

NORTH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE DIACONATE

Centre for the Diaconate *Monograph Series*

The Deacon
as
Para-Cleric

by

W. Keith McCoy



Monograph Series No. 9
PDF Edition

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North American Association for the Diaconate
271 North Main Street
Providence, RI 02903

The Deacon as Para-Cleric

by W. Keith McCoy

W. Keith McCoy is a deacon in the Diocese of New Jersey, where he serves as one of three Archdeacons and at St. John's Church, Somerville. This is a revised version of a keynote address given at the second Exploring Servant Ministry conference of the Diocese of New Jersey, at St. Stephen's Church, Waretown, October 23, 1996.

It used to be so easy. Peter and the other eleven leading disciples went to their small group of followers and said, "Select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.' Then they had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them." (Acts 6: 3a, 6). Today, before we can ordain someone as a deacon in the church, we have a year of discernment and years of study, committees and processes, canons and regulations, postulancies and candidacies — all designed to help us hear the Holy Spirit. Our God, who created the entire universe in six days, now cannot send us a minister in less than two years and without an ark-load of advisors.

It is a more complex world that we live in today, than Peter and his friends knew. There are more people, more types of people, more information, and everything moves so much faster, than in those Biblical times. The Christian community has grown from enough people to fill a large room to 1,900,000,000 souls. We are no longer divided into the followers of Paul, Peter, and James, but into Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, each with a myriad of subsets, some of whom won't speak to the others. But, then and today, the church has had the diaconate. Deacons are not easily defined today: there is too much history to point back to a single model, and the demands of a renewed diaconate for a modern world is creating new concepts and models. What I propose to do here is take some worldly ideas and play them off against our notions of what makes for a deacon in the Episcopal Church at this time.

The Minister as Professional

Did you know that the New Jersey Medical Society, one of the oldest in this country, was founded by an Anglican priest? That is because in the mid-1700's, a man seeking ordination in the Anglican Church went to college to learn law or medicine, and then read for orders after receiving his degree. The Rev. Robert McKean was a physician first, and a priest later.¹

In the earliest centuries of the church, the selection of ordained ministers was not far removed from what was described in that chapter from the Acts of the Apostles. Maybe five hundred years later, when the monasteries became centers of learning, one needed some specialized knowledge to be ordained, but not much. Even in the Middle Ages, it was enough to be able to say the Mass in Latin, and maybe sign your name. Illiterate priests and deacons were not unknown even a few centuries ago.

The idea of a seminary-trained cleric is a relatively new concept. This country's earliest colleges were established to provide a broad, classical education, after which one studied with a practitioner to become a doctor or a minister, or both as the Rev. Dr. McKean did. Two scholars of clerical education have pointed out that the "preparation [of ministers for office] has varied from age to age, according to the church's expectations of a minister, the specific nature of a given minister's duties, the class structure of church and society, and whether the minister is seen primarily as a priest, a shepherd of souls, or a preacher."² It was the Reformed churches which made the parish priest a theologian, and that implied the ability to read and to think. The early Methodists, on the other hand, emphasized evangelism and personal conversion, and trained men for that. Denominational seminaries, granting graduate degrees, did not start to develop until the early nineteenth century.

Even with that, in our denomination, it is still allowed to "read for orders", that is, study privately with a senior priest, be examined in the canonical subjects, and then be ordained. It is more common in sparsely populated dioceses, such as Northern Michigan and Alaska, than in urban, well-populated dioceses. Canon 9 priests, who are called to their office by a particular (usually isolated) community, follow the same required studies. However, they are not permitted to move around from place to place, even though most of them are chosen because of their deep roots in the community and the expectation that they will spend their lives in their native area.

However one gets there, clergy in the Episcopal church are seen as "professional" ministers, because they are specially trained. What makes for a "professional" minister, though? Is it important? And how does it affect deacons?

What is a professional?

William Sullivan, a professor of philosophy at LaSalle University, has defined "professionalism" as the "competent and ethical application of expert knowledge", and a "professional" as someone who performs certain acts with dedication and a sense for the common welfare.³ Professionals tend to have specialized information which they have acquired, and an agreed-upon code of conduct against which they can be measured. Some sort of payment for services rendered, usually set by the professional, is also a mark of that class.

Doctors, lawyers, and clergy are almost always thought of as "professionals"; social workers, librarians, and teachers less often. There is also among professionals the ability, or the probability, for independent action. This also affects the perception of professionalism. Doctors prescribe medicine, teachers consult a class plan. Lawyers choose from among laws which will best apply to a case, librarians point one in the right direction, without interpretation. Priests have the discretion to pray for someone, to consecrate, to absolve, social workers follow state regulations.

The education of professionals is of major importance. One writer has stated that there are three elements to the education of a professional: instruction in the basics of the field; review and discussion of typical problems and activities of the field;

professional initiation, linking theory with practice.⁴ That specialized body of knowledge is not easily, quickly, or (today) cheaply acquired. There is usually some sort of certification at the end of the acquisition of the knowledge, as well: a license, diploma, ordination, a swearing-in. Frequently there are controls over the education process: a determination as to what is necessary to be learned, how much information qualifies, who can teach it, where it can be taught. Not everyone can get into a profession, nor can one circumvent the process. They are like the guilds of old: those who are already there must test the newcomer, and find him or her worthy to join the limited ranks of the knowledgeable.

For all of this, it did not take much to become a doctor, a lawyer, or a priest one hundred years ago. The body of knowledge was more finite, and more easily acquired, once you were allowed into the process. But, information has been exploding, and that has altered the training of professionals. Medicine led the way in this change, developing sub-specialities shortly after the Civil War. All the other professions have followed. As an illustration of this, the current edition of a popular reference guide to colleges and degrees lists thirty-six different types of engineering programs, with six different sorts of degrees available.⁵ This is not atypical for any of the major fields of study.

In addition, there is also the perception that one's career track should take you into certain areas, and away from others. For example, in my field (librarianship), it is difficult to move from work with children to administration, and even harder to go from an academic library to a public library. Neither could one easily change from being a dentist to a podiatrist, and if one could, who would be trusting enough to use such a doctor?⁶ Professionalism has also come to mean specialization, a major component of the sense of trust by consumer of professional services in who they seek help from.

What is a para-professional?

That specialization of knowledge among professionals has created a new class of people known as "para-professionals". Libraries especially, and more commonly today medicine and law, are depending on this type of employee to expand the range of services available to the public, and to allow the fully-trained person the freedom to concentrate on more demanding duties. It's a term and a career that has come into being only within the last twenty-five years. *Para* is an ancient Greek word meaning "beside" or "closely related to". What distinguishes a para-professional from a professional is not the amount of knowledge, but the breadth of knowledge, as well as the ability to act independently. A para-legal will fill out papers originally drafted by a lawyer, at a much less expensive rate. A para-medical will do an initial diagnosis, or follow-up on treatment, or even stitch up a patient after an operation, but not do it all, allowing the doctor or surgeon more time to see other patients.

There is a down-side to this. Many people think of "para" as meaning "sub", that is, less educated, less capable, less authoritative, and therefore, not to be trusted. There is a class issue. There are people who always want "the boss", because they feel they are important, and they cannot bear to have what they consider to be second-best advice.

Ignorance plays a factor, too. I know what a doctor is, but I have never heard of a para-optometric⁷, so why would I want to talk with one when I am sick and expecting someone else.

Nevertheless, para-careers are a growing field. Demands for greater amounts of service from professionals, and more sophisticated advice from them, means that these people must spend more time studying the leading edge of their specialty. This leaves less time for knowing the leading edge of similar specialties. Such an effort to gain greater knowledge is best utilized by responding to specialized situations, rather than any situation. Think of it as a service/information bucket brigade: a problem or question is handed to someone at the start of the line, who then passes it off to someone closer to the solution and a more intimate knowledge of the ultimate need.

The Deacon as Para-Cleric

How does all of this relate to us, who are either deacons, or thinking about becoming deacons? There are issues of education, collegiality, and self-definition which need to be addressed.

Deacons are too infrequent to be the norm. Up until the early 1980's, there were, at most, a few hundred deacons scattered among nearly eight thousand parishes. By the mid-1990's, that number had risen to over fifteen hundred, a high water mark but still not enough to cover one parish in five. In contrast, it has always been the practice in the Episcopal Church and its parent body, the Anglican Communion, to have a priest in charge of every congregation. Affluent or busy churches might have more than one priest. The 1996 Episcopal Church Annual reports fifteen thousand clergy in 1993⁸ Subtract the deacons and the bishops, and priests outnumber the other ordained orders by about nine to one, or more than one per congregation. If you were to ask the "man-in-the-pew" about bishops, priests, and deacons, I would wager that he would tell you that bishops confirm, deacons read the gospel, but that priests do everything else. That is not only simplistic, it's scary.

In the complex world that meets the modern parish, having one trained person who is expected to do everything except confirm and read the gospel is placing a monstrous amount of pressure on one individual. Counselor, personnel director, volunteer coordinator, worship organizer and officiant, board chairman, community activist, educator, public speaker -- the list goes on. And counseling: these days there are issues of mental and physical abuse, sexuality, drugs, depression, marriage and divorce, unemployment, and occasionally theology and spirituality. In my parish, families come as two parent, one parent, single sex, multi-racial, multi-generational, and teenage. Who can cope?

Rather than place the entire burden for the well-being of a congregation on one ordained person, ministry within a parish needs to be broadened. More priests are not the answer: the church cannot afford the training, parishes cannot afford the personnel costs, and additional copies of the primary pastor is not the best way to encourage servant ministry among the laity. Deacons in a parish, on the other hand, can each take on one or two key issues, promoting broader involvement of the church with society,

while encouraging the best utilization of the priest's talents and abilities. The para-professional assistance of deacons will allow the parish priest to concentrate in those areas where the priest is specifically educated and historically empowered to operate.

Deacons are supposed to be the bridge between the church and the world. As such, they bring their everyday knowledge to an institution that frequently is used as a retreat from the world. Priests with church positions have a different life from their parishioners; not better or worse, just different, and that difference is not always understood on either side. Deacons can help make one side understand the other, though their life experience, and their decision to be one of the ordered members of the church. A priest with no assistance ends up as a jack of all trades and a master of none.

However, deacons do not do everything either, no matter how great the needs. It's not just historical, it's practical. Most deacons are secularly employed, leaving a certain percentage of their time for church and household. Optimal use of that time suggests concentration on one or two key responsibilities. One deacon handling the ministry of educating children frees up the priest to do other things. One deacon ministering to the shut-ins allows the priest to meet with those in crisis. One deacon fulfilling the liturgical role permits the priest to experience worship rather than race through it. The deacon remains in the world, continuing to know it as it moves and changes; it's a form of continuing education.

The para-cleric does not need to know everything a professional cleric does. A para-cleric will be knowledgeable in certain select areas, and competent enough in all other areas to do pastoral triage and give referrals. The education of a deacon ought to allow that person to be an interface between the world and the church, and one or two special ministries which are particularly her own. It doesn't have to be broad, but it needs to be sufficiently thorough to recognize a need and pass it on to someone who can meet it more closely.

A bench of deacons

Collegiality is perhaps something we don't think about when mixing deacons with priests, but as our numbers grow, the potential impact needs to be considered. How can the two orders work together if they don't speak the same language, or if one is seen as inferior to the other? With grace and friendship, or else with difficulty, I believe. I also doubt that emergency medical technicians hang out in the same bars as E.R. physicians (except on television), but they do respect each other's work. They each have a role to play, and lacking one or the other can create problems for the remaining person. Priests and deacons must work together in the same way. Effective cooperative ministry cannot allow for any sense of elitism or classism, or a sense that a seminary degree or worldly employment automatically confers wisdom.

It is historical that deacons are "the bishop's people", being assigned by and directed by him or her as the bishop sees fit. In practicality, deacons work in parishes with priests, and, except in small and underpriested dioceses, usually report to them rather than to the bishop. Whatever the record may have been, the church in the twenty-first century must come to grips with the deployment of deacons and their place in the division of ministries. Deacons need to be seen as part of a team, not as a threat to

lay ministry; not as an independent agent answerable only to diocesan headquarters; not as free help, with all the prestige that usually attends anything free. For the full range of ministerial action to be seen, every parish ought to have a priest working with at least one deacon as aides to the laity in their efforts.

Finally, there is the issue of self-definition. The idea of para-cleric need not be a pejorative one, if we define it as it is truly meant: working beside. Advertising deacons as specially trained to work on particular challenges is better than allowing that order to be defined as semi-educated, or incompletely trained, or incapable of doing so-called “real” church work. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote that “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.” Allowing others to say what we are will not help the reemergence and redefinition of the diaconate. We know what we are -- we should establish how we define ourselves.

One ministry, different approaches

There is no way that a program of occasional Saturdays or weekend retreats can substitute for being immersed for three years in an educational institution. But the goal in forming a deacon is not to duplicate a seminary. The goals are to 1) meet the canonical requirements; 2) provide a base of diaconal knowledge; and 3) enable the deacon to minister effectively in her chosen areas. Leave the exegesis of scripture to the bishops and priests: that is their special education. Let deacons handle the needs of the world: that is our experience, and what we are called to do. Hunger and loneliness are just as important as theological discourse and pronouncing blessing and absolution.

Deacons are not priests, deacons are deacons. We do different things, not lesser things or easier things. Just because priests perform servant ministries does not mean that deacons are not needed, or that we are trying to take away something from them to justify our existence. Priests have their own responsibilities. In a better ordered church, deacons and priests will work beside each other, not as deacons working for priests. The idea of the deacon as a para-cleric is not something that I have completely explored here, but I think the idea is worth beginning a dialogue over.

¹ McKean not only was one of the incorporators in 1766, but also served as its first president.

² Miller, Glenn, and Robert Lynn. “Christian Theological Education”, in *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience*. New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1988, p. 1627-1652.

³ “Experts and Citizens: Rethinking Professionalism.” *Tikkun*, vol. 11, No., 1, p. 15-18.

⁴ Dinham, Sarah M. and Frank T. Stritter, “Research in Professional Education”, in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1986. pp. 952-970.

⁵ *College Blue Book*. 25th ed. 5 vols. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1995.

⁶ Unless one were seeking treatment for “hoof and mouth” disease...

⁷ eye care assistants and technicians.

⁸ *Episcopal Church Annual*, 1996 ed. Ridgefield CT, Morehouse Publishing, 1996, p. 14.

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