

Losing a sense of (holy) order(s)?

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Peter Draper's piece ('The Nature and Value of MSE' in the light of some ideas afloat in the diocese of Sydney) in January's edition of the journal invited further comment and shared experience. The editor suggested he would be interested to hear from permanent deacon members. It is in that particular capacity that I respond. However, my thoughts are more about what the plans of the diocese of Sydney for a 'new permanent diaconate' suggest about its theology of ordained ministry - the issue which most concerned Peter when he wrote his article.

Permanent, or distinctive, ordained deacons in the Church world-wide, whether catholic, anglican, methodist, presbyterian or otherwise, would raise an eyebrow at the idea of the renewed diaconate as something 'new'; parts of the Australian church in particular have had an understanding of and a significant role for the diaconate for some while. Theological debate on the importance of the sign of the diaconate for the Church and the world, particularly in our current confused and fragmented times, has been going on all round the world at depth and at length. For those who are interested, there is a wealth of published books, biblical studies, reports, newsletters and websites which may be consulted.

My response to the question Peter raises about the theology of priesthood - and, I would add, the theology of all ordained ministry, diaconate included - is a personal one, and comes from my current self-questioning about my own ordination. The view of ordained ministry which he believes to be implicit in the Sydney proposals is, I would suggest, a debased view of ordination, to both diaconate and priesthood, but one which is widespread in the Church at large. It is a view often expressed in the questioning and discouragement faced by nearly every MSE about why she or he is ordained. It results from unwillingness to grapple with the theology of ministry and of ordination.

The 'Sydney view', as Peter rightly suggests, presents an ill-thought out theology, which results in a priesthood and a diaconate reduced to the carrying out of functions, for which, in themselves, there is no need for ordination. 'Incumbency' is a function, a job, and an often-bureaucratic one at that, for which no priestly sign is essential. If we believe that the gift and grace received through ordination - however 'high' or 'low' our theology of the sacraments may be - then we need to understand what that gift and grace are given for, what are the real and visible signs of priesthood and diakonia in the Church and in the world. (I do not exclude the possibility of arguing that ordination should be ruled out all together - is it needed for anyone to be an essential 'sign' of Christian ministry?).

Two issues in the article exercise me personally. One concerns selection and training for ministry - priesthood or permanent diaconate; the other the life-long nature of ordained ministry. It is not a new idea that training for the distinctive diaconate should be a distinctive matter. It happens in some parts of the world - on the European continent, even here in the catholic church in France - and in North America¹. It may be valid when the churches involved have a clear understanding of what ordained diaconate is and is for. In the Church of England - which is the only one I know well - we suffer from a lack of clarity about what any ordained ministry is for. Current discussion on the diaconate includes the issue of specific training. As for selection, experience shows that selectors have little understanding of diaconate and those who, at that early stage, feel called to this distinctive ministry, avoid saying so because of this lack of understanding.

I sit on both sides of the fence about the idea of 'separation'. I believe that we less and less train people to be priests, and have never trained people to be deacons. I would say the real meaning of diaconate is rarely touched on in most courses, which are, tellingly, often called 'ministerial training courses', presumably to appeal to all sensibilities. Perhaps it is right that we train ministers, and not priests and deacons. Specific or separate training might encourage further a functional view of priesthood and diaconate. One wonders what the diocese of Sydney intends by proposing separate selection and training for deacons - recruitment and 'job training' of functional, service orientated, assistant incumbents?

Something more needs to be done to debate, inform, discuss the theology of the diaconate and priesthood during the period leading to ordination. Even if we all train together, there comes a time when discussion should focus on one, on another and on both together (particularly since priests are importantly also ordained as deacons - the base ministry - and most of them are pleased to say that they are always deacons as well as priests). I would not suggest the complete separation of training, since I am not sure that, until the distinctive theology of diaconate and priesthood is chewed over, we can clarify to which order we are called. I was fortunate enough (if one can call it that) to have had opportunity to mull it all over. At the end of my ministerial training in 1984, I was made a deaconess. I thought I knew then that I wanted to be a priest if it became possible, because that was the only model I observed. In 1987, I was ordained deacon. There were still several years to go before priesthood was a possibility. During that time, I worked at the theology of diaconate, with others, and concluded that I really was a deacon, needed to be a deacon, especially as an MSE, and that the Church, even if it did not care to admit it, really needed me as a deacon as a sign and an encouragement to others to carry out their diakonia.

The idea that one may 'resign ... orders for a time' is, as it is to Peter, a major problem for me. It results from a completely functional view of ordained ministry, with the function is carried out only within the church organisation. This strikes right at the heart of MSE, but we have lived with this view for a long time, and have the confidence to shrug it off and get on with our work, an essential sign of our diaconate and priesthood.

One can long for the day when the Church has worked sufficiently on its theology of ministry to realise that not all is functional. Men and women whose ordained ministry is worked out through a 'church job' may indeed have to 'step down from their role' (i.e. function) for many reasons - ill-health, disappearance of the job, moving on and so on. Maybe a man or woman might wish to relinquish a function to 'raise a family'. But the idea that priesthood or diaconate itself is relinquished either permanently or temporarily at such times is difficult for me to comprehend since, surely, neither is limited by function.

However, are there other ways in which the ordained priest or deacon can cease to be a priest or deacon? I have been struggling with this question. I am no longer employed in the work I used to do - work which made sense of ordination and the way of life for/to which I was ordained. I work now as a member of the sector of the community called 'retired' - I write, I do historical research, I work at integrating into French society, and, most importantly, I see my Christian ministry carried out in my work for Amnesty International (France). I still regard myself as an MSE (retired section) but I am, despite my views on the sacramental nature and sign of ordination, wondering if I am still an ordained deacon. I have come to live in France - there is no 'home' for me in the catholic church, especially in a provincial diocese in the northeast of the country. My nearest Anglican community is in Paris about 150 kms away (though I am in touch with that community, and its chaplain, and the Anglican bishop in Europe has welcomed me to his diocese). I am sure that in my daily life and work I exercise diakonia. But what has that to do with my ordination if there is no link with or mission to/from the Church?

I know many an elderly retired priest, some too incapacitated to celebrate the eucharist, speak of absolution or bless the Christian community in an overt way - yet none of them has ever indicated that he felt he was no longer a priest. The essence of their priesthood was still attached to them and they were in no doubt they were still priests.

But what of the deacon, whether old and incapacitated or, like myself, 'beyond the pale'? The Anglican ordinal has a poor description of ordained diakonia, but nonetheless, I am able no longer to do the things prescribed there. A further problem is that my understanding of ordained diaconate (as of all ordained ministry) derives its authenticity from the Church, particularly from the episcopate.

For me, the best understanding of it so far is one found in the Church of England's leaflet, 'Diaconate Renewed' ⁱⁱ. It includes the New Testament images of diakonos as bearer of a message, spokesperson, envoy, a go between entrusted with important tidings; as an agent, a person given a commission on behalf of someone in authority, fulfilling a vital task; an attendant to a person or

household on whose behalf one performs various tasks. It was in this understanding that I wore my deacon's stole, ancient sign of the ambassador who travelled the boundaries carrying the message and (crucial to the MSE) bearing tidings back to the people/person who sent me.

I sense that I have lost my links with the 'household' (Christian congregation?) or the person (bishop?) who should authorise me and have therefore 'lost' my orders. Is it possible to cease to be priest or deacon when the world around one shifts so significantly, or one's own movements create this shift? I wonder if there are other ordained MSEs who are 'beyond the pale' for whatever reason who have thoughts on this dilemma. Meanwhile, I continue to think about it, and, as any convinced MSE, to get on with the diakonia, never mind the ordination.

ⁱ Here in France, I do not have with me all my papers on the distinctive diaconate. There will be others who have information more readily available and can provide international and UK denominational information.

*ⁱⁱ It derives from the eye-opening biblical work of John Collins, a biblical scholar and teacher in Australia that the diocese of Sydney would do well to read! For instance, John Collins, *Diakonia - re-interpreting the ancient sources*, 1990 and *Deacons and the Church*, 2002, both published by Gracewing.*