



Vittore Carpaccio,
St. Stephen Preaching,
c. 1520



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PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

THE DEACON AS CALL TO CONVERSION

BY DEACON DAVID A. LOPEZ



When, in the year 258, Pope St. Sixtus II was arrested and taken to his place of martyrdom, St. Lawrence is said to have followed him, weeping, “Father, where are you going without your deacon?” (“Hymn in honor of the Passion of the Blessed Martyr Lawrence,” vs. 21-28). The pope assured him that they would not be separated, since he too would die a martyr’s death, which happened only three days later.

St. Lawrence’s concern not to be separated from his bishop, even to the point of martyrdom, was no affectation. Four of Rome’s seven deacons died as martyrs together with Pope Sixtus, and two more later that same day. Many of Rome’s priests were also martyred on that and the following days. St. Lawrence would certainly not have wanted to remain separated from Pope Sixtus or from his brother deacons and priests (see, David Lopez, *Separatist Christianity: Spirit and Matter in the Early Church Fathers*, 85-88). Being united with them in the ministry of following Christ in life, he accepted, and even desired, the same unity in following Christ with them in martyrdom.

Today, the clergy may not expect their ministerial unity to lead to literal martyrdom. But the same ideal of unity in following Christ still binds priests and deacons to their bishop, and bishops to each other in their apostolic college under the leadership of the pope (*Lumen Gentium* §3). Even during the formation of deacons and priests (that is, before the actual grace of Holy Orders), the grace of Jesus Christ and the vitality of the Holy Spirit, which flow through the ministry of the bishop, work to prepare these men for such a ministry.

The Church's care for her children is expressed in the offering of the Word and sacraments, in love and solidarity, in prayer and in the solicitude of the various ministries. However, in this care, which is, so to speak, visible, the care of the Holy Spirit is made present. In fact 'the social structure of the Church serves the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body,' both in its universality and in the singularity of its members. In the Church's care for her children, the first figure, therefore, is the Spirit of Christ.... In the formation of permanent deacons, the first *sign and instrument* of the Spirit of Christ is the proper Bishop... (*Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* §§18-19).

Just as the bishop is the "visible principle and foundation of unity in his own particular Church," (*Pastoris Gregis* §55) so also is he the "sign and instrument" of the unifying Spirit of Christ for the formation of clergy.

But within this unity, is it possible to say that deacons, as a particular order in the Church, have a particular character for their ministry? They are ordained to serve (specifically in proclaiming the Gospel and in "pointing to" Christ), and their ministry of proclaiming and pointing must be one of firm ecclesial communion

(*Basic Norms* §9). As the homily for the ordination of the Deacon states in the Roman Pontifical:

Consecrated by the laying on of hands that comes down to us from the Apostles and bound more closely to the service of the altar, they will perform works of charity in the name of the Bishop or the pastor. With the help of God, they will go about all these duties in such a way that you will recognize them as disciples of him who came not to be served, but to serve (§199).

The deacon's ministry *participates in*—comes from, and supports, and leads back to—the *apostolic* ministry of the bishop.

This participation allows a deacon's service to lead people into the apostolic communion, both by "the service of the altar" and by "perform[ing] works of charity." But communion never happens without interior transformation. Thus, the deacon's proclaiming and pointing, in communion with his bishop, and through him with Christ, must also be properly understood as a call to conversion. This invitation was precisely the object of St. Lawrence's desire for unity in martyrdom with Pope Sixtus: "Let Rome behold the lands discrete / made one in Christ's redeeming grace; / Let Romulus embrace the faith, / and even Numa now believe." ("Hymn in Honor of the Passion of the Blessed Martyr Lawrence", vs. 441-44).

But the entire apostolic ministry embraces such a call to conversion. Does a deacon call others to conversion and communion in a manner different than (while still participating in) the sacerdotal call to Eucharistic communion? Is a deacon's witness, even to the point of death, characteristic of his diaconal identity?

Pope St. Leo the Great taught that it was. In a homily on St. Lawrence's martyrdom, he preached that St. Lawrence's example, both as a *martyr* and especially as a *deacon*, reveal something characteristic of how a deacon serves and calls to conversion:

The baffled plunderer, therefore, frets, and, blazing out into hatred of a religion, which had put riches to such a use, determines to pillage a still greater treasure by carrying off that sacred deposit, wherewith he was enriched, as he could find no solid hoard of money in his possession. He orders Lawrence to renounce Christ, and prepares to ply the deacon's stout courage with frightful tortures. . . . You gain nothing, you prevail nothing, O savage cruelty. His mortal frame is released from your devices, and, when Lawrence departs to heaven, you are vanquished. The flame of Christ's love could not be overcome by your flames, and the fire which burnt outside was less keen than that which blazed within. . . . By his prayer and intercession we trust at all times to be assisted; that, because all, as the Apostle says, 'who wish to live holy in Christ, suffer persecution' (2 Tim 3:12), we may be strengthened with the spirit of love, and be fortified to overcome all temptations by the perseverance of steadfast faith (s. 85, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360385.htm>).

In his perseverance as a *martyr*, St. Lawrence shares, with all martyrs, in Christ's victory over death. By imitating him and persevering in whatever challenges our faith, we too can share in the same victory.

More precisely as a *deacon*, St. Lawrence "baffles" the Roman officials. They demand money, the material treasures of the Church, which St. Lawrence administers. Instead, he gives them spiritual treasure, the poor whom he serves. They demand his

observance of traditional Roman religion, and apply judicial torture to intimidate him and others into compliance. Instead, he proclaims by his actions the reality of Christ's transforming love, which shows that paganism lacks true charity. They are baffled not just because he thwarts their demands, but also because he challenges their most deeply held conceptions of the way things are. Willingly dying as a deacon in communion with his bishop, he invites them to their own conversion. As Tertullian noted, "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church" (*Apologeticum*, 50). And even though we are not told that these persecutors accept this invitation, St. Lawrence has still shaken their pagan convictions and challenged the casual brutality of the Roman order.

Like St. Lawrence, deacons proclaim the Gospel's call to conversion as much by their actions as by their words. Within the Church, those in need of conversion will have the most contact with a deacon in a liturgical or catechetical role. The call to a deeper conversion may be received in these contexts as part of the continual process of living the faith more and more fully. But in the world, those in need of conversion (or "reversion") likely have the most contact with a deacon in a ministerial role – offering charity in a nursing home, soup kitchen, prison, or the like. The call to conversion in this sense can be more challenging, more "baffling," because it defies, even contradicts, worldly norms and expectations. In both contexts, any recognizable inconsistency between a deacon's words and his actions will undercut the message preached. Therefore the authenticity of a deacon's "ministry of service" is crucial to the hearing of Christ's voice. "This is at the very heart of the diaconate to which you have been called: to be a servant of the mysteries of Christ and, at one and the same time, to be servant of your brothers and sisters" (John Paul II, "Address to

Deacons of the United States,” Detroit, 19 September 1987; see also, *Basic Norms* §§9, 11).

In my personal experience as a deacon, prison ministry has best exemplified this dynamic. I recall, for example, one particular person, much battered by life and baffled by the world’s callousness. After several months of weekly catechetical preaching, he summoned the courage to ask me, “Why should I go to Confession?” It had been decades since his last encounter with that particular form of Christ’s grace. As I spoke with him, I could see the depth of his spiritual need, the palpable hunger not only to hear but to receive what only Christ can give. When next I saw him, he had been to Confession, and was a thoroughly changed man. His need and hunger had been fulfilled, and he was profoundly at peace, in ways I had never seen in him before. It was not only the catechesis offered, but also the faithful weekly presence of one of Christ’s ministers, which unlocked for him the desire for Christ’s mercy.

How should deacons cultivate this inviting authenticity? The most developed magisterial description of such a diaconal character is from the 1998 document, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*, issued from the Congregation for Education. This document offers that deacons must become “icons of Christ the Servant:”

The spirituality of service is a spirituality of the whole Church, insofar as the whole Church, in the same way as Mary, is the “handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:28), at the service of the salvation of the world. And so that the whole Church may better live out this spirituality of service, the Lord gives her a living and personal sign of his being as servant. In a specific way, this is the spirituality of the deacon. In fact, with sacred ordination, he is constituted a living icon of Christ the servant within the Church (§11).

Christ’s “living and personal sign” to the Church of “his being as servant” evokes not merely specific Gospel moments of Christ serving, but more profoundly His entire life and mission, from Annunciation to Pentecost. This is the sense in which it is celebrated in the ancient hymn of Philippians 2: “Though He was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at, but emptied himself . . .” Over and over, Christ “emptied Himself,” bending down to assume our human nature, to bear the Cross, to die and enter hell. This unswerving attitude of divine “condescension” is the essence of His “being as servant.” A deacon’s authentic witness to Christ’s salvation requires a similar total gift of self.

Jesus washing the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper (Jn 13:2-17) is perhaps the Gospel passages most commonly associated with the deacon’s self-emptying “ministry of service” (see Deacon William Ditewig, *101 Questions and Answers on Deacons*, Q. 85). As the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States* states:

The apostles’ decision to appoint ministers to attend to the needs of the Greek-speaking widows of the early Church at Jerusalem has long been interpreted as a normative step in the evolution of ministry. It is seen as a practical response to Jesus’ command during the Last Supper of mutual service among his followers. In washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus as head and shepherd of the community modeled the service he desired to be a hallmark of their faithfulness (§38).

This association of the deacon’s “ministry of service” with this particular ministerial moment has the advantage of being a concise icon of Christ the Servant, to whom the deacon is sacramentally conformed. It also seems to encapsulate rather neatly the distinction between the sacerdotal service of Christ the High Priest in the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and the diaconal service of Christ the Servant. In both these senses, one must agree that deacons should look to this passage to learn something of the Christ-like humility and gratitude which are essential to their ecclesial ministry.

However, the more profound senses of this association of deacon’s ministry with Jesus’s footwashing are not supported by the *lex orandi*. In the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, it is rather the bishop – either in person in his own cathedral, or in his co-worker, the priest, in parish churches—who washes the feet of the *virii selecti*. The deacon, if he is present, does not wash but merely assists the bishop or priest, by holding bowls and pitchers, and by handing towels, and so forth. Therefore the footwashing is not a mandate specifically *for deacons*, but has a more general meaning.

The more traditional association of the footwashing is with *the people’s* “ministry of service” – that is, the common or baptismal priesthood. St. John Chrysostom, for example, preached that the faithful should imitate Christ’s forbearance of Judas’s betrayal, and give good deeds, especially the good of prayer, in return for evil:

These things are written that we bear not malice towards those who injure us; but rebuke them and weep for them; for the fit subjects of weeping are not they who suffer, but they who do the wrong. The grasping man, the false accuser, and whoso works any other evil thing,

do themselves the greatest injury, and us the greatest good, if we do not avenge ourselves.... Do you see how we are the greatest gainers from the insolence of others? Nothing so delights God, as the not returning evil for evil? But what say I? Not returning evil for evil? Surely we are enjoined to return the opposite, benefits, prayers. Wherefore Christ also repaid him who was about to betray Him with everything opposite. He washed his feet, convicted him secretly, rebuked him sparingly, tended him, allowed him to share His table and His kiss, and not even by these was he made better; nevertheless (Christ) continued doing His own part (*Homily 71 on the Gospel of John*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240171.htm>).

In the same sense, St. Augustine preached that this passage shows Christ’s humility, and thus teaches the virtue of humility to all the faithful, “We have learned, brethren, humility from the Highest; let us, as humble, do to one another what He, the Highest, did in His humility. Great is the commendation we have here of humility: and brethren do this to one another in turn, even in the visible act itself, when they treat one another with hospitality... (*Tractates on the Gospel of John* 58.4, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701058.htm>).

Moreover, this humility has a higher spiritual corollary, in intercessory prayer:

But apart from this moral understanding of the passage, we remember that the way in which we commended to your attention the grandeur of this act of the Lord's, was that, in washing the feet of disciples who were already washed and clean, the Lord instituted a sign, to the end that, on account of the human feelings that occupy us on earth, however far we may have advanced in our apprehension of righteousness, we might know that we are not exempt from sin; which He thereafter washes away by interceding for us, when we pray the Father, who is in heaven, to forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.... Can we say that even a brother may cleanse a brother from the contracted stain of wrongdoing? Yea, verily, we know that of this also we were admonished in the profound significance of this work of the Lord's, that we should confess our faults one to another, and pray for one another, even as Christ also makes intercession for us (Ibid., 58.5).

Certainly, deacons too ought to be such imitators of Christ in forbearance, humility, and intercessory prayer. If they do not, their ministry will suffer. But, this Christ-likeness is characteristic of mature faith, and is therefore the foundation (both in the deacon and in those being served) for the diaconal call to conversion, not, strictly speaking, the call itself.

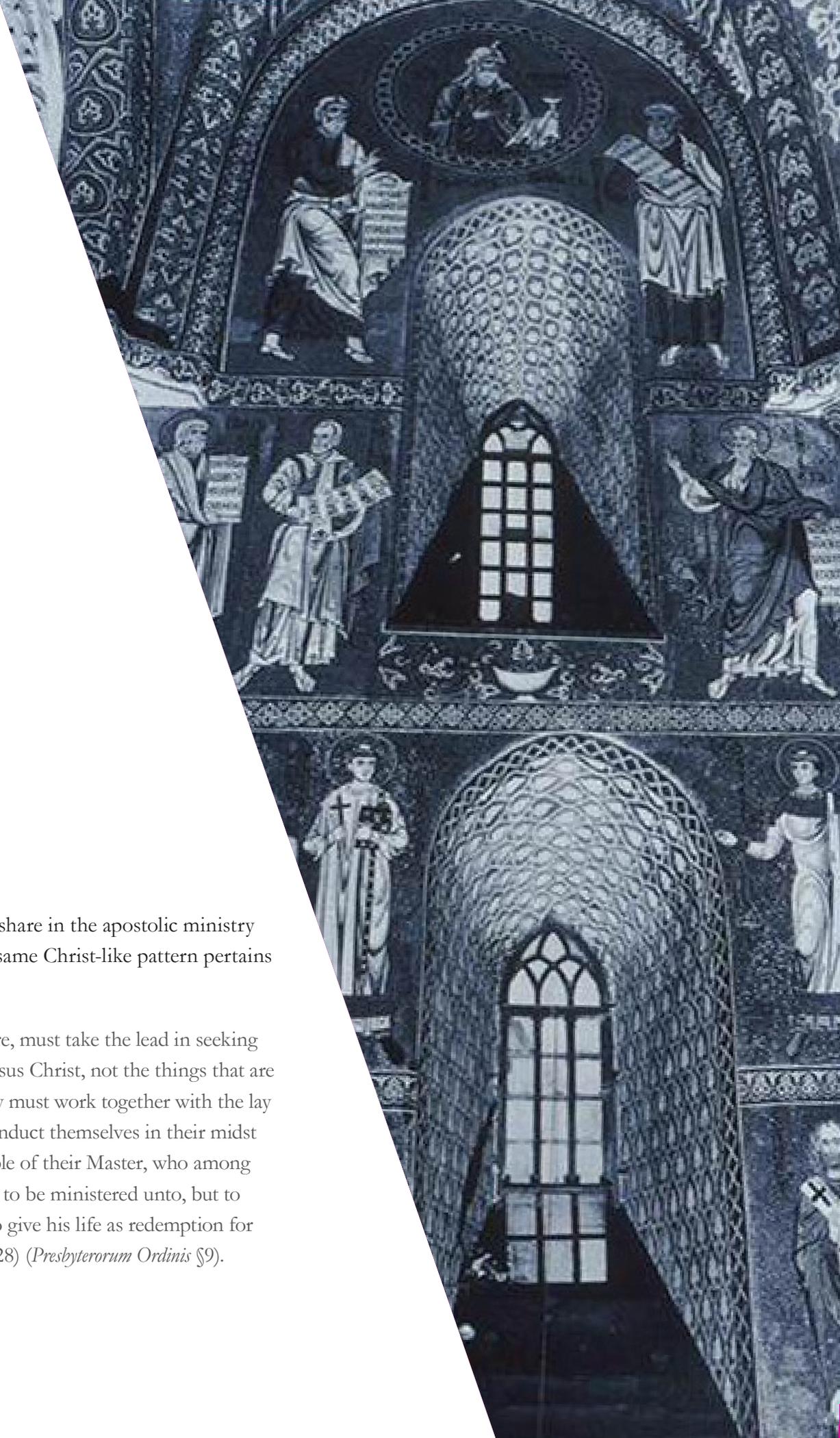
Deacons, in their ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and pointing to the fullness of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, should look to additional passages of the Gospel for how, more specifically *as deacons* and icons of Christ, they "baffle" worldly expectations and call the faithful to a deeper conversion. For example, in each of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus explicitly contrasts the arrogance of worldly leaders with the humility He expects in His own followers:

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mt 20:24-8).

This commandment of apostolic humility applies especially profoundly to bishops:

As those who lead others to perfection, bishops should be diligent in fostering holiness among their clerics, religious, and laity according to the special vocation of each. They should also be mindful of their obligation to give an example of holiness in charity, humility, and simplicity of life....In exercising their office of father and pastor, bishops should stand in the midst of their people as those who serve (Lk 22:26-7). Let them be good shepherds who know their sheep and whose sheep know them (*Christus Dominus* §§15-16).

Cefaláu Cathedral,
Left Wall Mosaic,
Prophets, Deacon
Martyrs, and Latin
Bishop Saints, 1148



Inasmuch as priests share in the apostolic ministry of their bishop, the same Christ-like pattern pertains also to them:

Priests, therefore, must take the lead in seeking the things of Jesus Christ, not the things that are their own. They must work together with the lay faithful, and conduct themselves in their midst after the example of their Master, who among men “came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as redemption for many” (Mt 20:28) (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* §9).

As we have already noted, deacons likewise share in the apostolic ministry of their bishop, and hence, likewise ought to imitate the same Christ-like pattern of humility. “The primary and most fundamental relationship [of the deacon] must be with Christ, who assumed the condition of a slave for love of the Father and mankind” (*Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* §47). Moreover, deacons learn that pattern from the example of the bishop and priests with whom they serve (*Ibid.*, §48).

In St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus contrasts this authentic witness to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’s seat. So you must obey them, and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (Mt 23:2-4). Such hypocrisy fundamentally opposes the effectiveness of apostolic ministry. Particularly for deacons, who are commanded in the ordination rite to “believe what you read [in the Gospels], preach what you believe, practice what you preach,” it is a substantial contradiction. Not only does it fail to baffle the worldly, it scandalizes the faithful. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Mt 23:15). Failure of consistency and authenticity in the apostolic ministry is not service, but a disservice.

But consistent and committed practice of humility in the apostolic ministry opens the divine gifts of ordination. The Apostles demonstrated this inviting sincerity at Pentecost, when they submitted to the impetus of the Holy Spirit and preached in tongues. Such an example did baffle many, who preferred to think the Apostles drunk than inspired (Acts 2:13). But the example and great profession by St. Peter on this occasion (Acts 2:14-36) won many converts for

Christ. “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized...’ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” (Acts 2:37-8, 41).

The same pattern is shown by St. Stephen before the Sanhedrin. Inspired with divine power in the same way (Acts 6:8), St. Stephen was proclaiming the Gospel as a deacon in Jerusalem. “Opposition arose, however, from the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen... These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up to his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, ‘We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.’” (Acts 6:9-11). Stephen’s preaching and example baffled these men, just as Peter’s had before.

Taken before the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, St. Stephen likewise gave a great profession of faith (Acts 7:2-53). At its conclusion, he condemned hypocrisy in very much the same terms Christ had already used. Like the Roman persecutors of St. Lawrence, the Sanhedrin responded to the witness of Stephen with violence, and he was taken away and stoned to death. His “profession of blood” later opened the door to the conversion of St. Paul (Acts 7:58).

While having the same fundamental meaning as the footwashing, these two passages are far more specific, even definitive, for the manner of following Christ’s demanding example of humility within the apostolic ministry in general (St. Peter’s profession), and for the diaconal participation in the apostolic ministry (St. Stephen’s profession and martyrdom). Both examples are explicitly imitations of Christ pouring Himself out for others (see Phil. 2:6-11). Both demonstrate the fundamental place in the ministry of proclaiming

the Gospel, in both words and deeds. Both baffle or challenge the hearers' false convictions about God and about reality. Both lead to conversion for others, even though not all the hearers accept the Gospel.

Pope Benedict, in the recent, post-synodal exhortation on the Word of God, *Verbum Domini*, strongly emphasized the same connection between authentic witness and fulfilling the latent hunger for what Christ alone offers:

What the Church proclaims to the world is the *Logos of Hope* (cf. 1 Pet 3:15); in order to be able to live fully each moment, men and women need “the great hope” which is “the God who possesses a human face and who ‘has loved us to the end’ (Jn 13:1).” This is why the Church is missionary by her very nature. We cannot keep to ourselves the words of eternal life given to us in our encounter with Jesus Christ: they are meant for everyone, for every man and woman. Everyone today, whether he or she knows it or not, needs this message (*Verbum Domini* §91).

In the restored diaconal ministry, what is most needed is just this proclaiming of the “Logos of Hope.” Like St. Lawrence and St. Stephen, deacons must be willing to “empty themselves” in communion with the apostolic ministry of their bishop, willing to preach an authentic witness to hope by their ordinary daily actions, willing thus to imitate deeply the example of Christ's own humble obedience. The authenticity of such deacons calls loudly to conversion, just as it always has:

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* recommends to the deacons of the first century: “As our Savior and Master said in the Gospel, ‘let he who wishes to be great among you, make himself your servant, in the same way as the Son of Man came not

to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many,’ you deacons must do the same, even if that means giving your life for your brothers and sisters, because of the service which you are bound to fulfill.” This invitation is most appropriate also for those who are called today to the diaconate, and urges them to prepare themselves with great dedication for their future ministry (*Basic Norms* §89; citing *Didascalia Apostolorum* 3.3).

Commenting on this same quotation, Monsignor Buelt has written, “[T]he church's service to the poor is the sign of the credibility of the Gospel she proclaims.... By feeding the poor with the Word of God and the Bread of Life, as well as with the bread of their physical sustenance, the deacon bears witness that Christ himself is serving the least of his brothers and sisters” (Edward Buelt, *A New Friendship: The Spirituality and Ministry of the Deacon*, 177).

The deacon's conformity to Christ the Servant is conformity to His “learning obedience through what He suffered” (Heb 5:8). Deacons may cultivate this conformity, not merely through the humility of the footwashing, but more specifically through participating in the apostolic paradigm of life-giving service, and the complete avoidance of hypocrisy, its antithesis. Deacons should also consciously imitate such examples as St. Stephen and St. Lawrence, whose apostolic unity and zeal gave them great power in professing the faith in word and deed. In this characteristic way, the deacon's sincere, authentic, self-emptying witness invites a deeper reception of Christ's love, mercy, and hope.

