

# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEACONS

## SOME REFLECTIONS ACBC NORMS AND GUIDELINES 2016: EARLY HISTORY

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I want to offer some commentary on the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and Guidelines for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons (2016). I will do so in a series of articles taking up different sections of the document. I am grateful for the work put into the document by the principal authors Frs Paul Cashen and Michael McEntee. I think they have attempted to provide a solid theological framework and improved on various aspects of the now superseded 2005 guidelines. One of my primary interest as a theologian is the theology of ministry, lay and ordained, in the Catholic Church. I have spent some time in research and writing about the diaconate, producing a few articles, given presentations in various contexts around Australia and overseas, I am currently completing a book to Catholic diaconate today. It is with all of that research and pondering rattling around in my mind that I decided to have a closer look at the ACBC document on deacons. I was also motivated by a number of deacons who have urged me to write something about the guidelines.

In this first article I want to comment on the little historical summary of the early history and decline provided in sections 2.1 and 2.2 of the guidelines. You will benefit by having a copy of the document on hand so that you can follow my commentary. First we should note that the history in the ACBC Norms and Guidelines does not intend to do any more than offer a thumbnail sketch of the early history and decline of the diaconate. We should not push the section too hard for a nuanced history. On the other hand the danger of such thin sketches is that they can cement ideas and mislead unintentionally. My commentary will extend some of the lines of history suggested in the ACBC document.

### **Sources and terminology**

One of the difficulties in talking about the history of the Church and the emergence of the threefold order and even ordination is that there is little Scriptural record and few historical sources on which to rely. What we do know is that in the first three centuries there was a great deal of variety in the kinds of ministries that operated within local churches. Two ministries seem to be prominent in the Scriptural record, that of oversight (episcopate) and deacon. In some places presbyters (elders) also seemed to have a role. Even into the fourth century, when we read sources such as the Apostolic Constitutions and we encounter a clear reference to bishops, deacons and presbyters we should not read back into the sources our present understanding of these orders. It is clear for example in this ancient document that bishops and deacons were regarded as ministers of the Church and were ordained but presbyters seem still to function as an advisory council to the bishop. It is not clear that presbyters were ordained. A bishop in this era was more like our parish priest/bishop combined and the presbyters were not called priests at this time in most documentary evidence.

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Presbyters gradually took on the role of presiding at the Eucharist, in the name of the bishop, in communities away from the bishop's church during the fifth century. This was because the church was experiencing rapid numerical and geographic expansion following its adoption as the State religion of the Roman Empire. Bishops had been referred to as priests (*hierus* in Greek *sacerdos* in Latin) and now that term is applied to presbyters. Deacons, remain as the bishop's right hand men and women during this era and his closest collaborators.

Ordination too is a term that has evolved in the history of the Church. We know from New Testament records and other early sources that the laying on of hands was the ritual act of handing on a mandate. We see this happen in Acts 6, when the Apostles lay hands on the Seven Greek speaking members of the Church and authorise them to share in the apostolic ministry for the ministry of the Word to the Greek speaking community. Overtime the concept of ordination is enriched and extended through ongoing theological reflection.

Certainly by the end of the fourth century there is a clear outline of the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon. From that time until the ninth century the majority of bishops will be chosen from among deacons not presbyters. The reason is fairly obvious. Deacons worked in close collaboration with the bishop providing ministry over what we would call a diocese today, a local Church. Presbyters were confined to smaller communities within that larger territory, though not yet considered a parish in our modern sense. Deacons therefore had a view over the whole diocese and its needs. Most of the deacons would be directly ordained to the office of bishop and not as presbyters first, though this would soon change.

As far as we can trace these faint lines of a developing threefold order, we see that the two which emerged first were bishop and deacon and then presbyter seems to be added later and generally once they assume in a region some of the bishop's responsibilities and especially that of presiding at Eucharist in his name. Even today, a bishop presides at the Eucharist because he is a bishop and a presbyter presides because there is a bishop. The bishop emerged as the focal point of the local church very early in our history.

### **The Cursus Honorum**

The fourth century was significant because the end of persecution of the Church and the adoption of the Christianity by the State meant that some integration of Roman culture was inevitable. The Guidelines mention the adoption of imperial dress and insignia. The dalmatic is a classic example. This garment could be worn by court officials, magistrates, and those tasked with delivering messages from governors and emperors and acting on their authority as ambassadors. It is a significant clue to the understanding the early Church had of the ministry of deacons and their status that it is this exalted dress that becomes their uniform. It places deacons on the same social rank as the civil authorities who were entitled to wear the dalmatic. They would never have associated deacons with servants and lowly tasks or care for the poor. The dalmatic was not originally a liturgical vestment but a sign of civic rank or grade.

It is only after the fourth century that we can actually speak of 'grades' or 'ranks' within the ministries of the Church. Roman civil society was very hierarchical and all persons were ranked or graded in what was called the *cursus honorum* or course of honours. Freeborn citizens could also hope to ascend some of these ranks but some ranks were fixed at birth by family of origin. The Church adopted the language of ranks and grades and copied Roman civil society by introducing the *cursus honorum* into its understanding of ministry. In the

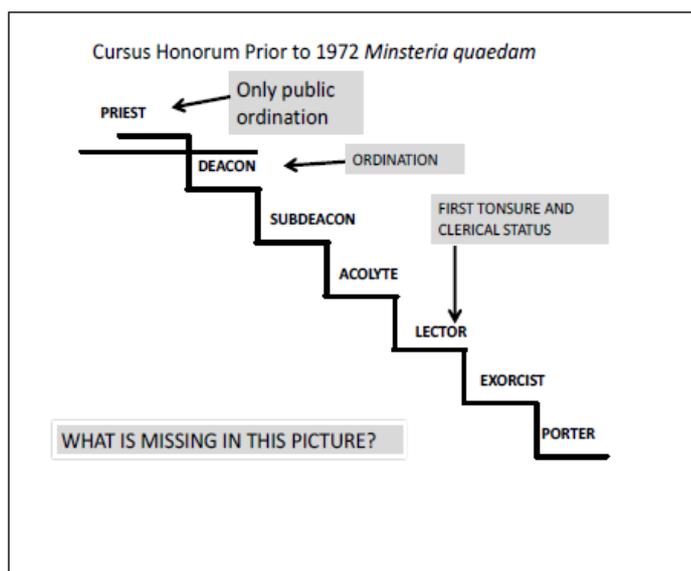
Church's *cursus* men could ascend up all the ranks but women only as far as deacon.

From the fourth to the tenth century the *cursus honorum* in the Church became more codified and the numbers of ranks and length of time between each was addressed at a number of local and regional councils. As we move closer to the eighth and ninth centuries the number and names of ranks/grades become fixed. The *cursus honorum* from then looks more or less like it did in 1965; porter, exorcist, lector, acolyte, subdeacon, deacon and priest. The term presbyter had almost completely dropped out of use. There were some significant changes between the eighth and thirteenth centuries. During this time some lists include deacon as the second last step before bishop and some include priest as the second last step. All attempted to fix the time periods between each rank/grade and as we move toward the ninth century most councils attempted to mandate that a cleric should pass through all grades and not skip any. We saw above that the earlier practice was that deacons skipped presbyter to be ordained bishop.

During the tenth to thirteenth century the priesthood becomes the last of the seven ranks. A man became a cleric not through ordination but through first tonsure. The rite of tonsure meant cutting a portion of hair from the top of a man's head before he became a lector. In many countries tonsure itself had ceased as a practice by the twentieth century but lector was still when a man took on the rights and obligations of clerical life until 1973. The ranks of lector, acolyte and subdeacon were considered minor orders and had no rite of ordination. Deacon and presbyter were major orders and included a rite of ordination. Every bishop had to first become a presbyter before ordination as a bishop. Bishop was also considered a major order. Even after this system became fixed there were always exceptions. One of the most famous being Pope Hadrian V, who was a deacon elected Bishop of Rome in 16<sup>th</sup> century and he died several months later without being ordained presbyter or bishop. His situation prompted a change to canon law which now requires that any man elected bishop of Rome who is not at the time a bishop should be ordained immediately by those bishops present as a bishop.

## Powers

Observant readers would have noted that the seven ranks or grades from the thirteenth century up until 1965 (canonically until 1972) ended with priest. You can see this in diagram one. In fact from around the sixth century on presbyters are rarely referred to as presbyters but as priests. The presbyterate term falls out of use almost entirely and is replaced in Catholic theology and canon law with priesthood. Peter Abelard in the eleventh century and later Aquinas in the thirteenth century regarded priesthood as the highest rank in the *cursus honorum* and not the episcopate. To understand why priesthood was the final point we also need to understand another concept added to the theology of Holy Orders; powers.



From the eighth century onward canonists and theologians, wanted to be able to define more

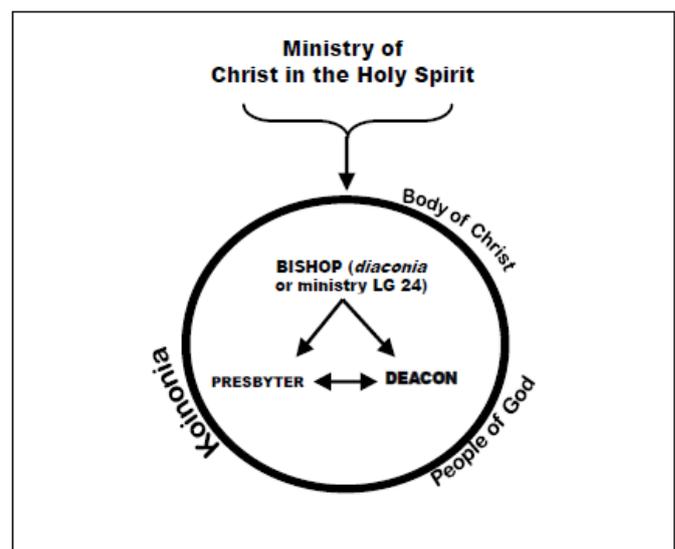
clearly the differences in the rights and obligations of ranks in the *cursus honorum*. They developed a system which described the powers each order had in the life of the Church. The lector had the power to proclaim the Scriptures and preach (outside of liturgy) but not the power to proclaim the Gospel in the liturgy, the acolyte had the power of custody and care of the sacred vessels and to approach the altar with the gifts, and so on up the ranks powers were enumerated. Sacramental power only came through ordination. As it became mandatory for all priests to acquire each power and grade, gradually the ranks only became steps toward priesthood. The lay ministries of lector and acolyte became clerical ministries because of their close association with the sanctuary and altar.

In the very earliest centuries of the Church it became clear to Catholics that when the Church assembles for the Eucharist, as the Body of Christ, that it becomes most fully what it is; the Body of Christ. The term Body of Christ (*Corpus Christi*) generally referred to the physical body of Christ and the Church not the Eucharist, until the thirteenth century, even though the Church understood Christ to be truly present in the Eucharist. The dictum they all understood within an ecclesiology of *communio*, was that the Eucharist makes the Church.

Since the Eucharist makes the Church, Abelard and Aquinas, and ever after until 1965 the Catholic theology of Holy Orders proclaimed that the highest power of Orders must be to consecrate the Eucharist. Therefore since a priest can consecrate the Eucharist this must be the highest rank in the sacrament of Holy Orders. The bishop ceased to be the pinnacle of the sacrament of Holy Orders because becoming a bishop added no higher sacramental power. What a man who was chosen as bishop received was juridical power to govern a territory and that power, unlike priestly power which was sacramental, did not come from Christ but from the pope. It was not long after this that consecration rather than ordination became the common word to describe the ritual for making bishops. It is a similar distinction one finds in the Greek language between *cheirotomia* as in ordination of a deacon, presbyter or bishop and *cheirothesia* as in the consecration of a monk or nun to monastic life. A bishop was known as a *sacerdos magnus* (greater priest) which only underscores the concept that there was no higher sacramental rank than that of priest. That is why bishops then and now (because they still inhabit the pre-Vatican II mentality) speak of themselves as priests and when gathered with presbyters might say “we priests”. The old *cursus honorum* persists in our language and ways of thinking.

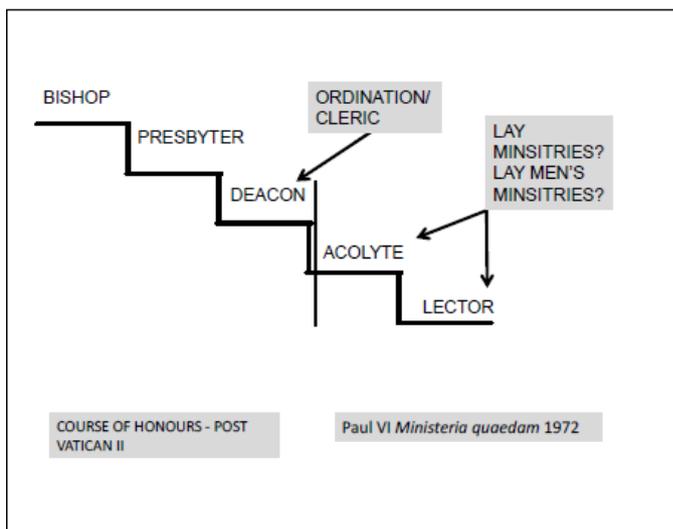
### A recovered theology

Vatican II was the first council to teach that episcopal ordination was a sacrament and also the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders. This is perhaps the most significant teaching of that Council. It resolved a doubt that had persisted about the episcopate since the thirteenth century and reoriented the Church as a communion of communion of local Churches (diocese). Each bishop was head of a Church and his sacramental power came from Christ, not the pope. There is no church without a bishop and not bishop without a church. Therefore when bishops gather in a council it is not individual bishops who meet but churches.



Vatican II also gave us a descending theology of Holy Orders. A man did not ascend up the ranks accumulating powers but the fullness of the one sacrament of Holy Orders received from Christ in the Holy Spirit comes down on the Church through the episcopate and is shared with the bishop's collaborators, the deacons and presbyters (fig 2). This was all made possible and only makes sense within an ecclesiology of *communio/koinonia*.

In practice we live out of the pre-Vatican II mentality and priesthood is still considered the pinnacle and we still have a *cursus honorum*, just a truncated version given to us by Paul VI in 1972 with his letter *Ministeriae quaedam* (fig 3). There is a mis-match between the recovery of episcopal ordination as the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders and the truncated *cursus honorum* Paul VI gave us. They are two irreconcilable theologies. Resolution can only be found, within an ecclesiology of communion by abandoning the *cursus honorum*. At the



1985 Synod of Bishops to mark twenty years since the close of Vatican II the bishops concluded that the Council was about the Church and the Church understood as a communion. *Communio/koinonia* they said was the central motif of the Council. This provides us with the key to understanding the theology of Holy Orders.

This major shift in the theology of the sacrament of Holy Orders that comes from Vatican II makes possible a recovery of the diaconate, not as a step along the way to priesthood, but as a stable and distinct ministry. Returning to figure 2 the bishop is once again at the centre of the communion of the Church, not above it in a hierarchy but standing in its midst's as one Christian among other Christians in the *koinonia* or communion of the Church. Christ only established one ministry in his life time that of the apostolic ministry of witness and building up the communion of the Church for mission. Deacons and presbyters share in the apostolic ministry of the bishop in distinct ways and serve the same mission of building up the Church as ministers of word and sacrament and grace. The whole Church shares in the mission of being the Body of Christ, as witnesses of the hope the resurrection gives and pointing to the presence of the Kingdom of God present and breaking into the world. They are the sign and sacrament of this close union with God and the unity of the whole human race.

We are a long way from that recovery yet. It is not helped by the fact that lector and acolyte mostly remain clerical and we persist in ordaining men as transitional deacons. Both lector and acolyte are reserved to lay men and are not available to lay women, which underscores how much the *cursus honorum* survives in our mentality. We could and should stop all of these practices. A discussion for another time though.

### Reading sources in context

If we jump back in time to look at some of the other references to deacons past, in the 2016 Guidelines, we need some context to understand the references. First we will look at the Seven Deacons of Rome. In Rome for a long time the city was divided into seven regions and over each a deacon provided leadership. This pattern was copied in a small number of

Roman cities like Naples but seems not to have been copied outside of Italy. It is worth noting that the role of the deacons of Rome was similar to that of an auxiliary bishop and also of vicar general or dean in modern usage. The church adhered then to the theology of one bishop in one city/diocese, who was assisted in his ministry by deacons. The concept of an auxiliary bishop was unknown. Today we keep to the letter of the law that says we only have one bishop by only having one *diocesan* bishop. In dioceses with coadjutor or auxiliary bishops the other bishops are from some other diocese, popping in to help out! They are called titular bishops and are bishops of a place where there was once a diocese but there is no longer. It is a fiction we like to maintain so that we can adhere to the law. We could arrange leadership in the Church without a resort to auxiliary bishops. This administrative pattern of seven regions or deaconries is like a deanery within a diocese today, except that the deacon had authority over the clergy and people in that portion of the diocese.

Not much is known about Lawrence's ministry in Rome except the famous and probably invented myth about the treasures of the Church being the poor. He very likely had responsibility for the finances of the diocese in what today would be the position of *economus* or diocesan director of finance. Two things to note are his closeness to the bishop a fact known also to the civil authorities of Rome. The other fact is that in all iconography he is depicted either holding the Book of Gospels or with them in a tabernacle like structure (which was the purpose of the tabernacle then) and he is never associated with money or with the poor. It is also worth noting that patristic sources ask that the deacon be the eyes and ears of the bishop and report to him about the needs of the members of the Church so that the bishop can see that their material needs are met. The deacon acts as go-between so that the Church can respond to their needs. We do not see the deacon himself taking up a charitable or service role. He has a role as bishop's emissary. Whenever we hear references to service and the poor in contemporary Church documents it is because these sources read into the ancient sources the service motif developed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century German Lutheran experience of a ministry of "deacons". It is a concept totally unknown to the Christians and Jews of the New Testament era and early Church.

The ancient sources all bear out the semantic profile recovered by John N Collins in his study; *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*. *Diakonia* at its most fundamental means some form of sacred ministry on behalf of another who provided the commission. *Diakonia* can include ideas like go between, ambassador, executive officer and similar terms but never service to another or care for the poor or charity work. The ordinary ministry of deacon in the earliest church sources seems to have been as the bishop's emissary, ambassador, go-between and executive officer of the local Church. The ordinary range of tasks indicated in the sources included preparation for baptism, catechesis, preaching outside the liturgy, assistance with the rite of baptism, distribution of communion, proclaiming the Gospel, proclaiming the intercessions, taking communion to absent brethren, carrying messages for the bishop and acting as the executive officer and ambassador for the bishop. Ministry was also given to women deacons and they took a prominent role in the rite of baptism of women and catechises of women and taking communion to women. This is mentioned clearly in the sources the Guidelines cite; The Apostolic Constitutions, which also include the rite of ordination for women deacons. Perhaps the next iteration of the Guidelines will include women and men deacons. We can live in hope.

## **Decline**

The explanation for the decline given in the ACBC Guidelines is a common though not well

supported trope. It is true that in a few ancient sources rivalry is mentioned and some deacons did seem to overstep boundaries at times. The main factor for the decline is in fact the rise of the presbyters and their evolution into priests. The adoption from Roman Civil society of the *cursus honorum* meant that as the presbyters evolved into priests and all of the ranks or grades had to be acquired, the orders below priest were simply absorbed into the priesthood. They did not disappear. There seemed to be no other point to the orders below priest except as preparation for priesthood. All orders, including the non-ordained orders of lector, acolyte and the ordained ministry of deacon were absorbed into the priesthood up until Vatican II. Even today no seminarian thinks of the ministries of lector, acolyte or deacon as anything other than a step along the way to priesthood. Formation never focuses on preparing a seminarian for anything else but being a presbyter. He is never prepared as a deacon for diaconal ministry. On the few occasions when a transitional deacon may be at a gathering with permanent ones, such as the chrism mass, he will only join the deacons for the procession in and out and look slightly embarrassed at being separated from the priests whose ranks he knows he will shortly join.

The Council of Trent did indeed call for the restoration of the permanent diaconate and did so because it in part agreed with Protestant objections. One point made by the Protestants of the time was that the Catholic Church herself did not really act as if she believed that the threefold order was of divine origin and part of the constitution of the Church because it did not have a permanent sign of the threefold order. The Church had only priests and bishops as a permanent and stable order. We might say the same today about the idiosyncratic restoration of the diaconate in some dioceses of the Latin Church but not all. It is still considered an optional extra. The Council did vote to restore the diaconate as this permanent sign of the faith of the Catholic Church in the threefold order but after the Council the necessary legislation was not enacted to bring this decision into effect. The 1998 Norms and Directory make this same point.

Both Luther and Calvin strongly defended the notion of office and the need for an ordination of ministers. This is in contrast to the claim in the ACBC Guidelines. Both suggested that those who thought otherwise should be excommunicated because their way of thinking would destroy the Church. What they did challenge was the sacramentality of Holy Orders and also the threefold order. They found in Scripture only a warrant for one or perhaps two ministries. They either found support for a single Minister of Word (and Sacrament) or perhaps also a ministry of oversight (episcopate). Some Protestant communities do have a single and some a double ministry. Both of them likewise challenged the concept of character, the idea that ordination leaves a permanent character or imprint on the one ordained. I presume they also rejected the Catholic teaching that baptism likewise imparts character. Both rejected the notion of presbyter as a priest. They did not recognise the presbyter as possessing in any way a priesthood distinct from priesthood of all the baptised. The notion of priesthood is tied to the notion of sacrifice and they rejected the theology of the Mass as a sacrifice hence no need for priests.

Like their contemporaries, Luther and Calvin experienced the diaconate as a mere liturgical frill. Sometimes men were ordained as deacon and priest on the same day without following canonical indices between orders. Frequently at liturgies which called for a deacon, a priest would simply vest as a deacon and take his part. So like most of their contemporaries they could not imagine the deacon as anything other than a step toward priesthood. They saw the entire *cursus honorum* as a Roman invention and a distortion of the Gospel not justified by

Scripture.

We also need to consider the place of women deacons because they are mentioned in the ancient sources, including some of those referred to in the 1998 General Norms and the ACBC Guidelines 2016. I write about this more extensively in the forthcoming book on deacons but we should note that the female diaconate survived in the West and East of the Church up until at least the thirteenth century. We find evidence of the ordination rituals for women deacons in pontifical sacramentaries in many regions of the Church including in the diocese of Rome. We find a number of canons referring to their status in the Church right through this period. We find reference to them in theological treatments of Holy Orders which simply state that an abbess was known as a deacon. It seems that it became for women a monastic diaconate sometime during the eighth or ninth centuries. It had been what we would now call a diocesan ministry in the period before that. Two Orthodox Christian communities have recently restored the female diaconate; Armenian Orthodox Church and Greek Orthodox Church of Greece. The possibility of restoring this ministry to women in the Latin Catholic Church is under consideration.

## Conclusion

The history of the diaconate and its decline, more accurately described as its absorption into the ministry of priest, is a complex one. Even this brief article just scratches the surface of that history. There have been many different ways of being a deacon even in the period of history this section deals with from the early Church to the sixteenth century. There has always been a ministry of deacon from the New Testament times until the very present. We cannot say the same about the priesthood. There was certainly a time when presbyters were not called priests, were not considered ministers in the same sense as deacon and bishop and when presbyters did not preside at the Eucharist. What we can trace in the history of the Church up until the thirteenth century is gradual absorption of all ministries into priesthood, including that of bishop. From that time on the *cursus honorum* with the priest at the pinnacle was cemented in canon law and the mentality of the Church. The word ministry (*diakonia* in Greek and translated *ministerium* in Latin) had all but ceased to be used in Catholic theology until its recovery in the twentieth century.

The lesson of history still to be learned is how to free ourselves from the old mentality and adopt what Vatican II called for; a *novus mentis habitus*, a new habit of thinking. There are ways we can learn some of this. We can adopt the language of presbyter for priest, our bishops can stop referring to themselves as 'we priests', and we can begin to recognise that the deacon, lector and acolyte did not disappear but were absorbed. We can untangle this by having direct ordinations of deacons and presbyters and not a step wise system. We can also restore the ministries of lector and acolyte as lay ministries for women and men and not as stages on the way to ordination. Perhaps we might ordain women as deacons. History teaches us to learn that things are not always as they seem and we need to look deeper.