

Saturday of the Second Week of Easter

Acts 6:1-7

As the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table.

Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them.

Monday of the Third Week of Easter

Acts 6:8-15

Stephen, filled with grace and power, was working great wonders and signs among the people.

Tuesday of the Third Week of Easter

Acts 7:51—8:1a

Stephen said to the people, the elders, and the scribes: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always oppose the Holy Spirit; you are just like your ancestors.

Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They put to death those who foretold the coming of the righteous one, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. You received the law as transmitted by angels, but you did not observe it."

When they heard this, they were infuriated, and they ground their teeth at him.

But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of

God, and Stephen said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

But they cried out in a loud voice, covered their ears, and rushed upon him together. They threw him out of the city, and began to stone him.

The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them"; and when he said this, he fell asleep.

Wednesday of the Third Week of Easter

Acts 8:1b-8

There broke out a severe persecution of the Church in Jerusalem, and all were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria, except the Apostles.

Devout men buried Stephen and made a loud lament over him.

Saul, meanwhile, was trying to destroy the Church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment.

Now those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

Thus Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Christ to them.

With one accord, the crowds paid attention to what was said by Philip when they heard it and saw the signs he was doing. For unclean spirits, crying out in a loud voice, came out of many possessed people, and many paralyzed and crippled people were cured. There was great joy in that city.



<https://collectionapi.metmuseum.org/api/collection/v1/iiif/391554/764653/main-image>

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Over these past few days, we have been hearing the accounts from the Acts of the Apostles regarding the first deacons of the Church and their evangelization of the people in the name of Jesus.

Now, I often refer to deacons as the newest animals in the Catholic barnyard. Even though they were instituted by the apostles, now-a-day Catholics seem to better understand popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, sisters & brothers, and nuns & monks.

While the diaconate was instituted in the first generation of Christians, over the first 400 years their role diminished to the point that the diaconate became a transitional order on the way to priestly orders. Just as all bishops were once (and still are) priests, all priests

were once (and still are) deacons. Just as the Pope is a bishop, the pope is a priest and deacon.

It was at Vatican II in 1964 that *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church was promulgated by Pope Paul VI in restoring the permanent diaconate, a diaconate that was not transitional, but which would ordain men to be deacons for their life-time.

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 group of priests, they serve the People of God in the ministry of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity.

It is the duty of the deacon, to the extent that he has been authorized by competent authority, to administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside at the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, and to officiate at funeral and burial services.

Dedicated to duties of charity and of administration, let deacons be mindful of the admonition of Blessed Polycarp: "Be merciful, diligent, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all." ⁱ

While there may be a certain degree of respect to the title, deacon, it is merely a translation of the Greek *diakonia*, which means servant. Any honor given to the title is that honor which is properly given to the one whom the deacon serves: the Body of Christ as found in God's children.

This may give us a better idea of how a deacon is to serve, but it is in the Acts of the Apostles that we more clearly see the heart of a deacon.

They are to put their wise and Spirit-filled service at table service of the needy and neglected. In the ways of the world, this would be humble service. In the ways of God, it is a privilege and an honor to respond to the needs of the poor and ill.

Being Spirit-filled, however, may lead an individual in ways prompted by the Holy Spirit. While it is proper for us to know who and what we are about, and to plan and set goals, we also need to walk lightly enough to be able to change directions as guided by the Spirit.

Let the first deacons, St. Stephen, the protomartyr, and St. Philip the Evangelist inspire us all to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, to come to the aid of the sick and needy, and to offer our very life and even death.

Deacons are to love, serve and bless as Jesus does, just as Jesus taught in the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

Blessed are they who mourn...

Blessed are the meek...

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

Blessed are the merciful...

Blessed are the clean of heart...

Blessed are the peacemakers...

Blessed are they who are persecuted... (Matthew 5)

The graces bestowed upon deacons through Holy Orders, are rooted in the Sacraments of Marriage (93% are marriedⁱⁱ), Confirmation and Baptism. As such, deacons share Christian charisms with all the faithful.

This became poignantly clear to me at my canonical retreat in my final preparation for ordination. I found myself in U of M Stadium at my son, Kevin's graduation. The whole explanation of the experience can be found in an old homily here:

<https://d2y1pz2y630308.cloudfront.net/26870/documents/2020/12/17th%20after%20Pentecost%20EF%202012-%20Mt%202234-40%20F-2.pdf>

In part, I was praying with my family awaiting the graduation ceremony to begin and started to have a conversation in my head with God.

I was in the middle of appreciating how many tens of thousands of people were in the stadium. They ringed around 2/3 of the way around the bowl. It was in the middle of my taking in the crowd that I heard, "Do you see all these people?" I replied, "Yes." I then heard, "Love them all."

I was struggling to throw a blanket of love over the tens of thousands there at the stadium. I was straining like I was trying to bench press 200 pounds. In my emotional frustration my heart cried out to the Lord, "I can't. I can't." I then heard with paternal softness and a bit of loving amusement, "Of course you can't...love them with MY love." And with that, the weight left and I was able to cast a blanket of care over everyone in the stadium. It was effortless (on my part anyways) and I was stunned.

That experience informs how I am to serve God's children to this very day.

Love them with God's love. We are able to do that through the cross. We are called to join ourselves to Jesus' sacrifice by entering into his Paschal Mystery, his life, passion, death and resurrection.

Let St. Stephen and St. Philip the Evangelist be our models.

Blessed are you...



ⁱ Lumen Gentium, *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 1964, The Deacon Reader (Kindle Locations 298-302)

ⁱⁱ *A Portrait of the Permanent Diaconate: A Study for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2012-2013*
Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, Washington, DC
<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:6e2d31aa-b5aa-43a8-9001-0b0cb906da3a>