

The spirituality of a permanent deacon

A wee girl once asked her mother:

"Mummy, where did I come from?"

As much to buy thinking time as anything else, the mother replied,

"That's a very clever question, darling. What made you think of it?"

"Well," said the wee lass, "there's a new boy in our class, and the teacher says he came from Kosovo, so where did I come from?"

Actually, the wee girl's question and her mum's misunderstanding have something in common. Whether it was a question about her home and environment, or a much more intimate question about relationships, at the root of the question was a search for identity. The wee girl was already trying to understand who she was. And if we are going to understand our own spirituality, never mind nurture and develop it, we need to begin by understanding who we are

and, in the most profound sense, where we come from.

Identity! Who you are is not the same as what you do. On my classroom wall at Lawside Academy there is a photograph taken when I was ordained deacon, with musicians from the school band who had played at the ordination Mass - I won't call it "my ordination" because it is really important to appreciate that it wasn't mine; diaconal ordination is a gift to the Church and the community rather than to the individual - but anyway, there are all these teenagers in school uniform with their various instruments, and me in my dalmatic.

And every once in a while some pupil will notice the picture and say,

"I didn't know you were a priest."

So of course I explain that I'm not a priest but a deacon. Well I don't explain it really, I just tell them - so the next question is usually:

"Deacon? What's that when it's at home?"

I should have it off-pat by now but I don't. I usually say that I'm an ordained Catholic minister but not a priest. So they start to ask what I do - now that I can answer much more easily. There are also photos of my nephews on the wall so I usually mention that I baptised them. Once they have a long enough list of what deacons can and can't do, they go back to the joys of total internal reflection in optical fibres. **They think I've answered their question. But I haven't, have I?** Indeed one criticism of the restored diaconate has been that deacons do nothing that couldn't equally well be done by others - it's a true statement but it's not a valid criticism because who you are is different from what you do. **And being a deacon is about who you are, not about what you do!**

Unlike me, most deacons are husbands and fathers - so let me illustrate the point I'm trying to make in another way. If you were to go abroad on holiday with your family, and you got a phone call asking you to drop everything because there's a problem at work, how would you react? Compare that with what you would do if you were abroad due to work commitments and got a phone call saying drop everything, there's a problem

with one of your kids. Your job is what you do; being a father is not what you do but who you are. **You can change what you do but you can't change who you are. You can go on holiday from work but you can't stop being yourself.** Ordination, like baptism, "imprints a character" to use the jargon - it doesn't just give you a function. That's why I don't like the term "part time ministry". That's like saying that if you have a job then you're only a part-time father. It doesn't make sense. **There are no part-time deacons! You can't have time off from who you are!**

So the Church in her wisdom teaches that for her ordained ministers,

"Progress in the spiritual life is achieved primarily by faithful and tireless exercise of the ministry in integrity of life".

Although that was first stated in relation to priests it is restated specifically in the context of permanent deacons, in the **"Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons."** I'm

sure you will have studied it, but chapter three, relating to spirituality of permanent deacons, should not just be studied - it is suitable for, and deserving of, prayerful reflection.

So the first of my buzzwords for today is **INTEGRITY**, or integration, or wholeness. Our spirituality as deacons should be part and parcel of our everyday lives. It is about how we live our lives, not just a safe haven for when we're tired or afraid. If you like, the deacon's whole life should be a prayer. Diaconal spirituality should be the subtext for everything the deacon does at home, at work, in the liturgy or anywhere else. Jesus came "that we may have life, and have it to the full." I think that's a great text for a deacon to reflect on. So we ask ourselves, **what does it mean to live life to the full as a deacon?**

About a year ago I met with some young people in the parish and I invited them to think about their ambitions. All of them first spoke of what they wanted to do as a job. To be fair to them, I didn't have to push them very hard before they sussed that they'd got it wrong and that a job, even their dream job, was not really what they

most wanted out of life. As an aside, I did wonder though about what we have done as families and as communities to reach the point where young people's ambitions look first to work rather than to relationships and so on. Maybe it explains what's been happening in terms of vocations - but let that pass for now.

The reason I was asking the kids about their ambitions was to lead them to reflect on this gospel passage:

Mark 9:33-37 (Read it here)

That passage flags up the other two key ideas I see in diaconal spirituality - my other two buzzwords - **SERVICE** and **HUMILITY**. It has to be said that the two go hand in hand for the deacon, because both reflect a life lived **selflessly**. We all know by now Mother Teresa's famous saying that God calls us **not to be successful but to be faithful**. That she was not speaking about ordained deacons is not the point - she was still speaking about Christian service, about **diakonia**. And one aspect of the humility that we need to have as deacons is the understanding that, just as all Christians are part of a priestly people, sharing in the

priesthood of Christ, so **all Christians are called to diakonia**, to diaconal service; and just as the ordained priesthood does not in any way diminish the priesthood of all believers, so **the restoration of the permanent diaconate need not and must not threaten or belittle the diaconate of all believers.**

The ordained deacon however is a **sacramental sign of the service of Christ.** Remember that a sacrament is both an outward sign and an inward reality. The deacon must be a servant and he must also be a witness to Christian service. But that does not necessarily mean that he needs to have a high profile in all circumstances.

Indeed some deacons take the view that their ministry should be more or less anonymous. They are quite happy if nobody knows who they are. They seek to work quietly in the background.

Now you may see a problem with that. The deacon's role in the liturgy, for example, is hardly designed to keep his identity a secret!

But I think that misses the point of what these other deacons are saying. They aren't saying that they go through life without interacting with other people. They're not pretending to be other than who they are, namely ordained ministers offering service in the name of the Church. They are saying that **their characteristic gift and calling as deacons is that of selfless service.** If in the exercise of Christian charity it becomes necessary for them to take a high profile they will do so - indeed they will do so even if by temperament and inclination they would rather be anonymous. But if you are motivated by the idea of being seen and admired by the multitudes, then maybe you need to think about whether you are really called to the diaconate.

Bluntly, it worries me when deacons talk (as we too often do) about our status, our rank in the church. The diaconate is not about status. Indeed, at the risk of making myself very unpopular in some quarters, I would say that **such concerns with rank and status are profoundly anti-diaconal.** If being thrust into the public eye is a sacrifice you make

for the greater good when circumstances require it that is one thing; if it is something you actively seek that is something else again. Aspiring deacons and indeed ordained deacons should frequently examine their consciences on this point. **Am I really serving Christ, his Church and the salvation of humankind? Or am I just enjoying the kudos of a perceived higher rank in the Church?**

So you'll gather that in my opinion the spirituality of the deacon is an active spirituality, a gloves-off spirituality, a spirituality lived in the hurly-burly of everyday life where the characteristic diaconal charism of service can have its greatest effect. But I always recall what a wise priest said to me, actually on my pre-ordination retreat:

"Remember, if you don't pray about it, it isn't ministry, it's only work."

So please don't think I'm saying that the hardest-working deacons are necessarily the most spiritual. Indeed another wise priest once told me that some religious priests have been advised to work to 80% of their capacity so that they always have time when there's an

unexpected call on their services. He didn't claim that this was widely achieved, but it's nevertheless a worthwhile aspiration not to become so immersed in work that we find we can't respond when the need is greatest.

If you don't pray about it, it isn't ministry, it's only work. **So what should the prayer life of a deacon look like?**

I have to say that many of the official writings on this suffer from a credibility gap. They don't pass the common sense test, and that is for the simple reason that they presuppose a lifestyle which will never be that of most permanent deacons - namely the lifestyle of a presbytery or even a monastery. But they do give some useful pointers. Each of us must apply the "common sense test" for ourselves in our own particular circumstances.

But certainly, **personal private prayer must be part of the life of every deacon.** I wouldn't dream of telling you how to go about that - others are much more knowledgeable about it than me, and in any case

it is something that will vary very much from one person to another. Prayer as a family is of course also important. The Church particularly commends to deacons the practice of Marian devotions, which can of course be incorporated into private prayer or family prayer according to your circumstances and preferences. Mary as **“teacher of faith, teacher of charity, teacher of prayer and teacher of humility”** is commended to us as a suitable model for the spiritual life of the deacon.

Clearly the deacon has a distinct role in the liturgical life of the church and must give due priority to **liturgical prayer and the practice of the sacraments**. Daily communion is of course to be commended wherever it is practical, and we know from experience that time spent in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is never wasted. Faithfulness to the liturgy of the hours is both a service to the Church and a source of inspiration for ourselves. At the end of the day an **examination of conscience**, perhaps built in to Compline as the breviary recommends, is a commendable practice. It is wholesome to reflect not only on our failings but on the blessings God has given us during the day.

The Church expects deacons to make a retreat at least every second year. I may be wrong but I see that as a concession to the demands of modern living. I have always assumed that we should go on retreat annually if our circumstances permit it but be that as it may; **a regular retreat helps us to keep our focus and remain prayerful and reflective amid the demands of ministry.**

In all this we should note the importance of **spiritual direction**, and I'm glad to see steps being made in the right direction in this area.

The deacon is also a minister of the Word of God and the Church reminds us that there is more to that than preaching. **We are called to live out the Word of God and proclaim it by the way we live.** As far as we can, therefore, we need to immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, not just studying them (though that's important too) but letting the Word of God seep into our very being. Thus the practice of **Lectio Divina**, prayerful reflection on a passage of Scripture, is also commended to us; and more broadly, our choice of reading material and our

participation in ongoing formation after ordination can also help ensure that the word of God is “**something alive and active**” in our lives. Incidentally it can also help ensure the authenticity of our preaching and teaching, bearing in mind that as ordained ministers we proclaim the Word in the name of the Church and not on our own behalf. Obedience to the Church is not a restriction but merely another facet of the humility with which the deacon imitates Christ the servant.

To integrate all this into a wholesome spiritual life, of course, each of us must reflect deeply on our own life circumstances and on our own particular call to diaconal service. The married deacon is no less a deacon when he serves and ministers to his family than when he takes on a more public role. The married deacon's visible witness to the sanctity of marriage, and the code of ethics by which we are seen to operate in our professional lives, are no less a proclamation of the Word of God, and hence no less an exercise of our diaconal ministry, than what we speak on a Sunday. **If we discharge our duties in the**

parish with due humility, one fruit of that will be the growth and development of lay ministry - not its demise as some would claim. All of these areas, therefore, and more besides, are suitable subjects for our regular prayer and reflection - remembering again that if it isn't rooted in prayer then it isn't ministry, it's only work.

To keep ministry, family life, professional duties and personal piety in balance - or better, to keep them in harmony - is really a response to the "universal call to holiness" which applies to all the baptised. Nevertheless, with the sacrament of ordination must come a renewed commitment to the spiritual aspect of our lives and perhaps a different focus, a shifted sense of priorities. By the grace of God however we know that with ordination also comes a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit to sustain us in our life and ministry.

We are called to share these gifts with others, living, working and praying with HUMILITY, with INTEGRITY and above all in a spirit of SERVICE, following Christ who came not to be served but to serve.