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A Deacon's Pushing

and is becoming. Due to this "poverty" within his call (he brings "nothing"—no absolution, no healing ointment, no celebration of the Eucharist, etc.), it becomes all the more urgent for the deacon to tend to his own ongoing conversion. A large part of diaconal ministry entails bearing the fruit of his own painful conversion to the people, fruit built upon the grace of ordination.

Since God is love, God is never idle, so God *always* loves us, always calls to deacons from within the grace of ordination. This call took on flesh in Christ, whose Spirit now continues to call to men deep within their consciences and from within the cry of those in need. The awe-inspiring beauty of this Mystery of God wanting men to receive His love is that Christ *enables* deacons to receive Him. His giving of Himself in self donation within the Paschal Mystery *makes men able* to receive Him. Deacons are invited to pause and behold this mystery everyday so that they might be converted by His grace, leaving behind all that will prohibit them from permanently ordering their lives to the servant mysteries of Christ. This conversion benefits the deacon, of course, but ultimately even his own personal conversion is at the service of the Church. One is becoming holy because the Church, Christ's Bride, needs to experience Christ loving Her, loving Her in Her own wounds. And it is the deacon who tends these wounds in Christ's own name.

Beholding the Beauty of God

To pause and behold the mystery of Christ's love, then, ushers deacons into

Ongoing Conversion: Against the Garish Age

Love's most profound language: silent gazing. Such a seeing is not a lustful taking but a *contemplative beholding*. When we behold someone, we are affected by the other's integrity; when we leer with lust, we take possession and use. God's beauty is such that it refuses to be taken and used; God's coming and God's beauty is such that He beguiles us, fascinates us, and makes us *want* to become worthy to be in His presence. The result and power of such beholding is even seen in Jesus' enemies, evidenced in Pilate's reticence to condemn him (Lk 23:4, "I find no guilt in this man"). Falling in love with another human is only a shadow of the depth of transformation wrought by God's Holy Spirit when a person yields to God's own beauty. And God, beauty itself, enters men most deeply at silent levels of receiving, too deep to adequately utter. Nevertheless believers know when God has arrived. Affectively those with faith know something has shifted in them, and they will never be the same.

God's eyes reach the eyes of our heart and change them. Leading and serving by example in silent prayer, the deacon gazes upon the face of God, Christ, who is the emblem of His love for all, and the deacon lets it change him (see Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 12). How does one receive this Presence within? How does one stay receiving at such a level of communion with the indwelling Spirit? The deacon must humbly and persistently surrender to the Spirit all of his *thoughts, feelings, and desires*. Satan has no power over the humble, because the humble live in truth, and the truth is Christ. Only those who rationalize and hide their sins from

God invite alienation from the Holy Spirit and communion with the father of lies.

Who would hide in such a way? It would be the deacon who loves his sins more than the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Men cannot love holiness by nature. This is true not because one is not personally good enough, smart enough, or strong enough to so love. Men are incapable of doing so because of the original wound, the original weakness with which all are born. What is this wound? Men are weak before sin. Men *naturally* like sin more than love. Humans are wounded with sin, meaning that it is easier for us to choose evil than to choose truth and love.

Only Christ can enter and heal this wound from within. His mystery enters us in silence and transforms our affections so that over time we come to know virtue as sweet and sin as bitter. If deacons believe this, then transitory emotions will not discourage them because they will base their ongoing conversions upon the reality of the objective content of *Christ's promises* (Mt 28:20). No matter what doubts they harbor or turbulent feelings they embody, deacons believe Christ is *always giving Himself* to them, purifying them and aligning their wills with His own. If they believe this, then they can *always* turn ever so slightly *within* and gaze upon His face and receive anew a share in His servant mysteries. God revealed himself as Christ ministered to all those in need. In a sense God was saying, "See how I love?" God moved toward humanity in love. The drama of the deacon's spiritual life is summed up this way: "How will I respond to such a love?" "How ought one live who has been so loved?"

Faith and conversion

Faith reveals that God wants to initiate conversion within His ministers. "Repent and believe" (Mk 1:15). God leads His deacons away from sin and toward healing. The healing flows from God's own being, spilling out from the Father's love for the Son and the Son's love for the Father and lifting us up into that same love in and through Christ. In this way the deacon becomes a new son, as do all who believe. The Trinity *is love* and wants to lead the whole Church to share in the life of this very same love. This divine love is paradoxically attracted to sin. God wants to come to deacons in their isolation and heal them by way of holy communion with the sacred. Clerics house the wounds, and God brings the salve. Or, do ministers think they can heal their own ontological and spiritual illnesses? Can they save themselves from continually choosing what is harmful to spiritual and moral happiness? The saints tell us no, and they tell us no because they tried to heal the pain of the human condition by first choosing sin instead of abandoning themselves in trust to the Trinitarian mystery. The converted lives of the saints indicate the road that all ministers must take: "After all you have died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3).

Why is Conversion so Vital to a Deacon's Ministry?

The deacon does not bring the sacraments with him into the secular culture on his evangelical journey, except for one: the sacrament of Holy Orders that he received

Listening and Bearing Fruit

The work of conversion is the work of the divine voice, not a human voice. God's voice is an *event of change*. When heard, it *always bears fruit*. Deacons must seek God's voice and listen so that they can be changed by it. Clerics must also pray that their voices echo the sound of Christ's own love and service, assisting in the change of other persons' lives. God's voice speaking within calls deacons back to their senses and leads them out to behold His face, the face that always gazes upon the Father in love.

The Spirit will see the deacon through to the end if he trusts in God's own indwelling presence. The Spirit rushes to any sinner to heal, but first a man must be courageous enough to name the sickness. The cause of the sickness is clear: it is a choice to never be denied a desire. This curse is powerful: "May you always get what you want!" In so living a desire-never-denied, deacons are given meaninglessness and emptiness, because they have ruled their lives by unpurified desire rather than the truth.

For a conversion to last it must be affectively connected to this truth: time and/or death takes all from a man except that which bonds him to God. What is the foundation of a deacon's identity? What is it that he would grieve losing? What would threaten his happiness, stability, inner peace? These are the things the deacon must name and explore with his spiritual director. The goal is to become a simple man, as St. Francis de Sales once noted: "If I could come back again and live my life over again I would have fewer desires."

The key desire to cultivate is to want to be acted upon by God, to simply seek His company. This is not unusual or self-centered; it is both a way to deepen communion with God and a way to prepare a man for mission. St. Francis turned his back on

what was once sweet (making money) toward what was once bitter (care for the poor, the lepers), so much so that his entire conversion can be summed up as the bitter becoming sweet and the sweet becoming bitter. He became occupied with God and what God is occupied with: the needy.

Personal Conversions serve our Ministries

During a man's life, however, he can become occupied with many other realities and appear to lose interest in communion with God. This can be a form of *acedia*, a spiritual listlessness born of nostalgia for what might have been had he not been chosen for the vocation he now has. Sometimes people mistakenly think that an inability to delight in God means one has to *endure* their vocation. Instead, such a lack of delight signals to a man that he has to *go deeper into his vocation not broader afield*. St. Teresa of Avila wondered why those who wish to serve the Lord can oftentimes feel no affection for spiritual things: "Why do those who serve God and desire to serve God abandon [prayer]?" Our ongoing conversions are not simply to bolster our communion with God but in fact form part of our ministry, our gift to the Church, in that our conversions carry hope to the poor. If we truly know Christ, then we can preach with conviction, serve with joy. This kind of man is needed badly in a culture that eschews the very communion that leads to and sustains one in a moral and spiritual conversion.

Scottish author John Buchan described the "coming of a too garish age, when life would be lived in the glare of neon lamps and the spirit would have no solitude." Here is what Buchan wrote about such a culture:

In such a (nightmare) world everyone would have leisure. But everyone would

be restless, for there would be no spiritual disciplines in life. ... It would be a feverish, bustling world, self-satisfied and yet malcontent, and under the mask of a riotous life there would be death at the heart. In the perpetual hurry of life there would be no chance of quiet for the soul. ... In such a bagman's paradise, where life would be rationalized and padded with every material comfort, there would be little satisfaction for the immortal part of man.

In modernity, nothing has been more public in its consequences than large segments of Western society privately turning away from God, or considering God irrelevant, or declaring God dead. Dostoyevsky reminded us in *The Brothers Karamazov* that "if God does not exist, everything is permissible." We are now seeing "everything." We see the damage that moral relativism and skepticism can wreak on human lives.

The deacon, out of love for the Church, ought not to shrink back from his own spiritual conversion. In this suffering he battles against "the garish age" and pushes against it. He does not wish to ignore it or join the culture of distraction that marks this passing age. Today people suffer from disconnectedness, loneliness, and a lack of real communion. Healing such, in cooperation with grace, is found in the effort of a deacon to become "a man of communion."

God is calling for the deacon to repent and believe, to go beyond the mind he now possesses to a mind that is possessed by the servant mysteries of Christ. May this call be heeded by courageous deacons today. May their own moral and spiritual conversions constitute a large measure of their service to the Church. ■

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