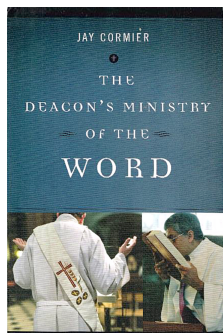


Book Review

by Canon Michael Jackson

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Jay Cormier. *The Deacon's Ministry of the Word*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016



This is the third volume of a welcome trilogy on the diaconate published by Liturgical Press, following *The Deacon's Ministry of Charity and Justice* by William T. Ditewig (2015) and *The Deacon's Ministry of the Liturgy* by Frederick C. Bauerschmidt (2016).

Should the deacon exercise a preaching ministry – or not? In the Anglican Communion, the response is ambivalent. In 1995, James Barnett stated categorically that preaching was not a function belonging to the diaconate. Ormonde Plater, on the other hand, writing in 2006, considered this to be an “antiquarian attitude.” The ordinal in the Canadian *Book of Common Prayer* (1959) stipulated that one of the roles of the deacon is “to preach, if he be admitted thereto by the Bishop;” this is omitted, however, in the ordinals of *The Book of Alternative Services* (1985) and the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* (1977).

The Roman Catholic view is unambiguous. According to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2011), deacons are authorized to preach with the approval of their priest, and Roman Catholic deacons see preaching as a normal part of their ministry. Jay Cormier places it in a broader context. “This book,” he says, “is about the deacon’s ministry of proclaiming the Word of God. In the deacon’s ministry, such proclamation takes place in a number of venues: the church, the classroom, the living room, sometimes even the local tavern.”

Deacon Cormier arranges his book in a series of eight essays, which do not need to be read in sequence. Each essay ends with a section called *Communicare*, offering practical suggestions to the preacher for applying the material covered in the chapter. A feature of *The Deacon's Ministry of the Word* is case studies taken from real life and applied to a homily – a radio advertisement, a film, an event in the news, a television commercial, a family problem. The author gives examples of the resulting homilies, mostly his own. The theme throughout is that the preacher, in proclaiming the Word of God, is engaged “in a system of communications.”

The book proceeds to give numerous and valuable suggestions, examples and applications of communications techniques. The deacon-preacher, says, Deacon Cormier, must engage the audience and, in humility, engender trust in them. In the words, of the Roman diaconal ordinal, “Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practise what you teach.” Only then can one “inspire action and change” in the listeners. One of the essays is entitled “The Sunday Conversation”: homilies should be a conversation with those in the pews, dealing with the day-to-day challenges and struggles of Christians – “discovering God in the messiness of our lives.” They are not theological discourses: they should be “spoken in the language of the everyday.”

Another essay gives a helpful, sensible tip: spend the week before you deliver the homily in a form of prayer, “mulling over” the text of the Sunday gospel. As you do that, consider four

questions: what is the single most striking word, sentence or image in the passage? Where and how do we see this gospel in our time and place? What is Jesus asking us to do? How does this gospel reveal God's love in our midst? Still another essay, entitled simply "One," urges the preacher to focus on one point: "an effective homily is centered on a single idea," with sample homilies to illustrate the technique. Very pertinent advice is offered in the essay "Preaching *Visually*." We all realize, or should, that we live in visual world, dominated by computer screens. While preachers cannot be expected (at least not normally!) to accompany the homily with PowerPoint, they are challenged to use visual language, with concrete illustrations from daily life – precisely as Jesus did with parables.

Indeed, the parables of Jesus are the key to the next chapter, "Putting It Together." Deacon Cormier suggests that we follow not only the teaching but the teaching *method* of Jesus: a story or image from everyday life, the connection with the reality of God in our own time and place, and the invitation to "embrace that presence in our lives." He illustrates that with effective homilies based on parables.

The last two essays deal with the preacher. How to prepare the homily and then deliver it. Tips on writing and revising, on speaking, on voice and posture, on vocabulary and style. The author concludes with a brief reflection on the minister as person and the spirituality of the deacon-preacher. "Preaching," says the author, "is the product of the preacher's lived experience," which will reflect trust, humility and "joyful servanthood."

This is a thoroughly engaging book. The style, ideas, examples and actual homilies are captivating. As the author says in his preface, effective preaching requires the same preparation and techniques, whether the homilist be bishop, priest or deacon. While Jay Cormier of course primarily targets the deacon in this book, any preacher will benefit from his advice. And in the light of Deacon Cormier's persuasive message, yes, deacons should indeed be preachers of the Word!