

## From Marriage and Holy Orders to Marriage with Holy Orders

Yesterday, we were presented synodality as a way of rediscovering the Church. It is in this wide-ranging movement that the question we are going to develop, finds its full legitimacy.

This talk is rooted in and nourished by personal experiences at different levels: first, in France where I represented French deacons' wives in the *Comité national du diaconat* in Paris for six years alongside our responsibility as a couple, of the diocesan service of the diaconate in Lille. Secondly, in Europe, with various meetings and talks organized in different European countries. Lastly, my election to the IDC has broadened my horizons further, on an international basis.

Clearly, what has just been said is not intended as a personal promotion but as a justification for situations or examples in a diaconal context that I might mention in the course of my talk, knowing that they are not always transposable from one country to another, for many reasons.

This morning, I propose to explore a path that goes **from Marriage and Holy Orders to Marriage with Holy Orders**, presenting two sections: the first will develop a doctrinal approach to each of the two sacraments, while the second will deal with praxis, with the association of two sacraments and the pragmatic experience it entails in the lives of couples where the husband is -or will be- a deacon.

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By way of introduction, I would like to remind that, in 1965, the decision of the Second Vatican Council to re-establish the diaconate brought back the figure of wife of a cleric who had gradually disappeared with the Gregorian reform imposing celibacy on priests in the Latin Church. Thus, the Church has opened a new chapter and the episcopate, priests, Catholics, communities and the deacons themselves realize that in the past, the place of deacons' wives is referred to only in very few previous examples.

With their decision, the Council Fathers brought closer together the 2 sacraments which the history of the Church had contributed to keep apart. How can we reflect on this renewed link?

Let's take a closer look since it concerns not only deacons but also their wives given that the large majority of deacons are married. Based on the Bible, the Magisterium and recent synod documents, what doctrinal approach can be proposed? This is the subject of my first section.

### *Section 1*

#### ***From Marriage and Holy Orders***

In this updated sacramental knot, what is the first thread to be pulled? I'll go for the easy way and for the most obvious justification: since marriage always precedes ordination, I will begin by developing the sacramentality of Marriage.

- **The sacramentality of Marriage**

Since its beginning, the reality of marriage has been found in every tradition, people and religion. Let's take a look at the Word of God and see how things have come about « *in the beginning* », to borrow the expression from the Bible. What does the first book of the Bible has to say about the theology of

Marriage? There are two major lessons to be learned: at the moment of creating the human being, God pauses.<sup>1</sup> In a kind of inexplicable plural, God enters into himself and says- I quote-: "*Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness* ».<sup>2</sup>

The second biblical teaching concerns fertility. Fertility given to human beings comes **first of all** from the fact that men and women are created in the image of God, of a fruitful God, a God who creates life. Through a mythical story, the second narrative reveals God's plan for mankind. Precisely because this first human being is created in the image of God, he can only exist and become himself if he is related: "*It is not good for the man to be alone.*"<sup>3</sup>

In the life of humanity, the male-female relationship is clearly the first inter-human relationship, the source and criterion of all others. It is about the humanization of human existence, and the humanization to which we are called has its origins in God's own covenant with us. Whatever the betrayals of his people that damage his image and likeness, God reveals himself as the faithful God who never tires of renewing his trust in us.

Having said that, let us highlight four key features of marriage theology among others:

1. What is permitted under the New Covenant refers back to *the beginning* in the Bible: it is not a special rule for Christians. Marriage is a service to the world and Christians are not in a world apart. In the world marked by hardness of heart and sin, Christians are given a **sacramental prophetic mission**. In marriage, Christian couples are called to bear witness to a fidelity rooted in God's free gift from now on that reveal the possibility of love and life in the midst of our gropings, our doubts and our infidelities, which led Pope Francis to

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<sup>1</sup> Gn 2, 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 18.

say that *"the couple that loves and begets life is a true living icon [...], capable of manifesting God the Creator and Savior"*.<sup>4</sup> The couple is "a 'living sculpture' of the Mystery of God". There is indeed a mission or ministry of the Christian couple in the world. Marriage is lived by both spouses as Christians, on behalf of their shared mission and ministry as baptized persons, what is called the Common Ministry of the Baptized which precedes the functions of the ordained ministry.

2. Another dimension of Christian Marriage is that of **a vocation**. Marriage corresponds to the call and to a gift from God as evoked by the first letter to the Corinthians. When he speaks about marriage, Paul says: *"each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another."*<sup>5</sup>

In marriage as in every other vocation, God's call reaches out to the man and woman and, in return, invites them to the total commitment of their freedom.

3. A third feature of Marriage is **consecration**. On two occasions, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* refers to Marriage as **a consecration**: *« Christ the Lord abundantly blessed this many-faceted love. »*<sup>6</sup>

Marriage as a consecration, but for what? Attempting to answer this question leads us to a very polemical passage by Paul in Ephesians 5, the famous and much-discredited passage from which we only retain *"Wives, be submissive to your husbands"* but which actually begins with *"Be submissive to one another in the fear of Christ"*. These days, the word submission -as much as the word authority- spontaneously evokes unacceptable realities even though what we're talking about is mutual dependence in love. According to the Gospel, true dependence has nothing to do with domination, crushing or whatever... Domination means the loss of the fundamental equality of man and

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<sup>4</sup> Apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, § 11.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Co 7, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, chap. 1, §2.

of woman in the unity of the two, that equality which is both a gift and a right from the Creator God himself. To the word *equality* I prefer the term *symmetry* between the spouses.

However equality does not mean similarity. A same vocation unfolds and expresses itself in different ways. From then on, there can be no growth in love without a profound respect of the vocation of the other person, in a mutual dependency that is not suffered but chosen, in and for a fruitful symmetry. It is definitely not an easy path; the sacrament takes us on a journey of learning to love in a spirit of self-giving, tenderness and respect, in everyday life and every day of our lives. For all that, this reciprocity does not do away with the always personal vocation of each member of the couple.

4. The fourth feature to be mentioned is the one most commonly understood in the current modern reality of Church life: Marriage is perceived as a commitment. Couples ask the church to witness their commitment and to bless them. Certainly it's a religious approach; it is an elementary one but a true one not to be despised. Today, the sacramental request -whether baptismal or conjugal-, is experienced more as a one-off act of ritualization than as entry into a state of life. Still is it appropriate to the sacrament being proposed?

A sacrament of any kind is a great deal more than a simple human commitment, even if it is accompanied by the blessing of the Church. It is first and foremost a gift from God offered to the freedom of a man, of a woman, who receives it and undertakes to live by it. Human commitment comes second, which doesn't mean it's secondary, **but** it is a response to an initiative from God. As Pope Francis writes: *"The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty rite or the mere outward sign of a commitment."*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., § 72.

In this necessarily short development on the sacrament of Marriage, we understand from the outset that there is indeed a sharing of the mission between man and woman, and it is precisely this that makes them spouses, with the symmetry that this mission establishes, at least ideally. It is the sharing of the mission as part of the Common Ministry of the Baptized. Then what about the ordained ministry?

We are now invited to take a further step to examine the threefold sacrament of Holy Orders and the current theology of the diaconate and related issues.

- ***The sacramentality of the diaconal ministry***

If the Church is entirely ministerial, how can we understand the specific gifts of ordained ministers within the one People of God? Is the diaconate to be thought of primarily in terms of the baptismal mission or in terms of a sacramental originality? This is a recurring question among Christians which shows that the theology and the reception of the diaconate is not complete. Is the basis of the diaconate's originality a simple extension of the baptismal apostolate or is it the specific sacramentality of the whole ordained ministry?

One of the achievements of recent theology of the diaconate is clearly the affirmation of its sacramentality and this is even the common thread running through the document of the *International Theological Commission*.<sup>8</sup> We must not forget that on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, a minority of theologians hesitated, even refused, to recognize the sacredness of the diaconate. At Vatican II, the theology of this minority was based on the theology of Order which was finally that of the priesthood empowered to administer the sacraments to the faithful. Finally, the Council Fathers confined

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<sup>8</sup> CTI, « Le diaconat », p. 94.

themselves to recognizing that deacons are "strengthened by a grace which is indeed sacramental."

If the sacrament of Holy Orders is one, is there a sacramental originality of the diaconate in relation to the episcopate and the presbyterate, given that these two ministerial figures have historically concentrated all ecclesial responsibility? What is the originality for the diaconate knowing that -1°- the Second Vatican Council solemnly declared the sacramental specificity of the episcopate<sup>9</sup> and -2°- in the religious imagination, the sacrament of Holy Orders is spontaneously perceived as the sacrament of the ministry of the priest. The question is therefore the following:

Where does the deacon's ministry fit in between these two specificities? Like a game of dominoes, the question gives rise to another: how can we reimagine the diaconate as a whole? As suggested during the recent synod debates, is it still appropriate to ordain **candidates to the priesthood** as deacons thus preserving the traditional understanding of the diaconate as a temporary step towards the presbyterate? Actually changing the rules could help to erase the problematic distinction between 'permanent' diaconate and 'transitional' diaconate, as if they were not one and the same degree of the sacrament of Holy Orders ?

During the first Christian centuries, the presbyterate and the diaconate, as well as many other ecclesiastical ministries, were conceived as distinct and complementary, although subject to the authority of the bishop (who, incidentally, was sometimes elected from among the deacons themselves, as Alexandre Faivre explained it<sup>10</sup>). At the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries, the bishop's authority was strengthened and a pyramidal concept developed in the

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<sup>9</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, §21-§26.

<sup>10</sup> Voir FAIVRE A. *Les laïcs aux origines de l'Église*, Le Centurion, 1984.

Roman area, under the influence of the imperial model, with the effect of placing ecclesiastical offices on an ascending scale. To this day, this practice has had the disadvantage of stripping the “minor” ministries of their value, transforming them into simple stages. The question therefore arises: could the rediscovery of the diaconate as a ‘proper degree’ of the sacrament of Holy Orders be promoted by overcoming this hierarchical perspective so that deacons no longer appear as subordinate ministers but rather as complementary ministers to priests, serving in a different way the one and only local Church under the direction of the bishop?

The different orders are organically linked to each other, in mutual interdependence, in the specificity of each. No minister can conceive himself as an isolated individual to whom powers have been conferred; rather, he must see himself as sharing in *munera*, the gifts of Christ conferred by ordination, with the other ministers, in an organic bond with the People of God of which he is a part and which, although in different ways, shares in the same gifts of Christ in the common priesthood founded on Baptism.

It is necessary to rethink the diaconate. The ***Diaconia of Charity*** needs to be highlighted in the pastoral service of the deacon, provided however that the ***Ministry of Charity*** is not isolated but is seen as the natural extension of the ***Ministry of the Word*** and ***of Liturgy***. Without the intention of transforming an ordained minister into a socio-medical worker, the diaconate is the outpost of a Church at the service of suffering humanity. The Ministry of Charity is really the Church's and more specifically the diaconate's DNA since deacons are in natural contact with society, particularly through their profession.

Because the theology of the diaconate was only revived by Vatican II, it appears to be still in its infancy and is still fraught with uncertainty. If the profile of the bishop and the presbyter has been shaped over twenty centuries,



in the case of the diaconate, we are faced with a gap of fifteen centuries without praxis. But we know that theological transformations take place through experience. It's the great adage that "life must precede the law". The profile of the deacon needs to be patiently built up without standardizing it; it cannot be done without experimentation, failures and adjustments. This is perhaps an opportunity to reflect on the ecclesial ministry in general, avoiding treating the ministry of bishops, priests and deacons in isolation; it is an opportunity to overcome this binary logic, for there are not, on the one hand, ordained ministers and, on the other, the mass of lay people, but a single People of God in which the Spirit gives rise to a variety of ministers, as well as charisms. The Synod issued a clear call to move beyond a vision that reserves all active functions in the Church for ordained ministers alone, reducing the participation of the Baptized to subordinate collaboration.

Certain sacraments offer points of contact. It is the case of Marriage which, like the sacrament of Holy Orders, aims to help Christians live the state of life they have chosen. However, in the context of the diaconate, things are not as smooth as they seem, which brings us one step closer to the second section of our talk: we are now invited to visit the pragmatic experience of these couples whose husbands are deacons.

## *Section 2*

### ***From Marriage and Holy Orders to Marriage with Holy Orders***

Prior to the diaconal ordination, marriage starts with two distinct stories, those of two persons who decide to write together a new common story with an absolute symmetry in the sacrament of marriage taking its roots in Baptism. Within the sacrament of Marriage, spouses are both directly involved in the

same way, by the same act, in a total symmetry that is overturned by the arrival of the diaconate. From then on, the married rhythm is doubled by a new tempo.

The married rhythm is doubled by a new asymmetrical pattern, the diaconal rhythm, and these two rhythms being themselves crossed by many others, whether it is family, profession, friends, or social rhythm. In short, deep in the dynamics of the couple, this form of asymmetry in the couple can be or can become the occasion, if not the cause, of imbalances and therefore of readjustments. Moreover, the diaconal approach brings into play multiple freedoms, with the result that freedoms sometimes meet, sometimes clash, question or combine. At the heart of this interaction lies the degree of freedom each spouse has within the couple. How does the freedom of one interact with the autonomy and decisions of the other? These questions will take us through the experience, feelings and discernment of each person within the couple.

- ***Between the altar and the world***

In France, as soon as the diaconate was reestablished as a permanent order, the Bishops' Conference recommended that a specific group be set up to support the candidate and his wife on their journey, and to contribute to the discernment of the vocation. In no case is it a question of a team of supporters, but of a group that comes together in diversity - colleagues, members of associations, friends, Christians- as a sign that it is the whole existence of the person being approached that is challenged by the prospect of the diaconate.

This supporting group stands as a service to the Church and its aim is to enable each person -the candidate and this wife- to develop their own path, their own vocation by asking relevant questions, and there are many of them. Here are just a few:

- Does the person called feel autonomous from the people who have approached him?
- In his professional life, does he feel able to distance himself from the demands of today's world which imposes social recognition, performance and success, at odds with the values of humility and selflessness that the ministry is supposed to represent? Does he feel free in relation to his wife, free to make his own decision in relation to the wife who, symbolically, dreams of the "diaconal alb, very much wanting her husband to be a deacon? How far can the fear of disappointing her go?
- Is he free in terms of an identity that he was searching for, with the diaconate appearing as a form of apotheosis or therapy?
- Can he rid himself of a strong obsession with ministry, clear his head about the exaltation of personal action or the feeling of a well-deserved reward for good and loyal service in the Church?
- Does he feel free, ready to assume his personal share of discernment by allowing himself to be challenged in his positions, but also ready to accept displacements that other places could help him discover? In short, is he willing to embark on this path of dis-appropriation, of decentering, of freedom?

The discernment extends to the questioning of the couple:

- do they feel free in relation to their family environment? Even if the children's consent is not required for their father's ordination, the couple must be able to accept a certain number of aggressive remarks such as " *Daddy is more concerned with other people's problems than my own!* ". Ministry can feel like alienation and an escape from the world and the home is one such escape.

- Are the couples aware of the traps of generosity. The couple can just as easily rush into a multiplicity of actions, which would mean escaping conjugal and parental responsibility.

- Finally, does the couple feel free in relation to the Church, in a right balance of secular and ecclesial integration since the diaconate places the deacon -and the couple to some extent- between the altar and the world?

It goes without saying that the common and shared vocation of the couple cannot be in contradiction with the call that rests on each person's life, even if this requires adjustments on the part of both.

In the case of a celibate deacon, the call to the diaconate involves the choice of a state of life, which entails a decision that must be well informed. However, the call involves the candidate alone.

- « ***Marriage, I have chosen it, the diaconate, I accept it*** »

On the contrary, for a married man, a diaconal initiative will involve both his wife and his family. In the current diaconate, there is a permanent tension. Indeed, on the one hand the commitment of the deacon is so important that it is essential that the couple commit themselves as a couple lucidly and freely. On the other, only the husband is ordained and there is, from his part, a personal commitment to the Church that the wife does not make. From this angle, the wife is outside the diaconate. It follows that wives have different ways of situating themselves, from the total commitment of the wife who places herself at the service of her husband's diaconate to the one who insists on her respective autonomy.

Yet, what is certain is that wives are questioning their rightful place. Allow me to illustrate my point with a few examples.

A. For some women, the diaconate brings a deployment, a deepening of the marital bond in the aftermath of marriage. In this understanding, the wife makes her **"yes"** to ordination a second **yes** to marriage. But this **yes** is not to be considered as a renewal of the one of marriage. There is nothing to add to the **yes of marriage**, this is said once and for all and nothing is missing. On the opposite, others claim a fundamental distinction, they underline the gap which exists between their free choice of marriage, and the reception -or potentially the non-reception- of the diaconate which makes them say: *" marriage I have chosen it, as for the diaconate, I accept it"*. The *yes* of the wife means that she accepts that her husband be given for the Kingdom.

The diaconate of her husband can be accepted by his wife as an invitation from God **that makes her as one who has been chosen too**, as if, in this action of God, **the Spirit had given her the gift of an additional vocation** for herself who shares her life with the one who commits his whole person to the service of the Church.

B. For wives, it's a question of seeking and finding their right place, a place that fits, but this search should not lead to confusion since the wife does not herself receive another sacrament. While some wives react like crayfish, recoiling, by stepping aside, others on the contrary, take center stage. Already involved in the Church, their husband's call reinforces in them an immense desire to do everything with the husband and strengthens the feeling of the "expert couple" with the traps that it brings along with it, and among other things, "the danger of the exhibition case". The wives over-expose themselves in the public sphere through frenzied activism of the couple or, more seriously, by a demand for exemplarity. We can then speak of a diaconal ministry by delegation, even by proxy, in which the wife is constantly called to behave as a "model of the flock". Here, the trap is not in the spiritual exigency but in the

concern for image - her image, their image- in truth contrary to the authentic service to the other, one is rather on the side of the service for oneself, even of self-promotion. Because for all the paradox is that: the diaconate leads at one and the same time to a taste for service, but also a true disinterestedness in service, which must be undertaken in humility and in truth. However, where there is overconfidence it risks making the couple appear as a "master" rather than a "servant", and this mode of partnership, moreover theologically incorrect, distorts the correct understanding of the diaconate and skews its proper reception. In other words, it is clear that with the diaconal ordination of her husband, the vocation of the wife is not to be seen as amalgamated or incorporated into that of the spouse. Moreover, we understand that a large majority of wives of deacons do not place themselves with those who think that, when we marry a violinist, we too can play in the orchestra!

C. Another element of this challenge for the wives is the trap of the unspoken, of an immediate spiritualization which tends to bury questions and difficulties instead of helping each other to live through them. Wives should benefit from support to avoid the risk of resignation, the giving up of the wife who would be tempted to rely on the institution for discernment and would thus be led to experience an adventure not chosen. She should benefit from help so that her consent is truly informed, so that she no longer has this feeling of "*signing a blank cheque*", of disappearing behind her husband. If the wives are located outside the diaconate, this does not mean that they are rubbed out, otherwise how and where would God join them if they are shunning their very selves?

D. Discernment is therefore essential and the wife has a say and a responsibility in this. In response to the bishop's request, the "*Yes I accept*" of the wife is not locked into a project or a program. For all that, the yes must be

situated in all its density; its nature must be explored: is this answer in the character of **acceptance**? Or perhaps **permission**? A **giving up**? A **resignation**? is this a **concession**? Or even a **promotion**? **Adherence**? Even a composite of these answers...

E. In this effort at clarification, the wives point out that the notion of service roots them and helps them to progress towards a broader understanding of the baptismal mission since this is the service they have chosen to live in the state of married life. This is how they respond to God's call to live love with him. In fact, if the Church calls such and such a man to the diaconal ministry, it is because this man is what he is, who he is, by being the husband of that wife. Marriage, because this man is in a relationship with that particular wife, made him become what he is. He is ordained with all that constitutes his person and it is this man whom the Church calls and on whom she counts. Another marriage would have made him a different person and therefore it is not a certainty that the Church would have entrusted him with a diaconal ministry. It follows that, to a certain extent, marital status determines the call to the diaconate. This means that the link between marriage and diaconate is established and the current ritual makes the sobriety with regards to wives all the more regrettable. If the wife has had the freedom to say yes or no, then, her yes on the day of ordination is a real yes that could take its full place in a different and less minimalist expression, in the course of a current ritual made by celibates for celibates.

F. On the contrary, if the project does not go through to completion, the responsibility should not fall on the wife. Saying no can be just as strong a spiritual choice. It can be the fruit of real discernment. It can be a fruit of the Spirit that allows to give up beautiful images of dedication or service that were neither realistic or livable for people and those around them. It is therefore

important to ensure that the conditions are in place to allow the wife to say no, and that this refusal is respected without discussing or negotiating the reasons for it.

G. Situated as they are inside and outside the diaconate, wives experience the freedom which enables them to take a step back from the diaconal ministry and, therefore, the distance that the wife experiences leads her to exercise in a recognized and serene manner her baptismal right so that the ministry of her husband is not distorted and can constantly rebalance itself, even if it means having to resist the inevitable pressures from the current situation of pastoral shortages. This distance can lead her to refocus on the essential, to point out the meaning or the lack of meaning of a particular commitment that the deacon takes on, especially in moments when the requests coming in are too many and require placing in order. For the time given up for the diaconate must not be stolen from the other calls on his time for wife, family, friends... The outside position of the wife permits her to ask questions which may prove to be decisive for balance within the life of the couple and for the fulfilment of family life. Giving the couple and the family priority that each has a right to expect must not lead to guilt, the diaconal ministry must not harm either one, otherwise the deacon is a very poor witness, even a counterexample.

H. This original partnership can nurture a bold approach which pushes at boundaries, leads toward the unknown, triggers a new dynamism. Besides, in the eyes of society, the diaconate plunges the Church through the experience of the married deacon and his wife, into the midst of the joys and difficulties of families, bringing her closer to the world since the Church is meaningless if it only looks after itself.



### **Time has come to conclude.**

Sixty years ago, the Council Fathers decided to re-establish the diaconate to be conferred in the future " even upon those living in the married state. "

In doing so, the Fathers re-established this sacramental knot revealing distinctive points but also points of contact. For sixty years now, together with celibate men and widowers who all insist on their wife's presence in their absence, couples have accepted to engage in this diaconal adventure, at the origin of a set of experiences which involve risk and novelty, thus putting the deacons' wives in an original place, for an original partnership since they stand at the junction of the conjugal, the ecclesial and the ecclesiastical.

As such, why should deacons' wives remain out of sight, as if in the blind spot of the institution's vision?

**Like** their husbands and **with** their husbands, they are vibrant and joyful witnesses of hope. May the future honor both sacraments in blissful distance, without confusion or separation !

**Thank you for your attention!**

Marie Maincent, Rome, February 19th, 2025.