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***THE HEART OF THE DIACONATE: SERVANTS  
OF THE MYSTERIES OF CHRIST AND SERVANT  
OF YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS***

**Papal Address to the Permanent Deacons**

**Detroit, Michigan**

**September 19, 1987**

Dear Brothers in the Service of Our Lord.

Dear Wives and Collaborators of these men ordained to the Permanent Diaconate.

I greet you in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom, as Saint Paul tells us, God has chosen us, redeemed us and adopted us as his children (cf. Eph 1:3 ff.). Together with Saint Paul, and together with you today, I praise our heavenly Father for these wonderful gifts of grace.

It is a special joy for me to meet with you because you represent a great and visible sign of the working of the Holy Spirit in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, which provided for the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the Church. The wisdom of that provision is evident in your presence in such numbers today and in the fruitfulness of your ministries. With the whole Church, I give thanks to God for the call you have received and for your generous response. For the majority of you who are married, this response has been made possible by the love and support and collaboration of your wives. It is a great encouragement to know that in the United States over the past two decades almost eight thousand permanent deacons have been ordained for the service of the Gospel.

It is above all the call to service that I wish to celebrate with you today. In speaking of deacons, the Vatican Council said that "strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the Bishop and his presbyterate, they serve the People of God in the service of the liturgy, the word, and charity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 29). Reflecting further on this description, my predecessor Paul VI was in agreement with the Council that "the permanent diaconate should be restored as a driving force for the Church's service (*diakonia*)

toward the local Christian communities, and as a sign or sacrament of the Lord Christ himself, who 'came not to be served but to serve' " (*Ad Pascendum*, August 15, 1972, Introduction). These words recall the ancient tradition of the Church as expressed by the early Fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch, who says that deacons are 'ministers of the mysteries of Jesus Christ ministers of the Church of God' (*Ad Trallianos*, II, 3). You, dear brothers, belong to the life of the Church that goes back to saintly deacons, like Lawrence, and before him to Stephen and his companions, who the Acts of the Apostles consider "deeply spiritual and prudent" (Acts 6:3).

This is at the very heart of the diaconate to which you have been called: to be a servant of the mysteries of Christ and, at one and the same time, to be servant of your brothers and sisters. That these two dimensions are inseparably joined together in one reality shows the important nature of the ministry which is yours by ordination.

How are we to understand the mysteries of Christ of which you are ministers? A profound description is given to us by Saint Paul in the reading we heard a few moments ago. The central mystery is this: God the Father's plan of glory to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under the headship of Christ, his beloved Son. It is for this that all the baptized are predestined, chosen, redeemed and sealed with the Holy Spirit. This plan of God is at the center of our lives and the life of the world.

At the same time, if service to this redemptive plan is the mission of all the baptized, what is the specific dimension of your service as deacons? The Second Vatican Council explains that a sacramental grace conferred through the imposition of hands enables you to carry out your service of the word, the altar and charity with a special effectiveness (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 16). The service of the deacon is the Church's service sacramentalized. Yours is not just one ministry among others, but it is truly meant to be, as Paul VI described it, a "driving force" for the Church's *diakonia*. By your ordination you are configured to Christ in his servant role. You are also meant to be living signs of the servanthood of his Church.

If we keep in mind the deep spiritual nature of this *diakonia*, then we can better appreciate the interrelation of the three areas of ministry traditionally associated with the diaconate, that is, the ministry of the word, the ministry of the altar, and the ministry of charity. Depending on the circumstances, one or another of these may receive particular emphasis in an individual deacon's work, but these three ministries are inseparably joined together as one in the service of God's redemptive plan. This is so because the word of God inevitably leads us to the Eucharistic worship of God at the altar; in

turn, this worship leads us to a new way of living which expresses itself in acts of charity.

This charity is both love of God and love of neighbor. As the First Letter of John teaches us, "One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen whoever loves God must also love his brothers" (1 Jn4:20-21). By the same token, acts of charity which are not rooted in the word of God and in worship cannot bear lasting fruit. "Apart from me, Jesus says, "you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). The ministry of charity is confirmed on every page of the Gospel; it demands a constant and radical conversion of heart. We have a forceful example of this in the Gospel of Matthew, proclaimed earlier. We are told: "offer no resistance to injury." We are commanded: "love your enemies and pray for your persecutors." All of this is an essential part of the ministry of charity.

Certainly today's world is not lacking opportunities for such a ministry, whether in the form of the simplest acts of charity or the most heroic witness to the radical demands of the Gospel. All around us many of our brothers and sisters live in either spiritual or material poverty or both. So many of the world's people are oppressed by injustice and the denial of their fundamental human rights. Still others are troubled or suffer from a loss of faith in God, or are tempted to give up hope.

In the midst of the human condition it is a great source of satisfaction to learn that so many permanent deacons in the United States are involved in direct service to the needy; to the ill, the abused and battered, the young and old, the dying and bereaved, the deaf, blind and disabled, those who have known suffering in their marriages, the homeless, victims of substance abuse, prisoners, refugees, street people, the rural poor, the victims of racial and ethnic discrimination, and many others. As Christ tells us, "as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me." (Mt 25:40).

At the same time, the Second Vatican Council reminds us that the ministry of charity at the service of God's redemptive plan also obliges us to be a positive influence for change in the world in which we live, that is, to be leaven - to be the soul of human society - so that society may be renewed by Christ and transformed into the family of God (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 40 ff.). The "temporal order includes marriage and the family, the world of culture, economic and social life, the trades and professions, political institutions, the solidarity of peoples, and issues of justice and peace" (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 7; *Gaudium et Spes*, 46 ff. ). The task is seldom an easy one. The truth about ourselves and the world, revealed in the Gospel is not always what the world wants to hear. Gospel truth often contradicts commonly accepted thinking, as we see so clearly today with

regards to evils such as racism, contraception, abortion, and euthanasia to name just a few.

Taking an active part in society belongs to the baptismal mission of every Christian in accordance with his or her state in life, but the permanent deacon has a special witness to give. The sacramental grace of his ordination is meant to strengthen him and to make his efforts fruitful, even as his secular occupation gives him entry into the temporal sphere in a way that is normally not appropriate for other members of the clergy. At the same time, the fact that he is an ordained minister of the Church brings a special dimension to his efforts in the eyes of those with whom he lives and works.

Equally important is the contribution that a married deacon makes to the transformation of family life. He and his wife, having entered into a communion of life, are called to help and serve each other (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 48). So intimate is their partnership and unity in the sacrament of marriage, that the Church fittingly requires the wife's consent before her husband can be ordained a permanent deacon (Can. 1031 §2). As the current guidelines for the permanent diaconate in the United States point out, the nurturing and deepening of mutual, sacrificial love between husband and wife constitute perhaps the most significant involvement of a deacon's wife in her husband's public ministry in the Church (*Guidelines*, NCCB, p. 110). Today especially, this is no small service.

In particular, the deacon and his wife must be a living example of fidelity and indissolubility in Christian marriage before a world which is in dire need of such signs. By facing in a spirit of faith the challenges of married life and the demands of daily living, they strengthen the family life not only of the Church community but of the whole of society. They also show how the obligations of family, work and ministry can be harmonized in the service of the Church's mission. Deacons and their wives and children can be a great encouragement to all others who are working to promote family life.

Mention must also be made of another kind of family, namely the parish, which is the usual setting in which the vast majority of deacons fulfill the mandate of their ordination "to help the Bishop and his presbyterate." The parish provides an ecclesial context for your ministry and services as a reminder that your labors are not carried out in isolation, but in communion with the Bishop, his priest and all those who in varying degrees share in the public ministry of the Church. Permanent deacons have an obligation to respect the office of the priest and to cooperate conscientiously and generously with him and with the parish staff. The deacon also has a right to be accepted and fully recognized by them and by all for what he is: an ordained minister of the word, the altar and charity.

Given the dignity and importance of the permanent diaconate, what is expected of you? As Christians we must not be ashamed to speak of the qualities of a servant to which all believers must aspire, and especially deacons, whose ordination rite describes them as "servants of all." A deacon must be known for fidelity, integrity and obedience, and so it is that fidelity to Christ, moral integrity and obedience to the Bishop must mark your lives, as the ordination rite makes clear (cf. also *Ad Pascendum*, Introduction). In that rite the Church also expresses her hopes and expectations for you when she prays:

"Lord, may they excel in every virtue; in love . . . concern. unassuming authority . . . self discipline and in holiness of life. May their conduct exemplify your commandments and lead your people to imitate their purity of life. May they remain strong and steadfast in Christ, giving to the world the witness of a pure conscience. May they. . . imitate your Son, who came, not to be served but to serve."

Dear brothers: this prayer commits you to lifelong spiritual formation so that you may grow and persevere in rendering a service that is truly edifying to the People of God. You who are wives of permanent deacons, being close collaborators in their ministry, are likewise challenged with them to grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. And this of course means growth in prayer - personal prayer, family prayer, liturgical prayer.

Since deacons are ministers of the word, the Second Vatican Council invites you to constant reading and diligent study of the Sacred Scriptures, lest - if you are a preacher - you become an empty one for failing to hear the word in your own heart (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 25). In your lives as deacons you are called to hear and guard and do the word of God, in order to be able to proclaim it worthily. To preach to God's people is an honor that entails a serious preparation and real commitment to holiness of life.

As ministers of the altar you must be steeped in the spirit of the liturgy, and be convinced above all that it is 'the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed and at the same time the source from which all her power flows' (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10). You are called to discharge your office with the dignity and reverence befitting the liturgy, which the Council powerfully describes as being "above all the worship of the divine majesty" (ibid., 33). I join you in thanking all those who devote themselves to your training, both before and after your ordination, through programs of spiritual, theological, and liturgical formation.

"Sing a new song unto the Lord! Let your song be sung from mountains high!" Sing to him as servants, but also sing as friends of Christ, who has made known to you all that he has heard from the Father. It was not you who chose him, but he who chose you, to go forth and bear fruit that will last. This you do loving one another (cf. Jn 15:15 ff.). By the standards of this world, servanthood is despised, but in the wisdom and providence of God it is the mystery through which Christ redeems the world. And you are ministers of that mystery, heralds of that Gospel. You can be sure that one day you will hear the Lord saying to each of you: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord." (cf. Mt 25:21).

Dear brothers and sisters: as one who strives to be "the servant of the servants of the Lord," I cannot take leave of you until, together, we turn to Mary, as she continues to proclaim: "I am the servant of the Lord" (Lk 1:38). And in the example of her servanthood we see the perfect model of our own call to the discipleship of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the service of his Church.

*<http://www.deacons.net/Pope/PopeDetroit.htm>*