

# AN APOSTOLIC LETTER IN MOTU PROPRIO FORM LAYING DOWN CERTAIN NORMS REGARDING THE SACRED ORDER OF THE DIACONATE

## POPE PAUL VI

For the nurturing and the constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in the Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body.<sup>1</sup>

From the apostolic age the diaconate has had a clearly outstanding position among these ministries, and it has always been held in great honour by the Church. Explicit testimony of this is given by the Apostle Saint Paul both in his letter to the Philippians, in which he sends his greetings not only to the bishops but also to the deacons,<sup>2</sup> and in a letter to Timothy, in which he illustrates the qualities and virtues that deacons must have in order to be worthy of their ministry.<sup>3</sup>

Later, when the early writers of the Church acclaim the dignity of deacons, they do not fail to extol also the spiritual qualities and virtues that are required for the performance of that ministry, namely, fidelity to Christ, moral integrity, and obedience to the bishop.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch declares that the office of the deacon is nothing other than "the ministry of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father before all ages and has been manifested in the final time".<sup>4</sup> He also made the following observation: "The deacons too, who are ministers of the mysteries of Jesus Christ, should please all in every way; for they are not servants of food and drink, but ministers of the Church of God."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 18: AAS 57, 1965, pp. 21-22.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Phil.* 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *1 Tim* 3:8-13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ad Magnesios*, VI, 1: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F. X. Funk, I, Tubingen 1901, p. 235.

<sup>5</sup> *Ad Trallianos*, II, 3: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F. X. Funk, I, Tubingen, 1901, p. 245.

Saint Polycarp of Smyrna exhorts deacons to "be moderate in all things, merciful, diligent, living according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all".<sup>6</sup> The author of the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, recalling the words of Christ, "Anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant",<sup>7</sup> addresses the following fraternal exhortation to deacons: "Accordingly you deacons also should behave in such a way that, if your ministry obliges you to lay down your lives for a brother, you should do so . . . If the Lord of heaven and earth served us and suffered and sustained everything on our behalf, should not this be done for our brothers all the more by us, since we are imitators of him and have been given the place of Christ?"<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, when the writers of the first centuries insist on the importance of the deacons' ministry, they give many examples of the manifold important tasks entrusted to them, and clearly show how much authority they held in the Christian communities and how great was their contribution to the apostolate. The deacon is described as "the bishop's ear, mouth, heart and soul".<sup>9</sup> The deacon is at the disposal of the bishop in order that he may serve the whole People of God and take care of the sick and the poor;<sup>10</sup> he is correctly and rightly called "one who shows love for orphans, for the devout and for the widowed, one who is fervent in spirit, one who shows love for what is good".<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he is entrusted with the mission of taking the Holy Eucharist to the sick confined to their homes,<sup>12</sup> of conferring baptism,<sup>13</sup> and of attending to preaching the Word of God in accordance with the express will of the bishop.

<sup>6</sup> *Epistula Ad Philippenses*, V, 2: *Patres Apostolici*, ed. F. X. Funk, I, Tübingen, 1901, pp. 301-303.

<sup>7</sup> Mt 20:26-27.

<sup>8</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, III, 13, 2-4: *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum*, ed. F. X. Funk, I, Paderborn 196, p. 214.

<sup>9</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, II, 44, 4; ed. F. X. Funk, I, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Traditio Apostolica*, 39 and 34; *La Tradition Apostolique de Saint Hippolyte. Essai de reconstitution* by B. Botte, Munster, 1963, pp. 87 and 81.

<sup>11</sup> *Testamentum D. N. Iesu Christi*, I, 38; edited and translated into Latin by I. E. Rahmani, Mainz 1899, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Saint Justin, *Apologia* I, 65, 5 and 67, 5; Saint Justin, *Apologiae duae*; ed. G. Rauschen, Bonn, 1911,<sup>2</sup> pp. 107 and 111.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, XVII, 1: *Corpus Christianorum*, I, Tertulliani Opera, pars I, Turnholt, 1954, p. 291.

Accordingly, the diaconate flourished in a wonderful way in the Church and at the same time gave an outstanding witness of love for Christ and the brethren through the performance of works of charity,<sup>14</sup> the celebration of sacred rites,<sup>15</sup> and the fulfilment of pastoral duties.<sup>16</sup>

The exercise of the office of deacon enabled those who were to become priests to give proof of themselves, to display the merit of their work, and to acquire preparation—all of which were requirements for receiving the dignity of the priesthood and the office of pastor.

As time went on, the discipline concerning this sacred order was changed. The prohibition against conferring ordination without observing the established sequence of orders was strengthened, and there was a gradual decrease in the number of those who preferred to remain deacons all their lives instead of advancing to a higher order. As a consequence, the permanent diaconate almost entirely disappeared in the Latin Church. It is scarcely the place to mention the decrees of the Council of Trent proposing to restore the sacred orders in accordance with their own nature as ancient functions within the Church;<sup>17</sup> it was much later that the idea matured of restoring this important sacred order also a truly permanent rank. Our predecessor Pius XII briefly alluded to this matter.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the Second Vatican Council supported the wishes and requests that, where such would lead to the good of souls, the permanent diaconate should be restored as an intermediate order between the higher ranks of the Church's hierarchy and the rest of the People of God, as an expression of the needs and desires of the Christian communities, as a driving force for the Church's service or *diaconia* towards the local Christian

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Didascalia Apostolorum*, II, 31, 2: ed. F. X. Funk, I, p. 112; cf. *Testamentum D. N. Iesu Christi*, I, 31: edited and translated into Latin by I. E. Rahmani, Mainz 1899, p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Didascalia Apostolorum* II, 57, 6; 58, 1: ed. F. X. Funk, pp. 162 and 166.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Saint Cyprian, Epistolae XV and XVI*: ed. G. Hartel, Vienna, 1871, pp. 513-520; cf. *Saint Augustine, De catechizandis rudibus*, I, cap. I, 1: PL 40, 309-310.

<sup>17</sup> *Sessio XXIII, capp. I-IV*: Mansi, XXXIII, coll. 138-140.

<sup>18</sup> Address to the Participants in the Second International Congress of the Lay Apostolate, 5 October 1957: AAS 49, 1957, p. 925.

communities, and as a sign or sacrament of the Lord Christ himself, who "came not to be served but to serve".<sup>19</sup>

For this reason, at the third session of the Council, in October 1964, the Fathers ratified the principle of the renewal of the diaconate and in the following November the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* was promulgated. In the 29th article of this document a description is given of the principal characteristics proper to that state: "At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed 'not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service'. For strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterium, they serve the People of God in the ministry of the liturgy, of the word and of charity".<sup>20</sup>

The same constitution made the following declaration about permanency in the rank of deacon: "These duties (of deacons), so very necessary for the life of the Church, can in many areas be fulfilled only with difficulty according to the prevailing discipline of the Latin Church. For this reason, the diaconate can in the future be restored as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy".<sup>21</sup>

However, this restoration of the permanent diaconate required that the instructions of the Council be more profoundly examined and that there be mature deliberation concerning the juridical status both of the celibate and married deacon. Similarly it was necessary that matters connected with the diaconate of those who are to become priests should be adapted to contemporary conditions, so that the time of diaconate would furnish that proof of life, of maturity and of aptitude for the priestly ministry which ancient discipline demanded from candidates for the priesthood.

Thus on 18 June 1967, we issued in *motu proprio* form, the Apostolic Letter *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, by which suitable canonical norms for the permanent diaconate were established.<sup>22</sup> On 17 June of the following year, through the Apostolic Constitution *Pontificalis Romani Recognitio*,<sup>23</sup> we

<sup>19</sup> Mt 20:28.

<sup>20</sup> AAS 55, 1965, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> AAS 59, 1967, pp. 697-704.

<sup>23</sup> AAS 60, 1968, pp. 369-373.

authorized the new rite for the conferring of the sacred orders of diaconate, priesthood and episcopacy, and at the same time defined the matter and the form of the ordination itself.

Now that we are proceeding further and are today promulgating the Apostolic Letter *Ministeria Quaedam*, we consider it fitting to issue certain norms concerning the diaconate. We also desire that candidates for the diaconate should know what ministries they are to exercise before sacred ordination and when and how they are to take upon themselves the responsibilities of celibacy and liturgical prayer.

Since entrance into the clerical state is deferred until diaconate, there no longer exists the rite of first tonsure, by which a layman used to become a cleric. But a new rite is introduced, by which one who aspires to the diaconate or priesthood publicly manifests his will to offer himself to God and the Church, so that he may exercise a sacred order. The Church, accepting this offering, selects and calls him to prepare himself to receive a sacred order, and in this way he is properly numbered among candidates for the diaconate or priesthood.

It is especially fitting that the ministries of lector and acolyte should be entrusted to those who, as candidates for the order of diaconate or priesthood, desire to devote themselves to God and to the Church in a special way. For the Church, which "does not cease to take the bread of life from the table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ and offer it to the faithful"<sup>24</sup> considers it to be very opportune that both by study and by gradual exercise of the ministry of the Word and of the Altar candidates for sacred orders should through intimate contact understand and reflect upon the double aspect of the priestly office. Thus it comes about that the authenticity of the ministry shines out with the greatest effectiveness. In this way the candidates accede to sacred orders fully aware of their vocation, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, constant in prayer and aware of the needs of the faithful.<sup>25</sup>

Having weighed every aspect of the question well, having sought the opinion of experts, having consulted with the epis-

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 21: AAS 58, 1966, p. 827.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Rom.* 12:11-15.

copal conferences and taken their views into account, and having taken counsel with our venerable brothers who are members of the Sacred Congregations competent in this matter, by our Apostolic Authority we enact the following norms, derogating — if and insofar as necessary — from provisions of the Code of Canon Law until now in force, and we promulgate them with this Letter.

I. a) A rite of admission for candidates to the diaconate and to the priesthood is introduced. In order that this admission be properly made, the free petition of the aspirant, made out and signed in his own hand, is required, as well as the written acceptance of the competent ecclesiastical superior, by which the selection by the Church is brought about.

Professed members of clerical congregations who seek the priesthood are not bound to this rite.

b) The competent superior for this acceptance is the Ordinary (the bishop and, in clerical institutes of perfection, the major superior). Those can be accepted who give signs of an authentic vocation and, endowed with good moral qualities and free from mental and physical defects, wish to dedicate their lives to the service of the Church for the glory of God and the good of souls. It is necessary that those who aspire to the transitional diaconate will have completed at least their twentieth year and have begun their course of theological studies.

c) In virtue of the acceptance the candidate must care for his vocation in a special way and foster it. He also acquires the right to the necessary spiritual assistance by which he can develop his vocation and submit unconditionally to the will of God.

II. Candidates for the permanent or transitional diaconate and for the priesthood are to receive the ministries of lector and acolyte, unless they have already done so, and are to exercise them for a fitting time, in order to be better disposed for the future service of the Word and of the Altar.

Dispensation from the reception of these ministries on the part of such candidates is reserved to the Holy See.

III. The liturgical rites by which admission of candidates for the diaconate and the priesthood takes place and the above-mentioned ministries are conferred should be performed by the Ordinary of the aspirant (the bishop and, in clerical institutes of perfection, the major superior).

IV. The intervals established by the Holy See or by the episcopal conferences between the conferring — during the course of theological studies — of the ministry of lector and that of acolyte, and between the ministry of acolyte and the order of deacon must be observed.

V. Before ordination candidates for the diaconate shall give to the Ordinary (the bishop and, in clerical institutes of perfection, the major superior) a declaration made out and signed in their own hand, by which they testify that they are about to receive the sacred order freely and of their own accord.

VI. The special consecration of celibacy observed for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and its obligation for candidates to the priesthood and for unmarried candidates to the diaconate are indeed linked with the diaconate. The public commitment to holy celibacy before God and the Church is to be celebrated in a particular rite, even by religious, and it is to precede ordination to the diaconate. Celibacy taken on in this way is a diriment impediment to entering marriage.

In accordance with the traditional discipline of the Church, a married deacon who has lost his wife cannot enter a new marriage.<sup>26</sup>

VII. a) Deacons called to the priesthood are not to be ordained until they have completed the course of studies prescribed by the norms of the Apostolic See.

b) In regard to the course of theological studies to precede the ordination of permanent deacons, the episcopal conferences, with attention to the local situation, will issue the proper norms and submit them for the approval of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, 16 AAS 59, 1967, p. 701.

VIII. In accordance with norms 29-30 of the General Instruction for the Liturgy of the Hours:

a) Deacons called to the priesthood are bound by their sacred ordination by the obligation of celebrating the liturgy of the hours;

b) It is most fitting that permanent deacons should recite daily at least a part of the liturgy of the hours, to be determined by the episcopal conference.

IX. Entrance into the clerical state and incardination into a diocese are brought about by ordination to the diaconate.

X. The rite of admission for candidates to the diaconate and priesthood and of the special consecration of holy celibacy is to be published soon by the competent department of the Roman Curia.

TRANSITIONAL NORMS. — Candidates for the sacrament of Orders who have already received first tonsure before the promulgation of this Letter, retain all the duties, rights and privileges of clerics. Those who have been promoted to the order of subdiaconate are held to the obligations taken on in regard to both celibacy and the liturgy of the hours. But they must celebrate once again their public commitment to celibacy before God and the Church by the new special rite preceding ordination to the diaconate.

All that has been decreed by us in this Letter, in *motu proprio* form, we order to be confirmed and ratified, anything to the contrary notwithstanding. We also determine that it shall come into force on 1 January 1973.

Given in Rome at Saint Peter's, on 15 August, the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the year 1972, the tenth of our pontificate.

**PAULUS PP. VI**