

(PDO)

## "DEACONS ARE CONFIGURED TO CHRIST THE SERVANT" POPE JOHN PAUL II

### **ADDRESS TO THOSE TAKING PART IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, NOVEMBER 30, 1995.**

1. I am pleased to meet you on the occasion of the plenary assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy, which is examining a question of particular importance for the Church: "The Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons." I affectionately greet Cardinal Jose Sanchez, the prefect, whom I thank for his words. I also greet Archbishop Crescenzo Sepe, the secretary, and the members of the congregation, together with the officials and experts who give you their valuable service.

You have organized these intense days of reflection and dialogue on the basis of an <Instrumentum laboris>, which has taken into account the suggestions and contributions of every episcopal conference. In addition to your satisfaction at the work achieved and the results so far reached, you intend to prepare a document concerning the life and ministry of the permanent deacon similar to that for priests, which you saw to at your last plenary session. Thus it will be possible to offer <providential practical guidance> following Vatican Council II's decisions. I encourage and bless your efforts, motivated as they are by a deep love for the Church and for our brother deacons.

#### **Fidelity to Catholic Tradition Should Mark a Deacon's Ministry**

2. Since the diaconate has been restored to the Latin Church "as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy" (<Lumen Gentium>, 29), the directives and guidance of the magisterium in its regard have increased. One need only recall Pope Paul VI's teachings and, in particular, those contained in the motu proprio <Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem> (June 18, 1967, AAS 59 [1967], 697704) and <Ad Pascendum> (Aug. 15, 1972, AAS 64 [1972], 534-540), which remain a basic reference point. The doctrine and discipline explained in these documents have found their juridical expression in the new <Code of Canon Law>, which must inspire the development of this sacred ministry. Several catecheses which I addressed to the faithful during

the month of October 1993 were also devoted to the permanent diaconate.

Reflecting on the ministry and life of permanent deacons, and in the light of the experience acquired so far, it is necessary to proceed with careful theological research and prudent pastoral sense, in view of the new evangelization on the threshold of the third millennium. The vocation of the permanent deacon is a great gift of God to the Church and for this reason is "an important enrichment for the Church's mission," (<Catechism of the Catholic Church>, No. 1571).

What is specific to the life and ministry of deacons could be summarized in a single word: fidelity—fidelity to the Catholic tradition, especially as witnessed to by the <lex orandi>, fidelity to the magisterium, fidelity to the task of re-evangelization which the Holy Spirit has brought about in the Church. This commitment to fidelity is, first of all, an invitation carefully to promote throughout the Church <a sincere respect for the theological, liturgical and canonical identity> proper to the sacrament conferred on deacons, as well as for the demands required by the ministerial functions which, in virtue of receiving holy orders, are assigned to them in the particular churches.

3. In fact, the sacrament of orders has its own nature and effects, whatever the degree in which it is received (episcopate, presbyterate or diaconate). "Catholic doctrine, expressed in the liturgy, the magisterium and the constant practice of the Church, recognizes that there are two degrees of ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ: the episcopacy and the presbyterate. The diaconate is intended to help and serve them.... Yet Catholic doctrine teaches that the degrees of priestly participation (episcopate and presbyterate) and the degree of service (diaconate) are all three conferred by a sacramental act called 'ordination,' that is, by the sacrament of holy orders" (<Catechism of the Catholic Church>, No. 1554).

By the imposition of the bishop's hands and the specific prayer of consecration, the deacon receives <a particular configuration to Christ>, the Head and Shepherd of the Church, who for love of the Father made himself the least and the servant of all (cf. Mk. 10 43-45; Mt. 20:28; 1 Pt. 5:3).

Sacramental grace gives deacons the necessary strength to serve the people of God in the <diakonia> of the liturgy, of the word and of charity, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate (cf. <Catechism of the Catholic Church>, No. 1588). By virtue of the

sacrament received, <an indelible spiritual character> is impressed upon him, which marks the deacon permanently and precisely as a minister of Christ. Consequently he is no longer a layman nor can he return to the lay state in the strict sense (cf. <Catechism of the Catholic Church>, No. 1583). These essential characteristics of his ecclesial vocation must pervade his readiness to give himself to the Church and must be reflected in his outward behavior. The Church expects of the permanent deacon a faithful witness to his ministerial state.

### **Magisterium Has Clearly Described Deacon's Tasks**

In particular he must <show a strong sense of unity> with the successor of Peter, with the bishop and with the presbyterate of the Church for whose service he was ordained and incardinated. It is of great importance for the formation of the faithful that the deacon, in exercising the duties assigned to him, should promote an authentic and effective ecclesial communion. His relations with his own bishop, with the priests, with other deacons and with all the faithful should be marked by a <diligent respect for the various charisma and duties>. Only when one keeps to one's own tasks does communion become effective, and each can fulfill his own mission.

4. Deacons are ordained <to exercise a ministry of their own>, which is not that of a priest, because they "receive the imposition of hands 'not unto the priesthood but unto the ministry'" (<Lumen Gentium>, 29). Therefore they have specific tasks whose content has been clearly described by the magisterium: "To assist the bishop and priests in the celebration of the divine mysteries, above all the Eucharist, in the distribution of Holy Communion, in assisting at and blessing marriages—if they are delegated by the ordinary or the parish priest (cf. Canon 1108.1)—in the proclamation of the Gospel and preaching, in presiding over funerals and in dedicating themselves to the various ministries of charity" (cf. <Catechism of the Catholic Church>, No. 1570; cf. <Lumen Gentium>, 29; <Sacrosanctum Concilium>, 35; <Ad Gentes>, 16).

The exercise of the diaconal ministry—like that of other ministries in the Church—requires <per se> of all deacons, celibate or married, <a spiritual attitude of total dedication>. Although in certain cases it is necessary to make the ministry of the diaconate compatible with other obligations, to think of oneself and to act in practice as a "part-time deacon" would make no sense (cf. <Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests>, 44). The deacon is not a part-time employee or

ecclesiastical official, but a minister of the Church. His is not a profession, but a mission! It is the circumstances of his life -prudently evaluated by the candidate himself and by the bishop, before ordination-which should, if necessary, be adapted to the exercise of his ministry by facilitating it in every way.

The many problems which are still to be resolved and are of concern to pastors should be examined in this light. The deacon is called to be a person open to all, ready to serve people, generous in promoting just social causes, avoiding attitudes or positions which could make him appear to show favoritism. In fact, a minister of Jesus Christ, even as a citizen, must always promote unity and avoid, as far as possible, being a source of disunity or conflict. May the attentive study which you have undertaken in these days provide useful guidelines in this area.

5. With the restoration of the permanent diaconate, the possibility was recognized of conferring this order on men of a mature age who are already married, but once ordained they cannot remarry should they be widowed (cf. <Sacrum diaconatus ordinem>, 16, AAS 59 [1967], 701).

"It should be noted, however, that the council maintained the ideal of a diaconate open to younger men who would devote themselves totally to the Lord, with the commitment of celibacy as well. It is a life of 'evangelical perfection,' which can be understood, chosen and loved by generous men who want to serve the kingdom of God in the world, without entering the priesthood to which they do not feel called, but nevertheless receiving a consecration that guarantees and institutionalizes their special service to the Church through the conferral of sacramental grace. These men are not lacking today" (<Catechesis> at the general audience, Oct. 6, 1993, 7; <L'Osservatore Romano>, English edition, Oct. 13, 1993, p. 11).

### **Spiritual Life Must Be Sustained by Personal Prayer**

6. The spirituality of the diaconate "has its source in what Vatican Council II calls 'the sacramental grace of the diaconate' (<Ad Gentes>, 16)." (<Catechesis> at the general audience, Oct. 20, 1993, 1; <L'Osservatore Romano>, English edition, Oct. 27, 1993, p. 11). By virtue of ordination this is defined by <the spirit of service>. "This service should first of all take the form of helping the bishop and the priest, both in liturgical worship and the apostolate.... However, the deacon's service is also directed to his own Christian community and

to the whole Church, to which he must foster a deep attachment because of her mission and divine institution" (ibid., n. 2).

To fulfill his mission, the deacon therefore needs a <deep interior life>, sustained by the exercises of piety recommended by the Church (cf. <Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem>, 26-27: AAS 59, 1967, 702-703). Carrying out ministerial and apostolic activities, fulfilling possible family and social responsibilities and, lastly, practicing an intense personal life of prayer require of the deacon, whether celibate or married, that <unity of life> which can only be attained, as Vatican Council II taught, through deep union with Christ (cf. <Presbyterorum Ordinis>, 14).

Dear brothers and sisters, as I thank you for your active involvement in this plenary assembly, I would also like to put into the hands of her who is the <ancilla Domini> the fruit of the work to which you have applied yourselves. I ask the immaculate Virgin to accompany the Church's effort in this important field of pastoral activity in view of the new evangelization.

With these sentiments, I willingly impart my blessing to all.

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