

**Diaconate in the Contemporary Church:  
The Vocation of Administration**

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1966 The Second Vatican Council issued the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*), which was “hailed as the most momentous achievement of the Council, both because of its important contents and because of its central place among the Council documents.”<sup>1</sup> What *Lumen gentium* did in recent history was open the door so that “the diaconate can in the future be restored as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy.” It did not “mandate” the office to the church across the globe, but it did leave it to proper territorial authority for the appointment of such “to be appointed for the care of souls.”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I discuss the permanent diaconate in the modern church, specifically the role it now plays and the role it might play in the future. In broad, general terms, *Lumen gentium* described what a deacon could do. It said “in communion with the bishops and his group of priests they [deacons] serve in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God.”<sup>3</sup> Some 50 years later, this office has grown significantly in the United States<sup>4</sup>, yet there still seems a great deal of uncertainty as to precisely which activities can be included among these three *munera, docendi, sanctificandi, and regendi*, are for deacons. There is no universal, official “job description.”

The office continues to evolve in the modern church, and in a later section we will explore the ways deacons function as well as ways they do not. Of particular interest in this paper is the role of “administration.” This is not a new topic. As far back as 1997 Rev. Msgr Joseph

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<sup>1</sup> Dulles, Avery, S.J., in an introductory article, “The Church” on *Lumen gentium*, “The Documents of Vatican II, general ed. Walter M. Abbot, S.J., New York, Herder and Herder New York Association Press, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 29, November 21, 1964, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Specific statistics from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. are cited on pages 7 and 8.

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R. Roth, D. D. said “. . . I would like to address an area that has not been addressed very much lately, but that is going to be a very important part of the church in our age. . . . The topic [to] of which I refer is that of priestless parishes and the appointment of deacons as pastoral administrators.”<sup>5</sup> Since the last decade the “shortage of priests” has grown (alluding again to CARA statistics), so the consideration of deacons as administrators merits continued exploration.

It is fair to point out that in all walks of life, when a shortage of an essential resources develops, a search for other resources begins. This includes a search for new resources, but just as often it means a search for expansion of and in innovative ways the use of existing resources. Since Vatican II our Church has regularly revisited the hierarchical relationships between bishops, priests, and deacons. In many ways already, bishops and priests have utilized the newly restored diaconate, not as “a substitute” for priests, but as a *supplement*, freeing priests to focus more on those things for which they are primarily trained, e. g. consecration at Eucharist, and other *munus sanctificandi* [function of sanctification]) specifically designated by ordination.

Before pursuing the matter of deacons as administrators, I will clarify some terminology and then look at the deacon in Church history. After that I discuss the ecclesial and practical considerations that are relevant to this topic.

## DEFINING THE TERMS

There are a number of terms used in this paper to clarify. When we talk about the diaconate we are specifically talking about the office of deacon. That would seem obvious; however,

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<sup>5</sup> Roth, Rev. Monsignor, Joseph R., *The Deacon in Church Ministry*, (Green Bay, WI., Alt Publishing Co., 1997), p.49.

the source of the word “deacon” is from the Greek *diakonia*, which is often used in the broadest sense of *service*.<sup>6</sup> Deacon, however, for this paper means the office (or person) as a member of the hierarchy in the Roman Catholic Church. Bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laity are all called to service; therefore, the word *service* is much too broad when applied to deacons alone. It includes everything a deacon does, or that others in the church do, or ever did, or ever will do.

*Ministry*, likewise is very broad. It also covers activities of the hierarchy as well as religious and laity. Since the focus of this paper is on the service of *administration*, I want to be clearer. Though the term “administration” is used in *Lumen gentium* 29, however, there is some interpretative leeway. As to precisely what this means, the paragraph talks first of “administering” baptism and sacramentals which seems to assume administration involves “a dispensing, giving, or applying of something”<sup>7</sup> liturgical. But, it next mentions the diaconate as “dedicated to duties of charity and of administration” in becoming servants to God’s people, and then follows this up with “duties so very necessary to the life of the church. . .”<sup>8</sup> I will have more to say about this shortly.

In general usage, administration also means “the process or activity of running a business, organization, etc: . . .”<sup>9</sup> Synonyms include management, direction, operation, governing, and overseeing. Some of these terms, such as “overseeing” take on a more narrow and precise meaning when applied to ecclesial matters, so I stress the following for this paper: administration means participating in the “*munus regendi*” (function of “governance”) into which deacons are

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<sup>6</sup> John Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*. (New York) Oxford University Press, 1990. Collins devotes several pages in the opening chapter to the many uses of *diakonia* from the early church to today’s churches, all of which are by no means Catholic.

<sup>7</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, © Oxford University Press, Translation by Bing Translator

<sup>8</sup> *op cit. LG 29*

<sup>9</sup> *op cit. Oxford*

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first baptized and then ordained, the “governance” of parish and diocesan affairs. But in all senses, it must be clear, this is done in communion with the church hierarchy, primarily bishops and secondarily with priests. Consistent with the Code of Canon Law, it also refers to the pastoral care of parishes as well as functions within the diocesan office. I am not suggesting that deacons are in any sense autonomous or independent of the hierarchy; this recognizes that the deacon is the lowest degree of the ordained hierarchy, below priests and bishops. Deacons can not participate in governing, independent of an assignment to do so by their bishop.

To sum up this point, *Lumen gentium* introduces the diaconate by saying that they (deacons) “serve in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity . . .”<sup>10</sup> For some this has become a limiting statement, perhaps even a stumbling block for the approach suggested in this paper. But as I already noted, *Lumen gentium* also says that the “service” element includes “Dedication to duties of charity and of *administration* . . . duties, so very necessary to the life of the church” that they may, in part, be fulfilled in the restoration of the diaconate as “a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy.”<sup>11</sup> This second use of *administration* seems to suggest activities that are quite different from the performance of sacramental services.

Another term with some relevance is that of *vocation*. Again in the broadest sense, a vocation is “The calling or destiny we have in this life and hereafter.”<sup>12</sup> While the laity are called to seek “the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will, . . . priestly and religious vocations are tied to the service of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, I often use the word *charism* and/or talent in this paper

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<sup>10</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 1994 as on [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), June 2016

<sup>11</sup> *LG*, 29, italics mine

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (CCC), Glossary, Second Edition, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1997, e-book edition, Digital edition, August 2011

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

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and the two are interchangeable. We can define both as any good gift or natural endowment, or special ability, but I'm aware that quite often the term *charism* carries with it a sense of a spiritual gift. I retain the interchangeable aspects because I recognize that all gifts are spiritual gifts, endowed to us by our Creator. Whether it is a talent/*charism* for the arts or for the analytical, God is the source.

In later sections I discuss historical evidence for and against my argument. I will also look at pertinent sections of Canon Law, additional statistical data, and ecclesial factors that may be of value in developing a job description for deacons. I think we will find that where deacons perform administrative tasks there are benefits to bishops, priests, and most importantly, to the People of God.

## DWINDLING RESOURCES

It would be hard to imagine today an organization more sorely lacking in resources and in the midst of a hostile environment than was the early Christian Church. The task then was to change the world, and it was given to a most unlikely band of men who lacked formal education, financial means, expertise, influence, power, and experience, to name a few resource shortages.

Nor did Jesus draw up "a business plan" per se and there is no evidence that his Apostles originally had any sort of plan either. There is, however, irrefutable proof that Jesus left ample human resources. The Apostles would have to "improvise," which they did, but it was not without grace, which came through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the approach the Apostles took to their mission was not designed by our standards, nor was it haphazard.

Today when one hears about the struggles our church faces in the light of cultural hostility and "priest shortages," the Church does not shy from the mission of making disciples of all nations and teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded (Mt. 28: 19-20). Materially

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speaking, we are awash with resources, technological and human, far beyond what was available 2,000 years ago. Should we not make fuller use of them?

There is in today's Church in the United States, an inverse relationship between the number of people (laity) to be served and the number of priests available to do so. Between 2005 and 2015 the number of diocesan priests in the United States dropped from 28,094 to 25,868. The number of parishes dropped from 18,891 to 17,337. The number of Catholics identified as "parish connected" grew from 64.8 million to 68.1 million over the same period. For every priest in 2005 there were 2,307 parishioners; in 2015 there were 2,633 parishioners for every priest. While the number of parishes and priests dwindled, the priest/parish ratio remained relatively the same, about 1.48 - 1.49 priests for every parish. Still, this number may be misleading, because many diocesan priests don't serve directly in a parish. They may be working in diocesan offices or other ministerial areas such as chaplains (public safety, hospitals, prisons), and social service operations (rescue missions, food distribution centers, homeless shelters, etc.) In actuality, the priest to parish ratio has averaged about one per parish in the ten years cited. (The above numbers exclude religious priests, though that number has also declined, now 88 percent of what it was 10 years ago compared to about 92 percent for diocesan priests). Lastly, the number of parishes shrank by 1,554, but the number of parishes without a resident priest/pastor grew by 282.<sup>14</sup>

There is, however, an indication that this "growing disparity" between ministers and needs is not "a bad thing." I'm not suggesting a lack of importance in the role that priests play in the faith, nor do I mean to imply "we can manage without them." Instead, perhaps we should

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<sup>14</sup> Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, (CARA) Washington, D.C. Frequently Requested Statistics (FRS), 2015, [www.cara.org](http://www.cara.org)

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view the trend as an opportunity and not a threat. In many ways we already have addressed it as an opportunity.

Two other sets of statistics demonstrate an increase of people responding to fill some of the gaps in non-priestly functions, which in turn allows priests to more diligently focus on the priestly functions. First, there is the growth in lay participation and second in the Permanent Diaconate.

The number of lay professional ministers grew from 30, 632 to 39,651, or almost 30 per cent, in ten years (compensation status not specified). The enrollment in Lay Ecclesial Ministry formation programs grew by 38 per cent. Unquestionably, the faithful are following the call to participate in the Church's work.<sup>15</sup> "To intensify the apostolic activity of the people of God, the most holy synod earnestly addresses itself to the laity, whose proper and indispensable role in the mission of the Church has already been dealt with in other documents . . .,"<sup>16</sup> says The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam actuositatem*), specifically referring to The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*) and Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*). As for the Permanent Diaconate, the number of Permanent Deacons has grown by 24 per cent (14,574 to 18,082) in the last ten years.<sup>17</sup> That growth is even more dramatic considering that 45 years ago, there were none!

Importantly though, we should not view these "upward" trends as something that would serve to substitute or supplant the power, beauty, and grandeur of the priestly vocation. Nor

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<sup>15</sup> CARA, A Portrait of the Permanent Diaconate: A Study for the Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009-2010 and 2014-2015. CARA does such a study on an annual basis and all of these reports are available on line at [www.cara.georgetown.edu](http://www.cara.georgetown.edu). See also Frequently Requested Church Statistics.

<sup>16</sup> The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam actuositatem*), ¶ 1, November 18 1965, Pope Paul VI, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

<sup>17</sup> CARA, *Portrait* . . .

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should we look at the growth in lay participation and the permanent diaconate as a response to the diminishing number (at least for the time being) of priestly vocations. I believe that would undercut the sense and purpose of Vatican II as well as speak poorly of those called to service, either as deacons, lay ministers, and priests.

Nor should the decline of priestly vocations, temporary or not, be used as a catalyst or reason to consider substantive changes regarding priestly celibacy or ordination of women. That too would be a distortion of the issues and suggest a deep misunderstanding of both. I also think it would overshadow the power of the “participation” of God’s people in God’s church. What is called for, I suggest, is a deeper exploration of the offices of priests and permanent deacons that takes into account their similarities, their differences, their distinct charisms and their formation. We should pursue a thorough examination of what we mean by service, ministry, and administration.

In effect the permanent diaconate, restored in Vatican II, is in need of a “job description.” For 50 years we have been writing that description, but it seems, as if by default. With all due respect to the many bishops who have boldly and warmly received the permanent diaconate (as well as those who haven’t), a renewed level of analysis should be pursued.

Ask a permanent deacon, “What do deacons do?” and you will hear two categories of response. The first is the “corporate” line, that is, liturgy, word, and charity (service), which is a proper response, direct from *Lumen gentium*, but not particularly informative. The second response, or I should say responses, is as broad and varied as the number of deacons itself. They are highly individual and this is perhaps less informative than the first. I know that during my 15 years of diaconal ministry, my “job description” has changed significantly. That’s not a complaint, to be sure. In fact, I feel blessed with the changing scenery, even if I am still writing my

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job description. My level of comfort and satisfaction is quite high; however, I'm not interested in addressing that. I am interested in addressing the issue as it pertains to fewer priests with growing congregations.

Do we have a problem with a "priest shortage?" Is it something that will worsen, or soon experience a reversal? (The number of graduate level seminarians has increased by over 10 per cent the last 10 years!)<sup>18</sup> In either case, taking a fresh look at the permanent diaconate and where it fits into our church may help to develop a more complete and accurate understanding within and for the benefit of the ordained as well as that of the laity.

### HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

In the opening section I spoke of the idea that the role of the deacon in the 21st century is still in the developmental stages. This section will look at deacons in the early church. Historical and traditional roles are always helpful, though they should not be the predominant factor in setting a future course of action. Between the Scriptural foundations of the diaconate and the modern church are 1,900 + years of rich experience, tradition, and inspiration regarding the Roman Catholic deacon. Historical evidence should never be disregarded.

Most commonly, though inaccurately according to some scholars,<sup>19</sup> the origin of the deacon is found in Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 6: 1-6. The entire passage is not repeated here for the sake of brevity, but there is something important to note. There was apparently a "*shortage of Apostles*" and some of the needs of the community were unmet; these needs arose from

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<sup>18</sup> CARA

<sup>19</sup> *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, International Theological Commission, Hillenbrand Books, Chicago, IL, 2003, p.10. Cited are 10 different post Gospel, scriptural references regarding deacons, concluding by saying "This fact shows clearly that in Acts of the Apostles 6:1-6 is not the institution of the diaconate that is being referred to."

sheer numbers of faithful as well as some degree of social and cultural disparity in the attention given to certain segments of the emerging church. “. . . (T)he Hellenists complained because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.”<sup>20</sup> Whether or not Acts 6 is the “true” foundation of the office of the deacon, the point I make here is that not all segments of the population, even when the Church becomes more established, are not equally served.

The Acts passage speaks of daily distribution, and it is logical to assume that food is what’s being distributed, for the very next verse talks of serving at tables. In an interesting footnote to this verse “. . . some commentators think that it is not the serving of food that is described here but rather the keeping of the accounts that record the distribution of food to the needy members of the community. In any case they [those appointed] are never presented carrying out the task for which they were appointed. Rather, two of their numbers, Stephen and Philip, are presented as preachers of the Christian message. They, *the Hellenist counterpart of the Twelve*, are active in the ministry of the word.”<sup>21</sup>

At verse 8 Stephen is “working great wonders and signs among the peoples.”<sup>22</sup> And further, the rulers at hand debated with Stephen but “could not withstand the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke.”<sup>23</sup> Chapter 7 details his discourse as well as his execution. Acts, Chapter 8 talks about Philip, now not only preaching and teaching, but baptizing as well. “. . . and Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water, and he [Philip] baptized him [the Eunuch].”<sup>24</sup> Another perspective on the “distribution” suggests that what was really assigned was “overlooking”

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<sup>20</sup> *Acts of the Apostles, 6:1* (New American Bible, Revised Edition), 2010, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, D. C., eBook Version 2.1

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, \* footnote to verse 6:2; italics mine

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, v 8

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, v 10

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* 8:38b

of the distribution.<sup>25</sup> Shawn McKnight suggests the distribution was already an established function, but perhaps in an unequal manner and thus some degree of oversight was appropriate. In view of this exegetical evidence and the earlier reference by way of footnote to “keeping accounts,” the text suggests that something like the function of “administration” in the more modern sense is at issue.

There are later texts that “reveal with greater clarity the role of the deacon within the Church. In assisting the bishop in the leadership of the Church, deacons administered the Church’s property and extended the bishop’s pastoral care to the sick and poor.”<sup>26</sup> Until the gradual diminishing of importance of the office of deacon in the 4th century<sup>27</sup> there is other “evidence of the kinds of ministry deacons actually exercised.”<sup>28</sup> Deacons served the bishops in many aspects of church life, not necessarily liturgically related. “As extensions of the bishop, deacons were intimately involved in day-to-day efforts of pastoral *governance*<sup>29</sup> of the flock. . . . We have here in the Golden Age of the diaconate the prime example of the deacon serving as a social intermediary among the people of God.”<sup>30</sup> Thus it appears that from the time of the Apostles deacons have preached, ministered, administered sacraments and sacramentals, and administered the affairs of the local church on behalf of its bishop. It seems the best we can say is that in the early church deacons served when and where and how as directed by the bishop, and it would seem hard to exclude from the modern church the functions we call administration. “History

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<sup>25</sup> *The Latin Rite Deacon: Symbol of Communitas and Social Intermediary Among the People of God*. William Shawn McKnight, Pontificium Athenaeum S. Anselmi De Urbe, Thesis ad Lauream n. 188, Rome, Italy 2001, p 33

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p. 138

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 172

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 169

<sup>29</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 170

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shows that the diaconate was vital to the life and mission of the Church when it served as an intermediate institution among the People of God in the Golden Age. This is an important lesson for the restructure [ing] of the diaconate for tomorrow.”<sup>31</sup> As we look to our next section on deacons in the Church today, we should note the following:

“ . . . Vatican II did not aim to offer a dogmatic decision of the questions debated in the course of the Council, nor to lay down a strict doctrinal system. Its true interest was in opening a path to the restoration of the permanent diaconate that could be put into effect in a plurality of ways. This is perhaps why, in the text taken as a whole, certain fluctuations can be seen in the theology, depending on the place or context in which diaconate is mentioned. Both with reference to pastoral priorities and in what concerns objective doctrinal difficulties, the Council texts show a diversity of theological nuances which is quite hard to harmonize.”<sup>32</sup>

Herein are the “roots” to the absence of a job description. My somewhat dated, secular experience in the discipline of human resources (called “personnel” at the time) often involved “job audits,” wherein extensive interviews with people in specific jobs would help define present and emerging tasks, duties, experience and educational requirements, salary levels, and to develop accurate position classification plans, and establish reasonable employee/employer expectations. We started with the premise that the more specific the description, the better it would be for the organization, the employee, the supervisors, management, and labor representatives. In every circumstance, however, regardless of how detailed and specific a job description might be, there was always the “catch-all” phrase, “other duties as assigned.” The above paragraph referencing the ITC seems contrary to the “business minded” philosophy that follows it, yet it appears to have been, in my estimation, remarkably effective for the church as well as for deacons. This success speaks loudly and favorably for the church hierarchy and the laity to be open to responding to ministerial needs in creative ways as well as to avoid legalistic and overly rigid limitations

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 200

<sup>32</sup> “*From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, North America Edition, International Theological Commission (ITC), Hillenbrand Books, Chicago, IL, 2003 p. 91.

that can sometimes stifle or block effective action. That said, as the church continues to develop its ministries, the openness to deacons as administrators must be part of this dynamic.

#### ECCLESIAALLY SPEAKING

On November 1964 with the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*), shortly thereafter in a commentary, Avery Dulles (1918-2008), a Jesuit priest, theologian, and cardinal, and a widely known lecturer and author<sup>33</sup> said of *Lumen gentium*, “[W]ith something like unanimity [it] has been hailed as the most momentous achievement of the Council, both because of its important contents and because of its central place among the Council documents.”<sup>34</sup>

Paragraph 29 of this document is generally regarded as the driving force in the restoration of the permanent diaconate. For brevity, I do not recite the full section but instead highlight three sentences.

1. “. . . the diaconate can in the future be restored as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy.” This “opening of the door” is left to the proper territorial authorities, what we today commonly know as episcopal conferences. In other words, it is not mandatory, but discretionary, presumably based on a region’s specific needs and desires.

2. “At the lower end of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed ‘not to the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service.’ ” to serve in the “ministry of the liturgy, of the words, and of charity.” This clearly reflects that deacons are members of church hierarchy, regardless of how one interprets degrees, or steps, or levels. “[U]pon whom hands are

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<sup>33</sup> Wikipedia, [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org), 2016

<sup>34</sup> See footnote 1, page 1. This remark is worth re-quoting given the importance of *Lumen gentium*, not just for the diaconate, but for the Catholic Church in the world today.

imposed” also ordination, the importance of which is discussed here as well as in a subsequent section of this paper, “Practically Speaking.”

3. A few lines later there is some elaboration regarding this in admonition to deacons to be mindful of their Christ - like office, that they must be “(D)edicated to duties of charity *and of administration.*”<sup>35</sup>

Again, the use of the word administration here needs to be unpacked so we can understand how these terms work together and how they don’t. Service, ministry, administration, charity have broad meanings in the general population, not just in the Catholic Church but in all faiths, as well as secular situations. It will be important to appreciate how these terms are “heard,” in both their societal sense and their more specific sense within the Catholic Church. It has been noted that “Vatican II could not be expected to provide a clearly defined picture of the permanent diaconate, . . .”<sup>36</sup> however there are some unmistakable points made.

Clearly the deacon is ordained, and the functions (*munera*) of liturgy and sacramental are explicit in *Lumen gentium*.

Ordination is important for several reasons. “The core of the ecclesiology traditionally espoused in the Roman Catholic Church was the authority and power exclusive to ordained ministers by which they might teach, govern, and sanctify the faithful.”<sup>37</sup> This is the authority of the bishop and can be reassigned to priests, and, if the bishop chooses, to deacons. Ordination not only designates the deacon as belonging to the ordained, but imposes that indelible character of the Sacrament of Apostolic Ministry through the laying on of hands.<sup>38</sup> Included within the grace

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<sup>35</sup> *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium)*, §29, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), 2016 (My emphasis. Italics mine.

<sup>36</sup> ITC, *From the Diakonia of Christ . . .*” p. 73

<sup>37</sup> Collins, p. 14

<sup>38</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Glossary: Orders, Holy

conveyed is the disposition and in some cases the talent and experience to assist the bishop in governance.

“Finally, it [the sacramental character of the diaconate] confers upon the diaconate a theological solidity that cannot be dissolved into something purely functional.”<sup>39</sup> With the importance of the ordination of the deacon, and the sacramentality of the diaconate well established, the question still remains, “Yes, the deacon is ordained, but to what?” Perhaps this is more aptly stated, “to whom?” If ordination cannot be “dissolved” into something functional, it can include, at the discretion of the bishop, assistance to him in his *munus regendi*, that is “governance.”

In baptism all Christians are baptized as “priest, prophet, and king.” Generally these designations correspond to the functions of sanctification, teaching, and governing. These same functions (*munera*) carry into Holy Orders, but are also quite distinctly differentiated between the functions of the laity and of the ordained. On the other hand, all three *munera* can be performed by all three ordained orders.<sup>40</sup> The bishop, the primary source of “governance,” must retain and be free to assign deacons and priests as he deems fit, including the assignment of deacons to parish administration regardless of the presence or absence of a resident priest. The point here is that administration as it is used in *Lumen gentium* can be included among the activities that fall und *munus regendi*. It can, and should.

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<sup>39</sup> ITC, *From the Diakonia of Christ . . .*” p. 94

<sup>40</sup> The *munera* (functions) of *sanctificandi*, *docendi*, *regendi*, translate to priest (sanctifying), prophet (teaching), and king (governing). Not all are exercised equally within the hierarchy in the sense that, for example, governing is most pertinent to bishops, and sanctification includes consecration at Eucharist, and specifically excludes deacons. Keeping the “degrees” of hierarchy distinct is a matter discussed in the section called Practically Speaking.

The deacon first and foremost is ordained in general terms to the People of God, but functionally and juridically he is first ordained to the bishop and then assigned by him to serve others on his behalf. *Lumen gentium* makes it clear that the deacon is ordained “not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service.” Further, “in communion with bishop and his group of priests,” the deacon will serve the people of God.<sup>41</sup>

There is another distinction in a deacon’s ordination. “At an ordination to the diaconate only the bishop lays hands on the candidate, not the other priests in attendance, thus signifying the deacon’s special attachment to the bishop in the tasks of his ‘diakonia.’”<sup>42</sup> “Deacons are to do that which the bishop entrusts to them.”<sup>43</sup>

Before moving on to Temporal Matters where we discuss what deacons do, can do, or should do, an area of concern in the restoration of the diaconate was the relationship between deacons and priests. Prior to Vatican II, and coming out of centuries of tradition, from around the 4th century on, it was assumed that the diaconate was a preparatory, transitional, step to the priesthood. This was clearly rejected in the Vatican II restoration, so today we often refer to permanent deacons and transitional deacons, the latter taking on the sense of a preparatory step to priesthood. This preparatory step is not automatic, any more than ordination to the priesthood is a preparatory step to the episcopate.<sup>44</sup>

I make this point to emphasize that while there is unity among the three ordained orders due to the sacramental grace received, there are also distinctions of activities among them, and to

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<sup>41</sup> LG 29

<sup>42</sup> CCC 1569, and substantiated by McKnight, in turn citing *Apostolic Tradition*, Hippolytus of Rome, a 3rd century theologian on p. 150.

<sup>43</sup> McKnight, p. 151. McKnight says that Bishop Hippolytus (170-235 A.D.) appears to envisage the diaconate a co-ordinate to the presbyter and directly subordinate to the episcopacy.

<sup>44</sup> ITC, “*From the Diakonia of Christ . . .*” p. 97

emphasize the need to understand each degree as distinct within itself. Thus the bishop is ordained to a distinct version of the three *munera* that allows him, if he desires and if needed for his diocese, to engage his deacons, specifically ordained by and to him in his *munus* of governance, even including administration.<sup>45</sup> Again, as we move to the next section, awareness of these distinctions will be helpful, if not critical, to shaping the office of deacon through the remainder of this century.

## TEMPORAL MATTERS

Shawn McKnight argues that “Ordained to the ministry of the bishop, the deacon’s ministry is to assist the bishop in providing the necessary structures for the exercise of the baptismal charisms of the laity. . . . the deacon stands in a unique position to meet some of these structural needs.”<sup>46</sup> He also stresses that permanent, married deacons are different from priests and bishops, an idea difficult to accept for those Catholics who are not used to married clergy; some may carry a trace of “clericalism” in their background from a time when there was a sense of a sharp distinction between unmarried clergy and married laity. Deacons have raised families, undergone career changes, and geographical re-locations across the country; they know family life as neighbors, parents, spouses, and community organizations of every nature.

Ninety-four percent of the active deacons in 2015 are (were) married, with only 2 percent never married. The other four percent are widowed or divorced. While priests are well educated, all having survived and prospered through the rigors of seminary formation, the education

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<sup>45</sup> It should be understood that deacons may move to and be incardinated in other dioceses, or bishops may have successors; accordingly, being “ordained to the bishop” does not imply a specific individual, but to the proper episcopal authority.

<sup>46</sup> McKnight, p. 132

of deacons is much more broad and diverse. Almost 95 percent are over the age of 50, if age accounts for nothing else than life experience. Almost two-thirds have a bachelor's degrees and of those just under half have graduate degrees.<sup>47</sup> No statistical breakdown regarding specific disciplines is available, but we know these degrees are in fields that include business, public administration, accounting, engineering, finance, law, medicine, theology, public safety, social work, human resources, health care, just to name a few. The point is, the contemporary American diaconate is replete with education, training, experience, and abilities for a vast array of functions and duties critical to the effective management of temporal affairs of the Church. With all due respect to priests and even bishops, given their extensive education, training, and experience, I doubt their educational backgrounds match the diversity of that of the diaconate population.

A brief review of seminary curricula and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) *Program of Priestly Formation* reveals an impressive array of requirements and electives at the college level seminary and into graduate level work for one being formed to the priesthood. There is extensive required coursework in philosophy, theology, pastoral care, spirituality, scriptures, church history, psychology, morality, ethics, canon law, and various counseling disciplines. There is also mention to some degree of the need for education in the liberal arts, humanities, and science. However, finance, human resources, economics, marketing, organizational behavior dynamics, statistics, information and technology, or business ethics are not, and probably, cannot be included in this formation process given the other educational demands required for ordination.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> CARA, *Portrait . . .*

<sup>48</sup> Saint Mary's Seminary and University, Baltimore, MD., Cathedral Seminary, Douglas, NY., The Institute for Priestly Formation, (Creighton University), Omaha, NB., St. Paul Seminary, Diocese of Pittsburgh, PA. were among those reviewed.

With appreciation for the depth, extent, and intensity of the education and formation of priests already required, I am not suggesting that priestly formation be expanded for several more years to include this latter curriculum. The *Program of Priestly Formation* recognizes that some candidates to the priesthood enter the higher seminary with college level education in some of the above practical areas of study and have related life experience, and it considers this as highly beneficial and positive. When candidates lack these backgrounds, however, there is not a reverse emphasis placed on obtaining them, nor is the absence of that background viewed as a shortcoming. Yet, quite often within five years or so of ordination, and out of necessity, many priests are assigned as pastors, sometimes administrating multi-million dollar organizations. The USSCB specifically points out that with regard to the intellectual dimension of formation, the focus is on *munus docendi*, the teaching function,<sup>49</sup> and not *munus regendi*.<sup>50</sup>

Thus it seems fair to conclude that priests are well-formed in the *munera* of teaching and sacramentalizing, and deacons are often well-formed in all three *munera* and the practical approach as potential administrators because of their education and life experience. One last point regarding seminaries in general. In the *Program of Priestly Formation*, the USSCB places an emphasis on the governance, administration, and faculty of seminaries as “models” for the candidates of these functions. Sections 290 and following clearly show this importance. It can not be assumed, however, that those in formation will learn such skills by osmosis, or through on-the-job training, or without formal, structured educational opportunities.

I want to make a distinction between “ministry” and “ad-ministry,” the latter comprehending functions other than teaching, liturgical, and sacramental activities. The CARA studies

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<sup>49</sup> *Program of Priestly Formation*, fifth edition, USSCB, Washington, D.C., 139

<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that in recent years qualified deacons have been appointed to the office of academic dean at seminaries, exercising the *munus regendi* over would-be priests under the supervision of priest rectors..

mentioned refers to “ministry” as those functions that directly touch people and include areas of chaplaincy (hospitals, public safety, incarceration), social work, marriage counseling, grief counseling, end of life counseling, youth work, faith formation, sacramental preparation, and RCIA. They also include general parish sacramental functions from baptism and marriage, to rendering of sacramentals and particular devotions (stations of the cross, Divine Mercy, rosary guilds, benediction and exposition, cursillo, marriage encounter, and neo-catechumenate activities).

The number of deacons involved in “ad-ministry” positions, on the other hand is very small comparatively speaking. Looking at the most recent statistics available, about 16 per cent are in compensated “ad-ministry” positions, and of those, only one in six is involved in a non-ministerial capacity in the parish, such as administration, business, or finance;<sup>51</sup> less than three in a hundred deacons currently serve in a parish in an “ad-ministerial” capacity. Given the depth and breadth of talent/charism, education, experience, and training, on its surface this appears to be a significant under-utilization of resources.

After distinguishing between ministry and “administry,” I suggest that those areas of the latter which might strike one (incorrectly) as bureaucratic, that is, overly concerned with procedure at the expense of efficiencies, should not be viewed as any less of a *service* in every sense of this word. The underlying logistical, administrative, and support functions in any organization are as critical to its success as are the functions of “front-line” service workers. “Ad-ministry” is still ministry.

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<sup>51</sup> CARA, 2015 report.

Education, training, and experience are without a doubt considerations in determining the assignment of deacons. In making an appointment of a deacon to an assignment, the principal criteria are “the pastoral needs of the diocesan Church and personal qualification of the deacon, as these have been discerned in his previous experience and the course of his formation.”<sup>52</sup>

On a personal note, in one of the first interviews my wife and I underwent when we applied for the diaconate, we discussed with the interviewers our current activities and involvement with the Church. A question was asked to which I “stammered” a response, - apparently not one that was disqualifying, but in some ways still a struggle, 17 years after formal acceptance into formation and 12 + years as an ordained deacon - : “How would being a deacon be different from what you are currently doing as a lay person?”

This same question was asked and explored during Vatican II and afterwards, and in someways still is today. Many of the administrative functions of which I’ve briefly spoken can indeed be done by lay persons, many of whom are as well qualified and educated as deacons. Thus, for example, in a parish that needs a business manager, what would an ordained MBA offer that a lay MBA could not? Some obvious responses are 1) church hierarchical status and 2) the sacramentality of the office of deacon, though neither of these should be taken lightly, neither do they guarantee a more effective or better qualified choice. But a third possibility to consider is that a deacon’s formation and continuing education offer ever deepening theological, spiritual, and pastoral perspectives on administrative functions that are too often thought of as bureaucratic and something less than true ministry.

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<sup>52</sup> *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of the Permanent Deacons in the United States*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., PUBLICATION NO. 5-368, 2005, ¶42

When it comes to the pastoral care of parish, Canon Law Chapter VI, Parishes, Pastors, and Parochial Vicars (515-552) pertains. The community we call a parish “is entrusted to a pastor (*parochus*) as its proper pastor (*pastor*) under the authority of the diocesan bishop.”<sup>53</sup> It is clear that such appointees are priests<sup>54</sup>; however, it is permitted for “. . . the diocesan bishop, because of a lack of priests, to entrust the pastoral care of a parish to a deacon, another person who is not priest, or a community of persons who are not priests” however, even then the appointee(s) is under the direction of a priest.<sup>55</sup>

Canon 530 lists seven functions that are “especially entrusted to a pastor.”<sup>56</sup> Of these, however, three are currently often performed by deacons in many parishes with deacons: the administration of baptism, the performance of funeral rites (outside Mass), the assistance at marriages and the witness (outside of Mass). In some circumstances this witnessing is done by a deacon, even in a Mass, when approved by the celebrant.

Thus, not only may a deacon may be assigned to assist a priest in parish pastoral care, but also deacons “who possess administrative experience and have received pastoral theological training also may be called to guide Christian communities that do not have the immediate benefit of a resident priest.”<sup>57</sup>

This does not present any particular problem, however, because even under the provision of 517.2, if a deacon is assigned to Parochial Pastoral Care, because of a lack of priests, it remains that he has to be under the supervision of a priest or the bishop, but supervision does not

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<sup>53</sup> *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, editors, CIC, 515,

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, CIC 519, commentary

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 517§2, commentary on this section.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* CIC 530

<sup>57</sup> National Directory . . . 51

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imply or require on-site presence.<sup>58</sup> Taking this further however, we must consider: if a deacon, duly qualified and appropriately appointed by the bishop, and supervised *in absentia* by a priest or bishop is effective in parochial pastoral care, how much more so might he be with a priest in residence? How much more effective might the pastor be freed from administrative tasks competently handled by a deacon? The point here is that if a deacon can (should) perform “administrative” functions in the absence of a priest how much more valuable might this service be augmenting that of a resident priest/pastor?

More can be said about CIC 515-552, but before moving on to another section of Canon Law, I want to revisit Vatican II, and another document, The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church or *Ad gentes* (To the nations). Because “missionary” work is developmental in nature, it implies areas of new growth with emerging churches. The restoration of the diaconate was clearly seen as important for that segment of the Church, hence it is understandable that the following statement: “Where episcopal conferences deem it opportune, the order of the diaconate should be restored as a permanent state of life according to the norms of “De Ecclesia.” (23)” This was deemed most appropriate for those lay men who were “presiding over scattered Christian communities in the name of the pastor and the bishop.”<sup>59</sup>

*Ad gentes* was explicit that where laity were performing diaconal functions, they would be strengthened by the “imposition of hands,” thus binding them more closely to the altar, and provide the requisite sacramental grace.<sup>60</sup> Mention of this paragraph offers support to two of the concepts discussed in this paper: 1) deacons may be given administrative functions and 2) ordination offers the elements of sacramentality that are not present in lay ministers.

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, CIC 517.2

<sup>59</sup> *Ad gentes*, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, 16, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

Returning to Canon Law, I now move to Book V, The Temporal Goods of the Church (§1245-§1310). This section talks about “all non-spiritual assets, tangible or intangible that are instrumental in fulfilling the mission of the Church.”<sup>61</sup> This is an area that can clearly benefit and service performed by the laity. They are “called to active participation in the life and activity of the Church, contribute their knowledge, experience, and special skills to make more efficient the administration of the material resources of the Church.”<sup>62</sup> In any case, whether speaking of laity or hierarchy (bishop, priest, or deacon), one must always distinguish between those goods that fall to the Church, the Diocese, and the Parish. Further, “supervision” by the proper authority is also emphasized by the Canon, and by degrees, depending on which office or which goods are being administered.<sup>63</sup> The point of this is to emphasize that, 1) at the parish level the oversight of the bishop is always required, whether priest, deacon, or lay person, and 2) there is nothing in the Canon Law that prohibits deacons from serving in a variety of administrative capacities in regard to temporal matters.

Returning to the question of the deacon performing functions that are also permissible for lay persons, we can again refer to specific aspects of the diaconate. First, there is the sacramentality of the deacon himself. The ordained deacon had bestowed on him and in his office an added sense of authority as well as the sacramental grace to aid in the performance of duties. Second, while one cannot automatically assume that a deacon is more effective in an administrative role by virtue of hierarchical and sacramental status, should be given preference because of his

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* CIC, Introduction to Book V, p 1451.

<sup>62</sup> *idid.*

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, Commentary for Book V, Title II, The Administration of Goods (1273-1289) synthesized.

status and the powerful graces it conveys. Third, a deacon makes a “promise of respect and obedience to the bishop”<sup>64</sup> that is lacking in a lay person. Deacons make both written and publicly proclaimed promises of this respect and obedience. Lay people also have “obligations and rights”<sup>65</sup> in submitting to church authority and especially when functioning in some official capacity within the parish or diocese. I suggest, however, that an “obligation” implies something less commanding (though still quite important) than a promise.

That the deacon is a “social intermediary” for the bishop is extensively documented.<sup>66</sup> Of course, beyond the practical, ecclesial, spiritual, and theological support for suggesting that a deacon be entrusted with pastoral care, we must always remember, this: “ministry is a summons.” This means we always try to discern our gifts (spiritual and material) in the light of 1 Corinthians Chapter 12. “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone.”<sup>67</sup> “Our work cannot be taken on by our own volition, but only as God wills. . . .”<sup>68</sup> and if we continue with the analogy, perhaps therein lies the writing of the “job description.”

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

*“Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlooker should laugh at him and say, ‘This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish the work . . . .’ ”* (The Gospel of Luke, 14: 28-29b, New American Bible, Revised Edition, eBook Version 2.1, 1970)

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<sup>64</sup> National Directory . . . 41

<sup>65</sup> *op cit.*, CIC, 224-231

<sup>66</sup> Mcknight, Chapter III, Precedents for the Deacon as Social Intermediary, pages 135-200.

<sup>67</sup> *op cit.*, NAB . . . 1 Cor. 12 1 ff.

<sup>68</sup> Collins, “*Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, p. 256

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This passage from Luke is often interpreted as a description of Jesus insisting that his disciples realistically assess their call to discipleship before taking it. But it can also be used as practical analogy of how to approach any endeavor, whether spiritual or material. It tells us that we must make an analysis of our resources, explore our weaknesses, and utilize our strengths. Sustainability requires flexibility, that is, a willingness and ability to adapt to changing circumstances in the environment in which we operate.

I am not suggesting that the flourishing and forever presence and beauty of God's church is dependent on human beings (except to some degree in the visible sense), but I do suggest that when Jesus handed over the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" to Peter and his successors, it was assumed he and his would use the talents God gave them to help build and sustain the kingdom as it emerges here on earth. There is a premise within the world of ministry that says "ministry follows need." Earlier we looked at The Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 6, and regardless of how this is viewed in regard to the "institution" of the diaconate, it bears out this adage. Among the Hellenists, there appear to have been a failure to care for their widows, so they sought from the Apostles ways to provide it. An assessment of available talent and resources resulted in the appointment of seven, who were prayed over by those whose hands were laid on them.

The realities of the secular world are this: a good teacher is not necessarily a good principal, a good doctor is not necessarily a good hospital administrator, a good civil engineer is not necessarily a good public works director. It shouldn't be an offense to say a good priest is not necessarily a good pastor. To move from the world of "doing" to a world of "leading" is not a case of natural evolution. Attempts to make that shift without additional training and education seriously reduce the chance of success. My point is that there is ample theological, doctrinal and

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practical justification to further explore ways to utilize resources within and outside the hierarchy that might better utilize available charisms/talents without further burdening priests, whose formation, education, and experience is not designed for being “pastors” in the administrative sense, and for which in many areas, there is definitely a shortage.

Perhaps there’s not a shortage of priest for those tasks for which priests are adequately prepared. Perhaps we are asking of priests more than is intended. Perhaps a re-examination of the priesthood and the diaconate would better identify their *complementary* charisms without having to suggest that deacons are priest substitutes or simply a means to alleviate a shortage.

Returning to some earlier comments from the International Theological Commission, we look again at a certain mindset that existed at the Second Vatican Council. While there was a definite impetus and considerable forethought regarding the restoration of this office, there was not a great deal of thought regarding its specifics nor their potential impact on the episcopacy or the presbyterate. The Council did not provide specifics “because of the gap that existed in the pastoral life of those times. . . the most it could do was to open the possibility . . . [I]t could do no more than wait for the contemporary form of the permanent deacon to develop . . . [and] . . . serve as an invitation to the Church to continue working to discern the type of ministry appropriate to the diaconate through ecclesial practice, canonical legislation, and theological reflection.”<sup>69</sup>

In the words of Saint John Paul II, echoing the words of Christ himself in the Garden, “Rise, let us be on our way.” (Mk. 14:42)

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<sup>69</sup> *op cit.* ITC, “*From the Diakonia of Christ to . . .*” p. 72

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