

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



✠ *Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham*
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle



Pastoral Letter to be read in all Parishes **Weekend of 20/21 January 2018**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ

It is just over 50 years since the Second Vatican Council restored the ancient office of the Permanent Diaconate and the first Deacon for our diocese was ordained in 1987. There would be no other ordinations though until 2005, but I'm pleased to say that we now have 34 deacons working in the Diocese and have a number of others in formation, of which three will be ordained later this year.

Of course it's almost 2,000 years since the first seven deacons were appointed by the Apostles to help them to provide and care for people in need. Through the following centuries deacons lived out their vocation in other ways too, modelling their lives on Christ as a servant. However, in later centuries becoming a deacon was simply seen as a stepping-stone on the route to the priesthood. This changed when in the 1960's the Second Vatican Council decided to re-establish the Permanent Diaconate as a distinct ministry, thus restoring it, along with the office of bishops and priests, as an integral part of the sacrament of Holy Orders.

An often-asked question is "What does a deacon do?" To answer this, we need to first ask, "Who is a deacon?" Our deacons come from a variety of backgrounds. The majority are married and have families, whom we thank for so generously supporting their husbands, fathers and grandfathers and even sharing in their ministry. Some deacons are in full-time employment while others are retired. It is this breadth of life-experience that roots deacons very firmly in the world, which enables them to be acutely aware of the challenges we face in living the Gospel today. This 'worldly' experience, coupled with the grace of Holy Orders, places deacons in a unique position, enabling them to act as a sort of bridge between the Church and the wider world. So Deacons have a distinct and unique role to play in the life of our diocese.

What does a deacon do? In short, deacons are ordained by the Bishop to be his helpers in supporting God's people in three different ways. The first is to be ministers of the Word of God; the second is to assist with the Liturgy, which includes conducting baptisms, weddings and funerals; and the third is to participate in the Church's mission of charity. While deacons support the work of the priest in a parish, they cannot replace the priest. So it is vitally important that a deacon is not seen as a "mini priest". The office of priest and deacon are distinct and unique in themselves.

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As the shortage of priests is increasingly felt across the diocese, the role of deacons in parishes is becoming more important. In these challenging times, the role of the deacon is to help people to exercise their baptismal calling, and not to take over roles already undertaken by lay people.

The deacon's role will always remain one of service: service both to the congregations who worship in our churches and service to those who find themselves outside our parishes and, possibly, on the margins of life. That is why, in addition to their ministry in parishes, our deacons also work in food banks, hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, schools, sea ports, refugee groups and shelters for the homeless. In short, wherever the saving message of the Gospel needs to be taken, there is an opportunity for the deacon to live out his ministry.

Over the coming months our deacons will be visiting parishes across the diocese, giving an insight into their ministry and how they live out their vocation: a vocation that is rooted in that calling of Christ to serve – the Christ who in our Gospel today called those first Apostles to help him in his ministry, and who, in turn, ordained those first seven deacons to help them in that saving work.

Our deacons are supported by the grace they received in their Ordination, by the love of their families, and by the prayers and encouragement of parishioners. I ask you today to join me in giving thanks for their witness and sacrifice. I also ask you also to pray for them, that the Lord will help them to truly live their vocation, a vocation that is nothing less than sharing in the ministry of Jesus Christ as Servant.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Séamus".

✘ Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

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