

## **What is a deacon?**

The Church has never been without the ministry of deacons from the time of the New Testament up to the present. Most of us have only known the transitional diaconate, which is for men ordained as deacons on the way to priesthood. Married or single men can be ordained as deacons for life, as a permanent ministry in the life of the Church. Vatican II restored this permanent ministry and has allowed each bishop to decide when this ministry will be restored in his diocese.

### **A little history**

The Council of Trent in the sixteenth century called for the restoration of the diaconate as permanent ministry in the Church. It had been a distinct and life long ministry in the Church but by the time of the Reformation it had become a transitional ministry that had a limited role in the celebration of liturgy. Trent did not issue the decrees to make the restoration possible and the idea was left to rest until Vatican II. In the years leading up to Vatican II, an increasing number of Protestant churches restored the diaconate as a permanent ordained ministry in their Churches. Its re-emergence among the Churches had now become a fact of the ecumenical life of the Church and one which the Catholic Church has now joined.

Vatican II taught us that Christ, through the Holy Spirit, provides ministries and ministers to the Church as one of the gifts which constitutes its inner nature. The Church has never been without some who were ministers to lead and guide the Church. We see this attested to in the Scriptures. It was not some later development in the life of the Church. The same Council also taught that while we have had the gift of ministers from the beginning, we did not have the three fold ministry in its present form from the beginning.

### **Being rather than doing**

When we talk about the sacraments of Baptism/Confirmation and Order, we are talking about sacraments that imprint character and conform the recipient to Christ. They are permanent and unrepeatable sacraments. Once baptised a person is a part of the Body of Christ, twenty-four hours per day, every day of the year. The same is true for the ordained. Ordination is not defined by what one does but what one is. To try to understand orders or baptism from what one does, the functions one performs, is to put the cart before the horse.

We cannot start from what a deacon does and define him from that because there is overlap in the Church with what people do. Lay people read Scriptures in the liturgy as do deacons and priests, lay people can distribute communion in Mass and take communion to the sick and so can priests and deacons. We are all called to prayer and called to attain to the same holiness. We each participate in the one priesthood of Christ.

Christ offers himself through his Church in head and members. Baptism is the sacrament through which Christ becomes present in the world through his body, the Church. Orders is the sacrament through which Christ continues his presence as head of the Body and shepherd of the flock.

### **Three aspects of ministry**

A deacon's principal ministry is to promote the interests of his sisters and brothers in faith, so that all who belong to the People of God may, through their well ordered efforts toward a common goal, attain salvation (Basic Norms for Diaconate). They work together with the Bishop and cooperate with the priests in the apostolic ministry to foster the full participation of all the baptised in the life of the Church and to assist the laity to live their principal mission in the world in which they live. Ordination is not a simple delegation but enables the minister to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church (Basic Norms).

A deacon has three aspects to his ministry. He has a ministry of the Word, a ministry of liturgy and a pastoral ministry. All three of these must be kept in balance and all of them visibly exercised in the life of the Church (*Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons.*)

Deacons are presented with the Book of Gospels at ordination and told to proclaim it, believe it and practice what they teach. Ministry of the Word includes proclaiming the Gospel in the Liturgy, preaching and teaching. Some of this teaching might take the form of sacramental preparation or RCIA programs.

Deacons have a liturgical role in the Mass and they can preside at other celebrations. A deacon has the task of sending the assembly out into the world to live what they have proclaimed and received. Deacons link Eucharist and mission and give visible witness to it.

Other liturgical/sacramental aspects of diaconal ministry include, baptism, marriage, funerals, leading worship (not Mass.) in the absence of a priest and various other blessings and prayer services. They are ministers of communion to the sick and can lead Eucharistic adoration outside of Mass and public celebrations of Liturgy of the Hours.

Pastoral ministry relates to the service/charitable role of deacons. There is a very wide scope here for deacons under the direction of the bishop; some possibilities are outlined in the *Directory*. A bishop needs to take into account the aptitude, skills and education of particular deacons. Pastoral placements could include roles in the diocesan administration such as Faith and Life, Centacare, Marriage Tribunal. Special ministries to which a deacon could be assigned include pastoral care of a particular group such as youth or migrants. A deacon could be assigned as a chaplain in industry, shopping centre or hospital.

### **Parish Ministry**

Every deacon is assigned to a parish which will be the regular place in which he exercises his liturgical and sacramental ministry even if a parish is not his primary place of ministry. This means that a deacon who is a hospital chaplain, for example, would also minister some of the time in a parish.

Deacons and lay people are not substitutes for priests, even though they can be appointed to the pastoral care of a parish in cases of real necessity. Most deacons and lay people will not be appointed to parish leadership roles. Priests, deacons and laity have distinct and complimentary roles in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church and the mission of Christ through the Church to the world.

Gradually our local Church will come to know and experience the ministry of deacons and be enriched by their presence. One wonders what the Spirit might be saying to the Churches as this ministry is restored in all of the major Churches of the Christian communion.

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