



PASTORAL LETTER ON THE PERMANENT DIACONATE

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

In today's second reading, St Paul tells us that preaching the gospel is a duty, a ministry given to him. He carries out this duty freely as a service to his Lord. Later, in the same Letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that in the Church there are "varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one"¹. There are then numerous different kinds of ministry and service to which Christ's disciples are called. Some of these ministries are exercised by both the lay faithful and the clergy, others only by those who are ordained.

We learn from the Book of Acts that the Apostles chose certain men of "good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" and "laid their hands upon them"² (ordained them) to assist in the ministry of serving the poor. These were the first deacons of the Church.

Deacons were very much a part of the life of the Church in its early centuries but over time men came to be ordained to the diaconate only 'transitionally' as a necessary stage before ordination to the priesthood. Wishing to renew the practice of the early Church, the Second Vatican Council restored the order of deacons as "a proper and permanent order of the hierarchy"³, so that it would be "a driving force for the Church's service or diakonia toward the local Christian communities and a sign or sacrament of the Lord Christ Himself."⁴

All too often, when I am asked about the diaconate and its importance in the Church, the first question I am asked is "What is it that a deacon does?" The immediate concern seems to be with the deacon's function - what he does for the Church - rather than who he is for the Church.

The deacon is meant to be a "living icon of Christ the Servant within the Church"⁵. It is only when we understand this, can we appreciate what a deacon does. His ministry is meant to encourage all the baptized to commit themselves to service of the Church and the world. For this reason, "The vocation of the permanent deacon is a great gift of God to the Church."⁶

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

² Acts of the Apostles 6:3,6

³ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, n. 29

⁴ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Ad Pascendum*, introduction

⁵ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*, n.11

⁶ John Paul II, Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy, n. 2.

The ministry of the deacon is exercised in the three 'works' or 'duties' given to all those who are ordained: teaching, sanctifying and pastoral governance. The deacon's work of 'teaching' is exercised by proclaiming the gospel, preaching, and by giving catechesis. The work of 'sanctifying' is exercised by prayer, in the solemn administration of baptism, in the custody and distribution of the Eucharist, in assisting at and blessing marriages, in presiding at the rites of funeral and burial, and in the administration of sacramentals. His duty of pastoral governance is exercised in dedication to works of charity and assisting in the pastoral oversight of communities or sectors of Church life, especially with regard to guiding the Church's charitable activities.

In 1971 the first two permanent deacons were ordained for ministry in the Diocese of Leeds. In 2018, we have twenty-two deacons exercising their ministry in parishes across the diocese and holding various specific pastoral responsibilities assigned to them by me as their bishop. We are blessed as a diocese with having five new candidates at various stages of formation for ordination as deacons. Their national origins, coming from Polish, Filipino, English and Dutch backgrounds, reflects something of the rich and diverse nature of the Catholic Church in our country.

Through this pastoral letter, I now wish to invite more men in our parishes to think about this ministry. I ask them to pray for guidance and try to discern if they might be called by the Lord to serve Him in the Church as a deacon. Discerning a vocation to the diaconate requires prayer, dialogue, and evaluation. The discernment process involves the candidate himself, his family, his parish clergy and his parish community. The Church's role is decisive.

If you would like to know more about formation for the diaconate in the Diocese of Leeds and the requirements on those who may have a vocation to this ministry, please contact the Diocesan Director for the Permanent Diaconate, Rev Keith Ballard.

Finally, I ask you all to pray for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and the religious life. May Our Lady of Unfailing Help and St Wilfrid pray for us and aid us with their intercession.



✠ Marcus

Bishop of Leeds

Given at Leeds on the 19th January 2018 and appointed to be read, and made available, in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the 3rd and 4th February, 2018.

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