

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Receiving God's Love in Ministry

In my book, *In the Person of Christ the Servant*, diaconal ministry is described as a, “salvific gift-of-self that wills the happiness of the other for the sake of the other.” This description arose out of a study of St. John Paul II’s Personalism and Theology of the Body as applied to the diaconate. While this way of speaking may sound rather broad, it’s significance is profound as it moves ecclesial service away from simply something we do, to someone we give, our very selves. Such an approach reveals diaconal ministry for what it ultimately is, an act of divine love poured out through human hands. As a result, the deacon, when he consciously gives himself in his diaconate, “incarnates” Christ the Servant in his ministry.

This broader understanding of *diakonia* provides a much-needed corrective from what can be called, “the rush to mission.” It respects the fundamental truth that we are human beings, not human doings. Because of this, genuine Catholic ministry, be it diaconal or otherwise, must avoid a kind of functionalism, which tends to depersonalize people treating them as things. Instead, ministry must adopt a relational approach seeing the one we minister as an *alter Christus* (another Christ). This is only possible if we source our love in Christ the Servant following, in our ministry, His own salvific gift-of-self.

The nature of interpersonal love, when it’s expressed authentically, is always mutual and reciprocal. This is to say that for love to be love, in its deepest sense, both parties must be willing to give themselves to the other while at the very same time receiving the other. Nowhere is this better expressed than in the interaction between the Blessed Trinity and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In the Incarnation, God extends his love to a young Jewish girl through an offer to participate in redemption. Mary’s *fiat*, her willingness to embrace this love, impregnated her with Love itself in the person of Jesus. Throughout her life, she gave as she received. Because she is without taint of sin, nothing except the finitude of her humanity limited her reception of God’s love. That same immaculate nature made it possible to reciprocate God’s love in an exemplary manner at the foot of the Cross.

Imagine the consolation she must have given our Lord as, in the midst of His terrible suffering, He saw the face of His loving mother. As Jesus was giving His very self to us and indeed to His own mother as she too was saved by His merits; His mother, representing the Church was, in that moment, giving back to Him in the only way she could, through her own gift-of-self. Mary teaches us that sometimes, in loving another, in ministering, all we can do is sit

at the foot of the cross and await the resurrection. This type of accompaniment is not a lack of love, but a form of love surrendered.

Since ministry, understood from a personalist perspective, is nothing less than an act of love, it too must admit to a kind of mutuality and reciprocity with Mary being the model. Put another way, we can't touch without being touched. This means that when we visit the nursing home to minister to six elderly residents, we not only go to bring Christ, we go to meet that same Christ – six times. This is even true when the person we visit is not very receptive. As long as he or she is open to the encounter, to the degree he or she is open, mutuality and reciprocity is established, and effective ministry can take place.

Mutuality and reciprocity also mean that as we feed, we are being fed. Of course, to fully partake in the grace we're offered in the ministerial encounter, we need to be subjectively open. Like the sacraments themselves, these encounters are sacramental and while the grace is always present (*ex opera operato*), for us to receive this grace, we need to be properly disposed (*ex opera operantis*).

When we are aware of this grace, when we embrace it, we embrace the crucified and risen Christ, who at the same time embraces us. This dynamic impacts in a powerful way the quality of our ministry. We become far less functional, far more relational. This infuses what we do with a tender character enabling us to enter into the suffering of those we minister bearing witness to Christ the Servant.

In some rare cases, this ministerial reality is more apparent than others. I few months ago, I had the privilege of preaching at my father's funeral Mass. It was something I knew he wanted me to do and something I wanted to do for him. The preparation was quite different for me consisting of prayerfully gathering my thoughts and writing a few bullet points. As I began to preach, not really sure of my exact words, I felt a comfort and peace. My words of consolation to my family and friends seem to touch me at the very moment I uttered them.

At the end of Mass, during the final commendation as the incense rose, I began to weep sweet tears feeling somewhat unconsolated – that is until I looked at the young altar server. He was a fine young man, perhaps about 15 and well groomed vested in an alb. As he held the rite book for the celebrant, his face was almost expressionless and yet tears streamed down his face and I could see, above his breastbone his alb drenched in tears. This young boy, this little Jesus did what our Lord did at the tomb of Lazarus; he wept. He didn't know my father and he didn't know me. His heart was moved and he shared his heart through his tears, tears that brought me great consolation.

Reflecting on this and my ministry over the past three decades, I can't help but think of the many times I've missed Christ, not because He wasn't there, but because I was too busy "ministering" to notice Him. I pray now for the grace to be intensely aware of His presence so

that, by being touched by Him, I can bring His touch to others. This way, like the Blessed Virgin Mary, we receive God's love in the very exercise of His will.

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