The Deacon: Marriage & the Eucharist

While we are talking about reviewing the Guidelines I think more needs to be said about marriage and the place of the spouse in the Permanent Diaconate.

In Guideline 45 Deacons are described as a “sacramental expression of the diaconal nature of the Church.” I certainly agree with that proposition, but I think the Deacon is much more than that.

Like the rest of us in ministry, the Deacon’s first commissioning for Mission is his Baptism. Then follow the other Sacraments which give legitimacy to his claim to minister. However, unlike those of us in celibate ministry, the Deacon’s marriage enables him to be a sacramental expression of the covenant relationship between Christ and the Church … Marriage and family, as expressions of the Covenantal relationship between Christ and the Church, are too important to warrant an occasional after-thought in the Australian Catholic Bishops Guidelines.

For example, in Guideline 29 the applicant is interviewed by the bishop or his delegate with all the necessary documentation tabled. Then it says: “An applicant’s wife should (!) also be interviewed!! It seems like an after-thought to me. Again, in Guideline 35 it says that “an applicant’s wife will be encouraged (!) to participate in at least some aspects of this formation programme.”

Let me tell you that I would not even think of accepting a candidate for the Permanent Diaconate without seeing him with his wife. Moreover, if an applicant shares his life with his wife, then he will also share the fullness of his ministry as a Permanent Deacon, especially his preparation for ministry. They would want nothing less than that and I would want the same for them. I think the married aspect of the Permanent Diaconate brings a rich perspective to bear in ministry.

And if the Deacon is “an expression of the diaconal nature of the Church” (Guideline 45) and through marriage is an expression of the Covenant relationship between Christ and the Church, then in the Eucharist both expressions of “diaconal” and “covenantal” are brought together. The Eucharist expresses both diaconal (service) and covenant (intimacy with Christ).

Because of this I would expect any Formation programme to have a comprehensive theology of the Eucharist — not a mere unit here or there, but a programme which picks up the fundamentally important aspects of Eucharist as Sacrament and Sacrifice, especially the ‘service’ or washing-of-the-feet aspect of Eucharist.

Just to recap a little: I have maintained that, while it is important to get the theology right about the diaconate and it is important to underpin the ministry with a solid theology, it is likewise important to allow the richness of the mission (or function) of the deacon to continue to develop and grow. A theology which narrows our understanding of the diaconate does not do it adequate service.

I have also maintained that an adequate Formation Course should extend over, at least, 4 years. In addition, while Formation may vary from place to place, a basic Course should be recommended to bishops. And lastly, I expressed my strong recommendation that more emphasis should be placed on Marriage and the Eucharist, and that the Australian Catholic Bishops Guidelines be strengthened accordingly.

+Michael Malone
North Sydney, 18th March 2009

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Dear Brothers in Ministry

In mid-March, those responsible for the formation of deacons in Australia came together in Sydney to formulate a basic program of formation—to tighten up, as it were, the present ACBC Guidelines for the Permanent Diaconate. This was to ensure a comprehensive treatment of all four essential pillars of formation: the human, spiritual, academic, and pastoral. While dioceses may vary in approach, there was a strong desire to ensure that all were ‘reading off the same page’.

Australia has some 105 Permanent Deacons, with some ordained in the early 1970s: Vince Dowdy 1972, C-G (dec’d); and Boniface Perdjert, 1974, Darwin. But with passage of time, experience has shown that a failure to provide such a basic essential formation has left deacons lacking confidence and, in some cases, with a considerable loss of pride in their legitimate calling. This has been detrimental to them, to their wives and families, and certainly to the Church.

The Conference was an initiative of the Aust. Catholic Council for Clergy Life and Ministry, backed solidly by the Bishop’s Commission for Church Ministry. Bishop Malone, Chairman of the Commission, gave an insightful opening address. Extracts of his speech are printed here. Congratulations are due to Paul Simmons, Coordinator of the Permanent Diaconate, who organised this very successful Conference. And to all of its 29 participants, our thanks. Its recommendations will be fed into the ACBC’s review of the Guidelines.

Blessings for the Easter Season,

Frank Devoy
Director
St Paul: His great many helpers, including Phoebe

We meet today and tomorrow during a year dedicated to the memory of St Paul. He was a contemporary of Jesus himself, and he had an enormous part to play in the spread of Christianity and the future structure of the Church.

I had the privilege of co-leading a pilgrimage to Greece and Turkey last May. … We were all struck by the distances covered by Paul during his missionary journeys, but we were even more impressed with his coverage in evangelising in vastly different places.

From the grandeur of Athens, Ephesus and Rome to the small towns along his way, Paul fearlessly proclaimed the crucified and risen Jesus everywhere he went. He comes across to me as a ‘man with a mission’ – fiercely concentrating on his commitment to Jesus.

As he went he established groups of believers under the leadership of a good man or woman. And he valued the encouragement he received from many followers of Jesus.

Listen to this greeting from his Letter to the Romans 16:1-16 ... You notice how Phoebe the Deacon tops the list – “she has looked after a great many people, myself included”, Romans 16:1. ... My choice of the reading from Romans is deliberate because of the myriad of people, women and men, for whom Paul had such a high regard. Phoebe seems to stand out because she proved herself to be a very caring and compassionate person – Paul himself had benefited from her kindness.

Here we have a fundamentally important issue for the Church – that all members of the Church have the right and duty to participate in its life and mission. This is their privilege, right and duty because of Baptism. (Lumen Gentium, Vatican II)

Differing Perceptions of Ministry & Theology

It does not matter very much whether the ministry is formal or informal – the fact is it contributes to the mission of the Church, which is no less than the mission of Jesus: to live a life of service as a sign of God’s love and healing presence in the world.

Therefore, ministry should be understood more as a verb than a noun! “Ministry” or “Ministering” is the active reality of God’s loving and healing presence in the world. It is through the ministry of the baptised person that people experience the love of God. That’s why Paul is full of praise for Phoebe – she is, for him and others, the living reality of God.

This becomes a little cloudy when we come to speak of ordained ministry. People refer to the Bishop, the Priest the Deacon as nouns, not as verbs. It is as if they become ends in themselves. …

All too often we engage in conversations about the differing roles of bishop, priest or deacon. These conversations can end up like union demarcation disputes: the priest can do A B & C, while the deacon does X Y Z and neither should encroach on the other’s turf!! – much less on the bishops!! …

While conversations about roles of the ordained ministers take place, there are also efforts to formulate “Theologies” to support those roles. These “theologies” are necessary, but one of my fears is that too narrow a theology of the bishop or priest or deacon may also narrow our understanding of the richness of the ministry in question.

For example, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Guidelines for the Permanent Diaconate describe “the ministry of deacons is one of liturgy, word, and charity” (No.2). That is a pretty comprehensive ministry description which is clearly stated.

Formation as Transformation

I become a little uneasy when efforts are made to emphasise one aspect of the deacon’s ministry over the other two. Bishops themselves do this I hasten to add! I’m inclined to emphasise the ministry of charity over liturgy and Word, while other bishops emphasise liturgy more. Others again speak of the service of the Word! These different perceptions of the Diaconate can cloud the richness of the deacon’s verb-like ministry of the Church.

These same different perceptions can affect the type of formation which Dioceses put in place for their deacons. This Conference of Formators may care to address some of those different perceptions and perhaps agree on, at least, a basic programme which might be rolled out across Australia.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Guidelines for the Permanent Diaconate are fairly broad when it comes to the Formation of candidates. They speak about applicants obtaining a Degree in Theology, if possible, but don’t mention a recommended number of years for that Formation.

Some Dioceses in Australia put men through a formation process rather quickly ie, in only a few months. I think the ministry requires much more than that to do it justice and to enable candidates to prepare adequately: theologically, personally, spiritually, liturgically.

What is required of formation is a transformation of the whole person. While learning is important, spiritual and personal development is, in my opinion, more important for the mission of the deacon. Transformation of the person is impossible in only a few months – it takes at least 4 years, with a lifelong commitment to further development on top of that. May I humbly suggest that the Guidelines, due for review by 2011, be made more specific in the area of Formation by incorporating a formation period of at least 4 years?