

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

Deacon Dominic Cerrato, Ph.D.



Behold the Handmaid, Marian Spirituality and the Diaconate in the Vision of Pope Leo XIV

When white smoke rose above St. Peter's Basilica on May 8, 2025—the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii—the newly elected Pope Leo XIV stepped onto the loggia and invited the world to silence. Then, with quiet conviction, he led the faithful in the *Hail Mary*. This gesture was not liturgical pageantry nor merely devotional formality. It was theological orientation. In placing the Blessed Virgin Mary at the threshold of his pontificate, Pope Leo signaled that his papacy would draw its strength from the woman whose fiat gave flesh to the Eternal Word.

Pope Leo's Marian theology is not sentimental or romanticized, but deeply ecclesial, rooted in the Fathers, illuminated by Augustine, and expressed in the prayerful posture of a son before his mother. In this light, his teaching on Mary provides a lens through which to contemplate the vocation of the diaconate. For if Mary is the "handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38), then her life becomes a mirror in which the deacon discovers the true face of service: humble, obedient, and sacrificial.

Mary as Archetype of Receptivity and Mission

The mystery of Mary lies in the harmony of two seemingly opposing dispositions: contemplative receptivity and apostolic mission. She is the one who receives the Word in silence, yet the one who "goes with haste" to the hill country to serve Elizabeth (Lk 1:39). She bears Christ not only in her womb but in her heart, making her life an unbroken offering of love. In her, we witness the Church in her fullness, not because she claims authority but because she consents completely to the will of God.

For the deacon—whose vocation is intrinsically ecclesial—Mary is not only mother but model. The deacon's first responsibility is not action but *presence*. Before proclaiming the Gospel or distributing Communion, he must receive Christ anew in the depth of prayer. The rhythm of diaconal ministry flows from interior communion to exterior mission. Mary teaches this rhythm: to be still before the Lord, to treasure His Word in the heart, and only then to act.

Pope Leo XIV, with his Augustinian sensibility, affirms this Marian sequence. He has often recalled the teaching of St. Augustine that Mary, "conceived Christ in her heart before she conceived Him in her womb."¹ This patristic insight resonates deeply with the theology of the diaconate, which understands ordination not as a function delegated by the Church but as a sacramental configuration to Christ the Servant. It is a permanent identity that pervades every

aspect of the deacon's life: family, work, liturgy, and apostolate. In Mary's undivided heart, the deacon sees the unity he is called to embody.

Humility: The Ground of Diaconal Ministry

Mary's first self-description in Scripture is not "queen," but "handmaid"—the Greek *doulē*, a term of servitude. Far from denoting servility, it reveals the interior disposition of one who belongs entirely to the will of Another. "He has looked upon the lowliness of His handmaid" (Lk 1:48). Her Magnificat becomes the anthem of all those who serve without seeking recognition, who find joy in being forgotten by the world yet remembered by God.

Pope Leo XIV has consistently emphasized humility as the foundation of clerical identity, especially for deacons. At the 2025 Jubilee for Deacons in Rome, he exhorted the assembled ministers to avoid the dangers of clericalism by embracing the hiddenness of their vocation: "Deacons are custodians of service, not of status. True power in the Church lies in the power of love that kneels."²

This echoes Christ's own instruction: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:26–27). The deacon, configured to this servant Christ, must carry the Gospel not in arrogance or ambition, but with the simplicity of the towel and basin. In a culture that prizes self-promotion and individualism, this witness of humble presence becomes a form of prophetic resistance.

In Mary, humility and dignity are not opposed. Rather, they converge. She is exalted *because* she is lowly, made Queen of Heaven because she was willing to be the servant of all. Her humility is fecund. So too, when the deacon embraces the hidden dimensions of his ministry—visiting the dying, comforting the forgotten, preparing couples for marriage—he manifests the humility of Christ who "came not to be served, but to serve" (Mk 10:45).

The Obedience of Fiat: Diaconal Docility

The deacon, like Mary, is a man of *fiat*. His ordination is not a promotion but a surrender. He offers his availability to the bishop and to the People of God, promising obedience that is not blind but spiritual—a discerned alignment of his will to the will of God through the mediation of the Church.

Mary's *fiat* is exemplary: "Be it done unto me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). This word echoes the deep well of the Old Testament where the servants of God respond in covenantal trust. In her assent, Mary embodies the openness that all ecclesial vocations must imitate: a readiness to follow without full understanding, to give without measuring the cost.

Pope Leo XIV has pointed to this Marian obedience as essential for a synodal Church. In his prior role as Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, he taught that Mary is the model of ecclesial listening—one who hears the Word, meditates on it, and allows it to take flesh through her.³ The deacon, too, must cultivate this Marian docility. His is not a ministry of personal

initiative alone, but of ecclesial alignment. He listens to the needs of the Church, the voice of his bishop, the cries of the poor. Then, like Mary, he says, “yes.”

This obedience does not suppress personality or initiative. Rather, it purifies them. The deacon learns to subordinate his gifts to the needs of the community, to serve in collaboration, not competition. Mary did not need to understand the whole plan of salvation to participate in it. She trusted the One who spoke. The deacon is invited to that same trust.

Standing with Mary: Diaconal Compassion at the Cross

The heart of Marian spirituality is not found in the Annunciation alone, but in Calvary. There, Mary stands—*Stabat Mater*—beneath the Cross, silently uniting herself with the Passion of her Son. She says nothing, yet she communicates everything: fidelity, compassion, strength, and hope.

For the deacon, whose ministry often unfolds in hospitals, prisons, shelters, and cemeteries, Mary at the Cross is a profound image. His presence is not always about answers, but accompaniment. Like Mary, he must learn to *stay*: to remain in spaces of suffering, to witness without fleeing, to offer hope not as optimism, but as love that endures.

Pope Leo XIV has referred to Mary as “Mother of Holy Hope,” one who “assists, restores, and consoles those who turn to her.”⁴ The deacon is called to this same consoling presence. His is a ministry of hopeful accompaniment—rooted not in technique, but in being-with. At wakes, he proclaims resurrection not only with words, but with eyes that hold tears. In hospitals, his touch carries the warmth of God’s mercy. At the altar, he brings the sorrows of the world into the mystery of Christ’s sacrifice.

Mary’s maternal suffering was redemptive because it was united to her Son’s. So too, the deacon’s ministry becomes salvific not by its scope but by its depth—when offered in union with the One who still suffers in the least of His brothers and sisters (Mt 25:40).

Mary and the Deacon as Bridge of Communion

The deacon is called to be a bridge: between altar and marketplace, between clergy and laity, between Word and action. Mary, as Mother of the Church, embodies this bridging role in a maternal and mystical way. She does not divide; she unites. She brings together shepherds and scholars, apostles and sinners. She holds the Church together, not by authority, but by love.

Pope Leo XIV has spoken of a “diaconal Church”—a Church that serves, listens, and accompanies.⁵ The deacon, animated by Marian charity, plays a unique role in fostering unity among the faithful. He is not a substitute for the priest or a glorified lay minister, but a cleric who serves from below, reconciling distinct members into one Body.

This vocation to communion begins with other clergy. The deacon must not view himself in isolation, but as part of the one sacrament of Holy Orders. His relationship with the bishop and

priest must be grounded in fraternal respect, theological clarity, and mutual love. Mary, whose heart embraced both John and the pierced Christ at Calvary, teaches this ecclesial embrace.

The deacon's communion also extends to the family. Most deacons are married, and in this state they reveal a sacramental witness to the love of Christ and His Church. Mary, though ever-virgin, lived the joys and demands of family life in Nazareth. Her presence in the home teaches the deacon and his wife to integrate ministry and marriage, sanctity and service. Their mutual love becomes fertile ground for ecclesial fruitfulness.

Marian Devotion and the Interior Life of the Deacon

The heart of diaconal ministry is the interior life. Without it, service becomes mere activism, and charity becomes philanthropy. Pope Leo XIV, by leading public Rosaries and entrusting his ministry to Mary, demonstrates that Marian devotion is not ancillary but essential to ecclesial life.⁶

For the deacon, Marian devotion deepens the interior life. The Rosary becomes not just repetition, but contemplation—meditating with Mary on the mysteries of her Son. Marian consecration is not pietism, but spiritual realism: entrusting one's ministry to her care because she is the surest guide to Christ. Mary's maternal presence sustains the deacon in hidden moments, in trials, in fatigue. She teaches him to pray, to persevere, and to remain joyful in the midst of sacrifice.

Mary, Mother of the Diaconate

Mary is not only the Mother of God and of the Church; she is also the Mother of the Diaconos—Christ the Servant. In this maternal relationship lies a profound insight into the vocation of the deacon. Her *fiat*, her haste to serve, her humility, and her silent fidelity at the foot of the Cross all reveal the essential contours of diaconal identity.

To call her Mother of the Diaconate is not a pious invention but a theological affirmation. She formed the One who came not to be served but to serve (cf. Mk 10:45), and in doing so, she forms those ordained to bear His image in sacramental service. Mary's example teaches the deacon how to receive the Word in silence, to act with compassion, and to persevere in humble fidelity.

Pope Leo XIV's Marian vision, grounded in tradition and shaped by synodal attentiveness, illumines this path. In Mary, the deacon finds not only a model but a maternal presence—one who accompanies, consoles, and strengthens his mission from within. She is the quiet companion of the deacon's hidden service, the spiritual mother of his vocation.

Let the Church, then, recognize her with this fitting title: Mary, Mother of the Diaconate—patroness of those who serve as her Son served.

Mary, Mother of the Diaconate, pray for us.

Footnotes

1. St. Augustine, *Sermon 215, On the Birth of Christ*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1993), III/6, 182.
2. Cardinal Robert Prevost, Address to Jubilee of Deacons, Vatican City, April 2025.
3. Robert F. Prevost, “Listening with Mary,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, December 2023.
4. Vatican News, “Rosary for the Health of Pope Francis,” March 2025.
5. Robert F. Prevost, “A Diaconal Church: Reflections on Synodality,” Address at the Dicastery for Bishops Symposium, 2024.
6. Reuters, “Pope Leo XIV’s First Address,” May 8, 2025.

###