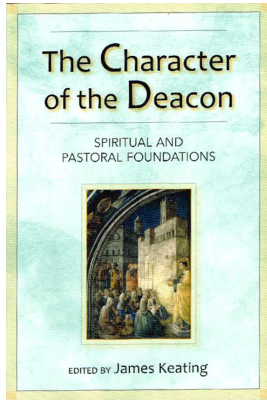


## Book Review

by Canon Michael Jackson

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**James Keating, editor. *The Character of the Deacon: Spiritual and Pastoral Foundations*  
New York: Paulist Press, 2017**



This is a collection of essays by eight authors, including the editor, exploring the spirituality, qualities, and roles of the deacon. It does so ably and from a variety of perspectives. Deacon Keating crisply sets the context in the very first words of his introduction: “The deacon’s primary ministry is twofold: to serve at the altar and ambo and from such service be sent by Christ, while always abiding with him in prayer, to respond to the spiritual and corporeal needs of people.”

The first part of the book, “Diaconate and Scripture,” deals with the vexed question of New Testament evidence for deacons. How I wince when preachers and writers tell us that the first deacons were the “seven” identified in Acts 6:1-6, notably Stephen! The authors of the three essays in this section wisely steer us away from these debatable assertions. The first, Scott M. Carl, in “From Being with Jesus to Proclaiming the Word,” states at the outset that “there is not a specific proof-text in Scripture for the establishment of the office of deacon as we understand it today but its distinct role developed in the life of the early Church – and is being discerned anew in the current day.” The aforementioned passage in Acts, he says, may well refer to the apostolic ministry of word and eucharist, not literally waiting on table. Citing the scholarly work of John N. Collins, Fr. Carl looks at the use of *diakon* words and the model *diakonia* of Jesus in Mark, Luke and Acts.

The theme of the *diakonia* of Jesus is picked up in the following two essays. Stephen F. Miletic examines the Gospel of Mark in “The Mystery of Jesus as Deacon.” The Markan view, he says, is that Christ is the sacrament of God; the “*diakon*-word complex strategically connects service with Jesus’ salvific mission.” Deacon Miletic notes the “diaconal character” of Jesus’ identity. William M. Wright pursues this theme in “Christ the Servant,” where he analyses the foot-washing at the Last Supper and Peter’s role as disciple and leader in the Gospel of John. He concludes that the Fourth Gospel presents Christ’s service in the form of “cruciform love.” Christ the servant is Christ crucified and this must be the basis of all diaconal ministry.

With the diaconate now firmly grounded in the *diakonia* of Jesus rather than in a New Testament office, the second part of *The Character of the Deacon* moves to “The Diaconate and Tradition.” In “The Uniqueness of the Deacon,” W. Shawn McKnight reviews the theological debate over the sacramental character of the deacon. After Vatican II, the scholastic concept of the diaconate (and the episcopate) as a derivative of the ministerial priesthood was superseded by a more balanced view of the sacrament of orders. The deacon is ordained not to priesthood but to ministry, with its own sacramental integrity. In detail and in depth, Fr. McKnight he explores the deacon’s ministry in relationship to that of bishops and priests. Whether it be liturgy and preaching, “encouraging the practice of biblical justice,” acting as mediator or go-between in the church community, deacons, ordained but working in the secular world, are “unique ministers of the Church’s communion.”

This theological approach to the diaconate continues in the essay by Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “Rahner in Retrospect.” Karl Rahner was a leading theologian at the time of the Second Vatican Council who was influential in placing the restoration of the permanent diaconate on the Church’s agenda. Rahner asserted that diaconal ministry was already alive and well in the Church and only needed to be sacramentalized by ordination. This approach had the unintended consequence of undermining the rationale for an ordained diaconate vis-à-vis lay ministry. For Deacon Bauerschmidt, however, “ordination makes someone a deacon” rather than the other way round – that is, ordination bestows an identity rather than making explicit an identity already there. This avoids stereotyping the prerequisites for the diaconate (so-and-so has the qualities of a deacon, so let’s ordain him) and leads to an “ongoing discernment of diaconal identity.” Concludes Deacon Bauerschmidt, “it is those who have received through ordination the name *deacon* who can best show us who and what a deacon is.”

The two essays in the third section of the book, “Diaconate and Prayer,” focus on the spirituality of the deacon. David W. Fagerberg, in “The *Lex Orandi* of the Ordination Rite,” shows that the various parts of the Roman diaconal ordination rite encompass both the mystical and the human dimensions of the Church. Dr. Fagerberg emphasizes the grounding of diaconal ordination in the Holy Spirit: “without an epiclesis that brings power from heaven, [the deacon] would be a social organizer but not a divine minister [...] the deacon is a man of mystery [...] he unites the ministries of altar, word, and charity.” James Keating pursues this spiritual approach in “Identity and Holiness.” The identity of the deacon is defined by the “servant mysteries of Christ,” which shape the deacon’s inner life and charism. On that basis, “the diaconal imagination should be aflame with bold, prophetic action for each age;” as an “envoy of Christ” the deacon should “deeply embed himself within the secular world with the life-giving message of salvation.”

The last section of *The Character of the Deacon* comprises a chapter by Dominic Cerrato, “Identity and Mission.” This is essentially a conclusion for the book. In recapitulating the preceding chapters, Deacon Cerrato finds nine “key themes of diaconal identity and their pastoral implications”. We can summarize as follows:

- The identity of the deacon is sacramental and is expressed theologically.
- Sacramental identity precedes mission and action.
- Diaconal identity “is more about being than doing.”
- The interior life of the deacon is the essential grounding for the diaconal ministry of mediation, proclamation of the Word, pastoral care and service in the world.

*The Character of the Deacon* provides an in-depth theological approach to the diaconate, and the contributions of Deacon Keating and his collaborators warrant careful study and reflection. The underlying premise of their essays is the tripartite role of the deacon, based on the sacramental identity given through ordination: word, liturgy and charity. As David Fagerberg neatly puts it, they are “three atoms united in a single molecular ministry.” Like other Roman Catholic scholars, the contributors to this book balance the spiritual and practical dimensions of the diaconate. This can be a useful reminder, and even a corrective, for those who – understandably – tend to emphasize social activism at the expense of the deacon’s ministry of Word and sacrament. As Stephen Miletic puts it, “our service is not sufficient if it is reduced to social service [...] diaconal spirituality originates in the liturgy and points to service in the church and the world.”