

“Deacon William Ditewig remains one of the most important voices writing on the diaconate today, and *The Deacon’s Ministry of Charity and Justice* adds to his already remarkable body of work. Insightful, accessible and engaging, this new work should be required reading for anyone with a serious interest in the diaconate—from men in formation to deacons, pastors and bishops. Significantly, Deacon Ditewig’s chapters on mercy and Pope Francis couldn’t be more timely or valuable—reminding us of what we are called to be. Superb.”

—Deacon Greg Kandra
Blogger and Journalist

The Deacon's Ministry of Charity and Justice

William T. Ditewig



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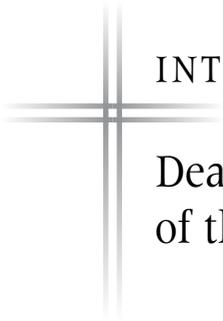
For Mom and Dad,

*Kathleen Powers Ditewig (1924–2014)
and William Frederick Ditewig (1917–86),*

*who were our first and best teachers in
Love, Faith, Mercy, Charity, and Justice*

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INTRODUCTION

Deacons and the *Diakonia* of the Church

In his document announcing a holy year of mercy, Pope Francis begins by referring to Christ as the “face of God’s mercy” (*misericaordiae vultus*). As we shall consider in more detail later, the deacon’s ordination, configuring him in a particular way to Christ the Servant, places the deacon clearly into this image. Christ is the face of the mercy of God; Christ’s deacons, therefore, might be said to be the hands of Christ, the hands of the very mercy of God. Nowhere is this participation more evident than in the deacon’s participation in the church’s own identity and mission as the people of God called to charity, justice, peace, and mercy.

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) the bishops of the Second Vatican Council opened their treatment of the diaconate with the words, “At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed ‘not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service.’ For strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the bishop and his group of priests they serve in a diaconate [Latin original: *in diaconia*] of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God.”¹ Therefore, the first point to be made about the deacon’s ministry is that it should always be seen through the single lens of service. There is, as consistently taught by the bishops of the United States in their various documents on the diaconate, “an inherent unity” between and among the deacon’s ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Charity. This unity forms the theological and practical basis for all that follows.

In speaking of the ministry of the deacon, it must also be kept in mind that *diakonia* is not unique to the (ordained) deacon; all disciples are called to service. Furthermore, *diakonia* is not only the responsibility of the entire church: it reflects the very nature of the church. Second, as mentioned already, there is a frequently referenced “inherent unity” to that *diakonia*; its functions are not to be separated and they are to be fully integrated. Third, the diaconal nature of the church is not simply an *ad intra* concern affecting only the members of the church; there is an *ad extra* dimension: in the words of Pope Paul VI, “The Church has declared herself a servant of humanity.”² In short, Catholic Christians have a vocation, a call from God, to respond to God’s great and gratuitous love by living a moral life of service. We do what we do because of God’s loving invitation to be one with God, and this covenant relationship is lived out through the way we in turn respond to others.

The goal of this introduction is to explore these three points in more detail in order to provide a backdrop for what is to come.

I. *Diakonia*: The Threefold Ministry of Christ and the Nature of the Church

Just what are we to make of this word “diaconate” (Greek: *diakonia*; Latin: *diaconia*)? It is a term easily misunderstood. Often translated simply as “service,” *diakonia* lacks a certain specificity of meaning. After all, just what is “service”? Many writers, in particular scholars such as John Collins, have pointed out that “service” is used in so many contexts it is hard to pin down: we receive “service” in restaurants, in automobile repair shops, in government offices. We conduct “services” in churches. Government officials and military personnel “serve” in various roles.

So it is not surprising to see people fall into a similar trap when considering the nature of the Order of Deacons within the context of *diakonia*. Not unreasonably, some simply equate deacons with *diakonia*: deacons are the ministers of the church who “do” *diakonia*. Furthermore, in this misunderstanding, *diakonia* is commonly thought to refer only to activities related to charity and justice. Before proceeding any further, then, we should consider more carefully *diakonia* within the tradition of the church.

An often-overlooked fact is simple grammar: the word *diakonia* is singular. There is *one* diaconate, one “service.” This one diaconate,

however, is expressed in the three functions traditionally associated with Christ's own ministry, sometimes referred to as "priest, prophet, and king" or "worship, word, and charity" or by the Latin *munus docendi*, *munus sanctificandi*, and *munus regendi* (the office of *teaching*, *sanctifying*, and *ruling*). As we shall see shortly, there is an "inherent unity" between these three functions.

The association of the deacon with the threefold ministry of Christ is an ancient one. Ignatius, the bishop-martyr of Antioch, is one of the earliest witnesses to this connection. His letters, written in the early second century, describe a clearly defined tripartite hierarchy of bishop with priests and deacons assisting. Ignatius compares the bishop to God the Father, presbyters to the College of the Apostles, and the deacons to Jesus Christ: "Correspondingly, everyone must show the deacons respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as the bishop has the role of the Father, and the presbyters are like God's council and an apostolic band. You cannot have a Church without these."³ "Let the deacons (my special favorites) be entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ who was with the Father from eternity and appeared at the end of the world."⁴

Ignatius is not the only writer to make this connection between Christ and the deacon. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, martyred about 156, writes to the Philippians, "It is necessary . . . to be subject to the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ."⁵ From Syria in the early years of the third century, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*⁶ has this: "Let the deacon make known all things to the bishop, even as Christ to His Father. But let him order such things as he is able by himself, receiving power from the bishop, as the Lord did from His Father."⁷ "The bishop sits for you in the place of God Almighty. But the deacon stands in place of Christ; and do you love him? . . . If then our Lord did thus, will you, O deacons, hesitate to do the like for them that are sick and infirm, you who are workmen of the truth, and bear the likeness of Christ?"⁸

Three points may be made: (1) All ministry, and in a particular way, ordained ministry, is grounded in and flows from the ministry of Christ; (2) the three functions of Word, Sacrament, and Charity have, therefore, a unity in Christ that cannot be compartmentalized or separated; and (3) the diaconate exercised by deacons is a participation in the larger *diakonia* of the church herself. It is important to remember that during the Second Vatican Council, when the bishops first write about *diakonia*, they are not speaking of deacons. Rather, that first

reference is to the ministry of the bishops themselves. They write in *Lumen Gentium*,

The bishops, in as much as they are the successors of the apostles, receive from the Lord, to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth, the mission of teaching all peoples, and of preaching the Gospel to every creature, so that all may attain salvation through faith, Baptism and the observance of the commandments. . . . For the carrying out of this mission Christ the Lord promised the holy Spirit to the apostles and sent him from heaven on the day of Pentecost, so that through his power they might be witnesses to him in the remotest parts of the earth, before nations and peoples and kings. . . . That office, however, which the Lord committed to the pastors of his people, truly is a service, which is called very expressively in sacred scripture a *diakonia* or ministry. (LG 24)⁹

Considering the traditional and ancient relationship of the deacon to the bishop, this citation carries significant ramifications for the role of the deacon. The deacon is ordained to assist and to extend the mission of the bishop himself. *Diakonia* is not simply the province of the deacon but of the bishop and the entire church; we deacons are simply privileged to participate in it in a particular way.

But here we must turn and ask a further question. The church has consistently taught about the unity of functions within the church's one *diakonia*. The bishops of the United States, for example, have stressed this point from the beginning of the renewed diaconate: "By ordination, the deacon, who sacramentalizes the Church's service, is to exercise the Church's *diakonia*. Therefore, 'the diaconal ministries, distinguished above, are not to be separated; the deacon is ordained for them all, and no one should be ordained who is not prepared to undertake each in some way.'"¹⁰

Why should this be the case, however? Why couldn't a person who simply will focus on charitable works be ordained? Or serve as a gifted preacher and teacher? Or concentrate on service as a sacramental minister? Why do we hold that the deacon must be competent in all three areas? Why couldn't the diaconate be "compartmentalized" so that some deacons could specialize in one or two areas rather than all three? The answer is quite simple: the unity of identity (who we are) and function (what we do) is found in Christ himself. Christ did not come simply to teach about the reign of God; he was, in himself, the

very initiation of that reign. Christ is the Word, and not simply the teacher of the Word. Christ, in his kenotic self-giving, poured his whole being into the concrete realities of human life in order to transform and redeem us. There was no distinction in Christ between his Person and his Mission. If deacons are to be true icons of Christ, then we must try within our human limitations to have that same unity within ourselves. This would seem to be sacramental significance of the deacon's ordination: the deacon is to incarnate this unity, to demonstrate in his own ministry and life how all of these dimensions of discipleship fit together. This is who the deacon is; what the deacon does specifically in service will flow from this sacramental identity.

II. "Inherent Unity": The Perichoretic Diaconate

Let us consider the inherent unity of the threefold diaconate more closely. I once spoke with a newly ordained deacon who was in the process of working on a "ministry agreement" with his new pastor. A "ministry agreement" is a form and process developed by a diocese in which the deacon, his pastor or other ministerial supervisor (such as a chaplain in a hospital, for example), the director of deacons, and the wife of the deacon (if he is married) outline in some detail the specific ministries in which the deacon will serve. During this process, they will consider the three areas of Word, Sacrament, and Charity along with how much time will be devoted to each in any given week or month. This can be a very useful process, especially when there has been a change of pastor, or the deacon is newly ordained, or there has been some significant change in the life of the parish itself. Expectations can be clearly stated and can be just as easily adapted as pastoral need dictates.

However, as this deacon pointed out, there was a problem at the same time. He quickly realized that he had allowed his understanding of ministry to become compartmentalized. He will do so much of *this* ministry, then he will shift and do a certain number of hours in *that* ministry, and then move on to the *next* ministry. He was rightly concerned that he might lose sight of how all of this was supposed to fit together for the good of the church.

The contemporary diaconate is grounded on the balanced exercise of the three-fold ministry; it is precisely in this balanced exercise that the deacon serves as a sacrament of unity, living through his

ministry and life, the marriage of witness to Christ, the praise of God and the care of neighbor. Christian discipleship demands *martyria*, *leitourgia* and *diakonia*: the deacon serves as a public and permanent sign of the unity binding these three dimensions together. His particular role is to remind the church of its own sacramentality, of its own *diakonia*, of the church's responsibility to be a "sign and instrument" and "leaven and soul" in creating a more just world.¹¹

Diakonia, then, is a profoundly rich concept that transcends facile associations of the term with notions of menial service alone, or even less, "that ministry which deacons do"! It is here that an insight from the earliest centuries of our theological tradition might be helpful, namely, the concept of *perichoresis*.

As Christians began to spread the Good News of Christ, they had to come to grips with Christ's very identity. "Who do people say that I am?" was not just a question for the disciples assembled in Caesarea Philippi; it remains fundamental for all Christians. Flowing out of monotheistic Judaism, Christians struggled to describe the Christ. Was Jesus a human being called by God to be a prophet, teacher, and healer? Or was Jesus God who simply "acted" like a human being? Or was Christ (following Arius) a completely unique creature, neither truly human nor truly divine? After all, some mused, if they said that Jesus was God, then would that mean there were *two* Gods? For those earliest Jewish Christians, such a possibility was unthinkable: there was only one God. As the debate continued, various teachers tried to find a way to express what Christians believed about Christ and, therefore, about God. Eventually, the church was able to develop language that attempts to describe more clearly how all of these elements of faith might come together in a cohesive manner. Through the councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, language of *person*, *hypostatic union*, *nature*, *substance* were all used to describe Christ as well as the triune God. How do the two natures of Christ, human and divine, relate to each other in one Person? How are the three distinct divine Persons one God? While the classic schema reminds us that "the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father," that same schema asserts that each of those Persons is God. The dynamic and inherent unity between and among those Persons began to be described by the Greek *perichoresis* (or its Latin translation *circumincessio*, circumincession). Oxford theologian Alister E. McGrath offers a good description of the term:

This Greek term . . . came into general use in the sixth century. It refers to the manner in which the three persons of the Trinity relate to one another. The concept of *perichoresis* allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of “a community of being,” in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them.¹²

I propose that this term offers us a useful insight concerning the threefold *diakonia* of the church. While each area of service is unique, it penetrates the others and is penetrated by them. To preach and teach without the reality of our sacramental life and without the moral life in Christ would be nothing but empty rhetoric. To celebrate Sacrament without Word and Charity becomes little more than empty ritual. To focus on charity and justice without Word and Sacrament becomes social work that might be undertaken by any reasonable and caring person, and not the act of the disciple of Christ. What we want to remember is that each of the three areas of *diakonia* must constantly be understood and undertaken with an intentional relationship and interpenetration with the other two.

When preaching or teaching, how are we led to a more profound celebration of sacrament and worship as well as to a more active presence in caring for those at the margins of society or in any way in need? How does our celebration of sacrament flow from our breaking open the Word of God and how well does that help us go forth to serve others? How do we bring back our experiences from service “in the streets” to our growing understanding of God’s Word and again lead us to celebrate an even richer sacramental life? In a very real, perichoretic sense, then, we cannot have one function without the others because each addresses, informs, and penetrates the others. This is the ministry of the church in which the deacon participates in a particular sacramental way. As Pope Paul VI observed at the end of the Second Vatican Council, “We stress that the teaching of the Council is channeled in one direction, the service of humankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need. The Church has declared herself a servant of humanity. . . . [T]he idea of service has been central.”¹³ This would become a consistent theme for Pope Paul, and it was echoed by John Paul II when he addressed US deacons in Detroit in 1988: “The service of the deacon is the Church’s service sacramentalized. Yours is not just

one ministry among others, but it is truly meant to be, as Paul VI described it, a 'driving force' for the Church's *diakonia*. You are meant to be living signs of the servanthood of Christ's Church."¹⁴

To further examine the threefold, integrated reality that is the church's own servant-identity, we turn to Pope Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, given to the church as a wonderful Christmas gift on December 25, 2005.

III. The Fundamental Truth: God and God's Love for All

Pope Benedict begins with our most fundamental dogma, the nature of the triune God: "'God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him' (1 Jn 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: 'We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.'"

We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. . . . Jesus united into a single precept this commandment of love for God and the commandment of love for neighbor found in the Book of Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18; cf. Mk 12:29-31). Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), love is now no longer a mere "command"; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us. (*Deus Caritas Est* 1)

As Pope Benedict develops this thought further, he arrives at a very perichoretic description of the nature of the church through two "essential facts":

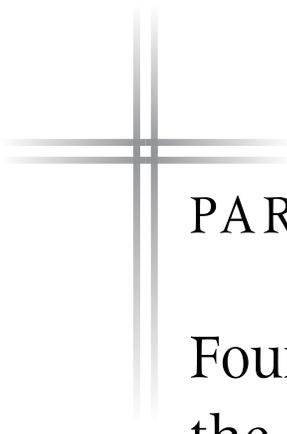
a) The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). **These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable.** For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity

which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.

b) The Church is God's family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life. Yet at the same time *caritas-agape* extends beyond the frontiers of the Church. The parable of the Good Samaritan remains as a standard which imposes universal love towards the needy whom we encounter "by chance" (cf. Lk 10:31), whoever they may be. (ibid. 25, emphasis added)

As we now turn our attention to the particular participation of the deacon in the church's ministry of charity and justice, it is hoped that the reader will bear in mind this fundamental and essential unity. This unity can serve as a constant reminder and prophetic challenge to all who serve in the person of Christ and in the name of the church. When all is said and done, how well do we connect the dots for the people we serve? How well do we live out the promise of the Word through the constant presence of God through our sacraments, and the concrete acts of charity, justice, and mercy as the graced moments of God's healing touch in the world today?

A final introductory comment is in order. The specific, concrete, and tailored responses of deacons to very unique pastoral needs will vary greatly from place to place, culture to culture, and diocese to diocese. This book could never serve as a kind of "directory of diaconal services" to be provided! Each deacon, along with his bishop and the priests, religious, and lay ministers of the diocese, must find his own creative responses to very specific needs within his own contexts. What I hope in this modest work is to suggest some foundational tools that might be considered in developing such diaconal pastoral strategies. In short, what means are available to the deacon to assist in carrying out his ministry? What follows, then, is a kind of deacon's "tool kit" for ministry.



PART I

Foundations for the Ministry of Charity

“Location, location, location” is a truism associated with realtors. Everything about the sale of a property depends upon where the property is located. In the “right” location, even a poor property might sell; in the “wrong” location, even a wonderful property will not. Location, they say, is everything. Where are we to “locate” the deacon’s role in the ministry of charity, justice, and peace? How does this part of the deacon’s ministry relate to the ministry of others, and how does it relate to the other dimensions of the deacon’s ministry? Where do we situate the deacon?

In part 1 of this book, therefore, I want to address some foundational issues against which to consider the vocation of the deacon and his exercise of ministries of charity. Then, in part 2, we can dig deeper into practical issues and principles related to those ministries.

A stylistic note is necessary. As we shall soon encounter, the term “charity” (from the Latin *caritas*) has come to mean much more in the teaching and praxis of the church than simply giving someone what they need at a particular moment. Rather, we now explicitly link charity with justice, and in the more recent papal magisterium—especially with Pope Francis, but not exclusive to him—we have included mercy

as well. While it will be more efficient at times to refer simply to “the ministry of charity,” it should be borne in mind that, unless otherwise noted, the term includes all three notions of charity, justice, and mercy and the relationships among them.



CHAPTER 1

The Church as Sacrament of God's Mercy

A Church of Servants

In order to understand the deacon's specific role and responsibilities for areas of charity and justice, it is necessary to peel back other layers of meaning, since no one serves within a vacuum. We begin by considering the nature of the church herself and, within this broader framework, introduce the role of the ordained within the church; we shall develop these themes in the subsequent chapters of the nature of vocation and on the specific characteristics of the diaconate.

The deacon, of course, serves in relationship with other deacons, with his bishop and the presbyters, with religious and laity. To consider his particular exercise of *diakonia* one must first consider the *diakonia* of the whole church to find how the deacon fits into the rich tapestry of ministry. We begin with the church: the people of God, the Mystical Body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

In particular we attend to Pope Paul VI's teaching that the nature of the church is diaconal; we are a servant church. As we saw in the introduction, Pope Paul stressed this fact at the end of the Second Vatican Council as he summarized its work: "We stress that the teaching of the Council is channeled in one direction, the service of humankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need. The Church has declared herself a servant of humanity. . . . [T]he idea of service has been central."¹ This character of the church is of critical importance when considering the

role of the deacon. As Popes Paul and John Paul II frequently reminded us, deacons are to be the animators and promoters of the church's service, so the way in which deacons exercise their ministries involves more than the simple "doing" of service; rather, ordination confers a responsibility for leadership in service. This shall be examined in more detail in subsequent chapters, but for now we focus on the simple fact that the rationale for having deacons ordained for service can only be found within the servant nature of the church herself.² Deacons are not ordained simply to serve in lieu of others, or so that others do not have to serve. Deacons are ordained to serve in ways that will inspire, motivate, and lead others to join with them in service.

As this book was being prepared, Pope Francis released the Bull of Indiction to initiate the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. Titled *Misericordiae Vultus*, the document begins with a simple and profound truth: "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith."³ Jesus, the Anointed of God, is (in the words of Edward Schillebeeckx) the "primordial sacrament," the preeminent pathway connecting humanity to the divine. When one encounters Christ, one encounters God. The church, therefore, as the people of God participates in this encounter through the power of the Spirit. Christ's mission becomes our mission, and in this instance, our mission is to be an expression of the Father's mercy to all. What has brought us to this point in our contemporary ecclesial self-understanding?

As has been well-documented, the Second Vatican Council took place after what Fr. John O'Malley (following Eric Hobsbawm) has referred to as "the long nineteenth century," and the political, social, industrial revolutions, world wars, the holocaust, worldwide economic collapse, and the global upheavals and devastation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴ It is also well-documented that the impetus behind many of the reforms of the council, and in a particular way the renewal of the diaconate, can be traced to the experiences of priest-prisoners in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War.⁵ The 2,700 bishops who assembled from around the world realized that the church had to examine itself closely and honestly in light of these developments, and that things had to change if the church was to be a more effective witness of Christ in the contemporary world. This point cannot be overemphasized: the world of the first half of the twentieth century was a profoundly violent and tragic place, and the

bishops who gathered for the council had all in various ways experienced war, economic depression, terrorism, totalitarianism, violence, and a loss of confidence and meaning in human existence itself on the part of many whom they served. Consider that outside St. Peter's Basilica on October 11, 1962—the day the council opened—the inaccurately titled “Cold War” was raging, atmospheric atomic testing was taking place by the Soviet Union and the United States, and the following week would see the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis. At the heart of all the pastoral needs of the world and the church was the very nature of the church herself and how the church ought to relate to the modern world. In short, who is the Catholic Church today?

Vatican II opens its teaching on the nature of the church by acknowledging this fundamental identity of the church herself as sacrament. “Since the church, in Christ, is a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race—it here proposes, for the benefit of the faithful and of the entire world, to describe more clearly, and in the tradition laid down by earlier council, its own nature and universal mission” (LG 1). There are many attempts to define a “sacrament,” but the simplicity of the council's words captures an essential element: a sacrament is both a sign (of necessity, a *visible, outward, and public* reality) and an instrument, a tool in the hands of God to bring about that which is signified.

Father Joseph A. Komonchak captured this mystery well when he asked, “Who are the Church?”⁶ Since the church *are* the people of God and the Mystical Body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, then each person of the church shares in this sacramental nature and mission. Each baptized person is a sign of unity; each baptized person is to work as an instrument to bring about greater unity, a perfected unity. This will be explored more deeply in the next chapter when we discuss the nature of “vocation” in the church. For now, however, starting with the idea that all the baptized share in this sacramental identity and mission, how are we to understand the nature of mission of the ordained within that ecclesial reality?

Holy Orders for the Common Good

Within the church-as-Sacrament are celebrated the seven sacraments of the church: privileged ways in which people celebrate particular encounters with the divine. These sacraments are also signs

and instruments: they express an existing reality while at the same time challenging and deepening and perfecting that reality. Turning to the sacrament of orders, we refer to chapter 3 of *Lumen Gentium*. Paragraph 18 introduces this chapter on the hierarchical nature of the church, as the bishops explain the ministry of the ordained:

In order to ensure that the people of God would have pastors and would enjoy continual growth, Christ the Lord set up in his church a variety of offices [ministries] whose aim is the good of the whole body. Ministers, invested with a sacred power, are at the service of their brothers and sisters, so that all who belong to the people of God and therefore enjoy true Christian dignity may attain to salvation through their free, combined and well-ordered efforts in pursuit of a common goal. (LG 18)

This common ministry of service that is shared by all the ordained is then particularized in the succeeding paragraphs, emphasizing the role of bishops from paragraphs 19–27, presbyters in paragraph 28, and deacons in paragraph 29, the final paragraph in the chapter. In 2005, the bishops of the United States promulgated, with a *recognitio* from the Holy See, the National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States. The context of the sacrament of holy orders within the overall sacramentality of the church, of those ordained to service within the whole body of believers, echoes conciliar teaching:

Out of the body of initiated believers—anointed in the Holy Spirit through the Sacrament of Baptism, strengthened in the Sacrament of Confirmation, and nurtured with the Bread of Life—Christ calls some to ordained service. The Church, discerning their vocational charism, asks the bishop to ordain them to *diakonia*. [Author’s note: the text here is referring to all who are ordained: bishops, deacons, presbyters; *diakonia* applies to all the ordained.]

“Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles [and their successors] continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time” [CCC, no. 1536]. Thus, it is the sacrament of apostolic ministry: “The mission of the Apostles, which the Lord Jesus continues to entrust to the Pastors of his people, is a true service, significantly referred to in Sacred Scripture as ‘*diakonia*,’ namely, service or ministry” [Ibid., no. 22; cf.

LG, no. 24]. This *diakonia* “is exercised on different levels by those who from antiquity have been called bishops, priests and deacons.” [LG, no. 28] (National Directory 23–24)

The diaconate participates, therefore, in the sacrament of apostolic ministry, exercised in its own unique way. “Exercised on different levels,” the council says. On the level of the diaconate, then, it is fair to say that the diaconate is a “sign and instrument” (sacrament) of God’s charity, justice, and mercy. It is a sign of something happening in the life of the church, but it also serves to bring something new. The people of God already serve each other and the rest of the world in countless ways: the diaconate is a sign of that existing service. On the other hand, much remains to be done to extend God’s loving presence to those who remain in need: the diaconate is to be an instrument in finding new and creative ways to meet those needs. This has been a consistent and constitutive part of the deacon’s ministry from the beginning. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* was composed in Syria during the early to middle years of the third century.⁷ Probably no other ancient source is more descriptive of the relationship of bishop to deacon, of the source of the deacon’s authority, of the deacon’s responsibility to the poor, and even of the deacon’s exercise of governance.

Let the bishops and the deacons, then, be of one mind; and do you shepherd the people diligently with one accord. For you ought both to be one body, father and son; for you are in the likeness of the Lordship. And let the deacon make known all things to the bishop, even as Christ to His Father. But let him order such things as he is able by himself, receiving power from the bishop, as the Lord did from His Father. . . . But the weighty matters let the bishop judge. Yet let the deacon be the hearing of the bishop, and his mouth and his heart and his soul; for when you are both of one mind, through your agreement there will be peace in the Church.⁸

Deacons, through the sacramental grace received at ordination, become both signs and instruments—the hands—of God’s mercy.

Overview of the Deacon’s Ecclesial Ministry

In the next chapter we will examine the deacon’s ministry in greater detail and context, but for now we offer a brief introduction. In 1998,

the Congregation for Catholic Education issued Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons, including a particularly helpful, albeit lengthy, review of the deacon's identity and mission:

The ministry of the deacon is characterized by the exercise of the three *munera* proper to the ordained ministry, according to the specific perspective of *diakonia*.

In reference to the munus docendi the deacon is called to proclaim the Scriptures and instruct and exhort the people. This finds expression in the presentation of the Book of the Gospels, foreseen in the rite of ordination itself.

The munus sanctificandi of the deacon is expressed in prayer, in the solemn administration of baptism, in the custody and distribution of the Eucharist, in assisting at and blessing marriages, in presiding at the rites of funeral and burial and in the administration of sacramentals. This brings out how the diaconal ministry has its point of departure and arrival in the Eucharist, and cannot be reduced to simple social service.

Finally, the *munus regendi* is exercised in dedication to works of charity and assistance and in the direction of communities or sectors of church life, especially as regards charitable activities. This is the ministry most characteristic of the deacon.⁹

I would first draw attention to the opening sentence above: in referring to the three areas of ordained ministry, the Congregation concludes, "according to the specific perspective of *diakonia*." This emphasizes the essential point that there is one *diakonia*, expressed in three distinctive ways. The *munus docendi* (the "function of teaching") is often summarized as the ministry "of the Word"; the *munus sanctificandi* (the "function of sanctifying") is likewise summarized as the ministry "of Sacrament"; the *munus regendi* (the "ministry of ruling") as the ministry "of Charity and justice." However, all three of these distinctive functions are to be understood from the perspective of, and as a reflection of, a single worldview of *service*.

Consider as well the final observation from the citation above, that it is the *munus regendi*—dedicated to works of charity, assistance, and leadership—being "the ministry most characteristic of the deacon." This book focuses on this ministry of the deacon as a constitutive element of the nature of the church herself. Always flowing from the ministries of Word and Sacrament and leading back to them, and never

apart from them, the deacon's exercise of charity, justice, mercy, and leadership extends the loving hand of God's constant love and mercy to all who are in need.

The bishops of Vatican II, after speaking of the sacramental grace received by the deacon during ordination, and suggesting various ways in which the deacon might carry out the responsibilities of *diakonia*, conclude by saying, "Dedicated to works of charity and functions of administration, deacons should recall the admonition of St Polycarp: 'Let them be merciful, and zealous, and let them walk according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all'" (LG 29, referencing Matt 28:18ff.). With this understanding it is hoped that we can better appreciate the observation of the bishops of the Second Vatican Council when they referred to the functions of the deacon as being so difficult to experience in today's church and world and yet "so very necessary to the life of the Church" (ibid.). It was precisely this reasoning that led to their decision to seek the renewal of a diaconate permanently exercised in the contemporary church.