

St. Lawrence the Deacon and the Vocation of Catholic Deacons

Deacon Keith Fournier, JD, MTS, MPhil

I often write or speak about the challenges we face in this time of crisis engulfing both the Church and the Nation. Western culture is corroding from within, precisely because we have forgotten God. When any culture forgets God, it inevitably loses its humanity. When we turn away from our source, we lose ourselves. That is because we are created in the Image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ so that the Image can be restored. Then, we are called to grow in His likeness, by cooperating with grace.

I find myself regularly reminding my fellow Catholics and other Christians that the times in which we live are not the only difficult times which the Church has faced in over two millennia. I tire of hearing, reading, and being told we are living in a "post-Christian" age. I long ago ceased using such language. I find it to be a counsel of despair.

I prefer to view this time in which we live as Pre-Christian. In doing so I want to emphasize once again that as Christians we are the leaven, life, light, and seed which the Lord wants to use to transform this age from within. We should not waste time wringing our hands. Those hands need to be put to the plow, not looking back, but tilling the ground and sowing the seeds of authentic, Spirit led, renewal and restoration. (See, Luke 9:62)

We were born - and born again through the waters of Baptism – for this time. And, as Catholic Deacons, we were ordained for these times, called to be Heralds of the Gospel - called to receive it, believe it, teach it and live it - as we promised at our ordination.

The hostility toward the Christian faith and the Church is real. And it is accelerating. Personally, I think it will get worse - before it gets better. That is why we need inspiring role models to help us through these times. We can imitate their example and we are assisted by their prayers.

On August 9th or 10th in the Roman Catholic Liturgical Calendar we commemorate the Deacon of the undivided early Christian Church named Lawrence. The situation we face in a declining western culture is not unlike the situation Lawrence and his companions faced.

In some respects, we live in a New Rome, beset with remarkably similar signs of moral decay which those early Christians faced. They did not wring their hands; they fell to their knees asking the Lord for grace, then they rose to their feet to do something about it!

I have served as an ordained Catholic Deacon for twenty nine years and continue to draw great encouragement from his heroic witness in the First Millennium. It inspires me as I seek to be faithful to my own vocation as a Deacon in the Third Millennium.

Catholic Deacons are called to be an icon of Jesus Christ the Servant. In both word and witness they are to proclaim that Jesus Christ is alive, raised from the dead, and continuing His ministry through His Mystical Body, the Church. They live their lives in what is sometimes called the "real world", but it is to be a life that is not of "this world" but rather a seed of the world to come. (See, e.g. Romans 12:2, 1 John 2: 15 - 17)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes this order of Clergy, the diaconate in Christ, in this way:

"At a lower level of the hierarchy are to be found deacons, who receive the imposition of hands 'not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry.'" At an ordination to the diaconate only the bishop lays hands on the candidate, thus signifying the deacon's special attachment to the bishop in the tasks of his "diakonia."

"Deacons share in Christ's mission and grace in a special way. The sacrament of Holy Orders marks them with an imprint ("character") which cannot be removed and which configures them to Christ, who made himself the "deacon" or servant of all. Among other tasks, it is the task of deacons to assist the bishop and priests in the celebration of the divine mysteries, above all the Eucharist, in the distribution of Holy Communion, in assisting at and blessing marriages, in the proclamation of the Gospel and preaching, in presiding over funerals, and in dedicating themselves to the various ministries of charity.

"Since the Second Vatican Council the Latin Church has restored the diaconate "as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy," while the Churches of the East had always maintained it. This permanent diaconate, which can be conferred on married men, constitutes an important enrichment for the Church's mission. Indeed, it is appropriate and useful that men who carry out a truly diaconal ministry in the Church, whether in its liturgical and pastoral life or whether in its social and charitable works, should "be strengthened by the imposition of hands which has come down from the apostles. They would be more closely bound to the altar and their ministry would be made more fruitful through the sacramental grace of the diaconate." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraphs 1569-1571)

When I am asked about the service of a Catholic Deacon, I often say that we go from the altar and the ambo (pulpit) into the world - in order to bring the world into the "new world" of the Church. Deacons are invited to live as leaven in the loaf of human culture, elevating it from within by lives lived in the heart of the Church for the sake of the world.

Deacons are called to be witnesses. The word "martyr" means witness. For most of us, being a witness will not mean the shedding of our blood. But, if it does, we have great examples. The deacon martyrs, including Stephen and Lawrence and so many others. Their lives of sacrificial love continue to inspire the whole church as a perpetual homily! But they have a special role for deacons.

Deacon Lawrence's' heroic life and death commend him to all who choose to see the Third Christian Millennium as a new missionary age. However, the witness of Lawrence is of particular importance for contemporary Catholic Deacons. The Catholic Church is facing growing hostility from those who hate our insistence upon a respect for all human life, from conception to natural death, our defense of true marriage as solely between one man and one woman, open to life, intended for life, and formative of family.

They seek to silence us and engage in a soft persecution, at least so far in the West. They especially focus their animosity on those in the Catholic Church who still "guard the deposit of faith" and embrace the full teaching of the Scriptures, the Catechism, and the authentic Magisterium. Those who will not compromise the truth. It is in just such times that we need for the Lord to raise up Deacons like Lawrence to stand strong in their uncompromising fidelity to the ancient yet ever new Catholic Christian faith in this new missionary age.

The same God Deacon Lawrence loved and served is pouring out his Holy Spirit in this hour upon His Church. History will record the story of when this Rome of the West returned to Jesus Christ! We are

called to hasten that change. Let me share with you the story of the Deacon Martyr Lawrence, through whom all of Rome became Christian.

The year was 258. It was a difficult beginning for what would become the First Christian Millennium. Hostility against these early followers of Jesus Christ was growing. The barbarism and severity of pagan Rome had begun to reach a fever pitch. It would soon lead to a blood lust. The newborn Christian Church, faithful to the One who had given Himself for the life of the world, continued the work of His redemption.

Roman authorities charged Christians of that era with "odium humani generis" [hatred of the human race]. The Romans claimed to be citizens of a great empire, yet they practiced primitive forms of abortion as well as "exposure", the killing of unwanted newborns.

First and Second century Rome was a challenging mission field for these early Christians. Rome proclaimed itself the shining example to the world of its age while it violated the Natural Moral Law and embraced debauchery. Sound familiar?

The day that Deacon Lawrence experienced his birth from death to life was an ominous and frightful day in ancient Rome. Four days earlier, the great Bishop of Rome, Sixtus, was arrested by soldiers of the emperor Valerian, along with his beloved deacons, and beheaded.

Valerian had issued an edict to the Roman Senate that all the Christian clergy-bishops, priests and deacons-were to be arrested and executed. There were so many holy people among the martyrs of early Rome. That makes it even more remarkable that the life and death of this one humble Deacon-Lawrence-is attributed with all of Rome becoming Christian.

Sentenced to death in the Emperor Valerian's sweeping condemnation of all Christian clergy, Lawrence offended the Emperor - and endeared himself to all Christians since then - by assembling before Valerian the real gold and silver of the Church, the poor.

According to the tradition, Deacon Lawrence, knowing that the fervor of Valerians' hatred was extending to all Christians who owned property, began to give it all away. He distributed the money and treasures of the Church to the city's poor. He knew the clear admonition of the Savior that they were blessed and especially loved by Him.

Valerian heard the news and wanted the treasure to satisfy his unbridled lust for worldly power. So, he offered Deacon Lawrence a way out of sure death. If he would show him where the Church's great gold and silver were located, he would issue an order of clemency, sparing his life so that he could continue his work.

Valerian was delighted when the deacon asked for three days to gather all the gold and silver of the Church together in one central place! His pride and greed filled blinded him from seeing the truth.

For three days, Deacon Lawrence went throughout the city and invited all the beloved poor, handicapped, and unfortunate to come together. They were being supported by a thriving early Christian community who understood the Gospel imperative to recognize Jesus in the poor.

When Valerian arrived, Deacon Lawrence presented him with the true gold and silver of the Church, the poor! The emperor was filled with rage! Beheading was not enough for this Christian Deacon. He

ordered Deacon Lawrence to be burned alive, in public, on a griddle. Witnesses recorded the public martyrdom. The deacon cheerfully offered himself to the Lord Jesus and even joked with his executioners!

The Christian tradition records massive conversions to the Christian faith as a result of the holy life and death of one Deacon who understood the true heart of his vocation. He was poured out, like his Master, Jesus Christ the Servant, in redemptive love, on behalf of others. It is still said to this day that all of Rome became Christian as a result of the faithful life, and the death, of this one humble deacon. He was buried in a cemetery on the *Via Tiburtina*. On that spot, Constantine would later build a Basilica.

A special devotion to Lawrence, deacon and martyr, spread throughout the entire Christian community. Early Christians had no doubt that those who had gone to be with the Lord continued to pray for those who still struggled in this earthly life. They saw in Lawrence a great example of how to live, and how to die, faithful to the Gospel. Years later,

St Augustine reflected on the heroism of this great deacon in a sermon preached on his feast day, emphasizing that his life and death were an example for all Christians to emulate: *"I tell you again and again my brethren, that in the Lord's garden are to be found not only the roses of His martyrs. In it there are also the lilies of the virgins, the ivy of wedded couples, and the violets of widows. On no account may any class of people despair, thinking that God has not called them."*

The life and death of Deacon Lawrence speaks the timeless message of the Gospel to all who will listen. Whether we are ever called to shed our blood in what has traditionally been called red martyrdom or simply called to offer our sacrifices daily in a continuous life of poured-out love, traditionally called white martyrdom, we continue the redemptive work of the Lord.

The Deacon and martyr Lawrence offered himself fully to Jesus Christ, for the sake of the world. His heroic life and death witness is a challenge and an invitation to all Catholic Deacons in a new missionary age. May the Lord give all Catholic Deacons the courage needed to respond.