

Explorations in the Pastoral Potential of the Diaconate 1: Ministry to Families

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In this series of articles we will explore some of the potential for pastoral ministry placement of deacons. The principal source document for these explorations is the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons (Directory).¹ It is intended that the articles will give some concrete shape to the potential of diaconal ministry as a stimulus for reflection to those who are engaged in diaconal ministry, or formators of deacons and those involved in diocesan pastoral planning.

Theological underpinnings

A number of key theological ideas underpin these explorations. The first is that the ministry of deacons is a gift of the Spirit to the Church as noted in the joint declaration accompanying the Directory, '...the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Second Vatican Council has brought about a more complete actualisation of the sacred hierarchy'.² Therefore the ministry of deacons needs to be received by the church with faith and gratitude that Christ continues to make himself present in the Church through his ministers and continues to build up his Church for mission through them.

The second theological underpinning is that through the gift of the diaconate the Holy Spirit has furnished the church with ministers who are able to contribute significantly to the new evangelisation and new missionary endeavours especially in places where Catholic faith and life struggles with indifference and diminishment. The significance of deacons for the new evangelisation is brought out forcefully through the Norms and Directory and the catechesis on diaconal ministry offered by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.³ It is worth considering that the first sentence of the Joint Declaration highlights new evangelisation:

The permanent Diaconate, restored by the Second Vatican Council, in complete continuity with ancient Tradition and the specific decision of the Council of Trent, has flourished in these last decades in many parts of the Church — with promising results, *especially for the urgent missionary work of new evangelisation*.⁴

A third theological underpinning is that the ministry of deacon is always lived within the communion of the sacred ministry of bishop, priest and deacon, and the communion of the Church. As such it is a participation in the one ministry of Christ in his Church.⁵ Priests and deacons are the collaborators of the diocesan bishop in his *diakonia* (ministry) in the local church.⁶ Walter Kasper refers to deacons and presbyters as the right and left hands of the bishop.⁷ Liturgically the deacons' relationship to his bishop is symbolised in two ways. The

¹ Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*. Strathfield: St Pauls Publications. 1998 see also Congregation for Catholic Education, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*. Strathfield: St Pauls Publications. 1998

² Congregation for Catholic Education and Congregation For the Clergy; Joint Declaration n3, in the Directory and Norms.

³ See especially John Paul II General audience October 6 and 18, 1993.

⁴ Joint Declaration 1. The emphasis is mine.

⁵ International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*. London: Catholic Truth Society. 2003. Pp57-60

⁶ Lumen Gentium 24 and Directory 8 and 23.

⁷ Walter Kasper, *Leadership in the Church: How Traditional Roles Can Help Serve the Christian Community Today*. Veritas: Dublin. 2003

first is through the rite of ordination in which only the bishop lays hands on the deacon, in contrast to presbyteral ordination where all the presbyters present also lay hands on the ordinand. The second is the place of the deacon in the liturgy at the bishop's right hand.

Lumen gentium has a partial citation of the document the Constitutions of the Egyptian Church when it notes that the deacon is ordained not to the priesthood (*sacerdos*) but to the ministry (*ministerium*) and although both terms require further elaboration it is the full citation that helps illuminate the meaning of the expression is as it concludes with 'for the ministry of the bishop' (*in ministerio episcopi*). If the primary orientation of the presbyter is toward the parish and presiding over the eucharistic assembly in the name of the bishop then the primary orientation of the deacon is toward the diocese and the bishop.

The final theological underpinning which is frequently overlooked or misinterpreted is that the decision to restore the ministry of deacon belongs to each diocesan bishop and not to the pope or a bishop's conference.⁸ The local church responding to real pastoral situations is the place where discernment about the restoration of the ministry needs to be considered and always in relation to pastoral priorities. The ministry of the deacon must always be viewed in the light of the response to the pastoral needs of the People of God in the particular and always with a view to building up the local church for the mission of Christ in which the clergy and laity share and for which they are co-responsible.

Keeping these four theological underpinnings in mind we can commence this particular exploration of pastoral placement for deacons.⁹

In this series of short articles we will explore some of the pastoral placement options that are suggested in the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons (1998) and other documents on the diaconate. The pastoral scope for a deacon's ministry is quite wide when we examine key source documents but in practice many dioceses limit his scope of activity to the parish, as if he is a kind of priest or to a small group of ministries considered to be especially 'diaconal', such as prison ministry, because of a misunderstanding of the nature diaconate. Exploring the documents and the theology which underpins them might help to unlock the potential for the ministry of deacons to fully enrich the Church.

Indications From the Directory

One area of pastoral potential is to be found in the care of families. Deacons may have a unique contribution to bring to the pastoral care of families in the Latin Catholic Church as most deacons are family men who daily face similar challenges and questions experienced in other families. The Directory recognises the potential for a diaconal ministry to families when it states:

The pastoral care of families, for which the bishop is primarily responsible, may be entrusted to deacons. In supporting families in their difficulties and sufferings, this responsibility will extend from moral and liturgical questions to difficulties of a social and personal nature, and can be exercised at diocesan or, subject to the authority of the parish priest, local level in promoting the catechesis of Christian marriage, the personal preparation of future spouses, the

⁸ See the discussion of the ITC on this point in *From the Diakonia...*Chapter V.

⁹ I have developed some of these theological underpinnings in other papers that readers may wish to consult in the general articles and conference pages of this website.

fruitful celebration of marriage and help offered to couples after marriage.

The Directory suggests pastoral care of families has three broadly defined elements. The first element is support to families directly. The support to families is envisaged as having a wide scope encompassing the dimensions of moral formation, liturgy formation as well as social and personal issues. These are dimensions which may play a part in existing families.

The second element of pastoral care of families is care for couples. This element includes pre-marriage formation and the celebration of marriage. These two dimensions represent care for the foundations of married and family life through support of the husband and wife who may one day be parents.

A third element of pastoral care of families concerns post-marriage formation. We have seen as a Church that after the RCIA has led people to initiation into the Catholic life that sometimes a lack of post-baptismal follow up causes some to drift away. The same can be viewed with parents who present their children for the sacraments that after the rites have been celebrated there are few plans in place to maintain contact as foster inclusion in all aspects of parish life. The same is true of pre-marriage preparation. A great deal of time and effort may be expended by the couple in preparing for the wedding day and if the priest or deacon is not mindful his preparation will focus only on the day too. Celebration of the rite of marriage is only one part of pre-marriage formation we need to be preparing a couple for married life and offering ongoing reflection and formation in married life.

It may seem counter-intuitive but post-marriage support is more necessary in a culture where so many people live together before marriage. From a purely human point of view living together before marriage is a risk factor for divorce. Couple who cohabit are 70% more at risk of divorce than those who never live together before marriage. From a sacramental point of view the grace of marriage is not received in one lifetime dose on the wedding day. The grace needs to be nurtured, prized and developed to sustain the couple and help them grow into covenantal love. Living together is only one dimension of the sacrament of marriage and the greater sacramental significance of marriage may be lost on those who assume that because they lived together before marriage that they are merely continuing the same relationship except now it is 'legal' or 'blessed by the church'.

John Paul II taught that "A particularly felt need behind the decision to restore the permanent diaconate was that of a greater and more direct presence of sacred ministers in areas such as the family, work, schools etc. as well as in the various ecclesial structures".¹⁰ The directory draws on this quote to support the pastoral placement of deacons in ministries which support families.

A fourth area for the care of families is suggested in the Directory, advocacy for the family which should be among the potential pastoral concerns of deacons. 'Contemporary society requires a new evangelization which demands a greater and more generous effort on the part of ordained ministers. Deacons, "nourished by prayer and above all by love of the Eucharist... should strive to transmit the word in their professional lives, either explicitly or merely by their active presence in places where public opinion is formed and ethical norms

¹⁰ Catechesis of John Paul II at the General Audience of 6 October 1993 n. 6, *Insegnamenti*, XVI, 2 (1993), p. 954.

are applied — such as the social services or organisations promoting the rights of the family or life.¹¹

Deacons working in government or non-government agencies which provide care to families or develop policy concerning families may be able to bring to these agencies values and ideal which are consistent with the Gospel and which are for the common good of society. Especially in the moral and ethical dimension Catholic teaching strives toward those things which will enable full human flourishing. The Catholic vision of the family does not require the imposition of a specifically Catholic way of life on secular culture and law but draws on values that enable all families to find what is necessary for human flourishing.

Creative possibilities

Each of the four areas identified above; direct pastoral care of families, pre-marriage preparation, post-marriage support and advocacy all have their place within diocesan pastoral programs. Deacons may be able to work within existing diocesan structures and agencies which provide one or more of these kinds of care for families such as Catholic welfare organisations, or family life support agencies and agencies providing pre-marriage relationships education.

Perhaps there exist new and as yet unexplored ways in which deacons might assist family ministry. One of these ways might be for deacons to study the best methods for pre-marriage education and post marriage support and to engage lay people in parishes in formation activities to become formators and supporters of couples. Deacons might coordinate such programs or organise study days for parishes and deaneries to explore models for pre and post marriage formation perhaps modelled on RCIA to help couples to draw on the grace of the sacrament and enrich their marriage.

Engaging deacons in the four area of family ministry outline above is an aspect of new evangelisation. There are many couple who present themselves for Catholic marriage without understanding what the sacramental sign is or the grace that may be received. They have neither heard the good news or Gospel of marriage, which is lifted up through Christ and made a means of holiness for the couple, their family and our world. They have yet to truly encounter Christ in the sacrament and without such an encounter they will not live marriage in its fullness.

A ministry to families is part of the life of a mission oriented church and one that is oriented toward transformation of culture. Our society needs strong families and families where holiness can flourish so that each person can flourish. The family is the fundamental cell of the body of society and it needs to be a healthy and vital cell in order that society as a whole may be fully humanised through the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit. Appointing deacons to this ministry in one of its four elements is a sign of the care and concern of the local church (diocese) for families everywhere and not just the families we know well from the Sunday assembly. Deacons could adopt a coordinating and animating role in the diocese and parish to support parishes and parishioners to support families.

Adequate formation

¹¹ Directory n26

One of the factors that may limit the capacity of local bishop to utilise deacons in a variety of diocesan roles is the formation that deacons have received. Formation and appointment are deeply interrelated and formation programs themselves may create a “Catch 22” situation. If the formation was inadequate or deficient in some aspects there may be many things a deacon is not prepared for in ministry and so he remains under utilised. If he is under utilised or unable to perform some ministries because of his formation priests and others may consider this reflects on the deacon personally and the diaconate in general. If his formation had not been deficient he would have possessed greater pastoral capacity. The bishop would then be able to confidently appoint him to a variety of diocesan ministries. The circularity and necessary frustration that could flow from this situation should be apparent.

Ultimately it is the diocesan bishop who is responsible for the formation program. Normally he will delegate the process of selection and formation to a Director of Deacon Formation and a team which supports the Director. The *Ratio fundamentalis* issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) provides an outline of what formation is required for deacons. In short the formation of deacons parallels that of priests in terms of the four strands of formation: human, pastoral, spiritual and intellectual/theological. Deacon formation is not a mirror copy of presbyteral formation but it should be similar especially in terms of theological formation. The pastoral formation is aimed not at parochial leadership and presiding at Eucharist but to the ministry of word, liturgy and pastoral service primarily within a diocesan scope or for particular communities within a parish or diocese.

The *ratio fundamentalis* for presbyteral and diaconal formation indicate that formation is also self formation. Deacons need to take responsibility to see that they are adequately formed for ministry and continue their formation after ordination. Commitment to excellence in all aspects of formation will only enhance the confidence that a local bishop will have in his deacons and also the confidence of his co-workers in the Gospel, the priests. The laity have a right to have sacred ministers to pastor them but that right includes properly formed ministers, whether they be deacons or presbyters. A bishop is more likely to be persuaded he cannot afford to be without deacons when he is confident of their formation.

Can I afford this?

Deacons as clergy incardinated into a particular diocese are due the remuneration which is fitting for their own support and that of their families.¹² As clergy of the local church they are not employees in the sense that a lay person working in a diocesan agency may be considered an employee and in fact anything which might create an impression that they are regarded as employees of the diocese is to be avoided.¹³ Given these two facts a bishop might be tempted to ask, “Can I afford this? The answer has two parts. The first part concerns the practical aspects- yes you can afford it if you can afford to provide clergy remuneration for priests.¹⁴ Remuneration can be paid through the common clergy fund in the normal way or through the budget of an agency in which the deacon (priest) ministers.¹⁵ As a

¹² CIC 281 §§1,3 and Directory 16

¹³ Council for Interpretation of Legislative Texts folio N. 7194/2000 and Directory 11 ‘Associations too which, under the guise of representation, organize deacons into a form of *trade(s) unions or pressure groups*, thus reducing the sacred ministry to a secular profession or trade, are completely irreconcilable with the clerical state.’

¹⁴ Not all dioceses can afford to provide for their priests so the ‘if’ is real. But if a diocese can provide for its priests it can and must provide for its deacons, if they are dedicated exclusively to ecclesiastical ministry.

¹⁵ Council for Interpretation of Legislative Texts folio N. 7194/2000

cleric he can be paid in cash and non-reportable fringe benefits at less cost than a lay person thereby saving money in the agency budget.

The practical part is made a little easier for a diocese when it comes to clergy remuneration. Australian taxation law allows churches to provide for clergy remuneration relatively cheaply. Priest clergy in most dioceses receive a cash stipend, a fully maintained motor vehicle brought at a fleet price significantly lower than retail, a house, all utilities paid for, a living allowance, study and other allowance, health insurance and other benefits. The cash component is normally too low to be taxed or else taxed at the lowest rate and all else is a non-reportable fringe benefit. Taken together it is a very healthy income which could, with a few adjustments support a deacon and his family. A similar package, with perhaps slightly more cash, could easily be provided to deacons as cheaply as it is to provide this for priests. Most dioceses already pay priests in special ministries, such as full time hospital and prison chaplaincies in this way. Presumably dioceses that have married priests have already had to prepare for this situation.

The second part of the answer is more important. How can we not afford to do this is by far the most significant answer to the question. The International Theological Commission noted that diaconate offers a new way for the Church to think about the ordained ministry outside of the dominant model of the *sacerdos* (priest) and parochial models of ministry.¹⁶ As a Church we urgently need to respond to the challenges of the new evangelisation and go out with fresh proposals and renewed energy to respond creatively to our present situation. In particular the presence of deacons in many of the ministries above provide the presence of the sacred ministry while at the same time freeing up priests from these tasks allowing them to focus on parochial ministry.

We need to ponder the second answer and prayerfully open ourselves up to the creative energies of the Holy Spirit and then the practical element will follow. John Paul II regarded the temptation to jump ahead to the practical as a weakness in pastoral planning and something which would see plans end in dissipation. What is required is renewed contemplation of the face of Christ and deepening of a spirituality and theology of communion if we are to be faithful to God's plan and to respond to the world's deepest longings.¹⁷

Conclusion

This exploration into the potential for the pastoral placement of deacons has considered the family. Marriage preparation and continued marriage support remains a vast field of pastoral potential and opportunity waiting to be developed. Deacons can make a significant contribution to the presence of Christ, through his ordained ministers, in the midst of his people. Their presence can give witness to the spiritual closeness and concern the local Church has for them. Appointment of deacons would be an indicator of the pastoral priorities of the diocese.

The success of a pastoral placement like this depends to some extent on parish and diocesan administrators embracing a mission oriented approach to pastoral life and sharing a common vision for outreach. Partnership in good faith and openness to new paths for evangelisation is for the good of the mission, which is Christ's mission.

¹⁶ ITC, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diaconia of the Apostles*, Part V.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* n43.

Ultimately the success of the mission is not dependent on our own efforts and plans. It is the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, and distributor of new energy, who can bring about in us the new dreams and visions that bring what Christ has begun in us to its proper fulfilment.