

Appointment Processes

Deacon Anthony Gooley

The Directory states clearly that It is good for the deacon to have some clear indication of his pastoral responsibilities both for himself and for his relationship to others with whom he might minister. A clearly communicated mandate helps everyone; including the deacon identify the scope of ministry and their own boundaries within that ministry. Clear investiture may reduce the possibility that the deacon become a “lone ranger” in ministry and keeps him always mindful that he is a minister in communion with others.

While the capacity to improvise can be a useful and flexible tool for ministry, the basic outline of what a deacon’s ministry is to be should be known by all. Each deacon in every situation should not have to improvise a role for himself. Too much improvisation can make for a lack of clarity in common mission.

“for the good of the deacon and to prevent improvisation ordination should be accompanied by a clear investiture of pastoral responsibility. (#40)

In this short article I want to touch on some aspects of this important section of the Directory. I am sure some dioceses have excellent processes for the appointment of deacons but in others appointment may be more haphazard than the result of careful planning. I suggest that the Directory provides us with some significant pointers with regard to appointment of a deacon and that if these ideas are taken up than the mission of the local church can be enriched in the process.

A Variety of Ministries

Throughout history the ministry of deacons has taken many forms (#40). The Directory gives a fairly wide list of some of the areas for potential ministry of a deacon, scattered throughout the document. Below I list a few of the suggested areas of appointment:

- Christian education of children and adults
- Coordinate RCIA programs
- Marriage preparation and pastoral care of families
- Youth groups
- Migrant, hospital or school or university chaplaincy
- Diocesan chancellor,
- Diocesan or regional tribunal
- Parish pastoral leader in the absence of a priest,
- Curia and diocesan agencies responsible for the pastoral mission of the church
- Director of Mission for a catholic agency

A ministry of enablement

The Directory suggests two reasons for the diversity and variety of forms the ministry of deacon has assumed. The first is the need to satisfy the diverse needs of the community. The second is to enable the community to exercise its mission of charity.

Across our local churches (diocese) there are a variety of pastoral and spiritual needs which the People of God have and which deacons may be able to address. One aspect of the process of diaconal appointment would be to identify clearly what some of these needs are and then to match the particular gifts of a deacon with those areas of need.

Matching needs and gifts suggests that there is already some process in place to identify areas of need in a planned and coordinated way. It assumes that there is some long term strategic thinking which informs the appointment process so that some of the identified needs are met.

Matching deacons to these needs suggests that the bishop and his pastoral advisors are familiar with each of the deacons in the diocese and their particular gifts, qualifications, experience and temperament. There should be a concern to see that the particular talents of each deacon are engaged to the maximum benefit of the community.

Matching deacons to these needs suggests that the bishop and his pastoral advisors are familiar with each of the deacons

Bishop Kicanas of Tucson Arizona, writing in *The Deacon Reader*, points to the necessity of the bishop knowing each of the men in deacon formation and their wives as well as maintaining close bonds with them after ordination. The same advice is provided in the Norms and the Directory for permanent deacon. Through knowing the deacons personally the bishop is better able to accept the advice of his pastoral advisors about potential placement of deacons.

The second reason given for the diversity of forms is that of enabling the community to exercise its mission of charity. The deacon is not the minister of charity per se, although he too may be involved in this ministry. The prime task of the deacon, as with all ministers, is to enable the mission of the majority; the laity.

As a ministry of enablement each diocese needs to ask, where can we place the deacon so that the maximum number of people are enabled to take up their mission? Or how do we enable the deacon to become an enabler of others?

Conferring Office

Sections 39-42 of the Directory are concerned with appointment to office. The section requires some extensive study both canonically and theologically, a study which is beyond the scope of this article. However a few observations and suggestions for the future can be touched on lightly.

Taken as a whole section there seems to be a widening of the term office. Whether or not the writers intended they include a wide scope of activity called office. Included are diocesan and parochial pastoral action (#41), pastoral care of parishes, celebration of the word with communion, parish and diocesan pastoral councils, diocesan chancellor, judge,

diocesan commissions, pastoral work in specific contexts, especially families, ethnic communities and groups with special needs.

Number 42 calls all of the above (and I have shorten the list) offices. This is broader than the traditional and narrower interpretation of the word office given by canonists which is being offered by the Directory.

The ACBC Guidelines (#11) state that an ecclesiastical office is any post constituted in a stable manner by divine or ecclesiastical law to be exercised for a spiritual purpose (Can 145). The Directory seems to be saying that a deacon appointed to a ministry to families or as chaplain of a community or school or the diocesan tribunal, for example, has been appointed to an office. This is worth exploring further.

A second observation is that (#40), although in deciding which office to confer he may and should consult with others who also know the deacons well and are familiar with the pastoral needs of the diocese. The Directory seems to suggest a personal administrative act, such as a decree of appointment from the bishop to the deacon.

A third observation is the necessity to confer ecclesiastical office on each deacon (#40). This would suggest that the Directory has in mind that every deacon in the diocese would have received a letter from his bishop conferring office on him.

The requirement to be appointed to ecclesiastical office also keeps the deacon within the ecclesia, the church, and prevents him from creating his own ministry.

It is for the bishop alone to confer office on the deacon

The ordained are always ordered toward the service of the ecclesia and so the bishop appoints them and directs them toward the service of the ecclesia. Their ministry is never their own but the service of Christ in the community, nurturing and forming the body of Christ.

Careful attention

In conferring office careful attention should be paid to two factors; the pastoral needs of the diocese and the personal family and professional situation of the deacon (#40). What is envisaged then is not a haphazard appointment process but a careful and thought out process.

The first factor, pastoral needs has already been dealt with above. The second refers to the fact that most deacons have families and that consideration should be given to the family stage and situation of a deacon, particularly in large diocese where movements from one are to another may be difficult.

Many deacons are also employed workers, in either part time or full time secular employment. This will be a limit on the placement of the deacon and should be considered in appointment processes.

Identity as Ministers of Christ

In every case it is important, however, that deacons fully exercise their ministry, in preaching, in the liturgy and in charity to the extent that circumstances permit (#40). This is

a significant point for all those involved in the appointments process and for the presbyters and lay pastoral workers who will work with them to keep in mind. The Spirit gives the gift of ordained ministry to be fully utilised for the good of the Church.

Further the Directory states, they should not be relegated to marginal duties, be made merely to act as substitutes, nor discharge duties normally entrusted to laity (#40). There is overlap between the ministries of presbyters, deacons and lay ecclesial ministers and this is as it should be, since they share in ecclesial ministry in different ways. It is not the task of one ministry to substitute for another nor for one ministry to inhibit the other or take over tasks which properly belong to another.

Deacons are not a substitutory ministry for either priests or laity. We do not have deacons because of the shortage of priests and we do not have deacons to exercise lay ministries. They do not have the permanent character of a “supply ministry”.

“The true identity of deacons as ministers of Christ” (#40) will only become visible when they fully exercise their ministry in the Church

I am not sure that we are yet at a point where “the impression [is] avoided that deacons are simply lay people particularly involved in the life of the Church” (#40)

...the gift of the Spirit given to the Church through the ministry of deacons will be bear much fruit

A Matter of Timing

At his ordination the deacon should receive a clear investiture of pastoral responsibility (#40). This can only occur if there has been prior consideration of the needs of the diocese and the gifts of the deacon candidate, who at this stage of his journey of formation is well known by his bishop and key personnel with whom the bishop might consult.

Before his ordination some prayerful reflection and discernment should have been undertaken, especially in the final year of formation. In this way the good of the local church is better served. If questions about appointment are left until after ordination or worse, if they are not considered at all, the uncertainty which is created is not good for the deacon or the diocese.

If there has not been a careful consideration of post-ordination placement, involving the formation team, pastoral planners, the bishop and the candidate and his family then we may be right to ask if the local church has really received the gift of this vocation which the Spirit has raised up. We might also ask if the impression that deacons are lay people with a strong interest in things ecclesial has been avoided or reinforced.

Preparation of communities

This should include the community of the diocese and the community of a parish in which he will normally exercise his sacramental and liturgical ministry.

This preparation should include proper catechesis about the nature of the sacrament of Orders, the relationship between priest, deacon and bishop in this sacrament and Catholic understanding of vocation and the work of the Spirit in providing the gifts of ministry for the building up of communities for mission.

It may be that deacons work in several communities. They may exercise a ministry in a diocesan agency which places them in contact with many parishes in their pastoral role. They should be appointed to a parish community where they would normally exercise their liturgical and sacramental ministry. It may be that the place where they exercise their primary pastoral ministry is not the parish where they exercise their primary liturgical and sacramental ministry. This in itself is not unusual because there are priests and lay people who may exercise a ministry in more than one context, such as a hospital, parish, school or diocesan agency. However, ordained ministers should have a parish to which they are appointed for the normal liturgical and sacramental ministry so that they are not wandering from place to place without roots in a Eucharistic assembly.

...they should not be relegated to marginal duties, be made merely to act as substitutes, nor discharge duties normally entrusted to laity

The preparation of communities requires an ongoing commitment to sharing and communication. "Under the bishop's authority and without multiplying existent structures, periodic meetings should be arranged between priests, deacons, religious and laity involved in pastoral work both to avoid compartmentalization or the development of isolated groups and to guarantee co-ordinated unity for different pastoral activities."(#78)

Challenges and opportunities

Appointment of a deacon presents the local church with challenges and opportunities. There are challenges in the form of discernment of the gifts of deacons but also of the spiritual and pastoral needs of the local church.

There is a challenge not to act in an *ad hoc* fashion or even to necessarily repeat older models and structures to solve pastoral issues. Challenges emerge to a renewed understanding of ecclesial ministry, lay and ordained in concert together firmly grounded in acceptance of the gift of ministry which comes from the Spirit.

There are opportunities for renewal of the mission of the local church. In restoring the ministry of deacon at the Second Vatican Council the Spirit offered the Church the gift of receiving the fullest expression of the sacrament of Orders for the good of the Body of Christ, which is the Church.

This is why careful thought to appointment processes and letters of appointment are so important; so that the gift of the Spirit given to the Church through the ministry of deacons will bear much fruit.