

Assisting the Assembly

Deacon Anthony Gooley

There may be a temptation to focus on what a deacon does in the liturgy, when we think about the liturgical ministry of deacons. This may seem obvious to us because it is a visible ministry. The congregation can see and hear the deacon in his role of assisting at Mass.

Section thirty of the Directory points to another role, which is to promote liturgical celebrations which involve the whole assembly, fostering interior participation of the faithful in the liturgy and the exercise of the various ministries. It is essentially a ministry of assisting the assembly.

Interior participation

Interior participation is the praying of the liturgy with mind and heart and voice in communion with the whole assembly. That is, each person in the assembly is not simply repeating the words and gestures as mere repetition and rote formula. There is an interior disposition which can accompany and enhance the participation of the assembly in the liturgy.

Once I was at a Mass and singing in the choir which was set up close to the sanctuary. The whole community joined in the entrance hymn with full voice. The priest arrived at his place and after the hymn had finished began Mass with the Sign of the Cross. The microphone was not working. His next words in the liturgy should have been, "The Lord be with you", but instead he said, "there seems to be something wrong with this microphone." The response came back from the back rows of the Church, "And also with you".

Although, this event was just one of the funny things that can happen at Mass sometimes, I also wonder if we are not just responding automatically without heart and mind engaged in what we are saying, doing or hearing?

Liturgy calls us all to be united in prayer, in our heart and mind and in the presence of our sisters and brothers. It is not time for private interior prayer but is a call for a suitable interior disposition of consciousness.

According to the tradition of the Church and the provisions of law, deacons "assist the bishop and priests in the celebration of the divine mysteries". They should therefore work to promote liturgical celebrations which involve the whole assembly, fostering the interior participation of the faithful in the liturgy and the exercise of the various ministries. Directory #30

Involving the whole congregation

All of us have probably experienced a school Mass in which every child had to have something to do. To read, to sing a song, to dance, to bring up the gifts, to tell a story... and much else to make sure every child was actively involved. Unfortunately this kind of busyness is not what is meant by active participation of the whole congregation.

From the moment the assembly begins to assemble, Christ is truly present (*Sacrosanctum concilium* #7). Christ prays through with and in the community at every liturgy. The whole

assembly is the priestly people, the holy nation set apart for offering praises to God. The whole assembly is the *leitourgos*, offering the sacrifice along with the priest who presides over the assembly.

**The whole assembly is the
leitourgos...**

Involving the whole assembly is therefore not a matter of getting everyone busy and making sure everyone has a job. Full, active participation of all the people happens when we are conscious that we gather as that priestly people, as the body of Christ and together the bishop, priest, deacon and laity offer the sacrifice of praise and thanks.

Some within the community have special ministries, such as the deacon, bishop, priest and readers or cantors. All of the lay ministries should be visible. But the whole assembly has an active role to play in their prayers, gestures and silences.

The deacon's role

In order to assist the assembly toward full active and conscious participation in the liturgy the deacon needs to be well formed in the liturgy both in his knowledge and his own liturgical spirituality. The deacon needs to not only appreciate his part in the liturgy but be a man deeply formed by the liturgy.

There may also be a role for the deacon to assist the assembly by helping to form readers and extraordinary ministers of communion or to train servers and acolytes. He would, in conjunction with the priest and the liturgy team, make use of resources available in his diocese for the formation of people in the liturgy. Perhaps he could offer specific catechesis on the liturgy and the role of the assembly from time to time.

Above all he assists the assembly by his own prayerful ministry at the altar.