

Conference I:

The Deacon as Herald of Communion: Witnessing to Unity in the Body of Christ

Introduction

Brothers in Christ, let us begin where Christ himself began on the night before he died - in prayer. Picture the scene: the Upper Room, the Last Supper, the shadow of the Cross looming. In that moment, Jesus could have prayed for courage to face suffering, for protection against betrayal, or even for justice against his enemies. But his heart overflowed with only one desire: unity. *"That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21).*

That prayer is not a footnote of the Gospel — it is the very heartbeat of the Church. It is the pulse that has carried the Body of Christ through centuries of persecution, division, renewal, and mission. And it is a prayer that still reverberates today, echoing across a fractured world, a polarized Church, and communities strained by suspicion, loneliness, and division. The world is starving for communion - and Christ has placed that mission in our hands.

Brothers, we as deacons are not ordained into a ministry of mere functions. We are ordained into this prayer. Our vocation is not simply to "do things" in the parish, but to be something for the Church: living icons of unity, visible reminders that the Body of Christ is one, holy, and indivisible. When we serve at the altar, proclaim the Gospel, or carry Christ into the lives of the poor, we are not simply performing tasks — we are embodying communion. We are making the prayer of Jesus flesh in our time and place.

This is why the diaconate is so vital today. In a world tempted to tear itself apart, the deacon's life whispers, and sometimes shouts unity is possible. In a Church that struggles with tensions, the deacon's presence says: Christ is greater than our divisions. Our diaconal vocation is nothing less than to be bridges - bridges between altar and street, priest and people, rich and poor, Church and world.

Brothers, unity is not an option; it is our mission. It is not a task on a list; it is our very identity. To be a deacon is to embody Christ's prayer for oneness - so that the world may believe.

Acts 6 as foundational

The diaconate was born in Acts 6 when the apostles faced a threat to unity. Greek widows were being neglected, and division was creeping into the young Church. The Spirit's response was not to ignore the problem, but to raise up men filled with faith and wisdom to restore harmony. From the beginning, the deacon's mission has been to guard communion by service. When we turn to Acts 6, we find the Church still in its infancy, glowing with the zeal of Pentecost, but already wrestling with real human struggles. The Greek-speaking widows - vulnerable, dependent, and often marginalized - were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. This was not simply a logistical issue; it was a matter of justice, dignity, and unity. If left unresolved, it threatened to fracture the early Christian community along cultural and ethnic lines: Hebrews versus Hellenists, insiders versus outsiders. The division was at the door.

The apostles' response is striking. They did not ignore the complaint or silence the voices of the neglected. Nor did they attempt to control everything themselves. Instead, guided by the Spirit, they called the community together and discerned a new ministry. Seven men, "full of the Spirit and wisdom," were chosen and set apart through prayer and the laying on of hands. In this moment, the diaconate was born - not as an honorary title, but as a concrete response to injustice, designed to restore harmony and protect communion.

This story still speaks powerfully to the Church today. We too live in a time when divisions creep into our communities — divisions of culture, language, class, politics, or ideology. Just as in the early Church, these fractures threaten our credibility as witnesses to the Gospel. Pope Francis often reminds us that division is the devil's weapon

of choice. And just as in Acts 6, the Spirit continues to raise up deacons to be guardians of communion, not through power, but through humble service.

Consider today's "neglected widows." They may be the migrant family living in fear, the elderly parishioner forgotten in a nursing home, the single mother balancing two jobs, or the prisoner left without visitors. They may also be groups within the Church who feel unheard - young people longing for meaning, the poor who feel invisible, or even faithful parishioners hurt by scandals and divisions. The mission of the deacon is to recognize these wounds, to bring them before the community, and to act so that no one is left behind.

Pope Leo XIII, reflecting on the Church's social mission, insisted in *Rerum Novarum* that solidarity with the poor and vulnerable is not optional but essential for Christian life. In a similar way, Acts 6 shows that charity and justice are not add-ons to the Gospel - they are integral to communion. The Church cannot be one if some of her children are hungry, neglected, or excluded.

For deacons today, this passage is both a consolation and a challenge. It is a consolation because it roots the diaconate in the Spirit's wisdom — we are not self-appointed, but Spirit-called and Church-sent. It is a challenge because it reminds us that our ministry is not about status but service; not about recognition but reconciliation. To be a deacon is to see where communion is threatened and to act with faith, humility, and creativity so that the Church remains whole.

Acts 6 ends with a note of growth: once the deacons were appointed and harmony restored, "the word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly" (v. 7). Unity bore fruit in mission. This too is a promise for us: when deacons faithfully guard communion by service, the Church becomes more credible, more missionary, more alive.

Lesson from Satis Cognitum

Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Satis Cognitum* (1896), reminds us that the Church is one Body, united in faith, sacraments, and governance. He insisted that unity is not optional but essential: without communion, the Church cannot be the living Body of Christ. When Pope Leo XIII issued *Satis Cognitum* in 1896, he was addressing a Church facing division and fragmentation, especially in its relationship with the modern world. His words remain strikingly relevant today: the Church is one Body, united in faith, sacraments, and governance. For Leo, this was not a matter of theology in the abstract; it was the lifeblood of the Church. Without unity, the Body of Christ would lose its credibility as the visible sign of salvation in the world.

Without communion, the Church would not be the Church.

In our own time, this teaching resonates with urgency. We live in an age of polarization — social, political, and even ecclesial. The Body of Christ today suffers wounds from ideological battles, liturgical disputes, and cultural divides. Pope Francis has repeatedly warned that a divided Church cannot proclaim the Gospel with authenticity, saying in *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) that "conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced." Unity is not uniformity, but it is communion: a shared faith, a common table, and obedience to Christ through the pastors he gives us.

Here the ministry of the deacon takes on particular importance. The deacon is not an ornament at the altar; he is a sacramental sign of Christ the Servant, and by his ordination, he embodies the Church's communion in three directions. Standing at the altar, he assists the bishop and priest, visibly connecting the community to its shepherds and through them to the universal Church. Proclaiming the Gospel, he reminds us that our unity comes from hearing and living the one Word of God. And serving the poor, he demonstrates that communion is not confined to the sanctuary but must overflow into the streets, where Christ waits in the least of our brothers and sisters.

Current realities make this ministry more necessary than ever. In many parishes, different cultural groups worship side by side but rarely together - Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Catholics, for example, or long-established parishioners and recent immigrants. Deacons can be bridges here, fostering bilingual liturgies, shared celebrations, and common service projects that break down walls of misunderstanding. Similarly, in a time when political allegiances can divide even the pews, the deacon's role is to call the faithful beyond partisanship toward the deeper unity we share in Christ.

Pope Leo XIII's vision also reminds us that unity is not only spiritual but concrete, expressed in sacraments and governance. In an era when some question the authority of the pope or the role of bishops, the deacon's very presence at the bishop's side in diocesan liturgies is a reminder that we do not belong to ourselves. We are part of a Church that is bigger than our preferences and older than our disputes. This obedience, lived with joy, is itself a form of preaching.

Yet unity cannot be preserved without charity. Pope Leo was clear: faith, sacraments, and governance are inseparable from love. The deacon embodies this most of all in his service to the poor. When he visits the sick, carries Communion to the homebound, or organizes parish outreach, he is not performing mere "tasks." He is saying to the world: This is what communion looks like. *This is what it means to be one Body in Christ - no one is left behind.*

In this sense, the deacon is both a gift and a challenge to the Church. He is a gift because his very presence recalls the unity we profess. He is a challenge because he calls all of us — clergy and laity alike - to live that unity concretely in love, forgiveness, and solidarity. As Pope Leo insisted, unity is not optional. And as Acts 6 reminds us, unity is preserved not by control but by service.

The call for today's deacon, then, is clear: to be a living icon of communion in a fractured world. To stand at the altar as a servant of unity. To proclaim the Gospel as a herald of truth. To serve the poor as a minister of charity. And in doing so, to make visible Pope Leo XIII's enduring conviction - that the Church, united in faith, sacraments, and governance, is the true Body of Christ, shining as a light to the nations.

Becoming Witnesses.

Think for a moment of the deacon at Mass. His role is never accidental or ornamental; every gesture, every word, every movement is charged with meaning.

When the deacon lifts the Book of the Gospels and proclaims it before the assembly, he is not just reading aloud. He is holding up the one Word that gathers the Church from every tribe and tongue. That Gospel is like a trumpet blast that calls scattered sheep into one-fold. In a world filled with competing voices, the deacon becomes the herald of the only voice that unites us — the voice of Christ.

Then, as he prepares the altar, the deacon quietly sets bread and wine in place. It seems like a simple act of arranging vessels, but here lies a powerful sign: many grains of wheat are crushed to make one loaf, many grapes pressed to make one chalice of wine. The deacon's hands touch the symbols of unity, showing that in Christ our individual lives are gathered, broken, and transformed into one Body, one sacrifice, one communion. What looks like ritual arrangement is a profound homily in action - unity is born out of the offering of many.

And finally, at the end of Mass, it is the deacon who gives the dismissal: "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." He does not send the people away as individuals going back to private lives. He sends them forth as a missionary communion - one family, scattered like seeds but bearing the same Spirit. The dismissal is not an ending,

but a commissioning: what was celebrated in unity at the altar must now be lived in unity in the world. Think again of the deacon. What he does at the altar is a mirror of what he is called to live everywhere. The liturgy spills into life.

When he proclaims the Gospel in the church, he also "proclaims" it in the world. Picture the deacon reading Scripture at a parish Bible study, or sharing the Word at a prison chapel, or simply breaking open the Gospel around a kitchen table with families. Just as he lifts the Book of the Gospels high at Mass, he is called to lift up Christ's Word wherever there is confusion, despair, or division - giving people a voice that calls them into communion.

When he prepares the altar with bread and wine, he is also preparing the "altars of life." Think of the deacon arranging donated food at a parish pantry, or carrying meals to the homebound. Each act gathers the "many" into "one" - many donors, one table; many families, one community. Just as bread is made from many grains, the deacon's service in charity weaves together people's small offerings into a banquet of communion.

And when he dismisses the assembly with the words "*Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life,*" he does not only say this — he lives it. He is present at the hospital bedside, blessing the sick and reminding them they are not alone. He stands at gravesides, commending loved ones to God while holding grieving families together in hope. He joins parish councils and committees, not to dominate discussions, but to ensure that decisions are made in a spirit of communion. Everywhere he goes, he is "sending forth" the Church to be what it is: one Body, many members, united in love.

So, the deacon is not simply a liturgical functionary. He is an icon of communion in motion - bridging the sanctuary and the street, the altar and the marketplace, the Eucharist and the everyday. His ministry teaches us that unity is not confined to an hour on Sunday; it is carried into kitchens, hospitals, prisons, schools, and soup lines. The deacon's life proclaims: *the Church is one, and the world will believe when it sees us living as one.*

Every gesture of the deacon, then - from proclamation, to preparation, to sending - speaks of communion. He is like a living icon, reminding the Church that we are not a collection of isolated individuals, but one Body, bound together by Word, sacrament, and mission. In the deacon's ministry at the liturgy, the Church sees its own vocation: to be gathered by the Word, united at the Table, and sent forth as a sign of Christ's love in the world

Conclusion

Dear brothers, unity is not just an idea - it is our mission and our witness. The Church is never more herself than when she is one Body, breathing with one Spirit. From the Book of Acts, where the first deacons were called forth to heal division, to Pope Leo XIII's *Satis Cognitum*, reminding us that communion is essential, we see the same truth: without unity, the Church cannot show the face of Christ.

And so, brothers, our ministry is not small. Every Gospel we proclaim, every altar we prepare, every act of service we perform is a stitch in the seamless garment of Christ's Body. We are called to be bridges in a time of walls, healers in a culture of fractures, heralds of communion in a world that glorifies individualism.

Imagine if every deacon lived this fully: parishes would become schools of unity, the poor would feel not forgotten but embraced, and the world would glimpse a Church that is not divided but radiant with the oneness of Father, Son, and Spirit. This is our call. This is our witness.

So let us take Pope Leo's words to heart to be servants of the one Body of Christ, so that the world may see not us, but Him, in our communion.

Examen for Deacons: Living as Signs of Unity

1- At the Altar: Unity in Worship

- When I serve at the Eucharist, do I consciously see myself as a sign of communion - binding the parish to the bishop, the priest, and the universal Church?
- Do I help foster a spirit of reverence, inclusion, and participation in liturgy, or do I allow divisions (language, preference, style) to deepen?
- How do I prepare myself spiritually so that my service at the altar flows into daily life as a witness of unity?

2- In the Word: Unity in Proclamation

- Do I proclaim the Gospel with clarity and conviction, recognizing that this Word is the source of the Church's communion?
- In my preaching or catechesis, do I build bridges between different groups and perspectives, or do I unintentionally favor one "side"?
- How often do I allow God's Word to challenge my own assumptions, so that I become a servant of truth and not of opinion?

3- Among the Poor: Unity through Charity

- Who are the "neglected widows" in my parish or community today - those overlooked, unheard, or forgotten?
- Do my ministries of service address only immediate needs, or do they also build communion by integrating the poor and marginalized into the life of the parish?
- How do I help others see that serving the poor is not an optional ministry, but an essential sign of being one Body in Christ?

4- In Communion with the Bishop and the Church: Unity in Governance

- Do I live my vocation with a spirit of obedience and collaboration, seeing myself as part of a larger mission beyond my parish?
- How do I support and encourage my pastor, bishop, and brother deacons, even when I disagree or find it difficult?
- Am I attentive to the danger of individualism - acting on my own - instead of serving in communion with the wider Church?

5- In My Personal Life: Unity in Witness

- Do I seek reconciliation quickly when misunderstandings or conflicts arise in my ministry or family life?
- Do I cultivate habits of prayer, humility, and listening that strengthen my witness as a servant of communion?
- Where is Christ inviting me today to heal division, bridge gaps, or embody unity in small but concrete ways?

Pastoral Applications

- Promote reconciliation in your parish: be attentive to cultural, generational or spiritual divisions.
- Encourage collaboration between ministries, showing that no one group "owns" the parish.
- Practice deep listening - unity begins when people feel heard.

Discussion Questions:

- Where have I seen disunity in my parish or ministry, and how did I respond?
- How does my role at the altar flow into my role as servant of communion in daily life?

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