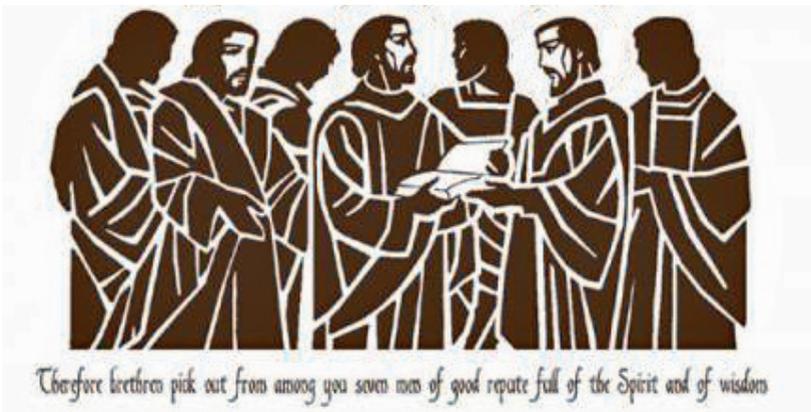

The Diaconate

What is a deacon and
what do they do?



The Diaconate: an introduction

Deacons, strengthened by the sacramental grace of Ordination, "are dedicated to the people of God, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate, in the service of the liturgy, of the word and of charity. It is a deacon's task, as authorised by the competent authority, to administer Baptism solemnly, to reserve and distribute the Eucharist, to assist at and to bless marriages in the name of the church, to take viaticum to the dying, to read the sacred scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and the prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, and to officiate at funeral and burial services. Dedicated to works of charity and functions of administration, deacons should recall the admonition of St. Polycarp: 'Let them be merciful, and zealous, and let them walk according to the truth for the Lord, who became the servant of all.'"

(Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Church - Lumen Gentium.)

In the very earliest days of the Church, there was one order of clergy: bishop. Bishops led the assembly in the celebration of the Eucharist. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1-6), there came a time when the ministry of charity on the part of the apostles was delegated to seven men, who were the first deacons. One of these first seven deacons, St. Stephen, became the first Christian martyr.

Eventually it became physically impossible for the bishops to preside at every Eucharistic celebration, so they delegated presbyters (priests) to preside in their stead, sharing in the bishop's munus as High Priest. It was also at this time that the initiation of Christians was separated into the two sacraments of baptism and confirmation, because while the priest or deacon would administer the baptism, the bishop reserved the anointing to himself as a sign of unity, and people would sometimes have to wait years until the bishop could come and complete their initiation.

Later, in the stational liturgies of Rome, unity with the bishop was considered so important that deacons would bring portions of the Body of Christ consecrated by the bishop to the outlying churches to be dropped into the chalices at the various Eucharistic liturgies, a practice that remains today where the priest drops a portion of the host into the chalice.

Deacons became very important in the early Church because of their relation to the bishop. As one ancient description says, they were “the eyes and ears of the bishop” in the community, informing him of who was in need and the special concerns of the people. The ancient form of basilica churches reflected this relationship, with the bishop’s chair in the apse, flanked by his deacons and surrounded by semi-circular tiers of benches for the presbyters. The role of deacons was of such importance that the See of Rome was in the early days administered by The Seven Deacons of Rome, who were deputed by the Bishop of Rome to handle the everyday affairs of the diocese. The ministry of the bishop and deacon was very closely intertwined. The story of the martyrdom of St. Sixtus, an early pope and martyr, tells of St. Lawrence, a deacon, and the other six deacons of Rome following and crying as Sixtus was led away to his death, saying “Father, where are you going without your deacon?”

Among the early deacons were also prominent theologians, such as St. Athanasius, who came to the Council of Nicaea as a deacon and was subsequently elected bishop. One of the greatest theologians of the Eastern Church is St. Ephrem, a deacon. It was not uncommon for deacons to be elected bishop, in fact St. Callistus II was elected pope when he was only a deacon. Numerous other stories exist of such episcopal elections of deacons, many of whom became saints. Another notable example is St. Thomas Becket, the archdeacon of Canterbury who was named Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of England by his friend and future nemesis, King Henry II. St. Patrick was the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest.

The ministry of the deacon is typically described as a three-fold ministry: a servant of Charity, the Word and the Altar.

The Ministry of Love and Justice (Charity)

Deacons were an important part of the early Church. From the foundation of the order of deacon those ordained to this order had the special role of caring for the poor and outcast and reminding the members of the Church to do the same. The word "deacon" comes from the Greek diakonia, which means "service." It is because of this role of the deacon as servant that medieval paintings depicting angels typically show them wearing dalmatics, the vesture of deacons, for they "serve before the Throne of God."

So vital was this ministry of charity that deacons were entrusted with all the worldly assets of the Church so they could distribute them as necessary to the needy. One of the greatest stories that illustrates the ministry of the deacon in the ancient Church is that of St. Lawrence of Rome. Along with St. Stephen the First Martyr (Protomartyr) and St. Francis of Assisi, he is one of the three great deacon saints of the Western Church.

Tradition tells us that Lawrence was roasted to death on a gridiron, and to him are attributed the famous dying words, "Turn me over, I'm done on this side." But the circumstances leading up to his martyrdom tell us much about the role of the deacon.

In the year 257 new laws were enacted in Rome against the Church. The prefect of Rome learned that deacons were responsible for safeguarding and distributing Church assets, so he sent for Lawrence and demanded that he turn over the treasures of the Church. Lawrence asked for three days to gather the wealth. He went about the city gathering the poor and outcast, the widows and orphans, the sick and the homeless supported by the Christian community.

He took them before the pagan prefect and declared: "These are the treasures of the Church." Lawrence paid for this lesson with his life. (The Italians, with their characteristically ironic humour, celebrate the Feast of St. Lawrence with barbecues!)

By the end of the first millennium, the order of deacons had died out in the Western Church. Ordination to the diaconate became a step along the road to priestly ordination, along with other ancient roles such as lector and acolyte. There are many interesting theories as to why this happened, which we do not need to go into here, but it is notable that the Eastern Church retained the permanent diaconate all through its history. Even in the Western Church some still lived the life of a deacon, such as St. Francis of Assisi, who after his ordination as a deacon declined to be ordained a priest, and lived as a deacon for the rest of his life. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) ordered the restoration of the permanent diaconate, but this decree was never implemented.

The restoration of the permanent diaconate by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was the result of extensive theological, historical and pastoral scholarship, originating primarily in Germany, on the need to emphasise the servant role of the Church. The leaders of this movement were a group of priests who developed their thoughts while imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau. For decades they championed the restoration of the diaconate as necessary for the full life of the Church. Based on the extensive historical and theological work on the order of deacon prompted by the witness of these priests, the Council decided to restore the permanent diaconate.

While the bishop is an icon of Christ the shepherd and the priest is an icon of Christ the priest, the deacon is an icon of Christ the servant. The deacon must seek out the poor and outcast in the community. He ministers to their needs and brings them to the Christian community for continued care. To ensure that the faith community is disposed to welcome the outcast, the deacon is called to remind the faithful of their Christian responsibility to service and justice and to assist them in carrying out this responsibility.

The deacon ensures that the Church community is a welcoming place for all. By personal service among those on the margins of society, the deacon becomes intimately familiar with their needs as he is intimately familiar with the Christian community. Thus, he lives in two worlds, seeking to bridge the gap between the comfortable and those in need of comfort. To those whom society deems less-than—the poor, the immigrant, the imprisoned, gays and lesbians, the divorced and remarried, and all those alienated from society and the Church for whatever reason—the deacon brings the compassion of the Church, and to the Church community he presents these for whom God has a special love and asks the community to welcome them. In this way, the deacon continues the ministry of the prophets of the Old Testament, who constantly called the Chosen People to concern for the anawim, a Hebrew word meaning “the least” and often identified as the widow, the orphan and the alien—those in such dire straits that they can only rely on God, and by extension, his people, just to exist.

The deacon is the voice of the Church to the marginalised, and the voice of the marginalised to the Church.



The Ministry of the Word

To the deacon is entrusted the proclamation of the Gospel. The priest proclaims the Gospel only if no deacon is available. We see this historic role of the deacon illustrated in ancient icons, where deacon saints are depicted holding a Gospel book. The deacon's ministry of the Word, the second aspect of his three-fold ministry, is not merely a ceremonial honour.

The deacon's ministry of the Word is symbolised in the Entrance Procession, where the ancient practice of the deacon carrying the Gospel Book in procession has been restored. In the same way, the Gospel Procession has been restored as one of the three great processions of the ancient liturgy (entrance, gospel and communion, with the two lesser processions: offertory and recessional).

The Mass consists of two main parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Just as the priest plays a principal role in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the deacon plays a prominent role in the Liturgy of the Word. The deacon's most complete service in the Liturgy of the Word consists in proclaiming the Gospel, applying it to everyday life in the homily, and leading the assembly in prayer based on this reflection in the General Intercessions (Prayer of the Faithful).

Why are these roles assigned to the deacon as a servant of the Word? They flow from his ministry to the poor and outcast. As an icon of Christ the servant, the deacon ideally helps us to be "doers of the Word and not just hearers" (James 1:22-25). By his familiarity with the needs of those in the wider community, the deacon helps us to avoid becoming too internally focused on our faith community. In the homily, the deacon should call the assembly to compassion and action on the part of those who otherwise would have no voice. He does this by unpacking the social ramifications of the Gospel, the

Good News of Jesus, who came to “bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and new sight to the blind; to free the oppressed and announce the Lord’s year of mercy” (Luke 4:16-21). The last part of the Liturgy of the Word is the General Intercessions, or Prayer of the Faithful. This is the part of the Mass where the assembly exercises its priestly role by praying for the needs of all the world. By virtue of his ministry of service, the deacon is supposed to be familiar with the special needs of those in the community. After proclaiming the Gospel and helping the assembly to reflect upon it in the homily, the deacon formulates prayers for the assembly based on the Gospel as his final aspect of service to the Word. These prayers should be specific and externally focused, encouraging the assembly to pray for the needs of the world as we experience them personally or have knowledge of them from today’s news. So the deacon helps us to live both responses to the needs of the world: action and prayer, “to pray as though everything depends upon God, and to act as though everything depends upon us.”

The corresponding part of the General Intercessions in the Eastern Church are the many litanies for the needs of the world sung during Divine Liturgy: these litanies are always led by the deacon. In fact, most Eastern Churches do not have provision for any liturgy celebrated without a deacon. In some cases, such as in the Armenian Church, where there are no deacons lay people are trained to perform the deacon’s parts of the liturgy (the litanies) and are “ordained” as subdeacons.

Hearing. Reflecting. Praying. Acting. As a servant, the deacon assists us in living this response to the Word of God.

The Ministry of the Altar

As we read in the Acts of the Apostles (6:1-6), the first seven deacons were chosen to serve at the table. Today the deacon continues this role as a servant at the Table of the Lord, the altar. He receives the gifts of the assembly, prepares the altar, assists the priest, gives directions to the assembly, administers communion, clears the table and finally dismisses the assembly.

After his service to the assembly in hearing and reflecting upon the Word of God, the deacon receives their gifts for the use of the faith community and the poor. He then prepares the table with these gifts. What is more characteristic of a servant than setting and clearing a table? The liturgy is filled with reminders of the deacon's role as a servant. He pours the wine into the chalice. He distributes the Eucharistic bread into separate containers. He fulfills the ancient role of cup-bearer. And when the sacred meal is completed, he clears the table and cleans the vessels. During the Eucharistic prayer, his stance is to the side of the priest, careful to avoid the spotlight. By his very presence, he is a reminder that Eucharist is more than what happens at the altar; it is the source and summit of Christian life and everything such a life entails.

The deacon also provides logistical direction to the assembly. While the priest leads us in prayer, the deacon offers practical directions, such as when to give the sign of peace, or when to leave. He may offer other directions as needed, such as when to stand or kneel during special ceremonies, or give the announcements at Mass.

What is the most important part of the Mass? I once heard a liturgist say the most important part of the Mass is when the People of God, having heard the Word and having been nourished by the Eucharist, are sent out from the assembly to live what they have experienced. Maybe a bit dramatic and not quite standard theology, but he was making a point. The very last words of the Mass are the deacon's dismissal, reminding us that we are called to be Church not just in the church building, but

outside in the world. This dismissal is so important that from it comes our very word for Mass: we are sent, missa.

And so the assembly disperses to become the Body of Christ to all they encounter during the week. Confirmed in their faith through the ministry of lectors, altar servers, musicians, ushers, ministers of communion, the deacon and the priest, God's People are now called to be bread broken for the world in their everyday lives, thus bearing the fruit of their reception of the Body and Blood of Christ at Mass.

Other Liturgical and Devotional Ministries of the Deacon

As ordained clergy, deacons also serve the faith community in various sacramental and devotional ways. The deacon is an ordinary minister of baptism and presides at marriages. The deacon is also authorised to preside at the solemn celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, or Divine Office, and at the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, where he may give the blessing with the Blessed Sacrament and carry the monstrance in procession. Deacons also customarily preside at funeral vigils and devotional services such as the Way of the Cross. Deacons are also authorised to perform all the blessings of the Church, with the notable exception of the blessing of a seminary building. The deacon has other roles in the liturgy proper only to him. The great Easter Proclamation, the Exsultet, was in the ancient Church permitted only to the deacon. Two other historic diaconal proclamations were restored to the liturgy: The Proclamation of the Birth of Christ at Christmas Midnight Mass and the Proclamation of the Date of Easter at Epiphany.

During the Liturgy of the Triduum, the deacon conducts the Veneration of the Cross at the Solemn Liturgy of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday and brings the Easter Candle into the Church at the Easter Vigil. These corresponding diaconal processions, each with their three proclamations by the deacon, tie the death and resurrection of Jesus together in the Triduum liturgy.

Ministry within the Diocese

In his ancient role as the “helper of the bishop,” the deacon has a role that is not confined to any individual parish. At solemn stationary liturgies celebrated by the ordinary of the diocese, especially in the cathedral, he must always be accompanied by deacons. It is customary also for deacons to serve as Masters of Ceremonies whenever auxiliary bishops visit parishes for Confirmation. Often deacons serve as canonical secretaries to auxiliary bishops, a role typically reserved to priests as secretaries to ordinaries.

Although the deacon canonically belongs to the bishop, it is customary for the bishop to assign a deacon to a particular parish as the primary locus of his service in order that he may function canonically as parish clergy with the appropriate canonical faculties. Such assignments are typically general and open-ended, as compared to a priest's assignment. Thus, the deacon is free to petition the bishop to be assigned to another place where he feels he may be more effective, and the bishop would typically be inclined to grant such a petition.

The deacon receives no salary from the parish or diocese for his ministry, but is expected to earn his own living in a manner appropriate to his ordained state of life. This way of life gives rise to what is called the ministry of the workplace, where other employees often approach the deacon in the workplace for pastoral ministry. Pope Paul VI eliminated the “minor orders” (exorcist, porter, lector, acolyte, subdeacon) reducing the ranks of the clerical state to bishop, priest and deacon. He retained the ministry of acolyte and lector, although they are no longer called “minor orders.” The clerical state is thus entered into upon ordination to the diaconate, rather than tonsure, as was the previous custom. Thus, as he enters the clerical state, the candidate promises the bishop obedience and makes a commitment to celibacy if he is not married and the praying of the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office). After the laying on of hands, the bishop presents the deacon with a Gospel Book, saying “Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach.”



The twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.'

What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:2-7 NRSV).