

The Nottingham Diaconate

Issues and Ruminations

It's a simple historical fact that our diaconate is a field whose gate is kept by the priests of the Diocese; no deacon has ever been ordained without the active support of his Parish Priest. It's a cause for gratitude that we have so many parish priests who positively support the diaconate. In my view they are doing something of great significance, and providing a seedbed in the Western Church, where the lineaments of a new form of ordained service can wisely be developed. It's been perceived from the beginning that the restored diaconate can't be modelled on its previous forms in the mediaeval Church; and this knowledge has surrounded the restored order and its ministry with a good deal of space, where we await the Holy Spirit to guide and fill out its new patterns. I for one am grateful for this space.

Not all priests or even bishops, however, are sure of the diaconate, and some profoundly negative responses have appeared. I think it's important that we should examine these negative attitudes, to see if they embody genuine warnings and counsels, which ought to be heard and embodied in our constitutions and policies.

I take it as agreed in what follows

- that ordained ministry is an essential feature of Catholic religion;
- that ordained ministry has been, and is once more, a tripartite reality; and
- that this restoration of the third ministry is a decision taken at the highest level, which is not open to negotiation.

So whether the diaconate appeals to a particular priest or bishop is an issue for him, but not for the Church at large. Still, not everyone is persuaded of these three points.

I've found that negative opinions expressed about the diaconate come under a few broad headings. I've also sensed that there are unspoken (perhaps unspeakable!) negative feelings about it which have to be conjectured, and which are just as significant. Here are some of the most common speakables:

- "Deacons are expensive luxuries, because they can do nothing that a good lay minister can't do already."
- "Deacons spoil good laymen by making them into clergy, and they become a danger to shipping for other lay people."
- "The diaconate excludes, and therefore disparages, women."
- "Deacons don't have the training priests have, and therefore they cannot be entrusted with the sensitive work priests do."

The unspeakable responses involve things like power, and self-respect, and may include

- the fear that deacons might become loose cannon on the parish decks, behave badly, abuse their position, and begin to create faction, discord and disunity. This fear especially afflicts priests who have long been in lonely eminence in the Sanctuary, and have grown a little monarchical in their approach. It also afflicts bishops, when they reflect that the policy of moving priests away from sensitive areas and scenes of pastoral disaster cannot be used on deacons who may similarly transgress.

- the thought that a deacon may improperly preside in the parish, having been there before the priest arrived, and continuing to be there after he has left. This is particularly relevant to some very patriarchal deacons who have fingers in many pies
- the fear that deacons might actually preach, or instruct, or pastorally care for people *better than the priest*. This is a particularly unspeakable response, but it deserves an airing; celibate priests can sometimes drift rather a long way from the realities of family life, and a less rarefied approach can sometimes come as a great relief to parishioners. This sounds pathetically petty and irreligious, but sometimes we priests are those things as well.
- Canonical Jealousy. A grumpy old canon, interviewing a young married father of four at a diaconal selection meeting, said: *You'll have it all then, won't you? Marriage, and kids, and Holy Orders, and the lot!*

There's no answer to that!

Some of the above is simply confessional matter. Some of it demands a serious response drawn from theology and ecclesiology and sound practical consideration. For instance, the belief that the diaconate is a malign programme for wrenching control of the church out of the hands of lay people and clapping it safely back into hierarchical hands is particularly out of touch with the truth (not to say slanderous!). I believe that a positive presentation of the actual experience of having deacons at work in a parish should suffice to lay most of these apprehensions to rest. There are certainly questions that need, and deserve, to be answered.

1 Are ordained ministers a good idea?

Let's not simply assume a positive answer. If they are a good idea, why are fewer and fewer applying to be one? It's become clear that one of the most cogent reasons why young people are no longer offering themselves for the priesthood in our country is that the life of a priest no longer seems acceptable to them - or to their parents. It's commonplace for honest mothers and fathers to confide that they would discourage the idea if it arose; and that, surely, is a fairly clear sign that it isn't likely to enter the frame for their children.

Some of the debate about deacons might suggest that ordination is itself a bad idea, and that the Church is at its very best when ordained people are out of the picture. *The Tablet* regularly prints articles celebrating the survival and success of parishes that have lost their resident priest, describing the excellence of sacramental preparation, community administration, and pastoral ministry in the hands of religious sisters and other lay people: the counselling of the bereaved is particularly mentioned as an area of great success.

The fact that some priest pays a visit to these communities from time to time "to do the liturgy" is taken for granted, but not dwelt upon: and the impact *on him* of his etiolated contact with a parish for which he is still presumably responsible I have never seen described. The assuring of an organic relationship between the pastoral care of the parish and the liturgy isn't described either. It is as if the priesthood has been reduced to a visiting cultic necessity, whilst the Christian life of the parishioners is otherwise autonomous.

I stress this particular question because of the speed with which I think life is about to change in the Catholic communities of Britain. The Diocese of Middlesbrough had 120 priests ten years ago; it now has 65 in active ministry, and in twenty years' time expects to have 25: that is a helter-skelter progress from 120 to 25 in three decades. Nottingham priests who are now coming to terms with the running of a second, usually small, parish next door may need to scale up their thinking. We may, sooner than we think, be contemplating the ministry to four or five parishes for each priest. Middlesbrough has projected the scenario of having no priests at all by 2050; one assumes that vocations to the Episcopate will not have similarly run into the sand, but where does our adjacent Diocese expect ordained ministry to come from in East

and North Yorkshire? If these analyses are realistic, one thing is certain: the close relationship between a priest and his single “home” parish will be a thing of the past. So will the reasonably cosy relationship between parishioners and their priest.¹

We mustn't become blinded to the enormous significance of the priesthood for the Catholic Church in England. We've got used to seeing the clergy criticised for all sorts of wrong ideas, misdirected policies, and personal derelictions. But these are cogent and important precisely because the priests have been so comprehensively loaded with the task of giving meaning to the local church. Some priests have risen impressively to the challenge. For what has been a quite modest outlay small communities of people have acquired the services of a fairly competent administrator, a leader of daily liturgy, a chairman of proceedings of all sorts, a pastoral carer and duty welfare officer, a front-of-house meeter and greeter for the Catholic Church, a theologian of whatever degree, a counsellor, a celebrant of the rites of passage, a printer, a bookkeeper, a safe pair of hands in the School Governors, a reconciler and healer of family quarrels, a source of balanced and experienced spiritual care at moments of bereavement and funeral. It has been wrong to concentrate so much into the hands of priests, and the redressing of this wrongness is a process long overdue. But ordained ministry has always been of huge significance, whatever the level of people's relationship to the Church. In our time it is under threat. The people don't want to be priests. Do they want priests?

This relationship with clergy is far from a universal pattern in the worldwide Catholic communion. One reads of churches in the developing world where faithful Catholics receive Communion from a priest only two or three times a year. Effectively they are already living in a different sacramental economy from us. Nor has it been like this throughout history. People - not just historians - know that, despite our modern piety towards the Papacy, and the institutional Church expressed in the Vatican, Rome may once have had a profoundly free attitude to church structures - so that early Christian Rome, for instance, may have had many autonomous house-based churches, each with its own “episcopal” structure². Furthermore, the tripartite shape of ordained ministry was not tidily fully-formed in the early Church: the Petrine ministry, as we see it today, being a very late development indeed. (We must never assume, of course, that a *late* development is a *wrong* development: a maxim which might liberate the thinking of those who assert the unchangeable nature of the arrangements we see today. The question “Has the Church been wrong for two thousand years?” is meant to be a rhetorical question. But it implies a monolithic, dead church structure that cannot adapt or change. The dinosaurs could teach us about what lies ahead, if that is the case.)

It's possible to be immensely positive towards the field of lay people's ministry and their responsibility for their parishes, without conceding that the rôle of ordained ministry is a thing of the past. The heart of the community is always the Eucharist - the celebration of the Mass. The idea that the relationship with the priest who celebrates the Eucharist can be practically dispensed-with, or reduced to something incidental and formalistic, seems to me to be profoundly wrong. Our fear of clericalism mustn't destroy the very relationships that found the Church as a unity, and keep it close to Christ in all his members.

¹ This may suggest a further debate, which has hardly broken the surface in my experience, about whether our Church might be evolving away from the hierarchic model altogether, and becoming a totally lay organisation, effectively abolishing its present authority-structures. The lay people in a particular place - Europe, for instance - would simply refuse to be ordained: i.e., refuse any candidates for the ordained ministry in its current form - and settle for a Eucharist without an ordained minister, a breaking of bread and prayers without any authorisation beyond fidelity to the Scriptures. The Vatican would be the last to go.... Maybe there are already lay people and priests who are contemplating such a destructured Church with equanimity. For them, certainly, the diaconate would be a dead-end reform which delayed the evolution of the Church.

² Quite without the benefit, it seems, of a Sacred Congregation for Bishops.

It seems to me to follow that, in the situation we face, the admission of people to the ordained diaconate is an essential part of any practical policy for preserving the ministerial heart of the Church. At present people habitually think of “the Church” as *a Eucharistic celebration presided over by a priest*. If the provision of this becomes problematic, the perceived nature of the Church will also change. Although it’s bad form to mention the diaconate in the context of the reduced number of priests, it seems clear to me that only through the presence of deacons will many people (for instance) have a vested clergyman to celebrate their baptisms, weddings, and funerals in future small parishes; without the diaconate they will have to conduct such ceremonies themselves, as best they may (much as has been the rule in Latin America for a long time³). The scarcely-hidden message is that a Church that fails to find vocations to the priesthood *as it is understood at present* must bear the consequences, in the damaging of its Eucharistic heart. Perhaps it is true that the inability of Europe to find celibate males to take up this rôle is a sign of Europe’s loss of faith in God. But perhaps it will happen that the flourishing of the diaconate may illuminate the viability of a different style of life for the Church’s ministers. The presence of deacons is certainly not a negligible fact in the field.

2 Do deacons have a specific ministry?

When the diaconate fell into disuse its accustomed functions were passed to others. Among them were

- **the ministry of the Gospel**, expressed in the reading of the Gospel at Mass and, for the modern diaconate, the power to preach;
- **the ministry of the service of the liturgy**, expressed in the keeping of the sacred vessels and books, the organisation and supervision of practical ritual, and the issuing of directions during the Eucharist;
- **the ministry of service of people**, expressed in the administration of the goods of the Church, and the supervision of sharing within the Church and charity to those outside; and
- the conducting of practical **relations between the Church and the secular world** beyond the *koinonia*.

The lion’s share of first two areas have passed into the ambit of an omnivorous presbyterate; the third and fourth have somewhat etiolated, due perhaps to the deep-freezing of the Church after the Council of Trent; the Council of the twentieth century has had to work hard to restore, to the agenda of a Church grown self-engrossed and somnolent, the notion of a servant-Church, the ecumenical dimension, and the idea of engaging the world at large in friendly dialogue.

But there is a great deal here that belongs to the diaconate specifically; what formally differentiates deacons from lay men is their sharing in the ministry of the Word, proclamation and preaching. From this, as from their other liturgical domains like the ministry of the Chalice and the direction of the congregation, is drawn the specific amplification of their other good deeds.

We must not think so badly of the Church as to suggest that it has left gifts discarded and duties undone since the decay of the diaconate. The frequently-asked question “What can deacons do?” will not be answered by the rediscovery of a lost sacrament or the opening of a new way to Christ. *Of course* the deacon will spend much of his time doing what others can do: preparing people to receive the Sacraments, visiting the sick or the imprisoned, feeding the hungry and educating the young, burying the dead and so forth. The question should rather be “What *is* a Deacon?” This question is harder to answer, as is the question “What *is* a

³ Let’s not assume that the Vatican will accept any development of the rules for the sake of Europe; it has lived cheerfully with a scandalous lack of the Eucharist for millions of Latin Americans for decades, all for the sake of preserving clerical celibacy.

priest?" and when it comes the answer will be drawn more from the experience of their ministry than from any set of intellectual principles. Ministry is where principles recede and practice is everything: the written rule of an institution (which killeth) is relegated before the personal truth of people moving under the aegis of the Holy Spirit (which quickeneth).

There is about the work of a deacon a beautiful sense of closeness to the lay people he is serving. For a small instance: anyone can inform a new parent about the duty to bring his child to Mass; a priest can say it without truly knowing what it can cost. A lay catechist probably will know; but the deacon can talk feelingly about the bringing of his own children to the faith, and will go on to celebrate the Sacrament himself. That gives both his personal witness and his ministry of the sacrament a special resonance. Priests may feel that a good layman is treasure, and that he can engender apostolic zeal in other laymen. My experience is that this capacity is not harmed by diaconal ordination, but enhanced, in that the good things he does have refreshingly little about them of the clerical, and yet he is an ordained minister. He carries the character we associate with lay apostolate into the clerical field; and the benefit is mutual.

The clergy are under the cosh in the Western media, accused of secret sins driven by the urge to dominate, isolated by a cult-like separation from ordinary life, suspected of huge hypocrisy concealing all-too-familiar base motives. Instead of the single-minded holiness which celibacy is there to express, people see charlatanry and incredibility, and think better of those who take an honest decision to leave the priesthood than they do of those who persevere in it.

A recent (lay) correspondent wrote acidly: "Deacons are clerics, and some of them know it". I am pleased that they are, and do; I think they change people's perception of, and bring honour and benefit to, the clergy, and that they worthily take their long-vacant place in its ranks. Only those who believe that *clergy are a bad idea* could be distressed at it. Those who are anxious for the success of lay ministry should test their assumption that a deacon contradicts or confuses our message about its cause against the reality.

3 What About Women?

A short while ago a cartoon appeared of a priest welcoming repair technicians to his computer. "It's broken," he tells them, "it keeps saying there were women deacons in the early Church." One of the recurring realisations of the experience of training deacons is that one meets very many women whom one would love to propose for the rôle. I suspect the subject will not go unaddressed at many levels in the Church in the years ahead. I'd like to see it vigorously taken up by bishops; but it seems unlikely in the polarised atmosphere prevailing at present that it will. In the absence of that, it would be good if priests at least could raise the issue as they see it, so that the mind of the Church at large may be more clearly laid open. For the time being, there is much mileage in the experience of that new figure in Catholic circles, the clergyman's wife.

It is obviously an extremely delicate area to approach, but the involvement of a deacon's wife in her husband's ministry is an area of huge interest. The unfairness of the assumption, in other Christian communions, that the minister's wife is a second pair of hands, unpaid and taken-for-granted, to help him in his work alerts us to a minefield of apprehension. The Church notes that without the free and complete agreement and support of his wife, a man cannot seek ordination to the diaconate. The question of what is entailed in *support* is of course wide open. One sees that there is a brilliant opportunity, if a deacon's wife is so disposed, for them to offer their help together, particularly in family circumstances: to those approaching marriage, or parenthood, or bereavement. On the other hand, it can never be presumed that such a thing will happen, or be appropriately mooted, until it is clear that it is a welcome suggestion. The plight of a woman whose husband has accepted ordination without her genuine agreement would be tough indeed.

There is thus a serious need for the student during the preparation programme, and the deacon, especially in the start of his ministry, to be carefully looked-after by a spiritual director and by the priest with whom he works, to make sure that all is well in this area of consent. It is up to pastors and spiritual directors to make absolutely sure that truths are told in the relationship between a married couple and their Church.⁴

If the field of difficulties surrounding the perception of ordination as a male preserve can be got round, the effectiveness of a deacon's wife in the pastoral areas they share will largely negate such difficulties; after all, we are talking about a woman having a real pastoral relationship. When this is satisfactorily achieved, it will in my experience be deeply appreciated by everyone concerned, and will educate the Church, as all spiritual gifts do. We are in a poor position to affect the issue of women's ordination, except in the forum of our own discussions and influence. If discussion of the ordination of women to the priesthood has been declared closed, I would certainly regard it as a *quaestio disputata* with regard to the diaconate.

3 Is our training of deacons adequate?

Another place of real concern for everyone is the effectiveness of the training we can offer within the restrictions imposed by our resources and the time available. I find the comment of some priests, that they find the deacons undereducated for their rôle both thoughtless and rather lordly. The Course has to make practical sense, and must relate to the real situation its members are in. The Vatican in its guidelines envisages a "propaedeutic" year devoted to discernment of vocation, installation of study skills, and background study, followed by a three-year course which includes one thousand hours of lectures, accompanied by an exhaustive spiritual programme. A thousand hours over three years signifies six-and-a-half hours of lectures per week with no holidays, and I defy anyone who has a job and a family firstly to find such a course, and secondly to complete it. It is entirely unrealistic.

We give Nottingham deacons a series of interviews and some reading during the year of their application, and then a three-year course consisting of a study-day once a month, which includes four hours of lectures and one hour for lunch. They are offered a personal local supervisor, to whom they can turn for help in their private study; we ask them to do ten hours per week, and we give them two assignments to deliver each month.⁵

⁴ It should be borne in mind that there is much to tempt a couple to conceal any problems in this area, especially if the syndrome of denial revealed by psychological testing of some candidates is in vigour. This has shown itself in a tendency in candidates to distance themselves from even quite ordinary weaknesses and peccadilloes, under the impression that these might disqualify them from ordination. There is still quite a powerful impression in the Church that ordination is reserved for the spiritually superior Catholic. Behind this looms the familiar bunker of clericalism, which filters the personality in the direction of guaranteed acceptability, and thus invites mendacity, reinforced by various forms of rôle-playing. If this is severe, it might bear witness to schizoid tendencies, and is an extremely negative feature of the personality, especially for an ordained person. It is sometimes quite hard to make a candidate understand that it is precisely in our acknowledged weakness that we can most readily help the weak. To get into serious denial about one's own weakness is clearly a major barrier to any honest relation with other vulnerable and sinful people. Some people will often be predisposed to accept a priest or deacon as having some superior kind of sanctity, and this fiction lays them all too open to a syndrome of falsity which may be quite unintended - a consequence of well-meaning concealment which has got out of hand.

⁵ To save on mathematics: the Vatican's *thousand hours of lectures* is thus reduced to 132, plus whatever the student can cadge from his supervisor. In my own career as a supervisor, this was two hours per student once a fortnight, in other words an additional 156 hours over the three-year course: 288 hours in all. When I had three students to supervise, this was no small commitment of my own prime time, but the very regularity of it probably made the course more successful for those students.

The teaching element of this course has migrated from the peace and quiet of the convent at Rearsby, where the Sisters could regretfully no longer take on the catering for such a group, to the classrooms of Ratcliffe College, where a school lunch was served, and from thence to the University of Loughborough, where it is sustained by a salad lunch. We considered that a monthly meal was the minimum we should offer by way of trying to create community in the group. We have in the latest course invited wives to come to study-days, and some have got a great deal out of it.⁶

Where a student's supervisor has been talented and generous the course has done some good work. Sadly, there is not always such a supervisor in place where the students are. Where the appointed supervisor has been too busy, or the student unmotivated or unfitted to study, the inevitable has happened. Some worthy aspirants have certainly been lost because they could not be properly helped. Others who needed intensive help have not received it, and the level of that imponderable essential, *inspiration*, has been at the mercy of geography and local exigency. We have proved that in the best conditions the course is adequate. It is not very successful under even slightly adverse conditions, because it has no resources for solving problems: to put it baldly, if you can make your way with what we offer, fine. If you have problems, we're sorry.

Functioning on a shoestring, relying on the goodwill of parishes for printing and computer services, nomadic in its lack of premises, devoid of library facilities, we find we have nothing much to offer our students beyond our own input. We all have other work to do, and are fitting in our work for the course beside heavy commitments. It isn't really enough. Other dioceses have dedicated resources and manpower to the task; many are contributing to the running of major seminaries and staffing them. We have no seminary, of course; but should that mean that we relegate the education of our deacons to a spare-time activity?

I've voiced at the end of every course the following thoughts. We badly need somewhere in the Diocese that can provide a meal for twenty, a room to collect a small library in, a well-equipped lecture-room. We are, after all, helping to develop an Order on whose ministry large tracts of our Diocese will soon be dependent for the Sacraments. It is a good thing that our Diocese can rise to this achievement; it is a sign of our integrity as a Diocese, and a mark of independence, and we should be proud of it. It deserves investment; but because it is assumed in our Diocese that a thing like this is done for nothing, it is difficult to feel other than sidelined. I suggest that two ways lie ahead of us.

- Either, when the shortage of clergy has set in more widely, it may assume a higher priority in our minds to see that we are giving the formation of clergy a better foundation for success.
- Or perhaps it will simply make the clergy who are left less and less willing to contribute their diminishing resources to the task.

It's a question of leadership, and the decision the Diocese must take about the importance of the work.

⁶ The course just completed was paying £291 per study day to Loughborough, financed by the parishes from which the students were drawn. Per student eventually ordained, this works out at £960 over three years. The Diocese contributed the cost of the five-day pre-ordination retreat at Ampleforth, which for a married couple came to £300. This represents the whole investment of finance in the teaching of the students. Their travel and books they have mostly financed themselves.

What Deacons can do for the Clergy

As the Parish Priest of the only full-time employed deacon in the Diocese, I can say that the diaconate has the power to transform a priest's experience. As the fortunate pastor of a parish with two other deacons in it, I can further describe what their impact is on my life as well.

Having a deacon on the strength means that a parish priest can forget a great number of the niggles and hassles that crowd in from a busy parish. The deacon knows where everything lives, and can sort all procedural questions, from the rules about hiring the hall to the location of its gas meters, from the service agreement on the heating system to the frequency of meeting of the Pastoral Council. He is competent to answer practically every question coming in by 'phone. In opening mail he can answer most letters, sign cheques, process requests for certificates, arrange times of funerals, baptisms, and weddings. He knows when to pass questions and requests directly to the parish priest; but he is well able to shoulder most of the problems people have, and is entirely acceptable to parishioners in that quality. He can act as the clearing house for requests for masses and other liturgies, for requests for sick visits and regular communion at home. With seventeen busy Extraordinary Ministers and a regional Hospital to look after, this is no mean feat.

Our full-time deacon acts as the Chaplain to the city's secondary school and supplies preaching at masses and assemblies there on a regular basis. He is responsible for arranging and running Confirmation group sessions and Baptism courses. He has also run the Youth Group and arranged large numbers of young people to accompany the diocesan Lourdes Pilgrimage, and raising the finance to pay for them.

It is my view that anyone who instructs and prepares people for the Sacraments should ordinarily go on to celebrate the sacraments when the time comes. Accordingly, unless Baptism is celebrated during Mass, it is regularly a deacon who baptises. Similarly, those who ask for a crematorium funeral will regularly find a deacon coming to discuss the ceremony and the same deacon leading the liturgy. Receiving bodies into church on the vigil of a funeral is a diaconal task (in our case this enables the PP to play the organ, which sets a peaceful tone from the beginning. This particular division of labour happens at other times also: deacons can and do take on special services, like ecumenical occasions and liturgies of the Word, Stations of the Cross, October Sunday Devotions with Benediction, and our two exposition periods each week). The elderly clergy in neighbouring parishes often find their own burdens lightened by our deacons conducting the crematorium committal when the requiem has taken place twenty-five miles away, or when the crematorium service is the only one celebrated. We are not grudging with our gifts, and deacons are diocesan, not parochial!

I have asked each deacon to preach once a week. The people therefore get a different voice from mine on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and at the first Mass on Sunday. In a church which used to have three priests, it is an important thing: no-one could be blind to the value of this variety. The standpoint from which they preach is notably different from my own, and their competence as preachers is directly dependent on their flying-time. I know of priests who complain that their deacons can't preach, when the poor chaps have had only three invitations to preach in their lives. Priests can be as impatient with their deacons as road-hogs with learner drivers. One wants to say: *Father, you too, with the advantage of seven years' full-time training to reinforce you, were once tentative and nerve-wracked in the pulpit. Be merciful - be encouraging - you may be entertaining an angel unawares!*

Our full-time deacon has set about organising a visiting group, and roughly half the parish has been visited over the last nine months. These visits, which have no specific purpose save ostensibly the updating of the registers, have been greeted with delight by many people who thought they had disappeared from pastoral view, and they have resulted in many restored relationships with the Church, both of attendees and the housebound.

I've regarded the hospital chaplaincy as primarily a priest's job because of the importance of anointing and absolving. But the deacons' knowledge of the city and parish has been significant on many occasions, since a little awareness of people's past can enable one to say and do the right thing, and more vitally, to avoid saying or doing the wrong one.

But the main benefit of the deacon has been without doubt the fact that he was born and has grown up in the parish, and has watched its life and times for fifty-two years, whilst still appearing to be a young man. My own feeling is that this experience and awareness is priceless; but it certainly is not unique. It was the kind of equipment won over mighty periods of ministry by the likes of Canon Philip Soar in the Meadows Parish for over fifty years, and Canon Chris McKeown in Alvaston for nearly as long. They kept no street registers, but these priests had baptised the grandparents of people seeking to marry, and their wisdom and understanding were irreplaceable assets. It is no longer Diocesan policy to leave priests to become rooted to the spot in that way. But the deacon may well be stable in the parish where he works for even longer periods. They have not lived keeping their heads down or their eyes shut. Most will be a bottomless source of anecdote and awareness.

I can never forget the rôle of our deacons as members of the lay working world. As I walk through the city with the deacon, I recall that he has met a huge proportion of the people amongst whom we pass on our way to the bank or the shops. He worked on a city-centre market-stall when he left school, and then did a five-year apprenticeship in the motor-trade at a large garage. He spent a quarter-century in the local fire-brigade, dealing with extreme situations of all sorts, and learning how to belong to a corps of other men facing the same realities. He has been a driver for building-firms, a library caretaker, and an undertaker's assistant. He has worked with people with learning difficulties in the social services and made money cleaning cars. In the street we can be as determined as we like about reaching our destination. But in a reverse situation from the Ancient Mariner, we find that one of three will stop *us*.

I cannot understand how anyone could miss the point of such amazing contact, or imagine that a parish would not be enhanced by its recruitment, or that a parish priest parachuted in from outside might not find his life easier because such a man was beside him in his pastoral tasks. The impact of that background on the church ministry he offers is quite simply incalculable: and indeed, it would *never* have been the same if he had remained a good lay member of the parish, nor would he have the grace of state which ordination has given him to become so effective a minister.

Of course, he is an *expensive* minister because with a mortgage, a wife, and four children he has the sort of money issues that the rest of the congregation grapple with, and I never have. But a Diocese like ours must surely have to contemplate the future employment of more like him, and begin to count the very different blessings to be sought and hoped-for in these new circumstances. The investment mentioned above is seriously needed. If the quality of the diaconate is to be enhanced, and the opportunities taken that are already there, we need to do serious thinking about these questions; and meanwhile, the rôle of deacons in priestless parishes is something that must be urgently considered, since there are so many issues to be resolved. Putting a couple of religious sisters into the Presbytery, and hanging the fate of the parish across the shoulders of the nearest half-vertical parish priest is not, I submit, the only, or the best way to preserve parish life.