

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Called to Teach, Sanctify, and Serve

There comes a point in every deacon's life when ministry begins to raise a deeper question. It may come at the altar, in the hospital room, at the graveside, or in a conversation with someone who is hurting. The question is not simply, "What am I supposed to do here?" but something more personal: "Who am I called to be in this moment?"

That question opens the door to understanding the *munera* of the diaconate.

The word *munus* is often translated as "office," "duty," or "function," but each of those words can sound too narrow. A *munus* is not simply a task assigned to someone. It is a gift and responsibility entrusted to a person because of a particular calling and mission.

For the deacon, this distinction is crucial. If we reduce the diaconate to functions, then diaconal identity becomes little more than a list of permitted activities. But the Church begins somewhere deeper. The *Catechism* teaches that through ordination the deacon receives an indelible sacramental character and is configured to Christ, who made himself the servant of all (CCC. no. 1570). What the deacon does, therefore, flows from what Christ has first done in him.

The Church speaks of Christ's threefold *munera*: teaching, sanctifying, and governing—*munus docendi*, *munus sanctificandi*, and *munus regendi*. These are not three unrelated jobs. They are dimensions of the one mission of Christ continued in the Church.

In the diaconate, these three *munera* take on a distinctively diaconal form. Vatican II describes deacons as serving the People of God "in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 29)." These correspond broadly to teaching, sanctifying, and governing, but always according to the particular character of *diakonia*, or service.

The *munus docendi* is expressed in the deacon's ministry of the Word. He proclaims the Gospel, preaches, catechizes, and evangelizes. Yet he is not simply a religious communicator. At ordination the Book of the Gospels is placed into his hands with the charge to believe what he reads, teach what he believes, and practice what he teaches. The Word entrusted to his voice must first take root in his own heart.

The *munus sanctificandi* is expressed especially in the deacon's service of the liturgy. He assists at the altar, baptizes, witnesses marriages, presides at funerals and certain forms of prayer, and serves the Eucharistic assembly. But this liturgical service is not merely ceremonial. The deacon stands at the altar as one sacramentally configured to Christ the Servant. His service there should shape the whole pattern of his life.

The *munus regendi* is expressed in the deacon's ministry of charity, pastoral care, and administration. Here "governing" must be understood in the light of Christ, whose authority is revealed in self-gift. The deacon's participation in this *munus* takes the form of service: attending to the poor, the forgotten, the sick, the imprisoned, and those whose needs might otherwise remain unseen.

These three dimensions cannot be separated. The deacon who proclaims the Gospel but neglects charity contradicts the Word he preaches. The deacon who serves at the altar but remains indifferent to suffering has not allowed the Eucharist to shape his ministry. The deacon who serves the poor without drawing life from Word and sacrament risks reducing ecclesial charity to social work.

The three *munera* belong together because Christ is one.

For the deacon, then, the movement is always relationship, identity, and mission. He begins in relationship with Christ the Servant. From that relationship, sacramentally deepened by ordination, comes his identity. From that identity flows his mission in Word, Liturgy, and Charity.

The *munera* are therefore not simply three things a deacon does. They are three ways his sacramental identity becomes visible. Through them, the deacon is called to make Christ the Servant present in the Church and in the world.

That is the deeper challenge of the diaconate: not merely to perform the ministry, but to become, more and more, the servant he has been ordained to be.

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