

# Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

Deacon Dominic Cerrato, Ph.D.



## “O Sublime Humility”: The Diaconal Heart of Francis

On Christmas Eve 1223, in a cave at Greccio, St. Francis of Assisi gathered the townspeople to behold the mystery of the Incarnation in a way never before seen. He arranged a simple manger with hay, bringing in an ox and a donkey to create a living Nativity scene. As Thomas of Celano, his earliest biographer, recounts, Francis was “clothed with the vestments of the deacon, for he was a deacon, and with full voice sang the holy Gospel.” He then preached with profound devotion on “the birth of the poor King.”<sup>1</sup> This moment at Greccio was not merely a reenactment but a theological statement: Francis, in his diaconal role, was pointing beyond himself to Christ the Servant. In this, we see the essence of his vocation – not only as the founder of a great religious movement but as a deacon of the Church, living the radical humility of Christ.



*Nativity Scene in Greccio*

Today, St. Francis is often remembered as a mystic, a reformer, and the founder of the Franciscan Order. Yet, his identity as a deacon is rarely emphasized, despite its profound significance. Francis was never a priest; he deliberately chose to remain in the Order of Deacons, seeing himself as a servant rather than one who held ecclesial authority. His entire life embodied the essence of *diakonia*: humility, care for the poor, reverence for the Eucharist, and preaching the Gospel through word and deed. His diaconal identity offers a model for today’s deacons and all who seek to serve Christ.

### A Humble Servant: Francis as a Deacon

Historical sources confirm that Francis was indeed ordained a deacon, though we do not know the exact date or circumstances. Celano describes him at Greccio as wearing the vestments

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas of Celano, *The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Placid Hermann (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1963), 86.

of a deacon and proclaiming the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> Later, St. Bonaventure echoes this, referring to Francis as a “Levite of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> This reference is deeply significant, as the Levites in the Old Testament were consecrated to assist the priests in temple worship, care for sacred objects, and minister to the people of Israel. Their role was one of mediation, service, and dedication to God's work. In many ways, the Levites prefigure the ministry of the diaconate, as both are called to serve at the altar, proclaim the Word, and minister to the needs of the faithful.

Unlike many clerics of his time, Francis revered priests but did not seek their office. He often said, “If I saw an angel and a priest, I would bend my knee first to the priest,” because of their role in consecrating the Eucharist.<sup>4</sup> Yet, he deemed himself unworthy of such a high calling. Instead, he chose the path of humility, identifying with the least and embracing the role of a servant.

### **Service to the Poor and Marginalized**

Francis’s ministry to the poor was not just an act of charity – it was a spiritual necessity, rooted in his encounter with Christ among the suffering. In his *Testament*, he recalls, “The Lord Himself led me among [the lepers] and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, that which had seemed bitter was changed into sweetness of soul and body.”<sup>5</sup> This moment transformed his understanding of service: to serve the poor was to serve Christ Himself.

As a deacon, Francis lived out the Church’s ancient diaconal role of caring for the marginalized. He and his brothers did not simply give alms; they embraced poverty themselves, becoming beggars alongside the destitute. Celano recounts an incident in which a friar refused to give bread to a poor man. Francis rebuked him, saying, “Give him what he asks, for it belongs to him. We have promised to live for the poor.”<sup>6</sup> This radical solidarity with the poor embodied Christ’s own words: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.”<sup>7</sup>

Francis’s care extended in a special way to lepers, the outcasts of medieval society. He did not merely visit leper colonies – he lived among them, washing their wounds, embracing them, and restoring their dignity. Bonaventure describes how Francis conquered his initial horror of leprosy through an act of profound humility, kissing a leper’s sores in an imitation of Christ’s own

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of St. Francis*, trans. Dominic Monti (New York: New City Press, 2008), X, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Celano, *Second Life of St. Francis*, CLV.

<sup>5</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Testament*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, ed. Regis J. Armstrong (New York: New City Press, 1999), 124.

<sup>6</sup> Celano, *First Life of St. Francis*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Mt 25:40.

embrace of the broken.<sup>8</sup> This moment, recorded in both Celano and Bonaventure, marks a turning point in Francis's conversion, teaching him that divine love is found in radical self-gift.

### **A Liturgical Heart: Reverence for the Eucharist**

Francis' diaconal vocation was deeply tied to his love for the Eucharist. Though he could not consecrate the Body and Blood of Christ, he had an extraordinary devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. In a letter to clergy, he implored priests to treat the Eucharist with reverence, ensuring that "chalices, corporals, and all that pertain to the sacrifice be of precious material."<sup>9</sup> He was distressed when he found churches where the Eucharist was kept in neglect and took it upon himself to restore reverence to these sacred spaces.

His understanding of the Eucharist was inseparable from his view of humility. In his *Admonitions*, he writes, "O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that He hides Himself for our salvation under an ordinary piece of bread!"<sup>10</sup> Francis saw in the Eucharist the very humility of God – a humility that called him to lower himself in service to others.

### **Proclaiming the Gospel in Word and Deed**

Preaching was central to Francis's diaconal ministry. After receiving approval from Pope Innocent III in 1209, he and his brothers began traveling from town to town, calling people to repentance and conversion. Celano describes how Francis preached "not with learned words, but with a burning heart," stirring people to tears and action.<sup>11</sup> He often preached in marketplaces, on street corners, or wherever he found an audience.

Francis was keenly aware that words alone were not enough. He famously instructed his brothers, "Let all the brothers, however, preach by their deeds."<sup>12</sup> His own life was his most powerful sermon. Whether embracing lepers, begging for food, or reconciling warring factions, Francis embodied the Gospel he proclaimed. His very presence bore witness to Christ's love.

### **The Modern Diaconate and the Example of Francis**

---

<sup>8</sup> Bonaventure, *Major Legend*, V, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Letter to Clergy*, in *Early Documents*, vol. 1, 123.

<sup>10</sup> Francis, *Admonitions*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Celano, *First Life*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Francis, *Earlier Rule*, 17.

What can today's deacons learn from St. Francis? His life offers three key insights for living out the diaconal vocation:

**Radical Humility** Radical humility is at the core of the diaconal vocation. St. Francis lived this humility not as a posture but as a fundamental reality, choosing always the lowest place. Today's deacons, following his example, are called to embrace humility as their defining characteristic. In a world that often equates leadership with authority and status, Francis challenges deacons to lead through servanthood, prioritizing the needs of others above personal ambition. By modeling the humility of Christ, deacons not only serve more effectively but also bear powerful witness to the Gospel in an age that often misunderstands true greatness.

**Love for the Poor** Francis's profound love for the poor was a direct expression of his relationship with Christ. He saw the suffering Christ in the faces of the marginalized and responded with radical generosity. For today's deacons, this translates into a love for the poor – seeking out the vulnerable and offering practical acts of charity that flow from a heart transformed by Christ. More than simply providing aid, deacons are called to accompany the poor, sharing in their burdens and recognizing their dignity as children of God.

**Deep Eucharistic Devotion** The Eucharist was central to Francis's spirituality, shaping his entire understanding of service. His reverence for the Blessed Sacrament informs the diaconal ministry at the altar, where deacons assist in the liturgy, proclaim the Gospel, and distribute Communion. However, Francis's example reminds deacons that their service must extend beyond the sanctuary. A deep Eucharistic devotion compels them to bring Christ's presence into the world, carrying the sacrificial love of the altar into their daily ministry.

### **A Model for Today's Deacons**

The Nativity at Greccio remains one of the most enduring symbols of Francis' legacy. That night, dressed in the vestments of a deacon, he pointed beyond himself to the mystery of the Incarnation. In doing so, he demonstrated what diaconal service is all about: making Christ present in the world through humble service, proclamation of the Gospel, and love for the poor. Indeed, Francis' life reminds us that the heart of *diakonia* is not status or function, but a radical commitment to servanthood.

###