

Receive the Gospel of Christ

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Good Morning! The Lord be with you!

I shall tell you a little about my vocational journey as a Capuchin Friar, starting in the early '50's when our family lived in Holland. Little by little I was inspired by the friars in my hometown of Breda, as they went about their daily business to be with young and old, in the marketplace, in prisons and hospitals, in gypsy camps. And they were the friars of an Order of Brotherhood founded by St. Francis of Assisi, ordained a deacon, in order to be able to preach and teach.

Your identity as deacon in the Church comes from the whole Rite of Ordination and the Directory for the Ministry and Life of permanent deacons (July 1998). And that's where I will start this reflection. As the first talk of the Conference for Deacons, I need to start there.

After the laying on of hands, after the Prayer of Consecration and after the Investiture with stole and dalmatic, the newly ordained deacon goes to his bishop and kneels before him. The bishop places the Book of the Gospels in the hands of the newly ordained and says: "RECEIVE THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST, WHOSE HERALD YOU NOW ARE. BELIEVE WHAT YOU READ, TEACH WHAT YOU BELIEVE AND PRACTICE WHAT YOU TEACH."

A few nights ago, at a special neocatechumenal ceremony, I handed the Bible to a dozen lay people, who had gone through months of catechesis and had arrived at a certain point in their journey to renew their Catholic Faith and understanding. The Bible, God's Word, was given them with the words: Receive....etc. It is a significant GIVING, a free gift. In the context of their desire, their hunger to know more about God's Word in the OT and the NT. But the giving of the Gospel in the official ecclesial setting and rite to the ordained deacon is far more profound and it defines the deacon in his diakonia, in his ministry. Let me first spell out briefly about the status of the deacon.

The ordained deacon, after the Gospel has been given by the Bishop and accepted by the deacon, receives a kiss of peace from the bishop (a sign of welcome and communion). The celebration of the Eucharist continues with the deacon taking up his ministry at the altar for the first time. The deacon is truly constituted a sacred minister, and is indeed a member of the Church's hierarchy. This condition determines both his theological and juridical status in the Church. His Incardination is a juridical bond. It has ecclesiological and spiritual significance, in as much as it expresses the ministerial dedication of the deacon to the Church. (cf. Directory 1-2) In the Liturgy the deacon sits at the right hand side of the bishop. This is significant.

But there is more to be said. The deacon receives office by a decree of his bishop. In his decree of appointment the bishop shall ascribe duties to the deacon, which are congruent

with his personal abilities, his celibate or married state, his formation, age and with his spiritually valid aspirations. (cf. Directory no.8) What a wonderful expression of the variety and uniqueness of diaconal ministry.....! He is ordained not “for the priesthood but for the ministry.” (LG9) And as such he is the servant, or rather he stands at the service of his bishop. All kinds of ministries, but always in the spirit of the Gospel.

The contemporary diaconate is grounded on the balanced exercise of the threefold ministry of Word, Sacrament and Charity. The deacon is then a public and permanent sign of the unity, binding these three dimensions together, reminding the People of God (Church) of its own diakonia and its responsibility to be a sign and instrument in creating a more just world, in building up the Kingdom/Reign of God. It is the diakonia of evangelization and communion. (Cf. No.43 NMI) We must place the restoration of the diaconate in 1968 by Pope Paul VI in the context of Vatican II, especially *Lumen Gentium* and the *Church in the Modern World*.

There have been in the Church’s history and there always will be, deacons who have exemplified in a remarkable way what it means to receive the Gospel of Christ and what it means to be a herald of that Gospel. They made the Word of God truly incarnate in their lives, in a unique and personal way. And the witness of their lives inspired many others. Such witness is more important than the function or the role. “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” (Paul VI). One such deacon, who understood this message very well and practised it was St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226). Yes, St. Francis was/is a deacon.

Brother Francis of Assisi was ordained a deacon so he could officially in the name of the Church preach the Gospel. For no other reason. Indeed he is known to have said to his friars “Always preach the Gospel, and if necessary use words.” For Francis “preaching the Gospel” meant “living the Gospel”, imitating the lifestyle, spirituality and mission of Jesus and the Apostles in his company. Going from place to place, from village to village, close to people in the market place, close to the outcasts, preaching in parables (real life stories), bringing healing and affirmation, encouraging repentance, reconciliation and a turning to God, God’s ways, in short putting the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God first

At the heart of your ministry, even in the broad sense, is service to humanity, relationships with each other and God, making connections, building bridges...all those things which are very simply expressed in “Lord make me an instrument of your peace.” It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus....the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of holiness” (*Evangeliu Nuntiandi* Pope Paul VI)

Deacon Francis was often invited to preach the Gospel, and did so with great fervour from within, and never too long, but there were times that he preached in the way the prophets in the OT preached, through some strange unexpected action. I will just mentioned two such examples in the life of St. Francis: 1) Going to a village to preach in the snow 2) the Lenten sermon he gave to Clare's Poor Ladies. The preaching was an action, which spoke louder than any words.

We, who are part of the hierarchy of the Church, should always witness to the truth and love of the Gospel, of Jesus Christ...whose herald we are, by the way we live, listen and speak . We are public persons and we are expected to be authentic, and to make good use of our life experiences. As deacon Gary Stone recently said "I believe that all of life experiences that we've had in the past (and will have in the future), are part of God's design preparing us for all the ministries that we exercise in the future (which begins right now)....and it is vitally important that we bring a spiritual orientation and ministry of evangelization to the world beyond the Church" (Catholic Leader 3/7/11).

The necessity of good preaching and teaching is without question. St. Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome said "And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? So faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom. 10, 14,17) Such preaching is therefore indispensable. But it needs to be given a lot of thought, preparation and prayer, every time.

It is quite obvious to us all that modern man is sated by talk. He is often tired of listening and, what is worse, impervious to words. Many psychologists and sociologists express the view that modern man has passed beyond the civilization of the word (ineffective and useless) that words are often resisted and that man now largely lives in the civilization of image. The presentation by power point seems to be a little more useful. The fatigue produced these days by so much empty talk and the relevance of many other forms of communication must not however diminish the permanent power of the word, or cause a loss of confidence in it. The word remains ever relevant, especially when it is the bearer of the power of God." (EN .42) The lives of the Saints bear this out very clearly.

We must continuously call to mind that through baptism and ordination we are all called to be "heralds" of the Good News of Jesus Christ. When Br.Francis became certain that God called him to live and preach the Gospel: he sang and danced through the forest (where he had retreated in a cave for contemplation): "I am the Herald of the great King." A couple of twigs served as his violin. He did not want to write a Rule, because he said 'we have the Gospel'. The Pope gave him verbal approval in 1209. When he was finally told to write something,so he simply writes in the first of 12 chapters: "This is the Rule life of the friars Minor, namely to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.. and to obey the Pope" . This is repeated in the last Chapter for emphasis.

At the heart of your ministry is joy, trust and confidence in the presence and power of God and God's Spirit, and the strong desire to be a sacrament of Jesus Christ. The Bl. Trinity dwells within, and each morning sends us out..."As the Father sent me, so am I sending you, receive the Holy Spirit." (John)

Your many ways of expressing your threefold ministry will become more effective, the more you die to self and let Christ live in you. This dying to self in your baptismal and marital covenants and mission, with the help of discernment and grace, is very much a daily challenge. Only in this way can we grow in spiritual and ecclesial communion as the years roll by. This kind of transformation (to let Christ take over) is the challenge of a life time.

Our initial and ongoing formation have that lofty goal. The transformation takes place on the human, spiritual, doctrinal and pastoral levels of our lives. We are all sealed with the gifts of God's Spirit to bring about this transformation, to help us discern the signs of the times, to ready us for future ministry. And it is always the Lord's ministry and mission, never our own.

I have read a good number of articles in the preparation for this conference. They were given to me by our deacons. These articles were of course written some years after 1968 and more recently in the last 20 years. Some from a Protestant, others from a Catholic perspective. There is agreement and disagreement. I also get the distinct impression that there is a variety of interpretations, and implementations in our Australian and New Zealand Dioceses. Other Dioceses have opted for a "wait and see" policy. The US bishops Conference have gone into the implementation of Deacons in a very big way, but I believe that there are still many learning curves there, as of course elsewhere, including our own situation. Simply because the restored permanent diaconate is a new way of official ministry of being Church, of living diakonia, in the modern world.

In this talk I have deliberately not gone into the great variety of "diakonia" , of all the possible ministries by deacons. There is as we know the threefold structure of Altar, Word and Charity. It seems that it is up to the local Bishop and the Bishop of Rome to determine which ministries by deacons are possible in the Church of the future.

The texts of "I came not to be served but to serve" and "I have given you an example so that you may do.." is the principal criteria of Christian spirituality and mission, and will play an important part in any future development of ministry. I have therefore focused in this talk on the need for personal holiness and spirituality, as my way of understanding "receive the Gospel of Christ, whose Herald you now are. Believe what you read. Teach what you believe and practise what you teach"

Faith (Hope and Love) is at the heart of Spirituality. To say *believe in God the father almighty...* is one thing, one truth, but *to allow God the father almighty, to be God for you, to be Father to you, to allow Him to be Almighty in your life* is quite another application of what it means to believe. One type of faith gets away with lip service. The other brings about a change of life style and relationship. Because it is welcomed in the heart where it is treasured and cherished. "Ex abundantia cordis os loquitur". This is authentic witness.

You may have all kinds of questions, which I am happy to answer. The way I have dealt with the topic, leaves much unsaid, and there is much more to be said. I propose that the best way to summarize and to inspire you further on the diaconal journey is to recall a part of the Bishop's Prayer of Consecration of the Rite of the Ordination of Deacons:

“Lord, look with favour on these servants of yours whom we have now dedicated to the office of deacon, to minister at your holy altar.

“Lord send forth upon them the Holy Spirit, that they may be strengthened by the gift of your sevenfold grace, to carry out faithfully the work of the ministry.

“May they excel in every virtue: in a love that is sincere, in concern for the sick and the poor, in unassuming authority, in self-discipline and in holiness of life.

“May their conduct exemplify your commandments and lead your people to imitate their purity of life.

“May they remain strong and steadfast in Christ, giving to the world the witness of a pure conscience.

“May they in this life imitate your Son, who came not to be served but to serve, and one day reign with Him in heaven. “