

The Parish Deacon

The Recovery of an Ancient Office

In 2001 the General Synod of the Church of England described the work of a Deacon as: “The Deacon is a person on a mission, a messenger or ambassador, making connections, building bridges, faithfully delivering his or her mandate. All Christian ministry, ordained or lay is grounded in diakonia (service) because it is all dependent on the fundamental divine commission of the Church in service of the Kingdom.”

In Scripture, John 13:1-17 provides the most vivid image of Christ’s servant ministry. 1 Timothy 3:8-13 clarifies the deacon’s role as an ambassador or messenger by making a clear connection between bishops and deacons, whom bishops send to perform servant ministry. Interestingly, 1 Timothy suggests that the diaconate predates the priesthood. Priests eclipsed deacons only later when the Church grew and the bishop’s pastoral ministries were necessarily delegated. In the Acts of the Apostles we hear the story of Stephen, who by tradition is considered to be the first Deacon. Acts 6-7 describes what may be considered the first ordination of deacons.

The fundamental difference between priests and deacons according to Archdeacon Ormond Plater of the Diocese of Louisiana “is that priests tend to the ‘Church gathered’, deacons to the ‘Church scattered’.” The deacon’s ministry of interpreting the “needs of the World to the Church,” as the Ordination Rite specifies, reflects this important distinction. It also describes the essence of the mission which we envision deacons catalyzing in our Diocese.

In a very real sense we are recovering the Diaconate. In recent history it has become a stepping-stone for ordination to the priesthood and the work of a deacon – especially at the Sunday Eucharist done by a priest. When a deacon sets the Holy Table for the Eucharist, reads the Gospel and says the words of dismissal she or he is not taking something away from the priest. He or she is recovering the ancient role of the Deacon. To distinguish the two kinds of Deacons we will have once again in this Diocese, those who feel called to the priesthood and envision being deacons for no more than one year will be called ‘transitional Deacons’ while those who intend to be life-long Deacons will simply be called Deacons and be styled “The Reverend Deacon” and called Deacon Mary or Deacon John.

Normally, those called to this office will have a ministry outside the parish primarily serving those on the margins of society and outside the institutional Church. Their secondary vocation (approximately 20% of their time) will be spent in the parish where they may assist in the Eucharist and help enable lay ministry. While the parish should pay for any expenses they incur and provide funds for education, their work in the parish will be unpaid. They will not be in charge of congregations or parishes.

A candidate for ordination to the Diaconate will normally have received training in the Scriptures, Preaching, and the history of the Church in addition to training in their primary ministry, e.g., chaplaincy, advocacy, etc.