

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Discovering a Priesthood in the Diaconate

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Have you ever considered how the diaconate shares in the priesthood of Christ while remaining distinct from the presbyterate and episcopate? Just as priests share in the diaconate of Christ through their earlier ordination as deacons, deacons also participate in Christ's priesthood, though in a unique way. This insight, carefully nuanced and theologically accurate, has profound implications for deacons and for the Church we serve.

Initially, it might seem odd to speak of the diaconate as sharing in Christ's priesthood because the Church treats these as separate and distinct orders within the broader sacrament of Holy Orders. While this distinction is essential and must be maintained, both the diaconate and presbyterate participate in the one priesthood of Christ, each in its own unique way.

The Church distinguishes between two participations in the one priesthood of Christ: the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood. The common priesthood, often called the priesthood of the laity or royal priesthood, arises from Baptism. For priests, this common priesthood is further specified and enriched by ordination to the ministerial priesthood. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, both the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood of all the faithful participate in the one priesthood of Christ, each in their proper way (CCC 1547). While being ordered to each other, they differ essentially: the common priesthood is lived out by unfolding baptismal grace through faith, hope, and charity, while the ministerial priesthood serves the common priesthood by guiding and unfolding that baptismal grace for all Christians.

It's essential to note that the common priesthood is not absorbed by the ministerial priesthood, but they remain distinct. Holy Orders affects how this participation in Christ's one priesthood is lived out. Since deacons receive Holy Orders, it stands to reason that the diaconate also participates in the one priesthood of Christ – a diaconal participation. Saint John Paul II recognized this unique diaconal participation in Christ's one priesthood when he taught:

The catechesis I have given on the diaconate, to complete the picture of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, thus highlights what is most important in this order, as in those of the presbyterate and the episcopate: a specific spiritual participation in the priesthood of Christ and the commitment to a life in conformity to him by the action of the Holy Spirit ... Deacons, therefore, are called to participate in the mystery of the cross, to share in the Church's sufferings, and to endure the

hostility she encounters, in union with Christ the Redeemer. This painful aspect of the deacon's service makes it most fruitful.¹

While we often associate the diaconate with service, our ministry is more than just performing tasks. Our self-gift in ministry should take on the form of sacrifice, moving our service from merely functional to deeply relational, where we connect with others person to person and soul to soul. This reveals Christ the Servant and makes visible the crucified and risen Lord.

Thus, we can properly speak of a "priesthood of the diaconate," as this priestly quality imbues our ministry with a redemptive character. In revealing Christ the Servant, we also reveal Christ the Priest, albeit differently from the presbyterate. This sacrificial service moves our ministry beyond mere functionality to something salvific – for those we serve and, equally important, for ourselves.

So, to return to our opening question: How does the diaconate participate in Christ's priesthood while maintaining its distinction from the presbyterate and episcopate? It does so by embracing the sacrificial and relational nature of Christ's servanthood, revealing Christ the Servant and Christ the Priest in a unique and powerful way. Brothers, let us continue to offer ourselves fully in service, embodying the priesthood of the diaconate for the glory of God and for the good of His Church.

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¹ Pope Saint John Paul II, "Deacons are Called to a Life of Holiness," General Audience of October 20, 1993, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=298>.