

25 Years Of the Permanent Diaconate

Deacon Paul Gee

Deacon Paul Gee was in one of that first groups ordained as Deacons. Following are his reflections on 25 years service as a Deacon.

For me, my ordination as a deacon was a dream fulfilled. Looking back now over the past 25 years much has happened, with many people having not only touched my life, but left an indelible mark. My early desire to give my life to God in the priesthood had never left me, even though I could not imagine my life without my soul mate, my confidante and music companion Elsa, who has stood by me and helped me live my dream.

When I joined the church as financial administrator in 1980, at my request Bishop McKeon included in my contract a promise to do all he could to work towards my ordination to the diaconate. This became a reality in the beautiful old Bunbury St. Patrick's Cathedral, on the 8th February 1984, when Bishop Peter Quinn ordained me and Frank Nieman before a capacity crowd of family, friends and parishioners in a very beautiful and meaningful ceremony.

In the next few weeks following, Denis Conlan and Duncan Cameron (Albany) Mick Flynn (Kojonup) and Reg Pardoe (Mandurah) were also ordained Deacons. Mick Flynn eventually moved to Bunbury; Frank Nieman to Mandurah and Duncan retired early. Of the initial six, Denis, Frank and I are still working on a reduced scale, as Deacons. Throughout our training, the lecturers insisted that we were not to be considered as "mini priests". We had a separate ministry, part of which was to support our Bishop and Priests of the diocese.

Chancellor

My appointment as diocesan Chancellor, a position I occupied for over 23 years, occurred soon after my ordination, the workload of which tied in very favourably with my work as a Deacon. Frequently, my public role at Masses was that of Deacon of the Book, or Deacon of the Altar or as officiating minister at baptisms, funerals or weddings. The permanent Diaconate was so new in our Diocese, it took a long time for parishioners to get used to seeing Deacons so involved in the liturgy and the Sacramental life of the Church.

Chancery Office C.D.F

Here I must diverge and share some of my life in the Chancery office, where the staff became not only employees but firm friends. Having spent 25 years in the banking industry and experienced at first hand as a bank manager the ups and downs, joys and traumas of customers, my dream was to do my best, as a strong Catholic to gradually introduce Christian concepts and even a kind of spirituality into the normal commercialism of banking. The first step was to form a church bank and with the help of John Walsh at the Perth Archdiocese Office, the Catholic Development Fund was established (CDF). This began in 1981 with the blessing of Bishop McKeon and the priests of the Diocese. I remember the look on the Bishop's face when he handed me his cheque for \$500 and said that this was all he could afford due to the parlous state of the Diocese's finances.

With the firm support and prayers of the Bishop and priests and staff I set a very ambitious growth pattern in deposits of \$1 million per annum. That was in 1981, with a staff of three. When I retired from the Chancery in 2002 with a staff of ten, the CDF had attracted deposits in excess of \$30 million. I felt satisfied that the path towards linking Christian concepts with commercial banking had begun. One notable highlight of my life as a Deacon, was to attend the annual meeting of the CDF managers throughout Australia. Each meeting would be attended by the Bishop of that Diocese, who would lead us in a special Mass usually in the

Cathedral. My great delight as the only deacon and CDF manager in Australia, was to attend the Bishop in this special ministerial role. The managers of the various CDF's were on the whole highly educated and experienced laymen, who loved the church and their faith. Their expertise in financial matters was exceptional and I benefited greatly from their advice and help.

Preaching

Being ordained meant being available to proclaim the Gospel at Mass and to preach. Bishop Quinn was the most effortless preacher I have ever listened to and he contended that if you could not get your message over in seven minutes it would be best to just sit down! Accordingly I usually restricted my homilies even now, to less than ten minutes. My wife Elsa, is my most reliable critic, and her commonsense is invaluable. When I do preach, her non verbals like "open your mouth" or "talk louder" bring a smile when she catches my eye.

Family

Family plays a vital part in my life and being a Deacon has only enhanced this. Officiating at the weddings of our children was not only a privilege, but something I will never forget. At my second son's wedding reception when the time came for my speech, I unfolded a worn and yellowed letter, sent to me by my own father on the day of my marriage to Elsa so many years before. The letter read, *"Dear Paul family is the beginning of life and life is incomplete without faith in God. As you start your life together remember the importance of your faith. Please pray for your mother and I. Affectionately yours, Dad"* The passing on of the faith was as essential for my own parents, as it is for me now. I was blessed to be able to remind our children of this and to stress the importance and relevance of the Faith in daily life. Baptism is the first sacrament and I was able also to baptize all of our grandchildren, with the exception of one born in Canberra. We are blessed with thirteen grandchildren. Recently another of my dreams became a reality when I was asked by my eldest grandson Scott to officiate at his marriage to Melissa.

Study

Another dream that I had hoped to achieve, was to undertake a study course in order to learn more about the Church, about God and faith, which really was central to my life. Accordingly, with Bishop Quinn's blessing and financial help, I undertook a Bachelor of Arts degree in Theology, at Notre Dame University. My study was mainly by correspondence and covered a long period of seven years. Though not considered by myself as academic quality, I relished the study and this resulted in what was for me exceptional pass marks in all 24 subjects. Spiritual writers say that although the study about God is good, to know God in the biblical sense is far more important. Looking back, I can say that my studies opened the door to a greater depth in my knowledge of God and the Church and made me realize more fully that the movement towards God is a lifelong journey and every day a step forward in that journey.

Bishops & Priests

My life as a Deacon would not be complete without some reference to those who have touched my life, particularly the Bishops and priests of the Bunbury Diocese. Some have gone to their reward and some are still with us.

RCIA

Involvement in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has always been a joint effort. It has been a part of my life as a Deacon for nearly 20 years. This year we had 13 people who became Catholics last Easter. The process takes about 20 weeks and is scripture based, but equally important the idea of community is talked about and practiced.

Today (2009)

They say that a priest never really retires. I might say the same for Deacons. I retired from the Chancery in 2002, and since then my involvement in the liturgy and church life generally has not abated.

Playing the music at Mass, the weekly RCIA meetings, the occasional baptism, marriage and funeral and being able to preach at Mass coupled with love of the church stay central in my life, despite the many changes. Changes always occur, but the basics of our Faith remain the same.

Finally

My 25 years as a Deacon would not be complete without reference and thanks to the good Lord, who instilled the desire of a vocation in the very beginning. Even my banking days, where I served in many parishes of the Bunbury Diocese, was a preparation for my life as a Deacon. In thanking the Lord and all those who have helped me, I can only look forward to a continuation of love and service.