



By Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers

Holy Orders: Deacons and Bishops

Assisting in Christ's mission to go and make disciples

The relationship between the bishop and deacons goes back to the earliest days of the Church. In the Acts of the Apostles, it was the bishops who ordained the first seven deacons when they “prayed and laid hands on them” (Acts 6:6). It is through the bishop that the deacon receives the authority to exercise his ministry.

While it is true that deacons assist parish priests, which is what most parishioners see deacons doing on a daily basis, his primary ministerial responsibility in assisting the bishop with his duty of evangelization takes place outside the parish: in the encounter with widows, atheists, prisoners, the indifferent, the indigent, the homeless, racists, the fallen away, the disenfranchised. These are people on the margins, who have fallen through the cracks, who no one sees, who live in the shadows.

Deacons can reach people the parish priest cannot. After encountering the marginalized and sharing the Gospel, the deacon, brings them to the healing ministry of the priest.

The ordination rites of both bishops and deacons indicate their intimate connection with the Gospels. At an episcopal ordination, two deacons hold the Book of the Gospels opened and above the head of the soon-to-be bishop. After the prayer of consecration and the anointing with the sacred chrism, the consecrating bishop hands the Book of the Gospels to the newly ordained bishop saying, “Receive the Gospel and preach the word of God with all patience and sound teaching.” The placing of the Book of the Gospels illustrates that the preaching of the Word of God is the preeminent obligation of the office of bishop.

The bishop, whom Christ has called and filled with the Holy Spirit like the apostles on the day of Pentecost, assisted by deacons, will follow Our Lord's example by preaching the Good News in this “crooked and perverse generation” (Phil 2:15) that is awaiting the Living Word that will stir the dried, dead bones of an ane-

mic culture.

At diaconal ordinations, the bishop prays over the deacon, who will be entrusted with the ministry of the word. After invoking the Holy Spirit upon the ordinands, the bishop continues, “Lord, send forth upon him the Holy Spirit, that he might be strengthened by the gift of your sevenfold grace to carry out faithfully the work of the ministry.” After being vested with the stole and dalmatic, the Book of the Gospels is placed in the hands of the deacon by the bishop, saying: “Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach.” The nexus between the two ordination rites (episcopal and diaconal) is the mandate to preach the Gospel.

“When he is ordained, a deacon is commanded by his Bishop, the successor of the apostles, to preach the Gospel. This brings about a change deep in his being. The deacon's physical breath is now inspired by the Holy Spirit so that what he will preach and teach will not sound like a mere human voice. From that moment on, the deacon's preaching and teaching must be the voice of Christ” (Archbishop Roberto O. González Nieves, “The Permanent Diaconate: Its Identity, Functions, and Prospects”).

This is the heart of the deacon's service ministry that is strengthened by the gift of the Holy Spirit in ordination. This same Spirit inspired our brothers Stephen and Philip to boldly preach the truth of the Gospel in love. Ennobled by sacramental grace, the deacon, with humility and charity, helps the bishop continue Christ's mission to go and make disciples, thereby sharing in his sacramental, apostolic ministry. **TD**

DEACON HAROLD BURKE-SIVERS serves at Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Portland, Oregon.