

Towards a Vision for the Permanent Diaconate in the Diocese of Portsmouth

I'm very happy to be here for this address! It was good to meet many of you last month at the Vatican II Conference and I have also been meeting some of you with the priests in the Pastoral Area groups.

I would like to say a brief word about the identity and role of the deacon in our Diocese of Portsmouth. Fr. Peter has given this address an ambitious title. I would want to say immediately that any vision for our diocese must be absolutely faithful to the 1998 Vatican *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, and the 2010 CBCEW *Directory for the Formation of Permanent Deacons in England and Wales*. Let me also add that any vision must honour, support and value the crucial role played by deacons' wives and by the families of deacons, although I will have to leave speaking about that to another occasion.

Let me preface these remarks by making two differentiations. First, to differentiate 'what a deacon is' from 'what a deacon does', i.e. the sacramental, spiritual and theological nature and identity of the deacon - the ontology if you like - from the deacon's day to day functions and his actual ministry. Being comes before doing. The diaconate is the first grade of Holy Orders, the Church's three-fold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon. As an ordained minister, the deacon is configured to Christ the Head of the Church and so he shares in Christ's triple *munera* as priest, prophet and shepherd. He is thus a Minister of the Altar, a Minister of the Word, and a Minister of Charity. Of course, the diaconate is not a *Bene Merenti* or long-service reward given to leading laymen, nor is a deacon a substitute priest. The deacon is configured to Christ the Servant. He is a living icon of Christ the Servant. To become a deacon involves a vocation from Christ and his Church to be a minister, a servant, a man directly under the bishop, ready to go wherever the bishop needs him. Usually, though not necessarily in every case, this also means serving under a priest who shares in the authority of the Bishop and who acts in his name.

We must also make a second helpful differentiation. We need to differentiate the three moments within the process of diaconal formation:

- vocations promotion and vocations discernment;
- the primary formation of deacons with its four pillars: intellectual, spiritual, pastoral and human; and then
- the ongoing in-service formation and the pastoral care of deacons and their wives.

Fr. Peter and I have been discussing how we might in time develop appropriate pastoral support for these three moments, perhaps with sub-groups responsible for each: vocations, formation and ongoing formation/pastoral care.

What is of primary importance for our Portsmouth vision is how to help deacons foster and develop a truly diaconal heart, to be men configured to Christ the Servant, men who love and serve the people with Christ's love, because they have a strong sense of their vocation and sacramental identity. This means developing a spirituality of service, becoming a 'living icon of Christ the Servant.' This is why daily prayer is absolutely essential: the Divine Office, daily Mass if possible, the Rosary, the study of the Gospels, *lectio divina*, and the study of the teachings of the Church, especially the *Catechism*. In a busy 'out-there' culture, we need to focus on developing the 'in-here' and an evangelical 'interiority'. The vocation of the deacon is to configure himself and his life to Christ the Servant, and in so doing to give his life in service of the Church, under the direction of the Bishop. Christ must increase; I must decrease. I must live for Him not for me. I must be a man for others, not a man who makes the whole world revolve around himself. I have to 'let go and let God!' Speaking as your

Bishop, I absolutely insist and I challenge you: I cannot think of any better way to acquire and develop such a spirituality than by spending, regularly, indeed every day if you can, at least 30 minutes in silent prayer and adoration of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. In other words, I would wish our Portsmouth deacons to be known for their holiness of life, their humility, their Christ-like spirituality, their personal-passionate love for Jesus above all in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

From being to activity. What deacons do is very varied. In most cases in the Diocese of Portsmouth, deacons are appointed by the bishop to assist priests with the pastoral care of their parishes within the various pastoral areas. Yet deacons need not necessarily be appointed to parishes. As I go round the diocese, I find myself asking: What other needs do we have? Which existing ministries could be given to deacons: chaplaincies in schools, hospitals, prisons, parish administration, spiritual direction, interreligious dialogue, ecumenism, marriage preparation and support, counselling and human development? Could deacons serve or lead some of our diocesan commissions? For the Church in our Western secular culture, new evangelisation is now a central task and deacons are important agents of this, communicating the Catholic faith within contemporary culture. What new fields of ministry need to be opened up? Depending on their gifts and skills, could deacons, for instance, be used to evangelise, to enter into critical conversation with, the cultural sectors: finance, the arts, management, psychology and counselling, medicine, shopping centres, local government, travel nodes, and so on? Indeed, what about those deacons who work and are present as sacred ministers in secular domains and professions? What about the role of the deacon within his family? More, should we be encouraging younger candidates to come forward? Or identifying possible candidates with the skills the diocese needs?

Now to the qualities of a deacon: What would be some of the qualities hoped for in our Portsmouth deacons and in the candidates for the diaconate? The deacon should fundamentally be a man whose life is modelled on Christ the Servant, a man of the Beatitudes, a man for others, a man practised in Christian virtue and purity, a man free from anger and self-centeredness with his passions controlled. He should also be a man totally available for whatever the Bishop needs, who lives his life each day as an oblation of service to Christ. I would hope for men willing and able to be collaborative ministers, devout and thoroughly faithful to the Church's Magisterium, yet able to explain sympathetically and attractively the Church's teaching, whilst being open to new ideas, methods and approaches. I would hope for men who avoid clericalism in its various forms, yet when on duty, would wear 'clericals', thus proudly identifying themselves as men of the Church. I would hope for men happy to work ecumenically, to be people of justice and social responsibility, inspiring evangelists, able to engage confidently in conversation with all people of good will, and yet also be men of critical reflection on matters to do with contemporary culture. To do this, we have to keep ourselves up to date in both theological AND secular knowledge, a man of imagination and zeal, anxious to devise new ways of evangelisation that capture peoples' imaginations.

St. Stephen and St. Lawrence are the models. Let me sum this up. A Portsmouth deacon should be a man

- configured to Christ the Servant, a man of prayer with a personal-passionate love for Christ
- a man who, if he is married, loves and supports his wife and family, who strives to coordinate and balance family, work and ministerial commitments
- someone who loves people and is able to relate well, a listener as well as a talker
- a man able to live out his vocation in a work context
- a man who is able to collaborate effectively with the Bishop, local clergy and other ministers

- a man of mission and evangelisation, striving for the Kingdom
- a man of the Church with a broad vision, but not clerical
- someone who knows his faith, who knows contemporary culture and who tries to keep up to date
- a collaborative, ecumenical and sincerely 'dialogical' minister, devout, flexible, zealous and imaginative
- a man committed to ongoing spiritual and professional development
- a man of prayer who strives to say the whole Divine Office each day, or at least those parts of it mandated by Canon Law.

What skills are needed? If we take the triple *munera*, then, first, as a Minister of the Word, a Portsmouth deacon will be able

- to proclaim the Gospel and preach effectively at Mass and in the Liturgy
- to read the signs of the times in the light of Christ and to critique structures
- to catechise and instruct others, with all the pastoral care involved

As a Minister of the Altar, he will be

- liturgically proficient and effective, a man imbued with the *ars celebrandi*, who follows exactly the liturgical norms of the Church as laid down in the *General instruction of the Roman Missal* and other documents
- a man able to celebrate baptisms and funerals with all the pastoral care involved
- a minister able to celebrate marriages, prepare couples for marriage, care for and support married couples, and counsel those in difficulty
- a minister able to care for the sick, visit hospitals and offer the necessary pastoral care

As a Minister of Charity, he will be a man

- of justice and social concern, truly a 'bridge'
- someone able to liaise with social agencies, take local initiatives, become involved with local structures and charities, the local school, etc
- keen on acquiring a knowledge of how to assist the needy
- able to help with parish administration
- with a sincere knowledge and love of the people and contexts to whom he is sent

I realise that all of this is a tall order! I know it is a long list and an immense challenge, one we can only dare to begin by the grace of God, assisted by the intercession of St. Stephen and St. Lawrence. But let me end here by thanking you profoundly, on behalf of Our Lord and His Church, for all that you do as deacons and for all that you deacon-students aspire to be: for your witness, your example, your fidelity, your loyalty, your hard work and your love. As I said before, it's not easy being a disciple today. It's not easy to be a Catholic today. It's not easy at all to be a deacon or a priest today, and next summer I want to invite all the clergy to a special Day of Reflection on being a Priest in a Secular Culture. The world offers many tempting options. Many things vie for our attention and to remain faithful to the Lord requires energy. Yet we know that Christ is the Way. We know from the spiritual homing-device in our hearts that Christ is the Truth. We know that Christ is our Life and that we must do everything we can in order to find him, to sit at his feet, to imbibe his Word, and to draw Love from his Sacred Heart. For it is in Him alone that we can find the true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which we long.

Thank you for listening. Please pray for me – as I will be doing each morning in Bishops House for you.