

Liturgy: God's Own Work

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1. What is Theology?

What are we doing when we “do” theology? Saint Anselm answers: *Fides quaerens intellectum*. Faith seeks understanding. He does not say, *Intellectus quaerens fidem*. He does not opine that understanding precedes faith. Saint Augustine makes the lucid remark: *Intellege ut Credas; Crede ut Intellegas*. “Understand in order that you may believe; believe in order that you may understand.”

Pope Paul VI regretfully noted that “the world is in trouble because of the lack of thinking”.¹ Therefore we have to think about our faith which is actually a human response to God’s self-communication. John Paul II is precise in his observation: “Faith and reason,” he says, “are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself.”²

Theology helps us to think about God who is at the same time the Revealer and the Revealed. God is the object of Theology. By the sole fact that God is the object, it is not an easy task. It behooves us to let ourselves be led by Him who is Light, Way, Truth and Life. Our God in whom we believe is the One who becomes flesh and dwells among us, God-with-us, Emmanuel. Though without sin, He took our human condition and context so that whenever one engages oneself to know Him, one should not put a distance between God and his or her own milieu where God unceasingly

¹ PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, 85. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, 53.

² JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* 1.

reveals Himself. We can only understand God from within the framework of our environment in all its states.

Human beings understand reality within the framework of their language, their social situation, and their cultural context. The principle that Thomas Aquinas lays down relative to personal appropriation of knowledge can be rephrased in social terms: whatever is learned or known is appreciated initially according to the social historical form of the community who learns it. Bearing this principle in mind, it comes as no surprise to learn that in its initial stages Christological reflection was able to take a variety of forms, depending on who was engaged in the reflection and the circumstances in which they were finding themselves.

In his book, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, Gerald O'Collins distinguishes three types or styles characteristic of post-Vatican II Catholic and indeed all Christian theology. O'Collins distinguishes these according to the parameters of their nature (object), their method (style), their origins, the authorities they invoke and the locus within which they are practiced.³

2. *Fides quaerens intellectum scientificum*

The first style is described variously as *North Atlantic theology* or *academic theology*. In traditional terms this style can be described as *fides quaerens intellectum scientificum*, faith seeking scientific knowledge or understanding. Here, the law of faith (*lex credendi*) has primacy. This style of theology has as its predominant *object*, the pursuit of the “meaning and truth of Christian revelation”. Its concern is to uncover “fresh knowledge and new insights”. The focus here is on truth, “understood more theoretically.” What is aimed at is greater “knowledge and understanding”. The *authorities* invoked are generally the “normative voices and texts” that form the core of Church doctrine. These include the Bible, the works of the Greek, Latin and Syrian Fathers, Church documents, the books of medieval and Reformed theologians, and other traditional texts which bear witness to the

³ G. O'COLLINS, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology*, New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993, 9-11.

Church's understanding and interpretation of revelation. Of course, these sources possess varying degrees of authority.

The *method* employed in academic theology is, above all, the "cultivated use of reason", "research, hard thinking and serious dialogue with academic colleagues in other disciplines" and with intellectual contemporaries. The locus for such theology is not necessarily North Atlantic. It primarily refers to the universities, colleges and faculties that reflect an overriding respect for the authority vested in the Apostolic Tradition and the Scriptures: the Philippines, Korea, Europe, North America, Japan, and India. As far as its origins are concerned, this type of theology embraces a tradition which stretches back to the medieval universities and even to the intellectual glories of Greece.⁴ Its *practitioners* are typically well-educated persons or at least those who aspire to be well educated who adopt a critical attitude towards the Enlightenment and philosophical positions that claim the Enlightenment as their inspiration. Learned experts, both believers and non-believers, are the desirable dialogue-partners. Typically the style of this theology is largely a matter of consulting the "experts" in matters theological. The experience which is at the centre of this way of theologizing is primarily the experience of others, "above all the apostolic experience of God's definitive self-revelation in Christ."

3. *Fides quaerens iustitiam sociale*

The second style of theology is what O' Collins calls *practical theology*. In traditional terms this style can be described as *fides quaerens iustitiam sociale*, faith seeking social justice. Here, love (*lex vivendi*) has primacy. This style of theology has as its *objective*, above all, the desire to promote justice and the common good. It is a practical way of doing theology, concerned to struggle against the massive injustice found in our world. The *focus* is on justice and the common good, achieved through service for and with others. The method that is typical of this theology is best

⁴ For the academic style that one finds in the Far East, the Confucian respect for authority interweaves with the intellectual emphasis on the Bible and Tradition. (Editor's Note).

exemplified by liberation theology. It is, of course, a practical way of doing theology, which characteristically questions itself: What does our theology lead us to do or leave undone in the world?

It aims to stimulate, interpret and critique action in the present. It thrives on contact with the poor and with youth: the poor and young Christians in Latin America, the poor non-Christians in India, the poor and young Filipinos who scatter themselves throughout the world and the disintegrating victims of global consumer societies. This theology has its origins in a Jewish-Christian tradition that reaches back to the Old Testament and the prophetic denunciation of social evil and oppression and has been reiterated time and time again by particular Catholic Popes. It draws inspiration from Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed, the marginalized of his society, and with children.

Typically, the style of this theology is largely a matter of consulting the poor, the suffering and the youth in matters of faith, doctrine and morality. The *experience* which is at the centre of this way of theologizing is primarily our present experience of physical suffering and other evils. While this theological style demonstrates respect for the normative voices of Church doctrine, the scriptures and official Church teaching, it nevertheless regards its *leading authority* to be the voiceless in the contemporary world: in particular, the millions of victim "non-persons" of our world. We all recall precious words that Pope (St.) John Paul II repeated often to the youth of the world: "What I am going to say to you is not as important as what you are going to say to me" (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 124). The primary theological locus is found in the suffering people of today and in the young. The locus for this way of theologizing is generally the places where the poor and the young gather.⁵ We may also call it liberation or contextual theology.

⁵ G. O'COLLINS, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, 10. See, in this regard, A. PIERIS, "Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religious: An Asian Paradigm", *Horizons* 20 (1993) 106-114, where Piereis identifies the poor as the third source for understanding Church doctrine alongside the academic efforts of the theologians and the magisterial authority of the bishops in union with and under the authority of the Pope. See also A. PIERIS,

4. *Fides quaerens adorationem*

The third style is described by O' Collins as *contemplative theology*. In traditional terms, this style can be described as *fides quaerens adorationem*, faith seeking adoration. Here, hope (*lex orandi*) has primacy. This style of theology has as its *object*, above all, the concern to bear witness to the Triune God, revealed and reflected in liturgical celebration. It focuses on divine beauty, and sees its task, above all, in the service of prayer. This theological style has its *origins in eastern Christianity, the classic home of contemplation. Typically, the style of this theology is largely a matter of consulting worshippers in matters of faith and doctrine. The experience which serves as the point of departure for this way of theologizing is our experience (both liturgical and extra-liturgical) of the beautiful and the mystical and our yearning for complete fulfilment. The authorities invoked are traditions inherited from the past. This way of theologizing is characterized by its eschatological orientation and its concern for religious practice. The focus is on the exhibition of the exalted and heavenly Christ and our eschatological future. The locus for such theology is the Church at public prayer and persons immersed in prayer. This locus is, therefore, not only solemn, official worship but also expressions of popular religiosity in feasts, pilgrimages, images and other things that mirror underlying beliefs, attitudes and experiences of God.*⁶

Nevertheless, in our present essay, we have a concern that does not involve all styles of theology at once but rather concentrates upon one of them. The issue at hand is that of contemplative theology, *fides quaerens adorationem* or faith seeking adoration. In other words, it is about Liturgy.

According to the Second Vatican Council, "liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows".⁷ The document continues by saying, "From the liturgy, and especially from the

"Doing Christology in the Context of the Religions and the Poor", *Louvain Studies* 25 (2000) 187-231, especially 207-211.

⁶ G. O'COLLINS, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, 10.

⁷ SC 10.

Eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us from a fountain, and our sanctification in Christ and the glorification of God to which all other activities of the Church are directed, as toward their end, are achieved with maximum effectiveness”.⁸

Elsewhere, we find the same weight given to the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Christian life.⁹ “The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch.”¹⁰ Therefore, “the Eucharistic celebration is the centre of the assembly of the faithful”.¹¹ In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “The Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith: Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the *Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking*”.¹²

5. *Fides quaerens sacramentum*

In order to grasp the depth of what has been previously said, there is a need of proposing another type of theology, *lex celebrandi*, in order to complement the three styles that O’Collins has proposed, *lex credendi*, *lex vivendi* and *lex orandi*. In our present study, we shall suggest that the law of prayer should coincide with the rubric of celebration. Without this *lex celebrandi*, theology would suffer a serious lacuna. The law of our faith, the law of our life, the law of our prayer should be at the same time the law of our celebration. We do not think, on the other hand, in willy-nilly fashion of just any type of celebration. The particular law or rubric that we have in mind seems to correspond handsomely to the catchphrase *fides quaerens sacramentum*, faith seeking sacrament.

The sacraments belong to the Church in the double sense that they are “by her” and “for her”. They are “by the Church”, for she is the sacrament of Christ’s saving action at work in her through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. They are “for the Church”

⁸ SC 10; 47.

⁹ LG 11.

¹⁰ PO 5.

¹¹ PO 5.

¹² CCC 1327.

in the sense that the sacraments render the Church present as the Bride of Christ, since they manifest and communicate to human beings, above all in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with the God who by nature is a communion of love, One in Three Persons.¹³ Even though we add this fourth style, we hold fast to our ecclesiological principle of interdependence of images, metaphors, paradigms and styles.

A comprehensive ecclesiology ought to incorporate elements from each of these styles. On this, we totally agree with O'Collins when he says: "Christian theology will happily survive and serve the people of God to the extent that it can combine (no longer the three but the four) styles".¹⁴ We need David Tracy (style one), Jon Sobrino (style two), Hans Urs von Balthasar (styles one, two, and three), Kabasele Lumbala (style four), and Pope John Paul II (styles one, two, three, and four). It is obvious that we cannot enclose theologians just in one style. Christianity needs an inclusive way of doing theology which encourages the four styles to "complement and mutually enrich each other"¹⁵. Jesus Christ should remain the point of departure and the point of arrival, the alpha and the omega of our theological endeavours.

By proposing the *Lex Celebrandi* as the fourth style of doing theology, we would like, actually, to point out our great admiration of the theological plan of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which builds its theology on four pillars: the baptismal profession of faith (*lex credendi*); the sacraments of faith (*lex celebrandi*); the life of faith (*lex vivendi*) and the prayer of the believer (*lex orandi*). Being inspired by the way the Catechism has been presented, we presumed that the types of theology proposed by O'Collins, will not be fully complete, unless we add *lex celebrandi* to the other three, *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, *lex vivendi*. In fact, the theology of *lex celebrandi* aims at explaining how God's salvation, accomplished once for all through Christ Jesus in union with the Holy Spirit, is made present in the sacred actions of the Church's liturgy, especially in the seven sacraments.

¹³ St AUGUSTINE, *De civ. Dei*, 22, 17: PL 41, 779; St THOMAS AQUINAS, *S. Th.* III, 64, 2, ad 33; CCC 1118.

¹⁴ G. O'COLLINS, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 14.

“The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the Body of Christ and, finally, to give worship to God. Because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and actions they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called ‘sacraments of faith’”.¹⁶ In such a case, “the Church’s faith precedes the faith of the believer who is invited to adhere to it. When the Church celebrates the sacraments, she confesses the faith received from the apostles – whence the ancient saying: “*lex orandi, lex credendi; lex orandi, lex celebrandi*: the Church believes as she prays; the Church celebrates as she prays. Liturgy is a constitutive element of the holy and living Tradition”.¹⁷ For this inner reason no sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community. Even the supreme authority in the Church may not change the liturgy arbitrarily, but only in the obedience of faith and with religious respect for the mystery of the liturgy.¹⁸

Liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed.¹⁹ Paramount among the Church’s celebration of the sacramental liturgy is that of the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life.²⁰ It is obvious, therefore, that liturgy itself becomes the main *locus* of sacramental theology.

The liturgical celebration of the sacraments takes place during the Eucharist. This can easily be explained by the fact that other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself²¹. For this reason, “the Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith: Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the *Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking.*”²²

The Church of Christ is the Church of the Eucharist. That means the Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the

¹⁶ SC 59.

¹⁷ DV 8; CCC 1124.

¹⁸ CCC 1125.

¹⁹ SC 10.

²⁰ LG 11.

²¹ PO 5.

²² CCC 1327.

Eucharist. All the sacraments have their full meaning while they are being celebrated during the Eucharist. Typically, *the style* of this theology is largely a matter of celebrating properly the sacraments because each sacrament bears its theological richness. The experience which serves as the point of departure for this way of theologizing is our liturgical experience of a divine action, an action that God accomplishes in the truth of love. This way of theologizing is characterized by God's self-Revelation and the human response to that revelation: Sacraments are truly God addressing the ecclesial assembly and the human, ecclesial answer to God's call. The *focus* is on the sanctification of the human race because the purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the Body of Christ and, finally to give worship to God.²³

Taking into account what we have just said, let us affirm that *liturgy is an action of the Body of Christ in its entirety, i.e., the whole Christ (Christus totus)*. Liturgical services are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church, "the sacrament of unity", the Family of God united and organized under the authority of the bishops.

Therefore, liturgical services pertain to the whole Body of the Church. They touch individual members of the Church in various ways, depending on their state of life, their place within the sacramental order, their role in the liturgical services, and their actual participation in them. For this reason, "rites which are meant to be celebrated in common, with the faithful present and actively participating should as far possible be celebrated in that way rather than by an individual and quasi-privately."²⁴

Liturgy is very important for the life of the Church. It makes alive the Church. "It is in the liturgy that the Spirit and the Church enable us to participate whenever we celebrate the mystery of salvation in the sacraments".²⁵ Therefore, it is the great wish of the Church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy.²⁶ Seeing the central role of the Eucharist

²³ CCC 1123.

²⁴ CCC 1140.

²⁵ CCC 1139.

²⁶ SC 14.

in the life of the Church, Vatican II underlines with force that it is absolutely essential, first of all, that steps be taken to ensure the liturgical training of the clergy.

This point of emphasis is at the backbone of the present essay: the proper formation for the clergy in liturgical services. This should start in the formation houses. That is why Vatican II underlines once more: “The spiritual formation of clerical students in seminaries and religious houses should be given a liturgical orientation. For this they will need a proper initiation, enabling them to understand the sacred rites and participate in them wholeheartedly. They will also need to celebrate the sacred mysteries and popular devotions which are imbued with the spirit of the sacred liturgy. Likewise, they must learn to observe the liturgical laws so that life in seminaries and religious institutes may be thoroughly influenced by the liturgical spirit”²⁷ Neither personal devotions nor personal feelings will ever take over the place of liturgical services of the Church.

6. Fidelity to the Liturgy of the Church²⁸

It is compulsory to entrust the proper liturgical formation to the formators. Communities and their formators should never mix personal devotions with official liturgical services. Students have to know the full and proper meaning of the signs and symbols which compose the liturgical world of the Church. Nothing has to be taken for granted. They have to be taught everything from the easiest to the most difficult signs; from the habitual and ordinary to the more complicated signs and symbols. Whenever one arrives at a certain understanding of the meaning of a sign, one is more prepared to express it properly and respectfully. Nevertheless, liturgy remains a mystery which will one will never completely understand.

The liturgical signs communicate power and grace.²⁹ For this reason, sacred liturgy is to be ranked among the compulsory and

²⁷ SC 17.

²⁸ J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 2000.

²⁹ BENOIT XVI, *Le pouvoir des signes*, Paris : Parole et Silence, 2012; Arnauld Join-Lambert, *Guide pour comprendre la Messe*, Paris : Mame, 2002.

significant courses in seminaries and religious houses of studies. In theological faculties it is to be one of the principal courses. It is to be taught with a conscious concern for its theological, historical, spiritual, priestly, and juridical dimensions. It is to be remembered that those who teach other subjects, especially dogmatic theology, sacred scripture, spiritual and sacerdotal theology, should – while accepting the intrinsic demands of their own disciplines – expound the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation in a manner that will make clear the connection between their subjects and the liturgy, and the unity of all training.³⁰

Formators at all levels have to be aware of their delicate task of both giving students the necessary information about the liturgy and then forming students to participate properly in the liturgical services. Being formators or professors has always two dimensions: formative and informative. The two cannot be separated. There is a growing desire in our University to open a dialogue centre for theological and liturgical conferences. Since theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, we are aware of the positive tension such a centre might create: *Intellege ut credas. Crede ut intellegas*. Whenever this tension ceases, we can no longer talk about theology as science.

As theologians, we have a twofold task. Our first task is to raise challenging questions so that people may enter into themselves and think about the essence of their beliefs, the meaning of the signs, symbols, rites and gestures they are making, the importance of sacraments in their lives and the moral implications of everything they do or decide to do. Meanwhile, our second task is to try to give answers to those who seek understanding as Saint Paul urges us to do: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15).

Theology can only be done in living community with the Church. The Church's faith precedes one's personal faith. While developing their discipline critically and systematically, theologians should do so starting from their faith, guided by their faith and with the aim to enhance their faith. In short, thinks St. Athanasius, one cannot do theology without a pure heart and a morally upright lifestyle (*De Incarnatione*, Conclusion). Borrowing

³⁰ SC 15.

from Athanasius, Gerald O'Collins expresses the same idea by affirming that theology needs to be faithful as well as rational.³¹

There is no greater school of liturgy than the Eucharist. The real presence of Jesus, the Word of God, in the Eucharist is the greatest text for theology. Therefore, every liturgical service originates from this great mystery and returns to it. In this sense, every single sign, symbol, rite, and gesture – as small as it may be – has its theological meaning and import. Each exists for and by the Church because each originates from her. The following statement from Vatican II should be the guideline of all involved in the formation of seminarians, formators, professors and educators: “No sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community. Even the supreme authority in the Church may not change the liturgy arbitrarily, but only in the obedience of faith and with religious respect for the mystery of the liturgy”.³²

People who have dared to change the liturgical services used to say, for instance, these are just small things of no great importance and hence do not interfere with the mainstream current of the liturgy. They forget that the Eucharist liturgy is at all moments an intricate fabric of words and actions. Each single thread has its importance in the fabric; thus the other threads depend on it.

All the liturgical services are developed on the principle of inclusivity and not of exclusivity. Whatever changes we make on our own harm the whole fabric of the liturgy. One has to realize that the liturgy is not our personal possession; rather it is the liturgy of Christ, who has entrusted it to his Bride, the Church.

In liturgy, it is important to recall the principle of Saint Augustine: “Small things are small, but being faithful in these small things is a great thing”. Liturgy requires from us strict respect and uncompromising fidelity. Otherwise, we are destroying the essential of the essentials. It is in the liturgy that the true encounter between God and the human being occurs.

Let us just consider some examples: How does one make the Sign of the Cross properly? How many times do we strike our

³¹ G. O'COLLINS, *Fundamental Theology*, New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1981, 6.

³² CCC 1125.

breast during the Eucharist? At the "Agnus Dei", do we strike our breast – is this optional or mandatory?

Regarding the topic of this present essay: can a deacon bless? Yes. Can a deacon bless an assembly where either the bishop or the priest is present? No. In fact, the celebration of the liturgy is a world of signs and symbols. "As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for his relationships. That is why God speaks to man also through the visible creation".³³ Liturgy is a world of signs and symbols and thus a world of beauty. Beauty leads us to contemplate its origins. For this reason, we dream of the purity of the liturgy.

We believe in the central role of liturgy for the life of the Church. Liturgy indeed is a constitutive element of the holy and living Tradition.³⁴ Therefore, it bears repeating that no sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community.³⁵

Having offered some general remarks on the liturgy that anchors the liturgy in the heart of the Church, the present study focuses more specifically on the question: what can a deacon do? Can a deacon bless? The first question invites us to investigate the Code of Canon Law (*Codex Iuris Canonici* [CIC]).³⁶

7. What May a Deacon Do or Not Do?

First and foremost, it is important to realize that a deacon is a cleric.³⁷ This is true whether he is a permanent deacon, or

³³ CCC 1145-1148.

³⁴ DV 8; CCC 1124.

³⁵ CCC 1124.

³⁶ *Code of Canon Law*

³⁷ CIC 266§1. By the reception of the diaconate a person becomes a cleric, and is incardinated in the particular Church or personal Prelature for whose service he is ordained. §2. A member who is perpetually professed in a religious institute, or who is definitively incorporated into a clerical society of apostolic life, is by the reception of the diaconate incardinated as a cleric in that institute or society unless, in the case of a society, the constitutions determine otherwise. §3. A member of a secular institute is by the reception of the diaconate incardinated into the particular Church for whose service he

a transitional deacon, i.e., a seminarian who is preparing eventually to be ordained a priest. It is worth mentioning that the word “transitional” may be misleading because even if one is a priest, a bishop, or the Pope he remains a deacon forever.

Becoming a deacon is not comparable to becoming an altar-server or a lector. People who agree to assume these latter two roles may sometimes be “commissioned” in some sort of ceremony in church, but a deacon must actually be ordained by a bishop! An altar-server or lector might later relinquish his responsibilities, but once a man becomes a deacon, there is no going back to the lay state. Ordination brings with it an ontological change in the person, which cannot be undone.

If he is a transitional deacon, who will ultimately be ordained a priest, he normally returns to his studies at the seminary after his diaconal ordination. If he is a permanent deacon, he is bound to minister where the diocesan bishop assigns him, most commonly in a parish, assisting the priest in ministering to the parishioners.

On a purely practical level, the average lay Catholic will notice that a deacon does many—but not all!—of the same things a priest can do. This is because some sacramental/ministerial actions are within the purview of all clerics, while others specifically require priestly ordination. Let’s look at the sacraments one by one, in the order in which they are addressed in the Code of Canon Law, and see which actions a deacon has the ability to perform:

1. **Baptism.** Anybody can baptize, as ordination is not required for the valid conferral of this sacrament. It goes without saying, then, that a deacon can baptize, too!

In a non-emergency situation, however, a deacon is not simply an extraordinary minister of a sacrament administered validly:³⁸ The pertinent canon notes that he is indeed an ordinary minister of baptism, just as is a priest or bishop. What does the term *ordinary minister* mean here? Since a deacon is a cleric, administering the sacrament of baptism is an action that is proper to him. In other words, a lay-person should only be administering baptism in extraordinary situations (when an anabaptized person is dying, or

was ordained, unless by virtue of a concession of the Apostolic See he is incarnated into the institute itself.

³⁸ CIC 861§1.

perhaps in some war-torn region where there are no clergy available to do it); but a deacon lawfully baptizes in ordinary, non-emergency circumstances, just like any other member of the clergy. Thus if (for example) a permanent deacon baptizes a baby in his parish, with the knowledge and approval of the priest, he does so both validly and licitly.

2. **Holy Eucharist.** The average Catholic understands that a deacon cannot celebrate Mass because he is unable to consecrate the bread and wine and hence transubstantiate them into the Body and Blood of Christ. In fact there is a canon³⁹ that states lucidly that the only minister who can do this is a validly ordained priest. This is reinforced by canon 907, which notes that at Mass, neither deacons nor the laity are permitted either to say those prayers (particularly the Eucharistic prayer) or to perform those actions which are proper to the celebrating priest. Deacons read the Gospel and invite the faithful to offer each other the sign of peace. They may perform the rite of dismissal. Besides the two moments, he may read the prayer of the faithful introduced by the priest. In other words, if the priest is present, he is the one to say the opening and the closing prayer of the faithful.

But with regard to the distribution of Holy Communion to the faithful, canon 910§1 states that the ordinary minister of this sacrament is a bishop, priest, or deacon. As we just saw above with regard to baptism, the term *ordinary minister* means that this person may confer this sacrament under typical, non-emergency circumstances. The laity are allowed to distribute the Eucharist too, but only in situations that are outside the norm—which is why such persons are properly termed *extraordinary ministers* of the Eucharist.⁴⁰

3. **Confirmation.** Once again, the term *ordinary minister* is used with regard to the one who confers this sacrament. Canon 882 asserts that the ordinary minister of confirmation is a bishop. But a priest can also administer confirmation by law, when he baptizes an adult, or receives an already baptized adult into the Catholic Church, when a baptized Catholic is in danger of death, and in extraordinary circumstances where the Bishop may give him the

³⁹ CIC 900§1.

⁴⁰ CIC 910§2.

general faculty to confirm (for example, in a country with very few bishops).⁴¹ A deacon, however, cannot administer the sacrament of confirmation under any circumstance—if he were to attempt to do so, the confirmation would be invalid.

4. **Penance.** The law regarding this sacrament is unequivocal: only a priest can administer the sacrament of penance.⁴² There are no circumstances under which a deacon can hear a confession! Note that it is quite possible for a deacon to counsel a person pastorally; but if, in the course of that counselling, that person decides that he wants to confess his sins, the deacon will have to get a priest to do this.

5. **Holy Orders.** There is no surprise here: only a bishop can confer the sacrament of ordination.⁴³ Since even a priest isn't able to ordain, it follows logically that a deacon cannot do so either.

6. **Anointing of the Sick.** The Code specifically notes that only a priest can validly administer the anointing of the sick. If a person is gravely ill, a deacon might very well pay a pastoral visit to him and his family; but a deacon cannot actually anoint anyone.⁴⁴

7. **Marriage.** Catholics who wish to marry are bound to observe the *canonical form* for marriage. Among other things, this means that the wedding must be celebrated in the presence of either the bishop, or the priest of the parish, or a priest or deacon delegated by either of them.⁴⁵ It follows, then, that a deacon can validly officiate at a Catholic marriage ceremony, so long as he has been delegated to do so by the parish priest.

8. Can a Deacon Bless?

8.1 Theology of the Blessing⁴⁶

Before going in depth on this question, we find it essential to talk briefly on the theology of the blessing. We shall do so by

⁴¹ *CIC* 883§2&§3.

⁴² *CIC* 965.

⁴³ *CIC* 1012.

⁴⁴ *CIC* 1003§1.

⁴⁵ *CIC* 1108§1.

⁴⁶ The celebration of blessings holds a privileged place among all the sacramentals created by the Church for the pastoral benefit of the people of God. By celebrating a blessing the faithful can also sanctify various situations and events in their lives.

referring to the first reading of the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, on the 1st of January.

The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "Say this to Aaron and his sons: "This is how you are to bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace". This is how they are to call down my name on the sons of Israel, and I will bless them" (Num 6:22-27).

The General Introduction to the *Book of Blessings*⁴⁷ provides us with a beautiful commentary: "The source from whom every good gift comes is God, who is above all, blessed forever. He who is all good has made all things good, so that he might fill his creatures with blessings and even after the Fall he has continued his blessings as a sign of his merciful love".

It continues:

Christ, the Father's supreme blessing upon us, is portrayed in the gospel as blessing those he encountered, especially the children, and as offering to his Father prayers of blessing". That means "in Christ the blessing of God upon Abraham has reached its complete fulfilment".⁴⁸ Whether God blessed the people himself or through the ministry of those who acted in his name (patriarchs, kings, priests, Levites, and parents), his blessing was always a promise of divine help, a proclamation of his favor, a reassurance of his faithfulness to the covenant he had made with his people.⁴⁹ In a word, God bestows his blessing by communicating or declaring his own goodness; his ministers bless God by praising him and thanking him and by offering him their referent worship and service". Therefore, "whoever blesses others in God's name invokes the divine help upon individuals or upon an assembled people."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Book of Blessings*, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press Collegeville, 1989. This is the English translation of the Latin *De Benedictionibus* (1984). In this book, there is a *General Introduction (GI)* on the theology of Blessings to which we are going to refer (for instance: *GI 1*). *Shorter Book of Blessings*, New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1990.

⁴⁸ *GI 4*.

⁴⁹ *GI 6*.

⁵⁰ *GI 6*.

As the universal sacrament of salvation, the Church continues the work of sanctifying and in the Holy Spirit joins herself to Christ her Spouse in giving glory to the Father.⁵¹ The Church profoundly exhorts the faithful to ensure that the celebration of blessings truly contribute to God's praise and glory and serve to better God's people. In order that this intent of the Church might stand out more clearly, blessing formularies have, from age-old tradition, centred above all on glorifying God for his gifts, on imploring favours from him, and on restraining the power of evil in this world.⁵²

The celebration of a blessing prepares us to receive the chief effects of the sacraments and makes holy the various situations of human life.⁵³ When through the Church we ask for God's blessing, we should intensify our personal dispositions through faith, for which all things are possible. Then seeking what is pleasing to God, we will fully appreciate his blessing and will surely receive it.⁵⁴ In a word, blessings refer first and foremost to God, whose majesty and goodness they extol, and since they indicate the communication of God's favour, they also involve human beings, whom he governs, in his providence protects, and in his love sanctifies. Further, blessings may engage other creatures through which, in their abundance and variety, God blesses human beings.⁵⁵

8.2 Offices and Ministries

Having said this, let us bring into our perspective the offices and ministries pertaining to blessings as the official document of the Church states: "Blessings are a part of the liturgy of the Church. Therefore their communal celebration is in some cases obligatory but in all cases more in accord with the character of liturgical prayer."⁵⁶

For the more important blessings that concern the local church, it is fitting that the diocesan or parish community assemble, with the bishop or priest (parish priest) presiding, to celebrate the

⁵¹ *GI* 8.

⁵² *GI* 11.

⁵³ *GI* 14.

⁵⁴ *GI* 15.

⁵⁵ *GI* 7.

⁵⁶ *GI* 16.

blessing.⁵⁷ The ministry of blessing involves a particular exercise of the priesthood of Christ and, in keeping with the place and office within the people of God belonging to each person, the exercise of this ministry is determined in the following manner:⁵⁸

- It belongs to the ministry of the bishop to preside at celebrations that involve the entire diocesan community and that are carried out with special solemnity and with a large attendance of the faithful. The bishop, accordingly, may reserve certain celebrations to himself, particularly those celebrated with special solemnity.⁵⁹
- It belongs to the ministry of a presbyter or priest, in keeping with the nature of his service to the people of God, to preside at those blessings especially that involve the community he is appointed to serve.⁶⁰ Priests therefore may preside at the celebration of all the blessings in this book,⁶¹ unless a bishop is present as presider.
- It belongs to the ministry of a deacon to preside at those blessings that are so indicated in place in this book, because, as the minister of the altar, of the word, and of charity, the deacon is the assistant of the bishop and the college of presbyters. But whenever a priest is present, it is more fitting that the office of presiding be assigned to him and that of the deacon to assist by carrying out those functions proper to the diaconate.⁶²

At this level, one may cite *Lumen Gentium* and take note that blessings given by the deacon have been extended by the Second Vatican Council: "It pertains to the office of a deacon, in so far as it may be assigned to him by competent authority, to administer Baptism solemnly, to be custodian and distributor of the Eucharist, in the name of the Church to assist and to bless marriages, to bring

⁵⁷ *GI* 16.

⁵⁸ *GI* 18.

⁵⁹ *SC* 79.

⁶⁰ *CIC* 530.

⁶¹ *Book of Blessings*, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press Collegeville, 1989. This is the English translation book of the Latin *De Benedictionibus* (1984). *Shorter Book of Blessings*, New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1990.

⁶² Let us have a look to Vatican II: "It pertains to the office of a deacon, in so far as it may be assigned to him by competent authority

Viaticum to the dying ... to administer sacramentals, and to officiate at funeral and burial services".⁶³ It is true that they have been extended; but the underlined words are mostly important. Whatever a deacon does should have permission from a competent authority. He cannot do anything on his own especially when bishops and priests are present.⁶⁴

Taking in mind this clarification, some distinctions should be made. Although the deacon is an ordained minister, he is of a lower grade than a priest⁶⁵ and therefore he should not preside over the community if a priest is present.

Therefore in normal cases if a priest is present and available, a deacon may not give a blessing, and even less so Benediction.

He may do so if the priest is legitimately impeded, for example, if the priest were hearing confessions during exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and could not leave the confessional to impart Benediction. "And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed Abraham" (Gen 14:18).

In those cases where the deacon legitimately imparts Benediction, either because there is no priest or the priest is impeded, he may also recite or sing the same prayers as the priest.

During Mass, the deacon's work is to assist the priest. He reads the Gospel after having received a blessing from the bishop or the priest. He may also preach if the main celebrant allows him! Then he invites the faithful before the *Agnus Dei* to offer each other the sign of peace. Finally, he sends away the assembly at the end of the Eucharistic Celebration: *Ite, Missa est* or Go forth, the Mass is ended". It is only during these moments that a deacon is allowed to speak out or to acclaim or to proclaim. He may also read, but not lead, the prayers of the faithful. The opening and closing prayers of the prayers of the faithful are recited by the priest, i.e., the main celebrant, and not by the deacon. It is the priest and only the priest who is the main celebrant that is acting in *persona Christi* at that

⁶³ LG 29.

⁶⁴ GI 18.

⁶⁵ LG 29.

particular moment.⁶⁶ He is the one allowed to collect the prayers of the faithful and offer them to God. The Eucharist is not a kind of drama wherein roles can be interchanged between the main celebrant and the deacon.

The deacon is not allowed, after the Institution Narrative and Consecration, to introduce the Memorial Acclamation: "The Mystery of Faith". It is the duty of the main celebrant to act in *persona Christi* who must solemnly acclaim it. This role is clearly indicated in the rubrics.

The deacon should usually kneel for the consecration, silently hold up the chalice (not the paten) for the doxology, and should always receive Communion from the priest and not self-communicate after the main celebrant has consumed both the Body and the Blood of Christ. In a word, the clergy have moral and spiritual responsibilities to explicate and defend the mysteries of the Church. They have to know that their personal devotions have no authoritative clout over the liturgical services. On this matter, it is important to remind the clergy that "no sacramental rite may be modified or manipulated at the will of the minister or the community. Even the supreme authority in the Church may not change the liturgy arbitrarily, but only in the obedience of faith and with religious respect for the mystery of the liturgy".⁶⁷

Special permission or dispensation from the bishop (who is unlikely to dispense from basic liturgical law for no reason) is usually not what occasions liturgical errors. Many errors are more often due to bad habits and imperfect liturgical formation on the part of the liturgical ministers. The person responsible for correcting them is the priest, the priest celebrant, or even the bishop if the local priest is unwilling.

When a deacon is ordained he promises the bishop and the Church that he is willing to carry out the diaconal service with humility and love as a co-operator of the priestly order and for the

⁶⁶ As for the opening and closing prayers, the main celebrant invites the faithful to pray by saying: "Let us pray". And all pray in silence with the priest for a moment. Then the Priest says the Collect prayer. The same theology is at work here: the priest acts *persona Christi*.

⁶⁷ CCC 1125.

good of the Christian people. If he lives up to his promise, then he will gladly correct any errors that might have crept in.

8.3 Benediction with Monstrance

The deacon, whether permanent or transitional, may give the blessings contained in the sacramental rites or the Book of Blessings. For instance, deacons have the power to impart many (but not all) types of blessings, in accord with the liturgical books.⁶⁸ When a deacon is an ordinary minister for the exposition of the Eucharist, he may bless the people with the Sacrament. He may also preside at the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours and bestow its concluding blessing.⁶⁹ But whenever a priest is present, it is more fitting that the office of presiding be assigned to him and that of the deacon would then be to assist by carrying out those functions proper to the diaconate.⁷⁰

Conclusion

At this point, it is our mission to recall the sense of theology according to Saint Anselm: *Fides quaerens intellectum*. Faith seeking understanding could be done in the library; but for us the best locus of this exercise is during the liturgy because liturgy is the summit of the whole Christian life, especially during the Eucharist, which is actually for us the sacrament of the sacraments, the essential of the essentials. In a word, the real presence of Jesus, the Word of God, in the Eucharist is the bestseller book of theology. That is why we need to open up both our external and internal hearts if we do not want to miss the core of our faith who is Christ. We are convinced that the present crisis in the Church is not so much either ethical or theological; rather it is liturgical. Show me your liturgy, I will tell you the kind of theology you are dealing with. In other words, “like liturgy, like theology”.

⁶⁸ CIC 1169§1.

⁶⁹ CIC 943.

⁷⁰ *Blessings in the Bible*, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Second Edition) vol. 2, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2002, 437-440.