

## ***THE DIACONATE: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION***

### **Part One:**

#### **ESTABLISHMENT OF PERMANENT DIACONATE: from Vatican Council II to Archdiocese of Melbourne**

On October 27 2012, seven men will be ordained by Archbishop Denis Hart as permanent deacons for service in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. They come from each region of the Archdiocese, and from different nationalities - Australian, English, South African and South Sudanese. Their ages range from 40 to 60. One is widowed, six are married. Their families number from 1 to 6. All have a record of service in their parishes and professional commitments. All have been studying and preparing spiritually and pastorally since 2007.

This short article is the first of three to present this development. Later articles will present the theology of the diaconate, and some of the possibilities offered by the order of deacon in a diocese and a parish.

The grades of the Sacrament of Orders consist of the ministry of bishops (the episcopate), and the ministry of priests (the presbyterate) and the diaconate. For many centuries, the order of deacon was conferred only on men who were soon to be ordained as priests. This custom has been called a 'transitional' diaconate. However, the earliest centuries of the Church's life were well served by the stable exercise of all three ordained ministries.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) discussed the desirability of restoring the permanent diaconate. In 1967, Pope Paul VI decreed that the order of deacon could be conferred for a life-long ministry upon married or celibate men. Forty five years later, there are about 37,000 permanent deacons, of whom about half serve in the United States of America, even though the discussions by the Council Fathers had concentrated on the benefit of the diaconate in missionary dioceses. Throughout Australia, there are about 100 permanent deacons.

When asked to undertake the task of establishing this ministry for our Archdiocese, this writer agreed readily because the ministry is an element of the life of the universal Church, a part of its fundamental sacramental reality. Our awareness of the importance of the seven sacraments has been deepened by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that the Church itself is in the nature of a universal sacrament of God's offer of salvation to all men and women.

The diaconate being a novelty in our archdiocese, it could be difficult to understand the relationship of these ordained men to parishioners, pastoral associates and other pastoral workers, as well as to priests. Further questions arise in the light of the contemporary desire to receive the benefit of women's charisms in the life of the parish and local Church.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the diaconate was exercised in northern Europe within the Lutheran communion. It was conceived predominantly as an expression of Christ's command to his disciples to serve one another, and was exercised through systematic social work.

During the Second World War, the faith and reflection of Catholic priests who were imprisoned in the concentration camps alongside the Jewish people led them to recall the diaconate in the early Church. If it were to be restored, it seemed to them to be a way that the Church could develop effective strategies for a more versatile pastoral ministry, including service of oppressed groups such as those to whose cries they had been exposed in the camps. After their liberation, they met with theologians Karl Rahner and Jean Rodhain who undertook to study the sources of the permanent diaconate. Their studies added further dimensions to extensive theological reflections once the Second Vatican Council opened the way.

Though it is a threefold ministry of the Word, of the Sacraments and of charity, the genesis of the contemporary diaconate in the Catholic Church is rooted in this profound evangelical call to service.

**Part two:**

## **THEOLOGY OF THE DIACONATE**

After ten years of study, the International Theological Commission concluded in 2002 that the theology of the diaconate remains a disputed question. The Commission cautiously noted the historical reality of deaconesses, not disputing that a decision to resume that ministry rests with the teaching authority in the Church.

### **DEACONS SHARE IN THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY ORDERS**

From the earliest centuries, ordination by the laying on of hands was conferred on deacons, priests and bishops, these orders being three grades of one sacrament of Holy Orders. The Permanent Diaconate is integral to the sacramental dimension of the Church itself. Its eclipse in the Middle Ages was a loss to the Church.

The Second Vatican Council decreed that it should be restored. In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI clarified the distinction between the diaconate and the presbyterate, stating that the deacon's representation of Christ is not a representation of Christ as Head of the Church. The headship of Christ is a metaphor for his life-giving presence to which He gave perfect expression on the Cross and which is celebrated in perpetual efficacious memorial in the Mass. This is the reason that the presiders at our Eucharist - bishops and priests - are said to represent Christ the Head of the Church. Deacons are ordained not "for the priesthood but for ministry." (Vatican Council II *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* #29)

At their ordination, deacons are invited into a specific share in the Trinitarian life of grace, known as the grace of the sacrament, which, in the words of Blessed John Paul II addressing deacons at Detroit in 1987, "is meant to strengthen him" and configures him "to Christ in his servant role."

In pastoral discussions, the focus may be on the question of what services does a deacon offer that a lay person could not. Prior to this concern, however, the sacramental presence of a deacon is a benefit in itself. "Who is a deacon?" is a question about the grace and the sacramental character given to the deacon in ordination.

### **ORIGINS OF THE DIACONATE IN THE CHURCH**

Many Catholic theologians explain the diaconate in similar terms as modern Protestants do, among whom the diaconate first reappeared two centuries ago. It was an extension of the charitable work of the Church in modern conditions; hence the deacon was a minister of service.

This pastoral phenomenon appears to have influenced both Catholic and Protestant contemporary translators of the Scriptures. Before modern times, the 'deacon' words in the New Testament letters were translated 'deacon' (*diakonos*), 'ministry' (*diakonia*), 'to minister' (*diakoneo*) both in English and continental Bibles. Reflecting modern Protestant history, modern Bibles use the translation 'servant', 'service', and 'to serve'.

An exhaustive study by a scripture scholar from Melbourne, Dr John N Collins, recognizes as a given the pervasive spiritual significance of any Christian's service of our neighbour in imitation of Jesus' example and command given at the Last Supper (Jn 13:1-11). However, the earliest understanding of the deacon in the primitive Church was as a subordinate participant in the apostles' ministry of preaching (Acts 6:6-8). Despite what several translations now state is an issue of food in verses 2-4, the function at issue is preaching.

In January 2007, in an address about Saint Stephen, one of those deacons and the first martyr, Pope Benedict XVI remarked upon the rapid shift by the Seven from service at tables to evangelization. He noted that “the first lesson we can learn from the figure of St Stephen (is that) charity and the proclamation of faith always go hand in hand.” The Pope went on to remark that the missionary consciousness of the Church seemed to spring from this persecution of Stephen, replicated shortly after against the entire community (Ac 8:1-4).

Writing to the Christians at Corinth (1 Cor 3:5; cf. 2 Cor 3:6 and 5:18), St Paul calls himself a ‘minister, envoy’ (*diakonos*) called by God and sent to communicate in the power of the Spirit the good news that God in Christ offers reconciliation to all humankind.

Later, in writing the gospels, the evangelists were inspired by the Holy Spirit to repeatedly refer to Jesus’ insistence that he was ‘sent’ by the Father and was carrying out the ‘ministry’ (*diakonia*) of giving his life for many (Mk 10:45 and parr). Jesus acted as a ‘deacon’, sent with this joyful news from within the ever-to-be-shared life of the Holy Trinity.

Early in the second century, the bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote that the deacons are “officers of the church of God”. He emphasizes this teaching by explicitly excluding them as deacons of food and drink. They were associated with the ministry of the bishop, a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care.

#### A DEACON’S SERVICE IN THE CHURCH

The National Directory for Formation of Deacons in England and Wales (2010) offers a handy theological summary (page 15):

“As Christ is the sacrament of God, so the Church is the sacrament of Christ. ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ and ‘we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us’ (2 Cor 5:19-20). So the service that truly defines *diakonia* is akin to the noble service rendered by a faithful ambassador, totally dedicated to his master, his mission, his message; and the message in this case, carried in the name of Christ, is one of reconciliation and peace.”

The deacon’s ministry in the Church is truly one of service, “the Church’s service sacramentalized” (Blessed John Paul II). Every deacon has a bond with his bishop. His service, first of all, consists in extending the reach of the bishop’s service of the Gospel. Bishop Terry Draine (Middlesborough, UK) refers to deacons as “the bishop’s men, working wherever sent in the name of the Church, not just as private individuals”. Perhaps the developed theology that the International Theological Commission believes is in the future will speak of the deacon as a sacramental representation of Christ the obedient messenger (*‘diakonos’*) who, in the power of the Spirit, spoke in the Father’s name with good news for the poor (cf. Mark 1:2-3,9-11 citing Mal 3:1, Is 40:3).

#### **Part three:**

#### **PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS**

After considering the contribution of wives and family in a deacon’s vocation, this concluding section will draw on some of the teaching of Blessed John Paul II.

Though some are unmarried, most permanent deacons bring the wealth of the vocation of marriage and family life to the sacramental presence of Christ as a deacon in the Church. Their wives have explicitly consented to allow their husbands to follow this vocation of service outside the home and family. This is these women's gift to our local Church. The deacons' love of their family will give a different and fresh flavour to their preaching and to their sacramental ministrations at such significant moments in family life as baptism, marriage and funerals.

Their service in parish ministry "might seem an easy way to meet current demands." However, the ministry of deacon is not only in the parish. "Rather, parochial work should be regarded as extraordinary, it might not be the best use of what should normally be a radical ministry" whenever the bishop sees that kind of ministry is needed. "Like a smartphone, deacons have many apps, doing whatever the one who has oversight requests." (T Drainey) Blessed John Paul II foresaw "a greater and more direct presence of Church ministers in the various spheres of the family, work, school, etc., in addition to existing pastoral structures." (Rome, 6 Oct 1993)

The Pope taught too that the ministry of a deacon does not compete with the rightful service of the faithful. "(Deacons') services are not carried out in isolation, but in communion. Permanent deacons have an obligation to respect the office of the priest and to cooperate conscientiously with him and with the parish staff." (Detroit 19 Sep 1987) And again, the Pope said: "According to the Council, the functions assigned to the deacon can in no way diminish the role of lay people ... On the contrary; the deacon's tasks include that of promoting and sustaining the apostolic activities of the laity." (Rome 13 Oct 1993) "The deacon also has a right to be accepted and fully recognized by ... all (as) an ordained minister of the word, the altar and charity." (Detroit 19 Sep 1987)

As a start, each deacon has been assigned to a parish, while all but two of them have assumed specialized ministries in the Archdiocese with school, migrant and refugee, and indigenous ministries. Fr Bill Edebohls PP has been appointed to mentor the deacons' first years of ordained ministry.

This reflection looks to our future together, to an experience of being a vital church communion that the deacons together with every member of our local church must continue to build. This is the aim to which, in prayerful response to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we must dedicate ourselves with charity, generosity and creativity.

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