

The Prophetic Ministry of the Deacon VII: *Religious Pluralism and a Global Ethic*



(Opening of the Second Vatican Council, 1962)

Four years ago I was participating in a meeting of a local interreligious group. We started the meeting by telling something about our own religious tradition. A number of people made the point that fundamentally we had many things in common, i.e. a belief in God or the Ultimate, the need for redemption, the desire for true community, and similar moral concerns. When it came time for me to share I acknowledged the many things we all had in common but I also noted that there are distinct differences between the traditions as to how we understand and experience God and the human person. I felt that if real dialogue is to take place we have to learn to accept each other with our differences and that, indeed, such differences can be enriching and helpful for gaining insight into one's own religious tradition.

The deacon and the people to whom he ministers belong to a local and global community. What's more, in any given neighborhood in the United States a number of various religious traditions are present. This is becoming a more common feature in the Western world as peoples from various parts of the world emigrate to Europe and the United States. In my own neighborhood I have neighbors who are Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Sikh. How can the deacon's prophetic ministry be brought to bear on this situation of religious pluralism, while at the same time remaining faithful to one's own tradition? This was discussed by Anglican priest and physicist, John Polkinghorne:

I am writing from within the Christian community of faith, but one must admit that exploration of sacred reality is made problematic by the diversity of the world faith traditions. Each displays a considerable stability in its traditional heartlands. Each manifests an authenticity in the spiritual way of life that it preserves and nurtures. Today's multicultural society makes us keenly aware that this is so. People of other faiths are no longer strange people, living in faraway countries and believing very odd things. They are our neighbors, living down the street, and we can see the evident integrity of their lives. The deeply troubling intolerance and violence that some minorities within the different faith communities can display do not negate the values that are affirmed and followed by the majority. Yet, each religion also makes claims about the

form of its encounter with sacred reality that appear incompatible with the testimonies of other faith communities.

Polkinghorne, *Exploring reality*, pp. 127-28

This situation offers a tremendous opportunity and challenge to deacons in the ministry of kenotic service. What's more, this opportunity and challenge sits in a larger context of major forces shaping our world situation. These are some of the forces at work in our world today which are having significant impact on the present world situation:

- The recognition that human rights as norms for national and international conduct require groups and nations to adhere to these norms, regardless of their internal law, eroding some level of national sovereignty of nation-states.
- The widespread proliferation on nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction that render the defense of national border increasingly ineffectual for the protection of society.
- The growth of transnational threats that transcend state borders, such as damage to the environment, mass migrations, population expansion, famine and shortage of drinkable water.
- The continued development of globalization of capital eroding the control of national economy.
- The creation of a global communications network that penetrates borders electronically and threatens national languages, customs and culture.**1**

With these developments comes the opportunity to work for justice and peace via the cooperation and shared moral vision of the world's great religious traditions. We could also include a growing religious pluralism in the United States and the Western European nations as a growing trend. Certainly, the concern for peace is at the core of all the great traditions. However, we know that even today religion plays a role in many conflicts and wars around the world. In our time we are being given an opportunity to redress the great scandal that has plagued human history of religions fomenting and fueling wars and persecution of others, often resulting in many people rejecting organized religion. For if there cannot be peace among the world's religions, how can there be peace? It in the light of this scandalous situation the religions of the world have endeavored to be a source of peacemaking and justice-seeking reflected in the World Parliament of Religions' document *Toward a Global Ethic*.



(Pope Benedict XVI and Minister of Interreligious Affairs)

This vision for the unity of the human race and universal salvation under God found expression in the great prophetic tradition of Israel most clearly articulated in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

In the days to come,
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest mountain
and raised above the hills.
All nations shall stream toward it:
and many people shall come and say:
"Come let us climb the Lord's mountain,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may instruct us in his ways,
and that we may walk in his paths.
For from Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and impose terms on many peoples.
They shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
One nations shall not raise the swords against
another,
nor shall they train for war again.

Is. 2:1-4

Ecumenical and interreligious cooperation and dialogue are among the dimensions of deacon formation mentioned by the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, #119:

Attention should also be given to topics reflecting the specific needs of the Church in the United States....the study of the beliefs and practices of other religions and Christian denominations—deepening a spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. Ample

opportunities also need to be given to the study and practice of missiology—learning how to evangelize—so as to form deacons who will be actively present in society, offering true diaconal witness, entering into dialogue with others, and cooperating in charity and justice to resolve common concerns.

In this regard it is important that deacon formation programs and post-ordination deacon formation address this situation in a manner that equips deacons for productive activity in the area of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation and dialogue. This is delicate business to be sure. It may be that certain deacons in the diocese are chosen to advance the cause of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and given advanced theological training to promote such cooperation and dialogue while at the same time maintaining orthodox Catholic teaching. I would submit that this is not an option but a requirement for the present and future ministry of the Church and the diaconate. The challenges that face the global family are too vast and far-reaching in their implications to engage in any form of *tactical provincialism*.2

The great issues of our time: war and peace, economic justice, environmental stewardship, migration, resource scarcity, and other concerns will need a global effort to secure a humane future for the people of the earth. Certainly, this is fundamental to the concerns of the Church expressed at the Second Vatican Council in *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965, # 1*

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of people, of people who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the Kingdom of the Father and are bearers of the message of salvation intended for all people.

Such solidarity with the human situation compels the members of the Church to engage with every aspect of human and earthly life as a result of the Incarnation, reflected in the aforementioned quote from *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.

In the *Directory For the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons, 1998*, from the Congregation for the Clergy it states:

The deacon.....should be conversant with contemporary cultures and with the aspirations and problems of his times. In this context, indeed, he is called to be a living sign of Christ the Servant and to assume the Church's responsibility of reading the signs of the time and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, so that, in language intelligible to every generation, he may be able to answer the ever-recurring questions which men ask about this present life and of the life to come and how one is related to the other. #43

The ecumenical and interreligious cooperation for a global ethic finds solid foundation in the Second Vatican Council documents: *Nostra aetate* and *Unitatis redintegratio*. The

challenge for deacons is to have a strategy for engaging in this aspect of their prophetic ministry. It could be reasonably argued that how the Church engages this aspect of its mission may well decide the future of the planet for:

- There can be no ongoing human society without a world ethic for the nations.
- There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
- There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.³

Notes

¹ Philip Bobbit, *The Shield of Achilles: Law, Strategy and History*, (New York), Anchor, 2003.

² Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, (New York) Seabury Press, 1980 and *The Emergent Church*, (New York), Crossroad, 1981

³ Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, (New York), Crossroad, 1991, p. 138.