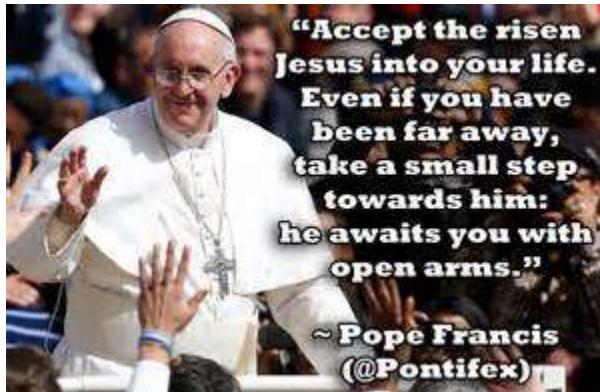


Engagement: Diaconal Praxis for the 21st Century



Evangelization in this time of great social transformations, necessitates a missionary outreach Church, capable of discernment in order to measure up to different cultures and visions of man. For a world in transformation, there is a need for a Church that is renewed and transformed by contemplation and personal contact with Christ, by the power of the Spirit. ...It is He Who gives us the strength to undertake the missionary path and the joy of proclamation, so that the light of Christ may illuminate those who still do not know Him or have denied Him. This takes the courage to go forth to 'reach all the peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel.' We cannot be held back by our weaknesses or our sins, nor by the many obstacles to the witness and proclamation of the Gospel."

-- Pope Francis' Address to the Pontifical Mission Societies, May 9, 2014



Today, the potential for the deacon's involvement in efforts to bring about structural change through economic, political, and legislative strategies is virtually unlimited and sorely needed. This means that working for social justice—striving to overcome such evils as abortion, euthanasia, and racism, to name only a few—is an integral, vital part of the deacon's ministry of charity and love today.

--Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, *The Call to Service: Pastoral Statement on the Permanent Diaconate*, 1993.

The above quotes direct us to the diaconal aspect of Church mission that is at the service of the global evangelizing mission of the Church. Such diaconal activity is not confined to ordained ministers but is the duty of all the faithful. However, the deacon is called to be an *icon of the servant Jesus Christ*.¹ Through the simplicity of the deacon's lifestyle, his advocacy for the poor and vulnerable, and as a transforming agent for God's peace and justice, he reveals the *servant Jesus Christ* to the world through the evangelizing power of the justice and peace mission of the Church.



The Encyclical Rerum Novarum can be read as a valid contribution to socio-economic analysis at the end of the nineteenth century, but its specific value derives from the fact that it is a document of the Magisterium and is fully a part of the Church's evangelizing mission, together with many other documents of this nature. Thus the Church's social teaching is itself a valid instrument of evangelization. As such, it proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being, and for that very reason reveals man to himself. In this light, and only in this light, does it concern itself with everything else: the human rights of the individual, and in particular of the "working class", the family and education, the duties of the State, the ordering of national and international society, economic life, culture, war and peace, and respect for life from the moment of conception until death.

--Pope St. John Paul The Great, *Centessimus Annus*, 1991

In the Archdiocese of Hartford the first ordination to the Permanent Diaconate took place on February 4, 1973. Since that time the ministry has flourished and over 500 men have been ordained to this ministry in the Archdiocese. Deacons have been very helpful in their roles as ministers to the

Altar, Word and Service. Deacons have largely been based in parish life, though not all, assisting in marriage preparation, RCIA, social outreach, Catechesis, hospital visitation, prison ministry, social justice work, and many other forms of service. In recent years, there has been a greater attempt to assist the deacons in the implementation of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). While this is certainly not the only aspect of diaconal ministry deacons are involved with, it is the most underdeveloped.

The deacon in the role of justice-seeker and peacemaker is a developing aspect of the ministry of deacon in the United States and around the world. In the *National Study of the Permanent Diaconate of the Catholic Church in the United States, 1994-5*, it states:

*The restored Order of the Diaconate, largely parish based, has been successful and increasingly important in the life of the Church. The primary challenges to the diaconate for the future are to broaden its ministries beyond its largely successful and increasingly indispensable adaptation to parish life and to emphasize more strongly that deacons, through ordination, are called to be the model, animator, and facilitator of ministries of charity and justice within the local church.*¹

Deacons are called to be models, animators, and facilitators of ministries of charity and justice. Deacons are to serve as visible signs to the whole Church's call to service in manifesting Christian charity and working with God and others to promote a more just and peaceful world. The deacon is to be an effective sign of the concern for service in the justice, peace, and agapic love of the reign of God.

*A fundamental aspect of the deacon's ministry is to model and encourage the development of the servant ministry of all the baptized. The deacon's task is to inspire, enable, and prepare the laity for the service of others. How faithful the deacon is to his call will be evident to the extent that others are inspired, welcomed, and led to engage in the ministry of service as a result of his presence and ministry.*²

The Threefold Ministry of the Deacon

The deacon's ministry consists of three essential and interrelated dimensions, which are; service to the Word, Altar and Service. The deacon's threefold ministry reflects the threefold ministry of Jesus Christ as Priest, Prophet, and King or leader. Furthermore, the deacon is called to a life of prayer that directs the deacon and others to the experience of God in the world, directing others to the presence and eschatological promise of the fullness of the presence of God's Kingdom in the Parousia of Jesus Christ. The deacon does this by his participation and living out the Eucharist in day to day life manifested service. He proclaims the Gospel in the context of the *signs of the times* in word and deed, in the way the deacon models to others a life of Christian service. He attends to the demands of Christian charity and goes further in working to address the causes of the need for charity working for structural changes to remove the need for charity and to help empower others in the power of the Holy Spirit to help others to help themselves.

The deacon as servant serves in the power of the Holy Spirit and imitation of Jesus Christ. In Phil. 2:6-11, we have the model of diaconal ministry in the *deacon* Jesus Christ. It is the ministry of *Kenosis*, or self-emptying love, that moves us away from our selfishness so that the reign of God may be more visible. The service to the Word calls the deacon to bring the needs of the poor and suffering to the attention of the community in the mode of the deacon's kenotic ministry, so that the community will better be able to take as a model the deacons whose *sign as the icon of the servant Jesus Christ* and live this kenotic love that shares *power, wealth and status* with those who have little or none.

In the *preaching event* the deacon's homily can be a moment to bring the concerns of the poor and vulnerable to the attention of the community. In this moment the deacon must be pastorally sensitive to the community in presenting a challenging, affirming and empowering message that speaks to the signs of the times in local, national and global contexts. No evidence of self-righteousness is to be present in the homily of the deacon since the deacon shares in the same difficult situation as others and does not know the life challenges faced by each member of the parish community. While it is important to be energized and committed, it is also pastorally necessary to be compassionate with those to whom we minister, and truthful to oneself. Therefore, the deacon is called to utter the prophetic word and live a prophetic life of what *ought to be*, and help others to see *what is*, in order to

cooperate with God's grace to help make transformative change in the world in light of God's present/future Kingdom or Reign. It is a matter of the change of hearts and structures in mutually reinforcing praxis. This may entail struggle, hardship, and perhaps risk. But this is to be expected and not to serve as a deterrent to transformative action. The martyred young pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*:

*....what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.*³



Within the liturgical aspect of the deacon's ministry the deacon is the *minister of the cup*. The cup points to the possibility of suffering for the reign of God, even in that ultimate form in martyrdom—witness. While a great many deacons will never face this ultimate worldly cost it will always remain an intrinsic and fundamental dimension of Christian life and diaconal ministry when he received baptism, reaffirmed in Eucharist, and accepted as consequence of ordination.

The service of charity and justice is a major aspect of the lived reality of Eucharist that call each believer to be *the Lord's body broken for others and Lord's blood poured out for others*. The deacon, as stated earlier, is to serve as an icon of the servant Jesus Christ; summoning all the baptized to live out the paschal mystery in every dimension of life.

....let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other. The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation. Christians should rather rejoice that, following the example of Christ who worked as an artisan, they are free to exercise all their earthly activities by gathering their humane, domestic, professional, social, and

technical enterprises into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory.

--Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #43, 1965

This service to charity and justice in building peace is one that *enfleshes* the Gospel in every aspect of reality. Each Catholic Christian is called to this by virtue of their participation in Word and sacrament. Furthermore, the liturgical celebration sits in the *nest* of the present/future Kingdom of God. All liturgical celebrations (and daily life) sits in an *eschatological tension* between the presence of God and the future fullness of God's Kingdom in the Parousia.⁴ That means that all of our actions, at best, will reflect something of the Kingdom, but cannot be equated with the Kingdom because of the ambiguity of human action in a world tainted by sin.⁵ This insight helps us to avoid identifying the Gospel with a particular transient political option or ideology. This allows us the freedom not to impose totalitarian ideas and methods on how to prosecute Church mission allowing us the self-critical praxis that stands under the rule of the Gospel.

This eschatological tension also calls us to the co-creative ministry of building justice and peace in the world with others in the power of the Holy Spirit as covenant partners. This participation in the mission of the Church is integral to our growing in Christ and our humanity. In sum, this means meeting the immediate needs of people and working with others to devise appropriate pastoral plans for social action for justice.

Trinitarian Lifestyle and Diaconal Ministry

The lived experience of Christian faith and the ministry of deacon is grounded in the Christian experience of God in Christ animated by the Holy Spirit revealing God as Trinity. This Trinitarian experience of God is Christocentric in character, i.e., it is in the *Christ-event* that we come to know of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit clearly. In the *Christ-event* we glimpse the inner nature of God revealed to human beings. The Blessed Trinity reveals God as perfect community, yet One! All the members are interdependent in what is technically termed *perichoresis* or *communicatio idiomatum*. This interdependence is characterized by kenotic love or self-emptying love for the other. To say much more about the Trinity is impossible for human language and understanding because God is the

Absolute mystery of the world and cannot be grasped fully by human understanding and expression. Still we need to try to expression the experience of the Trinity as revealed in history to the best of our ability in word and deed.

*The presentation of the innermost being of God, revealed by Jesus, the mystery of being one in essence and three in Persons, has vital implications for the lives of human beings. To confess belief in one God mean that man should not submit his personal freedom in an absolute manner to any earthly power. It also implies that humanity made in the image and likeness of God who is 'communion of persons,' is called to be a fraternal society, comprised of sons and daughters of the same Father, and equal in personal dignity. The human and social implications of the Christian concept of God are immense. The Church, in professing her faith in the Trinity and by proclaiming it to the world, understands herself as a people gathered together in the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*⁶

Trinitarian-Christocentric faith is one that affirms and advances the sacrificial love of the members of the Godhead as that model and inspiration for Christian living. Therefore, anything that would oppose true community in the mode of Trinitarian kenotic love, or that would harm others and the world is to be resisted and transformed in the power of the Spirit of Christ.

*....God is not self-contained, egotistical self-absorbed but overflowing love outreaching desire for union with all that God has made.*⁷

Praxis for Justice and Peace and the Deacon

In 1983, the U.S. Catholic Bishops published their pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*. In this letter the bishops reminded Catholics that there are principles of our moral tradition that are to be brought to bear on the political issues of our time. They pointed out that while the principles are binding on Catholics, the specific policy recommendation made in the letters were open to informed and conscientious discussion. Therefore, it is important it is important that we not simply identify one political option with the

Gospel, but rather, to be discerning and open to genuine dialogue and innovation in our thinking and action.

The deacon is called and challenged to infuse justice-seeking and peacemaking into every aspect of his ministry as a *constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel*.⁸ To respond to this call and challenge I have constructed this program in a way that utilizes Dr. Thomas Groome's *shared praxis* methodology. The narrative structure of this methodology has proved effective in personal conversion and evangelization. Such is borne out in the experience of Small Christian Communities and other modalities that employ Groome's *shared praxis* approach.

In the Roman Catholic tradition there are three primary forms of justice: *Communitative, Distributive and Social Justice*. Communitative justice concerns the rights and obligations between individuals, and parties to contracts and covenants. Distributive Justice concerns the just distribution of the goods of the earth so that each person may live in human dignity free from grinding poverty. Social Justice is concerned with creating social structures that make distributive justice possible.

The Roman Catholic tradition has approached the implementation of Catholic mission to build a just world in three primary modalities. These modalities include: *educational-cultural, legislative-policy and prophetic witness*.⁸ All of these modes place emphasis on the importance of Catholic Social Teaching for the praxis of every believer.

The educational-cultural model places emphasis on the importance of formal and life-long education for the *formation of conscience* of believers that will lead to virtuous behavior and moral decision-making based on Catholic Social/Moral teaching. The legislative-policy models places emphasis on the importance of public dialogue and lobbying for various policy choices for government and public organizations that align with Roman Catholic Social/Moral teaching. The prophetic-witness model places emphasis on a truly counter-cultural living in a radical expression of Christian discipleship. This particular model calls the church to repentance and noting that the two other models concede too much to the world and compromise the gospel in the process.

Dimensions of Diaconal Engagement

While the ministry to social justice and peace are fundamental to diaconal ministry it is important that the deacons be able to effectuate this ministry in the context of the culture—otherwise the Gospel message and mission will remain incomprehensible and irrelevant to many of the culture. It comes down to Christian loving for the other, of living the spiritual work of mercy of educating the ignorant. Therefore the deacon will need some level of competency in dealing with the questions today's culture is asking of Christianity. This must be a piece of the deacon's ministry of engagement with the culture with the Gospel message, addressing the *signs of the times*. Therefore, this program will engage some of the major issues that confront out society.

Notes

- 1 *A National Study on the Permanent Diaconate in the United States, 1994-95* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB/NCCB, 1996), p. 13
- 2 Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, *The Call to Service: Pastoral Statement on the Permanent Diaconate, 1993*, p.2
- 3 Geoffrey G. Belly and F. Burton Nelson, eds., *A Testament of Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco; Harper, 1990), p. 332.
- 4 Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (New York: Oxford university Press, 1991),. This is an excellent discussion on the eschatological nature of Christian life and worship.
- 5 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1980), pp. 770-780.
- 6 *General Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB/NCCB, 1998), p.95
- 7 Catherine Mowry LaCagna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York; Harper-Collins, 1991), p.15
- 8 John A. Coleman, S.J., ed. *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 66-70.

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