

Let me introduce the deacon

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The sacrament of Holy Orders has three levels: deacon (servant), priest (elder), and bishop (overseer). In the early days of the Church all three levels were active in the service of the Christian community, but after several centuries the order of deacon largely disappeared, except as a stage on the way to the priesthood, especially in Western Christianity.

The Second Vatican Council decided that the order of deacon should be revived as a permanent order in the life of the Church. Since then thousands of deacons have been ordained, and most dioceses in Canada and the United States benefit from their service.

It is good to examine the meaning of the diaconate, and its foundations in Scripture and in the living faith of the Church. It is also valuable to look at what the service of a deacon involves, and how it relates to the ministry of the priest, and to the mission of lay people.

A Document from the Holy See, Directory for Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons, is a great help in understanding the role of the deacon within the life of the Church, as is also the document Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons, which is based on over 30 years of experience with the diaconate throughout the world, and which establishes norms for the program of diaconal formation.

DEACON'S PLACE

One question that is sometimes raised is the relationship between the deacon and others especially lay people, who are involved in pastoral work. I believe that there should be a rich variety of ways in which people can fulfill their Christian mission within the Church, and in their service of the wider community. The diaconate is one element of that variety.

A smaller number of lay people take the master of divinity program, and other such programs at St. Augustine's Seminary or the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto, with a view to more full time ministry within the institutions of the Church. We also need more priests and religious sisters and brothers, and active programs are underway, based upon prayer, encouragement and explicit invitation, in order to help those who are called to such vocations to respond to the call of the Lord. There are many dimensions to the life of discipleship which are being actively fostered within our archdiocese.

It is in that context that we need to see the order of deacons. It is simply one more thread within the rich fabric of apostolic life in our community. Deacons are meant to work together with lay people, religious, and priests, and to support them in their mission. This was their role when the diaconate was instituted in apostolic times, and it can be so again. For quite a while we have been operating with 6 2/3 sacraments, and I think that it is a wise idea to make fruitful use of all seven, especially in view of all of the challenges we face.

If we want to get a sense of the mission of the deacon, we should start with the Acts of the Apostles, where we read of the choice of seven men to help in the practical works of service in the community so that the apostles would be freed to devote themselves to prayer and the service of the word (Acts 6:1-6). The apostles ordained these men (Acts 6:6), and two of them are highlighted in the Acts of the Apostles: Stephen became the first martyr (Acts 6:8-8:1), and Philip did effective work in evangelizing (Acts 8:5-8; 8:26-40).

In these passages we get early indications of two vital elements that have always been part of the deacon's vocation: it involves a proclamation of the Gospel, but is especially connected to works of

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practical service to the community.

In 1 Timothy 3:8-13 some of the qualities expected in a deacon are outlined.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

Around the year 110 St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote several letters describing what is to be expected in the life of the Christian community, and he regularly refers to the mission of bishop, priest and deacon. In his letter to the Trallians, for example, he writes: "as ministers of the mysteries of Jesus Christ, the deacons should please all in every way they can; for they are not merely ministers of food and drink, but the servants of the Church of God. They must avoid all reproach as they would beware of fire.

"In the same way all should respect the deacons as they would Jesus Christ, just as they respect the bishop as representing the Father, and the priests as the council of God and the college of the apostles. Apart from these there is nothing that can be called a Church" (Ignatius to the Trallians, 2-3).

The ministry of the deacons developed within the early Church, in the context of a very rich variety of ministries among the people of God.

LITURGICAL ROLE

They had a liturgical role, but were especially engaged in works of service to the marginalized, and that is a key to their present role. After several centuries, however, the order of the diaconate came to be seen mainly as a stage on the way to the priesthood, since priests were often chosen from among the deacons, just as bishops are chosen from among the priests.

There is a logic to that, and there will always be deacons who are preparing to be priests, but the order of the diaconate has a value of its own, not just as a preparation for something else. A deacon is not a priest who cannot celebrate Mass and absolve, any more than a priest is a bishop who cannot ordain: a deacon is a deacon.

In 1964, the Second Vatican Council decided to revive the permanent diaconate. After describing the ministry of bishops, and of priests, the council states: "at a lower level of the hierarchy are to be found deacons, who receive the imposition of hands 'not for the priesthood but for the ministry.' For, strengthened by sacramental grace, they are dedicated to the people of God, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate, in the service of the liturgy, of the word and of charity.

"It is a deacon's task, as authorized by the competent authority, to administer Baptism solemnly, to reserve and distribute the Eucharist, to assist at and to bless marriages in the name of the Church, to take Viaticum to the dying, to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over worship and the Prayer of the Faithful, to administer sacramentals, and to officiate at funeral and burial services. Dedicated to works of charity and functions of administration, deacons should recall the admonition of St. Polycarp: 'Let them be merciful, and zealous, and let them walk according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all'" (Vatican II, Lumen Gentium, 29).