DIAKONIA AS LIVED THEOLOGY

Cosme Carlo A. Lacang, SJ

"*Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become.*
Believe what you read, teach what you believe,
and practice what you teach."

With these words, the ordaining Bishop entrusts to the newly ordained deacon the Book of the Gospels and reminds him of the ministry which is committed to him in the service of God and the Church. In this exhortation, I believe, is found not just the formula for an authentic and fruitful diaconal ministry, but also the synthesis of Christian faith and the study of theology.

In the early days of the Church, narrated in Acts 6:1-7, the apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit to choose seven men known for their wisdom and good repute to help them in the daily distribution of food, so that they could give themselves more fully to the ministry of the word and of prayer. Through the laying on of hands, these men were given the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit and were consecrated to the ministry of *diakonia*. Those called to this office of charity are to serve at the altar as "ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God"[1] and to lead lives that build up the community through their works and witnessing. Deacons carry out their mission in the heart of the Church, always in communion with their particular bishops, the presbyterium, and other ministers, as made clear in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (no. 28), of the Second Vatican Council.

---

[1]United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Rites of Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests, and of Deacons* (Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003), vii. Hereafter USCCB.

https://publications.lst.edu/

To be both a student of theology and a minister of service has been a profound experience for me. My ordained ministry these past four months has been characterized by *Lumen Gentium*'s description of the tasks of deacons within the life of the faith community: "to administer Baptism solemnly; to protect and distribute the Eucharist, assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, bring Viaticum to the dying; read the Sacred Scriptures to the faithful, instruct and exhort the people; preside over the prayer and worship of the faithful, administer sacramentals, and officiate at funeral and burial rites."[2] What we see here is not a list of mere duties to fulfill, but grace-filled means by which the life of God is communicated to God's people. It is a deeply meaningful experience to be an instrument of making alive to the Christian community, through the ministry of service, what is learned in and upheld by theological formation. *Diakonia* is lived theology—theology as incarnated in the life of everyday Church. In this synthesis paper, I intend to reflect on the vital connections between *diakonia* and theology by exploring the three movements that are shared by these two—movements that touch on their source, meaning, and fulfillment.

***Believe what You Read*: Receiving from God**

In his homily during our ordination, Bishop Honesto Ongtioco of Cubao started with a reminder that the foundation of every vocation is a humble acknowledgment that all is a gift. Everything we have—our lives, our histories, our talents, our areas of growth, the people who surround us with support, and even our desire to give back through the vocations we have embraced—is a gift. The entrustment to the deacon of his new

[2]Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, no. 29.

https://publications.lst.edu/

ecclesiastical ministry, symbolized by the giving of the Book of the Gospels, is a grace he freely receives from the community of faith and, ultimately, from God. The minister's giftedness is based not so much on his academic achievements or his moral faultlessness, but on his being freely and lovingly called by the Lord. Our foundational identity is giftedness, made possible because we have a God who is effusive love. Our giftedness speaks not of our merits or worthiness, but of the sheer goodness and generosity of the divine Giver. The apt response to this giftedness is to have hearts that are ready to receive with humble gratitude.

The first movement in both *diakonia* and theology is that of receiving.

Our knowing and relating with God begins with God's initiative of revealing his innermost identity and his deepest desire to share with us his divine life. God is the main mover and sustainer in this relationship he has forged with us. His act of creation, for instance, was done not because of compulsion or out of necessity; God, in himself, is perfect and complete. His free act of bringing into being this good and sacred universe is a result of his love, the overflow of his perfection and completeness. That we are made in God's image and likeness means that we are made capable of beholding divine gifts and of receiving them with awareness and the capacity to engage in a relationship of reciprocity.

The central act of divine giving is God's revelation that God is a community of love. Whereas the deities of other nations were known for dominating their subjects through fear and apathetic disregard, the God of Israel revealed himself to be deeply immersed in the lives of his people and profoundly desirous to grant them liberation from all forms of oppression. Whereas deities were appeased through empty sacrifices,

God primarily sought a loving relationship with his people, made concrete their worthy offerings and made lasting their covenant, and repeatedly reminded the people through the prophets and kings who were anointed for this task. In all this, God gifted his people with the knowledge of who God is and the steady assurance that God is near to bless them.

The progression of God's self-revelation finds its fulfillment and fullness in Jesus Christ. In him is found everything there is to know about God. He who was with the Father (John 1:1-5) reveals the Father. From Jesus Christ, we receive true life in God: we receive him as a child in his incarnation, we receive from him an understanding of the reign of God through his preaching of the Kingdom, we receive healing and fellowship from him through his ministry to the poor, we receive him as the Eucharistic Lord who offers himself for us at the altar of the cross, and we receive him as the Risen One in whose resurrection is found the promise of our eternal destiny with God. In Jesus Christ, we receive access to the inner life of God: that God is a trinity of persons in perpetual self-manifestation and self-offering to one another, whose deepest joy is to have us share in this celebration of love. In the Christ-event, we receive the Gospel that God is the Father who is the source of all, that God is the Son who redeems through his self-offering, and God is the Spirit who animates and brings together.

Believe what you read. What we are invited to *read* is this entire history of divine self-revelation and self-giving which culminates in Jesus Christ, passed on from one generation of believers to the next through what is put down and actively shared in Scripture and Tradition. We are to *believe* in faith and surrender what we have freely received.

Often there is an emphasis on giving as a manifestation—even a proof—of loving. We are so used to jumping into action

https://publications.lst.edu/

to show our appreciation and gratitude for gifts received. However, the first movement of theology reminds us that our first call is to receive. In the act of humbly receiving, we place the preeminence back on the Giver as the one who calls forth and sustains; through the attitude of humbly receiving, we return to our identity as children.

Teach what You Believe: Delighting in God

"Do you resolve to maintain and deepen the spirit of prayer that is proper to your way of life?" This is one of the questions the bishop asks the candidate during the ordination rite. The candidate's yes is his affirmation of the duty of the minister—, of all believers—to keep alive the gift of faith which one has received. Here, prayer is mentioned as a key element in fanning the flames of religious fervor. For deacons in particular, this exhortation is given: "The Church's work of praising God and interceding with Christ, and through him, with the Father, for the salvation of the whole world, is entrusted to deacons in the celebration of Ordination, in such a way that they are to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours on behalf of the entire people of God, indeed of the entire human race."[3] At the heart of this exhortation is the understanding that the important first movement of receiving ought to lead to delighting. The deacon/believer is invited to delight in what he has freely received, ever to keep these gifts in his heart and before his eyes.

The second movement in both diakonia and theology is that of delighting.

The very first chapter of Psalms declares as blessed those "whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on

[3]USCCB, *Rites of Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests, and of Deacons*, no. 178.

his law day and night" (Psalm 1:2). Such a one follows the righteous path and is not tempted to follow the way of the wicked. More importantly, those who delight in the Lord are rewarded with a life of bounty and peace because he is near to God who is the source of all that is good. To delight in the Lord is to behold him and to remain in him. To delight in the Lord is to find light and joy in him.

Jesus Christ is the true light of the world (Jn 8:12; 9:5; 12:46) because he illumines for us the way to the Father and one another. This light he shares with and entrusts to the Church. Over the centuries, the Church has had many ways of expressing her self-understanding with the use of images: the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the community of disciples, etc. At the Second Vatican Council, she highlighted her identity as bearer of Christ who is *lumen gentium*, the light of nations. This powerful image communicates to her members and the rest of humanity her essential role of bringing Christ, the true light, to the world. She does not exist for herself; she is not to be equated to the Kingdom of God. She is to be the sacrament of God, the visible presence of Jesus Christ in the world, the means by which the Holy Spirit imparts divine life. She is missioned to bring the Gospel to all areas of human societies. She is to make use of all worthwhile means—dialogue, catechesis, social service—to make her proclamation credible and fruitful. As a community of faith in pilgrimage, she is to accompany her children in the way of continual conversion to more fully delight in the Lord.

The Second Vatican Council declares that the Church shares in the "joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties"[4] of the people of this age. With this, the faith community embraces all that

[4]Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. no. 1

https://publications.lst.edu/

is human and, as herald of Christ's Gospel, unites itself with all persons in their quest for true happiness. The Church does this by immersing herself in the real-life situations of people and by faithfully offering the message of Jesus Christ as the authentic path towards blessedness. She does this in keeping with her identity as the sacrament of salvation; She does this most efficaciously through the celebration of the seven sacraments entrusted to her by her Head. Each sacrament imparts grace that accompanies the faithful in his/her journey. Each sacrament imparts the divine life of the Lord who is the delight of every heart: baptism restores original grace and introduces one to the family of God; confirmation incorporates more fully the believer into the Church and fortifies him/her to become a more faithful Christian witness in the world; the Eucharist nourishes one with the very body and blood of Christ; confession reconciles the faithful to God and the community; matrimony celebrates the faithful and life-giving love among couples which mirrors the love Christ has for his bride; holy orders empower disciples to lead the community and be a special sign of evangelical witness; anointing of the sick consoles and brings inner healing. All these celebrate—with joy and light—the nearness of God.

Mary is the model of how it is to delight in the Lord. She, who carried the Word in her womb and pondered all things in her heart, who was mother to her Son throughout his ministry, who was present at the cross and the outpouring of the Spirit—she knows how it is to possess the light and joy of the Lord. This is what makes her truly blessed. She who is blessed teaches us to delight in the Lord who delights in gracing us.

Practice what You Teach: Committing to God

"Do you resolve to hold fast to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience, as the Apostle urges, and to proclaim this faith in word and deed according to the Gospel and the Church's tradition?" Before being ordained, the candidate is asked to express his commitment to his new ministry. His assent binds him more closely to the way of Christ's self-giving love and service. He is to consistently manifest in his person, through his words and deeds, the faith of the Christian community. He is to be a credible representative of the Church and God, making the Christian way of discipleship attractive to others. From receiving and delighting, he is led to committing. The deacon/believer is invited to commit to what he has pondered in his heart and what he has beheld with his eyes.

The third movement in both *diakonia* and theology is that of committing.

For one to grow in maturity in the Christian faith, one is invited to progress from knowing about God into transforming his/her person to be profoundly of God. Commitment has two dimensions: the present and the eschatological.

Prophetically and always with the medicine of mercy, the Church works to reverse situations that disadvantage the least in society and prevents the realization of justice and genuine human progress. At present, the Christian believer is called to be heroic in his witness of Christian values, especially in the area of social justice. This is where we locate the Church's insistence on Catholic Social Teachings. These teachings and related papal exhortations have been very clear about the role of the faithful in society. Contrary to the prevalent belief that faith and politics are incompatible, the vocation of the Christian, we are taught, is to bring the values of Christ into

https://publications.lst.edu/

the temporal order. Pope Benedict, in addressing the Bishops of Paraguay in 2008, said, "A big part of the vocation of lay people is their participation in politics to bring justice, honesty, and defense of true and authentic values, and to contribute to the real human and spiritual good of society. The role of the laity... especially in politics, is key to the evangelization of society"[5]. If changes in the unjust structures of society are to be effected, especially in how policies are done, then the faithful have to embrace political involvement as a mission and as an integral part of their Christian identity. Pope Francis says that "politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity since it seeks the common good. We need to be convinced that charity is the principle not only of micro-relationships (i.e. family and friends), but also of macro-relationships (i.e. social, economic, and political ones)."[6] Because of their expertise and wider spheres of influence, the lay faithful are in prime positions to help in the Church's mission to reach out to the different sectors of society that still need the light of the Gospel. As the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines affirms: "The laity's field of evangelization activity covers the vast and complex world of education, politics, society, and economics, as well as the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media."[7] When work in these secular fields is

[5]Pope Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness to Bishops of Paraguay on their Ad Limina 2008*, Speeches, 08 February 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080911_ad-limina-paraguay.html

[6]Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, November 24, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. no. 205

[7]PCP II, *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1991), 434.

done with the guidance of the values of Christ and to provide authentic justice and liberation to all, then the reign of God is made more present in the here and now. There is, therefore, an urgent need for movement—regarding political involvement within the Church and especially among the laity—from apathy and fear to mission and participation.

Commitment has an eschatological dimension too. The work for evangelization affects not just the here-and-now of people, but has profound connections with our understanding of the ultimate destiny of all. If we commit to the belief that creation is called to journey back to God who is our true home and the fulfillment of our longings, then Christ's coming calls us to express our hoped-for communion with God in terms of our concrete commitments to the work of social justice and the liberation of the oppressed. This is so because our actions and ways of relating in the present affect God who is very much involved in and present to all of his beloved creatures, our manner of building up or destroying others and our communities in the present shape our experience of the eschatological gathering of all of creation, and the rule of God—which is his very being of love and communion—is manifested not just in the future, but equally so in our practical and day-to-day choices of making the divine life active and alive in the lives of people, especially in acts of *diakonia* for God's beloved poor.

https://publications.lst.edu/