

## Liturgy a harmony for four voices

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There are four voices in the Mass which combined together to produce the harmony that is the liturgy of the Church. Three of the voices are the laity, the priest and the deacon. I will come to the fourth voice later. For Latin Rite Roman Catholics the voice of the deacon is something relatively new and we are only hearing it occasionally<sup>1</sup>. Since the reform of the liturgy, in line with Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium, we have become used to hearing the voice of the laity and the priest in the liturgy. As we continue to implement the Second Vatican Council and its call to restore the diaconate as a permanent ministry we will need to engage in some ongoing formation and reflection with an attitude of openness to what the Spirit might be saying to the Churches.

The *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* recognise that one of the challenges for the Church today, in implementing the desire of the Second Vatican Council to restore the diaconate as a permanent ministry, is that we have been without the ministry for a millennium and we have only known deacons on the way to priesthood in the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>2</sup> One of the areas of ministry for deacons is the Mass and it is to this single aspect of the deacon's ministry that I wish to turn our attention.<sup>3</sup>

Few priests and parishes in Australia would have ever experienced a deacon at Mass, apart from a deacon on placement for a few months before ordination to the priesthood. In order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding the Church offers us several guideposts to help us understand the role of the deacon in the Mass.

Three documents provide an outline of the practice and the theology of the deacon's participation at Mass. These documents are the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Permanent Deacons* and, in Australia, the *Guidelines for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* issued by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in 2005. These three documents need to be understood within the framework of the theology of koinonia/communion.

There can be no fruitful reception of the ministry of the deacon at Mass without reflection on these documents. Nor is it possible that full, conscious and active participation will develop without an understanding of the theology and spirituality of communion.

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<sup>1</sup> The ministry of deacon as a permanent ministry in the Latin Rite was only restored after the Second Vatican Council and not all dioceses has restored this ministry.

<sup>2</sup> Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons, St Paul's Publications, Strathfield, 1998, #3 Deacons have remained part of the pattern of ministry in the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Orthodox churches. The past sixty years has witnessed the restoration of the permanent ministry of deacons in most of the larger Christian churches.

<sup>3</sup> In the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church deacons have three main aspects to their ministry, just as a priest does, ministry of the word, pastoral ministry and liturgical ministry. And just as it is for priests, all three aspects of the ministry must be kept in balance. Being a deacon at Mass is one part of his liturgical ministry.

## **Spirituality and theology of communion**

When we gather to celebrate the Mass we gather as the Body of Christ as a visible expression of Christ present in a particular place and time. What makes this assembly different from a crowd at a sports match is that we do not gather as isolated and unconnected individuals but as those who participate in the same reality; the body of Christ. We have been baptised into Christ and therefore we are parts of one another (Rom 12:5). We are a people made one in the unity of the Holy Spirit. It is the one Lord Jesus Christ, who prays for us, prays in us and is prayed to by us.<sup>4</sup>

The unity of the praying Church is brought about the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who is in Christ, in the whole church and in each baptised person.<sup>5</sup> It is the Spirit praying in us that allows us to call out with Jesus; Abba, Father (Gal 4:6). It is Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, who is the forth voice in the liturgy. We gather as a communion of persons, to pray as a communion of persons in order to extend that communion to the whole world, so that all things will be reconciled in Christ (Eph 3:10).

When the Church is gatherer for liturgy it is most visibly that sign and sacrament of intimate union with God and the unity of all humanity into which the Trinity invites the whole of creation.<sup>6</sup>

When we gather and celebrate the Mass we do so as Christ in head and member. Christ remains among us as head and shepherd and priest of the sacrament through the sacrament of ordained ministry. The laity as members the of Body are not passive recipients of the celebration of the Mass but are participants as God's priestly people who, together with the bishop, priest and deacon, offer the Mass for the peace and salvation of all the world.

This sacramental and liturgical theology is not new but it was perhaps obscured in the celebration of the Mass in the Tridentine Rite. This is why those charged with implementing the reform reached back into earlier times in the history of the Church to draw on prayers and rituals which give clearer expression to the reality in which we participate.

The reform of the liturgy can be seen as a restoration of all four voices. By voice I mean not only the spoken word, but the gestures and attitudes of heart that contribute to full, active and conscious participation of all the faithful (laity, deacon, priest and bishop).<sup>7</sup>

## **Restoring the voices**

Although in the Tridentine liturgy the actual voice of the priest was the one that was heard most, followed by the server and perhaps choir, his voice was given new force

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<sup>4</sup> General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours, #7

<sup>5</sup> General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours, #8

<sup>6</sup> Lumen Gentium §1 all quotes from Vatican II, Flannery, *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, Veritas Publications, Dublin, 1981

<sup>7</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §11.

after Vatican II through the ability to preside in the language of the people. Now the priest was faced with new challenges as a presider to lead the prayers which all could understand and to pray in such a way that he enabled the full, conscious and active participation of the assembly. Now priests had to be audible, clear in their gestures and provide the right pace and cues for the congregation that they now faced. In this sense the liturgical reform was a restoration of their voice too.

More dramatically, perhaps, was the restoration of the voice of the laity. The people were now able to hear that the liturgy was something that we all were doing. We began to hear that “we ask this”, “we offer”, “we bring” through Christ our Lord, and we were able to endorse and make the prayer our own by saying amen. The priest was no longer “saying” or “reading” Mass. We were conscious for the first time that we were offering the Mass together with the priest through, with and in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Full, active and conscious participation is not limited to those who proclaim the Scriptures, or assist with the distribution of Eucharist, but is something that we are all doing. One of the most visible aspects of the reforms and renewal flowing from Vatican II has probably been the discovery that we are truly the priestly people, as a result of our baptism, a consecrated nation offering praises to God (1 Peter 2:9). In short there is no room at Mass for spectators, only participants.

One voice that the Council sought to restore to the Mass was the voice of the deacon. That process of restoration has been one of the aspects of the Council that has yet to be fully implemented. It is not the place here to outline all of the factors which lead to the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent ministry but a few comments are required to provide some context.

The Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church has never been without the ministry of deacon, from the New Testament until now. In the last millennium most deacons have proceeded on to ordination as priests. What Vatican II wanted to do was restore the diaconate as a permanent ministry along side priest and bishop as was first proposed at the Council of Trent. Trent did not propose the restoration because of a shortage of priests but to give full witness to the threefold ministry of priest, deacon and bishop. Trent did not complete that process and it was taken up by Vatican II and finally realised by Paul VI. The ministry was to be restored for celibate and married men as an order for life and not as part of a transition to priesthood. It is a distinct ministry from that of priest and bishop.

Even if there were 1,000 future priests in the seminaries of Australia there would still be a need to restore the ministry of deacons. Deacons (laity too) are not substitutes for priests. If there were 1,000 deacons in formation in this country, there would still be a need for lay ministers too. While there is overlap between the ministries of lay ministers such as readers and extraordinary ministers of communion and the ministries of priests and deacons, we are not faced with a choice between either/or, it is really a matter of both/and, as we find in so many things within the Catholic Church.

Each of the laity, deacon and priest has a distinctive part to play in the liturgy. The liturgical tradition of the Church is that each one of us contributes his or her voice to the Mass in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Since the reform of the liturgy, we are hearing more clearly the voice of the laity and the priest and hopefully more clearly the voice of Christ, in the unity of the Spirit praying in us. We are now ready to hear the voice of the deacon.

People of my age, having only been born a few years before the Second Vatican Council, are too young to have noticed the difference when the Mass of the Tridentine Rite gave way to the Rite of Paul VI but we can imagine that there was a period of uncertainty and perhaps even discomfort mixed with excitement. Certainly for a period clergy and others had to study the books carefully to know what it would all look and sound like. In order to hear the voice of the deacon we have to repeat this process again except on a much smaller scale.

### **The deacon in the Mass**

When a he is present at the Eucharistic celebration, a deacon should exercise his sacred ministry, wearing sacred vestments.<sup>8</sup> The question of whether deacons should exercise their ministry within a celebration does not belong to the presiding celebrant.<sup>9</sup> Deacons are not obliged but exhorted to participate as deacons at Mass.

Sometimes there is confusion here for priests who incorrectly assume that the deacon is a concelebrant and therefore the decision as to the deacon's participation is thought to be the priest's. Deacons do not concelebrate because the deacon is not sharing, and in fact unable to share, any of the presidential prayers at Mass. Concelebration is defined here as the principal presiding priest (or bishop) inviting other priests to share in some of the presidential prayers of the Eucharistic Prayer.

Common sense should prevail when a deacon is present at Mass. We are not considering random deacons arriving just before Mass vested, any more than we would consider allowing a visiting priest to turn up in the sacristy five minutes before Mass saying he wants to concelebrate.

The laity too has their specific parts in the Mass and they are obliged to celebrate Mass each Sunday and certain other days of the year. Both deacon and laity are supposed to say and do those things that are set out for them in the liturgical books.<sup>10</sup> If we were to apply the logic of the priest deciding on the deacons participation we could extend that to the laity too, since neither are concelebrants, in the sense of sharing the presidential prayers, and each is performing the part proper to him or her.

The elements of diaconal ministry in the Mass are set out in GIRM 171-186, the basic outline of which is set out below.

During the entrance procession the deacon walks beside the presiding celebrant unless the deacon is carrying the Book of Gospels, in which case he precedes him. Both reverence the altar with a kiss and if incense is used he forms a procession of two with the priest. The deacon sits beside the presider in the sanctuary.

During the Liturgy of the Word it is always the ministry of the deacon to proclaim the gospel. His ministry is also to preach and he may do so in the Mass with the permission of the presiding priest, as is the case with other priests. If there is no delegated lay reader or acolyte present to read the first readings, the deacon should

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<sup>8</sup> General Instruction on the Roman Missal, 2003, §171.

<sup>9</sup> Guidelines For the Permanent Diaconate in the Church in Australia, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2005, #7

<sup>10</sup> *Instruction on certain questions regarding collaboration of the Non-ordained Faithful in the Ministry of priests.* St Paul's Publications, Strathfield, 1997, Article 6 §1.

read these as well. Note that the principle of each doing his/her own ministry applies so that if there are designated lay readers they should fully exercise their ministry.

From ancient times it has been the practice of the Church that deacons announce the intentions of the Prayers of the Faithful. It is not a lay ministry if a deacon is present. Proclamation of the prayers for the needs of the Church and the world are the counterpart to the dismissal. Through the intercessory prayer the deacon brings the needs of the wider Church and society into the midst of the prayer of the assembly and at the rite of dismissal he send the assembly out to live the gospel and address the needs of the Church and world as a continuation of the liturgy in life.

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist the deacon prepares the altar, receives the gifts with the priest and prepares the chalice. If incense is used he again forms a procession of two and when this is completed he incenses the priest and the people. The deacon elevates the chalice but does not pronounce the doxology, which forms part of the presidential prayers; instead he joins the people in the Great Amen.

The deacon invites the congregation to exchange the sign of peace. If communion is to be distributed in both kinds the deacon administers the cup but may administer the bread depending on the actual circumstances of the celebration and the number of other ministers.

In the concluding rites, after the post communion prayer is said by the priest, the deacon makes brief announcements from the notices or draws the attention of the community to events coming up, unless the priest prefers to do that task himself. If there is to be a solemn blessing the deacon invites the community to bow their heads and after the blessing by the priest, it is the deacon who sends the congregation on mission with the words of the dismissal.

## **Conclusion**

There are four voices in the liturgy, lay, deacon, priest and Christ who by the power of the Holy Spirit, combines the voices to produce a beautiful harmony, when the whole Church is gathered in a communion of time and place with all of the heavenly community (Heb 12:22-23). Each needs to find his/her proper part in the liturgy in order that the whole church in head and member participate fully and actively with a consciousness that we are one people, one body in Christ. We once had to learn how to find new voices in the liturgy after the initial reforms of Vatican II. We are now entering a new phase in the life of the Latin Rite Catholic Church and the implementation of the Council.

We have to learn how to hear the voice of the deacon. The learning is not just about rubrics and the liturgy. Hopefully having to learn to hear a new voice will take us once again into the heart of what the liturgy is and who are as a people when we gather. We are all God's priestly people in Christ and through him with him and in him we give glory to God in the unity of the Holy Spirit.