

Angels, Levites and Deacons

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It doesn't happen very often -- and it's probably better that way -- that someone compares the deacon to an angel. In a very interesting keynote address for an assembly of deacons and wives some years ago, the speaker compared the threefold ministries of the deacon to the roles of the archangels: Michael, Gabriel and Raphael.

The Archangel Michael is "like God" and stands at the heavenly altar; the Archangel Gabriel is a messenger of the Good News and announces "the Word", while the Archangel Raphael is a consoler, counselor and healer. When you take some time to think about it, this perspective on the deacon's ministries of Liturgy, Word and Charity can be a rich source for reflection as the day of Ordination nears -- or at any time.

Less celestial in tenor but easier to grasp is the notion of seeing the type of the deacon in the Levites of the Old Testament. In fact, the link is made clear in the words of the prayer of Consecration in the Ordination of Deacons when the Bishop praises Almighty God for the care of all creation and making "due provision for every age."

"You make the Church, Christ's body, grow to its full stature as a new and greater temple. You enrich it with every kind of grace and perfect it with a diversity of members to serve the whole body in a wonderful pattern of unity.

"You established a threefold ministry of worship and service for the glory of your name. As ministers of your Tabernacle you chose the sons of Levi and gave them your blessing as their everlasting inheritance. In the first days of your Church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the Apostles of your Son appointed seven men of good repute to assist them in the daily ministry..."

There you have it. What was the ministry of the Old Testament Levites? They were present to assist the priests in the Temple, to perform sacred but not priestly duties in the sanctuary, to purify holy objects, prepare the bread and provide general care of the sanctuary, to lead people in prayer and instruct them in the Law.

St. Jerome compares the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons to Aaron, his sons and the Levites in the Temple. Other Fathers of the Church compare bishops, priests and deacons to the high priest, Temple priests and Levites, while St. Athanasius, in a baptismal sermon, refers to the Levites, or deacons, bringing loaves of bread and a cup of wine to the table for the Eucharist.

God, indeed, does provide for His people, for His Church. Keeping before us the image of Christ the Servant, may we pray always that the Holy Spirit will strengthen us to carry out faithfully the work of our diaconal ministry: in love that is sincere, in concern for the sick and the poor, in unassuming authority, in self-discipline, with purity of life and a clear conscience. May we always strive to imitate Christ who came, not to be served but to serve.