The Permanent Deacon by Fr Stephen Bartlett

Fr Stephen was the Director of the Permanent Diaconate in Westminster diocese from 2010 to his death in January 2012. He wrote the following reflection on the Permanent diaconate at Easter 2011, shortly after being diagnosed with cancer. May he rest in peace.

The Permanent Deacon lives at the challenging interface of faith and life, Church and World. In the circumstances of his life, he witnesses to that peace which the Risen Lord has secured for all people. In the parish where he serves, he works to encourage the lay-people in that same witness. The vocation of the Permanent Deacon is a wonderful vocation. It is demanding. It is also one which, in many ways, is still to be explored and worked out. We have to be ready for trial and error as well as success and failure.

An unmarried Permanent Deacon will be celibate. However, all the current Permanent Deacons of this Diocese are married or widowed. I too, the Priest appointed to be their Director, am married. It was whilst I was at theological college, in formation for Anglican ministry, that Beatrice and I were married, and our first daughter was born. Our second daughter arrived whilst I was in my first parish. Marriage and family life was thus, for me, closely related to formation for ministry. I was received into the Catholic Church in 1996 and later ordained Priest by Cardinal Hume. As a married Priest I share similar experiences with Permanent Deacons, and with men in formation.

It is in our vocations, that each one of us is called and graced by God. We are not called by God into a life made up of separate, disconnected compartments. God who is love calls and graces us to the integrated response of an undivided heart. We are called to love, by the one good God who loves us more than we could ever know or deserve. In this mystery of love we grow to become more and more like God, taking on that image of Divine likeness in which we were all created. Our vocations, lived in the circumstances of our lives, constitute a school of love for each one of us. The school of love for me, and the Permanent Deacons, is the whole experience of marriage, family life, and ministry as Deacon and as Priest. It is in these lived experiences that we have been called and graced to the mystery of love.

The Permanent Diaconate in this Diocese works as a team. As Director, I work closely with three Assistant Directors, all of whom are Permanent Deacons. There are thirteen other Permanent Deacons in the Diocese. There are also five men in formation and a number of enquirers. The Permanent Diaconate reaches back to the earliest times (the Acts of the Apostles) and has some eminent members (including Saints Stephen, Lawrence, Vincent and Francis of Assisi). The Second Vatican Council called the Church to a rediscovery of the Permanent Diaconate. As this has been unfolding over the years, three defining ministerial characteristics of the Permanent Diaconate have emerged; the ministries of the liturgy, the Gospel and works of charity.

The Deacon's liturgical ministry is focused in the Eucharist as he takes his place in this primary work of the Church, the Body of Christ. From the Eucharist, this ministry extends to other liturgies as well, such as Baptism and Marriage. The Deacon's ministry of the Gospel is also focussed on the Eucharist. He proclaims the Gospel and preaches. This ministry then extends to further work, as he exercises leadership in catechetical ministry within the parish. The Deacon's ministry of works of charity is powerfully expressed in the Eucharist. The Priest offers the Sacrifice of the Mass, heart and living source of Caritas - Divine love. The Priest prays 'Lord, may this sacrifice which has made our peace with you, advance the peace and salvation of all the world.' Later in the Mass, the Priest prays that we shall receive from the Lord his gift of peace, flowing to us from his sacrificial death and resurrection. 'Grant us the peace and unity of your kingdom'. The Priest then declares that gift to the people. 'The peace of the Lord be always with you'. It is then the Deacon who calls and invites the people to enter into that gift. 'Let us offer each other the sign of peace'. Here is the focus for the Deacon's ministry of works of charity. As he himself enters into, and exercises that charity, he calls and encourages the people to do the same. Whilst this ministry of the works of charity originates in the mystery of the Eucharist, it will continue in daily life during the week. Thus the Deacon, at the close of Mass, sends the people out, saying, 'Go, in the peace of Christ'; in order to 'love and serve the Lord'. The Deacon thus calls and encourages the laity to the same service of works he will undertake in the world, sharing that peace which the Lord desires all humankind to enter into and enjoy.

In the exercise of these three ministries the Deacon lives his vocation. In celibacy or in marriage and family life; in parish ministry; in his professional life in the world; the Deacon, walking with the laity, struggles to live at the challenging interface of faith and life, Church and World, living that peace which the Lord has secured for all.