

Meet the new IDC president

*The International Diaconate Centre has its first president from the United States, Deacon Gerald DuPont, of the Galveston-Houston archdiocese, Texas. Gerald is speaking to Deacon Nick Kerr.*

Gerald DuPont, new president of the International Diaconate Centre, didn't rush the process of becoming a deacon. In fact, he was slow to realise that God was calling him to become a deacon.

Gerald went straight from school to Louisiana State University, where he majored in petroleum engineering and chemical engineering. Then he worked for Union of California. The job eventually took him to Houston, Texas. He is married to Peggy. In January they will celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary. They have two children and eight grandchildren.

"I've always been active in the Church, ever since I can remember, because of my Mom," Gerald said. "We were in St. Theresa parish in Sugar Land, on the southwest side of Houston. It was a Basilian parish. The priests kept asking me, 'Why don't you think about being a deacon?' It wasn't my idea. I kept saying, 'Father, why should I do that? Aren't I doing enough around here? I'm doing RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults). I'm doing Scripture study. I'm doing prison ministry and hospital ministry.'

"We weren't short of priests in the parish. We didn't have a deacon. I have to admit I didn't really know what a deacon was. But at some point my pastor sent me on a retreat, a vocations kind of retreat. It turned out I was the oldest one there. The others were young people thinking about being a priest, or religious life. I said to the retreat master, 'Maybe I shouldn't be here.' He said, 'Maybe not. But why don't you just take the weekend, go with it and see where it leads.'

"When I finished the retreat I went back to the parish and said to my pastor, 'Well. It was nice, but I don't feel any calling to this diaconate. But I did feel during the retreat that I should have a spiritual director. Maybe that would help me.'

Gerald suggested one priest he felt would be a good spiritual director for him. They were working together on the parish RCIA program. His parish priest said, "No, don't go to him, he hates deacons!" The priest couldn't have disliked deacons too much. After Gerald gave a presentation at the next week's RCIA meeting he came over to Gerald and asked, "Have you ever thought of being a deacon?" Peggy looked over to Gerald and said, "Have you ever thought that God's trying to tell you something through other people?"

After that Gerald called the priest in charge of the diaconal formation program. He was told there were 300 in the waiting list ahead of him and he probably wouldn't get in. Gerald said, "Monsignor, that's fine by me. It's not my idea, anyway." A few months later Gerald was selected, did his formation and was ordained at the age of 42.

Gerald got a Masters of Scripture and a Masters of Systematic Theology. He was in Sugar Land for 25 years in all. It was a young parish. He reckons he baptised about 3,000 little ones and was celebrant for 200 to 300 weddings.

Gerald has been involved in the formation of deacons most of the time he's been ordained. After some time he started teaching at the University of St Thomas, Houston, at the seminary. He was then asked to teach theology at the Oblate School of Theology at San Antonio as well. He and Peggy

moved out to the country so he was within travelling distance of both seminaries. By then he had retired from engineering.

He was director of the pastoral year for seminarians from Galveston-Houston between their second and third year of theology. He had them for the whole year in a parish setting.

“One day,” he said, “we were having an appreciation party and, as a good deacon, I was pouring the wine for all the archdiocesan employees. At some point I said to Archbishop Fiorenza, ‘Isn’t it interesting, you’ve got a priest in charge of your would-be deacons and a deacon in charge of your would-be priests.’”

“Two weeks later he called me and said, ‘I want you to think about something. I want you to think about becoming director of the permanent deacons in the diocese. It will be a full time position.’ They’d never had a full time position until that point. I said, ‘No, thank you.’ I enjoyed my teaching at the university. I was having a great time. Two weeks later he called me again, and said, ‘Have you given it any thought?’ I thought he doesn’t listen very well. But I said, “No, Archbishop, I’m fine, I love what I’m doing.’”

“About a week later his secretary called and said, ‘The Archbishop would like to see you in his office.’ So, when I came in he took me by the elbow and led me in. I thought, ‘Oh, Oh! I’m in trouble!’ And he said, ‘Now Gerald, I need to remind you of your promise of obedience.’ So I had to give up teaching full time and I became director of the permanent diaconate. Because I’d worked on the diaconate in my doctorate of ministry I pretty well implemented in Galveston-Houston what I had been proposing in my doctorate.”

Gerald was director for 13 years. He retired from the position last year. Galveston-Houston has the second largest number of deacons in the United States – about 450. The largest number is in Chicago. Galveston-Houston has the largest formation program.

On the national level, Gerald has been chief consultant on the permanent diaconate to the USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) for the last 10 years. He has been on the board of the National Association of Deacon Directors (NADD) for 12 years. He was a regional representative for six years and chair for four years. The NADD is celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the US in 2018.

At the moment he is involved in four NADD major projects – the national congress celebrating the 50 years of the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the United States (22 to 26 July 2018); a rewrite of the national directory for deacons; a national study on the diaconate; and a process for assessing those who are applying for the diaconate.

He is also assigned to two rural parishes which, he said, involves a lot of travelling.

We spoke about the ministry of the deacon in the United States.

“For me, in general terms, in the United States we’ve had three paradigm shifts,” he said. “I was formed under the second paradigm. Our first class in the United States was ordained in 1971. In Galveston-Houston, our first class was ordained in 1972.

“In the United States our first directory on the diaconate was a simple handbook known as the Little Green Book. It seems to me that in the United States the permanent diaconate started off as being

what I would call liturgical – men around the parish. It seems there was a lot of trial and error when we started. They were very good men and I have a lot of respect for them.

“They were trailblazers. They took this on and lived with the confusion between the diaconate and the presbyterate. And there was some stress, some tension between the deacons and the priests for quite a while.

“A national study was done and, because of the study, a new directory was put out in 1984-85. It came out in 1984 with some revisions in 1985. To my way of thinking this started a second paradigm. This was not only liturgical but charity. I’m sure that’s why, with some of the things we were doing in the parish of Sugar Land, with prisons, hospitals and so on, my name came up.

“Charity was primary. The only reason you were involved in the liturgy was because of your involvement in charity. The deacon was to preach – but to preach in a different way. He was to preach out of that social justice ministry he was involved in.”

The third paradigm was the understanding of the deacon’s threefold ministry of liturgy, charity and word.

“Smaller studies were done,” Gerald said, “and eventually, in 1998, the document on the basic norms for the formation of permanent deacons from the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Congregation for the Clergy came out.

“Before that, in 1993, Cardinal Bernardin (of Chicago), on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the permanent diaconate in his diocese, wrote a pastoral letter. What I noticed was that Rome pretty well used that pastoral letter as the basis of the 1998 document. The Roman document fleshed out the pastoral letter more completely. Probably the reason for that was that in 1998 the United States had more deacons than the rest of the world put together, above 60 per cent.

“In that letter Cardinal Bernardin spoke about the need for the deacon to function in all three areas – *liturgy, charity, and now we come to word*. A deacon can specialise in one ministry more than the others, but he has to be able to function in all three. That was the change in that 1993 letter and incorporated in the 1998 document.

“Our first really comprehensive national directory, our third directory, was actually promulgated in 2005 although most deacon directors were already working with drafts earlier than that.

“That’s the way I see the permanent diaconate has evolved in the United States. It’s obvious that in Europe it evolved differently. It seems to me that charity was first, not second in its development. At least, listening to deacons from other places, and listening to people in the IDC, it seems that way - I’m no expert on that.”

Gerald hopes the IDC will strengthen the diaconate in all countries.

“I don’t mean that we have to have a common language about the diaconate, or a common image of the diaconate,” he said. “That’s the beauty of the diaconate. It responds to what the needs are. The needs are different in different countries, so deacons will respond in different ways.

“We don’t want all deacons to look the same. That would, in my opinion, be an injustice to the diaconate itself. But there should be some common theology, some common ways of articulating what a deacon is – ways of envisioning what deacons **are** as opposed to what deacons **do**. What

deacons do will vary according to what the needs are. But there are commonalities in what we deacons are.

“There shouldn’t be a commonality to what we do. There should be a commonality to what we are. I hope we can look in IDC at how we can look at these commonalities across the world in some way or another.”

Gerald has written to the Congregation for the Clergy – and that has led to an appointment for the IDC Board to meet leaders of the Congregation in Rome on 9 March.

“Our statutes say that one of our purposes is to foster a close relationship with the Congregation for the Clergy,” Gerald said. So we want to ask them: What can the IDC do to help them? What would they like to see us focus on? I’m not yet clear on the issues arising around the world on the diaconate. What do they want clarity and help with? Then it will be easier for us to bring the issues that we see as important back to them.”

Gerald hopes the IDC can do more to provide resources for the diaconate in different countries, especially those where the diaconate is in its infancy.

“Recently one of our delegates, Erik Thouet, went to Lithuania and met the bishop and the three newly ordained deacons. That’s a good example of what we could do. I thought, ‘This is fantastic, what Eric did by going there and spending some time with the young deacons.’

“In the United States we have a process call visitation and consultation. A bishop can ask for a team to come in and look at what’s being done in his diocese and make suggestions on how to improve their formation program or their admission to scrutiny or their ministry. That would be a wonderful service if the IDC could offer something like that around the world.

“I hear that one of our delegates, Marie-Françoise Maincent-Hanquez, went to a diocese and gave a presentation about deacons’ wives. That’s a wonderful way of collaborating. We have so many charisms within our organization. We have to ask how we can use these gifts to foster the diaconate worldwide.”

*Deacon Nick Kerr is an IDC delegate and chair of the National Association of Deacons, Australia. He is a deacon at St Francis Xavier’s Cathedral, Adelaide, South Australia, and works mainly with refugees and asylum seekers. He has won many prizes for journalism and has been awarded a papal knighthood for his contribution to religious communications.*