

The Permanent Diaconate

On 14th October 2018 history will be made in the Diocese of Down and Connor when nine men will be ordained to the permanent diaconate. These men began their journey in September 2014 when, after a process of application they set out on their first year of prayer and discernment (Propaedeutic year) seeking through prayer and reflection clarification as to if it was Holy Orders to which they had been called. Some who did embark in this process decided it was not their calling. Those who felt it was began a three year academic course of study leading to a Diploma in Diaconate Studies awarded by Maynooth Pontifical University of Ireland. The course covered Theology (Systematic, Moral and Pastoral), Scripture, Liturgy, Church History and Canon Law. Their course was delivered every other weekend in St Mary's University College, Belfast. They also attended three residential weekends annually and since their second year were working in parishes as well as hospital and prison chaplaincy.

What is a Permanent Deacon?

Origins and History The Acts of the Apostles describes how, in the first century, the Church was faced with the challenge of responding to the needs of those who were at risk of being marginalised, either through culture or through material poverty. Keeping in mind the example of Jesus, the Apostles selected and ordained a number of men specifically for this service.

For a number of centuries, deacons ministered in close co-operation with the bishops of the Church, assisting at the Eucharist, preaching the Gospel, and exercising a ministry of charity.

Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Orders, is probably one of the best known deacons, though many tend to assume that he was a priest. Gradually, in the Western Church, the functions of deacons were absorbed into the ministry of the priest, and the diaconate became a transitional order, for those on the way to priesthood. The diaconate continued to exist as a permanent ministry in the Eastern Churches, including those in full communion with Rome.

Renewal

The Second Vatican Council envisaged a renewal of ministry, both lay and ordained, in the Church. The Council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, explains that the lay faithful, by virtue of their Baptism, are commissioned to an active apostolate and insists that "every opportunity be given them so that, according to their abilities and the needs of the times, they may zealously participate in the saving work of the Church."

The Second Vatican Council also proposed the restoration of the diaconate as a "distinct ministry of service" to be exercised "in communion with the bishop and his group of priests". Many of the functions which deacons perform can also be carried out by members of the lay faithful. The restoration of the diaconate is not intended in any sense to change that situation. The idea is that some of those who already exercise these functions would be "strengthened with the grace of diaconal ordination" and in that way would be designated to be a visible public sign of the Christ the Servant in the community of the Church.

What do Permanent Deacons Do?

The first responsibility of the deacon is to be an effective visible sign of Christ who came to serve rather than to be served. Although the ministry of the deacon may be exercised on a part-time basis, he remains at all times a deacon and he is called, in his life-style, to reflect this.

The ministry of the deacon is an expression of his being, as the documents say, an icon of Christ the servant. The areas of ministry which may be entrusted to deacons fall under three general headings, Altar, Word and Charity. They include:

ALTAR

- Assisting the priest at the celebration of the Eucharist
- Bringing the Eucharist to the sick at home and in hospitals
- The formation of altar servers and Ministers of the Eucharist
- Presiding at Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament
- The celebration of Baptism
- Celebrating marriages (with the appropriate delegation)
- Presiding at funerals

WORD

- Proclaiming the Gospel at the Liturgy
- Preaching the homily
- Participating in sacramental preparation programmes
- The formation of Ministers of the Word
- Facilitating study of, and prayer with, the scriptures

CHARITY

- Facilitating the development of lay ministry
- Visiting the sick
- Visiting prisoners
- Visiting the bereaved
- Youth ministry, and the facilitation of peer-ministry among young people
- Promoting awareness of the social teaching of the Church
- The promotion of justice and human rights