

Liturgical and Sacramental Ministry

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In a previous article we looked at the deacon at Mass. In this article we will look at some of the other liturgical and sacramental ministry of deacons. What is said here refers to deacons in the Roman Church and not Eastern Catholic Churches and will only be a brief outline of this aspect of ministry. As was noted previously the liturgical and sacramental ministry of deacons is frequently the smallest part of a deacon's ministry even if it may be more visible.

Although the primary source for understanding the liturgical ministry of deacons is the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Deacons (1998) their role is also outlined in the many liturgical books which will indicate the part for deacons.

Deacons may preside at the sacraments of baptism and marriage. They can preside at the baptism of infants and children but not at the baptism of adults (except in emergencies). Adult baptism requires confirmation which normally follows immediately and only a priest or bishop can preside at confirmation. The bishop is the normal minister of confirmation but he can grant this faculty to priests.

Marriages ceremonies which are celebrated without a nuptial Mass may be celebrated by a deacon. If a Mass is celebrated the priest presides over the wedding ceremony which is embedded within the celebration of the Mass.

A deacon can preside at the rite of Christian burial (funeral) without a Mass. He can also preside at the vigil celebrated before a funeral and at post funeral rites that may be celebrated at the graveside. In some cultures it remains the practice to gather at the graveside forty days after death and on the first anniversary of death.

As an ordained minister he is an ordinary minister of communion and may bring communion to the sick and those absent from the community. He may give Holy Communion as viaticum without the apostolic pardon for sin. Viaticum is the final rite of the Church for those close to death (not anointing or extreme unction as it was known) and deacons can be very involved in the pastoral care of the sick and dying through visitation, prayer and communion as viaticum.

Deacons can preside at exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. They may give the blessing with the Blessed Sacrament as prescribed in the rite.

The Book of Blessings indicates the blessings deacons may impart. Generally deacons may give any of the blessings a priest may give (except any blessing reserved to a priest or bishop such as the blessing at the end of Mass). They may bless objects of devotion such as rosaries, icons, other religious images. They can bless people who request them at any time but also special times like during pregnancy, engagements, birthdays as well as catechumens and pilgrims. They can bless things like homes, cars, boats and places of work.

In the absence of a priest a deacon is the ordinary minister of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest, where the bishop has allowed these in his diocese. They can preside at any public (parish) celebration Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Hours, and devotions such as Stations of the Cross

and similar celebrations. They can also preside at any penitential service with the Liturgy of the Word provided that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not celebrated with it or immediately following.

A significant aspect of the liturgical ministry of deacons is the daily celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours. Deacons are obliged to celebrate part of the Liturgy of the Hours every day for the good of the Church and the world. This is not the personal prayer of the deacon but the liturgical prayer of the Church in which he participates. In Australia deacons are obliged to pray the Morning (Lauds) and Evening (Vespers) Prayer every day. They may pray other Hours if they wish.

The Liturgy of the Hours is sometimes called the Prayer of the Church or the Divine Office. It consists chiefly of recitation of psalms and canticles and readings from Scripture and other sources in a four week cycle. This is interspersed with days of celebrations to mark feasts of the Lord, of Mary the Mother of God and the saints. Even when a deacon prays this alone he prays it with, through and in the Church.

In addition to the Liturgy of the Hours, which is liturgical prayer, he must make time for personal prayer and meditation.

Catholics believe that the liturgical ministry of deacons “founded on the Sacrament of Orders, differs in essence from any liturgical ministry entrusted to the lay faithful. The liturgical ministry of the deacon is also distinct from that of the ordained priestly ministry” (Directory 28). We believe the Sacrament of Orders conveys grace and creates ministers of the grace of God.

Deacons should “work to promote liturgical celebrations which involve the whole assembly, fostering the interior participation of the faithful in the liturgy and the exercise of the various ministries” (Directory 30). Like all clergy the primary purpose of the ministry of the deacon is to build up the Church for mission. The mission of the whole Church includes liturgical participation.

An essential dimension of “the ministry of deacons also includes preparation of the faithful for reception of the sacraments and their pastoral care after having received them” (Directory 30). They may do this through direct catechesis of children and adults and by the way they celebrate the rites so as to encourage active participation of all the faithful.

All Catholics should recall that “every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree (Sacrosanctum concilium 7)”.

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