

Restoring the Diaconate

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This article is the first in a series of reflections about the permanent ministry of deacons. Hopefully the series will provide some education and stimulate some thinking about the Church and its ministries.

The Catholic Church has had deacons from the earliest times of the New Testament up until the present. In the letters of Paul we encounter the Greek noun *diaconos* (deacon) as a title for a minister in the Church. The earliest centuries of the Church provide evidence of a permanent ministry of deacons. St Ignatius of Antioch in the first century teaches that the Church cannot be imagined without their ministry, alongside that of other ministers and the laity gathered around the bishop.

By the eleventh century the ministry of deacon had ceased to be a permanent one and gradually became a step along the way to priesthood. Occasionally there were some men who chose to remain deacons, but this was not common. Most Catholics today only know deacons usually as young men in their final year of preparation for the priesthood.

The Holy Spirit inspired the bishops at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to restore to the Church the full, divinely established, ministry in the Church which since ancient times had consisted of bishops, priests and deacons. Today there are more than 35,000 permanent deacons in the world. Of these 140 are in Australia and 15 of these are located in the Archdiocese of Brisbane.

When the bishops were asked what issues should be discussed at Vatican II three issues emerged far above others. The first was the theology of the episcopate (bishops), the second was greater use of the local languages (vernacular) in the liturgy and the third was the restoration of the permanent ministry of deacons.

The desire to restore the ministry did not come out of nowhere. In fact there was a long history involved in the restoration.

At the Council of Trent the bishops accepted the criticism made by the reformers that the Catholic faith taught that Christ had established the threefold ministry but they really only believed in the ministry of priests. At the time bishops were considered as priests with extra powers of government. Deacons were a mere appendix to the ministry. Deacons would be ordained priests very shortly after being ordained deacons. Even at Mass up until Vatican II priests would sometimes dress as deacons and take their part if a deacon was required for liturgy.

The Council of Trent decided that the permanent ministry of deacon should be restored so that the faith the Church professed would be visible in its structures of ministry. After that Council the legislation required to re-establish the permanent ministry of deacon was not promulgated and so it remained a transitional ministry.

Prior to Vatican II calls to restore the permanent ministry of deacon came from around the world and for a variety of reasons. The first reason was to witness to the faith that the Church professed in the threefold ministry as part of the essential structure of the Church. The second reason was to

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enlarge the pool of ministers by restoring a ministry not limited to traditional parish ministry like priests. Bishops felt that something more was needed than simply focusing on parish ministry if large parts of the population who had drifted from the Church were to be gathered up again.

The third reason built on the previous one; historical and pastoral studies revealed that the primary focus of the ministry of deacons had been the diocese (or a deanery). These studies revealed that deacons worked closely with the bishop in meeting needs across the diocese. Some of these needs were administrative, some charitable and some closely connected with catechetics and evangelisation. These later tasks of adult faith formation, as we would say today, were aimed at animating the laity for mission. The renewed appreciation of the laity in the Church accompanied renewed appreciation of the diaconate.

Today we would say the fourth reason was to focus on 'the new evangelisation'. This term is not found in the documents of Vatican II but the concept is clearly embedded there and in the writing of scholars on diaconate prior to the Council. After the Council, popes and others have consistently pointed to the huge potential (mostly undeveloped) of the diaconate for new evangelisation.

One aspect of the faith of the Church is essential to the decision to restore the permanent ministry of deacon. This aspect is the ecclesiology of communion (*koinonia*). Ecclesiology is a branch of theology about the nature and the mission of the Church. Vatican II recovered a more Biblical and patristic sense of its nature as a Eucharistic community gathered around its bishop and each of these local communities (dioceses) in communion with each other.

The ecclesiology of communion affirms that the Church is instituted by Christ and sustained as a Eucharistic community in the Holy Spirit in which the bishop is assisted by the priests and deacons in the one apostolic ministry and together with the laity offers worship to God and engages in mission for the life of the world. In this vision, which is closer to the apostolic times, the primary focus of the ordained ministry is to build up the laity for mission. The bishop, priest, deacon and lay person form an organic whole each with his/her own part to play in Christ's mission.

So much had the talk of restoring the diaconate gained pace prior to Vatican II that Pope Pius XII considered the possibility of restoring the ministry in line with the wishes of Trent and the desires of many bishops but felt that the time was not quite ripe for it. By the time Vatican II occurred much more was known about the diaconate and the Eucharistic nature of the Church. Inspired by the Holy Spirit the bishops voted to restore the permanent ministry of deacons. In 1969 Paul VI made this a reality by promulgating the legislation to make it happen.

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