

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

Deacon Dominic Cerrato, Ph.D.



On the Meaning of Diaconal Ministry

In his 1981 encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, Saint John Paul II eloquently explores the spiritual dimensions of work, emphasizing its role as a participation in the divine act of creation. Drawing inspiration from this profound encyclical, we see a striking parallel in the realm of diaconal ministry, though now applied to the divine act of salvation. Diaconal ministry stands as a unique embodiment of the principles laid out in *Laborem Exercens*, transforming the concept of work into a vocation of sacred ecclesial service.

Deacons, in the exercise of our ministry, embody the humility and selflessness of Christ. This ministry is not merely a role but an active participation in the mystery of our Lord's love. Saint John Paul points out that work enriches humanity, serving both as a transformative force to meet human needs and as a path to personal fulfillment. This profound insight resonates deeply within the context of the diaconate. Through our ministry, we do more than perform tasks; we engage in a transformative process that extends beyond the physical nature of our work. By serving the community, we not only meet the immediate needs of others but also foster our own spiritual and personal growth. In doing so, we become a living exemplar and embodiment of the Gospel, inspiring clergy and laity alike, to embrace a path of service, proper to their respective vocations. It is precisely in this respect, that we can say that our ministry is salvific, that is, leading others to the One who saves.

Properly understood, through our ministry, we offer more than acts of service; we offer our very selves. This gift-of self is a sacramental expression of love, reflecting Christ's sacrificial love and making us a conduit of grace. In line with *Laborem Exercens*, this service transcends the boundaries of mere function; it becomes a living testimony to the salvific power of self-giving love. As John Paul observes, through engaging in work, a person becomes a participant in the act of creation. Going one step further, and applying it to the diaconate, by means of our ministry, we participate in Christ's act of redemption.

The transformative power of our self-gift, when it cooperates with the grace and powers of our diaconate, reveals, in tangible and concrete ways, the saving act of Christ. This form of service, as highlighted in *Laborem Exercens*, is a sharing of life, where we bring the incarnate presence of Christ into the lives of those in desperate need of His saving love. Saint John Paul reinforces this, noting that the true value of human labor is not chiefly measured by the nature of the task, but rather by the reality that it is being performed by a person who is radically capable of giving himself in and through that act. Applied to the diaconate, the basis for determining the value of ministry is not primarily the kind of ministry being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a deacon, one configured to Christ the Servant and, by virtue of this, radically

empowered to incarnate Him. It is in this respect we act, *in persona Christi Servi*, in the person of Christ the Servant.

Laborem Exercens speaks of work as a means of personal fulfillment and sanctification. Similarly, in diaconal ministry, we find a path to our own sanctification. Each act of service, each moment of self-giving, draws us closer to the heart of Christ, aligning with the encyclical's view of work as a means of spiritual development and sanctification.

Our life and ministry as deacons play a pivotal role in the life of the Church. By our example, we encourage both clergy and laity alike to embrace the call to sacred service. The deacon, as a preeminent witness to Christ the Servant, becomes a beacon of hope and a symbol of the Church's commitment to love and service, a theme central to *Laborem Exercens* and central to what it means to be a deacon.

###