

The Deacon and the Liturgy: A Search for Identity
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On Holy Thursday, 2000, Pope John Paul II approved the third Latin typical edition of the *Missale Romanum* (*Roman Missal*). Since the first edition of the *Roman Missal* was published some thirty years ago, Conferences of Bishops have translated and adapted the *Roman Missal* according to the provisions of the 1970 and 1975 editions.

Like its predecessors, the third edition of the *Missale Romanum* will eventually be published in an English language edition for the dioceses of the United States. Also like its predecessors, the USA edition has been adapted through an Appendix and Norms for the Distribution of Holy Communion. More on that, however, in the next presentation.

Before I get into the specifics of how the revised *Roman Missal* will impact the way we celebrate the sacred liturgy in general and diaconal liturgical ministry in particular, I'd like to reflect for a few moments on who the deacon is at the liturgy. For it's only when we know who we are that we can be sure what we are supposed to do.

The Deacon and the Liturgy

Like its predecessors, the newest edition of the *Roman Missal* echoes the Council Fathers who saw normative Eucharistic celebration as Mass celebrated in the local of Church by the Bishop "surrounded by his presbyterate, deacons and lay ministers... in which the holy people of God take full and active part, for herein is the preeminent expression of the Church."¹

From the Council Fathers² to the latest edition of the *Roman Missal*, then, the deacon assumes an indispensable, normative role in the celebration of the Eucharist. Two significant changes in the new *Roman Missal* reinforce this point.

Strikingly, the structure of the General Instruction has been altered to describe just two basic forms of Mass: Mass without a Deacon and Mass with a Deacon. Thus, while describing with greater precision the specific roles assumed by the deacon, the new Missal emphasizes the all pervasive effect which that presence has to enhance and alter the shape of the celebration.

Secondly, in an entirely new section, we are told that "after the priest, the deacon, has first place among those who minister in the celebration of the Eucharist."³

Two points should be made here. First, this concentration on the importance of the role of the deacon is nothing new. It echoes the words of Pope Paul VI, who in 1972 observed that "Since the apostolic age itself the diaconate has had a distinctive and superior rank among these ministries and has always been held in great honor by the Church."⁴ In this regard he recalls

¹*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 112.

²See *Lumen gentium*, no. 29.

³*Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani*, (IGMR) no. 94.

⁴*Ministeria quaedam*.

how Saint Paul explicitly greeted not only to the bishops but also to the deacons,⁵ and describes in detail the qualifications for this important ministry.⁶

Likewise, he recalls the great martyr, St. Ignatius of Antioch who described the ministry of the deacon as the same as “the ministry of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father before all ages and has been manifested in the final time.”⁷

I suggest, by the way my brothers, that the earlier Pope’s reference to Saint Ignatius may help provide a key to what Pope John Paul II’s *Roman Missal* means when it says that the deacon “has first place among those who minister in the celebration of the Eucharist.”⁸ As Saint Ignatius equates the deacon’s ministry with Christ’s, he also recalls the Lord’s command to his disciples to love others as he had first loved them.

The deacon is called to be first of all the ministers, after the model of Christ, who came to serve and not to be served. The same Christ who told us that he who would be first should put himself last, should become like a little child and should be the servant of all, is the same Christ who through his Church calls the deacon first of all the ministers. The same Christ who dies upon a cross as they cursed and spat upon him, is the one who calls the deacon to love others as he has loved him.

Thus right from the start the definition of *diakonia* as kenotic self-giving, and service at both the table of sacrifice and the table charity must guide us in our reading of the identity and function of the deacon as envisioned by the latest revision of the *Roman Missal*.

The Role of the Deacon

Paragraph 94 of the new General Instruction give us the reasons for its high estimation of diaconal ministry. The predominance of the deacon is due both to the high honor in which this order has always been held and to the functions of the deacon at Mass.

It is precisely those functions which I suggest give us an even clearer picture of who the deacon is in the eyes of the Church, *lex orandi, lex credendi*. For as the deacon serves the liturgy, so he is called to serve the Church and the place he takes in the former is descriptive of the place which belongs to him in the latter.

While I am not suggesting that valid observations about the ministry and identity of the deacon cannot be derived from other sources, I wish to here recommend the liturgy as the privileged place for reflection on the meaning and ministry of the diaconate. In the homily at each deacon’s ordination the Bishop reminds him that among his most basic roles is to “prepare the sacrifice, and give the Lord’s body and blood to the community of believers.”⁹ Likewise, the antiphon which accompanies the investiture of the newly ordained deacon with the stole and dalmatic is

⁵See Phillipians 1:1.

⁶See 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

⁷Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Magnesios* 4, 1: Funk PA 1, 235.

⁸IGMR, no. 94

⁹*Rite of Ordination of a Deacon*.

accompanied by the singing of Psalm 84 with the antiphon, "Blessed are they who dwell in your house, O Lord."

And those deacons who dwell in God's house are called to five roles which, I will suggest, reveal essential characteristics of diaconal ministry. Those five roles described by the new *Roman Missal* Are deacon as Servant, Proclaimer, Voice, Invitatory and Dispenser.

Servant of Bishop, Priest and Altar

As we have implied above, the deacon's first role is one of diakonia. That role takes on concrete form at Mass as the deacon is called to assist the priest or bishop, but especially at the altar in the preparation of the gifts and during the communion rite.

St. Polycarp of Smyrna is the first to tell that the deacon is called upon to be "disciplined in all things, merciful, diligent, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all."¹⁰ Likewise, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, recalls the words of Christ, "Anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant."¹¹

All of this is echoed in each Ordination of a Deacon, which is replete with reminders of the diakonia to which deacons are called. Recall how in the homily the bishop reminds us that the deacon "will help the bishop and his body of priests as ministers of the Word, of the altar, and of charity. They will make themselves servants to all." Shortly thereafter, the Bishop turns to the man who will soon be ordained a deacon and says: "My son,...the Lord has set an example for you to follow. As a deacon you will serve Jesus Christ, who was known among his disciples as the one who served others."¹ Finally, we might recall the how the first exchange of the diaconal kiss of peace is accompanied by an antiphon quoting the very words of the Savior: "If anyone serves me, says the Lord, my Father in heaven will honor him."

An intimate and reciprocal connection between the deacon as minister of charity and servant of the priest and the altar has been with the Church through the ages, as we are reminded by the following early twelfth century description of the deacon which mirrors almost to the letter the roles assigned by the new *Roman Missal*:

¹⁰Polycarp of Smyrna, *Ep. ad Philippenses* 5, 2: Funk PA 1, 301-303.

¹¹Matthew 20:26-27.

It pertains to deacons to assist priests and to minister in all things which are done in the sacraments of Christ; that is, in baptism, in chrism, in the paten and chalice, to carry the oblations and place them on the altar, to take care of and decorate the table of the Lord; to carry the cross, and to read the...gospel to the people...To deacons also pertain the recitation of prayer and the reading of names of new catechumens. The deacon admonishes all to hear the Lord; he gives peace and he announces... deacons receive the texts of the gospel that they may know themselves to be preachers of the gospel of Christ.¹²

How, then, does the new *Roman Missal* call upon the deacon to serve the altar and the priest?

In the preparation of the liturgy, the deacon should see to it that the necessary vessels and vestments are properly arranged for the celebration. He should also see that the liturgical books are properly prepared, and that the texts for the celebration are marked with ribbons.

He accompanies the priest at almost all times and may offer the introductions and directions in place of the priest. He assists with incense and the sprinkling with Holy Water and is seated near the chair so that he might be available to direct any and all practicalities. If catechumens are present, the deacon may dismiss them before the profession of faith.

Most importantly, he prepares the altar and assists the priest in receiving the assembly's gifts or may receive them himself. He prepares the chalice and hands the gifts to the priest, who places them upon the altar.

He assists with the breaking of the bread and the distribution of the Precious Blood into ancillary chalices during the singing of the Lamb of God. As an ordinary minister of Holy Communion, the deacon also assists with the purification of sacred vessels.

During the Eucharistic Prayer the deacon assists with the care and even elevation of the chalice and the incensation of the consecrated elements. The new *Roman Missal* prescribes that while for most of the Eucharistic Prayer the deacon stands near the altar when his ministry involves the chalice and Missal, "as a rule" he kneels from the epiclesis to the elevation of the chalice. (179) "As much as possible, the deacon stands back from the altar, slightly behind the concelebrants." (215) Three principles seem to dictate the posture of the deacon during the Eucharistic Prayer: First, that he be well positioned to perform his role as principal assistant to the priest, Second, that it be clear that the deacon is performing diaconal assistance and not concelebrating and third, that the deacon model the posture of the faithful.

Thus the rites of the Church makes clear that *diakonia* means service and expresses the inextricable link between the diaconal ministry of charity and the liturgical *diakonia*. For just as the Eucharistic celebration is the source of all authentic Christian spirit and the summit of the entire Christian life, what the Church does at Liturgy is the prototype for what she does in life. The deacon servant of the poor is thus the deacon servant of the altar.

¹²Peter Lombard, *Sentences* (PL 192:903), as translated and quoted in Echlin, *The Deacon in the Church*, pp. 84-85 [*Sententiae IV*, dist. xxiv].

Proclaimer of the Gospel

The second role of the deacon in the new *Roman Missal* that of Proclaimer of the Gospel.

From the tenth century, the presentation of the Book of the Gospels at the ordination of a deacon has signified that the deacon was a minister of the liturgical proclamation of the gospel. The ordination rite recognizes the diaconal ministry of the word in the rite of presentation:

Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you are.
Believe what you read,
teach what you believe,
and practice what you teach.

When he carries the *Book of the Gospels* in the entrance procession, the book is “slightly elevated.” (172) When arriving at the altar with the *Book of the Gospels*, he does not bow, but immediately places the *Book of the Gospels* on the altar and then kisses the altar at the same time the priest does. (173) Greater detail is given to the deacon’s role in the proclamation of the Gospel as well. He is to bow when asking for the blessing and when taking the *Book of the Gospels* from the altar. (175) A description of the optional kissing of the *Book of the Gospels* by the bishop is likewise included. The deacon may proclaim the readings, but only in the absence of a qualified reader (176). Likewise, the homily may, on occasion, be given by the deacon. (66)

Voice of the needy

The third role envisioned by the new *Roman Missal* is the Deacon as the Voice of the Needy.

From the earliest days of the Church, the intention of the Apostles in establishing the diaconate as first expressed in Acts is made clear. As one early Church document relates, it is the role of the deacon to be the "one who shows love for orphans, for the devout and for the widowed, one who is fervent in spirit, one who shows love for what is good."¹³

This is why the deacon is the ordinary minister of the Kyrie, all litanies and even the general intercessions. He articulates the ‘cry of the poor’ because he is the minister most intimately acquainted with the pains, sorrows and struggles of those most in need of our prayers. He is, in a very real sense, their voice, both in the liturgy and in the world. For, in a sense, the general intercessions are the prototype of diaconal prayer.

Invitatory to Prayer

The fourth role of the deacon is to be the issuer of invitations, the invitatory of a rite made flesh.

The deacon assumes this role not because he is removed from the people, but precisely because he is a man chosen from among men to serve the needs of all. It is his intimacy with the assembly which empowers him to be the one who directs common posture and gesture and exhorts the members of the liturgical assembly to pray. Thus does he call upon the people to exchange the sign of peace, direct them when they are to kneel, to bow their heads, or perform

¹³*Testamentum D.N. Iesu Christi* 1, 38: I. E. Rahmani, ed. and tr. (Mainz, 1899) 93.

some ritual gestures, as at the solemn blessing or prayer over the people at the end of Mass, or in the solemn intercessory prayers of the Good Friday liturgy.

Bearer of the Cup of Salvation

From the earliest days of the Church, the deacon has been the minister of the Precious Blood. He bears the cup of eternal salvation and minister it to God's Holy people. Thus the new *Roman Missal* prescribes that at Communion, the priest himself gives communion to the deacon under both kinds (182). When Communion is given to the faithful under both kinds, the deacon ministers the chalice. After Communion has been distributed, the deacon, at the altar, reverently consumes any of the Blood of Christ which remains. (182)

All this begins with the sixth promise taken by the deacon at his ordination: to shape his way of life "always according to the example of Christ, whose body and blood [they] will give to the people." This promise, in turn, is rooted in the earliest prayer for the ordination of a Deacon found in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, which mentions but one specific task assigned to the deacon: "to bring forward [in your holy of holies] the gifts which are offered to you by your appointed high priests."¹⁴

Diakonia in the model of Christ Jesus

We began this brief reflection by recalling Saint Ignatius' description of the Deacon as a minister in the model of Christ Jesus. I wish to conclude by calling all deacons to see everything they do at Mass as an opportunity to make themselves vessels through which Christ Jesus can be made present to his holy people. Yet just as Christ's perfect sacrifice was accomplished to his kenotic self-emptying, so deacons are called to empty themselves each time they seek to serve the sacrifice of the altar.

When the deacon comes to serve, he must empty himself from all selfish concerns. He must see himself as servant of the liturgy and never its master. He must minister to the priest and to the altar with the humility of him whose very body and blood were offered on the altar of the cross.

When he comes to proclaim the Gospel, the deacon must empty himself of all his worldly wisdom that he might be filled only with the wisdom of God. He must decrease so that the Word of God might take root in him and those who hear his voice may hear not him, but Christ Jesus who lives in him. His acclamation of "the Gospel of the Lord" must ring authentic and true.

When he proclaims intercessions or invites the people to prayer, the faithful must recognize in him the trustworthy and compassionate man to whom they may go with any of their needs. The poor must know him as their friend. Orphans must see him as their father, and all who are alone, afraid or confused must see in him a refuge in the model of Christ Jesus. All must have such trust in his prudence and charity that his wise guidance is spontaneously welcomed.

¹⁴Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus (c. 215). H. Boone Porter, *The Ordination Prayers of the Ancient Western Church* (Alcuin Club Collections, no. XLIX; London, 1967), p. 12, adapted. See also Paul F. Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West* (New York: Pueblo, 1990).

Finally, all who receive the Savior's Precious Blood from his hands must receive the chalice as from one who knows the meaning of sacrifice, of being poured out for God's people, and of striving for holiness of life. The deacon too must take up the cup of salvation as one whose very life is a hymn of praise to the Lord. For the cup he bears is his salvation and a model of the life to which he is called as a deacon.

What the new *Roman Missal* and the Church ask of the deacon is to become more like Christ. To participate in his paschal death and resurrection: by how he lives and how he prays, by what he does and who he has become.

This is the mystery of diaconal ministry at the altar. It is the mystery of the Church and the mystery of all who are called to the Supper of the Lamb!