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## Serving the Spiritual Life

Just as Christ emptied himself in *kenosis* [self-sacrifice] for the sake of helpless sinners, so I am called to find my true self by emptying myself and taking on the needs of others. This is what the life of the deacon sacramentalizes for the sake of the whole church. Service of others is the dynamic of transcendence; service *is* spirituality.

—Fr. William T. Donovan,  
*The Sacrament of Service:  
Understanding Diaconal Spirituality*

### **Theological Reflection: The Gift of Vulnerability**

Your wedding day and the day of your ordination have one thing in common: those were the days you died. You promised God to die to selfishness, egotism, and pride. You vowed to accept the responsibility of being the chief servant of your wife and children, to leave your father and mother and cling to your wife, and to become one flesh with her (see Gn 2:24). Then, on the day you were ordained, you also promised with your wife's support to extend that ministry of service to the entire Church.

In order to serve both your family and the Church well, you cannot be afraid to make yourself vulnerable to them all, just as Christ made himself vulnerable on the Cross before his Bride, the Church. This gift of vulnerability, of seeing diaconal service as a participation in the work of the crucified Christ, is at the heart of what it means to be a man of God.

As I wrote in my book on male spirituality, *Behold the Man*, many of the temptations and challenges men face today are rooted in our inability to be vulnerable, thinking that it is a sign of weakness to share our inner thoughts and feelings with others. And yet, it was Christ's vulnerability on the Cross, giving himself fully in a singular act of self-gift, that accomplished the work of our salvation. And so it is with us:

Spiritual men must learn to take hold of the Cross in their lives—to open themselves to the love, the peace, and the real joy that flows from the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and to live this reality every day of their lives. . . . It is only when we begin to understand the gift of vulnerability lived from the Cross that we will know what it means to be a man of God.<sup>1</sup>

Being vulnerable means not being afraid to deal honestly with our weaknesses, insecurities, fears, and unresolved issues from our past. Maybe you are deathly afraid of preaching. Maybe your father was an alcoholic. Maybe you are anxious. We all have baggage that we bring into our relationships and into ministry. Yet, what seem like overwhelming inhibitors to effective ministry are actually opportunities to pick up our cross and follow Christ more closely, to trust more fully, to love more deeply.

Diaconal service reflects divine intimacy when we break open and pour out our hearts in loving service to our brothers and sisters. It is in this gift of vulnerability that we find the strength to serve:

“[The Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9–10).

Vulnerability is the fruit we bear before God that was seeded by the vocational call, planted by humility, watered by the sacraments, and fertilized by a rich prayer life. Vulnerability allows the deacon to be keenly aware that God uses all of him—his strengths and weaknesses—to accomplish his work in the world. In acknowledging his own weaknesses, the deacon understands that the strength to serve comes from God if he is willing to cooperate with the graces received in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

## **A Holy Path to Love and Sacrifice**

The most profound moment of my ordination was the Litany of the Saints. As I lay on the cold marble floor, I heard the names of our brothers who preceded us: Vincent, Ephrem, Lawrence, Stephen, Francis of Assisi—saintly men of God, men of extraordinary holiness—and I began to weep as I thought, *Who am I to follow in the footsteps of these great deacons? I’m nobody.* Then I remembered these words attributed to St. Teresa of Calcutta: “A sacrifice to be real must cost, must hurt, must empty ourselves. . . . Give yourself fully to God. He will use you to accomplish great things on the condition that you believe much more in his love than in your own weakness.”<sup>2</sup>

With absolute trust and confidence, the deacon must not be afraid to place his heart and life in the hands of Christ. The Lord gave his life on the Cross in a complete and perfect act of love and sacrifice. We, too, must not be afraid to live our ministry of service with passion and conviction in a world that rejects truth, goodness, and beauty.

We must empty ourselves of every earthly thing we believe we cannot live *without* so that Christ can fill us from *within*. We must become blind to the ways and thinking of this world so that Christ can lead us to life. Only then can we hope to lead others to Christ.

## **The Sacraments in the Life of a Deacon**

As deacons we must humbly recognize that when we give ourselves away in love, we truly find ourselves in God. We must continually live with the realization that we are always in the presence of God. Everything we think, say, and do occurs in his presence; everything that we are, everyone we meet, and all that we experience in this world is his creation. We must recognize with equal humility this essential truth: every time we sin against Christ and the teachings of his Church, we are separating ourselves from a personal encounter with God himself.

This is why the deacon, if he is to serve well, must stay close to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation. Frequent reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation allows the deacon to say, “Lord, I love you, but I am only human and, in my weakness, I have sinned against you,” confident that he will receive God’s mercy and forgiveness. “Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and tear your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy, and repents of evil” (Jl 2:12–13). Reconciliation empties us and prepares us to worthily receive the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

The reality of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is at the heart of the Christian life; the Eucharist is the principal source of our spiritual strength and nourishment precisely because it is Christ himself we receive. The power of the eucharistic Christ—present at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and in adoration—gives us the perseverance and resolve to stand up as witnesses to truth and to be true disciples

of Christ.<sup>3</sup> The Eucharist nourishes the deacon's spiritual life and enlivens his ministry of service.

In the words of St. John Paul II: "The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey" of faith on earth.<sup>4</sup> After sending forth the faithful at the end of Mass, we too must join them in being "eucharist" to the world. One of the greatest joys we have as deacons is bringing the eucharistic Christ to those who are homebound or in hospitals, assisted-living communities, and prisons. They are happy to see us but even happier to see Jesus!

The deacon is a living, sacramental sign of Christ the Servant. One of the important ways an ordained deacon serves the Church is as a guardian of the Eucharist. Therefore, we can only serve well if we ourselves live a Eucharist-centered faith; only then can we share that gift with those we are called to serve: "The Mystery of Faith is the indescribable gift of the Eucharist that the Catholic Church has received from Christ as a pledge of His never-ending love. . . . The Mystery of the Eucharist is in fact the source of life: purified and strengthened by the Eucharist, we live not for ourselves but for God, and [in receiving the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Eucharist] we are joined to one another by the closest bonds of love."<sup>5</sup>

## **The Marian Soul of the Deacon**

An examination of diaconal spirituality as it relates to service cannot be complete without a brief exploration of the role of the proto-servant, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In his *Rule for Monks*, St. Benedict says, "The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience. . . . This very obedience, however, will be acceptable to God and agreeable to men only if compliance with what

is commanded is not cringing or sluggish or half-hearted, but free from any grumbling or any reaction of unwillingness.” The obedience of faith means “to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth.”<sup>6</sup>

To obey in faith, then, means more than submissive compliance to authority; it involves a spirit of faith in which the people of God, with complete humility and generosity of spirit, obey, revere, and continually strive to discern and fulfill the will of God. Obedience is a free act of love in which the mind and the heart decisively submit to God’s will in faith. This is why we place our hands in the hands of the bishop at ordination and promise obedience to him and to his successors.

If the deacon is to truly embody this humility and generosity of spirit, he must look to the most blessed of all women, the Virgin Mary, who by the power of the Holy Spirit and in patient obedience to the Father’s will gave birth to God Incarnate. As her spiritual sons, we seek to imitate the Blessed Mother’s unwavering trust in God’s divine providence and her enduring love for all who seek the Lord with a sincere heart.

With a trusting heart, Mary allowed herself to become vulnerable before the Lord, and this vulnerability opened her heart ever more deeply to accept God’s will, including the pain of suffering. In this way, the woman Mary—the Immaculate Heart of love through whom God pours his love into our hearts—exemplifies the service ministry to which deacons are called. Let us strive to unite our souls with hers through the service we give to others.

Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, points the way to Jesus. Through her beautiful example of motherhood, fidelity, and holiness, Mary is for all humanity a living signpost along the road to salvation. Through the simple day-to-day events of home life as well as through her deep love for her husband and child, she shines as an

example of extraordinary holiness. Mary's greatest desire is for us to find her Son and bring him fully into our hearts and home, just as she brought him into her own heart and home at Nazareth.

Through the mystery of the Incarnation, God showed both the depth of his love and his abiding respect for the dignity of our human nature by becoming one of us. Through Mary, God identified with us in our poverty, sadness and humiliation, pain and suffering, and even in the darkness of death itself. By becoming incarnate in the womb of Mary, God shows us the way to share in the divine life of the Trinity. Similarly, through the example of the Blessed Mother—who humbled herself in love before God and opened her heart to his holy will, devoting herself completely to discipleship in Christ—God invites us to participate in his saving plan for all humanity. Mary's example serves as a template for the service ministry of deacons: to enter into the depths of humanity with the Good News in order to lead people to salvation in Jesus Christ.

From the first moment of his Incarnation in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Son of God embraced the Father's plan of divine salvation in obedience to the Father's will. Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" (Jn 4:34). Christ's whole life was an offering to the Father, and the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross "for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:2) expresses his loving communion with the Father. "The Father loves me, because I lay down my life," said the Lord, "[for] I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (Jn 10:17, 14:31).

When we receive Jesus Christ in the Eucharist during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, let us be mindful that, like Mary, we are carrying the Lord within us; that our bodies are united with his. Let us receive him in a state of grace, so that we can say to our Lord with all of our heart, soul, and will, "My God, I love you more than anyone or anything else

in this world. I love you so much that I want you to create your life in me. Lord Jesus, in obedience to your will, I renew my promise to offer you my unending love and devotion as a deacon for your people for the rest of my life.”

## **Reconciling with the Father**

In my travels, I often encounter neophyte Catholics who are uncomfortable with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. There may be many reasons for this discomfort: poor catechesis, confusing guilt with shame, fear, and so on. However, I believe one of the core issues in why we don't like talking about sin is that it is so personal. Sin makes us uncomfortable. Sin embarrasses us. Sin opens deep wounds that are often painful.

And yet, my brothers, if talking about sin bothers you, please look at a crucifix. Jesus took all of our sins upon himself. He was uncomfortable; he was embarrassed; his body endured deep wounds that were painful. Jesus took our sins personally. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and there is nothing we can ever do—there is no sin too great and no hurt too deep—that cannot be forgiven and healed by the rich mercy and restoring power of God's life-giving love.

Just as at Meribah and Massah (see Ex 17), where God made water flow in the desert from the hardest, driest rock, if we surrender ourselves completely to our heavenly Father, then his loving mercy will flow freely even in the hardest and driest of hearts. In order to serve well, we must be free to love. This means that we cannot hide behind alcohol or drugs, pornography, anger, hatred, pride, or any sin that we think God cannot forgive. His love and his mercy are too great!

Christ the Servant showed us by freely choosing to do the Father's will—by freely choosing what is good, what is true, what is beautiful—that even suffering and death cannot overpower God's love for



us. God literally loves us to death. In his suffering and death, Christ's humanity became the free and perfect instrument of the Father's divine love, which desires our salvation. This is the message of hope that Christ and his Church have entrusted to deacons.

God the Father sent his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ—true God from true God—to die in order to show us that in freely giving up that which is most precious to us, our very lives, to do the Father's will, we will receive everlasting life. Jesus shows us that even in the darkest hours of our lives, God's love knows no end. Even in the hardships of everyday life, God's love knows no bounds. Even in our suffering and death, God's love holds nothing back. This is the faith that deacons must bring to the poor in spirit who do not know Jesus. This is the power of the Cross that deacons must bring to people who have no idea how much God loves them. This is how a deacon meets people where they are—the sick, the broken, the fallen away—and brings them to Jesus.

This is not just something we do; it must flow from the depths of who we are. “The task of diaconal spirituality is . . . to look into the depths of diaconal service and to find in there treasures of the presence of God. . . . The spiritual experience of the deacon is two-fold: the transcendence of his spirit that occurs in the very act of service, and the prayerful recollection of that service in light of the mystery of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mk 8:34–35). God is not necessarily asking deacons to suffer physical death for his sake. All he asks is that we remember our promise to him at ordination, when we freely chose to die to our own sinful actions and selfish desires, to sacrifice those things that do not

lead us to our ultimate end—eternal life with him. God knows that this is not always easy. Yet, if we truly desire to serve God’s people honorably, then we must be receptive and obedient to his love and will, which is only possible when we humble ourselves and become reconciled with him through the Cross of Jesus Christ. God sent his Son, Jesus the Carpenter, to give us the tools of grace and faith, together with his own Body and Blood, to strengthen us as we carry the crosses in our own lives.

## **A Deacon Speaks: Diaconal Spirituality**

*by Deacon Dominic Cerrato, PhD*

When the term “diaconal spirituality” is used in popular literature, its meaning is often assumed. The context of its usage implies the way a deacon draws close to Christ through such devotional practices as *lectio divina*, spiritual direction, examination of conscience (with frequent Confession), and eucharistic adoration. In reality, our spirituality encompasses far more than this.

While all of these practices have great merit in cultivating the interior life, they don’t in themselves constitute a diaconal spirituality; instead, they are elements in the spirituality of a deacon. This is an important distinction. A deacon may and should participate in these various devotions; yet it’s not the fact of his participation but rather *how he participates* that reflects his configuration to Christ the Servant. Our relationship with God changed radically at ordination, when we were indelibly marked as Christ the Servant. Therefore, as deacons we have the capacity to relate to God in a particular way, in a diaconal way. This relationship is contextualized as a gift of divine love outpoured, and since love cannot remain static, the essential characteristic and distinctive feature of diaconal spirituality is that we are continually growing in more intimate communion with Christ the Servant. This ongoing, intimate communion is to be the source and

strength of our ministry, imbuing it with a particular quality—the quality of a servant who loves his Master tenderly.

There isn't any one way to grow in intimate communion with Christ the Servant, but many ways. Indeed, what is true of diaconal spiritualities and their associated devotions is true of all Catholic spiritualities. In his venerable work *Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis de Sales observes:

When God created the world, He commanded each tree to bear fruit after its kind; and even so He bids Christians, the living trees of His Church, to bring forth fruits of devotion, each one according to his kind and vocation. A different exercise of devotion is required of each . . . and furthermore such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual.<sup>8</sup>

Intimate communion implies a relationship, and a relationship always implies the union of two or more distinct individuals. While Christ the Servant is a constant in the relationship, individual deacons represent a widely diverse group. They share many commonalities, but the ways in which they encounter Christ and allow him to accompany them on their vocational journeys will differ. Just as no one human person can fully image God, so no one human person can “incarnate” Christ the Servant. The diversity of diaconal spiritualities reflects the diversity of men called to sacred service in the diaconate, and only together do they reveal Christ the Servant. In this way, they enable the ministry to permeate and penetrate all aspects of society.

The uniqueness of diaconal spirituality, what sets it apart from other spiritualities, lies in the deacon's mystical identification with Christ the Servant. While all are called to serve by virtue of their baptism, the deacon is called to be an icon of Christ the Servant, and in this respect, he acts in the person of that same Christ who came not to be served but to serve. This grounds diaconal spirituality

in a specific kind of vocational relationship to God: it begins as an unfulfilled calling to sacred ecclesial service that is realized when the bishop says the prayer of ordination over the deacon and lays hands upon him, and continues throughout his life as he exercises his diaconal ministry.

Because he is deacon by virtue of his ordination, his every act has the capacity to be diaconal. I say “has the capacity” because the deacon needs to be intentional about being a deacon. Ordination takes away neither the effects of original sin nor our free will, which, if it’s truly free, maintains the capacity to sin.

This intentionality is not limited to formal ministry per se but applies to all aspects of the deacon’s life, including especially his relationships with his wife and his family. Indeed, he must first be a deacon to them as father and husband before he can be a deacon to others. Diaconal spirituality in its many forms seeks to grow the deacon in the ways of perfection, enabling him to incarnate Christ the Servant more effectively. By sensitizing himself to God’s presence in those he serves and responding in love, he extends the hand of Christ to those in need. And he is transformed in this process, since it’s impossible to touch without being touched. To foster a greater intentionality within the exercise of his ministry, the deacon must foster that same intentionality within his interior life. He must seek Christ the Servant in all things and, in all things, discover him anew.<sup>9</sup>

## **Questions for Self-Evaluation**

1. What distractions prevent me from having a rich spiritual life as a deacon? Do I have trouble balancing work, ministry, and family life? Are there problems in my marriage? Am I making enough time every day for prayer? What is holding me back in my spiritual life as a deacon?

2. What two or three things will I do every day (no excuses!) to fight temptation and sin in my life?
3. What scares me the most about following God's plan for my life and ministry? Why am I afraid? What one or two things must I do to overcome this fear?

## **Goal-Setting Exercise**

Spend an hour each week for the next four to six weeks before the Lord in eucharistic adoration. Perhaps you will reflect on the above questions. If so, do not try to answer them. Spend this time in quiet contemplation and prayer before the Lord without an agenda or any preconceived ideas or plans. Just be before him. Allow God to speak to you and hear him with the ear of your heart. Surrender to him. Be a clean slate and let God create through you.

## **Closing Prayer**

Loving Father,  
your Son Jesus came not to be served but to serve.  
In your wisdom, you have called me, a sinner, to serve  
your people as a deacon in your Church.  
Open my heart as you opened the waters of the Red Sea  
and grant me the freedom to follow you without fear.  
Nourished by the Word of God and the Bread from Heaven,  
give me the resolve to abandon the slavery of sin and embrace  
the Cross with humility and love.  
Mother Mary, place me under the mantle of your maternal grace  
and intercede for me before the throne of your Son  
so that my ministry of service may bear fruit for the kingdom.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.