

Called to Serve

Every *Vocations Sunday* at the *Prayers of the Faithful* during the celebration of Mass in various parishes there are prayers for people to be called to serve as priests and religious. Wait a minute! What about the call to serve as a deacon?

Diaconate

The diaconate is one of the most ancient ministries of the Church, the apostles having elected and ordained the first seven (Acts 6:1-6). Sadly it seemed to disappear as a permanent ministry and became seen as a step along the way to ordination. as a priest however at the Second Vatican Council it was restored as a permanent ministry and throughout the world the number of men who have answered the call to serve as Permanent Deacons has risen every year and today there are around thirty-five thousand throughout the world. In Scotland, there are now over forty deacons serving in all the dioceses and there are more than thirty in the formation programme.

Service is the hallmark of the diaconal ministry as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church clearly emphasises: “Deacons ... receive the imposition of hands *‘not unto the Priesthood but unto ministry’*. For strengthened by sacramental grace they are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the Bishop and his body of priests, in the service of the liturgy, of the gospel, and of works of charity”. This is a life-long commitment and he will usually serve in the one diocese all his life. At ordination he is presented with the Book of Gospels by the Bishop who says “*Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are: Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you*

teach". This is central to the ministry of the deacon as he will proclaim, teach and aspire to live God's Word.

Permanent deacons, who can be married or celibate but cannot marry after ordination, are associated with the *Ministry of Service* which entails Word, Altar and Charity. In relation to *Ministry of the Word* this entails the visible-aspect of Proclaiming the Gospel, Preaching, articulating the Church's needs through the Prayers of the Faithful, Catechesis, RCIA, facilitating retreats etc. In their everyday lives they can spread the gospel in their contact with people in the work-place and community. In respect to the *Ministry of the Altar*, they prepare the Altar, distribute Communion primarily through the Chalice, they may baptise, witness marriages, bring Viaticum to the Dying, and preside at the non-Eucharistic parts of the Funeral Rites. He may also preside at Prayer Services and Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. In relation to the *Ministry of Charity*, the deacon can be involved in Chaplaincy in Hospitals, Prisons and Schools, minister to those who are sick, are affected by addiction, are treated unfairly, struggling with issues etc.

Collaborative

People have said that there is not really a need for deacons since lay people have been encouraged to use their gifts fully within the Church as can be the case when they have to administer a parish, conduct prayer services, and in extraordinary circumstances baptise a child or assist when people are being married. The sacramental Grace that a deacon receives at Ordination through the visible sign of the imposition of hands enables one to carry out the ministry of service with special-effectiveness. The service of the deacon is the Church's service sacramentalised which is a means of enabling all to use their talents that God has given them. Through ordination a deacon is configured to Christ in his servant role

and is a living sign of the servanthood of his Church. Jesus himself said that *he came not to be served but to serve* (Mk10:45) and this is illustrated in *His washing the disciples feet* (Jn 13:3-7). Here, it is clear that the ministry of service is Christ-centred.



If we pay too much attention to the functional role of the diaconate then we will fail to understand its real significance. A deacon is an ordained minister as he receives the sacrament of Holy Orders therefore is no longer a member of the laity. Equally, a deacon is not a substitute-priest therefore no matter how many priests there are in a diocese deacons should still be present and their ministry utilised. Collaborative ministry among the People of God is the way forward.

Vocation

If one feels called to be a deacon then after praying about it and, if married, having discussed it with his wife, he should approach his parish-priest or diocesan diaconate-director. If he applies and is accepted he will participate in a year's discernment-programme which is co-ordinated nationally. From here, if accepted, he will then undertake the four-year academic and pastoral national-programme. This, it must be said, entails a lot of study and one has to ensure that they can balance their lives in order to do so. If involved in your parish community sometimes you have to step back in order to focus on your course

During the course you will receive support from the national formation team and your diocesan director as well as from your spiritual director. It is evident that although it may be the candidate who is following the path to ordination, if married you cannot do so without the love of your wife and children as it does affect your life-pattern especially if working full-time.

However, the effort will be worth it as you will receive the sacramental grace of ordination which will be continuous as you carry out your diaconal ministry of service:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Mt 25:35-36).

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