

The Bishop's Right Hand Man

Anthony Gooley

In the liturgy the deacon walks and sits at the right hand side of the bishop. This liturgical relationship reflects the pastoral relationship that has existed between bishops and deacons since ancient times. Up until the ninth century deacons were literally the bishop's right hand men in the pastoral affairs of the diocese.

Deacons assisted bishops in the administration of the diocese, with charitable works, with liturgy, as theological advisors and with a variety of tasks as the bishop's emissary, a kind of executive officer. Their view of the diocese and its life was both wide and intimate. It was natural therefore that most bishops were chosen from among deacons rather than presbyters (priests) because they had a wider diocesan experience.

Until the eleventh century a deacon was not ordained a presbyter before becoming a bishop, he was ordained directly as a bishop. Even after the eleventh century there were still a few who were ordained as bishops without first being ordained priests. After the eleventh century the number of permanent deacons began to decline as their ministry was gradually merged into one step along the way to presbyteral ordination.

From the thirteenth century up until 1972 a system of steps toward priesthood (presbyterate) became the norm. A man preparing for the priesthood proceeded through each of these steps: porter, exorcist, lector, acolyte, subdeacon, deacon and finally priest. Priesthood, not bishop, was regarded as the top step and the fullness of the sacrament of Orders.

Up until 1972 the Church made lay men clerics. A man became a cleric at first tonsure before he became a lector. He did not get ordained until he became a deacon some years later. He would remain a deacon for almost a year before being ordained a priest. In 1969 when Pope Paul VI, restored the permanent ministry of deacons no one had a living memory of what a permanent deacon was.

Vatican II (1962-65) was the first council to solemnly define that the bishop has the fullness of Orders. It taught the priests and deacons were the bishop's collaborators in the apostolic ministry. The Council also went some way to removing the step-wise process of becoming a priest. A man became a cleric through ordination to the diaconate. Although there are still two forms of it, permanent and transitional, there is only one order of deacon.

Cardinal Walter Kasper has pointed out that one challenge for the Church after Vatican II has been to emphasise once again that the deacon is the bishop's right hand man, with a distinct ministry. Such a ministry is primarily directed toward diocesan wide ministry and groups or special needs within a deanery or parish. His task is to animate the mission of the diocese in collaboration with the bishop.

Kasper notes that a second challenge is to once again see the priest as the bishop's left hand man. The priest is a collaborator of the bishop with a primary focus on the life of the parish to which he has been assigned. The priest presides at the Eucharist in the name of the bishop and is pastoral leader of the parish for the good of the whole diocese.

These are challenges because mostly when Catholics think of clergy they think of priests and when they think of priests they think of parish. So our mindset is still to think about deacons in relation to priest and parish too. In our last reflection we saw how functionalism contributes to a distorted view

of ministry. In many ways the idea of the steps toward priesthood still persists and so permanent deacons are sometimes, incorrectly, thought of as being on one of these steps.

As left and right hand of the bishop, presbyters and deacons are meant to collaborate and have mutual respect and encouragement for each other's ministry, according to the Directory for the Life and Ministry of Deacons (1998). Both ministers are to collaborate with lay pastoral workers and all are meant to build up the local church for mission. Ministry is always ministry in communion. Theologian Paul McPartlan notes that one ministry cannot be viewed as a rival to another because it is the same Holy Spirit that has gifted the Church with all ministries.

The permanent ministry of deacon is an end in itself. It has a specific grace for the building up of the Church that Christ communicates through it in the Holy Spirit. The Council wanted the Church to be enriched by a ministry which could give expression to the sacred ministry beyond the idea of pastoral care of a parish. Even though some deacons have a distinct charism or gift for parish ministry and may focus their particular ministry there that is not the primary focus of most deacons.

Deacons are primarily directed to mission and evangelisation within the diocese. The International Theological Commission (2003) suggested that deacons may offer the Church entirely new ways of bringing the presence of sacred ministers to the Church and world.

The presence of the bishop and his pastoral concern for the diocese can be extended in different ways through deacons. They may be appointed to ministries or to minister to particular groups that suit their charism more than priests. There is freedom in the style of placement and the locations of their ministry that take deacons out from maintenance of parish life toward mission.

Pope Francis referring to new outreach said "When the Church loses this apostolic courage, she becomes a stalled church, a tidy church, a church that is nice to look at, but is without fertility, because she's lost the courage to go to the outskirts."

When diocese, mission and evangelisation, and reaching out to Catholics on the margins of Church become the primary area of ministry appointment, then it becomes clearer that the deacon is the right hand man of the bishop. Then we are coming closer to what John Paul II described as the more complete actualisation of the sacred ministry of apostolic times which is being brought about by the Holy Spirit.

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