

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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To Serve is to Love: Exploring the Implications of *Deus Caritas Est* for the Diaconate

Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), offers an in-depth reflection on the nature of love, particularly focusing on the integration of *eros* (possessive or ascending love) and *agape* (self-giving or descending love). Promulgated in 2005, the encyclical addresses the essential relationship between love and the Christian vocation, where love becomes both a gift received and a responsibility to be lived out. Pope Benedict introduces a profound challenge for the Church: to understand love not merely as sentiment, but as an act of the will, deeply connected to divine revelation.

For deacons, who are configured to Christ the Servant, *Deus Caritas Est* provides invaluable insights into their relationship to Christ, their identity in Him, and their mission with Him. Applied to their vocation, the encyclical invites deacons to see their ministry not merely as functional but as a manifestation of divine love flowing from intimate communion with Christ the Servant. In what follows we will explore how deacons can deepen their relationship to Christ, understand their identity in Him, and renew their mission of service.

The Deacon's Relationship to Christ the Servant

The foundation of *Deus Caritas Est* rests on the proclamation that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and that divine love is both the source and goal of Christian life. Pope Benedict stresses that this divine love is not simply abstract but is made manifest through the person of Jesus Christ: "In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1). For deacons, this love takes on special significance as they are ontologically configured to Christ the Servant at ordination.

In his encyclical, Pope Benedict emphasizes the role of Christ as the ultimate model of self-giving love, who "gave himself for us" (Eph 5:2). The deacon, by virtue of his ordination, is invited to enter into this relationship to Christ in a unique way. In this respect, the deacon's relationship to Christ is not merely one of imitation, but one of configuration. The deacon, through ordination, is not only called to serve but to serve in the person of Christ the Servant who is Love incarnate.

This relationship to Christ must be deeply personal and rooted in prayer. Benedict writes, "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1). For

deacons, this encounter with Christ begins in the interior life. It is through prayer, Eucharistic adoration, and reflection on Scripture that the deacon enters into deeper communion with Christ the Servant. In this regard, the deacon's relationship to Christ must be the wellspring from which his ministry flows. Without this interior grounding, his service risks becoming mere social work, devoid of the transformative power of divine love.

In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict also explores the relationship between *eros* and *agape*, showing that these two forms of love are not opposed but complement one another. *Eros*, or ascending love, represents the human desire for union with the divine, while *agape*, descending love, represents God's self-giving love for humanity. Benedict explains, "Love is indeed 'ecstasy,' not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 6). For deacons, this movement from *eros* to *agape* is crucial in understanding their relationship to Christ. As they grow in their desire for union with Christ (*eros*), they are called to express that love in service to others (*agape*), embodying Christ's self-emptying love in their ministry.

Identity in Christ the Servant

The deacon's identity is profoundly shaped by his configuration to Christ the Servant. Pope Benedict's encyclical emphasizes that the essence of Christian life is participation in the love of Christ: "Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom He gives Himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to Him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, His own" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 14). For the deacon, this union with Christ manifests in his service to his family, the Church and the world. His identity is not found in his functions—preaching, assisting at the altar, or serving the poor—but in his very being as an icon of Christ the Servant.

Here the deacon's identity is rooted in his "ontological change" at ordination. This change configures the deacon to Christ in a unique way, allowing him to act in the person of Christ the Servant (*in persona Christi Servi*). This identity is not something that can be separated from the deacon's daily life; rather, it must permeate and penetrate every aspect of his existence. Indeed, because he is deacon, because he has been indelibly marked as Christ the Servant, he now has the capacity to relate to God in a particular way, in a diaconal way.

Benedict XVI's reflection on the unity of *eros* and *agape* further illuminates the deacon's identity. The deacon, like all Christians, is called to embody both aspects of love: the desire for union with God and the call to self-giving love for others. This dual movement of love is at the heart of the deacon's identity. He is both a receiver of God's love and a servant who pours out that love in ministry. As Benedict writes, "Love grows through love. Love is 'divine' because it comes from God and unites us to God" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 18). The deacon, through his service, is called to make God's love visible in the world, embodying both the contemplative and active dimensions of love.

The Mission of the Deacon with Christ the Servant

The mission of the deacon is grounded in the deacon's configuration to Christ the Servant. This mission is not simply a series of tasks to be performed but a calling to make present the love of Christ in concrete ways. As Benedict XVI writes, "Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 20).

Deacons are sent into the world to embody this love, particularly through their ministry to the poor, the marginalized, and the suffering. The mission of the deacon is to make Christ present in the midst of human suffering, offering not only material assistance but also the spiritual consolation that flows from the love of God. As Benedict reminds us, "Practical activity will always be insufficient, unless it visibly expresses a love for man, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 34). The deacon's mission, therefore, is not merely about meeting physical needs but about revealing the presence of Christ through his acts of service.

Pope Benedict also explores the relationship between love and justice, a theme particularly relevant for deacons. He writes, "The just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics. As a social reality, the Church cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time, she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 28). For deacons, this means that their mission is not limited to charitable works but must also involve a prophetic witness to justice. They are called to advocate for the poor and marginalized, to be voices for those who cannot speak for themselves, and to challenge structures of injustice that deny the dignity of the human person.

The Challenge for Deacons

Deus Caritas Est offers a profound challenge to deacons today. They are called to deepen their relationship to Christ the Servant, to embrace their identity as icons of His love, and to carry out their mission with renewed zeal and commitment. Pope Benedict reminds us that love is the essence of the Christian life: "If I have no contact whatsoever with God in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in Him the image of God" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 18).

The challenge for deacons is clear: to become living icons of Christ the Servant. By growing in intimacy with Christ, deacons will not only deepen their own communion with God but will also bear witness to the transformative power of divine love in the world. As Pope Benedict writes, "Love is free; it is not practiced as a way of achieving other ends. But this does not mean that love can be detached from faith and hope" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 31). Deacons, then, are called to be witnesses to this free and self-giving love, drawing others into the heart of Christ the Servant.

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