

Vittore Carpaccio,  
*Consecration  
of St. Stephen,*  
detail (c.1511)

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**THE MORAL LIFE BY DEACON JAMES KEATING, PH.D.**

# THE SPIRITUAL POVERTY OF THE DIACONATE

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There is a great mystery to the diaconate that is revealed in the diaconal ordination rite. On the day of ordination very little is said about what a deacon should do; rather, the rite focuses upon who a deacon should become. This focus can cause some consternation in Western men who are trained to be active and to “get things done.” To become a virtuous man does not seem to be an inviting “work” because there is nothing to see upon its completion—no new ministry, program, or work of charity. And yet, to become a virtuous man is seen to be a centerpiece of diaconal identity and a major plea to the Holy Spirit from the bishop within the ordination prayers. The Prayer of Consecration makes it plain that the Church is not looking for another group of active men, men who do good works; the Church has those in many quarters. Instead, the Church is looking for a group of *spiritual leaders*, men who live from the inside out, regularly offering their hearts to Christ as places for Him to come and live His mysteries. The deacon must learn to lovingly endure this coming of Christ and, after doing so, witness to the effect that such an interior life has on the larger life of Church and society.

Obviously, all in Holy Orders are ordained to be men who participate in the ministry of Christ, whether bishop, priest, or deacon. All these men are to receive a share in the mystery of Christ. However, from the perspective of believers, the priest is more “useful” than a deacon. The priest can celebrate Mass, hear confessions, and anoint the sick. Of course, a deacon can witness marriage vows, baptize, preach, lead wake services, and preside at liturgical prayers and devotions like exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, but these are not assessed by the baptized as urgently useful. When a priest arrives, Mass can be celebrated, sins absolved, and sickness consoled or healed sacramentally. The priesthood fills the Catholic imagination. What part of the Catholic imagination is filled by the diaconal mystery?

To be honest, still in its infancy of restoration, the diaconate does not fill the imagination in any expansive way. When a deacon arrives to minister he does not bring anything with him so central as the capacity to forgive sins or celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy. There is a poverty to being a deacon. We know that in emergencies even lay people can baptize and preside at wake services, etc.

When a deacon arrives to minister, what then does he bring? The deacon brings the unique grace of his ordination, a permanent vulnerability to the servant mysteries of Christ. He carries this grace in his being. When a deacon arrives to perform a ministerial duty (baptize, counsel, pray with others), he is present among the people *as one who serves* (Lk 22:27). How? He serves primarily by being vulnerable to receive grace himself, being open to the reception of divine intimacy in his heart so that such intimacy *may define his presence*. The deacon becomes eager to say, “I have to give myself *in Christ’s own self-gift*. The *power is* Christ’s; the cooperation with such power *is my gift to Him*.” In the deacon, the Lord desires to be with His people *in their need*, and the deacon cooperates with this dominical desire by bringing a word of hope to all in the midst of

the secular culture of work, health care, law, education, labor, and more. As Christ descends *upon* the deacon at ordination, He is also descending upon the culture *through* the diaconal ministry. In this way, Christ continues to wait on the tables of human need through the deacon’s receptivity to Christ’s own life, Death, and Resurrection. In this cooperation with grace, the deacon extends the presence of Christ so that in and through the sacrament of Holy Orders, Christ presides, in time, at the *liturgy of charity*.<sup>1</sup> The deacon possesses no unique power by virtue of ordination but he does possess a share in the power of Holy Orders. He also possesses a mission: he is sent by the bishop at ordination as one open to being configured by the servant Christ. This servant chooses to love those in need and, in so doing, *evokes from them* the vocation that is theirs by baptism.

Our Western sensibility which highly esteems achievement might say, “Well that is not much.” But one can say it gets even worse. What a deacon truly brings to any occasion is his own poverty, his own dependency upon God to bear the fruit of his ministry. “I can do all things in Him who is my only strength and my only virtue” (Phil 4:13). A deacon sacramentally embodies the scriptural truth that “without Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). To be a spiritually poor deacon is to be one who suffers a new desire and new habits. The *new desire* is one that longs for an interior vulnerability to Christ’s servant mysteries (Lk 22:27; Jn 13:14-15; Lk 14:15-23; Lk 10:29ff). The *new habits* are ones that invite a deacon to a life of continual receptivity *to the grace* of such mysteries. When a deacon arrives at a ministry, what arrives in him is this new desire to be vulnerable and a new life of habitual receptivity. These two realities identify the man as poor. This poverty is his wealth, however, for without such poverty his ministry would rest upon *his own natural wit, strength, or skills*. These natural endowments can only minister to a person’s pain for so long and then these attributes become exhausted, revealing their inadequacy for the

mission of serving the Church. Only the spiritually poor deacon will minister with effect until death.

When a man first approaches the diaconal vocation, he normally considers it as a function, a work to be done, a contribution to the needs of the Church. To consider and be attracted to function is not wholly wrong; there is service to be rendered. But, as we have learned from the liturgy, the most important “active participation” in ecclesial realities is interior. Only when one truly is open to God acting in him can the activities of a man’s body be a source of healing. The deacon is called to let grace take him up into the action of Christ the servant. This “taking up” is not a poetic description of a pious wish but the key to effective ministry. To be spiritually poor is the anthem of the deacon, a worship that flows from the liturgy of his ordination and is sustained by his service at the daily Eucharistic liturgy. This disposition to poverty secures a deacon’s role in the liturgy of charity. We are to become united to the Lord and “provide a space for the action of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Further, the meaning of diaconal poverty can be understood within the context of his most singular liturgical role. It is the deacon who, even if in the presence of the Pope himself, is charged to proclaim the Gospel during the Eucharistic liturgy. This is his irreplaceable liturgical role and hence a key to his whole identity and mission: his voice must be *one* with the Gospel. What makes the deacon a spiritual leader in his diocese, and not simply a humanitarian, is his utter dependency upon his sharing in Christ’s *own mission of being sent from the Father*. This dependency is expressed by his fidelity to an ecclesially formed heart under the guidance of the bishop. Each deacon is invited to suffer the indwelling of God’s Word as *his only word*. This is experienced as a suffering because men favor their own opinions over the objective truth that is Christ. It is the deacon’s privilege to embrace the poverty of being subsumed in the Word, a spiritual poverty that calls him to listen to the Word and welcome

its forming power. Having the Word of God as his only word means that the deacon is more disposed to be *questioned by* the Word than to *pose questions to the Word*. In this way, his presence among believers, and within society, disposes others to *question themselves* about the ultimate meaning of any secular value.



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## NOTES

- 1 See James Keating, *A Deacon’s Retreat* (NJ: Paulist, 2010), 64-70.
- 2 Ratzinger, Joseph. *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 174.