

TERMS OF ADDRESS

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When deacons are very new on the diocesan scene many people are not sure and sometimes ask how a deacon should be addressed. This short article addresses that question.

There is variety in the manner in which deacons are addressed in various types of publications and discourses. In Australia, where spoken communication can be very informal, most deacons and priests are likely to be called by their first name. This is the preference of many deacons and priests. Although there may be a divergence of views on this it is certainly something that will simply be left to individuals to decide.

What is appropriate in more formal written or spoken discourse? Using Father is such a habit with Catholics when they see clergy, assuming that all clerics are priests, that deacons will frequently be addressed in this way. While it is easier to correct people with whom a deacon will have an ongoing relationship it can't be done with every single communication otherwise conversations would become stilted by corrections.

Deacon as the basic term

As more people encounter deacons more people will become familiar with terms appropriate for formal address when these are required. The basic term of address is Deacon just as we would address a bishop as Bishop. These are the Biblical terms for both ministers. Presbyters seem happy to be addressed as Father. I don't know if that is because the meaning of presbyter is elder and most of them do not want to be reminded! (I jest.) It is more likely the result of the predominance of the term "sacerdos" in the theology of presbyters and the priestly function that presbyter terminology takes a back seat.



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The Inappropriate "Rev Mr"

The term "Rev Mr" for deacons, which is popular in some parts of the USA and Australia, is not appropriate for deacons. The term is an English archaism from 18th century English language usage and was a term used to denote any minister of the Christian religion. The use of Father, in English as a term to denote a Catholic priest stems from 19th century usage encouraged by Cardinal Manning of England. These shifts in usage led to the contracted form "Rev Fr."

"Rev Mr" could equally apply to a priest or a deacon who have each been chosen from among the laity so there is no logical reason for applying to deacons only what could be applied equally to priests. Some places, incorrectly maintain the use of the term for transitional deacons.

One problem that is associated with the use of "Rev Mr" for a deacon is that it may lead people to consider that a priest is ordained while a deacon is not or that a deacon is some hybrid of clergy and laity or even a half priest. This perception is false and a contradiction of

the canonical status of deacons (transitional and permanent; Can 266 §1) who are clergy as much as are priests and bishops.

Language and witness

Ultimately it is not the term of address that is important but that a deacon is recognised by his deep commitment to his Catholic faith, the quality of his life and the effectiveness of his ministry which is to build up the local church for mission. This is so for every priest and bishop too. However we must remember that language is not just the words on the page or the spoken word but the meaning and context of the communication. It is important that our language is unequivocal that the deacon is represented through what we say and write that he is fully a minister of the Church and not as the Directory warns seen as “a lay person with a particularly strong interest in the Church.”

“Rev Mr” is one such term that could create the impression that for a deacon Church is a kind of hobby.

A system

The system for formal address outlined in the table below is consistent with and suited to the nature of Australian common language usage.

This system maintains equivalence between the forms of address for all clergy while also making distinctions possible when these are required. The contracted form follows the Standard Australian English practice of commencing a contraction with the first letter and ending with the last. Contracted forms can also create other problems. Recently one deacon at a conference was asked why he had two names Don Graeme. The person he was speaking to misread the Dcn on his name tag as Don. At least it got a conversation started.

The Following Table is for Formal Address

Context	Priest	Deacon
Every day speech	Father Smith or Fr Bill Depending on the preference for first or last name	Deacon Smith or Deacon Bill Depending on the preference for first or last name
Written listing in an informal document such as parish bulletin, local Catholic paper	Same as above for full reference. Fr. Smith or Fr. Bill for abbreviated form	Same as above for full reference. Dcn. Smith or Dcn. Bill for abbreviated form (or Dn)
Formal listing	Rev Smith Or Rev. Fr. Smith	Rev Smith Or Rev. Dcn. Smith
Formal listing for a holder of a PhD or doctorate.	Rev. Dr. Smith	Rev. Dr. Smith