

NEW EVANGELISATION

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What is new about evangelisation and why this is a ministry to which popes John-Paul II and Benedict XVI believe that deacons have a particular role? The next Synod of Bishops is to take up this theme and Benedict XVI has established a new dicastery specifically to support the Church in its efforts toward the new evangelisation.

The introduction to the *Norms and Directory* for Permanent Deacons expresses the belief that the diaconate “promises to make an important contribution to New Evangelisation.” The *Directory* states that (§26);

“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”, in addition to their involvement in diocesan and parochial programmes of catechesis, of evangelization and of preparation for the reception of the Sacraments, 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 are applied — such as the social services or organisations promoting the rights of the family or life. They should also be aware of the great possibilities for the ministry of the word in the area of religious and moral instruction in schools, in Catholic and civil universities and by adequate use of modern means of social communication.

In addition to indispensable orthodoxy of doctrine, these new fields demand specialized training, but they are very effective means of bringing the Gospel to contemporary man and society.”



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It is apparent to those who look at our society today that the Christian faith has become marginalised. Many people have drifted from the Church and others made a conscious choice to leave the church, and sometimes religion, altogether. Countries which once took the place of Christianity for granted are sometimes at best indifferent or at worst hostile to its place in society. We need new ways of engaging with people of our day and to present the message of Jesus as Good News.

Acts 6: The paradigm for the new evangelisation

The Seven of Acts 6 are not identified in the text as deacons but they do the kinds of things associated with those called *diakonos* in the New Testament. That is they preach, teach, baptise and provide leadership for a specific community. They share in the apostolic ministry through the laying on of hands. In the Tradition they have been referred to as deacons and this episode is regarded as the beginning of the diaconate as a distinct apostolic ministry.

I have written about Acts 6 more extensively in a number of articles in *The Pastoral Review* (November 2006, September 2007 and May 2008). Here we shall consider only the suggestion that in this text we have a paradigm for the New Evangelisation.

In Acts 6 the Greek or Hellenist Christians complain that their widows are neglected in the

daily *diakonia*. Many translations give distribution of food or funds as the meaning of *diakonia* in this verse. These same translators do not do so in any other place in the New Testament where *diakonia* is found or its cognates. Normally *diakonia* is translated as ministry. This is the case throughout all of Acts of the Apostles where it regularly occurs as *diakonia tou logou* or ministry of the word. In Acts *diakonia* used by itself also normally refers to the ministry of the word.

In Acts 6 the Hellenists (Greek speakers) complain that their widows are neglected in the daily ministry (of the word). This is probably because the Apostles who are Aramaic speakers, preaching mostly in the Temple forecourt, cannot minister to the Greek speakers in their homes. So the Apostles ask the community to identify seven from among themselves (Greek speakers) to carry out this ministry (of the Word) on their behalf.

As Joseph Fitzmyer comments on this section of Acts (Anchor Bible Commentary, 1998) when we read of the events in which Philip and Steven engage in the rest of Acts, which is to preach, catechise, baptise and give witness, it is clear that they were not chosen for some task of distributing food or funds (words which never occur in any Greek manuscript), but for some position of leadership among the Hellenists. We also see that the communities they go to visit are associated with the Hellenist regions outside of Palestine. He goes on to comment that the Seven have now received a share of the mandate that the Twelve received from the Lord. The eminent scripture scholar Raymond Brown refers to them as the Hellenist leaders.

The Seven are chosen for the task of the ministry of the Word, a new evangelisation, among the Greek speakers. The nascent community recognised that if the Word of God is to spread and influence the wider non-Jewish world, the Church needed to select people who could speak the word in a new situation and in a way that was comprehensible to a new audience.

In Acts 6 we see a paradigm of the New Evangelisation. The necessity for the Church to find new ways for the Gospel to be proclaimed in a way that people of today might come to believe. That is why the section of Acts which deals with the selection of the Seven concludes; "The Word of God continued to spread" (Acts 6:7) and not funds or food were better distributed.

The Church at that time felt that there was a pastoral opportunity that was not being addressed and a found a new way of evangelisation. If we continue to misrepresent Acts 6 as primarily a ministry to the poor or marginalised, or something to do with food or funds, words not found in any Greek text of Acts 6 and not in English Bibles until after 1946, we may miss an opportunity for evangelisation today.

Why today?

Today we are faced with new challenges. There are others who are neglected in the ministry of the word and we need to find ways to bring that word to them.

Not so long ago in our culture (perhaps fifty years or more) most people went to church on Sunday most of the time. The person, who did not attend some worship, expressed a choice that was counter-cultural. Today it is counter-cultural to attend regular Sunday worship and to live a Christian life.

To choose to be a Christian has become an expression of personal conviction rather than



Many people today have drifted from the church, made a conscious choice not to belong or never had a place in our churches.



social convention. Even in countries which had previously supported the Christian tradition at some level it can no longer be assumed that the Gospel finds ready acceptance.

A whole generation of Catholics (Christians generally) have failed to hand on the baton of faith to the next generation. Many aspects of Catholic identity and practice have been given up; some because they were not helpful to aid spiritual formation, but for the most part nothing as replaced them. The religious knowledge base of the laity today, especially those aged under 50 is quite low compared to previous generations and often quite low compared to how their knowledge of so many other things has increased. We have a much better school educated population in the wealthy industrialised nations, but a poorly religiously educated population. Sometimes this knowledge gap itself contributes to difficulties in receiving the Gospel as sometimes the Christian message is known as a child knows things and this childish faith is not an adequate foundation for living in an adult world.

A kind of secularism that can be intolerant of dissent from secular orthodoxies about sex and sexuality, education, science, abortion, euthanasia, condoms and values on a host of other issues is fostered in the media and in the public discourse. Not only through the direct presentation of arguments through news media but also indirectly through the values embodied in movies, TV and other popular culture. This contributes to new problems in presenting the Gospel.

One of the orthodoxies of this kind of secularism is that religious beliefs, practices and religion generally, are at best individual and private matters or may be shared between consenting adults in the privacy of their own home, church, synagogue or mosque etc but they do not belong in the public sphere. This kind of secularism attempts to prevent any religious values from having any influence on public debate in matters of significance. The worst forms of this kind of secularism, held by only a minority, is the aggressive atheism of the likes of Richard Dawkins who would like religion to be abolished so that only the atheist discourse and secular ideology can lead humanity. (Stalin, Mao and others have thought like this too and Hitler waged war against Christians who would support his policies because of their religious beliefs.)

Not all secularism is intolerant or rigid and unable to enter into dialogue with religion. Nor is all secularism aggressive toward religion. Much of what passes for secularism is really indifferentism, just a simple indifference to religion and sometimes to the big questions of society and life. And all secularism and most atheism can in fact serve to hold a mirror up to the quality of our living the Gospel we claim to profess and challenge us to live it more sincerely.

Listening to the Spirit

We need to be willing to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches today. Among the main churches, Catholic, Protestant and to a lesser extent Orthodox, the permanent diaconate is being renewed. This is happening in churches which have many vocations to other ordained ministries as well as those that are experiencing diminishing numbers of other clergy.

Perhaps we need to listen to the Spirit and discern what this means for us. Is the Spirit prompting us toward a solution to problems of the new evangelisation? Are we hearing those who are neglected in the daily ministry of the word today and calling forth a renewed diaconate to address the new situation in communion with bishops, priests and the laity?

John-Paul II and Benedict XVI seem to sense that diaconate is part of the Churches response to the new evangelisation. Have we grasped the significance of this claim for the renewed ministry of deacon?

Ways of evangelising for today?

In every age the church has found ways to speak the gospel to a new culture and in a new situation. When it has failed to enter the new culture and speak the Gospel in a new language, it has been less effective as a messenger. When Gregory the Great sent out missionary monks to the Germanic tribes and others in Europe he asked these Benedictine monks not to destroy the places of worship and customs of the pagans but to 'baptise' them along with the people. By this he meant to find ways to connect their story and customs with the Gospel so that they might more easily understand and be converted.

We examples some of the results of this approach to evangelisation present in culture today. In English we use the word Easter for the Paschal season from the Anglo-Saxon goddess Oestre, goddess of fertility and new life. In contrast when we brought Christianity to the indigenous people of Australia and we had absorbed secular ideas about the superiority of European culture, we failed to engage effectively with them and imposed on them a way of being Christian that required that they deny all aspects of their previous culture. Fortunately today we are finding ways to acknowledge indigenous culture and its positive elements along side of Christianity.

We need to be able to ask ourselves how are we to engage with the secularised culture of today and find new ways of evangelising those who have drifted from the church as well as those who were never with us. Where are the new fields of missionary endeavour? What new language and approaches are required for a new evangelisation to take place? And how might deacons contribute to the new evangelisation?

Faith at work movement

Scholars from the Yale *Centre for Business, Ethics and Religion* have documented the rise of the Faith at Work movement in the USA. This movement brings the Gospel into the lives of people at work, where many spend much of their time. Businesses are hiring workplace chaplains and offering time for workers to gather for prayer and seek spiritual counsel during the work day. Larger corporations may hire their own chaplains and smaller firms may draw on the services of a chaplain who has been hired by a collective of businesses or sometimes an industry peak body.

These chaplains offer a range of supports to workers and their families that a traditional minister might offer a congregation. Not all of those workers who use the chaplain service are regular members of a church community. Not all workers call on the service in the same way. The point is that workers are being reached in a place where they spend much of their time and reached even when they are the unchurched.

Typically the majority of chaplains come from the Pentecostal and evangelical churches. Other churches, including Catholics, are slow to enter into this new field of evangelisation. One consequence is that many Catholics drift further from the Catholic community toward the Pentecostal churches.

There are some signs of a similar movement beginning here in Australia, although on a very small scale. Some firms have added to their counselling support staff a chaplain or teams of chaplains who operate an ecumenical chaplaincy. The signs are that the non-traditional churches provide the personnel for these chaplaincies.

Deacons, many of whom have worked for many years may be ideal candidates for such roles. They can bring their knowledge and experience of the workplace into the ministry field of the workplace. They can minister in the language of the workplace and translate the Gospel into this language. They can meet people in their own space just as the Seven did in Acts 6.

In the market place

A parish secretary once said to me that the hardware store and the local shopping centre have become the new Sunday gathering place, replacing Church for many people. The shopping centre, that vast expanse of retail opportunity is the modern day equivalent of the market place. This is the place where the community gathers to find food for the evening meal, meet friends for coffee or be entertained at a cinema megaplex.

Research on the faith at work movement revealed a group of churches in one city, including the Catholic Church, recognised the shopping centre as a potential place to continue the *diakonia tou logou* of Acts. Each church agreed to supply a chaplain for the shopping centre, with the support of the centre management (which took some time to be convinced). The centre management rented a room to the churches with private space for customers and staff to meet with a chaplain and an open space for prayer. Later a prayer mat and a wall marking for the direction of Mecca were provided for Muslims.



They can speak the “language” of work and translate the Gospel into this language for those who are neglected at the daily ministry



Each chaplain made a commitment to be in the meeting room for a few hours in the week, on a roster system, this way drop-in meetings could occur. Eventually customers and staff would come to the chaplaincy centre for a chat or to request prayers or to pray. The centre ran occasional presentations on the Scriptures, prayer and Christian responses to challenges of modern living.

The shopping centre was divided into “patches”. Each church was assigned a “patch”, which might be all of the shops on one floor. They introduced themselves to staff and told them about the chaplaincy service. Gradually some shops and some staff began to identify with “their” chaplain. Chaplains might be invited to give a blessing for a pregnant staff member or staff might seek them out when they had personal issues they wished to discuss. As an ecumenical chaplaincy no attempt was made to proselytise members from other churches. When appropriate, staff and customers would be referred to the relevant Church minister if there was a specifically Catholic, Anglican or Methodist need or desire expressed by a customer or staff member.



If the Catholic church could embrace this ministry and take the initiative to make it happen this would provide another field in which the deacon could follow in the steps of the Seven.

Secular witness

One field for new evangelisation is the witness of the deacon in the workplace. Even if not a chaplain, his presence as a Catholic minister in the workplace brings the church in a particular way to the place where many people spend most of their time. The deacon in his situation is “bilingual” he speaks the language of the world of work and the language of the Gospel. In his workplace he may be able to witness to the Gospel by asking questions about ethical decision making, fair treatment of staff and other moral questions that arise.

For the Church he is able to bring the positive language of the workplace into the midst of the worshipping community. In his preaching he is able to draw on and connect with the reality of paid employment and the culture of the workplace. He is also able to infuse the idea of work with the positive message of co-creation and the promotion of the common good.

One deacon was approached by a colleague at work who asked if the Church would allow his child to be baptised because he and his partner were not married. The colleague had been to a Catholic school but not seen a Catholic church in the intervening fifteen years. The enquiry opened a fruitful dialogue that has led the colleague and his partner and child into the Church.

There may be a risk that deacons in the secular workforce may need to be mindful of, and that is to remember that they are workers and not chaplains. Boundaries need to be observed so that they do not take on a pseudo-chaplain role. A spiritual director may help the deacon with discernment about this.

The Catholic School

Recently I had been working with a parish on strategies for welcome and inclusion as part of a project I am involved with in my diocese. During the process a couple of parishioners complained about the fact that so few parents and their children in the parish school attended the parish for Mass or had any other commitment to the life of the parish. Australia has an extensive system of Catholic primary and secondary schools (education almost one third of school aged children in the country) and two Catholic universities and one Catholic Liberal Arts College, where perhaps the same lament may be heard.

What would happen if we looked at this situation of high take up of Catholic schools but low participation in parish life not as a problem but as an opportunity?

Parents are making at least some positive choice for Catholicism, even if it is minimal, by entrusting their child to the Church for thirty hours each week of school education. Our pastoral opportunity concerns how we can translate this into a commitment to at least one more hour on the weekend. Of course we just don't want them for Mass we hope that we will introduce them to the Gospel and a way of living. It is a pastoral opportunity because the parents and the children come to us and we simply need to find ways of converting this opportunity into concrete steps of outreach and evangelisation.

In this particular parish we decided to look at how we might break down boundaries between the parish and school and integrated them. For example the parish has an active small group discussion and reflection time in Lent normally advertised in the parish bulletin and held in the homes of parishioners. Therefore only those already at Mass participated. The parish decided to advertise in the school newsletter too and to offer two small group sessions a week in the school with a mixed group of school and parish parents. This and other initiative proved to be a useful means to evangelise.



Catholic primary and secondary schools either have no chaplain or lay campus minister or have one with limited time allocation and few qualifications for the role. Mostly the role is focussed on the pastoral and spiritual life within the school and is not connected consciously

and deliberately to integrate parishes, parents, teachers and pupils. What if deacons were appointed chaplains with a brief to connect school and parish? In the person of the deacon we would have the Church's minister enabled to provide what he is educated and formed to do, continue the mission of the Church which has been entrusted to him by the bishop.

Some of us would remember a time when it was often the curate who would be assigned a similar chaplaincy role to the school so that Church and school were obviously linked through his presence. That was a time too when most of the school population was already connected to parish. We could still have that presence but in a planned and strategic way that acknowledges the current disconnect as a pastoral opportunity.

An opportunity lost?

The task of the new evangelisation is an urgent one. Will our church really take up this opportunity and look for new ways to present the Gospel? Or will we continue to focus much energy on where people are not (Sunday worship) and neglect where people are, the market place, the Catholic school and the workplace? Will we have the courage and the imagination to look not outside the square but outside the Church to listen to the Spirit and respond with courageous and fresh initiatives?

In order to take up these opportunities and others we need to be able to do some 'blue sky dreaming'. We need to let our imaginations run wild with possibilities and to listen to the Spirit. We need to hold back from our 'yes but' limiting attitudes, and listen to the Spirit. We need to embrace the vocation of deacon in every diocese and receive with joy the generous gift of vocation the Spirit gives to the Church for its mission. We need to let go of the ideological blockages, the myths and misconceptions about deacons, our overly institutional and functionalist understanding of orders in order to recognise the grace of ordination poured out by the Spirit on the Church to build it up for mission. We need to look for more ways and opportunities to have more deacons in full time ecclesial ministry, supported by their local church, as the law and the Gospel requires, for the mission of the Church.

The Norms and Directory, popes John-Paul II and Benedict XVI, envisage that deacons have a particular role to play in the new evangelisation. Are our local churches hearing this call as they consider pastoral planning and outreach? How much considered and creative thinking is given to the pastoral placement of deacons? Do those in pastoral planning know the individual deacons and their gifts or their dreams for ministry? Do our churches examine the pastoral needs of today, engage with New Evangelisation, and listen to what the Spirit may be saying through the renewed diaconate?

Deacons, not in opposition to priests or laity, but in communion with the whole Church, could have a leading role in the New Evangelisation. They should be identified closely with the *diakonia* of their bishop (*Lumen gentium* 24) and his concern for those in need of the new evangelisation. Can our Church grasp this moment or will we witness an opportunity lost? Who would have provided for the Greek speaking widows if the Apostles had not called the Seven to share in their apostolic ministry?