

Permanent Diaconate presentation at Administration Day, Sept. 10, 2015 at the Cathedral of the Holy Family:

Bishop Don: Last year at Admin Day, I informed you of the report I had received from the diaconal discernment committee, and indicated how we moved forward. Salient points from that presentation were that this was a highly contested issue in our diocese, with strong feelings on both sides of the question; that we engaged in a lengthy consultative process, which many of you were involved in; how we situated our discussion in the context of God's call and our response; that we looked at different models of the diaconate, and eventually experienced a coming together of minds and hearts, as we were increasingly drawn towards a vision of the diaconate that would have as its primary focus a ministry of outreach which summoned the whole Church to reach out in service and compassion to places of great need; a vision in which a deacon's liturgical ministry would flow from active outreach that serves as a sacramental sign of the service to which all are called; that in resonance with Pope Francis' renewed emphasis on the Christian outreach to those most in need, all the baptized are called to engage in that reaching out in compassion; that a permanent diaconate should be structured in such a way that it supports, rather than stifles or competes with, the lay, religious and priestly responses to God's call to service currently being lived out in the diocese; that many would wish that the permanent diaconate would be open to women, and mindful that we belong to a universal church, encouraged me to contribute to that discussion in ecclesially appropriate and responsible ways when the opportunity availed itself; that coupled with first steps towards a diaconal formation program, we should give serious consideration to a justice outreach program open to all people.

Out of those proposals, I noted that three committees would be established. The first was to offer a more detailed proposal of what shape a year of formation for lay ministry of outreach and service on the peripheries might take. A second committee was mandated to study carefully the Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and to ask what would be required to supplement formation already given in our lay formation program and the proposed additional year of formation on the ministry of outreach. Both committees were asked to consider how these programs could be offered in a manner which is fiscally sustainable and responsible for the long term; in other words, drawing on as many existing resources as possible and costing the diocese as little as possible. A third committee would be asked to assess the financial and human resources required for the above initiatives, and to reflect on how the programs could be financed without draining funds from existing programs. We identified the Fall of 2016 as the earliest date at which we could start these programs.

In the interim, what has happened? Well, the first two of those committees have now completed their work, and prepared reports which I have received with gratitude. The committee dealing with finances will only take up their task when we have a clear idea of how we are proceeding.

Let's begin with the committee tasked with preparing a draft outline and curriculum of a year of justice and outreach formation. That committee consisted of people from our diocese who have combined experience working in northern missions, formation of laity, working with street kids and prostitutes, children and the elderly, working in schools, prisons and hospitals, working with First Nations and participation in the L'arche community.

These people include Mona Goodman, Debbie Ledoux, Kate O’Gorman, Peter Oliver, Myron Rogal, Gertrude Rompre and Blake Sittler (chair). I would ask the committee members to stand as I formally thank them for doing such a wonderful job of pooling their wisdom in presenting us a first draft of a curriculum and strategy for proceeding. Blake will give us a brief overview of the committee’s report.

Blake Sittler: Our committee was inspired by Pope Francis' desire, “Oh, how I would like a Church that is poor and for the poor;” his willingness to see the pilgrim church become a field hospital; to see the Body of Christ become marked and bruised with dirt from labour and a body bruised from stepping out from behind the safety and security of church walls and into the front lines of the daily life of God's People. And all of this in a spirit of joy!

It was this spirit of joy that also inspired our tentative name of the initiative: Justice and Outreach Year of Formation (JOY Formation).

It was important to us that participants have the opportunity to learn about the theology of mission and service that the Church has to offer - how we do not (or, at least, should not) serve from a pedestal but that we serve through relationship. Through that relationship, we share the dignity and respect of the Good News that is the birthright of all people and we are enriched through the same relationship.

We recognized that our relationship with Canada's Indigenous Peoples needs to be sensitive to their desire to be a part of their own healing. We need to be humble in terms of our approach. If we as Church cannot improve our relationship with our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, much of the work Christ is calling us to will be hampered.

The June release of the findings of the TRC especially notes that care should be taken to involve First Nations in the outline of any program addressing their needs. Consideration of their unique spirituality, culture and language will be part of the new flavour and aroma of the program.

This formation outline was focused on outreach to those on the peripheries of society: the poor, the marginalized, the refugee and new Canadian, our First Nations brothers and sisters, and the newly released prisoner.

Initially we looked at the Lay Formation Program as a model but early on felt there was need for a distinctive character that set it apart. We shared with Bishop Don a draft that would have participants gather on Friday and Saturdays with Sundays being spent back home in their parish, in their community. Friday nights would be spent in theological reflection on their ministry and outreach that they had experienced in the previous month. Rather than trying to bring the peripheries of the world to the classroom, we will take the classroom to the peripheries.

Catholic Social Teachings are rich and vast. From our scripturally inspired “preferential option for the poor” to the revelatory Christian recognition of the dignity of the human person to the

basic concepts of solidarity and subsidiarity, this year needs to plumb the depths and breadth of these gifts with practical experience through hands-on ministry.

We were also inspired to draw out the importance of how whatever service we offer as Church needs to evangelize; our service cannot be limited to one of pragmatic justice or pious charity but needs to inspire in those who experience it and witness it a sense of the closeness of Jesus to all people and all of creation.

Authentic dialogue and meaningful relationships are two important traits of the healthy and holy outreach that we hope to nurture in the participants. Dialogue and relationship, along with public advocacy, are what will transform simple charity into gospel justice.

We as a committee thank you, Bishop Don, for the trust you put in us to develop this year of formation for all of those in our diocese who are called in a special way to serve those in our community who have a special place in the heart of the Lord.

Bishop Don: Thank you Blake and members of this committee.

The second committee, tasked with offering a proposal for diaconal formation, brought together academics and those with expertise in pedagogy, clergy (including a deacon) and laity, with a wide range of experience in programming, catechetics, Christian initiation and adult formation. The committee was made up of Michelle Sieben, Dr. Terry Downey, Fr. Kevin McGee, Fr. Iheanyi Enwerem, Deacon Paul Labelle, Linda Labelle, and was chaired by Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers. I would ask them to stand and accept our gratitude for their insightful and thorough work. Fr. Kevin McGee will walk us through a few highlights of the committee's report.

Fr. Kevin McGee: I'm grateful to present on behalf of the committee members. Bishop Don, we thank you for entrusting us with this task. We met for a total of seven times between October 2014 and June 2015. One of our tasks given to us by Bishop Don was to carefully study the Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons. This is a document published by the Vatican, and as the title suggests, points to what the formation of permanent deacons looks like.

While this document offers pretty clear guidelines and directives, they are also meant to be applied in the lived experience of the local church under the discernment of the local bishop. For example, we learnt that the document assumed a cohort model with a formation process the equivalent of 4 years of university/seminary studies. Several factors in our unique diocesan situation required that we modify this assumption:

- We do not anticipate a large cohort (8 or more candidates) but more in the range of 2-4 at one time.
- Also, we anticipate that life situations of most prospective candidates will not allow full-time study and formation.
- We also foresee that candidates will come from a diversity of backgrounds which may or may not include prior study and formation.

- As the vision of our diaconal formation emphasises a call to service - to engage with those on the peripheries - we will also expect that some of our candidates may not already have a prior engagement in diaconate related ministries such as justice, outreach and service on the peripheries of Church and society.

As we discussed what a formation period for permanent deacons would look like based on a small number and a diversity of backgrounds, we discerned, at Bishop Don's request, how we could meet these needs through existing resources easily accessed at a local level. And there are indeed many local resources, including the Justice and Outreach year-long program that is currently being developed and will have at its core a mandate to go out to the margins. This will provide an ideal environment for an individual who is feeling a call to the permanent diaconate within our diocese.

According to the norms, it will offer a context for discernment and a period of preparation known as a propaedeutic period.

During this period the aspirant will be introduced to a deeper knowledge of theology, of spirituality and of the ministry of deacon and will be led to a more attentive discernment of his call. Beyond this period of discernment, should the aspirant be officially accepted as a candidate to the permanent diaconate, then further formation and studies will be required. At that point, we will partner, where possible, with institutes of religious sciences which already exist or of other institutes of theological formation. For example:

- The 2-year Lay Formation program
- Selected courses at St. Thomas More College
- Newman Theological College in Edmonton
- Certificate in Ministry in Edmonton
- Saskatoon Theological Union (Lutheran Theological Seminary, Emmanuel St. Chad, St. Andrew's College)
- Program in Ecumenical Studies (Prairie Centre for Ecumenism)

Alongside these potential partners, our diocese is abundantly blessed with a wide variety of gifted and competent individuals who can serve as local instructors. The Norms are very clear regarding the required oversight of a Diaconate Formation program. Those persons charged with the responsibility of oversight in the formation of candidates for the permanent diaconate are: the director of formation, the tutor (where the number requires it), the spiritual director and the pastor (or the minister to whom the candidate is entrusted for the diaconal placement).

Finally, we were asked by Bishop Don to do some preliminary thinking about how we would screen and evaluate candidates. This would include:

- A rigorous interview process
- Psychological evaluations and the request to provide independent references from a wide variety of sources.

It would take into serious consideration that many candidates for the permanent diaconate are married and have families, and efforts will be made to include spouses and children in the

formation program at all levels. The involvement, commitment and approval of a spouse are essential for a candidate's acceptance into the program and in the success of living out the diaconal vocation.

Our committee named a number of qualities sought in potential deacon candidates which I will not go into here - but which together will help to bring the gospel, the Good News of the Mercy of God, to those on the peripheries.

Bishop Don: Thanks, Fr. Kevin, and members of the diaconal formation committee. The reports of both committees, and this address, will be posted online later this month.

Because the two committees carried out their work more or less independently, there are areas where their visions have not merged. And these reports weren't intended to be the final word, but to advance our efforts towards both a year of outreach formation and towards the formation of potential permanent deacons. That being said, I greet these reports with much gratitude and find most of what has been proposed excellent and, I would say, exciting. Here's an initial glimpse into my own sense of where my own leanings lie: I hope the justice outreach year of formation will have a strong element of being hands-on, going to places where ministries of outreach are carried out, meeting and hearing from the people who offer such services and meeting people who are on the receiving end of their programs. While it will no doubt draw on the wisdom and experience of the lay formation program, the work on the diaconal committee makes me think it would be problematic to make the lay formation a pre-requisite for the outreach program, though we certainly hope our program will be appealing and of great interest to lay formation alumni. I resonate strongly with the proposal of the committee on the permanent diaconate that the year of outreach formation be understood as the propaedeutic or preparatory year for diaconal candidates. It makes sense that this would be the place where someone interested in the diaconate would begin. It would be a time of formation and of discernment, including about the participant's understanding of diaconal ministry and of their aptitude for such ministry.

Now, what lies ahead, what are our next steps? Stating that diaconal formation would begin with the justice outreach year allows us to concentrate our efforts, for the moment, on setting up that year first. It allows us to still maintain the goal of beginning in the Fall of 2016 with the justice outreach formation, but with no guarantees at this point.

Here is a rough timeline of the coming months. First, beginning this month: an oversight committee will be established to read carefully through the reports we have received, to work through the different challenges which are on the horizon, and to make some provisional decisions about the shape of the justice formation program - what to include, what not to include, with what priorities, etc. An initial part of that would be the compilation of a list of possible places where we would like to bring the group of participants: justice and outreach initiatives in the city/region that we'd have something to learn from.

Secondly, beginning in November, two things would happen, simultaneously although one certainly would effect the other. We would look to do some consulting about the draft version of the justice outreach program, and we would begin in three directions: with the Diocesan Council

for Truth and Reconciliation and other Indigenous leaders and faithful, to make sure that the program will be a gift and a good fit for that community; with the Council of Priests; and with the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Unlike last year and its consultations, this will be an ongoing consultation as the program is being developed. And we would free up Kate O’Gorman half-time to staff our efforts, beginning in November, setting up a working group, and trying to provisionally set up locations for gathering, presenters on various themes, and pull together a schedule for the JOY formation.

Then beginning in January, we will work towards developing some initial promotional materials for both the JOY formation and the permanent diaconate, mindful that it would be begin with the year of JOY formation.

Through this period, we will try to estimate provisional staffing and other programming expenses, and our Foundation team in dialogue with our Diocesan Finance office will begin the work of raising funds for the program.

For both programs, by March we will need to have set up a committee to evaluate candidates who are expressing an interest either in JOY formation or in the permanent diaconate. We will need to make some preliminary decisions about the number of participants, and whether the JOY formation will be offered every year or every second year.

Finally, in the Winter/Spring of 2016, we will need to begin work on the diaconal formation which will follow the propaedeutic year.

(Time for Questions)

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