

# THE ONGOING FORMATION OF PERMANENT DEACONS

## AN ADDRESS GIVEN TO THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF DIRECTORS OF THE PERMANENT DIACONATE AND DEACON DELEGATES 23rd NOVEMBER 2010

Every so often going through life one is drawn to ask the question: Actually what I am doing here? How did I come to be doing this? The answer, or more probably lack of any answer, to such questions can indeed sometimes be life-transforming. In his day to day ministry as a deacon a man might also wonder how exactly he comes to be in certain surprising places, dealing with particular people and so on. But the question is unlikely to be: Why? The reason why is that he is ordained for just such circumstances and that, of their nature, they will be often surprising. The question more likely is: How? Or perhaps How best? The short answer to this, of course, is prayer. The long answer is that formation is needed to prepare a man for such encounters. But it is in this person, the deacon doing his ministry, a someone who is somewhere that any reflections on the formation of deacons need to begin. We begin not with abstractions, still less with rule books or directories, but with real, live flesh and blood people on their journey of life. Only such a starting point will reveal what is truly involved. Indeed simply by putting the matter in these terms some of the most important dimensions of formation are clear. Simply by considering this deacon or that on his rounds certain propositions about his formation would seem to be self-evident:

1. The idea that the formation of a deacon can be a once-in-a-lifetime experience of three or four years before ordination is simply nonsense; we need formation and we need on-going formation. The formation must be above all spiritual. We simply cannot minister without prayer; a deacon has to be a man of prayer (so does his wife?). As one saint puts it:

“Action is worth nothing without prayer: prayer grows in value with sacrifice.  
First, prayer; then, expiation; in the third place, very much in the third place, action.”<sup>i</sup>

2. Our formation must also be human. What is said of the priest (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, 1992) should be true also of the deacon:

“It is necessary that, following the example of Jesus who ‘knew what was in humanity (John 2:25, cf 8:3-11), the priest should be able to know the depths of the human heart, to perceive difficulties and problems, to make meeting and dialogue easy, to create trust and cooperation, to express serene and objective judgements.”<sup>ii</sup>

Again we can see that this is not the work of an introductory course but of a lifetime lived to the full.

3. We must confront what precisely we mean by this word “formation”. Obviously formation is something bigger than training or even education, although it is likely to contain elements of both of these. Formation then is the action of being formed. Yes, but into what? Or rather, not what, whom? And the answer is into Christ, to be “conformed” to Christ. Such is indeed the life’s work of every baptised Christian but our formation as deacons is a sub-set of Christian formation, our conformation is with Christ, the Great Deacon who came “not to be served but to serve.”

Formation then like the ministry, as Pope Benedict XVI kept repeating during the Year for Priests, is not

functional but ontological, to do with our very being. It has to be Christocentric and, therefore, Eucharistic. We are talking about forming “other Christs”.

## **How?**

The Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons says:

“Candidates should be predisposed to continuing their formation after ordination. To this end, they are encouraged to establish a small personal library with a theological-pastoral emphasis and to be open to programmes of ongoing formation.”<sup>iii</sup>

Is this it? It says this in relation to doctrinal formation but read on and note that the formation of deacons consists not just of doctrinal formation but also of human, spiritual and pastoral formation. When we turn from the Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons to the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons we can more profitably discern the full elements for ongoing formation. There is, in fact, here a whole chapter on the “Continuing Formation of Deacons” described as “a human necessity which must be seen in continuity with the divine call to serve the Church in the ministry and with the initial formation given to deacons.”<sup>iv</sup> Continuing or ongoing formation is part and parcel of our “continuing conversion”, “based on the need of every deacon to love Christ in such a manner as to imitate Him.”<sup>v</sup> So if the ongoing formation of permanent deacons is to be human, spiritual and pastoral as well as doctrinal or intellectual, then:

“...formation cannot be reduced merely to participating at courses or study days or other such activities: it calls for every deacon to be aware of the need for ongoing formation and to cultivate it with interest and in a spirit of healthy initiative. Books approved by ecclesiastical authority should be chosen as material for reading; periodicals known for their fidelity to the Magisterium should be followed; time should be set aside for daily meditation. Constant self-formation which helps him to serve the Church ever better is an important part of the service asked of every deacon.”<sup>vi</sup>

This need for and commitment to self-formation needs emphasis especially in matters human and spiritual.

### **Human and Spiritual Formation:**

Both our Basic Norms and the Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, link human formation with what is called “affective maturity”. Such maturity presupposes an awareness of the central role in human life of love, “the discovery of the centrality of love” in our own lives and “the victorious struggle” against our own selfishness.<sup>vii</sup> Or, as Saint Paul proclaimed to the Philippians:

“Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Phil 4:8)

Herein lies the programme ground out of daily living at home, at work, at rest and in recreation comprehending everything we think, we say, we hear, we read, we watch from first rising in the morning to sleeping at night. Unsurprisingly, therefore:

“Human formation leads to and finds its completion in spiritual formation, which constitutes the heart and unifying centre of every Christian formation.”<sup>viii</sup>

And:

“Personalized assistance to deacons also assures them of that love with which mother Church is close to them as they strive to live faithfully the sacramental grace of their calling. It is thus of supreme importance that each deacon be able to choose a spiritual director, approved by the bishop, with whom he can have regular and frequent contact.”<sup>ix</sup>

Thus regular and frequent contact with a spiritual director is the supremely important content of ongoing formation. The Directory contains, in fact, a whole chapter on the Spirituality of the Deacon. This bears reading and re-reading often as a programme for the life of deacons. There is a universal call to holiness originating in Baptism, but from his ordination springs a specifically diaconal spirituality, that is following Christ in his diaconia. For this the spiritual life has primacy:

“Following Christ in the diaconate is an attractive but difficult undertaking. While it brings satisfaction and rewards, it can also be open to the difficulties and trials experienced by the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. In order to live this ministry to the full, deacons must know Christ intimately so that He may shoulder the burdens of their ministry. They must give priority to the spiritual life...”<sup>x</sup>

And the various aids to this spiritual life can be summarised as:

- Deepening knowledge of God’s Word
- Ensuring the authenticity of our teaching, preserving clear and effective communion with the Holy Father, the bishops and the Magisterium of the Church
- Above all, participating with faith at the daily celebration of Mass
- Adoring the Lord present in the Sacrament
- Regularly approaching the Sacrament of Penance
- Fostering fraternity and cooperation with the priests of their dioceses and communion with their bishops
- A life of prayer informed by the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours
- Directing the heart to Christ and thereby to the Church and to Mary, her mother since Marian devotion is “very close to the vocation of the deacon”.<sup>xi</sup>
- Retreats
- Regular spiritual direction.

The extent to which any of us meet this programme might well be an opportunity for an examination of conscience.

### **Intellectual / Doctrinal Formation**

Human formation is scarcely avoidable simply by virtue of living, spiritual formation we neglect at our (eternal) peril, but intellectual formation gets to be questioned, sidelined or ignored. It is very often argued by deacons that they simply do not have the time. It is subject, too, to some serious misapprehensions. Perhaps if these can be dispelled the need for, indeed the joy of, continuing intellectual formation will become clear.

There is, too, in the Directory a daunting list of “contents” of intellectual formation, stretching over a

whole page in my edition.<sup>xii</sup> A “small library” as suggested for getting on with this would be the very least requirement!

“Intellectual formation is a necessary dimension of diaconal formation insofar as it offers the deacon a substantial nourishment for his spiritual life and a precious instrument for his ministry.”<sup>xiii</sup>

What do we mean by “intellectual”? Popularly what may come to mind would be words such as egg-head, academic, theoretical, hence irrelevant, impractical, etc. Pragmatism and utilitarianism being so much part of the landscape deacons can be tempted to think that intellectual formation beyond some bare minimum is a distraction and a waste of time. To the Hebrew, early Christian, indeed medieval Christian this line of thought would have been incomprehensible. For them, the seat of human thought was not the human brain but the heart. A good Catholic dictionary advises that the intellect is a power of the soul, something therefore not to be neglected. It goes beyond the mere senses of this material world to conception, judgement, reflection and self-consciousness. Its formal and direct object is the universal, the immaterial, the absolute. It is distinct from the soul, but a power thereof through which the soul acts. So it is a spiritual faculty which, in his treatise on the spiritual life, Adolphe Tanquerey explains thus:

“We have been endowed with understanding, that we may know truth and above all that we may know God and things divine. It is God who is the true light of the mind. He illumines us with a twofold light, that of *reason* and that of *faith*. In our present state, we cannot come to the fullness of truth, without the joint help of these two lights. To scorn either of them is to blind our eyes. The discipline of the intellect is all the more important since it is the intellect that enlightens the will and enables it to direct its course towards the good. It is the intellect which, under the name of *conscience*, is the guide of our moral and supernatural life. That it may rightly fulfil its office, its defects must be corrected. The chief of these are ignorance, curiosity, hastiness, pride and obstinacy.”<sup>xiv</sup>

As the appetite tends towards that which is good, argued Saint Thomas Aquinas, so it is the intellect which tends towards and seeks the truth. Very clearly we cannot neglect our intellectual formation – ever! Saint Bernard wrote: “That they edify others, and this is charity...that they be edified themselves, and this prudence.” And Saint Augustine tells us that knowledge should be put to the service of love: “Let knowledge be used in order to erect the structure of charity.” Study, then, is not to satisfy our pride or curiosity but to purify the heart. Wrote Robert Louis Wilken:

“The Christian religion is inescapably ritualistic (one is received into the Church by a solemn washing with water), uncompromisingly moral (‘be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,’ said Jesus) and unapologetically intellectual (be ready to give ‘a reason for the hope that is in you,’ in the words of 1 Peter). Like all the major religions of the world, Christianity is more than a set of devotional practices and a moral code: it is also a way of thinking about God, about human beings, about the world and history.”<sup>xv</sup>

Faith, wrote Blessed John Henry Newman, “operates by means of reason, and reason is directed and corrected by faith”, his voice in this, as in so much else, being prophetic of the issues today confronting the world and the Church. At his beatification Mass Pope Benedict XVI quoted his famous wish:

"I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much

of history that they can defend it"<sup>xvi</sup>

How then can we expect the laity to “know their religion” if we, the ordained ministers do not study it day in and day out? In his famous discourses collected together as “The Idea of the University” he argued that the intellect deserves “an excellence of its own” as there is nothing which does not have its “specific good.” And enquiring of universities he posed the question:

“A Hospital heals a broken limb or cures a fever: what does an Institution effect, which professes the health, not of the body, not of the soul, but of the intellect? What is the good, which in former times, as well as our own, has been found worth the notice, the appropriation of the Catholic Church?”

“Good” he distinguished from “useful”. What is useful may or may not be good, but what is good is always prolific, reproductive of good;

“A great good will impart great good. If then the intellect is so excellent a portion of us, and its cultivation so excellent, it is not only beautiful, perfect, admirable and noble in itself, but in a true and high sense it must be useful to the possessor and to all around him; not useful in any low, mechanical, mercantile sense, but as diffusing good, or as a blessing, or a gift, or power, or a treasure, first to the owner, then through him to the world.”

He even went so far as to argue that the Liberal Education which he proposed was what made a gentleman:

“It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life; - these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge...”

Deeply unfashionable as that term “gentleman” may be should we not recognise here precisely the qualities which should characterise a deacon, a whole programme of formation for him? If so let us also heed his warning that such qualities, while truly human and desirable, are no guarantee of sanctity or even conscientiousness. They make the gentleman and not the Christian.

### **Pastoral Formation**

The pastoral aspects of a deacon’s ministry are about love in action. Far from being disconnected from the pursuit of truth, seen as something divisive, however, love in action demands the proclamation of truth. Unity and truth are not two separate aspects of being and cannot be divorced. Justice, according to St Thomas Aquinas, includes truthful speech, right living and the communication of ecclesial doctrine. This is virtue, its neglect is sin.<sup>xvii</sup> Love and truth are inseparable; love is in truth (*Caritas in Veritate.*)

Love in action, love in truth, however, is where we came in – the deacon going about his ministry in parish, hospital, school, prison or wherever and gently balancing this with family and work. We have done a full circle but hopefully not without learning. No one denies the need for pastoral formation. It is just that it simply cannot be done without human, spiritual and intellectual formation; it cannot even reasonably be discussed except on the basis of these other elements.

## **Professional:**

Human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral – these are the aspects of formation enumerated in the Directory and other documents of the Church. But we should not forget that most deacons are at work, that their work too requires formation. This is not simply training for a job, as a Christian we need to be also formed into doing a job well in imitation of the Lord Jesus who “did all things well.” This is an obligation again for all baptised Christians and so for the laity. But just how this is to apply and be worked out in the case of ordained deacons seems to me an interesting subject which has yet to be seriously addressed. This professional work is part of his simple “presence” in the everyday matters of human life, in everyday human contact and encounter and that is all part of the joys, hopes, disappointments, pains and suffering he daily places on the altar.

## **Practicalities:**

It is clear from the above that the ongoing formation of deacons is a large task, to be taken up daily. It is also clearly very much a task of self-formation under the aegis of a competent spiritual director. The initial formation of permanent deacons leading up to ordination, therefore, needs to prepare them for this challenge, both in emphasising its necessity and in teaching its methods. There has to be an “intrinsic link” between formation before ordination and formation after ordination. So long-term preparation for ongoing formation should take place within the initial formation and future deacons encouraged to look forward to it and to understand its necessity.<sup>xviii</sup> But it is perfectly clear that we cannot leave it at that. The deacon is a minister of the Church who must love the Church, but equally the Church must express in human and tangible ways her concern for and love of her deacons. The continuing formation of deacons is an obligation both for deacons and of bishops (Directory 63.)

“The bishop should show particular solicitude for deacons since they are his collaborators. When possible he should attend their meetings and always ensure the presence of his representative.”<sup>xix</sup>

The on-going formation of deacons should be “organised.”<sup>xx</sup>

By the time he is ordained a deacon has had to acquire and establish an ongoing relationship with a spiritual director. But in the nature of things people move, change, take up new responsibilities and so forth. Yet in finding an alternative as spiritual director the Church too often leaves deacons on their own. A Support Group (see below) may be a source of fruitful suggestions from one’s peers. But the question arises should there not be some organised method of ensuring that deacons have and regularly meet with their spiritual directors.

There should be retreats. The Directory states that every deacon should make a retreat “at least every other year.”<sup>xxi</sup> To facilitate this requirement the ongoing formation programme in Southwark organises one retreat each year open to deacons only and a separate one open to deacons accompanied or not by wives. In this, as in many other areas, we have attempted to build more formally on informal arrangements already in place. Many of our deacons do not attend either of these retreats. Presumably they arrange for their own retreats. But again the question arises whether there should not be some diocesan level method of reassuring ourselves on the point.

Especially crucial will be the deacon’s immediate service in the parish following ordination in which the Directory says he should be supervised by “an exemplary priest especially appointed by the bishop.” In most dioceses is this requirement met? In the diocese of Southwark the Dean is supposed to fulfil such a role but, in practice, this may not happen. There has been discussion, and even a failed attempt, to

launch a system of mentoring of new deacons by more experienced hands. This is an idea familiar to and supported by those being ordained nowadays, in part because it is so much a part of the secular working world landscape. So it is reasonable to expect some form of lateral (as opposed to hierarchical) support structure. Getting such ideas off the ground is another matter.

Then the Directory requires that there be organised “periodic meetings for deacons.”<sup>xxii</sup> Meeting is a human need; meeting with one’s fellow deacons is a human need of deacons. Simply meeting! Part of the task of the ongoing formation programme in Southwark has been to encourage, establish and affirm Deacons Groups (Support Groups) meeting regularly (usually five times a year) in various parts of the diocese. They meet for fellowship and mutual support and to pray the Divine Office. These meetings are open to students and appreciated by them and the newly ordained. By others support is limited for a variety of reasons – do not have the time, pressure of other commitments, do not get anything out of it, grown-up and do not need mollycoddling, etc. So it can be helpful to encourage such old hands to come along to give a talk on some aspect of the ministry in which they are engaged. These Groups are, or at any rate should be, opportunities for reflection in common. Like their priestly counterparts:

“They help to prevent cultural impoverishment or getting entrenched in one’s ways, even in the pastoral field, as a result of mental laziness. They help to foster a greater synthesis between the various elements of the spiritual, intellectual and apostolic life. They open minds and hearts to the new challenges of history and to new appeals which the Spirit addresses to the Church.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

We then organise three Diocesan Diaconal Days every year. The aim is to gather together the Diaconal Community of the Diocese, i.e. ordained deacons, students, aspirants admitted to the propaedeutic year and wives. These Days are mandatory for students who thereby have their formation extended, for ordained deacons in the first three years after ordination to emphasise the absolute necessity of ongoing formation, as well as for the spirants for whom a separate programme is arranged in the Day. The Days consist of a lecture in the morning by a specialist and giving serious intellectual content. At midday there is Mass. The afternoon may pursue further the morning’s lecture and include discussions or deal with some other, more pastoral topic. Whenever possible deacons are encouraged to contribute to the afternoon sessions, since it has been my conviction that there is a vast amount we can learn from each other. The Day finishes with Vespers and there is, of course, lunch. To date we have sought to follow a three year cycle, relating to the Ministries of the Word, the Sacrament and Charity and the three synoptic gospels. This was to reflect the cycle being used by the Womersley inter-diocesan formation programme. This is a useful guide to planning the formation on condition that it is followed quite loosely and that it gives way to more urgent or topical subjects which may arise. The three Days are arranged in different parts of the diocese so as to encourage ordained deacons to attend at least one of them per year. There is an opportunity on these Days for a Forum of more general discussion and for disseminating news.

Finally we publish a diocesan diaconal newsletter. This is four pages, electronic only, despatched by e-mail and made available on the diocese’s website. It contains news, views, and dates for diaries and aims to promote fellowship. It is also a vehicle for informing the rest of the diocese - priests, religious, and various agencies of what we are doing in the diaconate.

All this, of course, requires organisation. Initially this consisted of an assistant director for ongoing formation together with two other deacons informally as advisers, one of whom took on the task of publishing the newsletter and both of whom play key roles in organising the retreats. In this way the formation team was expanded to encompass ongoing as well as initial formation and regular meetings have been arranged of this whole team to plan the ongoing aspect. The presence of students at the Diocesan Diaconal Days especially has meant that the assistant directors for formation, as indeed the

director of formation himself, have attended and helped in these Days whenever possible. More recently the title of Assistant Director for Ongoing Formation was elevated to that of Director of Ongoing Formation. This was to accord with the Basic Norms (21.3) which state that there should be a Director of Formation (either priest or deacon) who preferably should not at the same time be “responsible for ordained deacons.” So having one Director for Formation and one for Ongoing Formation makes this clear as far as formation goes. And what this seems to imply is that he who is overall responsible for ordained deacons is to be the bishop.

“It is desirable that the bishop set up a diocesan *organization for the co-ordination of deacons*, to plan, co-ordinate and supervise the diaconal ministry from the discernment of vocation, to the exercise of ministry and formation – including ongoing formation. This organization should be composed of the Bishop as its president, or a priest delegated by him for this task, and a proportionate number of deacons. This organization should not be remiss in maintaining the necessary links with other diocesan organizations. The Bishop should regulate the life and activity of this organization by the issuance of appropriate norms.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

## Conclusion:

In short, much has been initiated in our diocese but much remains yet to be done. In this talk I have concentrated on the importance of, the absolute necessity for ongoing formation since, it seems to me, it is only when everyone really takes this on board, that we shall more fully realise our objectives. But this also requires us as formators to understand that any assistance we offer will only be successful in so far as “it responds to the personal needs of each deacon, since very deacon lives his ministry in the Church as a unique person placed in particular circumstances”<sup>xxv</sup>. They are the circumstances in which we all need to be assured of “that love with which mother Church is close” to us as we “strive to live faithfully the sacramental grace”<sup>xxvi</sup> of our calling. These are the often surprising circumstances of our ministry at which you, no doubt, from time to time marvel as I do myself.

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<sup>i</sup> Saint Josemaria Escriva, *The Way*, 81, 82.

<sup>ii</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1992, 43.

<sup>iii</sup> Congregation for the Clergy and Congregation for Catholic Education, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*, 1998, 84.

<sup>iv</sup> Congregation for the Clergy and Congregation for Catholic Education, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of permanent Deacons*, 1998, 63.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>vii</sup> *Basic Norms*, 68.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>ix</sup> *Directory*, 66.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.* 57

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>xiv</sup> Adolphe TANQUEREY, S.S., *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (Ch. 3, IV, 806.)

<sup>xv</sup> Robert Louis WILKEN, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*.

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- <sup>xvi</sup> B1 John Henry NEWMAN, *The Present Position of Catholics in England*, ix, 390.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Summa Theologia*, I-II, 109.3.
- <sup>xviii</sup> See *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 71.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Directory*, 78
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, 74
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 70
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 78
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 80.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Directory*, 80
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 66
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*