

From God's Heart to Ours

How the Institute for Diaconate Renewal awakens hearts to live in God's love



Saints that deacons can turn to for excellent examples of the many fruits of contemplative prayer (left to right): St. Joseph, St. Teresa of Ávila, St. John of the Cross, St. Thérèse of Lisieux and St. Ignatius Loyola.

By Deacon Stephen F. Miletic

The interior life is centered in our hearts, where our deepest longing exists. Our heart's deepest need is to be loved by God.

Divine love is nuptial. The dynamism of nuptial love consists of a continuous self-emptying of love, the divine gift of self to the other. We see this love witnessed in sacramental marriage, present as a grace in the ordained, and its manifestation in consecrated virgins and everyday believers. The reception of this great gift of God's Person awakens the heart to love.

The challenge then is praying, ministering and living with an awakened awareness and reception of love in the heart. This experience of God's gift of self is no doubt what St. Paul had experienced when

he wrote a poetic chapter on *agape* (cf. 1 Cor 13). The humility and obedience of Jesus toward the Father (cf. Phil 2:6-11) characterize how deacons can exist within Trinitarian communion. Being able to exist this way is one of the many fruits of contemplative prayer and living.

Formation and Renewal

The Institute for Diaconate Renewal offers opportunities for renewing and deepening the spiritual life of the deacon. Human, liturgical and pastoral formation and renewal occur when priority is given to the development of the interior life.

The institute's mission is to assist the deacon to live with a heart awakened to God's love. The heart awakened to God's personal, tender love is liberated, freed

and joy-filled. This experience is the result of cultivating the primacy of the interior life.

Silent, contemplative prayer allows God to shape the very fabric of our human-spiritual life. Such experience of spiritual and human formation is a highway that moves us from self-centered, selfish, broken human life to a Christ-centered self-offering to God and neighbor. This kind of life imitates Christ and, therefore, participates in Christ's sacrificial love at the cross (cf. Eph 5:25-29).

We take time to be quiet, silent before God, in our inner room (cf. Mt 6:6). God listens to this kind of prayer and renews us.

Renewal, ongoing conversion and formation all should produce integral human development, which is to say spiritual and

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR DIACONATE RENEWAL

The Institute for Diaconate Renewal offers opportunities for the renewal and deepening of the spiritual life of the deacon.

If you wish to reach out and discover more about the Institute for Diaconate Renewal and the opportunities it offers, email the institute. Contact Deacon Stephen F. Miletic, Ph.D., director of the Institute for Diaconate Renewal, Franciscan Center for Evangelization and Renewal, at idr@franciscan.edu.

For more information, visit the website at: steubenvilleconferences.com/institute-for-diaconate-renewal.

emotional maturation. Only the intimate experience of Trinitarian nuptial love addresses the universal hunger for love and intimacy.

At this level, our moral life is shaped by experiencing truths about ourselves, God and our neighbor. Guided by the Church, such experiences of truth are what transform the deacon to becoming more of what he has already become at ordination. This deep love reconfigures human service into the sacramental sign of Christ the Servant, present and active. Christ came to serve and not be served (cf. Mk 10:45). In and through love, our ministries are one, single mediation of Christ's servant mysteries.

'God Speech'

In silence, we listen for "God speech." Hearing God in silent prayer is a step in getting to know the Good Shepherd's voice (cf. Jn 10). God's word is cloaked, hidden in the words of men (Scripture). The Holy Spirit reveals God's Word through human words (inspired and inerrant). His "voice" bleeds through biblical words as ink bleeds through thin rice paper. We get to know God as person, and present, by doing as ancient Israel did in response to Moses' command, "Hear, O Israel" (Dt 5:1). Listening for God is the first step toward abiding in Christ as he abides in us.

How do we know we are hearing God in silent, contemplative prayer? There is plenty of biblical caution not to confuse our thoughts with those of God. God's thoughts are not our thoughts (cf. Is 55:8-

9). God's word is as distinct as his love since both are one in God. God's love is: His gift of himself is personal and nuptial. He bonds with us (baptism, confirmation, ordination), which changes us. This is how we begin to recognize God in both the heart and mind.

His word to us is intimacy and tender love itself. It is replete with kindness and mercy. These are like God's calling cards. Hearing these words and experiencing these tender affective movements in the heart is how we know they are from the heart. God's message is simple, clear, easy to understand and has the quality of a gift (un-generated by anything created).

Some fruits are joy, peace, liberation and a deeper love for God and neighbor. Scripture (cf. Gal 5:22-23), sacred Tradition (cf. "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," No. 2) and the spiritual tradition (cf. St. Ignatius of Loyola, Rule 2) all attest to these qualities when known in our minds and experience it in our hearts. This is where God's deepest passion for intimacy and friendship can be known and experienced. Receiving love in silent prayer actualizes our abiding in Christ. This is also the path to personal and ministerial renewal.

Listening

The contemplative dimension of our programs is integrated into our intellectual, affective and pastoral growth. Our programs assist deacons in listening for God's voice, who speaks from his heart to our hearts. This kind of listening leads

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BEARING WITNESS

Deacon Dominic Cerrato explores the integrated approach to diaconal life, which is an intimate communion with Christ the Servant, in his book "Encountering Christ the Servant: A Spirituality of the Diaconate" (OSV, \$19.95). This intimate communion originates in the interior life.

to deeper self-awareness and can be difficult to process. We encounter our sins, wounds, traumas, shame and guilt. These items impede our life in the Spirit, our intimate communion with Trinitarian love. We have already seen that hearing and listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd is the fundamental step in abiding in Christ.

From a programmatic perspective, the primacy of listening to God in silence is the "golden thread" (St. Augustine) that unites the vision and mission to our programs. Contemplative prayer is the water and sunshine for spiritual-human growth and transformation, and for integral human development. Listening to our interior "many voices" leads to deeper self-awareness and helps discern between God's Word and everything else.

The primacy of the interior life through hearing the Lord leads to intimacy with God.

Imitating Christ's way of life is a participation in his Person and work. Jesus often broke away from his ministry seeking solitude with the Father. Dare we follow, imitate and so participate in his solitude? If so, then we follow Christ's own humility and tenderness toward the Holy Spirit who leads him to the desert to be tempted, but also to commune with the Father (cf. Mt 4:1-2; Mk 1:12-13, 35; Lk 4:1-2, 42; 5:15). Christ sends us mediations of his Servant Mysteries to the world. He wants to be present in and through us.

Abiding in Christ

The mutual abiding in Christ, we in him and he in us, is challenging. We are tethered to attachments. We experience distraction ("we are walking, talking distractions"). Is there a time when that continuous abiding in Christ (cf. Jn 15:4) animates the fabric of our whole lives and not just one aspect of it (cf. Gal 2:20)? When that happens, Christ the Servant mysteriously becomes present and prays, works, ministers, becomes the husband-Good Shepherd of our marriage and parenting.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we become him, as if God the Father's "only begotten Son," who cherishes and loves us as much as Jesus. This animation and action of the Holy Spirit is where I am transformed, and I become a bread of life to another. This is where our words and deeds are no longer ours because they carry Christ's — food for the minds and souls of our brothers and sisters.

The formation produced by experiencing God's tender, loving self-surrender to the Father and us enables a response in kind. These are movements of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's power to build and sustain our weak human response to God is amazing. God strengthens, upbuilds and frees us to respond to the many needs of others; and this happens in and through sacrificial love received. We could easily say, "This is not me being joyful doing the distasteful task, it is Christ in me." An interior life imbued, saturated by God's love is how deacons join what St. Paul taught, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20, RSV).

Somewhere along this path, our *diakonia* becomes Christ's *diakonia*. This is intimacy with God; this is confidence; this is faith, hope and love finding a larger footing in the larger fabric of our lives.

At the Institute for Diaconate Renewal, we are just beginning to offer this foundational formation to the diaconal community. We invite all deacons and eventually their wives and families to come, see and join us on this exciting journey toward renewal in Christ. This journey costs everything (all our worldly treasures) but offers us much, much more (cf. Mt 10:39; 19:29; Mk 10:29). **TD**

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