

Explorations in the Pastoral Placements for Deacons 2: Catholic Schools

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In this series of articles we will explore some of the potential for pastoral ministry placement of deacons. The principal source document for these explorations is the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons (Directory).¹ It is intended that the articles will give some concrete shape to the potential of diaconal ministry as a stimulus for reflection to those who are engaged in diaconal ministry, or formators of deacons and those involved in diocesan pastoral planning.

Theological underpinnings

A number of key theological ideas underpin these explorations. The first is that the ministry of deacons is a gift of the Spirit to the Church as noted in the joint declaration accompanying the Directory, '...the Holy Spirit, speaking through the Second Vatican Council has brought about a more complete actualisation of the sacred hierarchy'.² Therefore the ministry of deacons needs to be received by the church with faith and gratitude that Christ continues to make himself present in the Church through his ministers and continues to build up his Church for mission through them.

The second theological underpinning is that through the gift of the diaconate the Holy Spirit has furnished the church with ministers who are able to contribute significantly to the new evangelisation and new missionary endeavours especially in places where Catholic faith and life struggles with indifference and diminishment. The significance of deacons for the new evangelisation is brought out forcefully through the Norms and Directory and the catechesis on diaconal ministry offered by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.³ It is worth considering that the first sentence of the Joint Declaration highlights new evangelisation:

The permanent Diaconate, restored by the Second Vatican Council, in complete continuity with ancient Tradition and the specific decision of the Council of Trent, has flourished in these last decades in many parts of the Church — with promising results, *especially for the urgent missionary work of new evangelisation*.⁴

A third theological underpinning is that the ministry of deacon is always lived within the communion of the sacred ministry of bishop, priest and deacon, and the communion of the Church. As such it is a participation in the one ministry of Christ in his Church.⁵ Priests and deacons are the collaborators of the diocesan bishop in his *diakonia* (ministry) in the local church.⁶ Walter Kasper refers to deacons and presbyters as the right and left hands of the bishop.⁷ Liturgically the deacons' relationship to his bishop is symbolised in two ways. The first is through the rite of ordination in which only the bishop lays hands on the deacon, in

¹ Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*. Strathfield: St Pauls Publications. 1998 see also Congregation for Catholic Education, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*. Strathfield: St Pauls Publications. 1998

² Congregation for Catholic Education and Congregation For the Clergy; Joint Declaration n3, in the Directory and Norms.

³ See especially John Paul II General audience October 6 and 18, 1993.

⁴ Joint Declaration 1. The emphasis is mine.

⁵ International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*. London: Catholic Truth Society. 2003. Pp57-60

⁶ Lumen Gentium 24 and Directory 8 and 23.

⁷ Walter Kasper, *Leadership in the Church: How Traditional Roles Can Help Serve the Christian Community Today*. Veritas: Dublin. 2003

contrast to presbyteral ordination where all the presbyters present also lay hands on the ordinand. The second is the place of the deacon in the liturgy at the bishop's right hand.

Lumen gentium has a partial citation of the document the Constitutions of the Egyptian Church when it notes that the deacon is ordained not to the priesthood (*sacerdos*) but to the ministry (*ministerium*) and although both terms require further elaboration it is the full citation that helps illuminate the meaning of the expression as it concludes with 'for the ministry of the bishop' (*in ministerio episcopi*). If the primary orientation of the presbyter is toward the parish and presiding over the eucharistic assembly in the name of the bishop then the primary orientation of the deacon is toward the diocese and the bishop.

The final theological underpinning which is frequently overlooked or misinterpreted is that the decision to restore the ministry of deacon belongs to each diocesan bishop and not to the pope or a bishop's conference.⁸ The local church responding to real pastoral situations is the place where discernment about the restoration of the ministry needs to be considered and always in relation to pastoral priorities. The ministry of the deacon must always be viewed in the light of the response to the pastoral needs of the People of God in the particular and always with a view to building up the local church for the mission of Christ in which the clergy and laity share and for which they are co-responsible.

Keeping these four theological underpinnings in mind we can commence this particular exploration of pastoral placement for deacons.⁹

Indications from the Directory

The Catholic school as a potential locus for the ministry of deacons is suggested in a number of parts of the Directory (26, 28, 33, 37 and 42) either directly or by implication from the context of that section of Directory. In relation to the ministry of the word and the new evangelisation, the Catholic school as well as Catholic and secular universities, are suggested as potentially fruitful areas of ministry. The Directory suggests that diocesan and parochial pastoral ministries are historically and theologically the prime area for diaconal ministry. Schools and universities would be included among these ministries.

Pastoral and spiritual care of families is frequently mentioned throughout the Directory as a special area of diaconal ministry in part because most deacons are family men and know intimately the joys and struggles the hopes and questions with which families experience daily. Schools provide one of the points of contact with families, especially families that are on the margins of the Church.

It has been well documented in recent years that, in countries like Australia, many of the people who choose to send their children to Catholic schools are not strongly connected to the life of Eucharistic communities, even when they are in a parochial school. The parents may feel some level of connection with the Catholic tradition. They may have been brought up by their parents as Catholics and perhaps been exposed to Catholic schools but they maintain little or no connection to the Catholic Church apart from the schools which their children attend. Their children are not likely to form deeply rooted faith when they only have minimal exposure to Catholicism while at school and little reinforcement in living and growing in faith at home.

Teachers in Catholic schools frequently have little solid grounding in a living and mature Catholic faith. This may be true of teachers of religious education (which is normally all

⁸ See the discussion of the ITC on this point in *From the Diakonia...* Chapter V.

⁹ I have developed some of these theological underpinnings in other papers that readers may wish to consult in the general articles and conference pages of this website.

primary school teachers) as well as teachers of other subjects. Teaching religious education may be experienced as a difficulty for some because they have such a diminished understanding of Catholic faith and life and perhaps very little lived experience of the Catholic tradition outside of the school in which they work.

Some Catholics might bemoan the situation described above suggesting it is a sign of a failed mission. With the eye trained to look through the perspective of new evangelisation the situations described above are pastoral opportunities waiting to be developed. Our concern and our energy for mission should be especially focussed on families, parents and teachers in this situation. Rather than casting the situation as a problem it may be seen to be a pastoral opportunity. Parents entrust their children to the care of the Catholic school and its Catholic mission thirty hours of the week. Even if we look at this in a minimalist way, we are only seeking to connect them with one further hour; at the Sunday Mass.

The choice of the teachers to work in a Catholic school and that of the parents to send their children there represents, even if it is only minimal, a positive choice for Catholicism. State schools provide an excellent education and high levels of pastoral care and parents could choose these for their children but something about the Catholic school attracts them. Catholic schools today are putting a great deal of effort into staff formation and reflection on the quality of their Catholic identity to clearly indicate that Catholicism is not a mere addition to school education, and parents still choose Catholic schools. They clearly want something that Catholicism has.

We can see why the Directory regards Catholic schools and pastoral care of families as such a high priority for diaconal ministry. Clearly it is a pastoral opportunity needing creative and imaginative ways to evangelise and develop the mission.

Developing Creative Partnerships

An ideal pastoral placement for a deacon is as school chaplain. The role needs some creative re-working from previous models which focus on school liturgy, retreats and broadly defined pastoral support of children and teenagers. These things are still important but looking at the picture above the deacon could have a more expansive role.

The deacon in a school chaplaincy role needs to have a brief which includes the pastoral and spiritual care of pupils, teachers and parents. He needs also to develop creative partnerships with local parish communities and in secondary schools with local and diocesan youth ministry services so that he can help connect families and young people with the parish and the broader Catholic life of the community. In secondary schools the deacon would need to connect with the parishes from which the majority of students are drawn and this could mean getting to know a dozen parish communities.

Parish-school-deacon partnership would involve the deacon in harnessing the gifts of lay leaders, parish clergy and resources within the school to create multiple opportunities for connection between families on the margins of the Church and families in regular parish life and worship. As an ordained minister he is able to bring the presence of the Church and the pastoral concern of the bishop, more closely into the lives of those staff and families who participate only at the minimal level of being present in the Catholic school system. He would be a bridge builder helping families to make deeper and lasting contact within parish life.

Appointment of deacons to school chaplaincy roles is a sign of the priority that the local church places on providing pastoral and spiritual care to families on the margins of Church. John Paul II emphasised in *Familiaris Consortio* that families like these ones should be a

pastoral priority in every diocese.¹⁰ The deacon can be pastor to them and bring them closer to the local parish and diocese. Our Church continues to expend time, money and energy on chaplaincy in hospitals, prisons and to sea farers, because we know how valuable it is to have the presence of ordained ministers in these situations of vulnerability or marginalisation. We need to harness a similar concern and missionary zeal for the pastoral opportunity provided in Catholic schools.

Within school communities

A deacon could have a ministry within the school community with a focus on pastoral and spiritual care of those in the community. Among the staff he could offer pastoral support and spiritual guidance. He could be there for the staff in times of joy such as blessing expectant mothers and parents to be as well as blessings for birthdays and other occasions. He could assist staff through times of grief and loss in helping to organise prayer times, to provide spiritual counsel and other support. He could be a resource person for the staff helping to locate theological resources. He could provide training in liturgy preparation. He could shed lights on difficult or contentions religious and social issues or provide background briefings for teachers on units of work in RE or Catholic Social Doctrine for economics, geography and social science teachers, or about science and religion and many other areas to help equip the teachers for their role.

Among the pupils he could be a friendly presence of the Church's ministers and sometimes lead prayer times for important occasions like the start of term and graduations. He could help to resource teachers and pupils in the art of liturgy preparation and class prayer. He might introduce staff and pupils to the treasury of spiritual practices and traditions handed down in the Catholic tradition.

In this creative partnership he would have a role in the pastoral and spiritual care of families with the assistance of the local parish community where the family live. Choosing a Catholic school has within it signs of a positive choice for Catholicism and the deacon could build upon these positive values to lead the family deeper into the life of the Catholic Church. When families experience loss and bereavement the deacon can be their as pastor to them, and he can accompany them through the process of preparing a Catholic funeral with their local parish community. In this case he would work alongside of the parish and family relationship and attempted to connect this school family with parish families who can help them during this time.

Working with school staff and parish the deacon might be able to assist in the development of programs for adult faith formation for parents in the school. The local parish may have lent discussion groups or RCIA or be having a parish mission and the deacon working in partnership with the school and parish might find creative ways to engage school families. He might for example coordinate a lent discussion group in the school, with participants from the local parish as well. This group might meet at 2pm and finish by 3pm in time for the end of the school day. The parents who join in this program might not be the kind of people who would know about let alone join a parish group in the evening but the convenience of the school program might attract a few. Having a mixed school parents and parishioners group might foster deeper connections between the families and the parish.

Among Parish Communities

Already in the section above we have seen how creative partnerships can continue to lay down bridges of connection between the school-families-parish. So the creative reshaping of the chaplaincy role can be seen to respond to the new evangelisation by bringing the gospel

¹⁰ *Familiaris Consortio* n65, 75

to where the people are and meeting them there. If they are in our schools but not in the parish, meet them in the school where we know some positive value has drawn them to Catholicism.

Deacons in the new chaplaincy roles could work in close collaboration with the local parish when it develops its own pastoral plans. Pastoral planning is not about only responding to needs for pastoral assistance when these arrive, such as in the case of a death in the family, but to look creatively at what the parish is doing or could do to reach out to families on the margin. The deacon can present to the parish some useful information about the pastoral opportunity and scope for the new evangelisation that exists within the school community.

To illustrate this outreach model of planning we could consider sacramental preparation programs. Most parishes simply advertise through the parish and school news letters that a new sacraments program is to commence and call for enrolments. Generally the preparation sessions are conducted by volunteer catechists leading sessions over a few weeks in isolation from the rest of the community. Initiation in the Catholic Church is really an apprenticeship only part of which involves 'classes' or 'instruction' the majority of the formation of Catholic apprentices happens through immersion in the life of the Catholic Church. An outreach sacramental program might run for a year before the celebration of the rites and it may involve parents already connected to parish life mentoring other families through Sunday Mass attendance, invitations to parish social activities, accompanying them on a St Vincent de Paul home visitation or work in a soup kitchen and attending an adult faith formation event. The deacon might help form and guide the volunteer mentors through the process in connection with parish families.

There is much that a deacon might do among parish communities to foster deeper connection between staffs and families in Catholic schools and the Catholic parish. The potential depends to a great extent on the gifts of the deacon and the openness of parishes and school administrators to embrace a mission rather than maintenance model of Church and to see creative ways of engaging in new evangelisation.

Adequate formation

One of the factors that may limit the capacity of local bishop to utilise deacons in a variety of diocesan roles is the formation that deacons have received. Formation and appointment are deeply interrelated and formation programs themselves may create a "Catch 22" situation. If the formation was inadequate or deficient in some aspects there may be many things a deacon is not prepared for in ministry and so he remains under utilised. If he is under utilised or unable to perform some ministries because of his formation priests and others may consider this reflects on the deacon personally and the diaconate in general. If his formation had not been deficient he would have possessed greater pastoral capacity. The bishop would then be able to confidently appoint him to a variety of diocesan ministries. The circularity and necessary frustration that could flow from this situation should be apparent.

Ultimately it is the diocesan bishop who is responsible for the formation program. Normally he will delegate the process of selection and formation to a Director of Deacon Formation and a team which supports the Director. The *Ratio fundamentalis* issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) provides an outline of what formation is required for deacons. In short the formation of deacons parallels that of priests in terms of the four strands of formation: human, pastoral, spiritual and intellectual/theological. Deacon formation is not a mirror copy of presbyteral formation but it should be similar especially in terms of theological formation. The pastoral formation is aimed not at parochial leadership and presiding at Eucharist but to the ministry of word, liturgy and pastoral service primarily within a diocesan scope or for particular communities within a parish or diocese.

The *ratio fundamentalis* for presbyteral and diaconal formation indicate that formation is also self formation. Deacons need to take responsibility to see that they are adequately formed for ministry and continue their formation after ordination. Commitment to excellence in all aspects of formation will only enhance the confidence that a local bishop will have in his deacons and also the confidence of his co-workers in the Gospel, the priests. The laity has a right to have sacred ministers to pastor them but that right includes properly formed ministers, whether they be deacons or presbyters. A bishop is more likely to be persuaded he cannot afford to be without deacons when he is confident of their formation.

Can I afford this?

Deacons as clergy incardinated into a particular diocese are due the remuneration which is fitting for their own support and that of their families.¹¹ As clergy of the local church they are not employees in the sense that a lay person working in a diocesan agency may be considered an employee and in fact anything which might create an impression that they are regarded as employees of the diocese is to be avoided.¹² Given these two facts a bishop might be tempted to ask, "Can I afford this?" The answer has two parts. The first part concerns the practical aspects- yes you can afford it if you can afford to provide clergy remuneration for priests.¹³ Remuneration can be paid through the common clergy fund in the normal way or through the budget of an agency in which the deacon (priest) ministers.¹⁴ As a cleric he can be paid in cash and non-reportable fringe benefits at less cost than a lay person thereby saving money in the agency budget.

The practical part is made a little easier for a diocese when it comes to clergy remuneration. Australian taxation law allows churches to provide for clergy remuneration relatively cheaply. Priest clergy in most dioceses receive a cash stipend, a fully maintained motor vehicle brought at a fleet price significantly lower than retail, a house, all utilities paid for, a living allowance, study and other allowance, health insurance and other benefits. The cash component is normally too low to be taxed or else taxed at the lowest rate and all else is a non-reportable fringe benefit. Taken together it is a very healthy income which could, with a few adjustments support a deacon and his family. A similar package, with perhaps slightly more cash, could easily be provided to deacons as cheaply as it is to provide this for priests. Most dioceses already pay priests in special ministries, such as full time hospital and prison chaplaincies in this way. Presumably dioceses that have married priests have already had to prepare for this situation.

The second part of the answer is more important. How can we not afford to do this is by far the most significant answer to the question. The International Theological Commission noted that diaconate offers a new way for the Church to think about the ordained ministry outside of the dominant model of the *sacerdos* (priest) and parochial models of ministry.¹⁵ As a Church we urgently need to respond to the challenges of the new evangelisation and go out with fresh proposals and renewed energy to respond creatively to our present situation. In particular the presence of deacons in many of the ministries above provide the presence of

¹¹ CIC 281 §§1,3 and Directory 16

¹² Council for Interpretation of Legislative Texts folio N. 7194/2000 and Directory 11 'Associations too which, under the guise of representation, organize deacons into a form of *trade(s) unions or pressure groups*, thus reducing the sacred ministry to a secular profession or trade, are completely irreconcilable with the clerical state.'

¹³ Not all dioceses can afford to provide for their priests so the 'if' is real. But if a diocese can provide for its priests it can and must provide for its deacons, if they are dedicated exclusively to ecclesiastical ministry.

¹⁴ Council for Interpretation of Legislative Texts folio N. 7194/2000

¹⁵ ITC, *From the Diaconia of Christ to the Diaconia of the Apostles*, Part V.

the sacred ministry while at the same time freeing up priests from these tasks allowing them to focus on parochial ministry.

We need to ponder the second answer and prayerfully open ourselves up to the creative energies of the Holy Spirit and then the practical element will follow. John Paul II regarded the temptation to jump ahead to the practical as a weakness in pastoral planning and something which would see plans end in dissipation. What is required is renewed contemplation of the face of Christ and deepening of a spirituality and theology of communion if we are to be faithful to God's plan and to respond to the world's deepest longings.¹⁶

Conclusion

This exploration into the potential for the pastoral placement of deacons has considered the Catholic school. The school remains a vast field of pastoral potential and opportunity waiting to be developed. Deacons can make a significant contribution to the presence of Christ, through his ordained ministers, in the midst of his people. Their presence can give witness to the spiritual closeness and concern the local Church has for them. Appointment of deacons would be an indicator of the pastoral priorities of the diocese.

The success of a pastoral placement like this depends to some extent on school, parish and diocesan administrators embracing a mission oriented approach to pastoral life and sharing a common vision for outreach. Partnership in good faith and openness to new paths for evangelisation between school and parish for the good of the mission of the Church, which is Christ's mission, is required of all.

Ultimately the success of the mission is not dependent on our own efforts and plans. It is the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, and distributor of new energy, who can bring about in us the new dreams and visions that bring what Christ has begun in us to its proper fulfilment.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* n43.