

A DEACON'S STORY

“But you’re so young!” was my parish priest’s response when I finally spoke to him that I thought I had a calling to be a permanent deacon. I was 30 years old. That’s eight years ago now, and at time of writing I’ve been ordained for two-and-a-half.

One of my earliest memories of Mass is being 8 years old and my mother telling me the parish priest had said I should be an altar boy. What Canon Turnbull said happened, and so began my service to the Church. Following that, I’d never been one to push myself into involvement in the parishes in which I’ve worshipped; I had always waited to be asked before taking up any involvement, not wanting to seem too forward or interfering. “More readers are needed,” Father announced one Sunday the end of Mass, so only then did I offer my services. A notice was placed in the parish newsletter asking for more extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, so I volunteered.

Yet with the diaconate, it was me who made the first move, making an appointment to see my parish priest, when he gave his reaction: “But you’re so young!” When I’m asked how I received my calling, I think since it was me who did the enquiring and offered myself – instead of waiting to be asked – it was God giving me that nudge, prod or push to put myself forward.

When the diocesan deputy director came to our house to speak to my wife Vicki and I, our second son was a new-born in the Moses basket, but I was reassured that even with a young family and a demanding, full-time job, this wasn’t a problem: each deacon has a different amount of time to give in service to his diaconal vocation, depending on his situation.

I don’t think there’s a ‘typical’ permanent deacon. Some recognise the call at a relatively young age, some much older. Some are retired, some are in secular employment or some are employers of others. A small number are like me employed by the Church (I work for my diocese as a vocation promoter) or have paid ministry as hospital, prison or educational chaplains. Many are married, but some are celibate – single or widowed.

Every deacon is called to be an icon of Christ the Servant. His liturgical ministry involves assisting at Mass (including preaching) and celebrating baptisms, marriages and funerals, but his wider service to sharing God’s word and of charitable service to others may vary, depending on his own gifts and the needs in the community he serves.

It really hit home to me what being a deacon is about when, a month after my ordination, I went to a city I’d never been to before, wearing clerical dress. I was walking down the street when I was stopped by a man, who clearly wasn’t happy and was drinking, even though it was only mid-morning. He saw my Roman collar and stopped me, asking for a blessing. We had a brief chat, said a prayer together, I blessed him and he left, happier than when he’d first spotted me. I then carried on walking up the long, deserted street. A few minutes later a very distressed man stopped me – he’d had someone very close to him die and was in tears. I spoke with him, prayed with him and he went on his way, thanking me with a smile. These two encounters with strangers in an unfamiliar town really made me realise the essence of a being a deacon: helping others recognise Jesus’ love as a reality in their lives in whatever I can.

Being a deacon isn’t simply about having enough experience or being able to commit enough hours to a role; it certainly isn’t about being holy enough or worthy enough. It involves allowing yourself to be used by Jesus Christ to make him known to others, whenever and wherever you can.