

## The Prophetic Ministry of the Deacon III

### *The Call to Discipleship*

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What is a disciple? One who sits at the feet of the teacher goes the usual definition. In the case of the Christian disciple it refers to one who follows Christ. The call to follow Christ began with Jesus' call of the *twelve* to follow him. This is one of the unusual features of being a disciple of Jesus, that he called each one of them by name to follow him. Usually disciples asked a teacher if they could study with the teacher. In Jesus' case, he called men to follow him. The biblical scholar, Fr. John Meier notes the following:

- Jesus seized the initiative in deciding who would be his disciples. He confronted certain individuals with his imperious command to follow him, a command that brooked no opposition or delay.
- Hence, in using the term, *following*, Jesus intended not some pious metaphor but literal, physical following on his preaching tours in Palestine. Accordingly, who accepted his command to follow had to leave home, family, and other comfortable ties.
- On top of those hardships, Jesus warned his disciples that they might face other sufferings: hostility and even deadly opposition, including opposition from one's own alienated family<sup>1</sup>

Whatever one makes of Fr. Meier's comments it is certain that the call to discipleship is one that involves a person's entire being. The surrender of the whole self to the Lord and his mission is a prophetic sign to the world of the Lord's own surrender to the Father for us. A deacon who accepts the demands of discipleship will find himself challenged to grow in ways that he may not have envisioned when he accepted his call to Holy Orders.

Fr. Meier reminds us of that fact that Jesus calls us to follow him to *new places* in our lives. He also reminds us that this call is one that requires immediate response by his followers. In a conversation in the 1980's about some of the troubling social issues the Church was confronting at the time, I was speaking with an individual who told me that, though she had great concern about these issues, she was not at the stage of faith where she felt she should address those issues of concern. I was startled by her answer and remarked, "Jesus makes no mention about what stage of faith a person has attained, but rather, he calls for immediate action, sometimes its urgent"! Sometimes this action may need to be confrontational and non-violent in practice to address social injustice. This is the hard part of discipleship for it calls a person to confront evil. Such a confrontation is meant to generate a *creative tension* in the situation to promote negotiation and change of the status quo. This is captured in Dr. Martin Luther King's *Letter from A Birmingham Jail, 1963*:

*You may well ask, Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path? You are right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored.*

As a consequence, the deacon who responds to this call to discipleship will find that his former manner of life may need to undergo some significant changes. As a disciple of Christ, one who shares in the prophetic ministry of Christ, he may need to examine and change some aspects of his lifestyle. Certainly this call of Jesus to come and follow him had already affected the deacon prior to his acceptance into formation. But as a deacon certain questions arise: Does the lifestyle of the deacon reflect solidarity with the poor and suffering of this world? When people view the deacon's ministry do they see a concern for justice and efforts to build peace? Do others see in the deacon's ministry a witness to the sanctity of all life from conception to natural death? Does the deacon seem to be a man of prayer?

Discipleship is easy to believe in—almost romantic to believe in. Living it, as Fr. Meier reminds us is far more challenging than anything a person has done in life; it costs something, sometimes everything. As Fr. Meier reminds us, those who take the Gospel seriously must be prepared to face opposition from others, even friends and family. Sometimes it is costly and may cost a deacon his life! Certainly it will entail a deep commitment to conversion and the death of egotism that hinders our service ministry.

The renowned theologian, pastor and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of the unique and challenging aspects of Christian discipleship in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He describes two ways to look at faith. One way to see faith is as a mere belief in faith, what he refers to as *cheap grace*. The other type of faith is really following Jesus in the midst of the *signs of the times*, what he refers to as *costly grace*. Bonhoeffer notes:

*Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the Church. Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like a cheapjack's wares. This is grace without price, without discipleship.*

For Bonhoeffer this *cheap grace* was more concerned with orthodoxy without orthopraxis, i.e. right doctrine without right action. On the other hand, he notes that:

*Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a person must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his or her life, and it is grace because it gives the only true life....Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son, and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.<sup>2</sup>*

The manifestation of such grace is only possible when one is intimately committed to a relationship with Christ is a self-surrender that lives the vulnerable, self-emptying or crucified love of Christ in the world. Many deacons will tell you that such a commitment has brought them into places they could not have foreseen prior to their ordination. Some have become prison or hospital chaplains, some teach, others minister to bring peace between adversaries, and so many other expressions of diaconal ministry. Discipleship raises the central Catholic concern that our faith be an incarnational faith that responds to the challenges of our times with the transforming praxis of the Kingdom of God in this world now!

*One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and their practice of their daily lives. As far back as the Old Testament the prophets vehemently denounced this scandal...Let Christians follow the example of Christ who worked as a craftsman; let them be proud of the opportunity to carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional, scientific and technical enterprises with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are ordered to the glory of God.*

*Gaudium et Spes, #43*

The possibility of alienating friends and family that can result from the deacon's acceptance of the call to discipleship will always remain an intrinsic aspect of his ministry. However, it is entirely possible that the spouse of the deacon, his children, good friends or co-workers are powerful examples of discipleship. In that the deacon can recognize as the Lord's presence in his life calling him to a deeper commitment to be a disciple of the Lord.

The prophetic ministry of discipleship is one of hope. In prophetic style the disciple of the Lord is fearless about denouncing the manifold forms of oppression in society. Such a ministry can provoke the real possibility of suffering, rejection and perhaps physical death. There *is* indeed a cost of discipleship.

*It is possible that what love demands of us here may look like treason—a betrayal, of the family, and of our customary way of life. But it is also possible that this is the very place where the discernment of spirits is needed in the churches of the rich and powerful countries of the earth.*

*Certainly, Christianity is never just there for the very brave. Yet it is not we who define the demands of love, nor is it we who fix the conditions under which it is tested. So, for example, Christian love in periods of nationalistic thinking may well have to incur the suspicion of harming national honor. In situations of racism it will incur the suspicion of race treason. And in periods when the social contradictions in the world cry out to heaven it will incur the suspicion of class treason for betraying the allegedly necessary interests of the propertied.*<sup>3</sup>

This is a great challenge for it may force the deacon to look deep within to examine his own vision of things and to compare them with the demands of the prophetic ministry of discipleship. While at the same time, the deacon announces the *good news* of a God who deeply desires to reconcile oppressed and oppressor via a forgiveness of the past and a just structural change of the present. All this is grounded in the present/future Kingdom of God which continually undermines any presumption to believe that the status quo is in any way perfect. That will take us to our next part of this series.

## Notes

**1** John F. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. III, Companions and Competitors*, (New York) Doubleday, 2001, p. 54-72.

**2** Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York), Touchstone Books, 1995, pp. 44-45.

**3** Johann Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church*, (New York), Crossroad Publishing, 1981, pp.14-15.