

## Three contexts of ministry

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The permanent ministry of deacons is new in the living memory of the Church, having only been restored at Vatican II. It is easy for us to imagine that the origin of the ministry itself is a product of Vatican II but this is not so. The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Deacons (Directory) allows us to place the origins of diaconate in a broader context.

The Directory says; “The origin of the diaconate is the consecration and mission of Christ, in which the deacon is called to share.” As with all sacred ministries the work of the ministry is that of Christ. We have seen previously that Christ willed that the sacred ministry, begun through the apostles, would continue in the Church. Deacons participate in that apostolic ministry.

A deacon participates in the apostolic ministry along with other clergy. The Directory indicates that; “Through the imposition of hands and the prayer of consecration, he is constituted a sacred minister and a member of the hierarchy. This condition determines his theological and juridical status in the Church.” He is no longer a lay person but a member of the clergy dedicated to building up the community of Christ’s Body, the Church.

He accepts with his ordination new obligations as a member of the Church consecrated to the apostolic ministry. Some of these obligations go beyond those accepted by all the baptised. The obligations include daily recitation of the Liturgy of Hours, availability and obedience to the bishop to accept appointments, to celebrate the sacraments according to the approved texts, to preach the Gospel in a variety of contexts. His main obligation is to ensure the building up of the Church for mission and evangelisation.

As with priests and bishops, the ministry of the deacon has three contexts. These are the ministry of the word, pastoral ministry and the liturgical/sacramental ministry. The Directory states; “The three contexts of the diaconal ministry, depending on circumstances, may absorb, to varying degrees, a large proportion of every deacon's activity.” One deacon may find one of these contexts has a greater part than others in his particular ministerial appointment.

Ministry of the word includes proclamation of the Gospel and the general intercessions in the liturgy as well as preaching. Sometimes he will preach at Mass, with the permission of the presider. He will preach when he administers baptism, celebrates a wedding, and presides at funerals and other occasions. Catechetics and theological education are other forms of this ministry.

A deacon who is appointed to provide formation of catechists and RCIA teams may find that the ministry of the word becomes the dominant aspect of his ministry. Pastoral and liturgical ministry may have a less prominent role in his ministry.

Liturgical and sacramental ministry includes, presiding at baptism, weddings and funerals as well as assisting at Mass as a deacon. From time to time he might be asked to bless people, homes and other things as set out in the Book of Blessings. He may lead adoration and benediction services and public celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours. As most deacons are not pastoral leaders of a parish community, the liturgical and sacramental dimension will often not be as prominent in their ministry as we would expect from priests.

The pastoral scope of diaconal ministry is almost unlimited. It depends on the imagination, creativity and courage of the local Church and the capacities and gifts of the deacon. For example, a deacon

may be appointed a chaplain in a school, university, hospital or prison. There are chaplains within industry, the police and military services. He may have special care for particular groups in need such as refugees or homeless people. He may have a ministry of care for people with mental illness or disability and so on. He may focus on pre-marriage preparation or formation of RCIA teams. He may minister within a diocesan agency. There is a lot of scope for pastoral ministry indicated in the Directory.

“Together, however,” the three contexts of ministry “represent a unity in service at the level of divine Revelation: the ministry of the word leads to ministry at the altar, which in turn prompts the transformation of life by the liturgy, resulting in charity.” The directory, drawing on the *Directory for Priests*, indicates that even if one context has prominence in the ministry of a particular deacon; as with a priest, they are unified within the one ministry of Christ.

The Directory suggests that; “If we consider the deep spiritual nature of [the ministry of deacons], then we shall better appreciate the inter-relationship between the three areas of ministry traditionally associated with the diaconate, that is, the ministry of the word, the ministry of the altar and the ministry of charity. Depending on the circumstances, one or other of these may take on special importance in the individual work of a deacon, but these three ministries are inseparably joined in God's plan for redemption”.

We see that not only the origins of the diaconate but also the ends to which it is to attain are deeply rooted in the saving mission of the Church. That mission is none other than the mission entrusted by the Father to the Son. The sacred ministry of deacons, priests and bishops, has a context in the saving action of God and in the enactment of the mission of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Sacred ministry is not a job some people in the Church do it is a participation or communion in the mystery of Jesus and his mission.

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