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Deacons in the Year of Faith: Toward a Lifetime of Faithful Service
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Faith and the Diakonia of Loving Service

- Introduction
 - In this retreat on Deacons in the Year of Faith: Toward a Lifetime of Faithful Service, it's fitting for us to conclude with a conference on the fruit of everything we've been pondering up until now. The fruit of zeal. The fruit of faithful prayer. The fruit of the transformation that is supposed to happen to us when we become whom we consume in the Holy Eucharist. The fruit of truly bringing the Gospel to others: charity.
 - The early apostolic writings, basing themselves on what Christ himself said and did in the Gospel — calling us to love our neighbor just as he has loved us, illustrating the call to love with the unforgettable image of the Good Samaritan whom Jesus himself enfleshed, washing the apostles' feet and instructing them to do the same, coming not to be served but to serve and give his whole life as the charitable ransom for the many, reminding us that we will be judged on how we respond with love to the hungry, thirsty, naked, infirm, imprisoned, and stranger — reminded the early Christians and us today of the indispensable connection between real faith and charity.
 - St. James
 - James 2:14-18: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Indeed someone might say, “You have faith and I have works.” Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works.”
 - St. John
 - 1 John 3: 16-18: The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him? Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.
 - 1 John 4:20-21: If anyone says, “I love God,” but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.
 - St. Paul
 - 1 Cor 12:31, 13:1-3: Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts. But I shall show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.
 - Charity is the fruit of true faith, the flourishing of the Christian life. This is a message for every Christian. But it's a message that is particularly associated with the vocation, life and ministry of deacons.
 - John Paul II said in Detroit in 1987, “The service of the deacon is the Church's service sacramentalized.”

- When Pope Paul VI restored the permanent diaconate following the recommendation of the Second Vatican Council, he said, “the permanent diaconate should be restored... as a driving force for the Church’s service (*diakonia*) towards the local Christian communities, and as a sign or sacrament of the Lord Christ himself, who ‘came not to be served but to serve’” (Pauli VI *Ad Pascendum*, Intr.).
- Permanent Deacons are meant to be the sacramentalization, the efficaciously visible sign, of the Church’s charity, of Christ the servant, and the catalyst and driving force of the Church’s whole mission continuing Christ’s charity in the midst of the world.
- Acts of the Apostles
 - We see this truth at the foundation of the diaconate in the early Church.
 - Pope Benedict gave a tremendously beautiful and deep reflection on calling of the first deacons in Acts 6 in his catecheses on prayer. He pondered the “serious problem that the first Christian community of Jerusalem was obliged to face and to solve ... concerning pastoral charity to lonely people and those in need of assistance and help.” He said:
 - This is not a secondary matter for the Church and at that time risked creating divisions in the Church; the number of disciples, in fact continued to increase, but the Greek-speaking began to complain about those who spoke Hebrew because their widows were left out of the daily distribution (cf. Acts 6:1). To face this urgent matter that concerned a fundamental aspect of community life, namely, charity to the weak, the poor and the defenseless, and justice, the Apostles summoned the entire group of disciples. In that moment of pastoral emergency the Apostles’ discernment stands out. They were facing the primary need to proclaim God’s word in accordance with the Lord’s mandate but — even if this was a priority of the Church — they considered with equal gravity the duty of charity and justice, that is, the duty to help widows and poor people and, in response to the commandment of Jesus: love one another as I have loved you (cf. Jn 15:12,17), to provide lovingly for their brothers and sisters in need.
 - So it was that difficulties arose in the two activities that must coexist in the Church — the proclamation of the word, the primacy of God and concrete charity, justice — and it was necessary to find a solution so that there would be room for both, for their necessary relationship. The Apostles’ reflection is very clear, they say, as we heard: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4).
 - Two points stand out:
 - first, since that moment a ministry of charity has existed in the Church. The Church must not only proclaim the word but must also put the word — which is charity and truth — into practice.
 - And, the second point: these men must not only enjoy a good reputation but also they must be filled with the Holy Spirit and with wisdom; in other words they cannot merely be organizers who know what “to do”, but must “act” in a spirit of faith with God’s enlightenment, with wisdom of heart. Hence their role — although it is above all a practical one — has nonetheless also a spiritual function. Charity and justice are not only social but also spiritual actions, accomplished in the light of the Holy Spirit.
 - The Apostles confronted this situation with great responsibility. They took the following decision: seven men were chosen; the Apostles prayed the Holy Spirit to grant them strength and then laid their hands on the seven so that they might dedicate themselves in a special way to this ministry of charity. ...
 - Even the difficulties that the Church was encountering as she faced the problem of service to the poor, the issue of charity, was overcome in prayer, in the light of God, of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles did not limit themselves to ratifying the choice of Stephen and the

other men but “they prayed and laid their hands upon them” (Acts 6:6).

- With the act of the laying on of hands, the Apostles conferred a special ministry on seven men so that they might be granted the corresponding grace. The emphasis on prayer — “after praying” — they say, is important because it highlights the gesture’s spiritual dimension; it is not merely a question of conferring an office as happens in a public organization, but is an ecclesial event in which the Holy Spirit appropriates seven men chosen by the Church, consecrating them in the Truth that is Jesus Christ: he is the silent protagonist, present during the imposition of hands so that the chosen ones may be transformed by his power and sanctified in order to face the practical challenges, the pastoral challenges. And the emphasis on prayer also reminds us that the response to the Lord’s choice and the allocation of every ministry in the Church stems solely from a close relationship with God, nurtured daily.
- Dear brothers and sisters, the pastoral problem that induced the Apostles to choose and to lay their hands on seven men charged with the service of charity, so that they themselves might be able to devote themselves to prayer and to preaching the word, also indicates to us the primacy of prayer and of the word of God which, however, then result in pastoral action. For pastors, this is the first and most valuable form of service for the flock entrusted to them.
- The development of the service of deacons in the early Church
 - Famous story of the deacon St. Lawrence
 - Pope Benedict, in the second section of *Deus Caritas Est*, gave a history of the development of the Church’s organized charity in the early Church by tracing, in a sense, the history of the diaconate.
 - DCE 20: Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practise love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community. The awareness of this responsibility has had a constitutive relevance in the Church from the beginning: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need” (*Acts* 2:44-5). In these words, Saint Luke provides a kind of definition of the Church, whose constitutive elements include fidelity to the “teaching of the Apostles”, “communion” (*koinonia*), “the breaking of the bread” and “prayer” (cf. *Acts* 2:42). The element of “communion” (*koinonia*) is not initially defined, but appears concretely in the verses quoted above: it consists in the fact that believers hold all things in common and that among them, there is no longer any distinction between rich and poor (cf. also *Acts* 4:32-37). As the Church grew, this radical form of material communion could not in fact be preserved. But its essential core remained: within the community of believers there can never be room for a poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified life
 - DCE 21: A decisive step in the difficult search for ways of putting this fundamental ecclesial principle into practice is illustrated in the choice of the seven, which marked the origin of the diaconal office (cf. *Acts* 6:5-6). In the early Church, in fact, with regard to the daily distribution to widows, a disparity had arisen between Hebrew speakers and Greek speakers. The Apostles, who had been entrusted primarily with “prayer” (the Eucharist and the liturgy) and the “ministry of the word”, felt over-burdened by “serving tables”, so they decided to reserve to themselves the principal duty and to designate for the other task, also necessary in the Church, a group of seven persons. Nor was this group to carry out a purely mechanical work of distribution: they were to be men “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (cf. *Acts* 6:1-6). In other words, the social service which they were meant to provide was absolutely concrete, yet at the same time it was also a spiritual service; theirs was a truly spiritual office which carried out an essential responsibility of the Church, namely a well-ordered love of neighbor. With the formation of this group of seven,

“*diaconia*”—the ministry of charity exercised in a communitarian, orderly way—became part of the fundamental structure of the Church

- DCE 22. As the years went by and the Church spread further afield, the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word: love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word. ... When Ignatius of Antioch († c. 117) described the Church of Rome as “presiding in charity (*agape*)”, we may assume that with this definition he also intended in some sense to express her concrete charitable activity.
 - DCE 23. Towards the middle of the fourth century we see the development in Egypt of the “*diaconia*”: the institution within each monastery responsible for all works of relief, that is to say, for the service of charity. By the sixth century this institution had evolved into a corporation with full juridical standing, which the civil authorities themselves entrusted with part of the grain for public distribution. In Egypt not only each monastery, but each individual Diocese eventually had its own *diaconia*; this institution then developed in both East and West. Pope Gregory the Great († 604) mentions the *diaconia* of Naples, while in Rome the *diaconiae* are documented from the seventh and eighth centuries. But charitable activity on behalf of the poor and suffering was naturally an essential part of the Church of Rome from the very beginning, based on the principles of Christian life given in the *Acts of the Apostles*. It found a vivid expression in the case of the deacon Lawrence († 258). The dramatic description of Lawrence's martyrdom was known to Saint Ambrose († 397) and it provides a fundamentally authentic picture of the saint. As the one responsible for the care of the poor in Rome, Lawrence had been given a period of time, after the capture of the Pope and of Lawrence's fellow deacons, to collect the treasures of the Church and hand them over to the civil authorities. He distributed to the poor whatever funds were available and then presented to the authorities the poor themselves as the real treasure of the Church. Whatever historical reliability one attributes to these details, Lawrence has always remained present in the Church's memory as a great exponent of ecclesial charity.
 - DCE 25: The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.
 - Deacons fulfill all three responsibilities, through their proclamation of the world, their participation in the sacraments, particularly that of the Eucharist, and especially in the ministry of charity.
- John Paul II in Detroit, 1987
 - When Blessed John Paul II came to Detroit in 1987 to meet with the 8,000 Permanent Deacons from across the United States and their wives and families, he could have spoken about many themes with them, but the one on which he wanted to focus was on what we called the “vocation to service.” He said:
 - “This is at the very heart of the diaconate to which you have been called: *to be a servant of the mysteries of Christ and, at one and the same time, to be a servant of your brothers and sisters.* That these two dimensions are inseparably joined together in one reality shows the important nature of the ministry which is yours by ordination
 - *The service of the deacon is the Church's service sacramentalized.* Yours is not just one ministry among others, but it is truly meant to be, as Paul VI described it, a “driving force” for the Church's *diakonia*. By your ordination you are configured to Christ in his servant role. You are also meant to be *living signs of the servanthood of his Church.*

- If we keep in mind the deep spiritual nature of this *diakonia*, then we can better appreciate *the interrelation of the three areas of ministry* traditionally associated with the diaconate, that is, the ministry of the word, the ministry of the altar, and the ministry of charity. Depending on the circumstances, one or another of these may receive particular emphasis in an individual deacon's work, but these three ministries are inseparably joined together as one in the service of God's redemptive plan. This is so because the word of God inevitably leads us to the Eucharistic worship of God at the altar; in turn, this worship leads us to a new way of living which expresses itself in acts of charity.
- This charity is both *love of God and love of neighbor*. As the First Letter of John teaches us, "one who has no love for the brother whom he can see cannot love the God whom he has not seen . . . whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1Jo. 4, 20-21). By the same token, acts of charity which are not rooted in the word of God and in worship cannot bear lasting fruit. "Apart from me, Jesus says, "you can do nothing" (Jo. 15-5). The ministry of charity is confirmed on every page of the Gospel; it demands a constant and radical conversion of heart.
- In the midst of the human condition it is a great source of satisfaction to learn that so many permanent deacons in the United States are involved in *direct service to the needy*: to the ill, the abused and battered, the young and old, the dying and bereaved, the deaf, blind and disabled, those who have known suffering in their marriages, the homeless, victims of substance abuse, prisoners, refugees, street people, the rural poor, the victims of racial and ethnic discrimination, and many others. As Christ tells us, "as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me"
- Taking an active part in society belongs to the baptismal mission of every Christian in accordance with his or her state in life, but the permanent deacon has a special witness to give. The sacramental grace of his ordination is meant to strengthen him and to make his efforts fruitful, even as his secular occupation gives him entry into the temporal sphere in a way that is normally not appropriate for other members of the clergy. At the same time, the fact that he is an ordained minister of the Church brings a special dimension to his efforts in the eyes of those with whom he lives and works.
- Equally important is the contribution that a married deacon makes to the transformation of family life. He and his wife, having entered into a communion of life, are called to help and serve each other
- By the standards of this world, servanthood is despised, but in the wisdom and providence of God it is the mystery through which Christ redeems the world. And you are ministers of that mystery, heralds of that Gospel. You can be sure that one day you will hear the Lord saying to each of you: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord"
- Mary, as she continues to proclaim: "I am the servant of the Lord" (Luc. 1, 38). And in the example of her servanthood we see the perfect model of our own call to the discipleship of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the service of his Church.
- The Prism of Lumen Fidei
 - Throughout this retreat, we've been pondering the thoughts given to us by the successors of St. Peter in *Lumen Fidei*. One of the main points the encyclical makes in response to criticisms of faith is that true faith is always connected to charity, that faith, rather than making us flee the world, drives us to try to form strong bonds of love to make it better. Faith connects truth and charity in service to God and others.
 - We can ponder the subject of charity from within the eight prisms given to us by Lumen Fidei
 - Charity as a mutual entrustment and commitment
 - Christ made a total commitment to us in charity and we are called to make a similar commitment.
 - Jesus never told us, "love me as I loved you," but "love one another just as I loved you." When Peter, in response to Jesus' three queries, said that he loved the Lord,

Jesus told him to “feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my lambs.” His love for the Lord would be shown in his love for others.

- Real charity is a commitment. It’s not just an ad-hoc thing. While the Lord always sends people into our path that we weren’t expecting, charity, nevertheless, needs to be “planned,” insofar as we need to take it as seriously as we do study of the Bible, as we do prayer.
- Those who involve themselves in charitable service know the commitment involved in visiting the sick in nursing homes and hospitals, caring for infirm family members, making St. Vincent de Paul home visits, running food pantries. Faith leads us to make such a commitment.
- Charity as a light flowing from faith
 - Charity begins with how we look at others in faith.
 - Blessed Mother Teresa always trained her Missionaries of Charity to look at the poorest of the poor as Jesus in a distressing disguise.
 - Faith-filled charity changes our vision.
 - Pope Benedict wrote about this in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*.
 - DCE 18: Love of neighbor is thus shown to be possible in the way proclaimed by the Bible, by Jesus. It consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. **Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend.** Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern. ... Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave. Here we see the necessary interplay between love of God and love of neighbor that the *First Letter of John* speaks of with such insistence. If I have no contact whatsoever with God in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in him the image of God.
- Charity in a new way of hearing
 - One of the biggest ways faith changes our hearing is by helping us to hear others with understanding instead of judgment. We begin to hear their pain, their sufferings, the background to some of their behaviors.
 - Faith leads to a charitable listening that is, as St. Paul would describe, patient, kind, not jealous, pompous, rude, self-interested, quick-tempered, easily injured, or focused on the wrong.
- Charity as a new way of touching
 - Faith-filled charity leads us not just to give “things” to others, but to give ourselves.
 - Famous story of the future-Deacon Francis of Assisi and the leper, giving alms.
 - Jesus was always touching those in the Gospel, to give this truly human interaction.
- Charity as a new way of memory
 - We remember all that the Lord has done for us and it changes us in our approach to others.
 - Fr. Cantalamessa’s Good Friday homily on the link between what God did for and said to the Israelites and what the Italians were being called to do for the refugees.
 - We should never forget that everything God has given us is a divine depository placed in our hands, as St. John Vianney would say. We’re stewards of it. To the

extent God has given us more material resources, we are called to enter more deeply into his generosity.

- Charity as a journey
 - Charity is the great exodus out of ourselves toward God and others. It's a continual Passover.
 - At a practical level, we need to go out to those in need, rather than let them come to us.
 - Just as there are no plateaus in the spiritual life, so there are no vacations from the life of charity.
- Charity as a form of building
 - Charity builds great bonds and it builds up those who are charitable more and more into Christ and the Church.
 - We see in the early Church how the faith flowed to charity and the diaconate itself was one of the structures built in the Church in order to care for the poor, something that expanded into the early *diakonia* and then into so many other structures that remain to this day.
- Charity as a mother
 - Mother's care for their children with their own heart and even with their lives.
 - St. John Vianney used to say that good mothers always give special preference to their wounded and sick children, to those in greater need. Fathers, we might say, are tempted to give greater care to their "successful" children, those who indulge their pride much more readily than try their patience, but mothers normally care for the wounded children with special predilection. The whole Church is called to this type of maternal care.
- Other points from the Church about the Charity of Deacons and of the Church
 - Church's charity begins with our own, but doesn't extend merely to our own:
 - DCE 25: The Church is God's family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life. Yet at the same time *caritas- agape* extends beyond the frontiers of the Church. The parable of the Good Samaritan remains as a standard which imposes universal love towards the needy whom we encounter "by chance" (cf. *Lk* 10:31), whoever they may be. Without in any way detracting from this commandment of universal love, the Church also has a specific responsibility: within the ecclesial family no member should suffer through being in need. The teaching of the *Letter to the Galatians* is emphatic: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (6:10)
 - We care for others not because they're Catholic but because we are.
 - Church's charity is not just social assistance, but love
 - DCE 31: It is very important that the Church's charitable activity maintains all of its splendour and does not become just another form of social assistance.
 - Those who carry out the Church's care for the poor need to be competent and have charitable hearts
 - DCE 31: Following the example given in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Christian charity is first of all the simple response to immediate needs and specific situations: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for and healing the sick, visiting those in prison, etc. The Church's charitable organizations, beginning with those of *Caritas* (at diocesan, national and international levels), ought to do everything in their power to provide the resources and above all the personnel needed for this work. Individuals who care for those in need must first be professionally competent: they should be properly trained in what to do and how to do it, and committed to continuing care. Yet, while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern. Those who

work for the Church's charitable organizations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity.

Consequently, in addition to their necessary professional training, these charity workers need a “formation of the heart”: they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others. As a result, love of neighbor will no longer be for them a commandment imposed, so to speak, from without, but a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love (cf. *Gal* 5:6).

- DCE 33. More than anything, they must be persons moved by Christ's love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening within them a love of neighbor. The criterion inspiring their activity should be Saint Paul's statement in the *Second Letter to the Corinthians*: “the love of Christ urges us on” (5:14). The consciousness that, in Christ, God has given himself for us, even unto death, must inspire us to live no longer for ourselves but for him, and, with him, for others. Whoever loves Christ loves the Church, and desires the Church to be increasingly the image and instrument of the love which flows from Christ. The personnel of every Catholic charitable organization want to work with the Church and therefore with the Bishop, so that the love of God can spread throughout the world. By their sharing in the Church's practice of love, they wish to be witnesses of God and of Christ, and they wish for this very reason freely to do good to all.
- DCE 34: Interior openness to the Catholic dimension of the Church cannot fail to dispose charity workers to work in harmony with other organizations in serving various forms of need, but in a way that respects what is distinctive about the service which Christ requested of his disciples. Saint Paul, in his hymn to charity (cf. *1 Cor* 13), teaches us that it is always more than activity alone: “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (v. 3). This hymn must be the *Magna Carta* of all ecclesial service; it sums up all the reflections on love which I have offered throughout this Encyclical Letter. Practical activity will always be insufficient, unless it visibly expresses a love for man, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ. My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift.
- DCE 35: This proper way of serving others also leads to humility. The one who serves does not consider himself superior to the one served, however miserable his situation at the moment may be. Christ took the lowest place in the world—the Cross—and by this radical humility he redeemed us and constantly comes to our aid. Those who are in a position to help others will realize that in doing so they themselves receive help; being able to help others is no merit or achievement of their own. This duty is a grace. The more we do for others, the more we understand and can appropriate the words of Christ: “We are useless servants” (*Lk* 17:10). We recognize that we are not acting on the basis of any superiority or greater personal efficiency, but because the Lord has graciously enabled us to do so. There are times when the burden of need and our own limitations might tempt us to become discouraged. But precisely then we are helped by the knowledge that, in the end, we are only instruments in the Lord's hands; and this knowledge frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world. In all humility we will do what we can, and in all humility we will entrust the rest to the Lord. It is God who governs the world, not we. We offer him our service only to the extent that we can, and for as long as he grants us the strength. To do all we can with what strength we have, however, is the task which keeps the good servant of Jesus Christ always at work: “The love of Christ urges us on” (*2 Cor* 5:14).
- Charity is not meant to be an occasion for convert making, but it's inevitable that if we're charitable some will seek to become a more permanent participant, and not just recipient or collaborator in, that charity. Christ needs to be part of what we give, even if silently.

- DCE 31: Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends. But this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside. For it is always concerned with the whole man. Often the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God. Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love (cf. *1 Jn* 4:8) and that God's presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love. He knows—to return to the questions raised earlier—that disdain for love is disdain for God and man alike; it is an attempt to do without God. Consequently, the best defence of God and man consists precisely in love. It is the responsibility of the Church's charitable organizations to reinforce this awareness in their members, so that by their activity—as well as their words, their silence, their example—they may be credible witnesses to Christ.
- The Church must form her people in charity
 - DCE 32: Today as in the past, the Church as God's family must be a place where help is given and received, and at the same time, a place where people are also prepared to serve those outside her confines who are in need of help.
- For a deacon, this charitable service must embrace his entire way of being
 - JP II 1993: The diaconate commits one to following Jesus with this attitude of humble service, which is expressed not only in works of charity but shapes and embraces one's whole way of thinking and acting. This perspective explains the condition set by the document <Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem> for admitting young men to formation as deacons: "Only those young men should be enrolled to train for the diaconate who have shown a natural inclination for service to the hierarchy and the Christian community" (n. 8: <Enchiridion Vaticanum>, II, 1378). The "<natural inclination>" should not be understood in the sense of a simple spontaneity of natural dispositions, however much this too is a presupposition to be considered. It is rather an inclination of nature inspired by grace, with a spirit of service that conforms human behavior to Christ's. The sacrament of the diaconate develops this inclination: it makes the subject share more closely in Christ's spirit of service and imbues the will with a special grace, so that in all his actions he will be motivated by a <new inclination> to serve his brothers and sisters
 - Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons: "The spirituality of service is a spirituality of the whole Church, insofar as the whole Church, in the same way as Mary, is the "handmaid of the Lord" (*Lk* 1:28), at the service of the salvation of the world. And so that the whole Church may better live out this spirituality of service, the Lord gives her a living and personal sign of his very being as servant. In a specific way, this is the spirituality of the deacon. In fact, with sacred ordination, he is constituted a living icon of Christ the servant within the Church. The *Leitmotiv* of his spiritual life will therefore be service; his sanctification will consist in making himself a generous and faithful servant of God and men, especially the poorest and most suffering; his ascetic commitment will be directed towards acquiring those virtues necessary for the exercise of his ministry. ... The element which most characterises diaconal spirituality is the discovery of and sharing in the love of Christ the servant, who came not to be served but to serve. The candidate must therefore be helped progressively to acquire those attitudes which are specifically diaconal, though not exclusively so, such as simplicity of heart, total giving of self and disinterest for self, humble and helpful love for the brothers and sisters, especially the poorest, the suffering and the most needy, the choice of a life-style of sharing and poverty. Let Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, be present on this journey and be invoked as mother and auxiliatrix in the daily recitation of the Rosary.
- This requires attentiveness in Deacons

- National Directory: The ministry of charity is “most characteristic of the deacon.” “In fact, with sacred ordination, [the deacon] is constituted a living icon of Christ the servant within the Church.” Therefore, as he conforms his life to Christ the Servant, making himself a generous and faithful servant of God and of those in need, especially among the poorest and those most suffering, he helps to shape the vitality and genuineness of the exercise of the corporal and spiritual works of charity in the life of the believing community. His attentiveness to the manifold physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of people in his immediate environment and throughout the world reminds the Church that it is a servant-people sent into a needy world.
- This requires simplicity of life in Deacons
 - National Directory: Deacons are charged at ordination to shape a way of life always according to the example of Christ and to imitate Christ who came not to be served but to serve. Therefore, deacons are called to a simple lifestyle. Simplicity of life enables a cleric “to stand beside the underprivileged, to practice solidarity with their efforts to create a more just society, to be more sensitive and capable of understanding and discerning realities involving the economic and social aspects of life, and to promote a preferential option for the poor.” The prophetic significance of this lifestyle, “so urgently needed in affluent and consumeristic societies,” is its important witness in animating the *diakonia* of every Christian to serve “especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted.”
- Conclusions
 - Year of Faith and Charity
 - Porta Fidei tells us that the Year of Faith is a good opportunity “to intensify the witness of charity.”
 - Pope Benedict reiterates there that “Faith without charity bears no fruit, while charity without faith would be a sentiment constantly at the mercy of doubt. Faith and charity each require the other, in such a way that each allows the other to set out along its respective path. Through faith, we can recognize the face of the risen Lord in those who ask for our love. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). These words are a warning that must not be forgotten and a perennial invitation to return the love by which he takes care of us. It is faith that enables us to recognize Christ and it is his love that impels us to assist him whenever he becomes our neighbor along the journey of life.”
 - We are called to persevere in faith and charity, the Pope continues. “Having reached the end of his life, Saint Paul asks his disciple Timothy to “aim at faith” (2 Tim 2:22) with the same constancy as when he was a boy (cf. 2 Tim 3:15). We hear this invitation directed to each of us, that none of us grow lazy in the faith. It is the lifelong companion that makes it possible to perceive, ever anew, the marvels that God works for us. Intent on gathering the signs of the times in the present of history, faith commits every one of us to become a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world.”
 - This charity is the path to sanctity for deacons and the Church. Pope Benedict finishes his encyclical on charity, Deus Caritas Est, by pondering the great figures of the Church who became saints through becoming perfected in Charity.
 - DCE 40. Finally, let us consider the saints, who exercised charity in an exemplary way. Our thoughts turn especially to Martin of Tours († 397), the soldier who became a monk and a bishop: he is almost like an icon, illustrating the irreplaceable value of the individual testimony to charity. At the gates of Amiens, Martin gave half of his cloak to a poor man: Jesus himself, that night, appeared to him in a dream wearing that cloak, confirming the permanent validity of the Gospel saying: “I was naked and you clothed me ... as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:36, 40).[36] Yet in the history of the Church, how many other testimonies to charity could be quoted! In particular, the entire monastic movement, from its origins with Saint Anthony the Abbot († 356), expresses an immense service of charity towards neighbor. In his encounter “face to face” with the God who is Love, the monk senses the impelling need to transform his

whole life into service of neighbor, in addition to service of God. This explains the great emphasis on hospitality, refuge and care of the infirm in the vicinity of the monasteries. It also explains the immense initiatives of human welfare and Christian formation, aimed above all at the very poor, who became the object of care firstly for the monastic and mendicant orders, and later for the various male and female religious institutes all through the history of the Church. The figures of saints such as Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, John of God, Camillus of Lellis, Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Giuseppe B. Cottolengo, John Bosco, Luigi Orione, Teresa of Calcutta to name but a few—stand out as lasting models of social charity for all people of good will. The saints are the true bearers of light within history, for they are men and women of faith, hope and love.

- Prayer to Mary from the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons
 - We finish by turning to the Blessed Virgin, the handmaid of the Lord, in the words given in the Vatican's Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons praying that she helps get you ready to conform your lives to her Son who has made himself deacon of all.
 - “Teacher of that service which is hidden, who by your everyday and ordinary life filled with love, knew how to co-operate with the salvific plan of God in an exemplary fashion, make deacons good and faithful servants, by teaching them the joy of serving the Church with an ardent love.”
 - “Teacher of charity, who by your total openness to God's call, has co-operated in bringing to birth all the Church's faithful, make the ministry and the life of deacons fruitful by teaching them to give themselves totally to the service of the People of God.”