

CHAPTER ONE

DOCTRINAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIACONATE

I. INTRODUCTION

20 This *National Directory* offers some theological points of reference based upon relevant magisterial teaching. As the Congregation for Catholic Education explains, “The almost total disappearance of the permanent diaconate from the Church of the West for more than a millennium has certainly made it more difficult to understand the profound reality of this ministry. However, it cannot be said for that reason that the theology of the diaconate has no authoritative points of reference. . . . [T]hey are very clear, even if they need to be developed and deepened.”¹

II. THE SACRAMENTAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH

21 *Lumen Gentium*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* from the Second Vatican Council, speaks of the Church as “mystery,” “sacrament,” “communion,” and “mission”: “The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”² The Church is the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.³ It is “the community of faith, hope, and charity” as well as “an entity with visible delineation.”⁴ “But, the society [formed] with hierarchical [structures] and the Mystical Body of Christ . . . [are] not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality, which coalesces from a divine and a human element.”⁵

1 BNFPD, no. 3.

2 LG, no. 1.

3 LG, no. 17.

4 LG, no. 8.

5 LG, no. 8.

- 22** Jesus Christ, through his ministry, life, Death, and Resurrection, established in human society and history a new and distinct reality, a community of men and women, through whom “He communicated truth and grace to all.”⁶ Through the Church, the Good News of Jesus Christ continues to be told and applied to the changing circumstances and challenges of human life. As Christians live their lives in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the assurance of Christ’s return in glory, they offer to others a hope to live by, encouraging them also to embrace Christ and overcome the forces of evil. In the sacraments, which symbolize and make real again the gifts of God that are the origin, center, and goal of the Church’s life, the power of Jesus Christ’s redemption is again and again at work in the world. In her ministry, the Church “encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of her poor and suffering founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ.”⁷ Thus, in the communion of life, love, and service realized under the leadership of the successors of the Apostles, a vision of reconciled humanity is offered to the world.

III. ECCLESIAL COMMUNION AND MISSION

THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION: BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION, AND EUCHARIST

- 23** Initiation into the Church, the Body of Christ, comes about first through the Sacrament of Baptism—the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism, every member of the Church receives new life in the Spirit and becomes a member of Christ’s Body—a participant in the new creation. This new life is strengthened in the Sacrament of Confirmation, through which the baptized receives the Spirit, is more perfectly bound to the Church, and is obliged to bear witness to Christ and to spread and defend the faith by word and deed. In the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the child of God receives the food of new life, the Body and Blood of

⁶ LG, no. 8.

⁷ LG, no. 8.

Christ. In this Holy Communion, Christ unites each of the baptized to all the faithful in one body—the Church: “Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are sacraments of Christian initiation. They ground the common vocation of all Christ’s disciples, a vocation to holiness and to the mission of evangelizing the world. They confer the graces needed for the life according to the Spirit during this life as pilgrims on the march towards the homeland.”⁸ “Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion. It is always the one and the same Spirit who calls together and unifies the Church and sends her to preach the Gospel ‘to the ends of the earth.’”⁹

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY ORDERS

24 The Church, itself the great sacrament of Christ’s presence, rejoices in another “outpouring of the Spirit”¹⁰—the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Out of the body of initiated believers—anointed in the Holy Spirit through the Sacrament of Baptism, strengthened in the Sacrament of Confirmation, and nurtured with the Bread of Life—Christ calls some to ordained service. The Church, discerning their vocational charism, asks the diocesan bishop to ordain them to *diakonia*.

25 “Holy Orders is the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles [and their successors] continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time.”¹¹ Thus, it is the sacrament of apostolic ministry: “The mission of the Apostles, which the Lord Jesus continues to entrust to the Pastors of his people, is a true service, significantly referred

8 CCC, no. 1533.

9 St. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (Christifideles Laici)* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1988), no. 32, citing Acts 1:8.

10 BNFPD, no. 5.

11 CCC, no. 1536.

to in Sacred Scripture as ‘*diakonia*,’ namely, service or ministry.”¹² This *diakonia* “is exercised on different levels by those who from antiquity have been called bishops, priests and deacons.”¹³ “The ordained ministries, apart from the persons who receive them, are a grace for the entire Church.”¹⁴ “These two terms—apostle and servant—go together. They can never be separated. They are like the two sides of a medal. Those who proclaim Jesus are called to serve, and those who serve proclaim Jesus.”¹⁵

26 The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the Sacrament of Holy Orders in this way:

Catholic doctrine, expressed in the liturgy, the Magisterium, and the constant practice of the Church, recognizes that there are two degrees of ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ: the episcopacy and the presbyterate. The diaconate is intended to help and serve them. For this reason the term *sacerdos* in current usage denotes bishops and priests but not deacons. Yet Catholic doctrine teaches that the degrees of priestly participation (episcopate and presbyterate) and the degree of service (diaconate) are all three conferred by a sacramental act called “ordination,” that is, by the Sacrament of Holy Orders.¹⁶

27 St. Paul points out that the Holy Spirit is the source of all ministries in the Church and that these services are quite distinct (see 1 Cor 12:4-11; Rom 12:4-8). The distribution of ministerial gifts follows a design set by Christ: “In the building up of Christ’s Body various members and functions have their part to play. There is only one Spirit who, according to His own richness and the needs of the ministries, gives His different gifts for the welfare of the Church. What has a special place among

12 St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, no. 22. See LG, no. 24.

13 LG, no. 28.

14 St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, no. 22.

15 Pope Francis, Homily for the Jubilee of Deacons (May 29, 2016).

16 CCC, no. 1554.

these gifts is the grace of the apostles to whose authority the Spirit Himself subjected even those who are endowed with charisms.”¹⁷

IV. THE REESTABLISHED ORDER OF DEACONS

- 28** The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, taking seriously the role of the deacon to which St. Paul refers in his First Letter to Timothy, remind us that “those who serve well as deacons gain good standing and much confidence in their faith in Christ Jesus” (3:13). It was for serious pastoral and theological reasons that the Council decided to reestablish the Order of Deacons as a permanent rank in the hierarchy of the Church.
- 29** The Sacrament of Holy Orders marks deacons “with an *imprint* (‘character’) which cannot be removed and which configures them to Christ, who made himself the ‘deacon’ or servant of all.”¹⁸ For this level of Holy Orders, Christ the Servant calls, and the Church asks the bishop to ordain, deacons to be consecrated witnesses to service. In his post-synodal exhortation *The Church in America*, St. John Paul II makes his own the words of the bishops of that gathering: “We see with joy how deacons ‘sustained by the grace of the Sacrament, in the ministry (*diakonia*) of the liturgy, of the word and of charity are at the service of the People of God, in communion with the Bishop and his priests.”¹⁹
- 30** Ordination confers an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It configures the deacon to Christ’s consecration and mission. It constitutes the deacon as a sacred minister by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. He is “consecrated and deputed to serve the People of God by a new and specific title,”²⁰ with a distinct identity and integrity in the Church that marks him as neither a lay person nor a priest; rather, the deacon is a cleric who is ordained to *diakonia*, namely, a service to God’s People in communion

17 LG, no. 7.

18 CCC, no. 1570.

19 St. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in America (Ecclesia in America)* (January 22, 1999) (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1999), no. 42, citing LG, no. 29.

20 DMLPD, no. 1. See CIC, c. 1008; Pope Benedict XVI, *Omnium in Mentem* (October 26, 2009).