

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Working Shoulder to Shoulder in the Vineyard of the Lord

Just last week, as Director of the Diaconate for the Diocese of Joliet, I received three different phone calls from three different pastors asking if there were any available deacons to be assigned to their parish. I've noticed, over the past few years, that this request has become more common. With the mean age of pastors increasing, and few entering the priesthood, attrition means there are fewer priests to meet the pastoral demands. Of course, some of these tasks can be given to lay ministers, however, many can't – particularly those associated with sacraments and sacramentals. Nonetheless, these can rightly be given to deacons when they fall within the scope of diaconal ministry. While a deacon can never replace a priest in a proper sense, he can replace some of the pastoral shortfall, thereby easing his pastor's burden. Unfortunately for the pastors who called me, I don't have a closet full of inactive deacons to activate.

All of this gives rise to some interesting questions: What will the diaconate look like thirty, twenty and even ten years from now? How will the pastoral demands, that are already increasing, impact the life of the Church? How might priests and deacons better collaborate, shoulder to shoulder, in the vineyard of the Lord.

The truth is that none of us really know what the future will bring. Sure, we can reasonably speculate, but who, for example, could have imagined the impact of a worldwide pandemic even a month before it struck? This is not to say we shouldn't prepare for what we think the future might hold. It is to say that all preparation is based on what we reasonably think might happen.

If the Church were only a human institution, then reason, as good as it can be, would be our best hope. However, the Church is also a divine institution and need not rely on reason alone, but reason enlightened by faith in Jesus Christ. I'm convinced that within the providence of God, He uses the present to prepare us for the future in ways only known in hindsight. This means that, while we should reasonably speculate on the future, we should also be attentive to the sacrament of the present moment, to the presence of God in the here and now. This is because God's providence for our future is grounded in a divine love that is not bound by time, though we experience it as such.

Taking into account faith and reason, I would like to suggest for your prayerful reflection a way to look at the future.

I think it's fair to say that, on a practical basis, Holy Orders is rather fragmented. True it's one sacrament consisting of three degrees but, beyond the liturgy, little effort is spent on how these three degrees work together. While these degrees are distinct, they serve one purpose as

expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. There we read, “Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time.”

If Holy Orders is central to the mission of the Church, and Holy Orders is fractured to some extent, then the mission of the Church is likewise fractured. Conversely, If Holy Orders is unified and integrated, then the mission of the Church is likewise unified and integrated. Based on our earlier consideration of faith and reason, this reciprocal relationship between Orders and mission, which is observed in the present, can give rise to how we ought to proceed in the future.

It’s my firm conviction that the key to the future of the Church lies not so much in new efforts and initiatives, though these are important, but more essentially, by recovering the unity that is Holy Orders. We need to look inward before we look outward and one way to do that is working toward the unity of Holy Orders while keeping the three degrees distinct. Much more can be said here, but perhaps the best way to begin is by a diocese creating the events and the plan to foster greater interaction between priests and deacons. While we need our own venues, alone these create silos, isolating us from one another making collaboration difficult. This is for some a radical way of thinking about Holy Orders but it’s a way consistent with our tradition. It has the very real potential, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, to work shoulder to shoulder in the vineyard of the Lord, thereby fulfilling the sacred mission entrusted to each of us.

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