

The Faith of the Catholic Church

Anthony Gooley

In the first article in the *About Deacon's* series, we learned that the Holy Spirit working in the Council brought about a more complete actualisation of the sacred ministry. Catholics believe that Christ willed that the Church has an apostolic ministry and from ancient times the apostolic ministries have been that of the bishop, presbyter (elder) and deacons. Generally today we refer to presbyters as priests.

The International Theological Commission (ITC), reflecting on the decision of Vatican II to restore the permanent ministry of deacon, declared that the primary motivation was that of faith. That is the Council hoped that the restoration would help Catholics to know and witness to the faith of the Church in the sacred ministry. The permanent ministry of deacons would witness to our faith in the full sacrament of orders when placed alongside a permanent ministry of priests and bishops.

Catholic faith teaches us that we have these ministers because Christ established the sacred ministry as part of the essential constitution of the Church. Within seventy years after Jesus death and resurrection St Ignatius of Antioch could write that a church (diocese) could not be imagined to be a church without a bishop, deacons and presbyters.

Catholics believe that the sacred ministry is part of the essence of the Church. Without the ministry established by Christ, the Church would no longer be itself. Christian communities that emerged from the Reformation generally regarded the ministry as a purely human construction. They argued that the ministry developed because the community required organisation and leaders. That view was rejected at the Council of Trent.

Catholics consider ordination to be a sacrament. All sacraments express the mystery of Christ present and continuing his work of building up the Church for his mission. Christ continues to work and makes himself present through Holy Orders. Deacons are part of the sacramental mystery of the Church both by being deacons and as ministers of grace.

Catholics believe that sacraments contain and convey grace which is necessary for the life of the Church. The ITC reflected that the Council sought to open the grace of the sacrament of diaconal orders more fully to the Church. In this way the Church would be strengthened for mission through the presence of this grace. The mystery of grace available in the more complete actualisation of the sacred ministry is one of the gifts the Spirit gives for the life of the Church through the Council.

According to the ITC the Council also wished to counter a functionalist understanding of the sacraments that was becoming common in theological thinking and which is in some way similar to the reformation opposition to the sacredness and divine institution of ministry.

Functionalism was a view that a man was ordained to perform certain kinds of functions for the Church. What defined a cleric from a lay person and different clerics from one another were the functions that they could perform. Therefore the key distinctions became about what a person could not do. A lay person, for example, was defined negatively as being a non-ordained person and one unable to perform clerical functions.

Monday, 20 May 2013

There were many distinctions among clergy and these too were based on what one level could not do that another could. The small step from functionalism to thinking about ministry as a mere organisational necessity may become clearer to you now.

Recovery of the theology and spirituality of communion/koinonia in the decades leading up to the Council provided tools for the development of a more firmly sacramental understanding of the sacred ministry and also the laity. New insights from biblical, patristic, liturgical and historical studies allowed the Council to once again take hold of some essential points about the Church.

Among these points was a deeper understanding that baptism/confirmation/chrisation and holy orders create the Church, the Body of Christ, in head and members. Through these sacraments the Church is formed by Christ in the Holy Spirit as an ordered communion in which each has his or her own place and gift to contribute.

In the theology of communion/koinonia the emphasis of identity is on *being the Church* and not on doing or performing functions *in* the Church. The sacraments of initiation and holy orders bring about a new state of being; that of being in the Body of Christ. Even if the parts have different functions they are united as one Body and this is their primary identity.

We can illustrate this point when we think about Mass. In the Mass it is Christ who prays in, through and with his Body the Church, through the communion of the Holy Spirit. Mass is an organic whole in which the bishop, priests, deacons and laity each have their own part to play as an ordered communion.

It is not as if the bishop says or does his part and then the people, and then the choir and then the deacon etc in an unrelated sequence of events. Nor is 'father saying Mass' while the rest listen. All of the words, actions, music and symbols are part of the one voice of the one assembly gathered in Christ by the Holy Spirit. We do not experience sequential and separate functions but parts of a whole.

The recovery of this theology of communion/koinonia enabled the bishops at Vatican II to see the diaconate in its own light, not as a step toward priesthood. The Council was able to affirm the faith of the Church more clearly and bring about the full expression of the sacrament of Holy Orders.

Deacons are not just doing functions but through diaconal ordination they are ministers of the grace of this sacrament given by Christ for the life of the Church, to reinvigorate its mission. They are a gift of the Holy Spirit which the Church receives in the rite of ordination.

Rev Dr. Anthony Gooley is a theologian and deacon of the Archdiocese of Brisbane.