

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Well Done Good and Faithful Servant

At ordination, we kneel before the bishop and pledge fidelity to him and to his successors. Of course, this comes as no surprise to us as a condition of ordination requires that we sign, just prior to ordination, the *mandatum*, stating the very same thing. What is pledged at ordination is a formalization and public affirmation of what has been pledged earlier by written consent.

Fidelity is an absolute and indispensable aspect of good service. It's the hallmark of *diakonia* and the definitive characteristic of what it means to be a deacon. We are called not simply to be servants but, to use the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14–30), *good and faithful* servants. The difference between these two forms of service lies in our relationship to the one we serve.

Unfortunately, it's not always clear who we're called to serve. Quite often, if we're not attentive, we can lose sight of the fact that it's God who calls us to serve. All too often, we can miss this fundamental truth, focusing instead on tasks and functions and, in the process, depersonalize our ministry, becoming little more than glorified social workers. In this respect, it's a serious mistake to believe that service is primarily to the people, but instead it's primarily to God, in-and-through the people. This may seem a distinction without a difference but in truth it makes all the difference in the world.

If our diaconal service is first and foremost to God, we'll source our ministry in Him. This means that, by grace, we'll have the capacity to exceed ourselves, becoming more than we are and bringing with us the One who really ministers, Christ the Servant. This means that when our strength fails in the exercise of our ministry, and it will, His strength provides what is needed. In this regard, it's not so much we who serve, but Christ alive and living within us, enabling us to incarnate Christ in a powerful and transformative manner. In this way, we fulfill as deacons our unique contribution to the mystery of salvation.

As noted earlier, the difference here lies in our relationship to our Lord. If we're inattentive to the interior life, if we don't seek intimate communion with Christ the Servant as an ongoing reality, then we'll pass right in front of Christ in those he serves. This is not to suggest that we'll cease to minister, but rather that we'll minister with our own imperfect love which, in our fallen yet redeemed state, will ultimately fail. This is simply to say that love of neighbor begins with love of God or, put another way, fidelity to neighbor begins with fidelity to God. Just as love grows over time, so too does fidelity. They are part and parcel of the very same reality and incomprehensible without one another.

When diaconal ministry is contextualized in divine love, we're transformed so that every aspect of our being bears witness to Christ the Servant. This is especially true of the first of those we're called to serve, our wife and children.

My brothers, when we knelt before the bishop at ordination and pledged our fidelity, we knelt before the representative of God. This was a solemn moment in a solemn event, affirming the call we received and the One to whom we're to follow. In this following – which entails a taking up of our cross – we will undoubtably experience hardship as we seek to become better and more faithful servants. This is the very nature of love as expressed so beautifully by our Savior. Nonetheless, if we source this fidelity in Christ, if we keep our gaze fixed on Him, all things are possible. This is what authentic diaconal ministry is all about, and this is what we've been privileged to exercise.

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