



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

5th Sunday of Easter-Year A-May 10th2020

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

Those of you who go back a long way will be familiar with a time when 'Deacons were not'. Well they were - but only as a final stage on the road to priesthood. The permanent diaconate had long lapsed in the Universal Church and its restoration came as a surprise result of the conciliar reflections of our lifetime. As someone who is a convert, I still do not quite understand why this extraordinary ministry was left in an ecclesiastical filing cabinet for so long. I am aware that here I am on touchy territory. Some priests value the restoration of the Permanent Diaconate – others are less welcoming.

For me, if that matters at all (and it does not – what matters is the health and wholeness and faithfulness of the Church's ministry), I welcome its restoration. The Scripture today give us a simple picture of the Order's origin and purpose and there is much to thank God for herein and clear ways in which this ordained ministry can enhance the mission and ministry of the Church.

The Acts of the Apostles throbs with excitement, miracles, economic reordering, spiritual solidarity, practical innovation inspired by the Holy Spirit and the kind of excitement that we often wish we could re-capture – not to mention danger and sacrifice and costly obedience.

The Diaconate springs out of a very practical need. The Church's exponential growth has created logistical problems. The numbers of those drawn to the Faith bring their own practical issues. The dependents, widows and children, attracted by the welfare provision and their equality of importance, are causing difficulties – not least when there is a row about who benefits more – Jew or Gentile convert. All of this necessary and intensely important brouhaha is beginning to take up the Apostles' time to the detriment of their preaching and teaching. It is beginning to handicap the Gospel, slow the mission, distract from the primary task of salvation.

In the light of this crisis the Apostles call a meeting and announce to the gathered disciples their (or more correctly God's) solution. They will appoint seven men to handle this practical ministry. The qualifications for this task are that the new deacons (or 'SERVANTS' as the name means) must be men of 'good reputation'. There must be no shady back story or room for quibbling about their appointment or cause for undermining their authority. They must be filled with the Holy Spirit. Their holiness must be unquestionable. They must be men who exhibit the Wisdom associated with servants of the Divine Wisdom Himself. (There will be other attributes added later by Paul, but these are the foundational essentials).

These men will take over the immediate practical and charitable tasks of the Church. That this is not a passing or human invention is underscored by the information that they are duly ordained – the Apostles lay hands on them. Thus, the Church is given an auxiliary order but an order nonetheless.

In the earliest Church then we witness a birth of a huge and vital practical ministry. In the Church of our lifetime we are much more used to witnessing a diaconal ministry that is Liturgical – that is an extra man in the sanctuary. But he is only there if he represents the whole

extraordinary ministry that develops in the diaconate and to which the Acts of the Apostles bears eloquent testimony.

Straightway, and this is no accidental detour, we are plunged into the life, witness, and martyrdom of one of these chosen men, Stephen. In him we see the prototype of diaconal ministry.

We begin by seeing deacon as aid worker, organiser of the practical charitable response of the parish. We then see Stephen preaching. The Deacon is the other one permitted to preach. He is considered a Word Bearer and can proclaim the teaching of the Faith in response to the Holy Scripture and under the continuing authority of the Apostles.

The Deacon is an important go-between in the relationships between the priestly ministry and the people. He is not a substitute but a facilitator, a minister, a reporter, a companion to the Apostle, the priest, in his ministry.

In Stephen we also see the fearless encounter of the Gospel in the public domain. The Deacon is a public figure and what he IS and says and does is vital in representing the Church in the public arena. Hence the stringent requirements for qualification for this order. He is NOT a failed priest but a minister of God in a vital and integral and wholly supportive and enabling order.

Note also that Stephen's courage puts him at the head of the pack of glorious martyrs. His little feast, hidden behind the glorious Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, reminds us that a Deacon precedes even the greatest Apostle in his willing sacrifice for Christ. He is pre-eminent in martyrdom, first in the witness of blood. So, no room for sissies.

The Deacon is given a huge and beautiful range of ministries. He is to be the practical arm of dispensation to the needy. He is to act as the go-between in the outreach of parish ministry. He is to be a preacher of the Word. He is to witness in the public domain to the sacrifice of Christ – even at the cost of his own sacrifice. Almoner, minister, preacher, public witness, martyr – just some of his tasks and responsibilities. No wonder

he needs to be a good man, wise, Spirit filled, courageous, obedient, able to co-operate with the apostolic ministry.

Finally, as a result of all that, he appears in the liturgy representing that extraordinary and supportive and community ministry. He is not there as a decoration or as a hobby. He represents this huge and ancient ministry. This ministry needs to be taken seriously. We need, just now, a new input of men willing to offer for this sacred ministry. Many of our deacons, like our priests, are old men. The next generation needs to listen for its call. If you have an inkling that this might be you – that God has his hand on your shoulder – that you are willing to put yourself forward for the discernment of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit – come and talk.

The years ahead will not want for opportunities for God to be glorified in this sacred ministry. There are no obligations in having the conversation and if the priest puts his hand on your shoulder and asks you to consider, he will not do so lightly – knowing both the joy and the cost and the glory of the sacred call.

He is, after all, himself a servant of the servants of God