

DIACONATE AND STATES OF LIFE: FROM DISCERNMENT TO FORMATION
San Giovanni Rotondo, 3 - 6 August 2009
XXII National Conference of the “Comunità del Diaconato in Italia”

Report by Enzo Petrolino, President of the “Comunità del Diaconato in Italia”

Diaconate and states of life: from discernment to formation, this was the subject of the XXII National Conference of Deacons organised by the “Comunità del Diaconato in Italia” and held in *San Giovanni Rotondo* from 3rd to 6th August 2009. The Conference, which saw the participation of about 350 people (priest delegates, deacons, candidates and aspirants, wives, lay people, religious and consecrated people), focused on the different aspects referred to in its title through 5 main lectures, fully adopting the objectives of the Study Seminary promoted by the Episcopal Commission for Clergy last November with the main objects of thinking over the “way” the deacon’s ministry is performed in our churches and tracing out the learning routes which should both precede and accompany this ministerial achievement.

Don *Giuseppe Bellia*, Professor of Sacred Writings at the Theological Faculty of Palermo and Editor of the Revue “*Il Diaconato in Italia*”, opened the proceedings with his reflection on “*the discernment and formation to the diaconal ministry in its relation to the different states of life*”. *Bellia*’s statement drew an interesting and suggestive picture which, starting from Joseph’s dream, enlightened the participants on the challenges the diaconate brings to our communities today. From *discernment* to *formation* the passage could seem ordinary and not so demanding, as it were an “easy” job, focused upon a whole of coherent choices inspired by a strong ministerial (diaconal) theology. On the contrary – pointed out *Bellia* – during these years our churches’ praxis has shown a very different and problematic situation, because beside serious and coherent learning routes there can be found extremely diverse and contrasting solutions, so that we have on the one side rigorous (sometimes even prohibitive) solutions and, on the other one, compromise arrangements which often appear somehow “patched” and improvised.

Passing from discernment to a consequent formation is neither just a sole action nor an only theoretical one carried out once for all: it is instead a work of careful and patient adaptation which aims at considering and tracing out a complex human and spiritual process. In other words, a work requiring the wisdom of a flexible pedagogy as well as the rigour of a “praying listening” discipline. Such passage cannot be committed to a generic programming unable to take into consideration the personal, environmental and historical situation of the individuals involved as well as the ambits of this ministry practice; and beyond any possible learning route based on commonly shared general lines, it is necessary to wonder whether – faced with adult men, already endowed with not only a human and social, but also a moral and spiritual formation – the learning process must exclusively concern intellectual and doctrinal aspects or, on the contrary, it is expected also to deal with the real problems of family life as well as the ones of professional and social commitment.

Dr. *Andrea Grillo*, Professor of Sacramental Theology at the Pontificio Ateneo Sant’Anselmo in Rome, was entrusted with a theological reflection on the ministerial aspects of Marriage in its relation to the diaconate: a critical issue, indeed, notwithstanding still little deepened on both a theological and pastoral level. Surely the introduction of a theology of the diaconate as a sacrament changes in various ways the understanding of Marriage in its present pastoral development and insights, and – vice versa – a theology that emphasises Marriage inside the whole of the ecclesial experience inevitably affects the theology of the Orders, including that of the diaconate. So, a theological perspective of the diaconate, in the light of this newly acquired reciprocity, engages both the state of conjugal life and the learning and spiritual consequences connected with the deacon’s ministerial tasks. This leads us to confront some problems which result to be still open, such as: the passage from the very “disciplinary” to the “ministerial” ambit to be discovered as a

resource for the Church's life; the capability to enlarge our consideration of the diaconate as a part of the ordained ministry; the "way" to avoid the increasing risk of the so-called "clerical immunization".

Two aspects of the learning route are particularly important and sensible for the community: the privileged service of the poor and the spiritual formation that – as the Italian bishops say in the document of 1993 – is the unifying element, indeed, in the whole diaconal learning process.

In his lecture, Mgr. *Giuseppe Merisi*, Bishop of Lodi and President of Italian Caritas, pointed out "how" deacons are to be formed at "the school of the poor". We all know that the centrality of the service to the poor and needy has accompanied – especially in the latest few decades – the "purification route" of the Church's self-consciousness, and this service represents her primary task for the passage needed from the *self-consciousness* to the *practice* of Christian life. Now, the ecclesial maturity shows us that the "preferential option for the poor" means *being on the poor's side by being close to them*; and this demands that the churches increasingly take into consideration the ministry of deacons, guiding and supporting their whole learning process through a carefully structured study and training plan, so that deacons may really be responsive to the needs and expectations of their brothers, especially the last ones, confronting the challenges and troubles of this time.

Diakonia maintains its sense if the bond between *the poor* and *the Eucharist* comes to be recovered, and consequently the bond between *the Church* and *the poor* is recovered, too. This is the key to a faithful and credible diaconal practice, as it is in this service – faithfully carried out in the name of Christ, by mandate of the bishops and on behalf of the whole People of God – that the very meaning of Christian diakonia and the true nature of the Church become visible.

The final lecture, held by *F. Raniero Cantalamessa* (Preacher of the Papal Household), offered the participants a careful and suggestive synthesis of the whole Meeting. Father *Raniero* underlined "how" the deacon's spirituality is rooted in the new identity acquired through the sacrament of the diaconate. A beneficiary of the grace proper to this sacrament, the deacon comes to be a *sign and instrument* of the same grace to the others by the whole of his life. Indeed, it is the sacramental grace that enables him to live as a servant of Christ. So, the very root of the diaconate is a Christological one: Christ came into the world to be "a Deacon", and deacons are in their serving the "epiphany" of the Church's *diakonia*. Nowadays – stated *Cantalamessa* – the word "service" is often used in a different meaning from the true original one (an example is the political context) forgetting that Christian *diakonia* has to keep itself rooted in the two "harmonic keys" of the serving act: *humility* and *charity*. The deacon is inhabited by the Holy Spirit, who guides his life toward the truth and enables him to denounce the evil, to discern the signs of times and to live the communion within the same and only love coming from God. In other words, diaconal spirituality is to be pursued through a process of gradual conformation to the Lord, who made himself the "*Servant of all*".

An important section of the Conference was dedicated to the listening to actual family diaconal experiences, shared and compared inside a panel held by three wives, respectively of an Italian deacon (*Laura Corradini*, from Modena), a Spanish one (*Montserrat Martínez*, from Barcelona) and a French one (*Marie-Françoise Maincent Hanquez*, from Paris). There emerged many interesting hints and ideas, which animated a widely participated discussion. In short, the answers given showed that if on the one hand undeniable are the difficulties accompanying the double sacramentality (coming from Marriage and Order), on the other one there are some aspects of this ministry by now clear to the diaconal couple and actually operating inside their everyday life.

As President of the "Comunità", in my lecture I tried to describe the situation of the diaconate in Italy at present, showing at the same time the role that the *Comunità* has played during the last decades for the development of this ministry. In Italy as well as in other countries, like any other reality "in progress" the diaconate, too, is characterised by realisations which show on the one hand an undoubted maturity process, and on the other one some questions still open – such as the discernment and formation ones – on which the study, reflection and pastoral suggestions have

recently focused a greater attention.

In these last years, the diaconate has surely acquired a “full citizenship” in the greatest part of our local churches (only 13 dioceses have no deacons, yet), and according to the latest statistics, in Italy deacons are about 3,419 and candidates are more than 1,500. But “*what do deacons actually do?*” They are generally co-operators of the parish priest, and their service range over the whole field of evangelisation, catechesis and charity. Of course, not everything is easy, and misunderstandings and difficulties sometimes affect pastoral work, especially because some fringes in our communities still need to be made more aware of the very meaning and role of the diaconate. Moreover, it is important that the learning process comes to recover the “cultural” dimension, which is essential to a ministry called to carefully “read” the signs of the times, to understand and share the real situations of people’s life and to positively relate to them. Along this route, in these years the necessity to integrate *the deacon’s ecclesial commitment* and *his social one* has become more visible as well, since it is primarily in the social space that the most critical challenges of our time call us to action.

The *Comunità del diaconato* is not concerned with drawing up an “inside” auto-referential balance sheet, as it does not exist just for itself but, indeed, for the promotion of the diaconate. Forty years have already gone by since the beginnings. Surely, in Italy the permanent diaconate is the only vocation on a steady increase, and its development very much owes – especially if we think of its initial steps and efforts – to the precious work carried out by inspired animators like don *Alberto Altana*. Undoubtedly the *Comunità* still accomplishes an irreplaceable communication and interlocution task, and for this reason it remains a reference point for both the Italian and the worldly information concerning the diaconate progress, a “meeting place” where to exchange experiences and to get the up-to-daye news on theological reflection and the Church’s teaching guidelines.

During the national and inter-regional conferences as well as in the diocesan ones, we have recently promoted and performed specific meetings for the deacons’ wives, aimed at creating an active *network* similar to the one already existing on an international level, which acts as a platform for the exchange of ideas and experiences of the deacons’ wives (and families) with the object of setting an efficient communication and a support and solidarity bond.

The *Comunità* has its informative instrument in the Revue “Il diaconato in Italia” and its exchange occasions in the seminaries and conferences periodically organised.

During the proceedings of this XXII National Conference, the new Board also carried out its election duties and I was honoured to be confirmed in my appointment as President of the *Comunità del diaconato in Italia* for the coming five-year period.