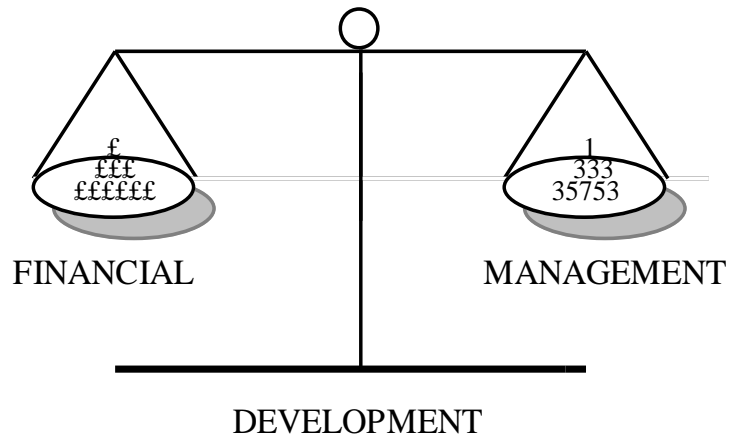


FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

CHRISTIAN MANAGEMENT

NO 912

THE PERMANENT DIACONATE WHAT IS A DEACON?



ONE OF A SERIES OF GUIDES FOR
FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

FROM

www.FinancialManagementDevelopment.com

This is one of a series of documents produced by David A Palmer as a guide for managers on specific financial topics to assist informed discussion. Readers should take appropriate advice before acting upon any of the issues raised.

THE PERMANENT DIACONATE

WHAT IS A DEACON?

I am a Permanent Deacon. I keep getting asked about it. This paper is my response. It concerns the new (well 2,000 year old so "newly discovered") role of Deacons in the Roman Catholic Church. If you want to know more drop me an e mail. God bless

Some quotes

"Deacons are just glorified altar boys."

"Deacons are would be priests who committed the sin of marriage."

"There's no point in Deacons - there is nothing for them to do."

"Deacons are just social workers with a collar."

"When we have enough Priests again we won't need Deacons."

"A parish without a Deacon is deficient." (Saint)

"Deacons and Priests are the two arms of the Bishop." (Cardinal)

"We will know we have enough deacons when by constantly going to and fro they have worn down the artificial barrier between altar and congregation." (Deacon)

Some Typical Deacons

St Stephen - Stoned for preaching too well

St Phillip - Chased foreigners down motorways and Baptised them

St Laurence - Roasted, told the Romans "poor are the Church's riches".

St Francis of Assisi - Publicly gave his father back all his clothes.

Remember, whatever our vocation in life we all need to pray for guidance and keep listening, "Rebuild my Church" was initially misunderstood by St Francis (probably to be a reminder to us that even Saints can get it wrong - although we already have the example of Peter in the Gospels!).

History

The ministry of Deacons is best understood by reading Acts 6: 1- 7.

St Ignatius wrote "No church was worthy of the name without the threefold ministry of Bishop, Priest and Deacon." In the early Church Deacons were an essential part of the Church. By the seventh century it had primarily become a transitional stage on the way to Priesthood. The Council of Trent (1560's) nearly restored the Permanent Diaconate, but it was Vatican II (1960's) which definitively re-established it. Pope Paul VI stated that the permanent Diaconate should be the driving force for the Church's service towards the local Christian communities as well as a "sign or sacrament of the Lord Jesus himself who came not to be served but to serve."

"For the nurturing and constant growth of the people of God, Christ the Lord instituted in the Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body. From the apostolic age the Diaconate has had a clearly outstanding position among these ministries, and it has always been held in great honour by the Church." Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Letter Ad Pascendum, 1972

There are now 26,000 Permanent Deacons in the world, 700 in England and Wales. Scotland have started training men and Ireland are considering it. Pope Benedict in 2005 in "God is Love" emphasised Diaconal Service. "See how they love each other."

Who is a Deacon and what do they do?

Typically a Deacon is a mature (over 35), married (although some are single) man, usually still in secular employment (since few are paid by the Church), although many are retired. They are often doctors, teachers or in pastoral types of employment. They are Ordained members of the Clergy. They have one foot in the world and one in the Church. (Note that Bishops and Priests are Deacons. They remain so by virtue of their Ordination as Deacons. Perhaps a helpful analogy is that Surgeons remain Doctors - even when they have moved into specialist areas.)

“A deacon is ordained to assist the bishop, and work with his priests, as part of the three fold ancient ministry of the Church. The deacon’s ministry has a triple focus: (1) of the Word – proclaiming, preaching and teaching, (2) of the Altar – in Liturgy, and (3) of Charity – in care of the poor and needy, in activating the Social Teaching of the church, and in administration etc.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1571)

Deacons can read the Gospel, preach and assist at Mass. They can preside at Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals. They have a special ministry in evangelisation though helping the sick and needy. They may be school, hospital or prison chaplains, or help others by managing their activities, assisting with catechesis, parish or community administration. They also intrigue their secular work colleagues.

“The deacon in no way diminishes the role of lay people... On the contrary, the deacon’s tasks include that of ‘promoting and sustaining the apostolic activities of the laity’. To the extent that he is present and more involved than the priest in secular environments and structures, he should feel encouraged to foster closeness between the ordained ministry and lay activities, in common service to the kingdom of God.” (Pope John Paul II, General Audience 13th October 1993)

The Catechism teaches *“Deacons share in Christ’s mission and grace in a special way. The sacrament of Holy Orders marks them with an imprint (character) which cannot be removed and which configures them to Christ, who made himself the ‘deacon’ or servant of all.”*

However, the key point to remember is that it is not what a Deacon does that really matters. It is who a Deacon is. They are to be salt and light in the world. Permanent Deacons bridge the gap that has developed between the Clergy and the Laity, "supporting the Christian people in a professional framework" as Pope John Paul II said on 26 January 2004.

Why do they do it?

Because they are called by God. "You did not choose me. I chose you."

The life of the Church has been marked by stages of transition of key roles. The Apostles and early Church Fathers were followed by the Friars, who spread the Gospel. They were followed by the Monks who developed the education and health service in the Monasteries. Then came the Priests who travelled the world and created Parish Communities. In each case the Bishops were the "overseers" not the "doers". An American Cardinal described Priests and Deacons "as the two arms of the Bishop". For centuries the Church has been operating with one muscular right arm. Now, in many Parishes, priests are experiencing burnout through overwork. The Church is currently tentatively flexing the muscles of the atrophied left arm. Who knows if the next five hundred years might see a greater role for Deacons?

Implications for the Parish?

There is another "boss" or another "worker". Roles need to be defined, and agreements have to be worked out in practice. Sometimes a Deacon's calling meets resistance. Few people like change. A Deacon needs to be sensitive to others - that is part of the calling. It is important to structure workloads and have clear communication. To help Priests, Deacons and Laity appreciate the implications, Birmingham Diocese produced an excellent handbook on the Permanent Diaconate as a working draft for constant updating. It is available as one of the documents on the website at www.permanentdiaconate-archdioceseofbirmingham.org.uk

One argument against having a Deacon is that there is nothing for them to do. Ask yourself: Does every Catholic family in the Parish receive a visit from the clergy every year? Are all the sick and housebound receiving Holy Communion regularly? Are local Prisons, Hospices, Hospitals and Schools all receiving full Chaplaincy services? Is the parish evangelisation so good that its congregation is growing 10% per year through receiving new adults into the Church? Is the Parish administration so good that the Parish Priest has plenty of time to pray? Is Catholicism made present in every workplace, school and home in the Parish? Is the Gospel being preached and lived?

How do You become a Deacon?

Wait for the call (remember Eli and Samuel)

Pray

Ask your wife and family

Look at the Diocesan website

Talk to a Deacon

Talk to the Diocesan Director for Diaconate Formation

Talk to your Parish Priest

See your Bishop.....and complete Three or Four years training

If the Calling is not for you, is it for someone you know?

PRAY FOR VOCATIONS TO THE PRIESTHOOD, TO THE DIACONATE, TO RELIGIOUS AND TO LAY LIFE.