

The Pastoral Ministry of the Deacon

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The pastoral ministry of clergy, sometimes called ministry of charity or service, encompasses a great variety of tasks. Pastoral ministry is perhaps most characteristic of diaconal ministry and more likely to absorb the greater portion of a deacon's life.

Once again the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Deacons* (1998) provides guidance on this aspect of ministry. "In virtue of the Sacrament of Orders, deacons, in communion with the bishop and the diocesan presbyterate (priests), participate in the same pastoral functions, but exercise them differently in serving and assisting the bishop and his priests (#37)."

There is only one pastoral ministry and bishops, priests and deacons participate in it and contribute to it in different ways. It may seem obvious but it is worth saying; the bishop will primarily participate through directing the activities of the diocese; the priest will primarily participate through leadership of a parish community and deacons participate through pastoral activity that may be diocese wide or include pastoral care of particular groups or in specific contexts (#37-42).

The ministry of the deacon is "exercised in hierarchical communion with the bishop and his priests" (#37). The clergy do not exercise a ministry that is their own or directed by their own whims and desires. Clergy are united in the mission of Christ for his Church. "And required by the same unity of consecration and mission, is a service of charity which seeks to help and foster all members of a particular Church, so that they may participate, in a spirit of communion and according to their proper charisms, in the life and mission of the Church" (#37).

In other words the pastoral ministry of the clergy is directed at building up all Catholics for mission and evangelisation. It is aimed at fostering deep bonds of genuine communion among the people of the parish and diocese. Clergy should assist the people to discern the gifts (charisms) that the Holy Spirit has bestowed among the People of God and to encourage the use of these gifts for the life and mission of the Church and primarily directed toward service in the world.

Benedict XVI, ever since he was a young theologian at Vatican II, has written of and spoken about the co-responsibility of the laity and clergy for the mission and life of the Church. The Church thrives not by having the clergy, say, do and decide all things but when the clergy foster the gifts of the laity and build them up for mission. After all, the clergy make up only about two percent of the Church and it is getting the ninety-eight percent focussed on mission that will renew the Church and bring the Gospel to all places in our society.

All of the above is a preamble to looking at some specific aspects of potential pastoral ministry of deacons. All that follows is meant to indicate that the deacon is not just doing some jobs but he is really focussed on building up the Church for mission and co-responsibility through these pastoral activities.

The Directory suggests that at the parish and diocesan level there are many pastoral activities to which a deacon could contribute. There is often overlap in these activities with aspects of the ministry of word and liturgy and as we saw in previous articles they form a unity of mission.

Among parish pastoral ministries are included pastoral care of families. This ministry receives a great number of mentions throughout the Directory. The 1980 Synod of Bishops, on the family, recommended that pastoral care of families should be a special concern of every diocese. This includes pre-marriage preparation, support for marriages and assistance for families with handing on the faith and witnessing to Christian marriage and family life.

Deacons may be able to make a valuable contribution to the pastoral care of families as most of them are married men with families. They understand the dynamics of marital and family life and the stages of family growth and development with an insider's perspective.

Chaplaincy is another area of ministry suggested in the Directory. Suggested contexts for chaplaincy include the military, universities and schools, including Catholic schools. In Catholic schools deacons could minister to students, teachers and parents and build up links between the parishes and schools. Many Catholics come to our schools and not our parishes and deacons might be able to help build bridges between the two communities.

Ministry within diocesan agencies such as the tribunal, episcopal office, Centacare, financial administration and others, are regarded as prime areas for diaconal ministry. Deacons in some dioceses have had a central role in formation for Catholic mission and identity within diocesan agencies and sometimes as workplace chaplains within Catholic and secular organisations.

Other areas of pastoral ministry include: formation of future priests and deacons, theologian in universities, diocesan censors and theological advisors, teachers of homiletics, retreat leaders, care for migrant groups, care for people with disabilities, youth ministry and so much more.

When we look at the pastoral ministry of actual deacons in Australia and overseas we can find deacons in all of the ministries mentioned above and in many more ministries too vast to list. There is a great deal of flexibility in the pastoral placement of deacons for ministry. Often the limit is determined by the extent of the courage, wisdom, faith and missionary zeal of the local church. We need only think back to the witness of our first Australian Saint, Mary MacKillop, to recognise how these virtues can open up immense possibilities for ministry.

The Second Vatican Council wanted to make available to the Church the grace provided through the sacrament of diaconal ordination. The Council expressed the hope that this grace and energy from Christ would revitalise and reform the ministry of the Church. This burst of new energy has the potential to form a new habit of thinking among the People of God-that we are always a people on mission, proclaiming and being good news to all.