

# The Proto-Martyr, The Deacon Stephen

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*Homily*

**Thomas A. Baima**  
**Mundelein Seminary**  
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The reading from the Acts of the Apostles presents us with the beginning of the story of the martyrdom of the Deacon Stephen. Since we have our full complement of deacons with us this term, I thought it good to focus my reflection on the diaconate. The word comes from the Greek word δίακονος which the lexicon tells us means “one who executes the commands of another, especially a master.” Other synonyms include servant, attendant, and minister.

I know that since you studied at Mundelein, you know that the Catholic Church chooses her priests solely from men who have discerned the charism of celibacy. I’ll bet we could wake you up in the middle of the night and ask you about it and everyone here would get it right. But I wonder if you have also recognized by now that the Catholic Church also chooses her priests solely from the order of deacons?

Don’t miss this point. Only deacons are ever ordained priests in the Catholic Church.

And the reason is the same as with celibacy, only a man who has configured himself to Christ the servant is the sort of person the Church wishes to entrust with the responsibility of pastoral governance. This is why when the Mundelein faculty teach you about priestly identity, function is never to be the starting point. In speaking to the pastoral interns during the recent Collaboration Workshop, I noted that: . . . Order is not about what a cleric does . . . It’s really about the sacramental dimension. The deacon

is the sign and instrument of Jesus servanthood, a sign of charity. The deacon is not a doer except as doing makes visible this aspect of Jesus presence in the Church and world. It is the making present of an aspect of Jesus presence in the Church that gives us the path to understand the ministerial priesthood. Don't start with what a priest does that a deacon or LEM doesn't. . . . Start rather with the sacramental dimension – making visible and effective the presence of Christ as shepherd and Head of the Church.

Those to be sacramentally configured to Christ as shepherd and head of the church are chosen solely from the order of deacons. And since sacraments are forever, every priest is still a deacon. Bishop William McManus, the late Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend and former priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, when preaching the pre-ordination priesthood retreat, chose as his theme, “Remember, you are deacons one year longer than you are priests.” He also suggested that as a way of reminding ourselves of this fact, that whenever we were asked “When were you ordained?” that we would give the year of our deacon ordination and then add that we were ordained priests the next year.

His point, which we have seen most recently in the words and actions of Pope Francis, is that a priesthood divorced from the identity of servanthood is unthinkable. And this is why, deacons and only deacons are ever ordained priests in the Catholic Church. Practically, I think this means three things:

First, you need to identify in a permanent way with the diaconate. In this framework, terms like permanent and transitional deacons are meaningless. There is only one order of deacons and though it is intended that you advance to the order of priesthood, you must always maintain the identity of a deacon, even as you build the identity of the priest upon it.

Secondly, you must recognize that you embody each previous identity in your person. You are a baptized Christian, you are an instituted reader and acolyte and you are a deacon. And when you become a priest, you will still be all of these.

Finally, you should always remember the first account we have of diaconal service in the bible, which is that of the Deacon Stephen, the proto-martyr. He was the perfect deacon. He carried out the command of his master. He was a servant, attendant and minister. And in the end he was a witness, which in Greek is rendered, martyr.