

Preference for the Deacon in Parish Pastoral Leadership

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In the Roman Catholic Church, and indeed most Christian Churches, pastoral and liturgical leadership of the community is entrusted to one who is ordained. That is, there is a preference for the ordained minister as the ordinary leader of the community over the lay leader.

In this essay I wish to explore the question of the preference for the deacon as pastoral leader in the absence of a priest. I will consider some of the key documents that outline or interpret the provisions of canon law in relation to the diaconate and parish pastoral leadership. Secondly I will offer some reflection on the ministerial placement of deacons. Finally I will consider the challenges of having a preference for the lay over the deacon for our understanding of the sacrament of ordination and our ecclesiology.

Before we commence our exploration of the topic a few caveats are required to establish some parameters for the discussion. Firstly I want to emphasise that the teaching of the Church is that the Bishop presides over local church (diocese) and its liturgical and sacramental life.ⁱⁱ When a parish is entrusted to a priest he provides pastoral and liturgical leadership in the name of his bishop and makes him present.ⁱⁱⁱ Each diocese is a Eucharistic communion and therefore the one who presides at the Eucharist, a priest, is always head of the assembly. Each parish community will always have a priest who has the *cura animarum* for the people even if a deacon or lay person is appointed pastoral leader. Because each parish is a Eucharistic community and subset of the diocese a priest should normally be the pastoral leader.

Secondly we should note that only if a bishop is completely unable to provide a priest to be present as the pastoral and liturgical leader of a parish may he consider appointing a deacon or inviting a lay person or group of lay people to take up the leadership of a parish. That is, real necessity, not a preference for deacons or the laity should determine the appointment of someone other than a priest.

Our final caveat is that a close reading of the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Deacons indicates that deacons have a primary focus on diocesan wide

appointments and appointment to specific communities within the local church, such as youth, married couples or some kind of chaplaincy. They should be appointed to a parish community so that they have roots in a Eucharistic community but not necessarily as their prime ministry and certainly not routinely as leader of a parish in the absence of a priest. More will be said about diaconal appointments later. Routinely appointing deacons to ministry solely in the parish tends to copy the presbyteral pattern and distorts the theology of the deacon as the bishop's right hand man at his disposal for the diocese.

Key documents

Four key documents of the universal Church that are relevant in this discussion are the *Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* (Norms) and *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* (Directory)^{iv}, issued by the Congregations for Catholic Education and for Clergy respectively. Also of importance is the inter-dicasteral instruction, *Mysterio ecclesiae* (ME).^v

The introduction to the Norms and Directory indicate the canonical status of the Directory when it states that,

The *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, as in the case of the *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, has, together with its hortative character, *juridically binding force where its norms "recall disciplinary norms of the Code of Canon Law" or "determine with regard to the manner of applying universal laws of the Church, explicate their doctrinal basis and inculcate or solicit their faithful observance"*. In these specific cases, it is to be regarded as *a formal, general, executory Decree (cf. canon 32)*^{vi}

A general executory decree is defined as;

Can. 32 General executory decrees oblige those who are bound by the laws whose methods of application the same decrees determine or whose observance they urge.

There is no room for doubt as to the intention of the Directory with regard to the interpretation of canon law. The Directory means to interpret the manner in which canons are to be interpreted for deacons and bishops in respect to their rights and obligations. *Mysterio ecclesiae* was adopted *in forma specifica* by Pope John Paul II and therefore it has binding authority when it interprets the law.^{vii} The documents from the Roman dicasteries provide an authoritative interpretation of the relevant canons for the universal church. Local guidelines/directories of a diocese or episcopal conference need to be in conformity with these provisions.

Pastoral leadership in the documents

Canon 517§2 outlines the options for pastoral leadership of a parish community if a bishop is unable to appoint a priest.

If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care.

Interpreting canon 517§2, the *Directory* exhibits a preference for the ordained minister:

Where permanent deacons participate in the pastoral care of parishes which do not, because of a shortage, have the immediate benefit of a parish priest, *they always have precedence over the non-ordained faithful*. In such cases, it is necessary to specify that the moderator of the parish is a priest and that he is its proper pastor. To him alone has been entrusted the *cura animarum*, in which he is assisted by the deacon.^{viii}

The *Directory* also includes a prohibition on the substitution of a lay person for a deacon in the pastoral care of a parish,

Where deacons are available, participation in the pastoral care of the faithful may not be entrusted to a lay person or to a community of lay persons.^{ix}

As the *Directory* concerns the universal law of the Church a local bishop is not free to set aside this provision. The preference for leadership in the Church is always the ordained and the qualification for leadership is ordination. In the best of circumstances the ordained minister would be gifted as leader and animator of a community and be able to lead without dominating and “lording it over the people as the leaders of the pagans do.” (Matt 20:25-27) The reality of Church life is that all priests are not this kind of leader, but their qualification for leadership is ordination and the sacramental bond between them and the local Church through ordination and incardination. Deacons, we may presume, cover a similar range of leadership styles to their fellow sacred ministers, the priests and bishops.

The universal law of the Church would seem to rule out a bishop inviting lay people and deacons to apply for pastoral leadership of a particular parish and then appointing either a deacon or lay person, the one that seems ‘best’ to the bishop. His

only option, according to the Directory and ME is appointing a deacon. The invitation to the lay person will have no bearing on the outcome. If we extend this to other diocesan appointments a similar problem may be encountered with the result that deacons and lay people will be seen as being in competition when they should not be.

Availability

With regard to pastoral leadership the question of “availability” requires evaluation. A deacon who had previously worked as a lay pastoral associate or is currently in full time ecclesial ministry may be “available” in the sense that he is able to take on the task because he is already in ecclesial ministry and he would have developed a set of skills suited to the task. A deacon who has never worked in a pastoral associate role may not necessarily have the requisite skills and capacities for pastoral leadership. He may be technically “available” but I would suggest not truly available until he has had some specific formation in parish pastoral work, and a parish pastoral placement perhaps for at least a year. This minimum is normally observed in the case of transitional deacons whom we know will proceed to parish pastoral ministry. “Availability” in this second scenario means a degree of adequate formation for a full time parish pastoral role.

If there are deacons available in a diocese they should be invited to give an expression of interest if the bishop is truly unable to appoint a priest. Among the deacons of a diocese there may be men who would have gifts for this kind of work in collaboration with other clergy. An invitation to express interest may mean that some deacons will make themselves available once the opportunity is presented.

A preference challenged

The preference for the ordained is under challenge today in the Roman Catholic Church but that challenge is not often recognised. One direction from which that challenge is emerging is with regard to deacons as pastoral leaders of communities in the absence of a priest. I have heard it expressed on more than one occasion, by clergy and laity alike, that if a choice had to be made between a lay person or a deacon, as pastoral leader of a parish in the absence of a priest that a lay person would be preferred over a deacon. Various arguments to support this choice have been expressed as, “preferential option for women”, “preferential option for lay leadership”, “promoting the gifts of the laity,” and “not wishing to impose more clerical leadership on the Church.” It is difficult to imagine that a lay preference would be expressed when considering the appointment of a presbyter as leader of a parish

community or a bishop as pastoral leader of a diocese, because their place and identity as sacred ministers is almost a given of Catholic life. Although a deacon is a sacred minister and participates in the sacrament of Orders along with both of them there is less certainty of their place and identity in the Catholic Church. We should be able to recognise that what is difficult to imagine in presbyteral and episcopal appointments is difficult for diaconal appointments.

It could be argued that an ideological discourse is privileged over a theological discourse when we allow non-theological factors to determine our preference for lay ministers over the ordained. Concerns about clericalism and the development of a “clerical caste” which creates distance between the laity and clergy rather than fostering the participation of all the Church in the mission of Christ is a legitimate concern. Failure to adequately accept the gifts the Spirit gives to lay women and men, for the building up of the Church is also a legitimate concern. Renewal of the diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church, without inclusion of women in that ministry is a legitimate concern which has received inadequate consideration by such bodies as the International Theological Commission^x. Further development on the question of women as deacons is possible and should be explored. All of these concerns need to be addressed but the path we follow should not be to reject the sacrament of orders, to diminish it or to create a competition between clergy and laity. We need to address these concerns and hold onto the sacramental theology which allows us to see all ordained ministry as a gift of the Spirit for the building up of the Church and as a sign of Christ present as Shepherd and Head of his Body the Church.

Why ordination is important in deciding

Ordination is the important criterion in deciding who will guide the community in worship and pastoral leadership because Catholics believe it to be a sacrament by which Christ makes himself present as Shepherd and Head of his Body the Church.^{xi} The preference is therefore not an honour reserved for the one ordained but a concrete expression that the Church recognises and receives this sign of Christ present. Churches which do not recognise ordination as a sacrament show a preference for the ordained woman or man, as the leader of the community and presider at the assembly. Luther and Calvin each stood by the belief that the recovery of the common priesthood of all the baptized did not mean that the laity could substitute for the ordained ministry. In their various commentaries on

Ephesians 4:12-13 both Luther and Calvin stress that the ordained ministry is a gift given by the Spirit for the building up of the Church and that to deny the reality of ordained ministry is to weaken one of the foundations of the church.^{xii}

There is one ministry of order in its pluriform expressions, whose ministers have been called from ancient time's bishops, priests and deacons.^{xiii} Deacons are not ordained to the *sacerdotal* priesthood but they are ordained into the one sacrament of apostolic ministry which "configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ's instrument for his Church. By ordination he is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet and king".^{xiv} Because the deacon is configured to Christ as head and shepherd by ordination he is the sign of Christ's continuing presence and can act as head of the body assembled for worship or as pastor of the community, in the absence of a priest. When a bishop asks him to assume the pastoral care of a parish he does so because the deacon's ordination enables him to act as a representative of Christ in an ordinary manner.

We must remember that the ordinary minister who presides over the Sunday assembly or as pastor of the parish community is a presbyter. The provision for a deacon or lay people to lead is always an extraordinary appointment. At the risk of stating the obvious; if a diocese had one hundred parishes and one hundred presbyters active and unimpeded from exercising their ministry, the bishop could only appoint them and not a deacon or lay people as pastoral and liturgical leaders. If at a later time a diocese had sufficient priests for all parishes any deacon or lay person appointed would have to relinquish pastoral leadership.

Permanent ordering of the deacon

Priests, deacons and bishops are permanently ordered toward the community as by virtue of sacramental ordination. Ordination is a permanent orientation toward the community and a sacramental realisation of Christ present as head in the midst of his body the Church. The lay person who is appointed requires a mandate from the bishop and the appointment is for a limited time only. Other lay people, who are suitably qualified, may be appointed to the leadership role to share it among themselves.

Catholic sacramental theology includes ordination as one of the signs by which Christ's ministry remains effective within the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. While the whole church participates in the apostolic succession in bearing witness to the faith and manner of life, into which we have been immersed at baptism, the once and for all ministry of witness and leadership of the Apostles continues through the sacrament of ordination. The Common Introduction to the *Norms and Directory* provide an elegant summary of Catholic doctrine on this point:

Through the Sacrament of Orders, the mission entrusted by Christ to his Apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time. It is thus the sacrament of apostolic ministry. The sacramental act of ordination surpasses mere election, designation or delegation by the community, because it confers a gift of the Holy Spirit enabling the exercise of sacred power which can only come from Christ himself through his Church. "The one sent by the Lord does not speak and act of his own authority, but by virtue of Christ's authority; not as a member of the community but speaking to it in the name of Christ. No one can bestow grace on himself; it must be given and offered. This fact presupposes ministers of grace, authorised and empowered by Christ.^{xv}

It is this sacramental reality in which the identity of the deacon is to be found. It is this sacramental reality which determines the preference for the ordained as leader of the community as pastor and in worship. To preference the laity over the ordained creates a tension within the understanding of the sacrament of orders and the nature of the church as an ordered communion of all the baptised.

Ecumenical consensus

In Churches which have an ordained ministry, the place of the ordained minister as ordinary leader of the assembly, both as pastor and presider is affirmed. The preference for the ordained is not restricted to the Roman Catholic Church. The constitutive place of the ordained is affirmed in the Faith and Order Commission study paper, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.^{xvi}

In order to fulfil its mission, the Church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ, and thereby provide, within a multiplicity of gifts, a focus of its unity. The ministry of such persons, who since very early times have been ordained, is constitutive for the life and witness of the Church.^{xvii}

The chief responsibility of the ordained ministry is to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of

God, by celebrating the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry.^{xviii}

The ecumenical dimension is germane to this discussion. If a Catholic diocese, in its appointment practice, adopts a preference for the laity over the ordained as leader of the community and its worship it would be at odds with its own tradition and the ecumenical consensus that has emerged in recent decades.

Although briefly mentioned above, it is worth repeating that the preference for the ordained occurs in churches which also ordain women. The preference cannot be said to be a preference for men instead of women. If we were to imagine a church in which only women were ordained to the ministry the same preference would apply if the sacrament of orders is truly a sacrament of Christ present as shepherd and head.

Ordinary diaconal appointments

The clear ordinary preference for ministerial placement of deacons within the local church are in diocesan roles such as, chaplaincies, diocesan agencies and curia, campus ministry in schools or universities, theological education, mission to particular groups such as migrants or youth, as well as many other ministries. Appointments within a parish include such ministries as RCIA coordinator, marriage preparation, and evangelisation in collaboration with a priest and lay pastoral ministers. This ministry placement preference can be deduced from the listing of all the possible ministry placements for deacons suggested in the Directory.^{xix} It is worth dwelling on this ordinary placement in the context of the present concern about preference for the ordained in leadership, especially in relation to deacons.

There are many creative possibilities for the appointment of deacons to ministries which will be potentially fruitful in the cause of the new evangelisation. To take just one example of potential diaconal placements we could consider the deacon as chaplain to a Catholic school. We know that many parents entrust their children to Catholic schools but they do not join us with their children at Mass on Sunday. A deacon may be well suited to bridging the gap between parishes and schools by working in collaboration with school and parish or deanery groups to provide pastoral and spiritual care to school staffs, children and families. Through his ministry he may be able to lead parents and their children into more regular contact with parishes by pastoring them and meeting some of their spiritual needs. If we take Acts 6 as the paradigm of the ministry of the deacon then we soon recognise that it was to just

such a ministry of the word, in its broadest sense, that the Seven are called to address.^{xx} The Seven were to share in the ministry of the word to the Greek speaking community so that those who would otherwise miss out on the effective proclamation, because they did not know Aramaic, could receive the word. Deacons could proclaim the Gospel to many who may not otherwise hear it because of diverse situations of estrangement from the Church. The Catholic school is just one of these pastoral opportunities waiting for a minister to be sent to proclaim the Gospel.

Thinking about diaconal ministry placement is sometimes focussed too much on the exceptional placements rather than the ordinary. That is, a focus on deacons and parish leadership or leading Sunday worship. Such a focus may create issues where none really exist. The Directory articulates a vision for ministerial placement of deacons that does not focus on deacons as substitutes for priests. I would suggest we have yet to address the creative potential of the diaconal ministry or to fully receive the gift which the Spirit provides us in the form of deacons.

A consequence of focussing too much on deacons as leaders of worship and the community is that we may simply be repeating the only clerical model we know which is the priest as leader. We may be imposing the priestly model as the paradigm of all clerical placements. While I do not want to shy away from the challenges of leadership of Sunday worship and the parish community which face many dioceses today, I would suggest that we could be more creative in thinking about a mix of presbyters, deacons and laity in mutually supportive ministry to the people of a parish or a cluster of parishes and to those who are on the fringe of the Church.

What if we preference the laity?

There are several difficulties raised if we preference the laity over the deacons in the absence of a priest as pastoral leader. The first of these is that we run into a logical problem. If we can preference the laity over one ordained minister than why not the others? Why not appoint a lay person as presider over the Sunday assembly or as pastoral leader, even when we have sufficient priests? Why not appoint a lay person as pastoral leader of a diocese instead of a bishop?

The second issue raised is a corollary of the first. To posit the preference of the lay person over the deacon as a norm, suggests that the ordination of a deacon is

something less than the ordination of a priest. If we preference the lay over the deacon than the deacon is seen as equivalent to the laity but the presbyter is not. Such a view jars against the Catholic understanding of ordination as ordering the deacon, priest and bishop toward Christ as head and shepherd of his Church. It runs counter to the recovery, at Vatican II, of a theology of ordained ministry within an ecclesiology of communion which would consider the deacon and presbyter as the right and left hand of the bishop and all of them in a service of ministry in communion with each other and the laity.

A third and significant issue raised by a preference for the laity is the element of competition that is introduced. Behind the promotion of the laity or promotion of women and concern about more clerics are some genuine concerns about the life of the Church which may need to be addressed in various ways. At a deeper level it is hard to avoid an impression that there is competition among the gifts and competition in the body of Christ, which is like that opposed by Paul in Corinthians 12-14. We must find a way of recognising the gifts of women and laity in general, without at the same time fostering division and discord. In a similar way we should be able to accept the gifts of deacons and of the diaconate with peace, joy and a grateful heart for what the Spirit is doing in the Church.

Finally the preference for the laity over the ordained entrenches a view of the sacraments as entirely human constructs, institutional elements which we can change to suit our present social concerns about promoting women and the laity. If we can so easily set aside the sacrament of Order, in the case of liturgical and pastoral leadership of the assembly, than why not set aside other sacraments? Do we only see in the sacraments elements of juridic institutional forms, which when not convenient we set aside? Or do we see sacraments of signs of Christ present and forming his body for mission by the power of the Holy Spirit? Do we see the sacrament of orders as an encounter with the divine in which God provides ministers for the building up of the Church?

Conclusion

Roman Catholics believe that the Sacrament of Order is divinely instituted and that from ancient times the ministries within the sacrament have been known as bishops, deacons and presbyters. The preference for the ordained in the liturgical and pastoral leadership is an expression of the Church's acceptance of the divine gift.

The Church receives this sacramental sign by which Christ, continues to lead his people through the ministry of the ordained. Recovery of the permanent diaconate at Vatican II has allowed the church once again to receive the full expression of the sacrament of Orders and to experience clerical ministry in such a way that makes us re-evaluate the clerical-lay divide that seemed too sharp in the decades preceding the Council. If we were to preference the lay person over the deacon in pastoral and liturgical leadership we would seriously distort our sacramental theology.

The Holy Spirit has provided the Church with a gift, in the form of the diaconate. Among the many fruits of the Council the diaconate continues to unfold and the seeds of vocation seem to be planted in the hearts of many. One of the fruits of the renewal of the diaconate as a permanent order is that it once again asks the Church to reflect on what is the meaning of the Sacrament of Orders and its place within the ordered communion of the Church. There is a great deal of learning about the diaconate and ministry and sacraments that is prompted by the renewal of the presbyterate, diaconate and episcopate initiated at Vatican II.

Accepting the fruits of the Council is a work of prayer and theological reflection which aims at renewing the Church for mission. Any *a priori* rejection of the leadership roles of some clerics which may be based on gender or promotion of the laity leads the church into potential privileging of ideological considerations over the theological and institutional over the mystical which goes to the heart of our understanding of the church as a complex reality.^{xxi} The preference for the ordained in pastoral and liturgical leadership is a reflection of the Church's reception of the gifts which the Spirit gives for the building up of the church, which include the gift of the sacrament of Orders.

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ⁱⁱ Lumen Gentium (LG) 20

ⁱⁱⁱ LG 26

^{iv} *Basic Norms For the Formation of Permanent Deacons and Directory For the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*; St Paul's Publications, Homebush, 1998

^v Interdicasteral Instruction, *Mysterio ecclesiae*: on certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priest. August 1997

^{vi} Introduction to the Norms and Directory, p13. The italicised emphasis is mine.

^{vii} The Supreme Pontiff, in Audience of the 13th of August 1997 approved in *forma specifica* this present Instruction and ordered its promulgation.

^{viii} Directory §41 Emphasis added to the non-Latin sections.

^{ix} Directory §41

^x International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*. Catholic Truth Society. London. 2003. The ITC examined the question and indicated that the Tradition includes women deacons but it side stepped a recommendation to restore the ministry of women.

^{xi} LG 18

^{xii} John N Collins, *Are all Christian's Ministers?* E.J. Dwyer, Sydney, 1992.pp23-26. See also Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New*. Gracewing, London. 2002. For further investigations on *diakonia* and ministry.

^{xiii} LG, Introduction to Norms and Directory

^{xiv} Introduction to the Norms and Directory

^{xv} Introduction to the Norms and Directory, Common Introduction §1

^{xvi} Faith and Order Paper 111 “the Lima Document”, Baptism Eucharist and Ministry(BEM) 1982

^{xvii} BEM 8

^{xviii} BEM 13

^{xix} The potential placements are listed throughout the Directory but the key sections are §§ 26, 33, 38, 40, 41, 42

^{xx} Anthony Gooley; Deacons and the Servant Myth. *The Pastoral Review*, Vol 2/6 November-December 2006, p3-8

^{xxi} LG 8