

The Deacon in the Church of *Evangelii Gaudium*

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Memorial of St. George, Martyr

Thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts with you today.

I'm here, in part, because of something that your colleague, Deacon Joe Michalak, thinks I left out of my book, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st Century Church*.

In October 2013, eight months after *Evangelical Catholicism* was published, I was here in the Twin Cities to address an archdiocesan convocation and Joe accosted me – in a friendly way, of course – at a reception the evening before the gathering. He said that he'd liked my book but thought that there was “a missing chapter.” In the book, I had discussed the evangelical reform of the papacy and the Roman Curia, the episcopate, the priesthood, the consecrated life, the lay vocation, the liturgy, Catholic intellectual life, and the Church's social witness. But where, oh where, Joe Michalak wanted to know, was the diaconate? So, he slyly suggested, perhaps I would like to come back to the Twin Cities in April 2015, to make amends and to outline the missing chapter.

That's not exactly what I propose to do, however.

For as I reviewed the extensive literature on the diaconate that Joe sent me over the past year and a half, it became clear that it was not my business to write the “missing chapter” – the chapter on the diaconate – for the Church of the twenty-first

century and the third millennium: that is your business, in conversation with the bishops whom you serve, the priests with whom the Church's deacons serve, and the people whom deacons serve. What I might offer to that ongoing conversation – which seems, from a review of the literature, to involve serious questions of theology, serious questions of formation, and serious questions of pastoral practice – is my own understanding of the “frame” in which that discussion should be set: which is to say, the best thing I can do for the evangelical reform of the diaconate in the Church in the United States today, and for the National Association of Diaconate Directors, is to offer you an understanding of this moment in Catholic history, and of this moment in American cultural history, so that your reflections on the future of the diaconate can meet the test set by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. There, the Council Fathers reminded us that, in order to fulfill the Great Commission given it by the Lord, the Church always has the obligation of “reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4).

It will help orient what follows if we remember that Vatican II set that mandate to read the signs of the times in an explicitly *evangelical* context. The Church reads the signs of the times, not in order to accommodate herself to the spirit of the age, but, as the Council Fathers put it, “to answer the ever recurring questions that men ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other” (*Gaudium et Spes*, *ibid.*). The Church reads the signs of the times, in other words, in the light of the Gospel. She does so in order to *convert* the times, and to remind *these* times, as indeed she reminds *all* times, that

history is His-story, God's story, in which the final chapter has already been revealed to us in Holy Scripture, in the vision given to the Apostle John:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new..." [*Revelation* 21. 1-5a].

I. The Church in These Times

For almost two millennia now, the Church has striven, in the power of the Spirit, to fulfill the Great Commission: to "go...and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" [*Matthew* 28.19-20]. The trajectory of that striving has been uneven and jagged; anything but smooth. There have been periods of great evangelical fervor in the history of the Catholic Church, some of which emerged from beneath the rubble of what seemed catastrophic circumstances; there have also been periods of evangelical lassitude in the Church, even though God has never ceased to raise up saints among us. But throughout that uneven history, the Church has remained, by the grace of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the same Church: for as St. Paul wrote the Church at Ephesus, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to

your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" [*Ephesians* 4.4-6].

Still, the obligation to read the signs of the times – to understand the circumstances in which the Gospel must be preached and “inculturated” – means that this one Church, founded on one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, has experienced great moments of change in its path through history. The Gospel has not changed; the Church remains the Church. But the *mode of being Catholic* has changed over time, so that the Gospel may be effectively preached in new human circumstances and heard in its astonishing freshness and power. We are now living through one of those seismic shifts in the mode of being Catholic. The geological metaphor is appropriate, because, just as shifts in the tectonic plates beneath Earth’s surface often cause serious turbulence on the surface of our planet, seismic shifts or developments in Catholic self-understanding cause significant turbulence on the surface of Catholic life.

There have been four previous, seismic periods of change in the history of the Church – moments of an epoch-creating transformation in the Church’s self-understanding and thus in the way of being Catholic.

(1) The first of these moments came early in the story, about 70 A.D., when what we know as the Christian movement began to separate itself definitively from what became rabbinic Judaism, at the time of the First Jewish War and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The mode or form of being-Catholic that emerged from this seismic shift created what we know as the *Early Church*; there are traces of its travails in the New Testament itself and in the sub-apostolic

literature represented by *1 Clement*, the *Didache*, and the *Letter to Diognetus*. Here, we can trace the lives and struggles of the first, second, and third generations of the followers of The Way, as they sought to find a distinctive Christian path into the future, once the expectation of the Lord's imminent return had faded.

The Early Church was full of both martyrs and evangelical passion, and it seems, according to studies by Rodney Stark and others, that the two phenomena were closely linked: the witness of Christians who lived lives of greater nobility and compassion than others in the harsh world captured in the film *Gladiator* (whether those Christians died *in odium fidei* or not) attracted converts to The Way. In *The Rise of Christianity*, Stark suggests that the power of that example was such that, by the time of the Constantinian settlement and the full legalization of Christianity, the followers of The Way may well have been a majority of the Roman world. Still, the Early Church also had its confusions and controversies, never better captured than in Evelyn Waugh's experimental novel, *Helena*. It's a novel well worth reading today, for the story of Constantine's mother, the Dowager Empress, and her search for the True Cross is in fact a story about the gritty realism of Christian faith in combat with the ethereal Gnosticism of the age. And that is a tale with many parallels to be found in our own times.

(2) The Early Church gave way to, even as it gave birth, the *Patristic Church*, the Church of the Fathers, as Catholicism emerged from its sometime-underground existence and fully engaged classical culture. This Patristic Church – the Church of Ambrose and Augustine, Leo the Great and Gregory the Great, the Cappadocian doctors, the deacon-hymnwriter Ephrem and Maximos the Confessor – lived

through its own period of historical turbulence, as the western Roman Empire collapsed under the assault of those of my ancestors formerly known as “the barbarians,” and was later reconstituted by Charlemagne and his successors. Nor was the Patristic Church spared theological turbulence: remember the Christological controversies that led to the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, the Donatist and Pelagian controversies that plagued Augustine, the iconoclastic controversy that roiled the eighth and ninth centuries. Yet for all that turbulence, historical and ecclesiastical, the Patristic Church produced extraordinary spiritual riches, on which we feed even today in the Office of Readings. And those spiritual riches had an evangelical impact, not least in bringing those of my ancestors formerly known as “the barbarians” out of Arianism and into normative, orthodox Christianity.

(3) The Patristic Church had a good run: say, five hundred plus years. Then, as the first Christian millennium was drawing to a close, the Church of the Fathers gave way to, even as it gave birth to, what we know as *Medieval Christendom*: the Church of Dominic, Francis, and the mendicant reform (a genuine *novum* in Christian life); the Church of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, in which Catholic self-understanding was reformulated and deepened by engaging the New Learning of the day, especially the recovered philosophy of Aristotle; the Church of Gregory VII, whose battles with state power eventually led to the institutionalization of the distinction between spiritual and political authority, so crucial for the future political development of the West; the Church of Westminster Abbey, Yorkminster, and Durham Cathedral, Chartres and Beauvais and Amiens and the Sainte Chapelle, in which faith was wedded to craft to produce

unparalleled architectural and decorative marvels; the Church of Catherine of Siena, mystic and reformer, who helped save the papacy from becoming a chaplaincy to state power – an epoch in which Christianity led culture onward (and upward), in H. Richard Niebuhr’s famous typology, into a synthesis as complete as is possible *in hac lacrimarum vale* (as a medieval hymn-writer, Hermann of Reichenau, put it in the *Salve, Regina*).

(4) Medieval Christendom had its own good run, another half-millennium or so, until it fractured in the 16th-century Reformation. And thus the medieval Church gave birth to, even as it gave way to, the Church of the Counter-Reformation: the Church of Charles Borromeo, Ignatius Loyola, and Philip Neri, of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross; the mode of being Catholic formed by the great Council of Trent – the Catholicism in which everyone here over fifty grew up. *Counter-Reformation Catholicism* was a Church of simple, question-and-answer catechesis, which lived the truths it professed through a devotional piety centered on Our Lady, the saints, and the Sacred Heart. Counter-Reformation Catholicism thought of the Church as a pyramid, with the pope at the top, the clergy and the consecrated religious in the middle, and the laity at the bottom; authority flowed in one direction (down) and so, typically, did discussion. Counter-Reformation Catholicism did not emphasize biblical literacy (meeting the Word made flesh in God’s written word) nor in its first three and a half centuries did it stress a frequent encounter with Christ in the Eucharist (a weakness that eventually had to be met by legislating the “Easter duty”). And if its concept of the Church was legal-juridical, so was its concept of the moral life, which was understood as a matter of training the will to obey a set of

rules (unlike the biblical, patristic, and medieval notions of the moral life as a life of growth in the virtues, a growth ordered to beatitude).

This Counter-Reformation way of being Catholic was subjected to a lot of ridicule in the immediate aftermath of Vatican II, and, in truth, there were some aspects of it susceptible to satire. But it should also be remembered that this was the mode of being-Catholic that crossed the Atlantic in the first great evangelization of the western hemisphere and that began the evangelization of sub-Saharan Africa; that this was the mode of being Catholic that withstood the fierce assault of political modernity that began in the French Revolution, continued through the German *Kulturkampf* and the Italian *Risorgimento*, and reached unparalleled depths of depravity in the communist assault on the Church in the twentieth century; and that this was the mode of being Catholic that, at a moment of grave assault both culturally and politically, produced the great missionary movements of the nineteenth century.

(5) When many of us were growing up within it, Counter-Reformation Catholicism seemed to be the Church as it always was and the Church as it always would be; immutability, or changelessness, seemed a fifth mark of the Catholic Church, alongside unity, holiness, universality, and apostolicity. Yet we can now see that, in our younger days, we were living at the end of the epoch of Counter-Reformation Catholicism and in the first phases of the mode of being Catholic that is being born today: the Church of the New Evangelization, or *Evangelical Catholicism*.

To make a long and complex story desperately short, the Evangelical Catholicism being born today, not without difficulty, began to be formed in the

pontificate of Leo XIII, who between his election in 1878 and his death in 1903 set in motion dynamics of change in Catholic theology and philosophy, biblical and historical studies, and social doctrine that, in concert with the Liturgical Movement and various movements of pastoral renewal, rippled through the Church in the first five decades of the twentieth century, producing a great flowering of Catholic thought, a renewal of pastoral practice, and not inconsiderable controversy. Leo XIII took a great strategic decision at the beginning of his pontificate: the Church would engage modernity, but it would do so with distinctively Catholic tools, newly honed for the encounter. Eighty years after Leo took that decision, John XXIII, newly elected in 1958, made a similarly bold strategic decision: he would gather up the energy let loose by the Leonine Revolution and focus it through the prism of an ecumenical council, so that the Church might enter its third millennium freshly empowered for its essential task of preaching the Gospel for the conversion of the world.

It would be left to two men of John's Council, Karol Wojtyła and Joseph Ratzinger, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, to offer the Church an authoritative interpretation of Vatican II: the "Council without keys" that, unlike every previous Council, did not offer authoritative keys to its own interpretation in dogmatic definitions, condemnations of heresies, canons, creeds, or catechisms. The authoritative interpretation of Vatican II, by contrast, emerged over the thirty-five years of these two pontificates, which, in terms of the papal magisterium, should be understood as one "moment." And that "moment" had a profound effect. For by the time Benedict XVI laid down the burden of the papacy, the liveliest parts of the

world Church were those that had followed the lead of John Paul II and his successor in thinking of the Church as *a community of disciples in mission*: a Church in which friendship with Jesus Christ and incorporation into the his Mystical Body impels all of the friends of the Lord Jesus into mission.

It was an interpretation of Vatican II that had first been suggested by Paul VI in the 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. That hermeneutic on the council was then deepened at the 1985 Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops and in John Paul II's 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, in which John Paul taught that the Church does not *have* a mission (as if mission were one of a dozen things the Church does); the Church *is* a mission, and everyone and everything in the Church should be measured by mission-effectiveness. It was a point the Polish pope underscored at the end of the Great Jubilee of 2000, when, in the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, John Paul II urged the Church to leave the shallow waters of institutional maintenance, to reconceive those institutions as launch-platforms, and to "put out into the deep" (Luke 5.4) of the New Evangelization – to put out into the roiled waters of the post-modern world and to become what Pope Francis would call, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, a Church in permanent mission.

The evangelical Catholicism of the future is going to be a more demanding way of living Catholicism than the mode of being Catholic that preceded it: it will demand greater biblical literacy, more frequent reception of the sacraments, intensified prayer, lifelong catechesis, and the courage to bear witness to Christ everywhere: the family, the workplace, the culture, and society. Evangelical Catholicism asks Catholics to stop thinking of their Catholicism as one aspect of their

lives, and to think of it as the very center of their being: that from which everything else flows. Evangelical Catholicism asks Catholics not to think of “mission territory” as those exotic places usually found in the pages of *National Geographic*, and to understand that “mission territory” today is one’s kitchen table, one’s neighborhood, one’s business or profession, one’s life as a consumer, and one’s life as a citizen. It’s all mission, all the time. And every Catholic is being called today to understand that, at the moment of baptism, he or she received a commission as a missionary disciple – the Great Commission, which is addressed to each Catholic today, just as it was to that first apostolic band, two millennia ago.

The proof of the providential nature of this emergent evangelical Catholicism is its embrace by the liveliest and most vibrant sectors of the world Church – our best dioceses, parishes, seminaries, and campus ministries; the communities of consecrated life that are growing; our renewal movements; new pastoral initiatives like FOCUS. And this embrace of a new and dynamic mode of being Catholic – of being a Church “permanently in a state of mission” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 25) – has come just in time. For we are now in a challenging situation in which the ambient public culture does not help transmit the faith. Nor is it neutral to the faith. The cultural air we breathe is toxic to the faith. Thus the Church will get no help from the culture in forming the Catholics of the immediate future – as it did when many of us were young. Fifty years from now – perhaps thirty years from now – no Catholic in America is going to be able to say “I am a Catholic because my great-grandmother was born in County Cork (or Cracow, or Würzburg, or Guadalajara, or Palermo).”

Catholicism-by-osmosis, Catholicism via the tribal or ethnic transmission-belt, is over. It has no future in these cultural circumstances.

The only future is an evangelically vibrant Catholicism, built for mission and living mission, prepared to engage the culture in order to convert the culture: which means a Catholicism prepared to be countercultural for the sake of offering the culture the medicine of the Divine Mercy, the experience of which leads us to the Truth who is the Thrice-Holy God.

That is not going to be easy. Let me explain why.

II. The Culture in These Times

In 1873, John Henry Newman preached at the opening of St. Bernard's Seminary in Olton and had some bracing words for the seminarians: "...the trials which lie before us," he said, "are such as would appall and make dizzy such courageous hearts as St. Athanasius, St. Gregory I, or St. Gregory VII. And they would confess that, dark as the prospect of their own day was to them severally, ours has a darkness different in kind from any that has been before it." The Church had lots of experience with pagans and their gods; but until his day, Newman continued, the Church had "never yet had an experience of a world simply irreligious" – a world in which the human instinct for the transcendent, the supernatural, seemed to have been snuffed out. And that was a world, as Newman saw with considerable foresight, in which Catholics would be "regarded as...the enemies...of civil liberty and of national progress."

Then, in 1955, and writing from Eisenhower-era Georgia rather than Victorian England, Flannery O'Connor tried to describe to a friend what Newman saw coming, and what Miss O'Connor thought had arrived. Thus in a letter to a woman whose religious questions Miss O'Connor was seeking to answer, she wrote, "If you live today, you breathe in nihilism...it's the gas you breathe. If I hadn't had the Church to fight it with or tell me the necessity of fighting it, I would be the stinkiest logical positivist you ever saw right now."

So we can't say that some of the most insightful spirits among us didn't give us fair warning that the western world was undergoing a profound cultural decomposition, under the impact of what one of the great theological influences on the Second Vatican Council, the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac, called "atheistic humanism:" a deformation of the great western humanistic project in which the God of the Bible came to be regarded as the enemy of human maturation and human liberation. In the worldview of atheistic humanism, created by such thinkers as Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche, biblical religion was not a benign mythology from an earlier stage of human development; it was the enemy, for it impeded the progress of humanity. Thus, modern humanity, tutored by natural science (*the* paradigm of all genuine human knowledge), must free itself from the constraints of religious faith so that it might march boldly into a bright, humane, and noble future, freed from the shackles imposed on it by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the God whom Jesus named as "Father."

Of course, what humanity marched into was World War I, an act of civilizational self-mutilation that was only comprehensible, the great Aleksandr

Solzhenitsyn wrote, if men had forgotten God. One might have thought that that experience, from which Europe has yet to fully recover, would have impelled a rethinking. But the long-term cultural damage had been done. And thus we have come, in our time, to a cultural moment aptly described by David Bentley Hart as “metaphysical boredom:” which is another way of describing what Newman foresaw in a world of religious indifference, or what Flannery O’Connor described as the nihilism we breathe without knowing it.

This, then, is the most important sign of these times which the New Evangelization must recognize: the “sign” which tells us that virtually the entire high culture of the West has ceased being interested in what we propose as the truth of the world and the truth of the human condition. And that “metaphysical boredom” or nihilism in the high culture has worked its way through the rest of our environment to such a degree that the French scholar Rémi Brague (winner of the 2012 Ratzinger Prize) has argued that the great question of the twenty-first century is no less than the question of Being or Nothingness. For what has been lost among too many of our contemporaries is a sense of awe and wonder at the very mystery of Being itself. Our horizons have been flattened; irony and skepticism dominate our culture; nothing in the human condition is simply given, but all is susceptible to manipulation by acts of our will; we are bored, dulled, uninterested; the pleasure principle, pursued as the supreme goal of life, has turned out to deprive us of joy.

In his Chrism Mass sermon this past Holy Week, Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit summed up the spiritual condition of our culture in these thoughtful

words, which would have resonated in the souls of Blessed John Henry Newman and Mary Flannery O'Connor:

Has there ever been a time like ours when a people who once heard the Gospel, living in a culture that had over time been shaped according to the principles of the Gospel, has so willingly become asleep about the Gospel, and shed the Gospel, and become indifferent to the Gospel?....Are we not bored with Christ? Is that not the condition that the Holy Spirit needs to heal in our time? Have we not come to a time when....hearts no longer seem to be restless, but rather more drugged, befuddled. Are we not at a time when there's a loss of confidence that there is out there, somewhere, some good worth striving for?

I think Cardinal Ratzinger was speaking about this at the beginning of the millennium. He said: The deepest poverty is the inability of joy, the tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory. This poverty is widespread today...The inability of joy presupposes and produces the inability to love, produces jealousy, avarice — all the defects that devastate the life of individuals and of the world.”

I was reading in Blessed John Henry Newman some lines that seemed to well articulate this being frozen, chill and dry. Newman wrote: “What a truly wretched state is that coldness and dryness of soul, in which so many live and die, high and low, learned and unlearned. Many a great man, many a peasant, many a busy man, lives and dies with closed heart, with affections undeveloped, unexercised.”

.... [This] attitude of heart is what the ancients call *acedia* — the noonday devil. The sort of weariness that saps the vitality out of life.... About this condition Dorothy Sayers writes: “This is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.” We have known it far too well for many years. Incessant activity, this desire to always be connected which is typical of our time, [Sayers] observes — these are all disguises for an empty heart and an empty brain and the empty soul of *acedia*.

Spiritual boredom, *acedia*, cripples souls, rendering them lame and devoid of joy. That human tragedy cries out, one soul at a time, yet throughout our culture, for the healing, enlivening message of the Gospel. But the soul-withering spiritual

lameness of our time also has public consequences. One of those consequences is what Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, at the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice* in 2005, dubbed the “dictatorship of relativism:” the use of coercive state power to impose a relativistic morality of willfulness on all of society, typically in the name of “tolerance.”

And here is the point at which the metaphysical boredom or religious indifference of our time suddenly rises up and takes notice of believers: when those who believe in and follow The Way affirm that there are truths built into the world and into us, truths that lead us to happiness and beatitude; when we remind our contemporaries that willfulness raised to a first principle is misery-making and ultimately death-dealing; when we affirm that the right to life from conception until natural death is the first of human rights, without which the state truly is Leviathan and no other “rights” make sense; when we stand with the Framers of the Constitution and St. John Paul II in declaring that religious freedom is the first of civil rights, because it embodies the essential democratic principle, rooted in the Gospel, that Caesar is not God and that there are sanctuaries that Caesar must not invade or attempt to occupy.

It can seem a little self-serving to say that ours is a moment of unparalleled challenge for the proclamation of the Gospel. Were things not difficult when the first followers of The Way ventured out of their Jewish comfort-zone and sought to evangelize the world of classical antiquity? Do we face anything like the assault that the vibrant Christianity of North Africa faced when the followers of Islam burst out of the Arabian peninsula in the name of religious conquest? Were things not difficult

when political modernity sought, in Voltaire's famous phrase, to "Crush the infamy!"— meaning the Church? Are our circumstances really more dire than those faced in Nazi Germany by Blessed Bernhard Lichtenberg, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sophie Scholl and the other young members of the White Rose? Or by the Ukrainian Greek Catholics whose Church Stalin was determined to eradicate? Or by the Catholics of Vietnam after 1975? Or by the Catholics of the Middle East today?

Comparative awfulness is not the point, however. The point is to recognize our situation for what it is, and to take heart from the witness of those who have faced grave and challenging evangelical circumstances before us. Still, it is worth underscoring that the challenge described by John Henry Newman, Flannery O'Connor, David Hart, and Allen Vigneron is a unique one because of its subtlety and its pervasiveness throughout our culture, which make it undetectable to many: to the point where too many of our people continue to miss the assaults on religious freedom that are becoming far too common in the United States, as the sexual revolution becomes ever more aggressive and ever more determined to force our public surrender. And it is distinctive because of the capacity of spiritual boredom or acedia, masquerading as tolerance, to erode the faith of those Catholics who have not fully embraced, as the defining reality of their lives, friendship with Jesus Christ, incorporation into his body, the Church, and the missionary imperative implicit in that friendship and that membership.

Thus perhaps the providential development of Catholic self-understanding that has led us into the New Evangelization or *Evangelical Catholicism* can now come into clearer focus. The challenge of these times – which, whether unparalleled or

not, is certainly grave – can only be met by a Church in permanent mission: by All-In Catholicism, which offers the world an experience of the Divine Mercy so that the world might then hear a word of revealed truth; by the Evangelical Catholicism that has been gestating among us since the pontificate of Leo XIII, and that has now come to its first, if fragile, maturity, not least in the Catholic Church in the United States.

III. The Deacon in the Church of *Evangelii Gaudium*

As I said at the outset, it is for you, not me, to discuss and, with the other relevant parties in the Church, to decide what the Order of Deacons ought to be and do in the work of the New Evangelization, the living-out of *Evangelical Catholicism*. But perhaps, in conclusion, I can offer a few suggestions that occur to me – a neophyte in these discussions – in light of what I have said about this moment in the history of the Church and the signs of these times.

- Discussion of the diaconate in the Church of the New Evangelization must begin theologically, such that the focus from the outset is on what the deacon *is*, not on what the deacon does. Or to put it crudely, the discussion must move beyond the notion of the deacon as a part-time ordained do-gooder and sacramental backstop (who probably shouldn't do too much preaching because he's not very good at it) to a biblically informed and theologically deepened notion of the deacon as a radically converted disciple who lives out his discipleship in a uniquely *ecclesial* way.

- The deacon as an ecclesial man embodies in the Church the *diakonia* of Christ, which begins with obedient listening to the Father and is lived in a mission that is born from, and is fostered by, the deacon's own continual conversion. Thus

the diaconate has contemplative, sacramental, and active dimensions: the deacon is a man immersed in the Word of God, who proclaims the Word liturgically and takes the Word of God into the world as witness, evangelist, catechist, and servant of charity.

- The deacon in the New Evangelization will see the poor as a privileged field of ministry: the materially poor, whose suffering he will relieve even as he works to empower those caught in the cycle of poverty to become protagonists of their own lives; the spiritually poor, whom he will strive to lead out of acedia and into a new appreciation of the beauty and wonder of the human condition, the full truth of which is revealed in Christ; the intellectually impoverished, who have never been offered a chance to explore the Catholic symphony of truth in its fullness.

- Thus the deacon in the New Evangelization will, like the angels who are often portrayed in art in diaconal vestments, regard himself as a messenger: an ambassador from the Church to the world, who by living compassionately, invites others to an experience of the divine mercy, and thence to an encounter with the God who is Truth; a mediator and animator within the Church who works to radicalize the discipleship of the lukewarm, the ill-catechized, and the scandalized, calling all into mission; a herald of the Good News, both within the Church and in the world, who can invite others to an encounter with the Lord and the Gospel because he is himself a man formed by a deep and ongoing study of Scripture and a sacramental piety centered on the Eucharist.

- In the current cultural circumstances of North America, the married deacon will have a special care and concern for the renewal of the vocation of marriage,

working with pastors to prepare couples for Christian marriage and to help couples live their marriage as precisely that: a vocation from God.

- At this moment in Church history when lifelong learning is essential to radical discipleship and effective mission, deacon-formation will stress the preparation of men who are master-catechists and compelling apologists, using the wealth of materials now available that “translate” the best of contemporary theological and biblical scholarship for non-specialists, who are nonetheless called to meet the challenge laid down in the First Letter of Peter: “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” [1 Peter 3.15]. Works by Father Robert Barron (*Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith*), Dr. N.T. Wright (*The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is; Paul: In Fresh Perspective*), and Father Servais Pinckaer, OP (*Morality: The Catholic View*) may be cited as examples of the kind of works that should form the intellectual core of deacon-formation programs, along with the weekly catecheses of Pope Benedict XVI (*Jesus, the Apostles, and the Early Church; The Fathers; St. Paul; Doctors of the Church; Great Teachers; Holy Women*). Sustained reflection on the truths of Christian faith, through an encounter with materials such as these, will support diaconal catechesis and result in diaconal preaching that allows the people of the Church, and seekers, to “see” the world with the eyes of faith.

The Servant of God Dorothy Day was fond of a challenge laid down by Pope Pius XI as the shadow of totalitarianism was lengthening across Europe, and would soon engulf the entire world in war. “Let us thank God that He makes us live among

the present problems,” Pope Pius said. “It is no longer permitted to anyone to be mediocre.” So, in that courageous spirit, let us thank God for the challenging times in which we live. Let us thank God even more fervently for making us live during the birth of a new epoch in Catholic history, the era of the New Evangelization. And may your work to reform the diaconate for the Evangelical Catholicism of the twenty-first century and the third millennium, inspired by St. Stephen, St. Philip, St. Lawrence, St. Ephrem, and all the holy deacons of the last two millennia, bear fruit in a great in-gathering of souls, out there in “the deep” to which the Lord is calling us, as he once did his first band of friends.

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