

## The Prophetic Ministry of the Deacon II

### *Kenosis as the Essence of the Prophetic Ministry of the Deacon*



(Crucifixion in White, Chagall)

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How does a deacon live the prophetic ministry in the world? Before answering such a question I should make it clear that I am focusing on the deacon's role in social justice ministry. Obviously, there are many ways to give prophetic witness and every form includes the self-forgetfulness of love extended to another. Also, it must be stated clearly and emphatically that only a man of deep and consistent prayer can truly give prophetic witness to the Lord. It is in a life of surrender to the Lord in prayer in all its manifestations in active contemplation that a believer comes to know the Lord and reflect the Lord to others.

The deacon is called to reflect on the spirituality that guides him in his ministry. A deacon knows he cannot do everything to respond to the concerns of justice and peace, but he knows he can do something. What that *something* is will become apparent to him as he delves into the proper attitude and motivation of his maturing spirituality.

*Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus,*

*Who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not deem equality with God something  
to be grasped.*

*Rather, he emptied himself,  
taking the form of slave... Philippians 2: 6-7*

These words from Paul's letter to the Philippians cites one of the earliest Christian hymns that attempt to express the reality of Jesus Christ. This hymn not only offers insight into why the Father raised Jesus from the dead, but also challenges a believer to imitate Christ by *emptying of the self* in service to others. In essence, it is a summons to

begin that inner spiritual movement away from egotistical pursuits toward a life of service in the power and manner of Christ. It is a call to what Deacon Bill Ditewig and others refer to as, *servant leadership*.1

For deacons this is a call to the imitation of Christ in a life that focuses on service to the other rather than assertion of one's own self- importance.

*The basic spiritual attitude of the deacon must make it clear that the Christian path is not an ascent or a triumphal march in glory, but a path that looks downward, following Jesus Christ, who descended from heaven. This downwardly mobile career is described in the Christological hymn in the Letter to the Philippians (2:6-11), which prescribes the basic Christian virtue, as the spiritual tradition teaches, namely, the attitude of humility, which is a willingness to serve. This must.... be the basic attitude of the deacon.*2

Such an inner spiritual movement expressed in outward service is a reflection of the inner life of the Blessed Trinity made manifest in the crucified love of Christ. In this kenotic lifestyle a deacon sacramentalizes the sacrificial love of the members of the Holy Trinity. Such a love is the basis for true community and the power that transforms the world.

*God is not self-contained, egotistical and self-absorbed but overflowing love, outreaching desire for union with all that God has made. The communion of divine life is God's communion with us in Christ and as Spirit.* 3

This kenotic love of the members of the Holy Trinity is the model for Christian life. It is this love that transforms human hearts and the world. And it is this love that joins us to all people in a fundamental solidarity and communion which the deacon is to help build in this world.

*The commandment of mutual love, which represents the law of life for God's people, must inspire, purify and elevate all human relationships in society and in politics....The modern cultural, social, economic and political phenomenon of interdependence, which intensifies and makes particularly evident the bonds that unite the human family accentuates once more, in the light of Revelation, a new world of unity of the human race, which must ultimately inspire our solidarity. This supreme model of unity, which is a reflection of the intimate life of God, one God in three Persons, is what we Christians mean by the word communion.*4

Such a life is prophetic because, by the very pattern of such a life, there is a clear denunciation of selfishness and egotistical self-seeking, while at the same time the deacon manifests the energizing and liberating praxis of Christian freedom in love. Such a life serves as a critique of the *cult of consumerism* and serves as a radical critique of a world order constructed on the foundation of force and aggression.

One practical manifestation of a trinitarian lifestyle will be a profound concern for human rights. This concern is grounded in our fundamental solidarity in interdependence with all people.

*Thus the doctrine of the Trinity is an essentially and radically political statement: it maintains that not only is human existence social but that the ground of all being is relationship.*<sup>5</sup>

What's more, this interdependence is anchored in the Judeo-Christian understanding that all people are created in God's image and likeness. As a consequence, the deacon is called to challenge and help remove those things that degrade, injure, threaten and assault human dignity. The deacon does this without concern for the *good opinion of others* and only with the concern to obediently respond to the Lord's words, *what you have done for the least of these....Matt.25*. The deacon also bears witness to the fact that we are not created to be *rugged individualists*, but rather, that to come to the truest expression of our humanity is to move out in kenotic love to others.

The deacon is called to make present the Christian freedom in love that embraces all people no matter the class, race, ethnic background or other artificial barriers erected through the centuries. In fact, the deacon is called to pull down *walls* that separate people and to help build *bridges* among people by calling forth their talents, time and treasure for the purpose of making God's in-breaking Kingdom a little more visible in this world.

*This includes a perceptive eye for those suffering distress, illness, or fear. The task is to bring a healing that sets free and empowers them to trust and so to serve and love others in their turn...*<sup>6</sup>

Kenotic spirituality frees a deacon to be obedient to the Lord's instruction:

*The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are addressed as Benefactors; but among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant.* Luke 22:25-26

If this be so in a deacon's ministry then a deacon can be assured of manifesting the priority of servant leadership and love to those to whom he ministers. Deacon Bill Ditewig captures this point when he states:

*The challenge of the contemporary diaconate is to realize the ramifications of kenosis, a totally self-sacrificial strength for service. In real terms this means that deacons must divorce themselves from any expressions, attitudes, and behaviors that smack of clericalism as the acquisition of power and authority for its own sake. This means that there should be something unique in the ways in which deacons serve that demonstrates this kenotic dimension. Excessive concern over the wearing of clerical attire or clerical forms of address, or an attitude that certain ministries may be "theirs" by right of ordination may be signs in opposition to the kenotic nature of the diaconate.*<sup>7</sup>

Such a lifestyle is a part of that prophetic *energizing* that reveals that there is a way to live that is free of the encumbrances of conspicuous consumption and the heavy weight of the anxiety producing effects of self-preoccupation. It is a lifestyle that gives concrete witness to the present/future Reign of God in the world

The deacon can bring such insights into daily life in the personal, interpersonal, national and international dimensions of our world. A deacon confronts himself with the call to service by exploring his motives of his activity in ministry. In serving others the deacon directs his ministry toward the uplift of others and the calling forth of their gifts that they have been given to serve the community. Socially, the deacon raises the awareness of others to the needs of the poor and the injustice in society summoning the community to actions to meet the immediate needs of the poor and to address the causes of such injustice. The deacon can also raise up to the nations of the world the call of those powerful and wealthy nations to share their time, treasure and talents as their form of kenosis in working with the poorer nations to build a more just and peaceful world order.

Kenosis, the life of service, will demand the discipline of prayer and the assistance of spiritual direction for the deacon. Such a life is bound to bring a deacon, or any person who answers the call to Christian service (discipleship), into conflict with some aspects of the surrounding culture. So what typifies prophetic Christian discipleship? We will examine this in the next article.

## Notes

- 1 James Keating, ed. *The Deacon Reader* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press), 2006, p. 248.
- 2 Walter Kasper, *Leadership in the Church* (New York: Herder and Herder), 2003, p.39
- 3 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For US: The Trinity and Christian Life* (SanFrancisco: Harper Collins) 1991, p. 15.
- 4 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB), 2005. #33.
- 5 Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press), 1993, p.59.
- 6 Kasper, p.39
- 7 William Ditewig, *The Emerging Diaconate: Servant Leaders in a Servant Church* (MahwaH, N.J.: Paulist Press) , 2007, p. 132.