

Ministry of the Word

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The bishop, during the rite of ordination, gives the book of the Gospels to the deacon saying: “Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you have become” (Directory for the Ministry and Life of Deacons, #23). This book is the principal symbol of the ministry of the deacon and is the parallel of the chalice and paten which are presented to priests as the primary symbol of their ministry. This rite is the foundation for the ministry of the word of deacons.

“It is for the deacon to proclaim the Gospel and preach the word of God.” (#24) In the liturgy if a deacon is present only he may proclaim the Gospel. If the parish has a Book of the Gospels it is the deacon’s task to process in with the book and enthrone it on the altar. In the ordination of a bishop it is deacons who hold the Book of Gospels over the head of the bishop. Deacons and the Gospel are always closely related.

As we saw from a previous article, on Acts 6, the ministry of the word, evangelisation and catechesis (instruction in the faith) are central elements related to the origins of diaconal ministry.

“Deacons have the faculty to preach everywhere, in accordance with the conditions established by law. This faculty is founded on the Sacrament of Ordination...” (#24) Normally at Mass the priest who presides will preach but he may delegate the homily to another priest or to a deacon. In most parishes with a deacon, the priest and deacon work out a roster for preaching at Mass.

Whenever a deacon presides at a liturgy, such as a baptism, wedding or funeral, he will preach. He may also preach at public celebrations of the Liturgy of the Word and other occasions in which a community gathers for prayer and worship.

Ministry of the Word is not limited to celebration of Mass or other liturgy. Like the first community described in Acts 6, we need to ask; who is being neglected today in the ministry of the Word?

“Contemporary society requires a new evangelization which demands a greater and more generous effort on the part of ordained ministers.” (#26) New evangelisation is one theme that runs through the Directory.

There is in a sense nothing new about evangelisation; it is Christ crucified, risen and glorified that we proclaim. What is new is the need for new methods, new energy and new places or contexts for proclaiming Christ to our world. Basically the Church needs to recover the same missionary zeal we had at the start. Just as the first Christians did; we must find a way to engage with our contemporaries.

Deacons “should also be aware of the great possibilities for the ministry of the word in the area of religious and moral instruction in schools, in Catholic and civil universities and by adequate use of modern means of social communication”. (#26)

There are fruitful new fields for ministry of the word if opportunities are grasped. When we think in terms of new evangelisation we need to ask questions about how we go about the ministry of the word and if these are meeting present needs.

Pope Francis has emphasised in *Evangelii Gaudium* the necessity for improving preaching by clergy. Some dioceses around the world have developed very structured approaches to helping clergy improve the way they preach. They have done this partly through pre-ordination formation with greater emphasis on preparation and delivery of homilies and post ordination programs of learning with and from the laity to whom they preach. Several dioceses have formed deacons to lead such programs.

Other deacons are making the Gospel present through active contribution to the new social media and other online platforms. They are engaging people in the places where many people meet today-social media. Just as we saw with Acts 6:1-8 in an earlier article, they are finding ways to bring the word of God to people who might otherwise miss out on hearing the proclamation of the Good News. That is, the Church needs to be missionary and send missionaries into the new fields of digital culture.

The thinking that led into the restoration of deacons at Vatican II was about this kind of missionary approach to the ministry of the word. It conceived of deacons being leaven in places like universities and schools to ferment change and engage the culture. The thinking was that deacons would make, as a focus of their ministry, dialogue between the word of God and broader culture.

These are ministries where a priest may not be required full time but where a deacon, as a minister of the Church, would continue the presence of the Church in new ways and in collaboration with priests and laity. Priests, after all, are primarily focussed on parish leadership.

This way of thinking about the ministry of the word of a deacon is to see him as the one who enables and empowers and prepares the laity for mission. Through theological and spiritual formation the future leaders and opinion shapers in our society are formed. Then they can bring the gospel of Christ into dialogue with their fields of study, work and family.

The ministry of the word can take on many forms. Today the ministry of the word needs to be seen as a dialogue or conversation with the world around us. Proclamation within Mass and other Church settings builds up the faith community in its faith.

Proclamation of the word out in the public square is a second form of proclamation. It is sometimes announcing the Gospel for the first time, or announcing to those who once heard it but no longer really listen. Paul VI regarded this second proclamation as the most urgent task facing the Church today.

This vision of diaconal ministry remains to be fully developed.

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