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Michael Duignan

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Diaconate
– *A Time to Take Stock*

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At the October 2000 meeting of the Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference, it was decided that:

in the light of the pastoral needs of the Church in Ireland, the Episcopal Conference considers it opportune to provide for the ordination of permanent deacons, and that in accordance with the provisions of *Lumen Gentium* 29b, the Episcopal Conference now seeks the approval of the Supreme Pontiff, John Paul II, for this decision.¹

In September 2001, following a positive response from the Holy See, the Episcopal Conference was invited to submit for recognition a set of Norms for the Permanent Diaconate. A draft National Directory on the Permanent Diaconate was prepared by Father Kevin Doran and submitted to the Congregation for Catholic Education for approval in October 2002 under the title *The Permanent Diaconate: National Directory and Norms for Ireland*. In July 2005, this directory and norms were approved for a six-year period. The way was now officially opened for the restoration of the Permanent Diaconate to Ireland.

Soon afterwards, the Episcopal Conference set up a working group chaired by Bishop Donal McKeown to deal with a national catechesis for clergy and laity regarding the Permanent Diaconate, the setting of norms for the selection and formation of candidates, and the implementation of the *National Directory and Norms for Ireland*. During 2007, Monsignor Dermot Farrell was appointed as National Director of the Permanent Diaconate and Father Gearóid Dullea as Coordinator of the Formation Programme. In March

1 As Quoted in McKeown, D., *The Permanent Diaconate: How Have We Come This Far?* In *Deacons: Ministers of Christ and of God's Mysteries*, ed Dullea, G., Veritas 2010. 12.

Michael Duignan is National Director of the Permanent Diaconate – This Address was given to the Second National Conference on the Permanent Diaconate, at St Patrick's College, Maynooth – June 17th 2017.

2009, the National Training Authority for the Permanent Diaconate was established to approve programmes for the formation of permanent deacons in Ireland. In due course, two programmes were accredited – one from St Patrick’s College, Maynooth and one from the Dublin Centre for Formation in Ministry based at the Mater Dei Institute.

All the necessary pieces were now in place. During the summer of 2008 the Archdiocese of Dublin and the Diocese of Elphin sought suitable applicants, and together they began the country’s first ever propaedeutic year for aspirants. Autumn 2009 saw two three-year formation programmes begin – one in Dublin and the other in Sligo. The first permanent deacons were ordained by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin for Dublin in June 2012 and by Bishop Christopher Jones for Elphin in December 2012 – fourteen deacons in all.

Soon the Dioceses of Armagh, Dromore, Kildare and Leighlin, Kilmore, Kerry and Waterford were to follow, with fifty-eight permanent deacons having been ordained for eight dioceses by September 2016. In the meantime, the Dioceses of Cork and Ross, Cloyne, Clogher, Down and Connor, Ferns and Achonry all began forming candidates for the Permanent Diaconate. Currently there are sixty-eight candidates for the Permanent Diaconate in six formation centres in Ireland. Autumn 2017 will see the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise and the Archdiocese of Tuam accept applications to the propaedeutic year for the first time. This will bring the number of Irish dioceses actively engaging with the Permanent Diaconate to sixteen. In just two years’ time, it is likely that over one hundred permanent deacons will have been ordained to serve the Church in Ireland. The vast majority of these deacons are married and have children. This represents a major development for the Church on this island. The reality of having one hundred permanent deacons in ministry offers us an ideal opportunity to take stock of our restoration of this ancient ministry.

Casting an eye over the journey the Permanent Diaconate has taken to date, it is evident that a large amount of time and energy has rightly been put into developing and deploying an appropriate formation process. Dioceses have put considerable work into delivering a rounded formation for candidates to include personal, spiritual, pastoral and academic formation provided for in local centres. In reality, permanent deacons are generally well accepted by laity and clergy. They are providing a much needed positive addition to ministry in the Church at many levels and are gradually becoming part and parcel of parish and diocesan life.

Now may be an opportune time for a formal review of the selection and formation processes in order to learn from the journey

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so far. Such learning could be a valuable tool in forging an even better future. It may well see the emergence of issues such as the possible development of common selection criteria and processes for the country as a whole and greater structured co-operation between dioceses as regards the organisation and delivery of the various formation programmes. There is a growing realisation that the overly packed nature of the three-year formation programme for someone with a family and full-time secular employment leaves little time for reflection and integration. Some readjustment may be needed here. Greater uniformity could be brought to the pastoral formation components of the programme and a greater space for the involvement of wives and families must be found. Any modification needs to enhance rather than detract from the generally accepted and internationally recognised positively robust nature of the Irish formation system for permanent deacons.

Understandably, the formation of candidates for the Permanent Diaconate has been a primary concern. However, with the growing number of ordained deacons ministering throughout the country, attention now needs to be focused more than ever on the lived reality of being and ministering as a permanent deacon, and the role of the Permanent Diaconate within a suitable fit for purpose collaborative model of ministry for the Church in Ireland. There are many emerging issues that stand in need of further reflection and informed action. I would like to draw attention to six.

Not “Replacement Priests”

The decline in vocations to the priesthood, coupled with the pressure to continue to provide pastoral services, can result in permanent deacons being conceived of and deployed as “replacement priests”.² While understandable, this runs the risk of the specificity of the permanent diaconate and its particular role in the ministry of the Church being sacrificed to the exigencies of our times. As a consequence, the deacon as minister of the Altar and of the Word has tended to overshadow almost completely the deacon as a minister of charity engaged in service at the margins of society and of the Church.³ Such a situation risks robbing us of the profound richness the Permanent Diaconate can bring as a

2 On this point *The Permanent Diaconate: National Directory and Norms for Ireland*, Veritas 2012, 5 state: “Permanent deacons are not ‘substitute priests’, nor are they intended to take the place of religious, or of lay ministers. The integration of permanent deacons into the ministerial fabric of the Church will require that the inter-relatedness of ministry be clearly understood and properly managed.”

3 *Lumen Gentium* 29. states that: “Deacons ... receive the imposition of hands not unto priesthood, but unto a ministry of service. For, Strengthened by sacramental grace they are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity.”

permanent reminder of the intrinsic servant nature of Christianity. To quote Pope Francis: “A disciple of Jesus who does not serve others is not Christian.”⁴

A Collaborative Model of Ministry

The introduction of the Permanent Diaconate has the potential to shed light on the model of ministry operative in many places. The arrival of a permanent deacon (s) in a diocese, parish or pastoral area challenges the bishop, parish priest, the area priests and the parish team including lay ministers to raise and answer in a practical manner the question of who does what and why? The opportunities of such a situation, the risks involved of tensions between priest and deacon and the understandable anxiety of lay ministers and women needs to be discussed further. This calls, not for an overly cautious attitude towards the Permanent Diaconate as we know it, but rather for the development and enactment of a truly shared model of collaborative ministry for the benefit of all.

Marriage and Family Life

For the first time, the Permanent Diaconate introduces ordained married ministers into the pastoral situation of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Marriage and family life effortlessly come to the fore in the ministry of married deacons. This brings with it potential enrichment for all concerned. However, married ministry is not without its challenges. The development of a greater understanding of the married deacon’s particular commitments to his wife and family is essential. In practice, the deacon’s responsibilities to his wife and family need to be greater acknowledged and accommodated by all concerned. The appropriate development and resourcing of outreach mechanisms and ongoing support and formation for wives and family members is required.

Ongoing Formation

While the formation programme brings with it a certain structure to the candidate’s personal, spiritual, academic and pastoral reflection, there now needs to be a similar structure brought to the area of the ongoing formation of permanent deacons. Although some dioceses have put in place some systems of ongoing formation, there is a real need for the further development of opportunities for deacons to meet together at either diocesan, inter-diocesan and even at

4 Pope Francis, Homily at Santa Martha, 11th June 2015. *The Permanent Diaconate: National Directory and Norms for Ireland*, Veritas 2012, 20. emphasise that: “in a pre-eminent manner, the deacon is called to be a witness of the charity of Christ, reproducing in his ministry the merciful action of the Lord, who came not to be served”

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national level to share experiences of ministry and to strengthen their common bond.⁵ Leadership and organisational structures for such initiatives need to be determined. It would be a mistake to confine the need for ongoing formation to deacons alone. Opportunities and courses for those involved in the formation of permanent deacons, for those assisting with the day to day management of the permanent diaconate in dioceses and for those working with permanent deacons in parishes are required.

New Structures

Deacons are gradually taking their place in and contributing to various parish, diocesan and even national structures. However, diocesan clergy gatherings, clergy retreats, common procedures for visiting deacons and even diocesan circulars and invitations need to be modified to take into account and include the novelty of the permanent deacon present in the midst of parish and diocesan life. As dioceses move from the formation phase to developing the ministry phase of the permanent diaconate this needs to be reflected in clear structures such as the appointment of a director of formation for those in formation and a director of the permanent diaconate for ordained deacons engaged in ministry.

Promoting Vocations

Finally, the question of the appropriate promotion of vocations to the Permanent Diaconate needs to be addressed. This is a sensitive area against the backdrop of the urgent need to promote vocations to the Priesthood and the need to respect the particular vocation of the laity in the life of the Church.⁶ It is an issue that perhaps will only gain greater clarity the more the particularity of a vocation to the permanent diaconate, *vis á vis* that of the priesthood and that of the laity, has received further sustained attention. For the Lord of the harvest calls labourers of many different varieties to work together in harmony for the renewal of the face of the earth.

5 *The Permanent Diaconate: National Directory and Norms for Ireland*, Veritas 2012, 59. state: "Ongoing formation should be provided for all deacons and participation in such programmes should be a condition of their continuing involvement in diaconal ministry. This ongoing formation will include elements of the four categories of formation to which reference has already been made. Deacons will take part in an annual retreat and in such other spiritual activities as will help them to maintain and deepen their personal and ministerial spirituality."

6 In this regard, the Congregation for Catholic Education and Congregation for the Clergy in its Introduction to *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and Directory of the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, 1998 Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2. states that: "the restoration of the permanent Diaconate was in no manner intended to prejudice the meaning, role, or flourishing of the ministerial priesthood, which must always be fostered because of its indispensability."

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The Permanent Diaconate has been restored now to the Church in Ireland. Far from abandoning it to its own fate, it needs renewed and sustained attention and care if it is to develop its own particular and hopefully life-giving contribution to Church and society in the years to come.

Other Voices. One major change in Pope Francis' style as Bishop of Rome, that has enormous implications for ecclesiology, that he is willing to include the voices of others, as he does in both his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ('The Joy of the Gospel') and in *Laudato Si'*. The first voice in *Laudato Si'* comes from the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who since his election as patriarch in 1991, has constantly focussed on protecting God's creation, especially the water bodies of the world.

– SEÁN McDONAGH, *Laudato Si': An Irish Response* (Dublin: Veritas) p.11.