

On the Rearing and Care of New Deacons

Deacons have arrived in a sporadic and geographically uneven fashion in our Diocese. They have now reached the number of thirty-eight, and it is a point where a certain survey suggests itself, so that we can take steps about the future. The simple fact is that there are parts of the Diocese where no deacon has set his professional foot, and the priests and parishes who have no experience of diaconal ministry feel they are in the dark about the whole issue.

There are conversations which continually repeat themselves in the diaconate trade, and it is as well to know what they are, so that we can guide the consideration we're giving to them in the most fruitful way possible. Priests' attitudes divide between positive and negative, and their questions and doubts are of material significance in the progress of the diaconate. The most frequent questions raised already indicate a somewhat negative attitude, and it ought to be addressed. The first question asked by a doubtful parish priest is usually *What Can Deacons Do?* - and sometimes this is further sharpened by another phrase *....that couldn't be done by a good lay-person?* The comment is often passed: *Well, they can't say Mass, and they can't absolve, and they can't anoint the sick* - as if this rendered them nugatory, and better left laic. It's often suggested that the institution of the diaconate is a malign attempt to restrict ministry to ordained rather than lay people, and men rather than women. Quite whose malignity is engaged in this enterprise I'm not sure: I personally feel the need publicly to wash my hands of any such motive.

I would say that priests find their place in the hearts of people, not so much because of their undoubtedly superb personalities, but because of the things they do. In other words, we are loved and respected when we bring people the Sacraments and teach them to believe and pray, when we give clear signs of faithful and unselfish love to those in need of our care. It is a profoundly healing experience to discover that one's curious appearance, strange voice, odd quirks of personality etc are of little significance beside this truth, and that we are accepted, simply as good priests, into people's hearts, families, and community. I can't think of any *positive* reason for people who love and value their priest to wish he had remained a layman; one does not hear people saying *If only Father were in the Catenians!* Nor do I often hear people saying, *Let's hope we don't get any more vocations to the priesthood - it's wrecking the Parish Council!* We don't restrict the work of Christ by ordaining people. We consecrate persons, setting them apart as chosen to be identified with his Church as leaders or as servants.

Ordained ministerial relationship is a gift of Christ to our church, as well as to us. It isn't a personal gong or a license to dominate; if that's how it functions, shame on us. It is in the same line of thinking that we must seek the value of the diaconate. When you think of the work priests do in order properly to administer the sacraments, you will remember the hours spent with catechumens, with new parents, with confirmation and first-communion groups, with engaged couples, with the sick: by virtue of the Diaconal Preparation Course, a great number of the priests of the Diocese can also remember the hours they spent with candidates for Holy Order, either as spiritual director, study supervisor, or teacher. The actual liturgy by which the Sacrament is brought into being is a relatively small part of the business. Still, it is as the man who stands at the lectern and at the altar that we find the heart of our meaning. It may be that new faces and voices are being called to enrich the spectrum of the ordained ministry, and to widen the resonance we hear in preaching and liturgy, as well as in the work of service that flows from them.

If you examine the list of ministerial works in the last paragraph, you will see that the deacon, relating as he does to the parishioners he has known and lived with for years, and to the parish which they constitute, can be of tremendous use in all those very areas. But his

combining ordained ministry with his standing in his own parish is something quite new, having about it a stability and permanence which no newly-arrived priest has. If he is married and a father, he can relate to new parents and to engaged couples in a way that is precisely irreplaceable in the ministry of a celibate priest. The sureness of touch of a deacon who has been a successful father with groups of young people can be enviable indeed, recalling the words of 1Tim 3:

*How can a man who does not know how to manage
his own family take care of the Church of God?*

As a priest I can easily explain to new parents that we still want to see them at church, and that the arrival of a baby doesn't mean that his family doesn't come to Mass on wet, cold Sunday mornings. A man who has dressed three children and got them to Church Sunday after Sunday can say a similar thing, but with an authority which isn't spelled out, and never need be. Of course, the baptismal preparation offered by a lay catechist can have a similar authority. But the Deacon will also be the *minister* of the Sacrament when it is conferred; and that is one imponderable element where the grace of orders can be at work. This applies in many more serious areas too. The capacity of a deacon to make friends on this basis is a new richness for the clergy at large. We can't draw bounds to the access of wisdom which the restoration of the diaconate will carry into the ambit of the ordained ministry of the Church.

Those of us "entrusted with their training" know all too well the limitations of what we've been able to give them in terms of formal theological learning. But we should not treat them or view them as half-trained priests. Their gifts are different. Bringing them to ordination means alerting them to their own ability to mediate the life of grace and the understanding of Christian life. As a man who has run, and may still be running, a career in the secular world, a deacon relates to the world of work with especial familiarity. He understands, without perhaps much adverting to it, the relationships of communities quite different from parish or diocese: it may be industry, law, finance, administration, research, office-work, education, health work, agriculture: we already have in our diocese a galaxy of varied diaconal work-experience which immeasurably enriches the diocesan clergy as a college. This enables a deacon to relate to working people and to address them about faith in terms that engage their real concerns. It is vital that the deacons be encouraged to use these gifts, and not forced into the sometimes narrow vocabulary and mindset which can limit the thinking and speaking of a priest. We need imagination to make this wealth of experience welcome - in our sanctuaries, as well as in the person of the deacon. It is the bringing-together of the sort of wisdom lay-people can acquire with the rôle of ordained ministry that gives the diaconate much of its power and attraction. It can lead to a most fruitful and enjoyable interplay within a particular parish, which enhances the different rôles of priest and deacon, and brings access of gifts to the benefit of all.

This is a powerful reason not to compare them with priests - as if we had an alternative choice! - and find them wanting. The criticism that they fall short of priests in intellectual grasp is also a fairly lordly comment, since, in my experience, many a deacon who has struggled through three years of lonely personal study, with a mere four hours' actual teaching per month, can preach a sermon which is well within sight of some of the priests who have enjoyed six or seven years' full-time supervised education, with a fully-furnished library and a highly-qualified staff in attendance, and who have signally failed to keep up with their reading or thinking. It is true that the deacons have been offered pitifully little; and we who offer it are all too conscious of it. But our priests have studied for the sort of years which earn doctorates in British Universities; and to look down on the quality of the deacons' intellectual attainments may be clericalism in its meanest mode.

There's a great tendency to reassure priests by pointing out that

- deacons are not priests, and that
- the diaconate is not being restored to compensate for the disturbing reduction of priestly ministry.

Whilst I'm sure both of these statements are true, it should also be said that, where parishes are losing their resident priest, the presence of a resident deacon, who knows and serves the parish well, and who may have lived there for a very long time, can be a gift from heaven to the priest from next door who suddenly has the whole care of a second parish thrown into his lap. The actual experience of well-used deacons is the best I can offer to illuminate these doubts and fears.

It is also the best antidote to fears for the ministerial involvement of lay people. It's partly by their closeness to lay life that the deacons deliver their share of the gospel: they are bridging the gap between two sorts of ministry. They are greeted by the congregation "as one of their own"; there's a no-nonsense, familiar rapport with them that successfully punctures the unease which clerical attitudes so sadly cause. I see very little sign of clericalism in the students we look after; indeed, if we detected such an attitude, they would have to choose between that and their progress towards holy orders. As the Bishop said at the last ordination, *Deacons are not ordained to privilege.*