

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

Deacon Dominic Cerrato, Ph.D.



Ministerial Integrity and the Diaconate

Some time ago, I was chatting with a brother deacon involved in hospital ministry. As he explained the ins-and-outs of chaplaincy, he made a rather broad comment that struck me as quite odd. He said, “The Church’s teachings don’t always work pastorally in a clinical setting.” When I pressed him to explain further, he said that, practically speaking, theology doesn’t make sense when we’re dealing with a terminally ill patient or a grieving widow and it’s the circumstances that govern how we minister.

In some respects, my brother was correct. The pastoral situation demands that we consider the circumstances and the persons involved. However, where I would disagree with him is in the relationship between theology in pastoral practice. In fact, I would argue that what gives ministry its distinctively Catholic characteristic is our theology. Pastoral practice is nothing less than a practical application of our deeply held beliefs. If such an expression is not tethered to the faith, then we become nothing more than social workers. This has the effect of weakening our integrity as ministers of the Church and diminishing our witness.

Considered on a more fundamental level, personal integrity requires that we live what we believe. So, for example, if I’m a “Catholic deacon,” if I make that claim and wave that flag, then the adjective (Catholic) ought to be quite evident in the noun (deacon). Integrity necessitates that, if we’re to remain faithful to Christ and His Church, we must act in accord with what we hold sacred. In fact, we know we truly believe what we deeply hold when our acts consistently reflect these beliefs. In this way we “incarnate” our beliefs in our lives bearing witness to our faith in concrete and tangible ways.

This is not at all to suggest that upon entering the hospital room we break out the *Catechism*. There’s a time and place for all things. That said, in over 30 years of ministry, I’ve yet to find a situation where theology didn’t inform my pastoral practice. The challenge becomes applying Church teaching in charity and prudence without diminishing its essence. Sometimes, this may even mean delaying a conversation until emotions settle.

I recall receiving word from the hospital that a man, who was already clinically dead, would be removed from life support and that his wife was requesting a Catholic presence. The man had already been anointed the day before, so I was assigned by the pastor to respond. As I entered the room and introduced myself, the wife signaled for me to come over to the bed. She put her arm around me and we both leaned over her dying husband. After a brief prayer, the respiratory

technician pulled the tube and the man began to gasp. In an attempt to comfort her husband's passing, she said, "Go to the light. Go to our horses and green fields (a reference to their ranch)."

While the theologian in me shuttered a bit, this was neither the time nor place to take up the question of the final disposition of animal souls and the man's particular judgement. This isn't to deny the relevance of these topics. It's instead to appreciate the emotionally charged situation and the appropriateness of such an observation within this context. The best I could do is accompany the wife through his passing, establish the relationship, and leave open the possibility that our Lord may create a future opportunity to address these issues. Moreover, in that particular situation, I quickly realized that, in a certain sense, she was saying what the Church taught as she understood it. This was "heaven" for her, explained in the only words she knew. A more refined sense would have to come, but it would have to wait.

Sometimes, the situation places a moral obligation on the part of the minister to explain Church teaching, such as a couple approaching marriage while cohabitating. To say nothing, to simply ignore the situation as though it will soon be remedied, is to betray Christ and His Church. The question is not whether we should bring the Church's teaching to bear in this situation, but how we do it. Again, this requires charity and prudence along with some death-to-self. Those who come to us are owed the truth and it would be a grave injustice either by omission or commission to deny them what we've been ordained to give them. Thus, critical to authentic Catholic pastoral ministry is our own theological formation and our willingness to continue that formation beyond ordination.

In this edition, we have a great line-up of writers, from Deacon David Lopez, editor of the *Josephinum Diaconal Review* to Sister Sara Butler, M.S.B.T. of the University of St. Mary of the Lake Mundelein. These and our other contributors will help us appreciate the connection between theology and pastoral practice enabling us to more effectively bear witness to Christ the Servant.

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