

THE DIACONATE IN ITALY (Deacon Enzo Petrolino – *President, Community of the Diaconate in Italy*)

To describe the situation of the diaconate in Italy as it stands now is no easy task. The difficulty lies above all in the methodology or in the ministerial aspect which are being underscored as one tries to give an image of the situation which would be as faithful as possible to reality. The latest statistics tell us that in Italy there are more than **4,334** deacons (with candidates being more than 2500). They are almost evenly distributed over the national territory: Deacons are present in 214 (94.27%) dioceses from the total of 227 (only 13 dioceses don't have deacons). A slight majority of deacons live in the south of the country (37.26%; with 37% in the center and 25.68% in the north). It's been quite some time – and it was especially after the Italian Bishops' Conference document - *The Permanent Deacons. Guidelines and Norms* (= ON) from 1993 – since many dioceses published and adapted a "Directory", meant to adapt the provisions and guidelines of the magisterial texts to the local situations and structures. A survey on the diaconal ministry in the Italian dioceses has shown that 93% of the deacons have a civilian profession, with the remaining 7% working full time for the Church; 97% of them are married and having a number of biological or adopted children well above the societal average. Among the wives of deacons as well, the number of those not working outside of the home is above the general average which is easily explained by the number of children they have to care for. The way which leads to the diaconate generally starts with a relatively early commitment in the life of the Christian community and in many cases the family as well is involved in parish activities. Clearly, the diaconate is, in the Italian Church of today, the only vocation on the rise – and a strong rise at that. Its development has to be linked, at least in the initial state to the Community of the Diaconate in Italy, founded in 1966 and, particularly to its initiator and prophet of the diaconate, don Alberto Altana. The visible differences which exist in the Italian diaconate are not only a result of the social and economic differences between the various areas – the north and the south of the country have witnessed, historically, a totally different development with the south left out of the industrialization process and with standards of living well below the national average – but also of different theological concepts – both in theory and in practice – of this ministry, which, in turn, have led to as many forms of practical realization of the diaconate. These differences notwithstanding, we can discern some basic elements which are common to all dioceses, be they large or small, Northern or Southern. Among the problems raised today with most seriousness and awareness of those involved in both the formation and the implementation process of the ministry, the one which undoubtedly has the utmost prominence is that of the position the wives and families have within the ministerial life of deacons and there is a constant issue regarding the problems posed by the civilian profession and the diaconal ministry. **The primary model** for Italian deacons is that of the permanent formation, focusing on the wives and families of deacons and candidates, in order to make them discover and deepen the grace of *twofold sacramentality* – of Holy Orders and Matrimony. **A second model** of diaconal presence is that of the deacon who takes to the other families – particularly to those in difficulty – his witness of *minister* and at the same time *husband and father*, and in this witness he is supported by his wife and also by his children. Here as well, the formation is meant to help create a better link between the ecclesial and the social role of the deacon. In practice, *the ecclesial space and the social space*, find, in the diaconal ministry, the "measure" of their reciprocity, the "key" which allows them to communicate and interact, the "instrument of grace" which makes the former into a place of welcome and redemption for the latter. For many reasons, this **third model** is sometimes left to the sensitivity of the individual deacon and in such cases, it's realized more at the individual level than as a part of the communities' pastoral programming. However, in many dioceses, there are deacons entrusted with the care of the sick in hospitals or of the incarcerated, or of the homeless; one can find others who have received the mandate to catechize engaged couples, young people, families and other small groups, both in small villages and in urban areas. The service of the deacon in the Italian Church has contributed to the initiation of a ministry hallmarked by immediate interpersonal contact, by the "sharing" of every joy and every suffering. Having made these precisions, we can single out three topics which are recurrent within the ordained *diakonia* in the Italian Church: they spring up from the biblical-theological vision of the diaconate and, at this moment, are the main constitutive elements of the diaconal ministry throughout the country. We may summarize them as follows: 1. *Poverty-service*; 2. *Word-witness*; 3. *Eucharist-liturgy*.