**From the Amen Corner**

**October 29, 2017**

This coming weekend, on Friday, Nov 3rd Archbishop Coakely will ordain 22 new Permanent Deacons. The ordinations will include three new deacons for St. Eugene Parish. They are: Adolfo Aleman, Rob Blakely and Terri Givens. In their service in the parish they join Deacons Bill Bawden and Tom Goldsworthy serving here with us, as well as Deacon Alejandro Randolph who is now serving at St. Joseph’s. We will have receptions after each of the masses next weekend to welcome our new deacons into the ordained ministry of the parish. It will be a great weekend for all of us.

The Permanent Diaconate can be counted as one of the greatest success stories of Vat II. From its initial fledgling phase in 1976 to today, this aspect of Church service has grown into a major part of parish life all over the United States. Currently there are 15,000 deacons actively serving in the country and many hundred more candidates in formation. We have all been the beneficiaries.

The Permanent Diaconate has been a story with many chapters in the life of the Church. In the course of the Church’s history there have been a number of innovations and a variety of expressions when it comes to diaconal service. In my lifetime I’ve been able to see some of the changes play out before my eyes; they have been intriguing. When we see our deacons at the altar and enjoy their ministry among us, we are all participating in some of the great theological and ministerial currents of our age. It is helpful to understand some of them.

The establishment of the diaconate goes back to the earliest days of the Church. In the Acts of the Apostles the early Christian community faced a crisis and then looked for a way to address it. In Chapter 6 it describes the challenges facing the apostles as they tried to preside over the growth of the community in Jerusalem There were people streaming into the Church on every side, making it hard to accommodate all of them. As so often happens when there no provisions to handle everyone, some people felt left out and pretty soon complained about it. In this case it was the families who spoke Greek who felt ignored in favor of those who spoke Aramaic. The community was especially good at taking care of widows and orphans and the poor, distributing bread and other support for all of those who needed. Quickly the ones who spoke Greek, the outsiders, felt they were being ignored in favor of the insiders. They complained to the Apostles about what was happening. It didn’t take long before they swung into action.

As they did they set a pattern for Church growth and adaptability. According to the Acts of the Apostles, they met and talked about the meaning of the community and their life together. In the process the Apostles clarified the status of their own ministry. It was clear to all of them they could not be bogged down trying to do everything for everyone. If they were to try, they would compromise their own function in the community as well as their own leadership. Their work was to spend time in prayer and in preaching and teaching; if they were trying to cover all of the needs their preaching and teaching would suffer. So they made the decision to expand the circle of those involved in leadership and service; they appointed deacons to handle the distribution of care to the widows and orphans in the community.

This appointment of deacons was the product of the Apostles’ concern for the whole community. But it was also a clarification in their own minds of what their roles were supposed to be. This is an important aspect of their reflections for us to notice. They couldn’t consult Jesus directly, there were no scriptures in the community to receive instruction from; they had to figure out a response from their own deliberation. They spent time praying about and thinking about what they were already doing, they clarified their particular roles and they did this in the context of the community’s needs. As they did, they came up with the role of the deacons. I think it is actually a model for good Church decision making through the ages.

The word ‘deacon’ simply means: ‘one who serves.’ It is not an especially solemn title; in fact, it did not become a title until the Church made it one. In this early age of growth the Church made use of the situations and vocabulary present to it. ‘Sacrament’ was a term borrowed from the Roman Army and ‘Bishop’ just meant ‘administrator’ for example. Later on these terms carried with them special significance but at this time the Church made use of the words and understandings it had. And deacons were those who were chosen to help identify and serve the needs of the community as it grew. They became those who were put in charge of the goods of the Church to use well and distribute fairly. Just as the word ‘sacrament’ soon came to mean much more than its original usage, so the office of deacon grew beyond its first, simple meaning.

In the case of this first group of deacons, the attribute most important to them was that they spoke Greek. They were empowered to pay attention to the needs of the community because they were part of it. These men became the bridge from the experience and history of the Jewish community in Jerusalem to the new members who had entered as part of the Greek community. It was important for the Jewish community to know of and to be sensitive to the needs of the Greeks, but everyone knew there was nothing like the community being empowered with its own ministers and those who understood it from the inside. This will be a recurring theme throughout Christian history, including in the Acts of the Apostles.

It is not clear from the Acts of the Apostles whether the men chosen to be deacons were from the Greek-speaking Jews who formed a part of the community in Jerusalem or whether they were pagans who had been attracted to the Apostles and the community that formed after Pentecost. There were both types of Greeks in the early Christian communities; this movement of non-Jews amongst the newly formed Christians was a feature from the beginning. But probably they were Greeks who were Jewish, which was also a feature of the Jewish world at the time. In fact, there had been a small explosion of non-ethnic Jewish converts throughout the Roman Empire in the century before Jesus. In just about every major Roman city the Jewish communities had grown a great deal because so many people had entered Judaism. This meant there were large numbers of Jews who did not trace their ancestry back to Israel nor were they naturally Hebrew or Aramaic speaking. This spate of conversions had been hastened by the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) into Greek in 135 BC. (This was the first time in history the major writing of a world religion had been translated into another language and the translation used at worship and study.) Jerusalem, although the heart of the Jewish world, was part of his trend; there were a number of Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem at the time.

Of course, this did not mean they weren’t still held apart by the rest of the community. People being the way they are, it was only natural there was a division between those who were ethnically Jewish and those who were ethnically non-Jewish; a division not easily overcome. Having the Apostles name these deacons to minister to the needs of the Greek community may well have been a solution already contemplated by various parts of the Jewish community even before the Apostles wrestled with it. It is interesting to note the apostolic response; it focused on the practicalities of service amidst the situation of the whole community.

In short order a couple of things happened. The most expected was the most obvious; the complaining stopped. This seems like a small thing but in the context of the moment it was of no little impact. With the community at peace and the Greek-speaking widows and orphans being taken care of, the growth continued. It was obvious to everyone there was a place for all who wanted to listen to and respond to the promises of Christ. Greeks continued to enter the Church. Eventually this would include a larger and larger number of pagans who had had no contact with the Jewish community but were attracted to the message of Jesus. While it took several generations for this reality to become firmly established, it began to define the Christian moment.

The next thing was unexpected but had as large an impact: the deacons began to expand their roles into preaching and teaching. While this must have seemed odd to the Apostles, it comes as a natural follow-on to the reality. Christian preaching isn’t mere commentary on the scriptures or simply bromides repeated at worship. Preaching is a living voice spoken from the heart of the gospel, informed by the life of the community. The best preachers are those who are amidst the people, who end up speaking from the life and the language of the whole community. When the deacons stretched out their hands to help those in need, when they focused their abilities to manage the resources they were entrusted with, when they had to make decisions about what was best for everyone, they had to put the message of the gospel into practice. It didn’t take long for them to be invited to put it into words. It was a natural follow-on: deacons became preachers.

The naming of deacons had tremendous impact on the whole community of Jerusalem. The first martyr was Stephen, a deacon, who was put to death because of his preaching. He refused to be quiet; his preaching and teaching upset those who wanted him to restrict his work to feeding the poor. When he didn’t he was silenced by being stoned to death. He preached even as he died. His ultimate service to the Church was the gift of his life, given to the whole community.

For centuries the diaconate functioned in the original sense, as the principal administrators of the goods of the Church. The precise expectations of deacons varied from community to community and we have many examples from across the early centuries of deacons who were respected teachers and preachers. In some of the larger cities in the Empire the deacons were the ones who bore the responsibility of caring for and using the wealth of the Church for charity and alms as well as for building and maintaining. In fact it became common for the deacons of the Church of the City of Rome to be the ones who were elected Pope. After all, they had spent their ministerial lives working as leaders and administrators; who better to become head of the whole Church? Of the 37 men elected Pope between 432 and 648, only three of them had not been diaconal administrators of the Church first. These 37 had to be ordained priests before they could become the Bishops of Rome.

Of course, there were those who thought the role of deacons had become unfocused; the role had expanded to include much more than the original scope of the ministry of service. Following this line of thinking, the diaconate as a permanent, standing position in the Church was passed over. Beginning in the about the 5th Century it became common to ordain men to the diaconate only as a preparation for the priesthood. The diaconate as a permanent office in the Church pretty much ceased, at least in the Western Church by the 7th Century.

This did not sit well with many in the Church and there was much concern that the ministry of diaconal service did not receive its proper position in the life of the faithful. At the Council of Trent (1545-1563) there was some talk about revivifying the diaconate but it was left up to individual bishops, who never really moved to make it happen. It was at Vat II, following much talk among priests and bishops amid their post WWII experience, the Permanent Diaconate was restored. This happened when Pope Paul VI formally reestablished it in 1972. The first deacon classes were formed in the US and were ordained in the late 1970s. As we here at St. Eugene’s can testify, permanent deacons have been a part of the life of this parish for going on 40 years.

I have watched the development of diaconal ministry over these last decades and have been grateful to see it come to full flower. In the early days of the deacon classes it was not really clear to priests or bishops or even deacons themselves exactly what was expected of them and what they would do. They had received the sacrament of Holy Orders and were ordained clergy, but they weren’t priests and weren’t supposed to function as priests did. Diaconal service was something that had passed out of the practice of the Church for 1000 years so no one really knew exactly what to expect of the deacons being ordained. It took a generation or so of active exploration for the ministry to take on its own character and focus. Now that we have so much experience under our belts we are much more comfortable with what we want deacons to do and how we want them to function. In the course of my years I have become very excited about the expansion of diaconal ministry and its gift to the Church. Deacons have come into their own.

Throughout the Archdiocese deacons are very active in the life of the Church. There are many who have become hospital and prison chaplains, spiritual directors, administrators and teachers. In many parishes the deacon is the director of RCIA and of the charitable outreach for the community. In a good number of our smaller parishes the deacon is also the face of the Church to the whole city. Deacons are often instrumental in the variety of ministries accompanying funerals and weddings as well as preparations for baptism and confirmation. Here in Oklahoma the Spanish-speaking deacons have also been instrumental in their work among the newly arrived. This has been especially important in the smaller parishes where the pastor often does not speak Spanish.

Our new deacons will be working in a variety of ministries, as well as sharing preaching duties. They will be serving at masses on the weekend and will be a regular feature at wake services and funerals as well. As part of the face of ministry in the parish it is hard to predict exactly everything they will be doing, other than to say they will be busy. The first ‘rule’ of ministry is simple: it expands to include every available moment and every available space among those who are involved in it. With such a portfolio I expect we’ll find them more and more present to the life of the whole parish.

I am especially grateful to Imelda Aleman, Sharon Blakely and Susan Givens, the spouses of Adolfo, Rob and Terry, who have been a part of the diaconal formation and preparation. They have sacrificed and worked alongside their husbands over these last 4 years. It hasn’t been easy; the formation process is thorough and wide-ranging and demanding and of long duration. At the insistence of the Archbishop, spouses are an integral part of it. Every deacon forms a team with his spouse; I have a great deal of confidence in the integrity and completeness of these teams of witnesses and servants who will be newly present among us. We only function as a parish because of the sacrifices of so many. These new deacons among us are the same; they are present here only because of their willingness to sacrifice as well as the ready sacrifices of those around them.

The basis of all Holy Orders is service. All priests are ordained deacons first. All bishops are ordained first a deacon and then a priest. Service is at the heart of this gift of life to the Church. From the first days of the Church it has been so. It remains so today.

 Fr. Don Wolf