

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

Deacon Dominic Cerrato, Ph.D.



Custodians of Service

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In over forty years of pastoral ministry on both the parish and diocesan levels, it became apparent early on of the importance of the relationship between the clergy and the laity. The various documents and decrees following the Second Vatican Council acknowledged and promoted the laity in assuming a more active role in the life and mission of the Church. This resulted in a number of lay ministries that spanned from liturgical to catechetical, from bringing Communion to the sick to corporal works of mercy.

As the laity were taking on greater ministerial responsibilities through the seventies, the expansion of the diaconate as a permanent order began to be felt. As more and more were ordained especially in larger dioceses, many deacons experienced a kind of “pastoral squeeze” between priests who had already given ministerial ground to the laity, and laity who didn’t want to give up ministries to deacons, not realizing that laity could only exercise those particular ministries in the absence of a deacon. All of this, combined with a lack of catechetical formation on the nature and role of the diaconate in the life of the Church, resulted in a diaconal identity crisis. Quite often, permanent deacons were seen by the laity as affable old men who helped out around the parish; sort of half-baked priests who couldn’t handle celibacy.

A large part of the challenge is that deacons are often viewed as lay people who exercise special ministry, and not clerics who live a lay life. It’s not popular today to be a cleric as, unfortunately, some identify being a cleric with clericalism. Where the former is a vocation from God, the latter is an abuse of that vocation. Within this context, clericalism refers to an excessive or unwarranted emphasis on the authority, privileges, or status of the clergy at the expense of the laity. It can manifest as an attitude, a set of behaviors, or a system of beliefs that separates the clergy from the laity and places the clergy in a superior or privileged position within the Church.

Because deacons seek to fulfill their proper place in the Church, a place often held by the laity in the deacon’s absence, it can, to the uninformed, appear as a form of clericalism. This is particularly true when exercising liturgical ministry as when the deacon carries the Book of the Gospels or reads the Universal Prayer, or displaces an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist at Mass. While this has diminished over the years, it’s still quite prevalent in dioceses where deacons are far and few between. This false clericalism fails to understand that the diaconate is not about “power” as the world knows it but serving as Christ served, loving as Christ loved. As pointed out by Pope Francis in an address to the Deacons of Rome:

Let us remember, please, that for the disciples of Jesus, to love is to serve and to serve is to reign. Power lies in service, not in anything else. And as you have

recalled what I say that deacons are the custodians of service in the Church, so we can say that they are the custodians of true “power” in the Church, so that no one goes beyond the power of service.

For deacons to be accepted for who they are, for them to enter more fully into the Catholic imagination, we must assume with humility what we are, members of the clergy who live a lay life. This is to say deacons are called, by virtue of our ordination to be clergy and exercise our *diakonia* within the whole of our lives and ministries, whether as a husband or in the sanctuary, as a father or in ecclesial ministry, we are deacons at the core of our being.

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