

The Prophetic Value of the Diaconate

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October is becoming not only the month *of Missions*, but also the month *of the Synod*, because for the past two years, the Synod of Bishops on Synodality has been held in the Vatican during this month. It is therefore no coincidence that this October Rome is hosting the Jubilee of the Synodal Path, to which participants in the synodal process at all levels from around the world are invited. At the beginning of the Jubilee Year, during the Jubilee for Deacons, **Geert De Cubber** from Belgium, the only permanent deacon to be a member of both final assemblies of the Synod, shared his experiences and insights. We offer our readers an interview with him, conducted by *Artuma* editor and permanent deacon Darius Chmieliauskas.

– *Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?*

I am fifty years old, have been married for almost twenty-eight years, and have three adult sons. I taught at a secondary school for fifteen years, then worked as a journalist for a Catholic magazine in Belgium for five years. In 2013, I became a deacon. In 2020, the new bishop of Ghent invited me to join his team. At first, I was responsible for catechesis, youth and family ministry, and last year I became his press officer. I have always worked in

in the fields of communication, journalism and social skills.

– *How did you become a deacon?*

I always joke that my wife is to blame. When our third son was born, she said she wanted to study something related to faith. For three years, she took courses to become a religion teacher. Every year, she would bring home a brochure that said *the programme was also for deacons*. The first year I put it off, the second year I googled it and thought, "It's good that there are people like that in the Church..."

In our third year, we participated in a family retreat at a monastery. There, one friend shared, "I am participating in the diaconate programme." That was when I first wondered: could this be something for me, for us? I remember that after a very early prayer at 4 a.m., we started talking about the diaconate – what it means to him, why he is doing it, since he already has a large family... I had many questions. We talked for maybe three hours, and when I returned to my sleeping wife, I said to her, "You know, I don't see any reason why I shouldn't try this. Do you agree? Will you be with me on this journey?" She replied, "Yes."

And so it began. I started to think about it. During that time, we heard many deacons testify about their calling and what it meant to them

It shows how their wives got involved and so on. The stories are very different, so we thought that if they could do it, then maybe we could find our place too. We started the diaconate programme, and after four years I was ordained. Although I had many doubts, I finally decided that everything would be fine if I walked with God and my wife.

– *Did your wife support you until the end?*

Very much so! Sometimes I say that

At that time, she was more of a deacon than I was. My wife was a teacher, and the way she treated her students was very *diaconal*. She really tried to listen to them and be there for them when they had various questions about life.

– *How did you come to be appointed as a delegate to the Synod?*

– From the very beginning, I participated in the synodal process in the diocese. Our bishop is a former abbot of a Trappist monastery in Belgium. The method of discernment is characteristic not only of the Jesuits, but also of the Benedictines and Trappists. Therefore, the bishop was very happy when it became clear that the Synod would be dedicated to synodality. I was also delighted because I knew how monks use it in their community. So, the bishop invited me to be the coordinator of the Synodal Path in our diocese. I took on the responsibility, prepared our diocese's report, and contributed to the national one.

When the continental stage of the Synod arrived, four delegates were needed from each country: the president of the bishops' conference and three others to be chosen. Belgium had to have representatives from the French-speaking and Flemish-speaking parts, and someone from the capital. I became the Flemish representative. In addition, there had to be two men and two women. Our Cardinal De Kesel, who was still an archbishop at the time, said that it was an advantage that I was also a deacon (it later turned out that there was only one other deacon at this stage).

I remember discussing with another delegate at the Synod Assembly that it would be good if not only bishops attended the actual Synod in Rome. We did not even think of becoming members of the Synod. We just wanted to make a short presentation or share our testimony, to be there for a day or two.

And, as it turned out, similar discussions were taking place on other continents. So it was very pleasant and unexpected when Pope Francis announced that non-bishops would also participate in the Synod of Bishops and that they should be selected



from the continental assemblies. There should be ten representatives from each continent. In the end, there were ninety, because a few additional ones were appointed.

Around May, we were asked if we would mind if our names were submitted to Rome. At the time, I was convinced that I would not be chosen. But I realised that if I were chosen, I would not be able to refuse to go. I told my wife and children, and they fully supported me. On 1 July, I received a message from the Synod Secretariat that I had been included in the list as one of the members of the Synod. I have no idea who nominated me, but at that moment I realised the great responsibility that had fallen on me. I told my wife, "This is a responsibility – I have to take it seriously." I was very fortunate that the other non-bishop members also took it very seriously. I think this is our gift to the Synod and to the Church.

Did you realise when you arrived in Rome that you were the only permanent deacon?

Until the full list was made public, I didn't know. I read various reports in the media saying, "There is one group that has been forgotten – the deacons." I have to admit, there was some truth in that. Then I started looking into whether there were more deacons, but I couldn't find any. In the documents, I was referred to simply as "Mr Geert De Cubber from Belgium," with no mention of my being a deacon. This was later corrected. A person from the Synod Secretariat's communications department told me that there was another deacon of the Melkite rite, but he would soon become a priest. So he is not a permanent deacon. On the first evening of the Synod retreat in Sacrofano, I met that deacon. He informed me that there is another one from the Syrian Catholic Church. He calls himself a deacon, but he has not been ordained. Most likely, he is a subdeacon. So, in terms of permanent deacons, I was the only one. Of course, this is a responsibility, because I suddenly became the representative of an entire group. During the Synod, the diaconate was discussed quite a lot. I noticed that some of the ideas did not correspond at all to what we consider to be permanent diaconate. Someone told me: "You have to say what it means to be a deacon. You have to testify." During one of the free discussions, I did just that. I told my fellow travellers at the Synod what the diaconate means to me. I emphasised its sacramental nature, how important it is to be ordained. The Synod working document contained a very simple question: "Can you imagine women deacons?" I told my colleagues: "It's easy for me to answer – yes." The only thing we have to be careful about is that we don't clericalise women by ordaining them. The real danger is clericalism. But then again, the danger of clericalism exists for everyone, even those who are not ordained. However, it is still important to me that if women are ordained, it should be for the right reasons – for service, not for power or authority. And we must respect the unique vocation, because the diaconate is an independent vocation. Deacons want to be deacons. They do not want to be half-deacons or substitute priests.

— Incidentally, during the first assembly, it was noted that the representation of priests was very weak. But is it a question of why only one deacon is participating?

— In fact, no, because there were more priests than deacons. Six months after the first session, a separate meeting was organised with parish priests, as if in response to the lack of priests at the plenary assembly. Perhaps it would have been meaningful to do something similar for the deacons. Well, but now it's all over.

— You said that there was a lot of talk about the diaconate at the Synod. What specifically was discussed: the diaconate itself? The diaconate of women? Or the permanent diaconate of men?

— Yes, about all three! In addition, there was also discussion about the transitional (transitional) diaconate. In one discussion, the question was even asked: should we really ordain a deacon first, and only then a priest? Should we simply ordain either a priest or a deacon right away? This would be a "purer" form of vocation and a purer structure of ordination. I do not know what the theological consequences of such a model would be for the understanding of ministry (ordination), but perhaps it is worth considering. And this is one of the tasks of theologians, especially now, after the Synod.

— What impressions remained after the discussions about the diaconate?

— Impressions vary, because in some parts of the world, permanent diaconate simply does not exist. I understand why some people did not understand "what he was talking about" or "who he was". I accepted this and was prepared to explain. I feel that I succeeded, especially during the roundtable discussions, where I had direct contact. They really listened and wanted to hear.

This is one of the "side" fruits of the synodal process – establishing very strong relationships with people. Sitting at those tables, you talk to people, look them straight in the eye, and there is nowhere to run. You cannot get away. If you are asked a question, you have to answer. And those people become your friends. And when you talk to friends, brothers, sisters – if something

even though you don't understand, you want to understand.

It was a great opportunity to explain what permanent diaconate means and to add to what I had said. I was more moved by the change that took place throughout the process. I remember one conversation during dinner at Sacrofan. I was sitting next to a bishop who was not familiar with permanent deacons. I introduced myself as a deacon. "So when will you be ordained a priest?" I replied, "No, I am a permanent deacon. That means I will remain a deacon and one day I will die as a deacon." He looked at me and said, "We don't need deacons. We have enough priests."

At that moment, my diaconal heart broke. But I don't blame them; they simply don't know what it means to have ordained deacons because they have never had them. After my presentation and discussions at the tables, where bishops who had deacons and could share what it meant for their communities were also seated, the same bishop came up to me and said: "You've made me think. I need to think about this." And it seems that he really did his "homework," because

during the second session, we met again. And the bishop said: "Last year, you made me think. We tried to figure out whether it was right for us or not." In my opinion, this is a huge step. The most important thing is that during that time, the bishop thought about the value of deacons themselves.

There were other cases as well. For example, a project to train deacons was launched in the Philippines. I am not saying that this is my achievement, certainly not. They began considering this even before the Synod. But still, these are big steps if we look at the Church, which is becoming more "diaconal" and prophetic in the sense of the word. Because a deacon is not just some kind of ordained altar server, but much more than that. And if we recognise the prophetic value of the diaconate, it could become a very powerful form of ministry. As far as the prophetic mission of the Church is concerned.

How would you describe the prophetic value of this diaconal ministry to the Church?

— A different form of ministry. It is a consecrated ministry for both celibate men and those who have wives and children. It has been practised since ancient times in the Roman Catholic tradition. And this fact alone changes the ministry somewhat from within.

Another very important thing is the *Lumen gentium* citation, which states that *deacons are ordained not for the priesthood, but for service*. If I am not mistaken, the citation continues — *to serve the bishop*. Therefore, a deacon should be a close collaborator of the bishop, and this could even change the ministry of the bishop himself. A deacon must be the bishop's "eyes and ears" in those places in society where the bishop cannot go, should not go, or simply does not go. The deacon must have contact with everyone, especially those on the margins of society, "giving a voice to those who have no voice, giving a face to those who are faceless". And to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. This is what a deacon should do. I remember a nice conversation with a German bishop. He said that he always asks his deacons to give him the names of poor people they have met in the past before meeting with him. I found this very powerful — indeed, we need to ask for the names of those we see. You need to hear their stories. And do everything you can to take care of them.

Sometimes as a deacon, you just don't know what to do. But then, I think a deacon has to keep it in his heart, as Mary did. She did not immediately understand what she heard, but she kept it in her heart. And so do I — when I go out into the world and hear many stories, on Sunday I bring them back to the altar, to the centre of the Church. So that their prayers may be heard through me. And that is how the Church can reach out and, through the deacon, bring it back to the centre, to the very heart of the Church. I think this has enormous prophetic potential.

— Can this be understood as the real presence of Jesus in the Church? Is this also related to synodality in the Church?

— Yes, of course. It all starts when you go to the periphery. Obviously, if a person is hungry, you have to feed them. But

Sometimes all you have to do is just come and listen. Just say, "Tell me your story." And that story may or may not come, and that's okay too. But when it does come, you can only say one word to the person. And sometimes you don't know what to say. But you promise: "Okay, I'll take your story to the very centre through the Eucharist. I don't know if the Eucharist means anything to you, but for us Christians, it is the core of our lives, and I will pray for you." And when you say that to a person, not always, but most of the time, you establish a connection. This is also a form of ministry.

— If we go back to the synodal meetings in Rome, especially in Sacrofan, during the recollections, how did everything look?

— It was wonderful! At first I was afraid because I didn't know anyone. Well, I knew some of the European delegates, of course, my cardinal and the bishop appointed by the Belgian episcopate. But living together for three days and listening to Timothy Radcliffe OP's insights during the retreat really changed the situation. He encouraged us to speak with authority, but also with humility. And the combination of these two things, trying to keep them in balance, was a great help throughout the Synod. Radcliffe really set the tone, he didn't shy away from difficult topics, he talked about them from the very beginning. And I think that is what encouraged the delegates to speak freely, from their baptismal dignity, as equals, as brothers and sisters. That is what we learned here.

There were two conferences in the morning, followed by a period of "spiritual conversation" in the afternoon, and then various conversations during dinner or other meals. This was an opportunity to get to know people more broadly and comprehensively. Among these people were quite a few parents and even grandparents. And what do parents and grandparents talk about? About their children and grandchildren! So everyone took out their phones and showed pictures of their families. How wonderful! I remember one bishop walking by and saying, "This is the first time people have shown pictures of their children during a synod." And that, again, is very beautiful — it helped to establish connections and start friendships that I believe will last a long time.

— You came back a year later and...

— Then the introductory retreat took place in the Vatican, a little shorter, but it felt like the first day of school after a very long break — meeting friends again, getting to know new ones. The interim period also helped: we were able to study on our own. And we tried to ensure that synodality did not remain just a theory, but to implement some synodal projects at home. Some were successful, some were not.

I myself realised that relationships are very important — perhaps even the most important thing in the context of synodality. This is not just some formal "business" relationship. It is a genuine conversation between equals. Even before you start talking — as baptised Christians — you are already friends. We are friends of Jesus. And through Jesus, we are friends of each other.

Of course, through baptism we are already brothers and sisters, but here it is even more than that. I believe that this is what determines whether something succeeds or not. If people know you and listen to what you say, if they honestly tell you that what you are saying is, let's say, nonsense —



Photo by Nerijus Čipras

that's fine too! That's also part of synodality. You have to be honest. If you are honest and seriously consider what someone else has said, then you can get somewhere. And maybe it won't be the idea you had in mind at the beginning.

I think that if you asked all the members of the Synod whether they felt that the Spirit was among us on any given day, more than 80% would say yes. So we must take everything written in the Final Document seriously. Because these are not the convictions of Europe, Asia or Africa – this is a text that the Synod offers to the Universal Church. For some, this came as a surprise – probably because they did not expect us to go so far on certain issues. But for me, this is a sign of synodal conversion.

— It is amazing that in such a short time it is possible to touch so deeply the hearts and minds of pastors and all such different people!

— Indeed! Bishops and cardinals spoke about the synodal experience of conversion when you go through a certain synodal method. Although synodality is not a method in itself, it is a way of life. However, there are various synodal methods. The one we used in the Synod is called "conversation in the Spirit." This is a very powerful path, because in a short time you can reach a very deep level of understanding and communication. But this requires openness. It is openness that allows this to be not just a matter of personal conviction, but truly the Holy Spirit guiding us. I know that talking about the Holy Spirit and how it guides us can be misunderstood. Maybe it's just your opinion? I can testify that this was not the case.

If we believe that we are being led by the Spirit, that is the only thing that matters. Then we must trust the process. And even if the results seem unexpected to us, they will still be right.

— Would you say that the presence of women (for example, the wives of deacons) in the life of the Church brings something new and special that the Church has yet to discover?

— In my part of the world, this is already quite common – women hold leadership positions in the Church. They work in the bishop's team, are on the bishop's council, work as chancellors, and so on. For example, my lay colleague is the bishop's delegate for education, and another delegate for consecrated life is a nun. There are already all kinds of opportunities for women to be in leadership positions. And there is no doubt that we need to expand those opportunities even further.

I learned one very important principle from the Synod: everything that is not prohibited by canon law is possible. So let's see what is possible. And I believe that women can greatly enrich the Church and its meetings. They can take a different, fresh look and see the bigger picture of all the issues we face. In our diocese, there is a woman who is a member of the diocesan council and who has been involved in the work of the diocese for many years.

She is responsible for contacting victims of sexual abuse. She is extremely empathetic. People tell her their stories, which are often very painful. And she is able to accept them, listen to them and decide what should be done next. She can advise us on what steps to take. And I think that's because (at least in part, I wouldn't say "only because") she is a woman.

— What is the future of the diaconate in the Church? I recently learned that for more than 100 years, the Lutheran Church in Finland has had a church law that every community and parish must have both deacons and priests.

— I would say, let's do it! We really need to start thinking about ministry on a broader scale, as a whole. Perhaps it is better for a parish to have a priest and a deacon. It seems that St. Irenaeus of Lyons said that a bishop has two hands: one is priests, the other is deacons. And in every parish, he should have both hands. Only in this way would the bishop be connected to the whole Church – not only through liturgical life or the work of priests, but also through the diaconal face of the Church.

I think this is a wise decision. I am not sure if it is possible in the near future. But there is no harm in dreaming or starting to move in that direction. For example, the Synod made pastoral councils mandatory at both the parish and diocesan levels. Why couldn't we do the same with deacons? Every parish should have a priest and a deacon at the altar. Maybe not tomorrow, but maybe the day after tomorrow.

— Everything is about proclaiming Jesus, who lives among us and serves us, and serving Him – in the liturgy and in caring for the poor.

— We must always remember this as one of the most important lessons of the Synod. Let us not turn this into a battle. It is not a battle. We must ensure that Jesus remains at the centre, that the Gospel remains at the centre. How can we ensure that the Gospel will be the living Word of God in 2025 or 2050? This is what we must always keep in mind.

— Thank you, Deacon Geert, for sharing, witnessing and serving! Thank you, Pope Francis, for inviting us on this journey, which is being continued by the new Pope Leo! And thank you, Jesus!

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