

## What are norms and directories?

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In 1998 two Dicasteries ('departments') of the Holy See, The Congregation for Clergy and the Congregation for Catholic Education issued at the same time two documents regarding the formation and ministry of deacons. John Paul II gave his approval to the two documents. The first document we shall consider is the *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis diaconorum permanentium*, which is referred to as the 'norms for formation' or simply the 'norms'. The second document we shall consider is the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, sometimes referred to simply as the 'Directory'. Together the congregations presented a joint declaration and introduction to both documents.

### Joint declaration

Generally the Norms and Directory are published in a single document but if they are printed separately the joint declaration and introduction are included in each document. The declaration and introduction establish the framework for the restoration and renewal of the permanent ministry of deacon in the Latin Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council. The Norms and Directory specifically apply to diocesan and not religious clergy, for whom the existing constitutions or rule of their institute and canon law governing clerical members of religious institutes provide an additional framework for their life, ministry and formation.

One important aspect highlighted in the declaration is the connection between the renewal of the presbyterate which Vatican II sought to bring about and the renewal of the diaconate. In fact all three orders underwent renewal and the three must always be considered together.

The Second Vatican Council introduced a renewal of the theology of Holy Orders and sought to give clearer definition to the unique ministry of the bishop, priest and deacon in the Church. Work soon began on the updating of norms (*ratio*) for the formation of priests (1985) (*sacerdos*) and directories for their life and ministry (1994) in harmony with the wishes of Vatican II and revision of canon law (1983).

Following the publication of the *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis* on priestly formation and the *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Congregation for the Clergy, completing the treatment of what pertains to the Diaconate and the Priesthood, the objects of their competence, now wish to devote particular consideration to the subject of the permanent Diaconate.<sup>i</sup>

The documents intended for the renewal of presbyteral ministry are to be read together with those pertaining to deacons. Both sets of documents form one project. Knowing this should help us interpret the document for deacons by keeping in focus the essential unity of the one divinely established apostolic ministry. In reading the document on deacons we are not reading about a special case or species of sacred ministry but completing a treatment of the sacred ministry. To put it another way, we are reflecting on one expression of the same sacred ministry which is, ultimately, the ministry of Christ building up his body the Church for mission.

The Norms and Directory for deacons,

While retaining their proper identity and their own specific juridical quality, both of these documents, published with the authority of the respective Dicasteries, mutually reflect and complete each other by virtue of their logical continuity. It is to be hoped that they will be presented, received and applied everywhere in their entirety. The introduction, here conjointly published with these documents, is intended as a reference point and a normative source for both, while remaining an inextricable part of each document.<sup>ii</sup>

We should note the expression that ‘it is to be hoped that these documents will be presented, received and applied everywhere in their entirety’. These are three important and related processes which induce other questions. Who is to present this material and to whom? Who needs to know about the contents of these documents? Certainly bishops and those they ask to oversee formation of deacons need to know, as well as those men aspiring to the diaconate and their wives (if married). Others, such as those responsible for pastoral planning in the diocese, clergy appointments boards, and other key decision makers and advisors in a local church (diocese), have a need to know. It would be useful for all clergy to have some awareness and the laity too, as they will come into contact with deacons and will need to know something about what may appear to them as a new ministry.

Knowledge is one thing but receiving that knowledge is another thing altogether. Consider the example of what the Directory has to say about diaconal appointments. The Directory states that all deacons should be appointed by letter from their bishop. The letter should outline, among other things, their areas of responsibility and the pastor with whom they will work if they are in a parish. But if a diocese does not issue letters of appointment or these letters come from someone other than the bishop then the Directory, in respect of appointment processes has not been received. Reception usually has visible signs which indicate that what is known has been taken into account in processes and formation. That is, we can be more certain that the Norms and Directory are presented and received when they are applied consistently in the life of the local church.

## The Norms

The joint declaration presents the purpose of the Norms,

The *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis diaconorum permanentium*, prepared by the Congregation for Catholic Education, is intended not only as a guideline for the formation of permanent Deacons but also as a directive of which due account is to be taken by the Episcopal Conferences when preparing their respective “Rationes”. As with the *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, the Congregation offers this aid to the various Episcopates to facilitate them in discharging adequately the prescriptions of canon 236 of the Code of Canon Law and to ensure for the Church, unity, earnestness and completeness in the formation of permanent Deacons.<sup>iii</sup>

It is clear that each episcopal conference is to prepare its own norms for formation of deacons. Two words which help interpret the purpose of the Norms prepared by the Congregation for Catholic Education are ‘guideline’ and ‘directive’. The Norms are not only guidelines but directives about how an episcopal conference should develop its norms for

formation. The prescriptions the Norms provide for developing local norms for formation must be a starting place for reflection on what can be done about formation in the local context. An emphasis is placed on developing norms for formation across the world which show a unified approach and are similar in their earnestness and completeness. In the past various experiments in formation occurred, including sometimes short courses over a few weekends in preparation for formation and others over a year. Some formation programs insisted on an academic degree in theology and others did not. The hope is that the Norms will bring about a much similar process of formation with positive outcomes for the universal Church.

The revised Code of Canon Law sets out some very basic principles for formation without any specific content and methods indicated, as is appropriate for a legal text.

*Can. 236 According to the prescripts of the conference of bishops, those aspiring to the permanent diaconate are to be formed to nourish a spiritual life and instructed to fulfil correctly the duties proper to that order:*

- 1. young men are to live at least three years in some special house unless the diocesan bishop has established otherwise for grave reasons;*
- 2. men of a more mature age, whether celibate or married, are to spend three years in a program defined by the conference of bishops.*

The purpose of formation is stated as nourishment of spiritual life and instruction in diaconal ministry. The second purpose begs the question of what is understood by the phrase, 'duties proper to that order.' There needs to be an understanding of what the Order of Deacons is before the bishops begin to develop their local norms and formators begin the task of formation. A third point to note is that the code envisages a program of formation which is of three years duration. The specific meaning of the term program is picked up in the 1998 Norms; 'The formation programme must last at least three years, in addition to the *propaedeutic* period, for all candidates.'<sup>iv</sup> The Norms recommend that;

The program of the propaedeutic period, usually, should not provide school lessons, but rather meetings for prayer, instructions, moments of reflection and comparison directed towards ensuring the objective nature of the vocational discernment, according to a well structured plan.<sup>v</sup>

It is worth noting the role of wives of aspirants, 'Even during this period, care should be taken, wherever possible, to involve the wives of the aspirants.'<sup>vi</sup> Throughout the formation period it is encouraged that the wives of aspirants be included in some way and that if possible even the children of deacons have some time to explore what diaconate means for them and their family.

The formation of deacons, as with the norms for the formation of priests, is divided into four distinct yet interrelated areas, human, spiritual, theological and pastoral.<sup>vii</sup> Human includes personal and psychological reflection. The spiritual concerns prayer, both personal and liturgical, reflection on aspects of personal spiritual practices and pathways, retreats and other aspects of the spiritual life. Theological normally takes the form of course in theology

and scripture and will frequently include the completion of a degree in theology of the kind undertaken by presbyteral candidates. (In Australia the ACBC established that a degree in theology is the norm for academic formation. See their guidelines of 1995.) Pastoral formation may involve parish placements, marriage and baptism preparation sessions and other aspects of pastoral practice.

### Coordinates for the goal to be attained

Close reference to the Norms is essential in the formation process for deacons but if this knowledge of the specific requirements of formation is not embedded in a proper theology of the ministry of deacons the formation will not arrive at the desired place and go off course. As suggested in the paper presented at the 2011 National Conference of Deacons this is exactly the problem we face today.<sup>viii</sup> The Norms express the importance of this theology.

The effectiveness of the formation of permanent deacons depends to a great extent on the theological understanding of the diaconate that underlies it. In fact it offers the co-ordinates for establishing and guiding the formation process and, at the same time, lays down the end to be attained.<sup>ix</sup>

Within the Norms and Directory and the resources of the Tradition and Scripture there are resources to develop this theology of diaconate. In recent times the work of John N Collins in Australia and Anni Hentschel in Germany, have renewed scholarly reflection on the theology of diaconate through a study of the Scriptural sources and the *diakon* group of words.<sup>x</sup> A number of theologians have begun to tease out the implications of this material for a renewed theology of diaconate. We do not have to invent this theology by resorting to servant myths, kenotic theology and foot washing, there are, as the Norms indicate, resources available for our reflection.

The almost total disappearance of the permanent diaconate from the Church of the West for more than a millennium has certainly made it more difficult to understand the profound reality of this ministry. However, it cannot be said for that reason that the theology of the diaconate has no authoritative points of reference, completely at the mercy of different theological opinions. There are points of reference, and they are very clear, even if they need to be developed and deepened.<sup>xi</sup>

Perhaps one of the great disabling elements of the renewed theology of diaconate is a failure to grasp the significance of the paradigm shift that Collins has created in our understanding of ministry in general and diaconate in particular by taking us back to a more fundamental understanding of the meaning of the *diakon* group of words and Acts 6:1-8.

### The Directory

The Directory primarily concerns the practical and theological aspects of the life and ministry of the deacon in the Latin Church who is not in a religious institute. The Directory not only provides some elaboration of the foundations of the theology of the diaconate but tells us something of the end in view of formation. The Directory provides some answers to some very central questions about the deacon, his identity and ministry, all of which are inseparable.

A Directory provides answers to questions such as:

- Who should appoint a deacon to his ministry?
- What kinds of pastoral appointments are best suited to deacons?
- What are his liturgical and sacramental tasks?
- What is the scope of his ministry of the word?
- How do we remunerate a deacon?
- What obligations have the diocese and parish for his ongoing formation and ministry expenses?
- Can he be appointed as leader of a parish community?
- What faculties does he have?
- And many more questions.

Most of these questions relate to the universal law of the Church expressed in the Code of Canon Law, documents of the *magisterium* such as the documents of Vatican II and the letter of Paul VI, *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* and the General Instruction on the Roman Missal. A diocese or conference of bishops need only consult the Directory for the answers to many of their questions. There are few things in the Directory that are left to particular law (diocesan bishop) or the episcopal conference to decide. Nowhere does the Directory suggest that an episcopal conference or a diocese needs to develop its own guidelines on these matters, with the exception of the few things relating to particular law.

The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests and the Directory for the ministry and Life of Deacons each have a very clear and specific standing regarding the interpretation of the universal law. They offer binding interpretations of the law, as noted in the joint introduction:

*The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, as in the case of the *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, has, together with its hortative character, juridically binding force where its norms “recall disciplinary norms of the Code of Canon Law” or “determine with regard to the manner of applying universal laws of the Church, explicitate their doctrinal basis and inculcate or solicit their faithful observance”. In these specific cases, it is to be regarded as a formal, general, executory Decree (cf. canon 32).

General executory decrees; ‘oblige those who are bound by the laws whose methods of application the same decrees determine or whose observance they urge.’ For example when the decree says that a deacon must receive his letter of appointment from his bishop, a bishop is obliged to provide the deacon with such a document and no one else may appoint the deacon. A deacon cannot be appointed by a parish priest or a lay person if his ministry is ecclesial and not secular. When the Directory says a deacon is obliged to accept an appointment from his bishop except for a grave reason then the Directory provides a binding interpretation about the obligations of the deacon.

In other words a diocese is not free to “make it up as they go along” in a kind of DIY interpretation of the law. The Directory provides a positive help to the deacon and diocese by providing some readymade answers to questions that might emerge. It is therefore the foundational document to be consulted before decisions are made about these questions.

## Sacred ministry

The 1983 Code of Canon Law uses the terms cleric and sacred minister as synonyms for the ordained ministry. The term encompasses deacons, priests and bishops. Therefore whatever the code says about clerics and sacred ministers applies to all three unless the code specifies otherwise. A man becomes a cleric through ordination into the order of deacons and incardination (Can 236). Knowing this is important to solving some of the questions that might arise such as those listed above, especially those one concerning the law.

The Directory reinforces the importance of keeping in mind the nature of who a deacon is and his place within the local church (diocese).

The origin of the diaconate is the consecration and mission of Christ, in which the deacon is called to share. Through the imposition of hands and the prayer of consecration, he is constituted a sacred minister and a member of the hierarchy. This condition determines his theological and juridical status in the Church.<sup>xii</sup>

A deacon's theological and juridical status is determined by these things in the same way that a priest or bishop's theological and juridical status is determined by these things. Another way of considering this statement is to substitute priest or bishop into any question about deacons (apart from the few differences listed in can 288 which apply to permanent deacons). For example can the bishop decide between a qualified lay person or a priest to be pastoral leader of a parish or invite each to a competitive application process? No he can't, because a priest, if one is available, must always be appointed as pastoral leader.

There is no special category of law for a deacon that is different from the law applied to a priest and bishop, even if the law itself specifies some differences as to the application of the law among these three. The Directory is insistent that; 'The Diaconate brings with it a series of rights and duties as foreseen by canons 273-283 of the *Code of Canon Law* with regard to clerics in general and deacons in particular.'<sup>xiii</sup> These rights are those of a priest or bishop too.

Within canon law there are some general exemptions granted to permanent deacons which remove the obligations imposed on other clerics unless his bishop has determined otherwise within his diocese. Among these are included:

- He is not obligated to wear clerical dress, but may if he wishes
- He may accept public office
- He may manage the finances and property of secular organisations
- He may conduct a business or trade
- He may participate in political parties and trade unions

With these last four the exceptions (derogations) are not absolute because he may not do any of these if they are not consistent with Catholic doctrine and morality, or denigrate the Church.

## Ministry Contexts

Deacons, like priests and bishops, have three inter-related contexts of ministry and these are a ministry of the word, a ministry of liturgy, and a pastoral ministry. A variety of names are used for these three contexts and an even greater variety of activities can be listed under each, some which overlap across contexts. There is also overlap between the ministries of deacon, priest and bishop and also lay ecclesial ministry. One should expect some degree of overlap because all share in the one mission of Christ.

Paragraph thirty-nine of the Directory is a very significant one for understanding the relationship that exists between the three contexts of ministry and because it is so significant I have included it in full:

The three contexts of the diaconal ministry, depending on circumstances, may absorb, to varying degrees, a large proportion of every deacon's activity. Together, however, they represent a unity in service at the level of divine Revelation: the ministry of the word leads to ministry at the altar, which in turn prompts the transformation of life by the liturgy, resulting in charity. "If we consider the deep spiritual nature of this *diaconia*, then we shall better appreciate the inter-relationship between the three areas of ministry traditionally associated with the diaconate, that is, the ministry of the word, the ministry of the altar and the ministry of charity. Depending on the circumstances, one or other of these may take on special importance in the individual work of a deacon, but these three ministries are inseparably joined in God's plan for redemption".

Each part of this requires some detailed reflection but we do not have sufficient space here to do that task. The general point to consider is that we must look at the ministry of the deacon holistically and not opt for a functionalist approach that splits his ministry into diaconal things and non-diaconal. For the unity that exists in his ministry is at the level of divine revelation, part of the truths of the faith we share as Catholics. If we think of a deacon who has a ministry in a Catholic school or agency as being an employee but when he ministers in a parish as a sacred minister or only considered this latter ministry as sacred ministry we begin to deny the reality of the ministry of Christ in and for his Church in the person of the sacred minister. If we are unsure about this point just substitute priest or bishop for deacon and see if we are really willing to commit to a notion that a priest in a Catholic school or agency is not engaged in his ministry when he does so, but only when he is vested and celebrating the sacraments.

As for priests, deacons may find that one of these contexts, liturgy, pastoral or word comes to have a prominence in his ministry more so than the others. This too should be expected if we realise different pastoral contexts such as ministry in a diocesan agency like Centacare will likely take up more of a priest's time who has a full time appointment there than would his liturgical ministry. Hopefully this prominence of one or the other ministry context would reflect the particular gifts of a sacred minister.

A deacon may find a number of ways to express his sacred ministry within each of the ministry contexts. As a church, we need to be careful that we don't treat the deacon as a

unique species of sacred minister, “neither fish nor fowl”. A good rule of thumb is to ask, what we would do if he was a priest in this situation? A second rule of thumb is to substitute sacred minister or cleric for deacon in any guidelines or policies about deacons and ask would this apply to other sacred ministers. Although priest and deacon differ in the specific elements of their sacred ministry they are both sacred ministers with the same rights and obligations. If, for example, we are not prepared as a church to say that priests can apply for any position in a diocese, such as pastoral associate, sacramental coordinator or pastoral leader of a parish and compete for that position along side of qualified lay people (and we should not for sound theological reasons) than we cannot say this of deacon. It seems the imperative ‘cannot’ is applicable because there is no warrant for this in the law and sacramental theology of ministry.

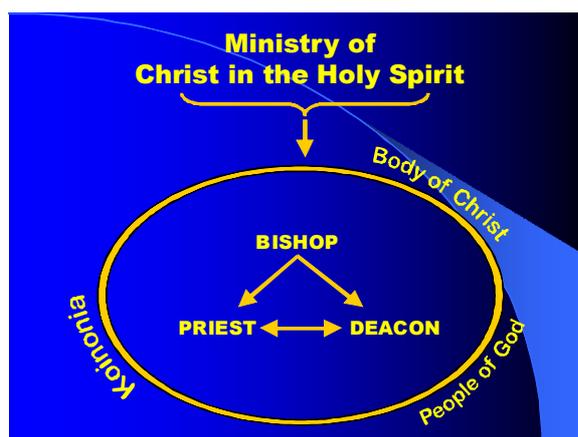
The Directory hints at two potential issues may arise if we routinely appoint deacons as parish pastoral leaders, they will be seen as ‘substitute priests’ and if they are to compete with laity for positions they may be seen as ‘lay people particularly involved in the life of the Church’, a kind of ecclesiastical hobby. In referring to diaconal appointments the Directory says;

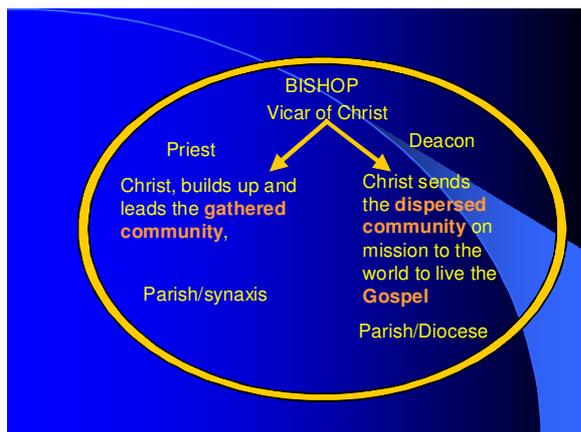
In every case it is important, ...that deacons fully exercise their ministry, in preaching, in the liturgy and in charity to the extent that circumstances permit. They should not be relegated to marginal duties, be made merely to act as substitutes, nor discharge duties normally entrusted to non-ordained members of the faithful. Only in this way will the true identity of permanent deacons as ministers of Christ become apparent and the impression avoided that deacons are simply lay people particularly involved in the life of the Church.

### Primary orientation

Functionalism and the listing of all the things a priest can do and then to subtract from that to get what a deacon does is a sterile process that will not open for us the meaning of diaconate found in the Directory.

The sacred ministry is a participation in the ministry of Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is his presence among us, ministering to us, that builds up the Church for mission. The primary task of the sacred ministry is to make Christ present so as build up the Church for mission. Christ’s mission has a Church and that Church is formed for mission by the sacred ministers (though not exclusively). The divinely instituted ministry since ancient times has been known as bishops, presbyters and deacons. The bishop is the pastor of the diocese and the presider over its Eucharist. The presbyter and deacon share in the episcopal ministry as his left and right arms.





If we consider the primary orientation of the ministry of the priest and deacon we can see that the primary orientation of the priest is toward the parish or the gathered community. A priest presides over the Eucharist in the name of the Bishop and makes him present. As presider over the Eucharist of the parish he is also the pastoral leader, again in reflection of the bishop. The priest's primary orientation is, through Christ, toward the building up of the gathered community.

The deacon is oriented toward the dispersed community and to mission. Through him the needs of the church and world are brought into the heart of the liturgical assembly (general intercessions) and through him the community is sent to bring the gospel into the world (dismissal). He does not preside over the community but assists the community to receive the fruits of word and sacrament and bring these into their everyday living. In this he makes present the bishop who is to have a care for all who are in his Church and all who live in the boundaries of his pastoral oversight, Catholic or not, and to proclaim the gospel to all people.

When we read closely the Directory and some of its suggested diaconal placements we soon discover that pastoral leadership of a parish is not considered a normal ministry placement for a deacon. The scope of his ministry is oriented toward groups and communities within the parish and diocese.

Section 26-40 of the Directory offers a diverse though by no means exhaustive list, of possible ministry placements for deacons. Suggestions are also found in other parts of the Directory too.



When we examine these we see that they fall into two categories that are referred to here as dispersed and diocese. I call the first dispersed, rather than parish, because although they are some of the suggested ministries for a deacon within a parish, it is not parish pastoral leadership. Depending on the particular gifts and interest of the deacon and the needs of a parish community he might focus the RCIA in his parish and provide leadership and formation for the team of lay people who will companion catechumens on their journey. He may take a focus on initial and ongoing formation of lay ministers such as readers, extraordinary ministers of communion and servers. That is, responsibility for particular groups within a parish, or even as suggested in the Directory ministering in a group of parishes or a deanery.

At the diocesan level, which the Directory says is the most common context for ministry of a deacon (as the one ordained for the ministry of the bishop), there is a great deal of scope for deacons within the diocesan curia or administration, agencies of the diocese and a variety of

chaplaincy positions. A deacon may be chancellor of a diocese, minister in the diocesan tribunal, and have other roles in diocesan administration. He may be appointed as chaplain to an ethnic community, or to a role in a diocesan agency. Catholic schools are one of the great pastoral fields in need of a minister, to minister to children, families and teachers on the margins of church and to connect them into the life of the diocese.

Although it is mentioned throughout the Norms and Directory we have hardly touched on here the great potential of the deacon for the new evangelisation. As many deacons are married men with families, some still in secular employment and others who have been in the past, there is much they share with the life of other Catholics and people on the margins of the church.

## Conclusion

The promise the Holy Spirit offers to the Church in the gift of the renewed diaconate cannot be received if three minimum conditions are satisfied. The first is deep formation of the priests, bishops and laity about the life and ministry of deacons. If there is no appreciation that the ministry of deacon constitutes part of the faith of the Church that the sacred ministry is part of the essential constitution of her nature, then we will not receive deacons as full and equal members of the sacred ministry. The second condition is the wider and deeper knowledge of the Norms and Directory and their application to initial and ongoing formation and to the life and ministry of deacons. Formators, bishops, priests and especially Catholics who 'oppose' the diaconate need to acquire this wider and deeper knowledge. The final condition concerns faith. We need to have faith in the movement of the Holy Spirit in the decision of Vatican II to restore a renewed diaconate as a permanent ministry in the Church and to receive this ministry as a gift, alongside of all other lay and ordained ministries. The diaconate can make a valuable contribution to the new evangelisation and the Norms and Directory are two of the sources that will help us to actualise that potential.

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<sup>i</sup> Joint declaration.

<sup>ii</sup> Joint declaration.

<sup>iii</sup> Joint declaration.

<sup>iv</sup> Norms, 49

<sup>v</sup> Norms, 43

<sup>vi</sup> Norms 43

<sup>vii</sup> Norms 55

<sup>viii</sup> The paper is found on the Conference page on this website.

<sup>ix</sup> Norms 3

<sup>x</sup> John N Collins, *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*. Oxford University Press. 1990.

<sup>xi</sup> Norms 3

<sup>xii</sup> Directory 1

<sup>xiii</sup> Directory 7