

The deacon — word, altar, charity

This unique servant of God follows a pre-ordained path

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In the ordination of a deacon, after the candidate has been called to the diaconate, the bishop preaches a homily. He concentrates on the readings chosen for the ordination Eucharist. In the rite of ordination itself, there is a prepared homily which explains well the mission of a deacon:

"He will draw new strength from the gift of the Holy Spirit. He will help the bishop and his body of priests as a minister of the word, of the altar and of charity. He will make himself a servant to all. As a minister of the altar he will proclaim the Gospel, prepare the sacrifice, and give the Lord's body and blood to the community of believers.

"It will also be his duty, at the bishop's discretion, to bring God's word to believer and unbeliever alike, to preside over public prayer, to baptize, to assist at marriages and bless them, to give Viaticum to the dying, and to lead the rites of burial.

WORKS OF CHARITY

"Once he is consecrated by the laying on of hands that comes to us from the apostles and is bound more closely to the altar, he will perform works of charity in the name of the bishop or the pastor. From the way he goes about these duties, may you recognize him as a disciple of Jesus, who came to serve and not to be served."

In each diocese, and in each parish, for that matter, the specific duties of a deacon will vary, depending upon the local circumstances. But the three guiding themes of the diaconal ministry are sketched in the above exhortation: word, altar and charity.

The deacon (like St. Stephen and St. Philip in Acts of the Apostles 6-8) is called to be a minister of the word of God, and to evangelize in the name of the Church. He is commissioned to proclaim the Gospel and to preach at the Eucharist, and at a later point in the ordination ceremony receives from the bishop the Book of the Gospels, with the admonition: "Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe and practice what you teach."

The deacon is also a minister of the altar, and has a role in the celebration of the Eucharist, as for example in preparing the gifts, and in inviting the people to exchange the sign of peace, and to go in the peace of Christ.

There is a special liturgical vestment for the deacon, the dalmatic, and the deacon when celebrating the liturgy wears the stole which is the sign of ordained ministry.

But the liturgical ministry around the altar must not be the focal point of the deacon's life, and in fact one who is attracted to the diaconate because of this dimension should not apply.

From earliest times, the deacon has been primarily characterized as the one who is ordained to imitate Christ the servant in the practical works of charity. He is to be in the background, quietly serving others in a multitude of works which will vary from place to place, dependent upon the local needs. He is ordained to serve, and in that to work in concert with those who fulfill the numerous other roles within the Christian community.

FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The prepared homily ends with this exhortation: "Like the men the apostles chose for works of charity, you should be a man of good reputation, filled with wisdom and the Holy Spirit. Show before God and mankind that you are above every suspicion of blame, a true minister of Christ and of God's mysteries, a man firmly rooted in faith.

"Never turn away from the hope which the Gospel offers; now you must not only listen to God's word but preach it. Hold the mystery of faith with a clear conscience. Express in action what you proclaim by word of mouth. Then the people of Christ, brought to life by the Spirit, will be an offering God accepts. Finally, on the last day, when you go to meet the Lord, you will hear him say: 'Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.'"