

## The Role of Deacons in the Liturgical Life of the Church



A remark often voiced by parishioners is their surprise regarding the wide variety of liturgical ministries and tasks deacons may undertake as they serve in the parish and diocesan community. In the springtime and early summer months, many dioceses, seminaries, and religious communities celebrate the ordinations of deacons. Some of these newly ordained deacons – transitional deacons – will eventually be ordained priests. Others have embraced this ordained ministry as a permanent state of life. Liturgical norms and rubrics draw no distinctions between the functions of transitional and permanent deacons. While not providing detailed rubrical instructions for every diaconal liturgical ministry, it is nonetheless useful to draw attention to some of the important ways in which deacons are called to serve in liturgical functions, and to specify some of the helpful resources for the new or even veteran deacon.

One of the most concise and complete listings of the deacon's liturgical roles is incorporated in the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*. Although this document concerns most directly the ministry of permanent deacons, the liturgical duties of a transitional deacon would, of course, be identical. Concerning the deacon's functions in the celebration of Mass, paragraph 35 of the Directory states:

During the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy, the deacon participates in specific penitential rites as designated in the Roman Missal. He properly proclaims the Gospel. He may preach the homily in accord with the provisions of Canon Law. He voices the needs of the people in the General Intercessions... The deacon assists the presider and other ministers in accepting the offerings of the people – symbolic of his traditional role in receiving and distributing the resources of the community among those in need – and he helps to prepare the gifts for sacrifice. During the celebration he helps the faithful participate more fully, consciously, and actively in the Eucharistic sacrifice, may extend the invitation of peace, and serves as an ordinary minister of Communion. Deacons have a special responsibility for the cup. Finally, he dismisses the community at the end of the Eucharistic liturgy.

The liturgical ministry of deacons, though, is by no means confined to the celebration of the Eucharist. The same paragraph continues with a wide array of other liturgical functions:

Other liturgical roles for which the deacon is authorized include those of solemnly baptizing, witnessing marriages, bringing *viaticum* to the dying, and presiding over funerals and burials. The deacon can preside at the liturgies of the word and communion services in the absence of a priest. He may officiate at celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours and at exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. He can conduct public rites of blessing, offer prayer services for the sick and dying, and administer the Church's sacramentals, as designated in the *Book of Blessings*.

The Church's approved liturgical books provide detailed instructions and rubrics for all the above activities, all of which should be addressed meticulously in both seminary training and formation programs for the permanent diaconate. The deacon, or any liturgical minister for that matter, can also profit by reviewing the official instructions both at the outset of his ordained ministry, and again months or even years later, as he has progressed in familiarity and comfort with executing the rites.

Three areas of diaconal liturgical ministry where questions often arise are in the celebration of the Mass, how to celebrate Sunday "Communion services" in the absence of a priest, and in the deacon's role in the conferral of blessings. Highlighted below are resources a deacon needs to familiarize himself with for the proper execution of his role in these liturgical rites.

### The Eucharist

It is of the highest importance that a deacon takes the time both to learn, and to revisit frequently, the various instructions for the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy. The rubrics ("red print") included in the Order of Mass are a good place to begin. Intended as simple reminders of actions, these instructions do not always present the whole story. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) contains far more detail. In particular, a deacon will want to focus on the section entitled "Mass with a Deacon" (nos. 171-186). Aside from this important section, there are numerous other references to the liturgical ministry of the deacon throughout the GIRM. But even this does not cover all the ministries of deacons at Masses where a bishop is present. For these additional details, the *Ceremonial of Bishops* must be consulted. The *Ceremonial* does not contain any complete liturgical rites, but instead gives the special rubrics for the Mass and for other liturgies where a bishop is present. Paragraphs 23-26 describe the general roles of deacons in episcopal liturgies, and other details can be found in the instructions for the individual rites.

### Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest

Approved for the use of deacons (or even lay persons) in the dioceses of the United States, *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* can be a vital resource in communities where a priest may be only intermittently available. Of particular concern should be paragraphs 14-17 in the introduction, which states that these rites should be used only in cases of genuine necessity, and never when a full celebration of the Mass may be available at a reasonably nearby parish. The deacon (or the specially delegated lay minister) called upon to preside at such celebrations should take special note that two rather different formats are provided as options for these services. Chapter II describes the format which is probably most familiar: Celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, with the optional distribution of Holy Communion (see nos. 186-216). A second format, however, is presented in Chapter I, in which the service is based in large measure on the Liturgy of the Hours (see nos. 118-185). Given the longstanding heritage of the Liturgy of the Hours as a liturgy which can be presided over by a deacon or lay person, and given the growing interest for praying the Liturgy of the Hours shown by the laity in recent years, this option might be an ideal choice for those communities where a priest cannot always be present.

### Blessings

The last resource to consider in this context is the invaluable *Book of Blessings*. This book contains a wide array of blessings, helpfully categorized in the table of contents as blessings of persons, buildings and various forms of human activity, blessings of liturgical or devotional objects for use in churches, religious articles, blessings related to feasts and seasons, and blessings for various needs and occasions. The General Introduction to the book presents a concise theological explanation of blessings in general, and paragraph 18 provides an important explanation of the various types of blessings as administered by a bishop, a priest, a deacon, or lay men and women. Of particular importance for deacons in this context is the stipulation: "But whenever a priest is present, it is more fitting that the office of presiding [at blessings] be assigned to him and that the deacon assist by carrying out those functions proper to the diaconate" (no. 18c). Although the *Book of Blessings* provides for considerable adaptation and flexibility in most of the blessings it contains, the General Introduction reminds the user that the blessings should be rooted in the word of God and in the prayer of the Church, and "to ensure active participation in the celebration and to guard against any danger of superstition, it is ordinarily not permissible to impart the blessing of any article or place merely through a sign of blessing and without either the word of God or any sort of prayer being spoken" (no. 27). The introductions to each of the many blessings the book contains clearly state whether the blessing may be administered by a bishop, a priest, a deacon, or a lay person.

This brief inventory of resources does not include all the instances of liturgical and public prayer in which a deacon would be involved. All too often, formal liturgical instruction for future deacons and other ministers is limited by time and resources. Every deacon should have the most current approved liturgical texts for all the rites he will be engaged in, including the *Roman Missal*. The ongoing study and review of rubrics as well as introductory matter of the various rites will go a long way to alleviate confusion about the roles and functions of deacons, and other ministers as well.