

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 210619e

Saturday 19.06.2021

Audience with Permanent Deacons of the diocese of Rome

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the permanent deacons of the diocese of Rome, with their families, to whom he addressed the following words:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome! Thank you for your visit.

I thank you for your words and your testimonies. I greet the Cardinal Vicar, all of you and your families. I am delighted that you, Giustino, have been appointed as director of Caritas: looking at you I think it will grow, you are twice as tall as Fr. Ben, go on! [laughter, applause]. I am also delighted that the diocese of Rome has resumed the ancient custom of entrusting a church to a deacon to become a diaconate, as it did with you, dear Andrea, in a working-class neighbourhood of the city. I greet you and your wife Laura with affection. I hope you do not end up like Saint Lawrence, but keep going! [laughter]

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Let us begin by reflecting a little on the ministry of the deacon. The main path to follow is the one indicated by Vatican Council II, which understood the diaconate as a “proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy”. *Lumen Gentium*, after describing the function of presbyters as a participation in the priestly function of Christ, illustrates the ministry of deacons, “upon whom”, it says, “hands are imposed not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service” (29). This difference is not insignificant. The diaconate, which in the previous conception was reduced to an order of passage to the priesthood, thus regains its place and its specificity. The mere fact of emphasising this difference helps to overcome the scourge of clericalism, which places a caste of priests “above” the People

of God. This is the core of clericalism: a priestly caste “above” the People of God. And if this is not resolved, clericalism will continue in the Church. Deacons, precisely because they are dedicated to the service of this People, remember that in the ecclesial body no one can elevate himself above others.

In the Church, the opposite logic must apply, the logic of lowering oneself. We are all called to lower ourselves, because Jesus stooped to us, He made himself the servant of all. If there is one great person in the Church, it is the one who made him- or herself the smallest, and servant of all. And it all begins here, as we are reminded by the fact that the diaconate is the gateway to the Order. And deacons you remain forever. Let us remember, please, that for the disciples of Jesus, to love is to serve and to serve is to reign. Power lies in service, not in anything else. And as you have recalled what I say, that deacons are the custodians of service in the Church, so we can say that they are the custodians of true “power” in the Church, so that no one goes beyond the power of service. Think about this.

The diaconate, following the high road of the Council, thus leads us to the centre of the mystery of the Church. Just as I have spoken of a “constitutively missionary Church” and a “constitutively synodal Church”, so I add that we should speak of a “constitutively diaconal Church”. Indeed, if we do not live this dimension of service, every ministry is emptied from within, it becomes sterile, it does not bear fruit. And little by little it becomes worldly. Deacons remind the Church that what Saint Theresa discovered is true: the Church has a heart enflamed by love. Yes, a humble heart throbbing with service. Deacons remind us of this when, like the deacon Saint Francis, they bring God’s closeness to others without imposing themselves, serving with humility and joy. The generosity of a deacon who gives of himself without seeking the front ranks has about him the perfume of the Gospel, he tells of the greatness of God’s humility in taking the first step - always, God always takes the first step - to meet even those who have turned their backs on him.

Today we must also pay attention to another aspect. The decrease in the number of priests has led to a prevailing engagement of deacons to substitute them in tasks which, however important, do not constitute the specific nature of the diaconate. They are substitute tasks. The Council, after speaking of service to the People of God “in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word and of charity”, emphasises that deacons are above all - above all - “dedicated to duties of charity and of administration” (Lumen Gentium, 29). The phrase recalls the early centuries, when deacons looked after the needs of the faithful, especially the poor and the sick, in the name and on behalf of the bishop. We can also draw on the roots of the Church of Rome. I am not only thinking of Saint Lawrence, but also of the decision to give life to the diaconate. In the great imperial metropolis seven places were organised, distinct from the parishes and distributed throughout the city’s municipalities, in which deacons carried out grass-roots work on behalf of the entire Christian community, especially the “least of these”, so that, as the Acts of the Apostles say, none among them would be in need (cf. 4:34).

That is why in Rome we have tried to recover this ancient tradition with the diaconate in the church of Saint Stanislaus. I know that you are also present in Caritas and in other bodies that are close to the poor. In this way you will never lose your bearings: deacons will not be “half-priests” or second-rate priests, nor will they be “special altar boys”, no, that is not the path to follow; they will be caring servants who do their best to ensure that no one is excluded and the love of the Lord touches people’s lives in a tangible way. In short, one could summarise diaconal spirituality in a few words, that is, the spirituality of service: willingness on the inside and openness on the outside. Willingness on the inside, from the heart, ready to say yes, docile, without making life revolve around one’s own agenda; and open on the outside, looking at everyone, especially those who are left out, those who feel excluded. Yesterday I read a passage from Don Orione, who spoke about welcoming those in need, and he said: “In our houses” - he was speaking to the religious of his congregation - “in our houses everyone who has a need, any kind of need, anything, even those who have pain, must be welcomed”. And I like that. To receive not only the needy, but those who have pain. Helping these people is important. I entrust this to you.

Regarding what I expect from the deacons of Rome, I would like to add three more brief ideas - but do not be afraid: I am coming to the end - which are not so much “things to do”, but rather dimensions to cultivate. Firstly, I expect you to be humble. It is sad to see a bishop and a priest showing off, but it is even sadder to see a deacon wanting to put himself at the centre of the world, or at the centre of the liturgy, or at the centre of the Church. Be humble. Let all the good you do be a secret between you and God. And so it will bear fruit.

Secondly, I expect you to be good spouses and good fathers. And good grandparents. This will give hope and consolation to couples who are going through difficult times and who will find in your genuine simplicity an outstretched hand. They will be able to think: "Look at our deacon! He is happy to be with the poor, but also with the parish priest and even with his children and his wife!" Even with his mother-in-law, that's very important! Doing everything with joy, without complaining: it is a testimony that is worth more than many sermons. And out with the complaints. Without complaining. "I had so much work, so much...". Nothing. Send these things away. Away. The smile, the family, open to the family, generosity....

Finally, thirdly, I expect you to be sentinels: not only to know how to spot the poor and the distant - this is not so difficult - but to help the Christian community to recognise Jesus in the poor and the distant, as He knocks on our doors through them. It is also a catechetical and prophetic dimension of the sentinel-prophet-catechist who knows how to see beyond and help others to see beyond, and to see the poor who are far away. You can make your own the beautiful image at the end of the Gospels when Jesus asks His disciples from afar: "Have you nothing to eat?" And the beloved disciple recognises Him and says: "It is the Lord!" (*Jn* 21:5,7). Whatever the need, see the Lord. So you, too, recognise the Lord when, in so many of his smaller brothers and sisters, He asks to be fed, to be welcomed and loved. I would like this to be the profile of the deacons of Rome and of the whole world. Work on this. You have generosity, and go forward with this.

I thank you for what you do and what you are, and I ask you, please, to continue to pray for me. Thank you.
