The Restoration of the Permanent Diaconate: A Blending of Roles

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Description of the Project:

This paper critiques the restoration of the permanent diaconate since Vatican II, focussing on historical discontinuities and theological issues. A core difficulty results from current attempts to merge two separate and distinct sets of functions into one role. Today, deacons are asked to fulfill not only traditional diaconal responsibilities; they are also expected to fulfill many roles that have traditionally been presbyteral functions. These two sets of responsibilities require different sets of charisms and different levels of formation, and do not naturally belong together. Deviating from the service-oriented focus of the diaconate in the early Church and assuming greater leadership roles within the liturgy, the symbolic value of the deacon becomes clouded. As a result, the permanent deacon is no longer a clear symbol of Christ-servant within the liturgical assembly. This paper traces the historical development of major liturgical functions in the early Church and in the Middle Ages, with particular focus on the precedents for diaconal preaching and baptism. It also examines the historical context that accompanied the restoration the permanent diaconate. Given that context, and a number of theological and pastoral arguments, the paper recommends a return to a more traditional conceptualization of the diaconate, where deacons are freed from presbyteral responsibilities in order to be able to concentrate more effectively on roles of service.

This paper may be duplicated.

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The permanent diaconate, restored by Vatican II, is extremely popular in some dioceses, while it continues to be avoided, minimized or overlooked in other dioceses. While some bishops actively encourage men to enter the permanent diaconate, others will not ordain permanent deacons, for fear of creating unnecessary divisions between deacons and lay ministers.\(^1\) The success of the restoration of the permanent diaconate has been decidedly mixed; while many successes are reported, much confusion continues in the minds of many, both laity and clergy.\(^2\) This paper will seek to demonstrate that a core issue behind this mixed success stems from current attempts to merge two separate and distinct sets of functions into one role.

The first set of functions, hereafter referred to as 'Set A', consists of responsibilities traditionally associated with the diaconate in the New Testament and in the early Church. These functions cover a gamut of possibilities, encompassing service in its many forms. Functions would include caring for the sick and the elderly, visiting those in prisons, and looking after the needs of the poor. The Church has a responsibility to look

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\(^1\) As an example of the unequal distribution of permanent deacons, consider the Canadian statistics. Of 64 Latin-rite dioceses in Canada (including the military ordinariate), 17 (26.6%) have no permanent deacons, 38 (59.4%) have 2 or fewer permanent deacons, and only 26 (40.6%) have more than two permanent deacons currently ordained. The 47 dioceses that report having permanent deacons have a total of 791 permanent deacons currently ordained, for an average of 16.8 permanent deacons/diocese among dioceses with permanent deacons, or 12.4 permanent deacons/diocese nationwide. Statistics derived from data published by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed 26 November 2002, [http://www.cccb.ca](http://www.cccb.ca); Internet. A similar inequity of distribution exists in the United States. While there are 12189 permanent deacons in the United States, only 130 of 178 Latin rite dioceses (73.0%) have active formation programs for the permanent diaconate. Source: Office of the Permanent Diaconate, Diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts, accessed 26 November 2002, [http://www.permanentdiaconate.org/cara2001.htm](http://www.permanentdiaconate.org/cara2001.htm); Internet. International statistics are even more skewed. As of January 1999, 16784 (66.8%) of 25117 permanent deacons worldwide were in North America. Source: L'Eglise catholique de Belgique, "Statistiques sur le diaconat," accessed November 16, 2002, [http://www.diaconat.calho.be/quelques.htm](http://www.diaconat.calho.be/quelques.htm); Internet.

\(^2\) Robert B. Slocum, "The Diaconate: Barrier or Catalyst for Lay Ministry?" *Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 33 (March 1990): 129-145. While Slocum's article concludes by pointing to the value that the diaconate offers in enabling lay ministry and in modelling service, his research also indicates that only 73 of 91 Episcopalian dioceses responding to his survey currently accept aspirants to the permanent or vocational diaconate. Of the 18 dioceses that do not currently ordain permanent deacons, specific concerns are expressed concerning the ambiguity and confusion surrounding this ministry.
after the needs of society, and that service function has traditionally been embodied and symbolized in the role of the deacon. Set A functions also include some liturgical duties, within the context of service. For example, the deacon proclaims the gospel, prepares the altar, receives the gifts and pours the wine during the mass. Performing liturgical roles of service symbolizes the life of service for which deacons are ordained.

The second set of functions, hereafter 'Set B', consists of functions that are traditionally presbyteral or episcopal functions, but which deacons have been commonly asked to assume in recent years. Set B contains such major liturgical responsibilities as witnessing marriages, presiding at baptisms and funerals, and preaching during mass.

These two sets of functions involve different charisms, different levels of and needs for formation, and they do not naturally belong together. A person who is very gifted at pastoral care may not be very gifted at preaching, and vice versa. Continued attempts to put these two sets of functions together cloud the symbolism of what the diaconate is intended to represent, discourage some men from seeking ordination as permanent deacons, and perpetuate a sense of competition between deacons and lay ministers. The permanent diaconate will only reach its full potential when these inherent contradictions are recognized and addressed.

After reviewing the Church's early emphasis on service and the role of the deacon within that context, the above distinction of responsibilities will be further examined to clarify why the functions of Set B are not rightfully the domain of the permanent deacon. We will review historically the reasons why these functions have been assigned to permanent deacons, and why this is problematic. Finally, a vision will be presented that
will outline an improved implementation of the permanent diaconate and its relationship to lay ministry.

**Reduced Emphasis on Service**

In the early Church and extending into the early Middle Ages, social responsibilities were very much integrated into the life of the community. The Christian community was recognized for the way in which it cared for those in prison, for the infirm, for the elderly, for orphans. Christ had set the example and Christians followed this example. The deacon in this early period was the person who took on full-time responsibility for coordinating the community's response to these needs. Service was the dominant theme associated with this function. The deacon was a symbol of Christ the Servant. Responsibilities included financial administration, distribution of alms and care of the hungry and homeless. This role continued in the liturgy, where the deacon provided service to the presider and to the community. The following 7th century account captures a well-developed understanding of the deacon's liturgical role:

> To the deacon belongs the duty of assisting the priests and assisting in everything which is done in the sacraments of Christ, that is, in baptism, in the anointing, in the paten and the chalice, in bringing the offerings and placing them on the altar, preparing and covering the table of the Lord, bearing the cross, proclaiming the Gospel and the Apostle ...; to him also belong the duty of prayers, the recitation of names; he advises people to have ears for the Lord; he exhorts by shouting; he announces the blessing.4

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3 Tertullian especially wrote about pagans' attitudes toward Christians and how impressed they were by Christians' acts of love, even toward non-Christians. Their acts of generosity included paying for the burials of poor people, helping orphans and the elderly who had no other form of support and caring for those who were in prison or banished. See Norbert Brox, "'Making Earth into Heaven': Diakonia in the Early Church," in Diakonia: Church for the Others, ed. Norbert Greinacher and Norbert Mette (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 33-35.

4 "Ad diaconum pertinet assimire sacerdotibus, et ministrare in omnibus quae aguntur in sacramentis Christi, in baptismo scilicet, in chrismate, in patene et calice; oblationes inferre, et disponere in altario, componere mensam Domini, atque vestire, crucem ferre, praedicare Evangelium et Apostolum... ad ipsum quoque pertinet officium precum, recitatio nominum; ipse praemonet aures ad Dominum habere, ipse hortatur clamore, pacem ipse annuntiat." The translation to English is my own. St. Isidore of Seville
These were roles of service, not roles of presidency. This role provided a tangible reminder to the community of the connection between life and liturgy.\(^5\) This connection between liturgy and ethical service to the community was very strong, and in this context the role of the deacon was strong, as the “embodiment of the common commitment, made in baptism, to live out the diakonia of Jesus Christ.”\(^6\)

Over time, both the Church’s involvement in social ministry and the role of the diaconate declined. As the altar table became distanced from the members of the worshipping assembly, so their lives became distanced from the liturgy. Charitable works were still recognized as a precondition and consequence of the liturgy, but were no longer inseparable from it.\(^7\) Monastic and religious communities took on responsibility for caring for the less fortunate in society, freeing the parish community to focus on liturgical celebrations and the sanctification of souls. Caring for the less fortunate in society became increasingly separate and distinct from the life of the parish community.

**Responsibilities within Set B**

From the late Middle Ages until Vatican II, virtually all liturgical functions had become presbyteral functions. Some refer to this phenomenon as the “omnivorous priesthood.”\(^8\) Care needs to be taken in discerning today which functions belong most


\(^7\) Searle, 99.

naturally to the presbyterate, which functions belong to the diaconate and which functions belong to the laity. In the twentieth century, attempts to rectify that presbyteral dominance have led to the laity and the diaconate taking on more roles in the liturgy. Theologically and historically, however, one can argue that some liturgical functions should be presbyteral, and that it is a distortion to invite deacons or laity to routinely take on these functions.

Three specific functions will be addressed within the area of presbyteral functions commonly fulfilled by permanent deacons. We will address the question of baptism; should deacons be ordinary ministers of baptism? Secondly, the question of preaching during the Eucharist will be addressed. Why is this properly a presbyteral or episcopal function? Under what conditions should a deacon preach at Eucharist? Thirdly, other liturgical functions will be briefly addressed. Should deacons witness marriages and preside at funerals, given that both are occasions where preaching would be expected from the one presiding?

Deacons as Ordinary Ministers of Baptism

Since Vatican II, Church documents and the views of many theologians have consistently listed baptism among the roles of the diaconate. *Lumen Gentium* 29 tells us: "It is a deacon's task, as authorized by the competent authority, to administer Baptism solemnly...." The 1998 *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* reiterated this mandate: "The *munus sanctificandi* of the deacon is expressed in prayer, in the solemn administration of baptism." Similarly, *Christian Initiation*, the general

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introduction to both the *Rite of Baptism for Children* and the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, and the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* both indicate, "The ordinary ministers of baptism are bishops, presbyters and deacons."^{11}

Nevertheless, there is value in revisiting the question, given both historical evidence and liturgical theology. An examination of the nature of the historical evidence for diaconal baptism, and the theological importance of connecting baptism to the worshipping community and ultimately to Eucharist, will lead to the conclusion that baptism should ideally be considered a presbyteral or episcopal function. A deacon may be an extraordinary minister of baptism, just as a lay person may be an extraordinary minister, but baptism is symbolically best treated as a presbyteral or episcopal function. Such an understanding would revive the provision in the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* that defined a deacon as an extraordinary minister of baptism.^{12}

In the early Church, bishops were the pastors of communities, so bishops presided at baptisms. Deacons played a very important, very active role of service during baptisms; in one account, they "guided the person to be baptized to the baptismal font, climbed into the water with him, anointed him, and handed him milk and honey following the baptism."^{13}

Some evidence suggests that deacons may have been allowed to baptize in certain circumstances.\footnote{Barnett, 74-77.} For example, in \textit{On Baptism} §17, written c. 200, Tertullian stresses the bishop's role as the preferred presider at baptism, and indicates that the right to baptize is granted "after him [the bishop], to the presbyters and deacons, yet not without commission from the bishop."\footnote{Ernest Evans, trans. \textit{Tertullian's Homily on Baptism} (London: SPCK, 1964), 35.} Tertullian indicates that, for the dignity of the Church, it is most fitting if the bishop baptizes. While the passage does indicate that presbyters, deacons or even laymen might baptize, it implies that this is an exceptional function.

This paragraph was written as a condemnation of laywomen who baptized without the bishop's consent. Similarly, the \textit{Didascalia Apostolorum}, a church order likely written in North Syria in c. 230,\footnote{For further background on the dating and origin of this document, see Paul F. Bradshaw, "Ancient Church Orders: A Continuing Enigma," in \textit{The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy}, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 78-80.} contains the following excerpt in a section addressed to bishops: "whether you yourself baptize or you command the deacons or presbyters to baptize."\footnote{Arthur Vööbus, trans., \textit{The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac}, vol. 408 of \textit{Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium}, ed. R. Draguet (Louvain: Secrétariat du CSCO, 1979), ch. xvi, p.157.}

The context suggests that the role in question may actually be a subset of the overall rite of baptism, consisting of the second pre-baptismal anointing and the immersion or submersion in water.\footnote{For a more in-depth analysis and explanation of Syrian initiation rites at this period, see Maxwell E. Johnson, \textit{The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation} (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 34-50.} The invocation of divine names, or epiclesis, could be done by someone else. This passage is ambiguous and inconclusive; we have no evidence from this passage that deacons baptized when the bishops were not present. If they did, it was only when commanded by the bishops. Canon 77 of the Synod of Elvira, held in Spain in c. 305-306, goes further to suggest that deacons might have been baptizing on their own in small country parishes. If a deacon in charge of an assembly without a
bishop or presbyter were to baptize, the bishop should complete those baptisms with a benediction.\textsuperscript{19} We do not know how common such a situation might have been. We therefore cannot say definitely that deacons never baptized in the early Church. The Synod at Dovin in Armenia in 527 declared, “No deacon may administer baptism \textit{without necessity}.”\textsuperscript{20} The above references suggest that diaconal baptism may have happened on occasion. If deacons did preside at baptisms, it appears that this was an extraordinary function, one that they could do when delegated, but not a function inherently related to their own identity as deacons.

During the Middle Ages, with minor exceptions, this pattern continued: deacons were seen as extraordinary ministers of baptism. The exception comes from Rabanus Maurus (d. 856), Archbishop of Menz, who wrote that deacons could baptize even in the presence of presbyters or bishops. He saw deacons as ordinary, not extraordinary, ministers of baptism.\textsuperscript{21} Two centuries later, Stephen of Balgraco (d. 1136), Bishop of Autun, saw baptism as primarily a presbyteral role, but one that could on occasion be filled by a deacon, for “in certain things they take the place of priests as in ministering baptism, Communion, and mercifully hearing the penitent’s sins.”\textsuperscript{22} Stephen’s position appears at first to differ from that of William Durandus of Mende (1230-1296), whose addition of the phrase, “\textit{Diaconum oportet ministrear ad altare, baptizare et praedicare},” to the Roman Pontifical led to the subsequent inclusion in Canon Law of the provisions

\textsuperscript{19} Charles J. Hefele, \textit{A History of the Christian Councils, From the Original Documents}, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1894), 169-170. The Latin text reads “Si quis diaconus regens plebem sine episcopo vel presbytero alios baptizaverit, episcopus eos per benedictionem pericere deebit.” See also Joseph W. Pokusa, “The Diaconate: A History of Law Following Practice,” \textit{The Jurist} 45 (1985): 105. Pokusa sees this passage as affirming that baptisms in such cases were valid, even if incomplete.
\textsuperscript{20} Charles J. Hefele, \textit{A History of the Christian Councils, From the Original Documents}, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1894), 146. Italics added.
\textsuperscript{21} Pokusa, 107.
for diaconal preaching and baptizing. However, as Walter Croce points out, one can only understand this phrase when one takes the rationale into account. Durandus was saying that a deacon should assist with baptism, not that a deacon should baptize, and he clarified this explicitly by adding that deacons “should never baptize nor distribute the Body of Christ, unless in the absence of and under the order of the bishop or the priest.” The subsequent omission of this clarification appears to have led directly to the current canonical regulations on diaconal baptism.

As we have seen, therefore, prior to Vatican II, a deacon was seldom if ever considered to be the ordinary minister of baptism. A deacon baptized only in exceptional circumstances, such as when in charge of isolated parish communities in the fourth century. The current practice of having permanent deacons baptize frequently in parishes is a new concept, not consistent with the tradition of the Church.

Moreover, from the perspective of liturgical theology, baptism is much more logically the domain of the presbyter or the bishop. Baptism celebrates one’s entrance into the Christian community, and is the first step to the table of the Eucharist. Baptism is the first step in the previously unified threefold initiation sequence of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist. For an adult, these three sacraments would be celebrated together at the Easter Vigil, with either a presbyter or a bishop presiding. When infants or young children are baptized, the symbolic connection both with the community of faith and with the Eucharist is strongest with the pastor of the local worshipping community. While

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other community members share in this function in various ways, such as through baptismal preparation, the ministry of hospitality, music ministry, the ministry of readers, and the ministry of the assembly, being present to witness and support this action, it is preferable for the minister of the sacrament to be the leader of the community.

Ideally, baptisms will be conducted on Sundays in the presence of the worshipping community, during a Eucharistic celebration. This is the strongest possible ritual enactment of the candidate's entry into a community of faith, whose lives are oriented toward and strengthened by the celebration of the Eucharist. When a baptism occurs on a Sunday afternoon during a Liturgy of the Word, the Eucharistic connection is lost. Since the deacon is never a presider at a Eucharistic gathering, the people gathered will not even be able to make a connection between his role as the minister of baptism, and the priest's role as minister at the table. While exceptions may be needed in emergency situations, as exceptions have been made throughout our history, it is a distortion of baptism to have it routinely conferred by a deacon. A deacon may be an extraordinary minister of baptism when necessary but should not be considered an ordinary minister of the sacrament.

**Preaching at Mass as a Diaconal Role**

Similarly, both historical and liturgical reasons point to the conclusion that preaching is not and should not be a usual function of deacons. Preaching was not a role of deacons in the early Church, and is a relatively recent innovation. Preaching was an episcopal responsibility. Even catechetical functions were not expected of deacons in general. The only case where we can say reliably that catechumens were sent to a deacon "so that he could instruct them in the rudimentary fundamentals of the Christian
faith is in the case of Deacon Deogratias of Carthage. This is a unique instance, given this person’s pleasant lecture style and knowledge of Christian teachings. In other circumstances, laypersons often instructed catechumens. Therefore, it would be a mistake to conclude that catechesis was always a function of deacons in the early Church. Similarly, preaching was not a function of deacons, even when they were in charge of isolated parishes. In such cases, or if the priest were unable to preach because of illness, deacons were instructed to read from the homilies of the Fathers.

As James Barnett concludes,

preaching was never a function belonging to the diaconate in the early Church. To make it so now is neither helpful nor desirable, confusing as it does the diaconate and the presbyterate, but in fact is counterproductive. Of course, there will be some deacons along with some lay people who are eminently qualified and possess a charisma of the Spirit for preaching. These should by all means be specially licensed by the Church.

Preaching during mass is a function that belongs primarily to the one presiding. The homily unites the Liturgy of the Word with the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The homilist breaks open the Word of God, helping us to see how that Word connects to our lives. This message must be linked to the Table. The Word of God prepares our hearts to say ‘yes’ so that we may join more fully in praying the Eucharistic prayer. There is a symbolic value when the same person gives the homily and presides at the Eucharistic prayer. The linkage of Word and Sacrament is most clear when this occurs.

The above argument does not imply that preaching by deacons should never occur. There are valid reasons for offering an assembly a different voice, one informed by a

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26 Croce, “From the History of the Diaconate,” 76.
27 Ibid., 75-76. Croce gives convincing evidence that it was exceptional for deacons to be catechists. In some cases, special instructors (doctores) were used; in other cases, lay persons were catechists, or priests.
28 Barnett, 80-82.
29 Barnett, 211.
diversity of life experiences both inside and outside the church hierarchy, provided the person preaching has sufficient formation. Some have suggested that qualifications for preaching include:

- commitment to the Catholic faith; a sense of the community to which the ... preacher was going to preach; academic background in Scripture, liturgy and related areas; communication skills; and cultural sensitivity and global awareness.\(^{30}\)

Nevertheless, the ideal for the sake of the unity of the celebration should be to have the same person presiding and giving the homily.\(^{31}\)

Expecting permanent deacons to preach and preferring deacons over qualified laypersons is a problem from several perspectives. It confuses the roles of presbyter and deacon, giving credence to the notion that ordained offices are much the same.\(^{32}\) It is a problem for lay ministers who may feel a sense of competition, or even a sense of outrage, at the injustice of seeing less-qualified ministers given the opportunities to do roles for which they have received more in-depth formation. It is also a problem for the assembly who may be faced with poor-quality preaching, given the relatively superficial level of theological training that many diaconate formation programs include. While the homily’s purpose is not primarily catechetical, it is the only catechetical formation that many parishioners ever receive, and if they are presented with an underdeveloped theology, it can damage their image of God. Moreover, it is a problem for the permanent

\(^{30}\) Patricia A. Paranchini, *Lay Preaching: State of the Question*. American Essays in Liturgy (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 58. While this set of qualifications was developed in response to the question of lay preaching, the author notes that the same set of qualifications should be expected from all those who preach.


\(^{32}\) Barnett, 191.
diaconate itself. There may be many who feel called to a life of service, who have the charisms to do a wonderful job coordinating pastoral care workers, coordinating visits to prisoners, organizing and rallying support for soup kitchen workers and food banks, or working with youth groups, instilling a sense of social responsibility in young people. Many who feel called to this ministry may avoid the permanent diaconate because they could not imagine themselves as good preachers, or because they do not have enough time to engage in sufficient theological education to enable them to be good preachers. In either case, the Church is being deprived of potentially excellent symbols of Christ-servant in our midst. We have raised the standards for the permanent diaconate beyond what it was in the early Church, expecting deacons to be able to preach when it is not and should not be a core part of their ministry. By insisting that it be a core part of their ministry, the importance of social responsibilities is reduced.

Other Liturgical Presidency Functions

Deacons are frequently invited to witness marriages, especially since marriages between a Catholic and a non-Catholic are seldom celebrated during Eucharistic liturgies. Deacons may also preside at funerals and vigil services, or lead communion services in the absence of a priest. In all of these scenarios, preaching is required. The presider or witness needs to be able to break open the Word of God, thereby proclaiming “God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy.”33 The scripture readings and the homily heard at a wedding or funeral may be the only way

that some people hear the Word of God proclaimed.\footnote{Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, 2.} It is certainly important for a deacon to be an active participant in these liturgies. A married deacon might be particularly gifted at marriage preparation, advising couples who are preparing for marriage. Through involvement in pastoral care to the ill, a deacon may have established strong ties with the family that is now grieving the loss of a family member. A deacon's presence and active liturgical participation during such liturgies would be extremely valuable, providing a link between his service to those in need and the liturgical celebration. However, he does not need to be a presider at these liturgies. If he cannot preach sufficiently well, or if he has had insufficient formation to preach effectively, it would be better to have somebody gifted at preaching be the presider, with the deacon continuing his usual role of service, e.g. proclamation of the gospel. As noted above, preaching clouds the distinction between the roles of the presbyter and the deacon.

One area where liturgical presidency is not as strongly connected to preaching is the sacrament of anointing of the sick. While the Word of God is still proclaimed during the sacrament of the sick, formal preaching is not common, except in communal gatherings. Unfortunately, despite well-documented historical precedents, deacons are not currently permitted to serve as ministers of this sacrament. This is especially unfortunate, because ministry to the sick is a core part of the traditional diaconal function. Several theologians make a strong case that the minister of anointing need not
be restricted to priests, so perhaps this is an area where change might occur in the future, enabling deacons to be more effective in their ministry to those in need.35

Reasons for confusion

There are three forces combining to contribute to the ongoing confusion of a deacon's function in today's Church. For many people, the function of the Church remains limited to liturgical, sacramental functions; service to the community continues to be an underemphasized dimension of our lives as Christians. Therefore, it is not surprising that the social dimension, the key dimension, of a deacon's raison d'être is sometimes neglected in order to give him the opportunity to take on presbyteral functions. Secondly, there were a number of historical and cultural factors at the time of the introduction of the permanent diaconate that led Church officials to position the diaconate as closely as possible to the presbyterate. Finally, the continuation of the transitional diaconate as stepping-stone to the ministerial priesthood pulls the diaconate closer to the presbyterate in the minds of many.

Even when the restoration of the permanent diaconate was first being discussed in the 1940s, one of the reasons given was the anticipated shortage of priests.36 Therefore, it is not surprising that what has developed is a merging of some diaconal functions and some presbyteral functions. In the 1960s, when the first permanent diaconate formation programs were being put in place, concerns for under-representation of specific cultural groups in the clergy led to some enthusiastic support

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for the restoration of the permanent diaconate. For example, in 1966, an Alaskan bishop wanted the American Church to support the permanent diaconate because

permanent deacons would make it possible for an official representative of the Church to be present in those small Alaskan communities which saw a priest only occasionally, and ... the restoration of the diaconate for Alaska would give Eskimos the opportunity to see themselves as part of the official Church.37

This bishop envisioned that duties of the permanent deacons would include catechesis and presiding at liturgy of the word services in the absence of a priest. Given these duties, it appears that the deacons were merely substituting for the shortage of priests, made particularly acute by cultural aversion to celibacy in the Native community.38

Similarly, acknowledging the under-representation of Blacks and Hispanic Americans among the ordained clergy, there were early proposals to recruit permanent deacons from these cultural groups. In 1969, there were only 175 black priests from a population of 800,000 black Catholics in the United States. In both cultural groups, requirements for celibacy and for advanced education hindered candidates for the priesthood. While many of the duties envisioned for Black deacons did match the traditional view of service, others saw the diaconate as a poor substitution for Black priests. The BCPD (Bishops’ Committee on the Permanent Diaconate) suggested that the diaconate be seen as a good first step toward the priesthood, in case the law should

38 For the Inuit community, family is such an important dimension of their culture that celibacy seems like a foreign concept. Only men with families can be considered community leaders. This issue prompted Harry Lafond, chief of a Cree community in Saskatchewan, Canada, to address Pope John Paul II during the Synod of the Americas in 1997. Lafond spoke passionately about the need for a married priesthood in order to serve the pastoral needs of Aboriginal communities. For the same reason, in 1993, Canadian bishops appealed to the Vatican for permission to ordain married men as priests in Aboriginal communities, but this request was denied. See “North Needs Married Priests, Bishops Say,” Toronto Star (October 9, 1993), K15; “Bishops Push Pope to Reconsider Married Priests,” Toronto Star (October 30, 1993), K18; and Bob Harvey, “Cree Chief urges Catholic Church to Accept Natives’ Spiritual Ways,” Ottawa Citizen (November 30, 1997), A5.
change to allow married priests.\textsuperscript{39} The Hispanic community was much more resistant to the idea of the permanent diaconate, for they felt that it did not meet their needs. The Diaconal Resolutions of the 1972 \textit{Encuentro Hispano de Pastoral} identified a number of changes to canon law that would be required in order to make the concept acceptable.\textsuperscript{40} From the beginning, there was preference for lay ministry rather than the diaconate primarily to avoid restrictions placed on celibacy, remarriage, age and gender.

For Blacks, Hispanics and native groups, the permanent diaconate was not the solution to their problem. Their problem was under-representation in the presbyterate because of restrictions on celibacy, gender and education. Where the diaconate was accepted and implemented, it was accepted begrudgingly as a second-choice to what their communities really felt they needed. In such an environment, it is not surprising that the traditional diaconal roles and responsibilities were not given priority.

Confusion between the transitional diaconate and the permanent diaconate is one other root cause of the current set of difficulties. While it is perfectly reasonable to expect a transitional deacon, a man preparing for ordination to the priesthood, to possess the charism of preaching, and to have the theological education necessary to enable good preaching, it is not reasonable to have this expectation of permanent deacons. Time and again, deacons themselves will say that they are not priest-helpers; theirs is a distinct ministry, rooted in service. If that is true, their charisms are likely oriented toward pastoral work and community leadership and may not include the gift of preaching. Canon law perpetuates these issues by specifying that deacons have the

\textsuperscript{39} Rashke, 34-36.
\textsuperscript{40} Rashke, 40-41. Proposed changes included reduction of the minimum age for ordination from 35 to 30, permission for widowed deacons to marry, permission for single deacons to marry, permission for Hispanic deacons to serve as ministers of the sacrament of penance and the anointing of the sick, and permission for women to be ordained as deacons.
faculty to preach by virtue of their ordination, offering no distinction between two very
distinct roles, that of the permanent deacon and that of the transitional deacon.\footnote{Caparros et al., ed., \textit{Code of Canon Law Annotated}, Canon 764.}

Rooted in gospel values and strengthened by the Eucharist, a permanent deacon’s
primary function is “dedication to works of charity and assistance and in the direction of
communities or sectors of church life, especially as regards charitable activities,”\footnote{Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons § 9.}
symbolizing for all our need to care for our society, as Jesus taught us. Canon law lacks
distinctions between functions appropriate for a permanent deacon and those
appropriate for a transitional deacon.

Some suggest that the ideal solution to this confusion of terminologies and
responsibilities may be the elimination of the transitional diaconate.\footnote{While Trent staunchly supported the \textit{cursus honorum}, the tradition of sequential ordination by steps, Pope Paul VI significantly simplified the sequential ordination process when he effectively eliminated the minor orders through his \textit{Ministeria quaedam} of 15 August 1972. The revised rites of ordination for deacons and presbyters, promulgated on 15 August 1972, no longer contain any reference to sequential ordination. The description of the deacon’s responsibilities in \textit{Lumen Gentium} 29 do not suggest a transitional office. These documents point to the permanent diaconate’s restoration as the normative model of the diaconate. The need to revisit the ongoing continuation of the transitional diaconate is supported by Barnett, 148, 191, 211; by Patrick McCaslin and Michael G. Lawler, \textit{Sacrament of Service} (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 123-124; by Wood, \textit{Sacramental Orders}, 166-171 and by Michael J. Himes, "Models for Diaconal Education," in \textit{Diaconal Reader}, ed. Bishops’ Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1985), 64-85. See also John St. H. Gibaut, \textit{The Cursus Honorum: A Study of the Origins and Evolution of Sequential Ordination} (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 326-331.}
The continuation of the transitional diaconate can give the impression that a deacon is less than a priest.
It is a training ground for those who have not yet made it into priesthood. This is not the
image most permanent deacons want; they see theirs as a distinct ministry. The
transitional diaconate does not have a long history in our tradition, and could be
eliminated in favour of direct ordination to the presbyterate. Its elimination would allow
for a clearer definition of the roles of the permanent deacon, and would help to avert its
continued conceptualization as being less than a priest.
The Way Forward

The diaconate today remains in search of a clear role definition. One dimension of the problem is characterized by an over-identification of the deacon with the role of the priest. While some have affirmed that "in restoring the diaconate, we are not trying to supply for the lack of priests," many of the functions assigned to deacons seem intended to do just that. Deacons are frequently assuming presbyteral responsibilities, such as preaching and baptizing. Even if there were not a shortage of presbyters, the same phenomenon might occur as a result of society’s under-valuing of the Church’s service ministries and the Church’s self-identity being largely limited to its sacramental and liturgical functions. The under-valuing of the service ministries in the Church today is not without impact. Deacons may focus their energies on preparing their Sunday homilies and have little time left to work at the AIDS hospice, do home repairs for the poor and elderly, visit the sick and the grieving, or encourage and train the laity in their ministries.

In addressing the above situation, the best place to start would be in the diaconal formation programs. Some dioceses require their diaconal candidates to obtain advanced theological education, such as a Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry, prior to ordination, while other dioceses organize their own formation programs, often in much less depth. To enable deacons to be effective ministers of service, it would make more sense for formation programs to be geared toward service. They should definitely provide some scriptural and theological formation, because the deacon needs that

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45 This is the practice in the Diocese of St. Cloud, Minnesota, for example.
background in order to effectively discuss his role and articulate the reasons for his ministry. He needs to internalize and be able to explain why the Church has a mission to the poor and to the needs of society in general. He should be encouraged and given the resources and spiritual formation he needs to carry out his ministry in a prayerful manner. The formation program also must include training for his particular ministry. This might include leadership training, interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, pastoral care, counselling, administration or youth training, dependent on his particular gifts and areas of interests, and also dependent on the needs of the diocese. Requiring advanced theological degrees may be an impediment to many strong candidates, who may not have the intellectual ability or the time to undertake such studies. There needs to be a correlation between formation and responsibilities.

Recognizing that there is a shortage of presbyters, and that there is a need for non-presbyters to take on traditionally presbyteral functions, it would be reasonable for the Church to define parameters within which non-presbyters may fulfill these roles as extraordinary ministers. These parameters would include training and commissioning. In this model, for example, if there is a need for somebody other than a priest to preside at baptisms within a liturgy of the word setting, those trained and deputed for this role could be given the authorization and the blessing of the Church to do so. Recognizing that such a role is not an inherent part of the role of the permanent deacon, this commissioning could be granted equally justifiably to laity or to deacons. The faculty to preach should not be granted automatically when permanent deacons are ordained; it

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46 Training for any role in ministry should encompass at least enough theological education and spiritual formation to meet the needs of the specific ministry. In addition, most ministerial roles would also necessitate some assessment of emotional maturity and interpersonal skills. These dimensions of formation should be in addition to the actual liturgical skills required to competently carry out the task at hand. Acceptance into such ministries should be based on charisms and adequate formation, while avoiding restrictions based on age, marital status and gender.
should only be granted to those who have the formation, education and the gifts to do so effectively.\textsuperscript{47} Inviting lay persons or deacons on an equal basis to take on extraordinary presbyteral functions would serve a levelling function, positioning lay persons and deacons as colleagues in service to the kingdom, alleviating a sense of hierarchy.\textsuperscript{48} In some ways, it may even be preferable to have lay ministers take on such roles, in order to avoid clouding the deacon's purpose as symbol of Christ as servant.

When asked, “Why do we need the permanent diaconate?” most answers gravitate around responsibilities within Set A. We need permanent deacons to be symbols of Christ in our midst, symbols of Christ as servant.\textsuperscript{49} We need permanent deacons to maintain and promote the Church's responsibilities toward the less fortunate in our communities.\textsuperscript{50} We need permanent deacons to help us remember the connections between liturgy and life, to help the assembly to live out its baptismal call in very tangible ways. Deacons “receive the imposition of hands not for the priesthood, but for the ministry.”\textsuperscript{51} The function of deacon will not be a clear symbol of Christ-servant in our midst if we continue to ask deacons to routinely fulfill presbyteral roles.

\textsuperscript{47} Canon 764 indicates that “priests and deacons, with at least presumed consent of the rector of the church, have the faculty to preach everywhere, unless this faculty has been restricted or removed by the competent Ordinary, or unless particular law requires express permission." The competent Ordinary has the responsibility to ensure that the preaching is appropriate, and may withdraw or restrict the faculty. See Caparros et al, ed., \textit{Code of Canon Law Annotated}, Canon 764.

\textsuperscript{48} The 1990 Prayers of Ordination for a deacon eliminate the phrase ‘honour’ that was present in the 1968 prayers in order to avoid the sense that deacons are receiving an honour or additional prestige by being ordained. There is added emphasis on diaconal service compared to the 1968 ordination prayers. See Wood, \textit{Sacramental Orders}, 157-158.

\textsuperscript{49} McCaslin and Lawler, 35-46.

\textsuperscript{50} Barnett, 137-142.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Lumen Gentium} 29.
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