

THE DEACON'S ROLE AT MASS

September 10, 2018

By Father Anthony Marques

The experience that most Catholics have of deacons is at Mass. There, the deacon's liturgical role expresses his identity: a servant of the Church. In each of the four parts of the Mass—the Introductory Rites, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Concluding Rites—the deacon assists the priest and guides the community, in practical ways, through the celebration.

As one who carries out a specific liturgical function, the deacon wears a distinctive set of vestments. This begins with the alb, the white garment symbolizing Baptism, which may be worn by all liturgical ministers. The deacon also wears a stole, signifying Holy Orders, but in a different manner than the priest. Whereas the priest wears a stole around the neck, the deacon wears this vestment on the left shoulder, draping it across the chest to the right side. The deacon's outer garment is the dalmatic, which symbolizes the diaconate. Unlike the chasuble, which is the priest's outer vestment for Mass, the dalmatic has closed sides and sleeves. (The dalmatic takes its name from Dalmatia [present-day Croatia], where the vestment apparently originated. Dalmatia is mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:10.)

In the Introductory Rites of Mass, the deacon carries the *Book of the Gospels* in the entrance procession, behind the other ministers and in front of the priest. After placing the *Book of the Gospels* on the altar, and then venerating the altar with a kiss, the deacon takes his place near the priest. If incense is used, the deacon assists the priest with the thurible, at this and at other points in the Mass. It is proper (although not required) for the deacon to lead the assembly in singing the *Kyrie, Eleison* (Lord, have mercy).

During the Liturgy of the Word, the deacon proclaims the Gospel. (Indeed, when no deacon is present and the priest proclaims the Gospel instead, he is understood to be acting as a deacon during that rite.) The deacon may occasionally preach the homily. In regard to the Universal Prayer, also known as the Prayer of the Faithful, it is preferable for the deacon announce the petitions (although a lay person may also carry out this function).

As the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins, the deacon prepares the altar and helps the priest to receive the gifts of bread and wine from the community. In this part of the Mass, the deacon's role as the minister of the chalice is notable: He prepares it by mixing wine with a small amount of water; he elevates it during the Doxology that concludes the Eucharistic Prayer; he administers the Precious Blood if Holy Communion is given under both kinds (even if this means that an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion distributes the Body of Christ); and he purifies the chalice, along with the other vessels (either after Communion or once the Mass has concluded). In keeping with his role of giving practical instructions to the community, the deacon invites the people to exchange the Sign of Peace.

For the Concluding Rites, it is proper for the deacon to make any brief announcements to the community. Finally, he gives the Dismissal, the brief but significant action that gives rise to the common name for the Eucharistic Celebration. The term “Mass” (Latin: *Missa*) is derived from the penultimate words of the rite: in Latin, *Ite, missa est*. Originally, this straightforward phrase meant something like, “The meeting has finished.” Gradually, the words came to imply the Church’s mission: The people, having offered and received the Sacrifice of Christ’s Body and Blood, are sent to proclaim the Gospel in their ordinary lives. Following the Dismissal, the deacon, together with the priest, venerates the altar with a kiss and then exits by walking alongside the priest.

Throughout the Mass, the deacon’s role embodies his service to the Church. By assisting the priest and ensuring an orderly liturgical celebration, he enables the assembly to worship God in a reverent and meaningful way.