

What does a Deacon Do?

While it is not a good thing to start thinking about ministry from the point of view of what someone does, the functions performed, inevitably people want to know what it is that deacons do. It is not a good thing to start with functions because a minister is not the total of all the things they do. Ordained ministry is one of the sacraments of character (like Baptism/Confirmation) and has more to do with being rather doing, that is, who we are and not what we do.

Diaconate is a distinct and permanent ministry, and although for some it is a step on the way to priesthood it is not half way between bishop and priest. Men who are training for priesthood will be ordained as deacons, and after ordination, if they do not proceed to priesthood they would remain deacons. Deacons and priests assist the bishop in his ministry in different ways. Walter Cardinal Kasper describes the deacon and priest as the right and left hand of the bishop indicating that each has a distinct character in the service of the bishop and the local church.

Deacons are not substitutes for priests nor are they substitutes for lay ministers. If there were 1000 men in training for the priesthood in a diocese, we would still be restoring the ministry of deacons. If there were 1000 deacons in a diocese there would still be need for lay people to exercise their lay ministries and most importantly to live and give witness to the gospel. The same Spirit who prompted the restoration of the diaconate prompted that Council to restore some lay ministries and energise the laity for living the mission of the Gospel.

These three introductory points need to be kept in mind when we consider what a deacon does. There will be inevitable overlap between the ministries of priest, deacon and laity because ministry is not always so neatly delineated. So having alerted you to the difficulties of this starting point, let's consider some of the things that deacons may do in our Church.

Threefold aspect

Deacons have three aspects to their ministry; a ministry of the word, a ministry of liturgy and pastoral ministry. The *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* requires that a deacon exercises all three aspects of his ministry and achieves some balance (#40). It also notes that one of the aspects may receive greater emphasis in the particular ministry of individual deacons'.

In this article I will focus on the pastoral ministry of the deacon. According to the *Directory* the prime purpose of the deacon's pastoral ministry is to promote the mission of the whole Church (#37). While only some in the church are called to specific lay or ordained ministries all are called to the one mission of living the gospel. As diaconate is relatively new in the Archdiocese of Brisbane most of the examples are drawn from suggested placements in the *Directory* and the practice of other dioceses.

Diocesan appointments

There are a number of roles in a diocese that a deacon could be assigned to fulfil provided he is suitably qualified. Within the administration of the diocese he could be appointed as chancellor or as a judge, auditor, and assessor in a tribunal or as a promoter of justice and notary (*Directory* #42). Other agencies in the diocese

responsible for pastoral care, parishes, education or health care could be suitable places for appointment.

Deacons can be appointed as chaplains to specific groups or agencies, such as hospitals, universities and ethnic communities or as teachers of theology at university. It may be that a diocese wants to place particular focus on some aspect of its pastoral life such as Catholics who are no longer connected to Eucharistic communities and a deacon could be appointed to coordinate programs across a diocese, such as Catholics Returning Home.

In one diocese deacons were appointed as chaplains to large shopping centres. Shopping centre management agreed to have an ecumenical chaplaincy for workers in the centre, to advertise the availability of chaplains to customers and to establish a prayer room.

In a diocese there are frequently a number of commissions, councils and committees which assist in various ways with the governance and pastoral direction of the local Church. As these bodies are drawn from the whole local Church deacons are also appointed as members (*Directory #41-42*). In some US dioceses deacons are appointed as executive officers to assist in the smooth running of these kinds of bodies.

Parish appointments

All deacons are assigned to a parish where they normally have a ministry of word and liturgy and this parish may also be the place where they exercise their main pastoral ministry but it is not always the case. Once they are appointed they are *ex officio* members of that parish pastoral council and may contribute to the pastoral, liturgical and sacramental life of the community (*Directory #41*).

Within a parish deacons could be assigned a number of different roles, in consultation with the priest and parish team. A deacon might undertake the leadership of the RCIA program or preparation of families for the baptism of their children. One role the *Directory* suggests is in marriage preparation. Most deacons are married and in preparing couples for marriage they may be able to share insights based on their experience of marriage and family (*Directory #33, 37-39*).

Deacons do not have to be assigned to one parish only and they may be assigned to a role in which they work across parish boundaries or at deanery level. For example in one area of the US a deacon, who had experience with adult and tertiary education, was assigned the role of adult faith education coordinator in his deanery.

Church law makes it possible for a bishop to appoint a deacon, as pastoral leader of a parish (*Directory #41*). Such appointments are always regarded as extraordinary, as the priest is the usual pastoral leader of a community. People, who assume that we are ordaining deacons because of the shortage of priests, are sometimes surprised to learn that leading a parish community is not a normal role for a deacon. Only two percent of the world's deacons have the task of leading a parish community.

Future directions

A major study of the diaconate in 2001 by the International Theological Commission and published in 2003 as *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* recognised that Vatican II wanted to restore the principle of the diaconate and not any particular form of it. ITC predicted that the diaconate would continue to develop

and mature as people become more familiar with a ministry which has been absent from the Church for almost 1000 years.

In countries and diocese which have had deacons since the 1960's we have already witnessed an evolution in the pastoral role of deacons. The diaconate presents the local church with an opportunity to think about how pastoral ministry is done which can offer new scope and shape for creative pastoral endeavour.

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