

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

Deacon Dominic Cerrato, Ph.D.



Being in the World but Not of the World

Over the last forty years in pastoral ministry, I've noticed a disturbing trend. In an attempt to become more "professional" and to protect the Church from litigation, we've adopted many secular corporate practices which, if embraced uncritically, have the very real potential to diminish the Church's mission.

Now don't get me wrong here, there's a lot the Church can learn from corporate America. By adopting certain financial, administrative, and marketing practices, we can fulfill our mission more effectively. However, we delude ourselves if we believe that the ideologies undergirding these practices are necessarily consistent with what we believe as Catholics. Consequently, when they are adopted without critical consideration, we end up taking evil with the good. This evil, because it's covered with the veneer of good, can act like an undetected cancer to the Body of Christ, the Church, eventually eroding our ability to advance the Kingdom. In this respect, we're called to be in the world, but not of the world (Jn 15:19).

Much like St. Thomas Aquinas did by adopting Aristotelian philosophy to better articulate theological truths, the Church must separate what is good from what is evil, thereby adopting the good and discarding the evil. She did this earlier by embracing much of the structure and organization of the Roman Empire "baptizing" it, so-to-speak, allowing for the rapid spread of Christianity. This same kind of critical discernment is called for in adopting corporate practices.

It's been said that social engineering begins with verbal engineering. Change the words we use to describe a reality and we change the perception of that reality. Years ago, in corporate America, the office responsible for finding, recruiting, training, and handling employees was known as "Personnel." Then, somewhere along the line, it was changed to Human Resources. Now that shift might sound rather benign, but it's widespread and now conventional acceptance belies a subtle but nonetheless substantial shift in our understanding of what an employee is – what a human is; a shift from individuals made in the image of God to mere resources. To use the personalist language of Pope Saint John Paul II, this has the potential to "thingify" the person, to make him or her an object of use instead of a person to be loved and respected.

If an employee is simply reduced to a mere resource then, at the end of the day, he or she can be used and then discarded like any other resource. If, however, we perceive in them another Christ, then not only does our perception change, but the manner in which they are treated changes (Mt 25:40). Even when such persons have to be laid-off or terminated for just cause, they can never be discarded like yesterday's trash. The Church has a sacred and moral obligation

to ensure that these people are treated with the dignity proper to being created in the image of God, redeemed in Christ Jesus, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

When we treat people as things, we see them as mere means to an end, and this can happen in ministry. Lay ministers, deacons and even priests can be used as mere instruments in ministry by those whose charge they are under. Instead, our Lord calls us to see them for who they are, affirming their dignity such that there is a shared vision and mutual collaboration all for the Glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom here on earth.

###