

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEACONS

PERSONAL THOUGHTS OF A CATHOLIC DEACON

Deacon Nick Kerr

NAD chair, Deacon Nick Kerr, was a guest speaker at the national conference of the Australian Anglican Diaconal Association conference held in Adelaide from 8 to 12 April 2018. The conference papers have just been published.

As you know, the permanent diaconate is very ancient. The renewed diaconate is very new. Fifty-one years ago, there were no permanent deacons in the Roman Catholic Church. Last year there were more than 45,000.

We have a rich heritage and history to draw on – we're also a young ministry, fresh and flexible enough to adapt to different needs.

In Mumbai we have deacons working, with their wives, in health and health education in the slums.

In Europe, deacons were shocked at the skyrocketing divorce rate. So a deacon and his wife devised a marriage preparation course. Now dozens and dozens of deacons and their wives are using it with great results in different countries across Europe.

The number of Catholics in the world is increasing. The numbers of priests, religious brothers and sisters in the world are declining. The number of deacons is growing at what the Vatican Year Book calls a significant pace – globally and in Australia.

We have 170 deacons in Australia. But half our rural dioceses don't have deacons. A lot of Australian Catholics don't know who a deacon is or what a deacon does.

In one sense things are moving quickly, but, when you're in the middle of it, things seem to be moving very slowly indeed.

I'm sure we share a lot in our understanding of our theology and of our practice of ministry. One thing we don't share might strike you as rather novel. Our church is still coming to terms with the idea of married clergy.

I believe wives should be as involved as much as possible in the formation of deacons.

My wife Eveleen audited most of the academic subjects I did for my first degree and we do a lot of ministry together.

We share our lives with refugees. We often prepare couples for marriage together. She's visited prisoners with me – and so on. That's how we've always worked. Perhaps we're an exception. - 79 -

Two years ago the Australian Bishops issued new Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and Guidelines for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons. These documents had to go to Rome. The Vatican Congregation for the Clergy evaluated them and approved them before they could be released.

We'd had similar documents before, but they were far shorter and far less comprehensive. We're delighted with the documents – but they're not perfect. My main criticism is that they seem to forget that almost all deacons are married men with children. They acknowledge that a **married** deacon brings specific gifts to ministry, but they say very little about the contribution the deacon's wife brings to the partnership and to ministry.

The norms dive back in history to the Council of Trent.

Trent taught that there are three orders in the church, bishop, priest and deacon, and that this is divinely inspired. But, of course, it didn't get around to restoring the diaconate. That had to wait till Vatican II.

I see this teaching as important. Diaconate has its own character. Most deacons I know are sometimes asked, "If the Catholic Church allowed married men to be ordained priests, would you become a priest?" And most of us would say, "No. I haven't felt a call to be a priest. God called me to be a deacon." We see diaconate as a specific, distinctive and important call.

Many lay people wouldn't understand that response. They see us on the sanctuary in our vestments. We haven't been good at articulating who a deacon is and what a deacon does. People are still trying to sort us out. Often, when you say you're a deacon, people say, "Oh, when are you going to be ordained?"

Most deacons will say they're called to serve. Most deacons in poor countries say deacons are called to serve the poor. Some deacons in developed countries say they're called to serve wherever their bishop says there's a need. That might be in a wealthy parish – but, they say, there's *spiritual* need there. That approach can shock the deacons from poor countries. There are very few places where there's no *material* poverty.

Historically deacons have been closely associated with their bishop.

Cardinal Walter Kasper is a champion of the diaconate in the Catholic Church. He sees the deacon as the eyes and ears of the bishop, helping him in his task of being father of the poor.

But many deacons are serving only in parishes, doing parish ministry. They're preaching and doing weddings, baptisms and funerals. They're becoming like mini-assistant priests. Our Archbishop often says that deacons should *not* be seen as replacements for the priests we haven't got.

After the Second World War theologians like Karl Rahner who were promoting the diaconate said the Church must change so the horrors of the first half of last century didn't happen again.

They felt bishops and priests had become too distant from the people they were there to serve.

Deacons would come from the people and stay with the people. They would be an ordained presence with one foot in the world and one in the sanctuary.

That raises a question: If the Church introduced deacons to change the Church because of the horrors of that time what are deacons doing about the horrors of today?

I have some idea of the suffering in pockets of my parish and our community. I meet some of the homeless. I visit some of the prisoners. I work with some of the asylum seekers.

How vividly are we deacons aware of the suffering and the poverty of our communities and of the world?

And how does that awareness influence our relationship with the Son of God who became poor for our sake – and how does it influence the way we live out and preach the Gospel?

Pope Francis issued a major statement on holiness this week. One thing he said was:

We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty.

Pope Francis took his name because he so admires the deacon, Francis of Assisi.

He wants the Catholic Church to be a poor Church for the poor. He wants the Church to be a diaconal Church, a servant Church.

He believes deacons are called to serve Christ and serve the poor. We're struggling to work out, what does it mean to be a deacon in a diaconal Church?

Francis links the institution of the diaconate firmly to Acts chapter 6. He says the deacon should be a visible sign of the diakonia of Christ the Servant in human history. - 81 -

In May 2016 Pope Francis preached to about 2,000 deacons at a Mass in Rome. He told them:

Available in life, meek of heart and in constant dialogue with Jesus, you will not be afraid to be servants of Christ, and to encounter and caress the flesh of the Lord in the poor of our time ...'

I was part of a delegation from the International Diaconate Centre which met Pope Francis the same year. He spoke of the washing of the feet and Jesus' great commandment of love. And he said:

Deacons manifest the commandment of Jesus in a particular way: imitating God in the service of others; imitating God who is love and desires to serve us.

And he concluded:

It is especially deacons who are the face of the Church in the daily life of a community, which lives and journeys in the midst of the people and in which the greatest is not the one who commands, but the one who serves (cf. Lk 22,26).