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Are Deacons the Enemy?

by

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Is the permanent diaconate a plot by bishops to take over Diocesan Conventions throughout this Country? Is this ordination today a harbinger of Episcopal tyranny? I am here, today, to tell you that the truth is worse than a mere plot by bishops to take over the Church. Much worse. The permanent diaconate is a plot by God to make the Episcopal Church relevant and responsive to the needs of poor and oppressed people in the 20th Century, to make ours a Church for all the people, not just those with Anglo-Saxon surnames and a stable income.

This is a plot that has been unfolding for twenty centuries. By the grace of God, it is a plot that is finally coming to fruition in our own time, in this very place, at this very time, with the ordination of these five people as deacons in our Church. Yes, it is a plot that has simultaneously ripened for the last ten years in many places in our country and throughout the world. It is a plot which I hope we, the People of God, will gladly be able to say, **Amen** to during this ordination ceremony today.

I think I have probably been asked to preach at this ordination, because for the last three years I have been involved in spiritual formation for the students in the Deacons School. For me, this has been a time of praying and teaching, discovering the meaning of this old—new ministry which is re-emerging in our midst. The invitation by the students of the Deacons School to be their spiritual resource has challenged and matured my theology. I want to begin this sermon by thanking you five ordinands, and the rest of the Deacon students who are here, for asking me to serve you as a spiritual resource. You people do not know what your prayers and love have done for this one short, dwarfish priest in both hard times and good times. Thank you.

I really have two things I want to say today. One thing is about the meaning of the diaconate for our Church. The other is about what you ordinands need to do to be ready for this new ministry.

Let's begin by looking at one of today's lessons, in particular, Luke 22:24-27:

A dispute arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather

let the greatest among you become the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

The key to understanding the meaning of the permanent diaconate is in the mystery of this table servant that Jesus refers to in our Luke reading. Let’s examine what the mystery of this table servant is, and what the inner preparation is that this servant needs, to have the Mind of Christ in his or her ministry.

First, we need to ask, who is this table servant? What is the standard that is used to measure the table servant? The Table Servant is, of course, as our Luke reading today says, Jesus Christ himself. In fact, you may remember that the table server, the deacon, for the Last Supper was Jesus Christ. He was deacon as well as priest at that supper. He was deacon very, very often in his ministry. It is Jesus Christ, himself, who is the model for you five ordinands today.

This is a very stunning recognition for the identity of the table server that gets lost immediately when we look at how deacons are seen in the Church today. I have heard many priests joke that the deacon is really a waiter or waitress with a collar on—a kind of ordained step-and-fetch-it. That is what the Church would like to think sometimes, and that is the way some of us have tried to treat deacons. We do this probably, because in our own age, we are uncomfortable with service and servanthood of any kind. It has no status. It is the kind of thing that some ethnic groups are supposed to do, or women. But, in thinking of service this way we forget what *the Table*, itself, meant for Jesus Christ and for the early Church, what a *table servant* was, and more generally, what *servant* and *servanthood* meant in the Gospel.

So, what does the Table mean? It is the place where the people of God are fed, clothed, brought together, and cared for. The Table is our symbol for community, for the Kingdom of God, for the Wedding Feast in that Kingdom. The diaconate begins as a ministry, in Acts, because the Table in the early Church is not serving its function as the place for God’s justice. The Table was not a place where all of the people were being cared for, all of the people being fed, all of the people being gathered together. People were being left out in the Acts account.

During our liturgy, the Table is the very interface of Heaven and Earth. It is, symbolically, the place where the Kingdom of God and God’s creation meet in a loving, almost erotic, embrace. Look at that Table, that is where Heaven and Earth meet. Truly, we bring to it the gifts of us the people, and the cries and brokenness of us, the people, all of us. And there we give these gifts to God, trusting in His grace and mercy. And, by God’s grace these gifts are made the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the healing heavenly Food of the Kingdom. It is really this Food that becomes for us, the actual presence of God and also the reminder of our ultimate destination with God, the heavenly bridal feast which never ends. This is what the Table means.

Let us take another look at who are the Table servants? In Acts, deacons are ordained to make sure that the needs of all of the people are met at the Table. It should be no surprise that one of these deacons, Stephen, turns out not to be a waiter at all, but a preacher. He is a preacher who is murdered, because his message was to invite all of

the people to the banquet, to the feast, to make sure that all of the people got an invitation to come to the meal. The deacon's purpose then and now is to take the message of the Church to the margins, to all of the people, and to bring those people back into the church.

Yes, the deacon makes sure that everyone gets to the Table. This heavenly table, this radical table, meant the same thing at the time of Christ, and for the new Church after Christ, as it means for us now. If we forget that this is what this table over there means, that it is the symbol of God's invitation to all of the broken, all of the hurt, all of the lonely, all of the victims, then the deacons who serve at that table will be trivialized, they will be reduced to waiters at the Episcopal Church restaurant.

That is not what the deacons presence means. They are the guardians, the assurance that our table is fair, that everyone is included, that everyone is heard. They are God's and Christ's sergeants at arms, the advocates, the voices for those who have no voices. It is especially important today, in a world with so much hunger, so much oppression, so much brokenness, so much death and fear, that we have deacons at the tables in our Church. It is critically important. Otherwise the Church may very easily forget the meaning of the Table and the necessity for every person's inclusion at our Eucharistic table.

If we understand the table servant, **then what about servanthood in general?** What does Jesus mean when he says, *I am among you as one who serves*. Jesus Christ is the servant. Jesus is the one who gave himself completely and totally for us, that we all might have opportunity to be included in God's invitation for wholeness, that we might fully understand what is to be divine and to be human, and that we might really understand our correct relationship to one another.

Jesus was not a power person. He was powerful, power was in him, but power was not his game, not his name. His name was love, was servanthood, was giving, was healing, was touching, was speaking, was advocacy, was rebel, was justice, was more things than I can name. But, his power and his person and his strength were shown, not by titles, not by institutional power struggles, but by devoting his life to his ministry among victims, the needy, the sinners, the broken, the god seekers, the questioners, the ill, the plague ridden. Servant is not lackey. Servant is not waitress or waiter. Servant is the spirit-filled proclaimer of the Gospel who is totally and unmistakably on the side of those who are in need of the Gospel. Servant in our Gospel today is the tested one, the tried one, the trained and educated one, the praying and prepared advocate of the victims. That is what servant is. In our Church, the diaconal servant is called to serve all of those people who are asked or forced to serve the powerful in the secular world. These people who serve are, of course, the same ones who too often are the oppressed, the ones in the welfare line, the hourly wage earners and the like. Deacons are called to serve them like Christ served us, with love and by restoring their dignity.

That is why you ordinands have been trained the way you have been trained, have been tested the way you were. You have not always been treated fairly and as justly as you might have been. Because your church is not a fair and perfect place. If it were, there would be no need for you. We are struggling as we learn to deal with your emerging ministry. You are new creatures. We do not fully understand you. We make

mistakes with you. We need your help to begin to learn to listen to your voices and to the voices of the people you represent. You are being ordained as a sign of our trust, of the Church's trust, that the Holy Spirit has truly selected you to help us discover the whole meaning of ministry in our Church, a ministry which includes everyone, lay and ordained. You need to take your own occasional experiences as victims and allow them to place you in compassionate solidarity with all of those victims whom you will serve. Because even the Church, God's Church sometimes makes some of its children victims.

I have one more thing I would like to say. I want to take the other major Lucan theme of inner preparation, of prayer, and relate it to this diaconal ministry of which I have just spoken. Now, I want to speak to you personally, as your spiritual director, the one you have chosen as your spiritual resource person. This whole thing will not work for you unless you are deeply connected to the one whom you are called to emulate, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is both an inner and an outer ministry. We have already said something about what you are to do in the world, what you are to do for the Church. This will not work unless you learn to care for yourselves spiritually. Unless you learn to look for the Kingdom within you, in your very center, converting your soul there, as you attempt to convert the world outside you, to convert the world and yourself from the laws of sin and death, to the laws of God's love in Christ.

This inner ministry has three aspects to it:

First, the Discipline of Jesus. You must read the Gospels carefully. Jesus is your model. Jesus is the one who does the things you must learn to do. He is with women, he is with people with leprosy, today he is with persons with AIDS, he is with the poor, the unclean, the low class, or no class. He touches the dead. He heals and feeds all of the victims.

You are called also to be present for anyone and everyone in this world. To never say no to anyone's needs because they are different than you, a different color, a different sexuality, a different religion, a different gender. You are asked to be like Jesus, to be present for anyone, within the limits of the resources which God gives you. You can only learn this Discipline of Jesus by immersing yourself in the Gospels in particular. Learn to speak about and think about and dream about every act that is in Jesus' life. It must be that simple for you. To begin with Jesus himself and then to look at all those women and men in the history of the Church whose commitment has been to Jesus first.

Second, Prayer. This will only work if you learn to pray. Look at all of the aspects of prayer in the Church. Today, we pray for you and the Bishop lays hands on you. You will now be prayed for everyday someplace in the world. Then, you must pray for others, especially those who are forgotten and abandoned, but you must also pray very distinctively and particularly for yourself. Learn to talk to God about what is happening in your life, everyday. Learn to be with God as friend and comrade in your daily life.

But, as important as these forms of prayer, you must also learn to be totally immersed in prayer, to be centered in it at the very core of your being. If you do not learn this inner prayer, you will simply burn out. You will learn this inner prayer when you begin to explore some form of meditation or contemplative prayer. We have already spoken about this at Deacon's School. But, I say it again now. The Discipline of Jesus will cease to mean anything to you, unless you learn to live with God inside, in some form of quiet strengthening prayer that will sustain you no matter what.

As a little aside here, I know that many of you have been praying for me the last few months, during my illness and my mother's death. I tell you now that I have felt these prayers and been strengthened by them as a result of my own contemplative prayer. God has granted the gift to me of your presence, all of you deacons students, during my times of trial. I have been granted the grace to feel your prayers concretely and actually during my hard times. If you engage in inner prayer, you too, will feel the prayers of others as I have. So, please be serious about your prayer. Find a spiritual friend or director to share with about this prayer.

Third, the Community of Deacons. You will also not make it if you try to do it alone. The diaconate began as a group activity. It should remain that now. You are going to strange places and you will do strange things. You need one another. You need other deacons. That is why the Bishop and Archdeacon will be supervising you in affinity groups, that is in groups according to your diaconal vocation. You will have one another to share with and to rely upon. Your ministry is developed, encouraged, and evaluated in the presence of other deacons. You will be distinctive because you will not be asked to do ministry separated and apart from other deacons. Your ministry is really conceived in our Church as a Team ministry, not as a lone ranger crusade.

You should know that it is a very real truth that the necessity of God's Kingdom will disappear, sometimes very slowly, if you attempt to organize the margins of society by yourself. Very slowly you will be seduced by society, by the secular world, if you are by yourself. You will become ashamed of the Church, of Jesus's name, of calling yourself a believer. You will use only secular language and believe in secular images and secular solutions. And, I can tell you brothers and sisters, as a former communist, which is probably the most powerful secular symbol system in the world today for social change, the Secular world is bankrupt. It has no solutions without God. We need God and we need Jesus Christ. Socialism, communism, or capitalism, without God, will breed no real solutions. People are converting today to religious belief more rapidly in socialist and communist countries than anywhere else in the world, except for the Third World, where secular answers haven't had much to offer either. So don't be ashamed of being Christian. And work together in teams so that you may strengthen one another in God's message.

The Charge

I don't believe in long charges. I charge you with three things today:

1. Be present to and for God in Jesus Christ. Be present in the world and in your Church. Be brave and insistent in this presence. It will not be easy. Learn what I have called the Discipline of Christ. Learn to think with the Mind of Christ.

2. Be present to God and Christ in your core by learning to pray. Learn to pray constantly. Learn to be centered in prayer. Learn to let God be so intimate in yourself that God is like a lover, constantly present, constantly a resource.

3. Be with one another as deacons. Go to the places of suffering, the places of need together, so that you are not overwhelmed by the brokenness of this world. Learn to see one another as sisters and brothers. You are the antibodies which our Church needs to bring it into the full consciousness of its mission. We need you to do it together as a team.

Thank you and may God continue to bless your ministries. In Jesus Christ's name.



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