

*Corrections made
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Sr Claire Griffin, pictured at the Brigidine Ministry Centre, Albert Park, Victoria.

Deacons have a prophetic role

Deacon Nick Kerr speaks to Sr Claire Griffin

DEACONS, as leaders in Christian communities, have a prophetic role in the life of the church, according to Sr Claire Griffin. Sr Claire has spent many years in education and parish ministry and is now a member of the Brigidine Sisters Congregational Leadership Team. She will speak on the final day of the NAD conference.

“The first days of the conference will raise for the deacons and their wives a number of key issues for any of us who call ourselves Christian today and who want to be committed to living justly and inviting others to live justly,” she said. “You deacons are in leadership roles in the church. It’s up to each individual deacon and each deacon’s wife to make a personal response to the challenges of the conference. But there’s more than that. As leaders in faith communities, deacons also have a role to call others to live the Gospel and to live justly.”

Sr Claire said that, during the conference, Fr Frank Brennan SJ and the people who present workshops will raise many justice issues. On the Saturday of the conference deacons and their wives will visit different sites. People will be confronted with real life issues. Examples will be homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, the rights of Indigenous people, the pressures on individuals and families, lack of employment and people caught in patterns of life that are far from healthy.

“So people will come out of those days in touch with many issues, particularly issues that are important for those of us who live in Australia,” Sr Claire said. “But we live in a global world. We can’t focus only on the issues of our own diocese, our own Church, our own country. We’re part of the global world.”

As a woman religious who has worked in parishes, encouraging the role of lay people – and women in particular – is dear to Sr Claire’s heart.

“The Church has a big challenge of acknowledging, celebrating and honouring women in the Church and women in society,” she said. “I fear we may have lost a generation of women. I think a lot of work has to be done, as faith communities, to see that women are engaged, honoured, involved, nurtured, celebrated and empowered and their role as Gospel people is lifted.

“I also have a passion for how we can engage our parishes in justice issues. We spend a lot of time on liturgy, which, of course, we must do, and on schools. That’s all good. But I think it would be a shame if parishes didn’t have ways of calling their community, young and old, into awareness of our world today and how we can take action in response to the justice issues facing our world.

“Pope Francis has made a real call to all of us to be engaged in these issues. He isn’t writing just to the ordained, or to certain nations, or to a certain class. He’s writing to the whole world. He makes that quite clear.

“So many wonderful people are already engaged in all sorts of wonderful work and all sorts of wonderful service. Yet often they can’t find a place in our parish communities. They have a heart for justice. They have a heart for the Gospel. They’re doing what Jesus asks us to do. But somehow we, as faith communities, are missing out on their passion, energy and action.

“Maybe we have to acknowledge that that’s where the laity live their vocation. They’re out there in the rough and tumble of life, in the cut and thrust of industrial action and justice for workers, in housing issues and work for youth, in services to the local community, in solidarity with people who are struggling and with the people who are really vulnerable, in drug and alcohol support, in services for women trapped in prostitution and the layers of abuse that often go with that, in family abuse services, in all these sorts of issues.”

She wondered if some of the people doing wonderful things but missing from our parishes are turned off because of our lack of joy. “Pope Francis told us not to be sourpusses,” she said. “It’s all

about joy.” (The actual quote from *Evangelii Gaudium* is: “One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, ‘sourpusses’,” EG 85).

Sr Claire also spoke about the role of women religious.

“As a woman religious I want to believe there’s a significant role for all of us. Women religious were called by the Second Vatican Council to rediscover the true charism of our founders. Most of our communities have gone through huge change since the Council. The whole Church has. The whole world has. We’re also at a phase where religious communities as we’ve known them are dying out, diminishing at a very rapid rate. Yet the call to be a prophetic voice is there.

“Women religious have a prophetic role, just as the deacon has a prophetic role.

“We’re not to be so enmeshed in the institution of the Church – we’re people of the Church, obviously – but not to be so tied to that that we can’t speak for justice. We can use our resources for justice.”

She gave the example of the Brigidine Ministry Centre at Albert Park, Victoria, which provides accommodation for many groups, including the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project and the Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans. We have resources.

“We also have experience,” she said. “ We are elders in the community. We don’t have new members. We don’t have many younger members. But we have resources of experience, of education, of a supportive community. I think there’s a strong call for us to say, ‘What are you going to do with these resources? What legacy will you leave the world, the Church?’

“We are the elders. I like to think the role of the elders is to bring our wisdom to the service of the community. We’ve all lived a good number of years. We’ve discovered that the Spirit can lead us on all sorts of twists and turns that we never dreamt of, but the Spirit can bring light and life when things seem at the end of what we’d hoped for. It’s the Emmaus story all over again. To be able to hold all sorts of situations, like what’s happening our world today.

“How do we make sense of the violence that’s happening in our world today? How do we live with this stance of our Government and leaders that seems to be so against doing justice for the most vulnerable in our society and in our world? How can we live with the way we shut our doors and say, ‘No more people?’

“Hopefully we’ve gained enough confidence, as well as experience, in the rough and tumble of life to be able to speak up. We can bring our education, our learning, to what’s happening in our world today.

“There’s a group, Grandmothers Against Detention of Refugee Children. That’s just wonderful – older women, grandmotherly age, who can speak out and say, ‘It’s not good for children to be kept in detention’. The government may not be able to talk about what it calls ‘operational matters’. But elders are able to say, ‘Just a minute. We need to talk about this. These are children like our grandchildren.’

“It’s like the environment. We need to talk about the long term effects of what we’re doing to our world. Politicians seem to have short term solutions. I’d hope elders have a long term view, a wider view of life issues.”