



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Easter Year A

They elected seven men full of the Holy Spirit

Readings: *Acts 6: 1-7, Psalm 32, 1 Peter 2: 4-9, John 14: 1-12*

One of the fascinating things about the New Testament is that, emerging from the nascent community, it gives us frequent and tantalising glimpses of life in the earliest years of the Church. St. Paul's letters leave us in no doubt of the squabbles, moral and doctrinal, that caused upheavals in local congregations and needed authoritative settlement.

Today we peer into the very origin of a ministry as the Acts of the Apostles unfolds the very beginnings of the community life that began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Pentecost.

Long before there is any consensus on the inclusion and required practises of Gentile converts, the Church is wrestling with a very practical problem. The charitable and communal nature of the Church has meant that widows and orphans will be supported, an embryonic welfare state. This is hugely attractive and immediately it becomes clear that there is a dispute about the distribution of largesse. There is suspicion that the Jewish dependants are getting a better deal than the Gentile.

Good old fashioned favouritism.

It is a practical problem requiring discernment, wisdom, justice and implementation. In short it needs a practical, workable solution. Let's look at what happened.

The Apostles call a meeting of disciples. They make it clear that they have not the time to make sorting this sort of pastoral and organisational problem a priority. They decree a simple practical solution. Men will be appointed to oversee this task. The men concerned must be of good reputation, wise and filled with the Holy Spirit. The choice of candidates is left to the assembly. These men must emerge from and with the consent of the community to which they will minister.

The Apostolic band will continue to devote themselves to the priority of their charism and call, prayer and preaching and teaching - the worship and education of the faithful and the mission to the world. Seven is the number listed for this ministry of service and supervision, the Hebrew number of divine completeness. Seven are selected by the community and presented to the Apostles for the laying on of hands for this entirely new ministry.

Thus is born the Order of Deacons.

Right from the outset we are clear that this is an 'order', that is to say that they are ordained to this ministry. When they are selected and proposed by the community, the sign of their ordination is the laying on of hands.

The Order of Deacons has an extraordinary history. During the two millennia of Christendom it went from these humble beginnings to one of enormous power to virtual redundancy. The deacons went, over the first few centuries, from being a sort of junior office to being right hand men to

the bishop and holding the purse strings and presenting candidates for office. Such was the power of an Archdeacon that St. Jerome once remarked that 'An Archdeacon would regard it as a personal injury if he were to be ordained priest' and Pope St. Gregory the Great once told off one of his bishops for ordaining an Archdeacon to the priesthood as a means of removing his power!

Many early popes were drawn from the diaconate and had to be priested before assuming supreme office.

This burgeoning power was only halted by the Council of Trent in the post – Reformation responses and the diaconate began its gradual decline to the simple liturgical function that it held up until the Second Vatican Council. It was a staging post for priesthood, a sort of apprenticeship year, with an assistant liturgical function.

Only in 1967, in response to *Lumen Gentium*, did the Church begin to restore this sacred ministry to its proper function and purpose. We are still in the early days of that rediscovery.

Priests still become 'transitional' deacons, that is on the way to priesthood. But they are never to forget that they remain diaconal, that is servants of the community of Faith. (The maniple used to be a sign of that – ironically jettisoned in the liturgical maelstrom that succeeded the Council.)

Permanent deacons are now a regular feature of the landscape of the community of Faith. They are responsible to their priest and their bishop but their ministry is pastoral, sacramental, communal and missionary as well as liturgical. A Deacon can baptise, marry, bury, preach, teach, lead

devotions etc. He can be a vital part of the ministry and missionary work of the parish with the delegated authority of holy orders. A Deacon can be a married man and often is (a celibate or widowed deacon may not (re)marry but a man already married is not debarred from this ministry).

Up until now the Order has seen a lot of very good older men give their remaining years to this rediscovered ministry. Now we must look to the future. The Order has been re-established. Its potential is immense. Now we need younger men to emerge from our communities to take this sacred order forward to its full potential.

The history of the Church is full of great Deacons, from her first Martyr, Stephen, to St. Francis of Assisi. Some of the great witnesses of Christ and servants of the community of Faith have rejoiced in this Order.

There may be here today a young man's heart to whom God is speaking and calling to this great Gospel enterprise.

Today we have listened to its divine origin. We are called upon to write the next instalment of the Acts of the Apostles in our time.

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