

DIOCESE OF NOTTINGHAM

THE DIACONATE



The Diaconate is one of the three Holy Orders. It was restored as a permanent order within the Western Church by "Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem", a Motu Proprio of Paul VI (June 18th 1967) which put into effect the suggestion of the Second Vatican Council in Lumen Gentium 29.

In order to establish appropriate practice in the parishes of the Diocese which enjoy the ministry of Deacons, it has been decided to draw up the following principles and practical guidelines, which will serve to illuminate the way in which a Deacon ought to share in the work of the Church, of whose hierarchy he forms a permanent part.



A New Situation for the Church and the Diocese

Deacons have been ordained in many parts of the world since the decision to restore their order was taken. It should be stressed that this decision was taken at the highest level in the Church, by the Pope in Council. It renews the state of the Church in a significant way, and the consequences are emerging in a series of changes, some of them quite momentous. We have to adopt a flexible frame of mind in order to understand and exploit the new possibilities the diaconate offers, and to avoid unforeseen pitfalls.

At the time of writing there are twenty-seven Deacons in our Diocese.

Aims of this Document:

- 1 We have thought it a good time to lay out the Church's vision of the Deacon's life and ministry, so that Priests and Parishes can think about their own communities in its light.
- 2 Potential candidates, and their wives and families, can look into this document to find out what the life of a Deacon involves.
- 3 We would like a statement of policy to which ordained Deacons can turn to guide them in their ministry.
- 4 There is a point of potential difficulty within the Diocesan clergy. If the Parish Priest is the one who has recommended a man for training and discernment, he will have a growing understanding of the role of the Deacon which is formed at the same time as his training. As time goes on, there will be more and more Priests who move into parishes where they "inherit" a Deacon. Just as the (increasingly rare) experience of moving into a parish where there is an Assistant Priest can be a fraught and challenging time for all parties, so there is a critical period in the relationship between the new Parish Priest and the Deacon, which these guidelines are designed to help.
- 5 We are anxious that the gifts of the Deacons be properly developed, and that they are not allowed by any default to go unused.

In every case it is important...that Deacons fully exercise their ministry, in preaching, in liturgy, and in charity, to the extent that circumstances permit.

They should not be relegated to marginal duties, be made merely to act as substitutes, nor discharge duties normally entrusted to non-ordained members of the faithful.

Only in this way will the true identity of permanent Deacons as Ministers of Christ become apparent, and the impression avoided that Deacons are simply lay people particularly involved in the life of the Church.

--Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons

1. A NEW SITUATION IN THE CHURCH AND THE DIOCESE

The Full-time Celibate Clergy In our past there has been a sharp distinction between the ways of life of the clergy, and of the lay members of the Church. The tenor of the clerical way of life has freed priests to be totally at the service of the Parish and the Diocese; this has been a tremendously important fact. Priests have been people who visibly put the service of the Church above all other considerations, and their commitment has been made most visible through their acceptance of celibacy. Their being at the disposal of the Bishop has been clearly seen in their mobility, and their sharing of the life of their people has been symbolised by the Biblical sign of their dependence on the parish for their material support. Despite occasional, clamorously publicised failings in the clergy, there is no doubt that the presence of Priests in parishes has established a very local sign of the seriousness of the Church's call for commitment to Christ. Catholic people have linked this seriousness both with the ministry of word and sacrament, and with the leadership they have accepted from their priests.

Transient Deacons On the parish scene deacons have appeared relatively lately, with the policy of giving transient deacons (seminarians on their way to ordination as priests) short periods in parishes, as part of their training for the priesthood. They have not disturbed the spiritual perception of the clergy as *men set apart*, and because of their destination for the priesthood, they have widely been perceived as apprentices, visiting students, half-baked priests, and so forth; and this is hardly surprising, since they have themselves mostly - and perhaps correctly - felt that to be the case.

Permanent Deacons¹ Those ordained to *remain* deacons are therefore a new reality. Despite the apparent comprehensiveness of the Church documents, the way of the diaconate is still in practice awaiting formation. Yet we have ordained deacons among us. A careful weather-eye must be kept on their presentation and their treatment, if we are to give them their authentic status and function as the Church directs. From the beginning, Pope Paul VI pointed out that

Although some of the functions of deacons (especially in missionary countries) are in fact accustomed to be entrusted to laymen, it is nevertheless beneficial that those who perform a truly diaconal ministry be strengthened by the imposition of hands, a tradition going back to the Apostles, and be more closely joined to the altar, so that they may more effectively carry out their ministry through the sacramental grace of the diaconate. (*Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, preface)

There are two things one could say in response to that: firstly, it is true that some of the work of the deacon will closely resemble that which he did as a lay parishioner, and this may tend to cloak or obscure the reality of his ordained ministry. Many deacons fear the prospect of becoming the parish priest's *ex officio* factotum (or as one deacon expressed it, his "gopher of choice"). The second point is that some of the deacon's functions are at present fulfilled by the parish priest himself; and these, however well the priest does them, must be shared with the deacon, not as a concession, but because of his order. If the priest feels the deacon

¹ The use of the phrase "*Permanent Deacon*" is increasingly distasteful to me. It seems to imply some kind of subordination to the "real" deacons to which we have been used - ie those who are destined for the priesthood. Surely in their stable commitment to the diaconate, it is the "permanent" deacons who are most truly called deacons; it is the other group who need an adjective to qualify their position.

is doing them less well than they were done before, that is natural. But how else is the deacon to fulfil his sacramental mandate – *which is not dependent on the dispositions of the parish priest* - if he is not allowed the space to develop his skills?

We must take note of the fact that, although they are full members of the Diocesan clergy in their own right, deacons are not distinguished by the commonly-recognised marks of the *priesthood* outlined above. The vast majority are husbands and fathers, and most are engaged in secular paid work of some kind. From the Bishop's point of view, they are not deployable as the priests are; they serve in the parish where they live, and have a stability and permanence there which (partly through their non-stipendiary relationship with the Diocese) is not at the Bishop's disposition. This is without prejudice to the fact that Deacons, like priests, only exercise their ministry at the express bidding of the Bishop.

These factors could be represented as diminishing the value and use of deacons; they can, instead, be experienced as great strengths. It is important that we turn them to the good of the Church. American dioceses are used to speaking simply of "an ordained life with a lay life-style"; this is certainly *not* an adequate understanding of the Church's mind. It is more a question of *a new style of ordained life*, one which in many different ways is nearer to the life of lay people, but which is for that reason closer to many of the situations they face; deacons are therefore prepared to move with more assurance in certain pastoral areas.

This does not mean, however, that the sacred duties entrusted to deacons are less important, or less central to their lives, than those entrusted to priests. Deacons must develop the power to preach, must be accustomed to the celebration of the Sacraments, and must acquire the sensitivity they need in liturgical leadership, in the care of the sick, in catechesis for the Sacraments, in spiritual counsel for the lapsed and the "scattered sheep". They must be treated as fellow-workers by the priests and – signally – by the Bishop. If this does not happen, their ministry will not unfold in the way the Church wants. This is a responsibility we must not fail.

At a convention at Bressanone, Alto Adige, in 1997, Bishop, now Cardinal, Walter Kasper drew the attention of the participants to the structure of the ordained ministry as it is modified by the re-introduction of the diaconate. He was at pains to insist that priests and deacons have their own *different* way of sharing in the overall ministry of the Bishop. Deacons are *not* ordained to assist priests: they are, like priests, ordained to assist Bishops.

Deacons and priests each have specifically graduated shares of the one sacramental ministry, which is granted to the Bishop. Both the priest and the deacon are working colleagues of the Bishop and are looked at in the light both of their independence from the Bishop and of their assignment to him. Deacons and priests carry out their duties as representatives of the Bishop, who, because of the overall burden of his duties, cannot perform them without colleagues and helpers. Although they are assigned to the Bishop, it does not mean that deacons are no more than his underlings. The actual dispenser of the sacramental ordination is Jesus Christ himself; through ordination, those ordained receive a lasting sign (indelible character) of the sacrament, through which, in a special way, they become one with Christ, the one High Priest, Shepherd and Bishop. *As a result of their ordination, those ordained are detached from the absolute authority of the Bishop; by virtue of their direct link to Christ, created by the sacrament of ordination, those ordained gain a certain independence and self-responsibility, which the Bishop has to respect.*

This thought seems to me to be a vital one as we open our consideration of the diaconate. It expresses, right at the start, the truth that the rôle of the deacon is to be determined, not by a free judgment of pastoral policy on the part of the Bishop, still less by the instincts of a parish priest, but by Christ himself, who allots a share in his total ministry towards mankind as he chooses – to bishops, to priests, and to deacons.

The bishop, the priest and the deacon therefore, each in his own way, have a part to play in the one mission of Jesus Christ and are thus dependent upon brotherly and comradely co-operation. Priests and deacons are not simply subordinates of the bishop, but should be addressed and treated by him as brothers and friends.

Diaconate and Lay Ministry It is sometimes pointed out that the importation of the restored Diaconate into the mix of the post-conciliar Church is vulnerable to the ugly charge of *clericalization*. Priests, sometimes even Bishops, will point out that the presence of good layfolk with a deep commitment to ministry is the great fruit of the Council, and that the Diaconate muddies the water by turning the male contingent of these people into clergy, which, in the process, relegates laywomen to the rank of “unordainable”.

In response it deserves to be said that the facts of life which have separated priests from lay people – their celibacy, their professional status as full-time ministers, and their conferred authority within parish and diocesan structures – are all missing from the lives of deacons. It would be far more pertinent to draw attention to the detonation of the customary use of the word *clerical*, which the deacons’ salutary arrival may touch off. There is no obligation for deacons to wear clerical collars; they have blessedly inherited no easy clerical title, and they resemble lay people in their lifestyle so closely that the word *clerical* hardly applies to them. In some sense they can be said precisely to subvert the least acceptable concept of clericalism, freeing the ordained ministry to do its work.

It is a responsibility of the Formation Programme to eliminate from the minds of candidates any trace of clerical vainglory, and if it be present in a Candidate ineradicably, it is a good sign that the vocation to the ordained ministry is not for him.

2 RESPECTING THE DEACON AND HIS FAMILY

Marriage Comes First We now have a married clergy in our Diocese. It must be understood from the outset that the first priority for a married deacon is his wife and family. Priests all know of lay people who have become more and more involved in the Church, to the neglect of their families, a fact which has vitiated or annulled the value of what they have tried to do for the Church. The Pastoral Epistles, when speaking of the qualities to be sought in Church leaders, look to the quality of a candidate’s family life as an indispensable indicator, and this emphasis is taken up in the Vatican documents on the modern diaconate. We must ensure that our deacons are not asked for a level of commitment that will impair their family life.

A Deacon’s Profession In second place, a deacon’s working life, by which he is enabled to support his family and himself, also takes practical priority over the demands of the ministry. Unless the Church decides to take on the total material support of the deacon and his family, Priests must always respect the fact that their deacons, after a heavy day’s work, need time for relaxation and rest with their families. Priests will need to keep a sensitive eye out for the slightest sign of tension or friction in this area, remembering that unless they make strenuous efforts, they may themselves be the last to realise there is a problem.

Enthusiasm The training course for the diaconate in our Diocese is demanding and tiring. No-one will come through it successfully without a great deal of enthusiasm. It is precisely because deacons are strongly committed to their vocation that a friendly and perceptive oversight is called-for in their ministerial life. It is especially vital that their wives should feel that they can confidently and openly talk with the pastor, and that he is used to offering them a ready way of communicating any difficulties or problems which may threaten, even before they have become a fact.

This vital awareness of the deacon's priorities should not be regarded as a difficulty. It is a simple acknowledgement that the ordination of a married man brings a married woman and their children closer to the ordained ministry of the Church as well. The responsibility of the bishop to ensure that his clergy are cared-for necessarily involves the care of the deacon's family. *Their* happy relationship with the deacon's ministry is a condition for *his*.

A Wife's Consent Canon Law requires that the wife of a diaconal candidate should give formal written permission for his *ordination*. This is no mere formality, and it points us towards a fair examination of her role in his *ministry*. They will usually have married without any thought of this eventual change in their life, and just as the deacon's work and availability are governed by the needs and facts of his married and professional life, so the involvement of his wife in his diaconal work will be, firstly, a matter for the Holy Spirit, and secondly for the prudent discussion of the couple themselves. Clearly the Church demands that her happiness with his new role be assured before he can be ordained. This makes it clear that there must be unanimity between them about the diaconate. But there are many ways in which she can support him and help him to be a married clergyman, and together to use their married experience for the good of the Church. There is a delicacy in this situation, in that there can obviously be nothing by way of *assumption* or *expectation* involved; it is an entirely voluntary possibility. But if a deacon is, for example, working with engaged couples, or with new parents before a Baptism, there are obviously wonderful opportunities for a deacon and his wife to work together.

The case of a deacon whose wife is not a Catholic requires especial sensitivity, since there is an obvious danger that the demands of ministry may be perceived as introducing a wedge into an area already demanding of compromise and mutual understanding.

The Spirituality of the Deacon It is important that the differences between the married and the celibate clergy should be noted in the spiritual realm. Much of the spiritual voicing of the priesthood has been in the evangelical terms of "leaving all things" to follow the Lord, and has set the ideals of this following in the very exact terms of celibacy and self-sacrifice. Deacons who are married follow the Lord in a different way, but their ideals of marital fidelity and intimacy, whilst contrasting substantially with the traditional structures of the priesthood, are still deeply sacrificial. They need a spiritual direction which is as yet under-developed in the Church, and which, like the whole practical field of diaconal ministry, is still "under construction". The spiritual experience of the new deacons, therefore, is of pioneering importance to the future as well as the present. They must be handled most sensitively, and never be accidentally led to believe that their family life is somehow excluding them from their proper place in the Diocese and its clergy (however much its spirituality may at present be ordered towards celibate priests). We are asking a great deal of the deacons, and they need every help and encouragement if they are to meet the responsibilities they have as husbands, fathers, providers, and ministers of Christ.

3 THE MINISTRY OF A DEACON IN THE PARISH

“Joined to the Altar” The whole ministry of the Church flows from the Eucharist: so does that of the deacon. When he attends Mass celebrated by the Bishop, he processes behind him and sits beside him. If he is present at any Mass, even a Papal liturgy, it is the deacon who proclaims the Gospel, and he may be invited to preach the homily afterwards. He has care of the vessels and of the offertory liturgy. In his own right he is an ordinary minister of the Eucharist, and he calls the people to exchange the sign of peace, and he dismisses them at the end of the Mass. In these few indications the rubrics express some of the principal features of the diaconal ministry.

Minister of the Word *A deacon can preach at Mass.* This makes him a tremendous asset to the life of his parish, since the Sunday Homily ranks as a most privileged place in the work of the Church. If the faithful are to be educated, instructed, encouraged, edified, and inspired, two voices instead of one are a huge asset even to the community most blessed in its priest. (It might be mentioned, by-the-by, that since most parishes now have only one priest, the only time most priests hear a Sunday homily is on their holidays; Parish priests need to be preached to, like everyone else.)²

Minister of the Eucharist Because the deacon does not celebrate the Mass, he is often regarded as a second-class priest rather than a first-class deacon. However, the ranks of Special Ministers have need of leadership; and this is an area where the word of Paul VI about the sacramental grace of the diaconate can be verified. A Eucharistic Service in the absence of a priest is a transformed reality when led by a deacon, and there is much sense in the thought that a deacon would be a good spiritual director of a body of Eucharistic Ministers, in a parish or a group of parishes. Equally the cult of the Eucharist, in terms of periods of adoration or Benediction services, can be appropriately entrusted to a deacon in a parish, particularly where there are Chapels-of-Ease.

Minister of Baptism *A deacon is an Ordinary Minister of Baptism.* Because he is often also a father, sometimes a grandfather, he can with great fitness be asked to lead a young couple towards the Baptism of their baby. In a climate where many couples who request a Baptism may not be practising their faith, a deacon who is himself a family man may speak more feelingly than a priest about family realities - getting the family on the move on Sunday mornings, the trials of babies and toddlers - and teenagers - in Sunday Mass, and the value of regular practice of the faith. It is one thing for a bachelor who lives next door to the Church to say how vital is the family's attendance in good order every Sunday; someone who is used to paying the price for this weekly miracle has a more convincing ground for saying it. This is very clearly another area where a deacon's wife can be of great help to her husband's work.

It is highly likely that such parents will want the deacon who has helped them to prepare to be present at the Baptism, and possibly to celebrate the Sacrament. Certainly they would feel a far stronger bond with the Parish after such a preparation, for whose running many priests have less and less time to offer.

² There is an important responsibility in all this which bears on the parish priest. We hear with sadness of deacons who have only been asked to preach on a Sunday two or three times a year. The opportunity to develop their own preaching voice, to grow in confidence, and to make their real contribution to the life of the parish is comprehensively crippled by such treatment, and they have every right to feel that an injustice has been done to them. Worse still, the *munus* of their ordination is being refused, and that is a matter that must be taken up with the Holy Spirit! Every preacher makes many mistakes on the way to finding the right course; and we must not lose a blessing for which some of our people may be yearning. It must be stressed that the best of preachers is not agreeable to everyone.

Understandably, many priests feel that the contact they make on the occasion of a Baptism is a vital one for their relationship with the Parish. This feeling is a good one, but it should not preclude the possible involvement of the deacon³

Minister before, and at, Weddings Priests have much to offer in advance of a wedding; perhaps it is not too much to say that a married deacon may have more. As the Church's official witness, his authority is greatly enhanced by his personal experience; he (and very desirably his wife) can be a source of strength to the Church's teaching, in ways which are not open to a priest. Once again, it is likely that a deacon will be a welcome guest at the eventual wedding, and this is something parish priests should be glad to encourage and foster, by entrusting to him his role in the ceremony, or by asking him to conduct it entirely. Where the wedding is not within a nuptial Mass, this is most appropriate.

Caring for the Sick Deacons are not ministers of the Sacrament of the Sick, or of that of Reconciliation. This may cause parish priests unconsciously to limit their possible function as ministers to the sick. In their role as Eucharistic Ministers, however, they may build up a considerable relationship especially with the chronically- or terminally-ill, particularly in parishes that do not have a priest, or in areas of a parish that are separate from the place of the parish church. This fact could be recognised by their being asked to preach at services of anointing, and if possible their accompanying the parish priest to the hospitals or even the homes of the parish when parishioners are to be anointed. In their sick-visiting, deacons can draw very close to the families of the sick, and can summon the help of the priest when there is need. Their spiritual unity with the priest in the sacramental service of the community should find its expression in every possible department. This, like all the sacramental situations, is an area where the contact with the deacon can supply that pastoral closeness, whose loss would otherwise be disastrous when priests are withdrawn from communities, as shortly they are in many places certain to be.

Deacons and Funeral Liturgies As the Church amplifies and variegates its liturgical practice, there are increased options available for all sorts of occasions. Nowhere is this clearer than in the area of funeral liturgy. For simply practical reasons, the Funeral Mass, for which the priest is indispensable, is already a rare reality in many parts of the Church, notably in Latin America. The options of vigils, in the home or the Church, and funerals without a Eucharist (especially at crematoria), have therefore found ample expression in the new ritual. In large parishes, the service of reception of the coffin into Church is an excellent place where a deacon can exercise his ministry, *not* as an easy substitute for the parish priest, but contributing his own gift as a member of the parish clergy. At the crematorium funeral, where there is no Mass, he is able to deputise whenever a priest is not available.

At funerals in communities where there is no resident priest, and indeed in any community, the deacon may be able to draw on his long and stable residence in the parish, where he may have known the family of the dead person for a very long time. This can, for example, make his homily "a perfect fit", where a recently-appointed or distantly-based priest might miss the mark. It should not be regarded as unusual or strange for the priest to invite the deacon to preach in such situations.

Deacons and Scripture and the Divine Office The Diocesan Training Programme for the diaconate lays great stress on the study and understanding of Scripture. It may be that

³ Rumour has it that we have deacons in the Diocese who have never been asked to officiate at a Baptism. This is an unfortunate and wrong situation.

some deacons may be particularly able to use their gifts as Ministers of the Word in Scripture Services, e.g. for Advent and Lent, and in the improvement and amplification of devotional services like the Stations of the Cross – which can become stale revisitings of published forms, lacking in vitality or immediacy. The Vatican's *Directory* for deacons makes a particular point of their involvement in the Divine Office, suggesting that they may appropriately be entrusted with its regular celebration in parishes.

Leading a Parish On a Diocesan level as well as a parochial one, this is the area which offers the most radical challenges and requires the most careful thought of all. The *Directory* remarks that, whilst under normal circumstances the deacon will find his place co-operating in a Parish with its priest, there will be times when a deacon will serve in a Parish that has no priest of its own, under the care of a Moderator from outside who will be the Pastor, and to whom the deacon is assistant. Here, and in places where the deacon has charge of a dispersed Christian community, either in the name of the Bishop directly, or in the name of the parish priest, he does so by ecclesiastical mandate, and *always* takes precedence over non-ordained layfolk; the document contains the principle that *where deacons are available, participation in the pastoral care of the faithful may not be entrusted to a lay person or community of lay persons*. This has far-reaching consequences for us; in the inevitable situation where priests are to be withdrawn, the presence of a deacon will transform the possibilities for the priestless community. It is because priests and parishioners will have to cope with this situation soon, that we must make the diaconate a familiar and effective presence in their lives, and the life of the Diocese, as soon as possible.



4 THE MINISTRY OF THE DEACON IN THE DIOCESE

Deacons and the Bishop The closeness of deacons to the Bishop in the Liturgy is no coincidence, and the *Directory* is quick to point out that the Bishop *alone* lays on hands at a diaconal ordination; this makes the point that the deacon has a legitimacy of his own, under the authority of the Bishop, which does not involve any mediation of the priests. Throughout the documents relating to the restoration of the diaconate there is a stress on the *personal* relationship of the deacon to the Bishop (in contrast to some relationship subordinated to the presbyterate). There is thus an appropriate role for deacons at Diocesan level. As Kasper writes,

the different orders correspond to different gradations in the share of the ministry of the Bishop. To support him, the Bishop has, so to say, two arms, which at times have different tasks, but which must work in co-operation with each other. "The traditional theology of the ascending ladders of ordination and the concept of the ordination of the Bishop as a non-homogeneous addition to the ordination of priests are thus abandoned". One has now to speak of an ordination theology involving differing parts of the Bishop's ministry and, therefore, of *the assignment of the deacon directly to the bishop*, all of

which, of course, includes brotherly co-operation with the priests, who likewise have a share in the Bishop's ministry.

Deacons and the Curia The *Directory* specifies the role of deacons in Pastoral Councils within the Diocese. Special mention is made of the Marriage Tribunal and of Diocesan Commissions, particularly those concerned with the family, with special pastoral needs, or with ethnic minorities. Within the Curia properly trained deacons may serve as chancellor, judge, assessor, auditor, *promotor iustitiae*, *defensor vinculi*, and notary.

Representation and Pastoral Oversight of Deacons Deacons cannot, for obvious reasons, take part in the Council of Priests: just as clearly there must be some structure that is set up for their mutual and diocesan representation and consultation. Likewise they are to be given special personal pastoral oversight *on a Diocesan basis*, exercised either by the Bishop himself, or by a priest appointed by him.

Deacons and Finance There is a long tradition of diaconal involvement in finance, and the provision of charitable administration within the Church, as the Acts of the Apostles evinces; the figure of St Lawrence, and his story in the traditions of the Roman church, are a good example. The *Directory* resumes this theme, recommending modern deacons to the role of "diocesan *oeconomus*" and to membership of the diocesan financial council.

5 DEACONS AT THE INTERFACE

Service to the poor The *Directory* mentions the destination of the deacon's ministry "ad gentes" - to the unbelieving world called "the nations" by the Bible. Over and over again the documents reinforce the mission of the deacon to those outside the Church: in ecumenical relations, in the world of work, and, in the ministry of charity, particularly to the poor and needy. These, like so much else in the Church's teaching on the ordained life, are all matters which affect every Christian, but which receive a particular emphasis when considered in relation to the ministry.

Gaudium Et Spes We have already mentioned the way in which a married deacon - with no prejudice to any other minister - has a particular affinity with the ministry to the married; in the same way, a working or professional involvement gives him a particular ability to move in secular affairs. The deacons of Rome, in former times, were customarily entrusted with the secular affairs of the Church itself. Because these were considerable, and the deacons were few, the latter became magnates in the eyes of the world and the Church alike. One does not necessarily wish to see this pattern repeated; but the point is justly made that the deacon is fitted in a special way to act at the interface between the Church and the world: his way of life gives him his own share in Christ's rôle of *pontifex*, a maker of bridges.

Charitable Work Most parishes are used to active forms of charity towards the poor locally and internationally. Deacons should be concerned with them as leaders. The SVP, often today in a poor state because of age and infirmity, is in great need of reinvigoration. But this charitable dimension of the diaconate does not stop at parish level. Diocesan organisations like the Children's Society and the Services to those with Special Needs welcome contacts and fellow-workers. The involvement of deacons (at parish level) in preparation for marriage and in the celebration of weddings suggests the appropriate development of their role in Marriage Care, counselling those whose marriage is in difficulties. Within the parish,

Diocesan and national second collections are often accompanied by some form of publicity or informative material, much of it abandoned to the bin; national institutions like CHAS or CaFOD run campaigns or organise their regular Fast Days, which can provide opportunities for liturgical and practical celebrations of their own. The charities instigated by the Diocese or the Church nationally, missionary or caring, bombard us with concerns and appeals which Priests may have little time to include in their thoughts and programme.

Co-ordination There are some places where the charitable operations of a parish have been magnificently co-ordinated (one thinks of the work of the parish of Our Lady of the Wayside, in Shirley, where millions of pounds have been sent to mission territories over the years). Such stories can bear witness to the power of a single person - in that case the parish priest - to kindle enthusiasm for charity on a vast scale. There is no reason why a deacon should not accomplish something similar, in his own parish, or in a group of parishes and their schools. The capacity of a deacon to involve outside organisations and people should not be underestimated; their lives are not as concentrated into Church contacts and circles as those of priests. We are used to saying that “our people love to give”; how many more people are there, geographically but not spiritually close, who could welcome a way of extending generosity to the needy?

Public Witness It is important that the deacons themselves should take these thoughts to heart, so that they do not conceal their ministerial life from their secular working colleagues and contacts. The teaching documents speak with one voice about the sign-value of the deacon outside the borders of the Church, and this is a practical matter which should not be impeded by any trace of ghettoism from the past. If our steps lie “in Gentile territory”, then that is where the mission is. The art of the business will be in the finding of the right balance between an unhealthy privacy about the diaconate, which will “bury the talent”, and an oppressive or intrusive flourishing of it, which may bring it into disrepute.

Other Organisations Christian laypeople bear witness to probity and justice in itself, and in their own right. A deacon does so as an official representative of the Church. It is good that the deacons take part in any public initiatives which spring from sound roots, which call and work for justice in the world. There is a caveat against joining with organisations “insidious to the full hierarchical communion of the Church”, and a deacon needs to be sure that his involvement with other movements, particularly political parties, cannot be misconstrued. It is, however, permitted to deacons, alone among the clergy, to belong to political parties and to exercise civil authority. The example of the late Cardinal Hume shows how immeasurable good can come from a co-operative and friendly attitude to the world beyond the Church. To promote this the deacon is especially called.

Education It is hard for a working life to be coupled with an involvement with schools, whose lives coincide with the working-hours. However, a deacon can become involved with the growing sector of evening adult education. Indeed, there are few things which can better encourage the ongoing clarification and firmness of one’s own grasp of the faith, than the duty of expressing it (and sometimes explaining, even defending it) in dialogue with others who are learning.

Deacons can play a fitting role in the work of schools by governorship; the demands for communication between school and secular authority makes this a perfect area for the diaconate to appear in its proper light.



The Diaconate can be a great gift to our Church. It can be a wonderful way of lifting and sharing the burdens of the ministry which are weighing heavier on an ageing and decreasing presbyterate. Before this can happen we need a measure of re-thinking at every level, and a sense of inspiration and imagination.

To prevent the suffocating pattern of over-charging with tasks being repeated, it is important to stress that the great list of activities outlined above is a catalogue of *possibilities*. Because most of our deacons are already loaded with responsibilities of their own, only a few of these will be realised by any one man. That is why we should be looking around positively - especially in small communities - for new aspirants, who can be encouraged to consider the course of training and discernment which leads to ordination.

The *essential* qualities required are predictable enough:

- “Among human qualities, psychological maturity, capacity for dialogue and communication, sense of responsibility, industriousness, equilibrium and prudence.
- “Among evangelical virtues, prayer, Eucharistic and Marian devotion, a humble and strong sense of the Church, love for the Church and her mission, the spirit of poverty, capacity for obedience and fraternal communion, apostolic zeal, openness to service, charity towards the brothers and sisters.
- “In addition, candidates for the diaconate must be active members of a Christian community and already have exercised praiseworthy commitment to the apostolate.”
- A single man must be at least 25, a married man at least 35, at the time of ordination.

Laid out on a single page this sounds exhaustive and demanding. But it is frequently a combination of qualities that is found in good lay men.



Perhaps it is worth noting, from the experience of choosing candidates and preparing them for ordination, the factor of age. Our Church is noticeably “greying”, not only in the ministry, but in the lay membership. Part of this is certainly due to the increasing pressure of life for young families. Many people do not get home from work until 7 pm, and are obliged to travel in at an early hour in the morning. There is usually no alternative to both parents working to service mortgages and pay for education. Housework has still to be done. This leaves little free time for voluntary activities. At the same time, the huge variety of evening commitments for the young, in a climate of perceived danger for them, involves most parents in taxi-duties as they accompany the youngsters to their sports fixtures, music lessons, and so on. Many families have duties towards aged grandparents to fulfil, and organised religion can fall victim.

We find our diaconal aspirants largely amongst those who have seen their children through University, or have even retired. Because of our Diocesan strategy, of a course which runs for three years, beginning every three years, it is hard to make the most of these aspirants. Some may have to wait three years more, because they have just missed the beginning of a course. A man retiring at 60 may think of the diaconate, speak

about it at 61, meet a priest about it at 62, and find he has to wait till he is 65 before beginning his course. He will be ordained at 68, and offer his resignation at 75.

It is still a wonderful thing if a younger person can be encouraged to accept the calling of Christ in this way. It's important that the Diaconate is never perceived as a hobby for the retired. Parish priests should therefore think creatively about this ancient order, which has so suddenly leapt from Medea's Cauldron. We need to take the opportunity to discover its potential and grace, while it is still young and supple.