



Deacons: A Gift to the Parish

Fr Gerard Condon, parish priest of Ballygriffin, County Cork and diocesan adviser for Religious Education (second level) in the diocese of Cloyne, gives an account of the permanent diaconate in his diocese and in Ireland.



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Pope's Intention: (evangelisation): We pray for deacons, faithful in their service of the Word and the poor, that they may be an invigorating symbol for the entire Church.

The word 'deacon' comes from the Greek diakonia, meaning 'work of a servant'.

An accountant, a healthcare worker and a taxi driver are among the eight deacons currently serving with the diocese of Cloyne in County Cork. It is ten years since the permanent diaconate was restored to Ireland, a time marked by a declining number of priests. However deacons are not a 'sticking plaster' solution for the shortage of priests. The diaconate is a distinctive way of representing the face of Christ, a nugget from Church history that was rediscovered by the Second Vatican Council.

Tradition sees their role as serving at the table of God's Word (at Mass) and at the tables of the poor. At Mass, the deacon proclaims the Gospel and preaches. He also baptises and can preside at marriages and funerals. The deacon's other role, as a servant to the poor, is identified in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1–7), when the Apostles appointed 'seven men of good reputation' to give alms to the most needy citizens of Jerusalem. Without this second dimension, the ministry risks being

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confined to that of a glorified altar server.

The second and third centuries were the golden age of the diaconate. Local churches throughout Europe modelled themselves on Jerusalem by having seven deacons. However, by the fourth century, the principal functions of the diaconate were absorbed into the priesthood. Eventually the diaconate was reduced to a stage on the way to priesthood. Since the restoration of the ministry in the 1970s, over 30,000 deacons have been ordained worldwide. A large majority are married and continue their regular work as well as a parish appointment.

In 2006, following research into the international experience, the Irish bishops drew up a four-year programme of formation for deacons. The conditions for becoming a deacon include a minimum age (twenty-five years for a celibate candidate, thirty-five years for a married man), an occupation that is compatible with the diaconate and the consent of his wife. The deacon learns to pray the Liturgy of the Hours (the breviary) and gains pastoral experience by volunteering for parish ministries during his candidacy.

Deacons, like priests, promise obedience to their ordaining bishop. After ordination, the deacon is entrusted with a letter of mission from his bishop, stating his

responsibilities. Some deacons may take on specialised ministries (such as a school chaplaincy or in diocesan administration) which are in keeping with their gifts and experience. Most assist in a local parish.

The deacon's primary responsibility is his family and profession. It can be difficult to harmonise the competing demands from work, family and ministry. However, those combined commitments also create a synergy. Revd Garret Cody, one of Cloyne's deacons, thinks of it as a 'circular economy'. 'My life informs my preaching and the Word of God influences my everyday actions'. Following ordination, in 2017, he has assisted in Blarney Parish, mainly with Sunday Masses and baptisms. Becoming a deacon has brought an added compassion to his work with the HSE's senior-care service and a calmer home life. He has been amazed by the trust that his ministry engenders, 'I have never had deeper conversations with people than since my ordination'.

At present there are more than one-hundred deacons at work with the Church in Ireland. A growing number of dioceses are offering the formation programme to men discerning their vocation to this unique ministry. Their presence is a green-shoot in the Irish Church, a life-giving witness to many other Christians. 