

# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEACONS

## PLENARY COUNCIL 2020 **DRAFT**

### Executive National Council of Deacons

The permanent diaconate: Why is it growing so slowly in Australia?

*This draft will form the basis of a submission from the executive of the National Association of Deacons to the Plenary Council. The draft has been widely circulated to Australian deacons. We have received some valuable responses from deacons. At this stage these responses have not been incorporated into the draft.*

Vocations to the permanent diaconate are growing faster than any other vocation in the Church. But in Australia the number of deacons is still small. Why is this? Why are things moving so slowly in Australia?

According to the figures supplied to us by the International Diaconate Centre<sup>1</sup>, based on Vatican statistics for 2017:

The biggest increase in numbers among vocations – a yearly increase of about 2.7% – was found in the case of permanent deacons. However, their number (46,312 worldwide) represents just approximately one tenth of the number of priests. The majority of new deacons is to be found in Asia, South and Central America. Their relative share in the clergy is the biggest on the American continent where there are almost 25 deacons for every 100 priests, in Europe there are eight and in Africa one.

But the number of permanent deacons in Australia is still relatively small. According to the *Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia*, Australia has 2900 priests and only 176 permanent deacons. Some Australian dioceses do not have deacons at all. Some have only one or two. Some dioceses that do have deacons do little to promote vocations to the diaconate.

The diaconate is one of the apostolic orders found in the New Testament and declared by the Second Vatican Council to be, with the episcopate and the priesthood, a permanent feature of the Church. Therefore, a diocese without the diaconate is incomplete.

We wonder why every diocese is not enthusiastically embracing the diaconate and promoting vocations to the diaconate. It astounds us that it is up to each individual bishop to decide whether to promote vocations to the diaconate or not.

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<sup>1</sup> The International Diaconate Centre for the study and promotion of the diaconate has its headquarters in Rotenberg, Germany. Its present president is American deacon, Rev Dr Gerald DuPont. Its website is <http://diaconia-idc.org/#2>.

Deacons actually cost the Church very little. They are usually self-supporting. Bishop W Shawn McKnight, of Jefferson City, Missouri, author of *Understanding the Diaconate*<sup>2</sup>, was a keynote speaker at the National Association of Deacon Directors conference in New Orleans in July 2018. The conference marked the 50 years of the renewed diaconate in the US. Bishop McKnight told the conference:

Deacons are a good buy. Deacons are the cheapest buy in the church. When you compare how relatively little resources the Church often invests in the diaconate program, especially in the ongoing formation of deacons, with the number of hours deacons spend on average in ministry without compensation, deacons are the biggest bang for the buck. The diaconate for some of us bishops is the ecclesiastical equivalent of a Costco or Walmart ... so little for so much in return.

We congratulate the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference for giving the Australian Church the excellent *Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and Guidelines for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* of 2016. They set out a concise theology of the diaconate. They also provide a comprehensive guide to building up the diaconate in all Australian dioceses. We believe that the whole Australian Church should be making the most of the opportunity the bishops have given us to develop a vital diaconal ministry across Australia.

We also applaud the fact that diaconal formators have been meeting and are planning their third meeting in March 2019. We realise that smaller dioceses can find it difficult to form men for ordained ministry. The fact that diaconal formators are coming together and sharing ideas and resources is extremely encouraging.

We share Pope Francis' vision for diaconal ministry and a diaconal Church. We believe that deacons can do a great deal for evangelisation and renewal in our Church.

***This is our main point – a plea to the bishops in every diocese to make a deep commitment to the permanent diaconate and to the promotion of vocations to the diaconate.***

Many Australian Catholics still know little about deacons and our ministry.

If there were a solid commitment to the diaconate and to the promotion of the diaconate and to vocations to the diaconate the number of deacons in Australia could double or treble within the next ten years.

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<sup>2</sup> Published by the Catholic University of America Press, June, 2018.  
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## Two other points

We would also like to see some uniformity across Australian dioceses in meeting the costs of diaconal formation and ministry expenses.

Deacons pay for part, or in some dioceses, all the cost of their formation. As already mentioned, in most cases deacons are financially independent. A few deacons are employed directly by a diocese or a church agency, but they are very much the exception.

We propose that the cost model applied to the training of seminarians be applied to those in formation to be permanent deacons. Men preparing to become priests do not pay their own academic fees. In most dioceses men preparing to be deacons *do* pay these academic fees – on top of all the costs of maintaining a family. This can make the diaconate available only to the comparatively wealthy and those approaching later middle age, when their family responsibilities are less. It can exclude many others.

In some dioceses deacons receive some ministry expenses but in others they don't receive even petrol money. We argue that all deacons should have at least their basic ministry costs covered. Deacons and their families make real financial sacrifices for the sake of ministry and this should be taken into account. But, we repeat, the ministry of deacons costs the Church very little.

Adopting these two proposals could yield a rich harvest of mature men in ordained ministry to serve the church and to bring the lessons of lives lived in marital unity to their dioceses.

## Conclusion

We are stressing the need for the Church to make a real commitment to the permanent diaconate and to the promotion of vocations to the diaconate in every diocese in Australia.

We are also asking that the bishops look at the questions of payment for the costs of formation of deacons and of deacons' ministry expenses.

In June 2016, when Pope Francis met deacons from around the world at celebrations in Rome to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the International Diaconate Centre he spoke of the “commandment of love” as “the last will of Jesus, given to the disciples in the upper room after the washing of the disciples' feet”. Pope Francis continued:

By loving one another, the disciples continue the mission for which the Son of God came into the world. They understand, with the help of the Holy Spirit, that this commandment

involves service to our brothers and sisters. In order to provide for the concrete care of people and their necessities, the Apostles chose several “deacons”, that is, servants. Deacons manifest the commandment of Jesus in a particular way: imitating God in the service of others; imitating God who is love and desires to serve us. The manner of God’s acting – that is, His acting with patience, goodness, compassion, and willingness to make us better persons – these must also characterize all ministers: Bishops as successors of the Apostles, priests – their collaborators – and deacons in the concrete “serving at table” (Acts 6,2). It is especially deacons who are the face of the Church in the daily life of a community, which lives and journeys in the midst of the people and in which the greatest is not the one who commands, but the one who serves (cf. Lk 22,26).

(This submission to the Plenary Council will be in the name of the executive of the National Association of Deacons)