By Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers

The Deacon's Role at Baptisms

Responsibilities pertain to the particularities of the sacrament

The past seven months have been unprecedented in the life of the Church. The tentacles of the coronavirus pandemic have reached into parishes around the world, constricting reception of the sacraments for millions of faithful Catholics. As the Church continues to slowly recover from the grip of COVID-19, receiving sacraments will resume with renewed vigor and enthusiasm. This is particularly true of baptism, delayed for both catechumens and children alike, who will now be received joyfully into the Church. Undoubtedly, deacons will be busy administering and assisting at baptisms.

The fact that deacons receive the faculty to baptize solemnly goes without saying, but deacons are also tasked to "assist the bishop and the priest during liturgical actions in all things," including baptism (*Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, No. 21.1).

This symbiotic relationship extends back into the Old Testament to the time of Moses, in the relationship between the priests and Levites. "The Lord said to Aaron. ... You shall also present with you your kinsmen of the tribe of Levi ... that they may be joined to you and assist you. ... They shall discharge your obligations and those with respect to the whole tent; however, they shall not come near the utensils of the sanctuary or the altar. ... You shall perform the duties of the sanctuary and of the altar. ..." (cf. Nm 18:1-7).

In the New Testament, we see deacons both preaching and baptizing outside of a liturgical context. In St. Stephen's eloquent speech before the high priest and the council, he makes two allegorical references to baptism.

The first prefigures baptism in circumcision: "And he gave him the covenant of circumcision, and so he became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day" (Acts 7:8; cf. Col 2:11-12). The second prefigures baptism in the crossing of the Red Sea: "This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea" (Acts 7:36; cf. Catechsim of the Catholic Church, No. 1221).

The Acts of the Apostles chronicles two occasions where the deacon Philip baptizes those to whom he preached the Gospel: "Once they began to believe Philip as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, men and women alike were baptized" (8:12).

"Then Philip opened his mouth and ... he proclaimed Jesus to him. ... Then he ordered the chariot to stop, and Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water, and he baptized him" (Acts 8:35-38). Both of these baptisms occurred outside of the Sunday gathering.

The question then becomes: What exactly is the deacon's role in assisting at baptisms during Mass?

The general introduction in the new edition of the Order of Baptism of Children (approved in 2019) states, "the celebrant of Baptism may be assisted by other priests or deacons and also by laypersons in those parts that pertain to them" (No. 15).

It is interesting to note that the rubrics for the Order of Baptism for One Child within Mass give no specific instruction for a deacon's role at all, except for, "Bow down for the blessing" (No. 329), indicating his role is the same as Mass without a baptism. For baptisms of multiple children within Mass, the deacon has the additional duties of assisting the priest with the anointing before baptism (cf. No. 275), the baptisms themselves (No. 286) and the anointing with chrism (No. 287).

The role for the deacon at baptisms during Mass is not much different than his role at Mass with no baptisms. Like our predecessors, the Levites, the deacon's responsibility at baptisms within Mass is to assist the priest, leaving plenty of room outside of Mass for the deacon, like the first deacons in Acts of the Apostles, to preach the Good News of the life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ and to solemnly confer the Sacrament of Baptism. **TD**

DEACON HAROLD BURKE-SIVERS serves at Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Portland, Oregon.