which to build their existence; a great many young people ask to meet men and women who can listen to and advise them in life's difficulties. Beside material poverty, we also find spiritual and cultural poverty.

Our Diocese, aware that the encounter with Christ, "gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (*ibid.*, n. 1) is devoting special attention to the topic of the transmission of the faith.

Dear deacons, I am grateful to you for the services you carry out with great generosity in many parish communities of Rome, dedicating yourselves in particular to the ministries of Baptism and the family. By teaching Christ's Gospel, a faculty conferred upon you by the Bishop on the day of your ordination, you help parents who ask for Baptism for their children to reflect more deeply on the mystery of the divine life that has been given to us, and that of the Church, the great family of God.

Meanwhile, you also proclaim the truth about human love to engaged couples who desire to celebrate the sacrament of marriage, explaining that "marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa" (*ibid.*, n. 11).

Many of you work in offices, hospitals and schools: in these contexts you are called to be servants of the Truth. By proclaiming the Gospel, you will be able to convey the Word that can illumine and give meaning to human work, to the suffering of the sick, and you will help the new generations to discover the beauty of the Christian faith.

Thus you will be deacons of the liberating Truth, and you will lead the inhabitants of this city to encounter Jesus Christ.

Welcoming the Redeemer into their lives is a source of deep joy for human beings, a joy that can bring peace even in moments of trial. Therefore, be servants of the Truth in order to be messengers of the joy that God desires to give to every human being.

However, it is not enough to proclaim the faith with words alone for, as the Apostle James recalls, "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas 2: 17). Thus, it is necessary to back up the proclamation of the Gospel with a practical witness of charity, so that "for the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity... but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 25).

The practice of charity has been part of the diaconal ministry from the outset: the "seven" of which the Acts of the Apostles speak were chosen "to serve at tables."

You, who belong to the Church of Rome, are the heirs of a long tradition, of which the Deacon Lawrence is a singularly fine and luminous example. Many of the poor who come knocking at the doors of parish communities to ask for the help they need to get through moments of serious difficulty often come from countries very far from Italy.

Welcome these brothers and sisters with great warmth and willingness, and do all you can to help them in their need, always remembering the Lord's words: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25: 40).

I express my gratitude to those of you who are employed in this silent and daily witness of charity. Indeed, through your service, the poor realize that they too belong to that great family of God's children: the Church.

Dear Roman deacons, by living and witnessing to God's infinite love, may you always be, in your ministry, at the service of building the Church as communion. In your work you are sustained by the affection and prayer of your families. Your vocation is a special grace for your family life, which in this way is called to be ever more open to the will of the Lord and to the needs of the Church. May the Lord reward the availability with which your wives and children accompany you in your service to the entire ecclesial community.

May Mary, the humble handmaid of the Lord who gave the Savior to the world, and the Deacon Lawrence who loved the Lord to the point of giving up his life for him, always accompany you with their intercession. With these sentiments, I wholeheartedly impart to each one of you the Apostolic Blessing, which I gladly extend to all your loved ones and to everyone you meet in your ministry.

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