



Heralds of the Gospel wherever they are: Catholic permanent deacons on mission *inter gentes*

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Abstract

Jesus commands the Church to its reason for existence: preaching the Good News of salvation to all (Mt 28:18-20). For restoration in Christ, the magisterial theology of mission of the Catholic Church emphasises this mandate. The Vatican II document *Ad Gentes* restricts “missionaries” to “priests, Religious, or laymen” who are distinct from but are sent “to all”. Deacons are excluded. As baptised and ordained Christians, permanent deacons are obliged to be missionary. However, they are usually incardinated into dioceses and are self-supporting, married men with familial and professional obligations. Thus, the possibilities for permanent deacons to be missionaries *ad gentes* are constrained. Ordained to be heralds of the Gospel, deacons may experience tension between the Gospel’s demands and their lives. Argued from the Southern African “mission territory” context, it is contended that this existential tension can be overcome through an *inter gentes* missionary theology.

Key words

Catholic; deacons; missionary; ad gentes; inter gentes

1. Introduction

Though many Catholics would have encountered seminarian “transitional deacons” on the path to priesthood, the permanent diaconate is a more unfamiliar clerical group in the Catholic Church. Yet, since Pope St Paul VI’s 1967 restoration of the diaconate as a permanent order within the Sacrament of Orders, this vocation has seen monumental growth. There are now over forty-seven thousand permanent deacons ministering on every continent, and in Africa most notably in Southern Africa, the context within which this research has been undertaken (Agenzia Fides 2020).

Permanent deacons are distinct from presbyters and bishops in that if they are married prior to ordination (*Code of Canon Law* [CCL], can. 1031, §2), the obligatory discipline of celibacy (can. 277, §1) does not apply. Furthermore, as family men, permanent deacons are usually not fully employed within the Catholic Church, being financially self-supporting (can. 281, §3). Being of the working world and family life results in the deacon's situatedness to be quite apart from most other Catholic clerics and more akin to that of the lay faithful (can. 266, §1). The deacon is thus positioned in between manifold actualities. Consequently, his potential for ministry is diverse.

All *Christifideles* (i.e. all the Christian faithful), are obliged to proclaim "... *the divine message of salvation* ..." to people throughout the world (can. 211). Clergy, including deacons, are more intensely expected to undertake this mission:

Deacons are ministers of the Church and thus ... they are not exempt from the missionary obligation of the universal Church. Hence, they should always remain open to the *missio ad gentes* [mission to the nations] to the extent that their professional or ... family obligations permit (*Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, §27).

The evangelical mandate is rooted in baptism (Mt 28:16–20; Mk 16:14–18; Lk 24:44–49; Jn 20:19–23; Pope Francis, 2019). The *Christifideles* are likewise bound to the observance of the Church's universal law (CCL, cann. 1 & 11), which includes the obligation of *missio ad gentes*.

An existential tension can potentially arise in the faithful when faced with their missionary duty; this strain is augmented by the impossibility of bringing the Good News beyond their own particular location, family, and professional life. Secular responsibilities can impede the missionary mandate lived to its fulness. Being consecrated for service (*Lumen Gentium* [LG], §29; CCL, can. 1009, §3), permanent deacons experience this tension more dramatically (CCL, can. 276, §§1–2). In the Eriksonian sense, by attempting to take their faith seriously but being unable to adequately respond to the missional aspect thereof, a lack of identity integration can result because multiple dimensions of existence pull in disparate directions (Syed & McLean, 2015:111). For the sake of authenticity and continuity

of identity, deacons need to reconcile themselves with the Church's interpretation of the "Great Commission."

Within the framework of the Latin Rite, it is both the Church's Law and the ordinary which bounds the regulation of the life of the cleric (cann. 1, 11, 273, 391–392). This article thus attempts to employ Magisterial sources to seek a resolution to the identified pressure.

In his intriguing study on Saint Thomas Aquinas' "spirit of ecumenism," Yves Congar draws out the welcoming disposition of Aquinas in the breadth of his intellectual vision (1974:201). Congar explains that, for Aquinas, "... every glimmer of the truth ..." is to be sought in any claim (1974:205). Hence, multiple positions can be true to some degree.¹ In his *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, Saint Thomas explains: "... [I]n choosing or rejecting opinions ... [thinkers should be moved] by the certainty of truth ... we must respect both parties, namely, those whose opinion we follow, and those whose opinion we reject. For both have diligently sought the truth ..." (Book XII, Lesson 9).

Through the employment of the pluralist Thomist theoretical framework, it will be argued that the permanent deacon's missionary obligation is best found in the formation to and adoption of *missio inter gentes* wherethrough deacons can be "... a great and visible sign of the working of the Holy Spirit" (John Paul II 1987). Enlightened by epistemic pluralism, I propose that this interpretation is not opposed to mission *ad gentes*. Rather, both *inter gentes* and *ad gentes* can be held together as true ways of being missionary within the Universal Church, dependent upon the situation of the missionary.

2. The identity of the Catholic permanent deacon

The permanent deacon's identity is formed from within the radix of the noble backdrop of "... the biblical witness" of *διακονία* ("diakonia") – "... that duty ... which in sacred literature is significantly called 'diakonia' or ministry" (LG, §24). This historical situation ennobled the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council toward the diaconate's restoration (McKnight,

1 Congar cites as evidence (1974:205–206): St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 2; III, q. 64, a. 3 and St Thomas Aquinas on Romans, Ch. 10, §848.

2018:4). The deacon’s distinctiveness in the contemporary Latin Rite will be developed by drawing on its historical evolution.

2.1 Historical background to the permanent diaconate

Harkening back to the primeval diaconal moments is contentious, for scholars like McCaslin and Lawlor argue that there is a “discontinuity” between the early diaconate and the diaconate after the Council (1986:13). However, this argument does not follow for although diminished after the fifth century, the diaconate continued to exist, though mostly in the transitional form of men *in via* to priesthood. Further, there were exceptional historical cases of men – like Saint Francis of Assisi (CE c. 1182–1226) and the Papal legate, Reginald Pole (CE 1500–1558) – who were deacons.²

Seeking for the roots of the diaconate, it is tempting – though unscholarly – to root the Order either in Jesus’ intentions (Rahner 2003:145) or in Acts 6:1–6, which is commonly given as evidence for the institution of the diaconate in the early Church.³ In this text, the word “διακόννοι” (“deacons”) was not specifically used (McKnight 2018:21). That the collective noun for these reputable men appointed to serve at table was omitted is important, because Acts can be dated to between CE 80–90 (Dillon, 1990:723). Yet, in a text older by three or four decades (i.e., c. CE 54–58) (Byrne 1990:792), Saint Paul (Phil 1:1) mentions the existence of a particular group of people – the deacons – who were the companions of the bishops (Kasper 2003:19). In the New Testament there is no precise point at which the deacon can be said to come into existence (John Paul II 1993b; Carl 2017:4). Still, from the Pauline account – particularly given that (1) Saint Paul does not elaborate

2 In his writings, Francis of Assisi never intimates that he is a cleric (Cusato 2009:14). However, in retelling the happenings of Christmas at Greccio (CE 1223), Francis’ early biographer Thomas of Celano labels Francis as “leviticis” (Tomasso da Celano, 1880:136; Cusato 2009:14). Franciscan tradition holds that Francis was a deacon and was never ordained a priest, which Cusato makes a strong case for based on Celano (2009:33). In the case of Cardinal Pole, Murphy contends Pole was named cardinal before he was ordained deacon in CE 1536 (2017:181). A powerful Church diplomat, Pole was eventually ordained priest twenty years after he was ordained deacon (Beccatelli 1766:137–138). His priestly ordination preceded his episcopal consecration as Archbishop of Canterbury by days (1766:123).

3 This tradition originated around the era of Saint Irenaeus of Lyon (c. CE 130–202) but was disputed by other Church Fathers (McKnight 2018:18).

on who the “ἐπίσκοποι” and “διακόνου” are and that (2) he mentions them in plural – it can be asserted that both of these groups existed and were known to the Philippians (McKnight 2018:23–24).

The root of the singular noun διάκονος, the plural διακόνου, and the verb διακονία, was traditionally interpreted as “humble service”, of the sort that was not particularly outstanding, involving lowly tasks like serving at table (McKnight 2018:5–6). However, tracing the etymology of the διάκονου group of words, John Neil Collins makes a compelling argument that a pre-Christian interpretation of διάκονος is linked to the Greek God Hermes, the “messenger of the gods” and attendant at cultic feasts (1990:91). Hermes as a διάκονος is exalted to prominence in his διακονία by being mandated to represent gods to one another by bearing official messages (Collins 1990:91; McKnight 2018:7). In this interpretation the διάκονος is understood as a mandated “go-between” (McKnight 2018:7).

Though the origin of the diaconate cannot be located in Sacred Scripture, Jesus embraces a διάκονου-orientation as a mandated-go-between, linking God with humanity and proclaiming the saving message of God (Lk 4:22; Carl, 2017:18–19). The Gospels narrate that Jesus challenged human ways of being, for instance, his Apostles’ lack of διακονία (cf. Mk 10:42–45, Lk 22:25–27), declaring “... here am I among you as one who serves” (Lk 22:27), living out his mission without assuming greatness. This Christological mandate to the responsibility of “go-between” is carried through in Saint Paul’s characterisation of the deacon (1 Tim 3:8–13; McKnight 2018:25–26), echoed by *The Didache* (CE 70–110) (Enright 2006:9).

By the second century, these standards must have been deeply entrenched, for *The Shepherd of Hermas* called the deacons in Rome, “holy” (Hermas, Vision III, §52; McKnight 2018:10). Saint Ignatius of Antioch is infamous for his praising of his deacons, who he notes are helpers to the bishop and who preach (Ignatius of Antioch, Ch. 10; Kasper 2003:19; Enright 2006:11). Justin Martyr clarifies the liturgical role of the deacon (Ch. LXV), and his fellow second century Church Father, Tertullian names the deacon as one who baptises (Tertullian, §17; Enright 2006:11–12). The bishop and deacon remained intimately bound up. Hippolytus accounts that when ordained (not simply appointed as in Acts 6:1–6), it is only the bishop who lays hands on the deacon, as the deacon is ordained for the service of the bishop

(1934:38). In the third century, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* highlights that the deacon is “... *the ear of the Bishop, and his mouth and his heart, and even his soul ...*” (1903:59). By this time, the deacons had more prominence than priests (Enright 2006:13; Hippolytus 1934:53).

In the fifth century, both Ambrosiaster and St Jerome, protested at the arrogance they perceived in the Roman deacons which resulted in animosity between the deacons and the priests (Hunter 2017).⁴ These tensions, coupled with the spread of Christianity and the resultant need for the Eucharist in dispersed communities, made bishops perceive the priesthood as more essential, such that the diaconate ceased to exist as an independent grade of Holy Orders – for the most part – becoming rather a step to priesthood (Enright, 2006:17). Notes Kasper (2003:16), the Mediaeval Period’s Eucharistic-focus limited ministry to the priesthood, blinding many to the sacramental nature of diaconal and episcopal ordination (“sacerdotalism”) (McCaslin & Lawler 1986:14). In CE 1563, the Council of Trent unsuccessfully supported the reinstatement of the diaconate as a permanent office (Original Deacon Circle, [1962]1986:143; McCaslin & Lawler 1986:12; Enright 2006:23–24).

2.2 The permanent diaconate as a restored order

In the darkness of Germany’s Dachau Concentration Camp, two priest-prisoners – the Jesuit Otto Pies and Wilhelm Schamoni – lit the flame for the restoration of the permanent diaconate (Enright 2006:25). Pope Pius XII mentioned the restoration of the diaconate in 1957 (John Paul II 1993b). Assisted by the Jesuit Karl Rahner SJ and the Dominican Congar, the “Original Deacon Circle” requested the restoration early in the Second Vatican Council (Original Deacon Circle [1962]1986:150; McCaslin & Lawler 1986:11–12). Although some opposition to the diaconate was experienced at the Council, prominent voices argued in its favour. The Maronite Patriarch Ignatius Ziade proposed it out of pastoral need (1964:98–99), whilst Cardinal Leon Suenens of Mechelen-Brussels defended the restoration of the diaconate as it concerned “... *the very structure of the Church*” (1964:103). Anticipating the argument that laymen can do

4 It is amusing to note Jerome’s critique that lower-ranked deacons were more highly paid than priests (Letter 145).

diaconal tasks, Suenens countered that the diaconal vocation was essential for the people of God (1964:104). Thus, the Council Fathers supported the restoration (LG, §29). This was reiterated in *Ad Gentes* [AG] (§16). Through *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, Paul VI provided norms for the restoration of the Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church (1967). In a further *Motu Proprio, Ad Pascendum*, Paul emphasised the permanent diaconate as a “go-between” to facilitate the Church’s diaconal character:

... [T]he permanent diaconate ... [is] an intermediate order between the higher grades of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the rest of the people of God ... a mediator of the needs and desires of the Christian communities, an animator of the service of diaconia of the Church among the local Christian communities, and a sign or sacrament of Christ the Lord himself, *who came not to be served, but to serve*.⁵

The deacon does not undertake any service that cannot be done by any other minister. But it is in the deacon being set-aside as a “go-between” – ordained to bring the Divine Word from the sanctuary to the world, and the needs of the world back to the sanctuary – that he becomes a sacrament of Christ the Servant (John Paul II 1987). The Prayer of Consecration at diaconal ordinations is, therefore, significant to the distinctiveness of the diaconal vocation:

May he in this life imitate your Son,
 who came, not to be served but to serve,
 and one day reign with him in heaven (*The Rites of the Catholic Church*, 1991:35).

Still, in the restoration of the diaconate as a pastoral need, LG outlines the potential ministry which the deacon can serve (§29) by participating in the threefold ministry of Christ: teaching, sanctifying, and guiding (*Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, §22).

In the Southern African Church – which is still “mission territory” under the Holy See’s Dicastery for the Evangelization of Peoples – requests to restore the permanent diaconate began early after the Council, as

5 Translation by W.S. McKnight (2018:59) of *Ad Pascendum* (1972).

Cardinal Owen McCann of Cape Town (CE 1907–1994), then-President of the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference, sought permission from the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1967 (Tito 2009:72–73). Later that same year, the Benedictine territorial abbot of Pietersburg, Francis Clement van Hoeck (CE 1903–1976) stated his intention of restoring the permanent diaconate in his territory (2009:73). The first two ordinations of permanent deacons were celebrated in Pietersburg in CE 1970. Although the permanent diaconate has not been restored in every territory in Southern Africa, there are – as of 2019 – 224 permanent deacons in the Southern African Church.⁶

3. *Missio ad gentes* as conceived by Vatican II

The restoration of the diaconate was part of the *aggiornamento* brought about by Pope St John XXIII’s convocation of the Second Vatican Council (*Humanae Salutis*, [1961]1966:703). Through this Council, the Church’s manifold facets would be scrutinised to better bring the Gospel to the world. The missionary character of the Church was part of this endeavour (LG, §1; *Gaudium et spes* [GS], §1).

The missionary dynamic from Jesus (AG, §5; Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15), is expressed by the Council Fathers with an anxious tone: “... *there still remains a gigantic missionary task ... [f]or the Gospel message has not yet... been heard by two million beings (and their number is increasing daily) ...*” (AG, §10).⁷ In order that all may be restored in Christ and that the Church meets her baptismal obligation, she is sent out to make Christ known to all nations, because the Church is missionary (§§1–3, 5–6): “*She exists in order to evangelize ...*” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §14).

6 The permanent diaconate has not been restored in the Dioceses of Aliwal, Eshowe, Mthatha, Umzimkulu, Manzini (eSwatini), Francistown (Botswana) or in the Military Ordinariate of South Africa. The growth, though, in Southern Africa has been striking over the last fifty years. The commitment of the Catholic Bishops of Southern Africa to the permanent diaconate was reconfirmed through their 2019 promulgation of *Guidelines for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* (2020). In the foreword, Bishop Xolelo Kumalo of Witbank praises the diaconate as an “*important enrichment*” to the Church’s ministry (2020:2).

7 The world’s population in 1965 was half of current figures (UN World Population Prospects, 2019).

At mission's specific service are “*priests, Religious, or laymen*” (AG, §23). Noted is the exclusion of deacons, as it would be two years before Paul VI promulgated guidelines for the reestablishment of the diaconate. AG imagines missionaries as sent “abroad” (§3) to the “missions” among the nations that do not know Christ (§6), first becoming familiar with the customs of those they are sent to (§11), before preaching the Good News to them at every opportunity (§13), and finally establishing communities among these people (§15). From the tradition entrenched by Saint Paul's Jewish distinction between his own people and the gentiles, the AG missionary comes from outside the people, culture, nationality or the tradition of those they are sent to (Gal 2:7–8; AG, §§15, 20; Pernia 2014:13). In their turn, the newly evangelised are challenged to take up their missionary obligation to other nations (§20).

Consequently, AG conflates *missio ad gentes* with *missio ad extra* (“mission outside”) of the missionary's own indigenous locale. To restrict “mission to the nations” to a narrow conception of “mission to the outside” assumes that the nations from whence formal missionaries come are fully evangelised. Yet, the Gospel has not fully penetrated people in “Christian nations”. Further, an implicit assumption of evangelisation as a once-off rather than a continuous process is present. Several consequences for the *Christifideles* follow out of this undergirding spirit of AG. First, there is an inconsistency, for although all the Christian faithful are called to be missionary in following out the command of Christ, the emphasis of AG upon *missio ad gentes/ad extra* precludes the missionary vocation of all the faithful. Second, permanent deacons are excluded from being missionary as they (1) go unmentioned and (2) the mode of missionary life anticipated by AG is mostly incompatible with the conditions of deacons' lives.⁸ This exclusion is entrenched by AG's insistence that pastoral work exercised among the faithful – the usual context of the ministry of the deacon – is not missionary (§6).

8 AG (§§15–16) does mention deacons, however, not in the context of their being missionaries.

4. The evangelising vocation of the deacon in contradistinction to *Ad Gentes*’ “missionary”

Since the Council, an increasing broadening of the definition of “holy” to include all vocations has occurred; the Church recognises the holiness in all calls. In the same way as LG widened the vocation to holiness to include the laity (§40), Pope St John Paul II expanded the missionary vocation to include all the Christian faithful (*Redemptoris Missio*, §90). He proposes that the call to holiness addressed to all the *Christifideles*, is bound up with the “*universal call to mission*”, because one cannot become holy without missionary action (§90).

The synchronicity of the evangelical visions of John Paul and Pope Francis is striking. In the first year of his pontificate, Francis reemphasised the universal call to mission through the concept “missionary disciples”: returning to the sacramental primacy of baptism, all the faithful are to be missionary by baptism (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §120). To be a missionary disciple implies being active in evangelisation, yet this pursuit need not be in some far away land among “others” (§120). The mission field of the missionary disciple is in the immediate (§§120–121). *In situ*, each missionary disciple should use any means to communicate the Good News (§121).

If all the faithful are called to be missionary disciples within their situations – bound by the contexts of familial, professional, and socio-political obligations – the basic call of the diaconate is no different. But the vocation of the deacon makes their responsibility as missionary disciples stronger by being consecrated as *heralds* of Christ. Of the threefold *διακονία* for which the deacon is ordained, it is the mandate to the *διακονία* of the Word that is most apparent as the ordaining Bishop entrusts the *Book of the Gospels* to the newly ordained, saying:

Receive the Gospel of Christ,
whose herald you now are.
Believe what you read,
teach what you believe,
and practice what you teach (*The Rites of the Catholic Church*,
1991:35–36).

Ordained as “go-betweens,” deacons are commissioned to become living witnesses to Christ as they carry the Divine Word in their hearts and on

their lips into the world (*The Sunday Missal* 2011:11). By their lives they are precursors of the Word they herald. With the special responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel, the deacon is also mandated to teach and preach in all places (*Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, §§23–25). As foreshadowers of the Gospel, deacons' whole lives must cry out the words of the One who sends them as "... *active apostle[s] of the new evangelization*" (John Paul II 1993a; 2000; *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, §23). Verily, the deacon's vocation is intimately intertwined with the Divine Word.

However, the life of the permanent deacon is not fully compatible with the mission theology of AG given the circumstances within which deacons' vocations exist: ecclesiastical, personal, professional and societal. Ordained for ministry, it is clear that an existential crisis has the potential to emerge when the deacon is impeded from responding to the missionary mandate. From the Eriksonian perspective of psychological identity development, a lack of integration of dimensions of identity can lead to serious psychological ailments (Syed & McLean 2015:110).⁹ In the case of the permanent deacon, the multiple identity domains of deacon, husband, father, and professional person must be integrated to avoid identity fracturing, most especially because each of these identities are integral to the whole identity (2015:110–111).

Canon 265 regulates that all clerics must be incardinated into a diocese or similar structure. Most permanent deacons are incardinated into local churches.¹⁰ It is for service in these that the deacon has been ordained (can. 266, §1), and from his local ordinary the deacon obtains his faculties.¹¹ The

9 The developmental psychologist, Erik H. Erikson, proposed that identity integration refers to "... *a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity ...*" ([1968]1994:19).

10 The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, 2020–2021 study indicates that in the American Church 1% of active permanent deacons are consecrated men (2021:9). At the present time in the South African Church, less than 0.5% of permanent deacons are consecrated men, and in the Catholic Archdiocese of Pretoria, all permanent deacons are incardinated into this local church.

11 The canonical faculties to celebrate or witness the sacraments permitted to the diaconate, to preach, and to serve at other ministries within a particular local church are granted by the ordinary in terms of Universal Law.

deacon is embedded in his diocese and is usually assigned to minister alongside other clerics in a parish. Although it is possible for a deacon to later be incardinated into another local church (can. 267, §§1–2) or to accept responsibilities as a missionary to another diocese (*Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, §27), these are not usual.

In the main, permanent deacons are married.¹² The responsibilities that the deacon faces as a spouse and father also curtail the freedom required for *missio ad gentes*. The deacon must be married prior to his ordination (can. 1087), and his wife must give her consent (can. 1031, §2). But this does not imply that she agrees to their marriage and family life being neglected due to ministry; service to the people of God cannot result in their abandonment of familial obligations. In fact, their diaconate must call deacons to stronger commitment to marriage and family, because the sacramental bond must demonstrate the Divine Love that calls them to marriage. It would be a scandal were this not the case. Furthermore, as a father, the deacon must look to God the Father as model; to nurture, care for children, and to demonstrate love to them such that their family unit becomes a reflection of Trinitarian love. In married and family life, deacons cannot simply abandon all material goods, home, and stability, to be available for *missio ad gentes*. But does the deacon's domestic life not bear missionary witness?

To contribute to the material needs of their families, the *Code* makes provision for permanent deacons to work in secular professions, specifying that the income they derive from secular work should be utilised for deacons and their families' support (can. 281, §3). The deacon is expected to be self-supporting and thus not reliant upon the local church or the parish for survival. Thus, the permanent deacon's professional requirements may not be compatible with AG. In mission territories, deacons may not find gainful employment, or in their native lands, the deacons' secular careers may necessitate them being bound to particular locales. Finally, although

12 CARA figures show that approximately 18% of American deacons were retired from active ministry, and 78% were in active ministry (2021:8). 93% of the active deacons are married, while 4% are widowed (2021:10). A similar statistical picture is found among the 22 permanent deacons in the Archdiocese of Pretoria, approximately 23% are retired, while 77% are active in ministry. Approximately 81% of the deacons are married, with the remainder widowed.

the deacon's character is altered by ordination, as an employee in secular employment, the deacons' clerical status is inconsequential for the employer or for the performance of work-related duties. The secular workplace is not the context to proselytise. Yet, AG proposes that “[w]herever God opens a door of speech for proclaiming the mystery of Christ ...”, the Good News should be preached to convert people to the faith (§13). But, to proselytise in workplaces and other public spheres illustrates a sensitivity to their secular and multifaith natures and may not be permitted. However, is the deacon in the workplace, as both employee and colleague, not engaging in the ministry of the Word by his presence?

Juxtaposed to the missionary *ad gentes/ad extra*, deacons are not outsiders to their communities. AG proposes that the missionary – although being among the people to whom they are sent – are not really part of the *gentes* because they come from abroad (§26). Living an ordinary life in domestic and professional situations like any other family person, being a parent and grandparent, the life of the deacon is set in the socio-economic-political, cultural and ethnic reality of his community. Though mobility is possible, the familial, marital, and professional dimensions of extra-ecclesiastical life push the deacon toward stability. Yet, does stability in a community exclude the deacon from being a missionary *in loco*?

Given the complexities surrounding AG and its reductive conceptualisation of mission, what form could integration of the missionary mandate *ad gentes* take in the ministry of the deacon? To reach this integration, application of the pluralist epistemology outlined becomes necessary; there is not a singular true response to the Christian missionary mandate. Considering the context of missionary endeavours is central to conceptualising what sort of activity is “missionary”. Viewing the problematic through Thomist pluralism, directs the argument that a singular interpretation of mission is limiting. Rather, multiple perspectives to missionary activity can be considered “missionary”, provided that mission is undertaken bringing the Good News of Christ's love to all people. The context of the mandate must be enfolded in terms of the context of the Christian person, such that an identity integration is constructed considering family, marriage, ministry, work, and the missionary identity of the Christian. Understood from this pluralist perspective, the disciple who gives flesh to the Divine Word does not necessarily need to do so through the apostolate of preaching. In

this sense, there is no “more-missionary” way of being when comparing one Christian to another; if the Gospel is proclaimed, it is not pertinent whether one be located in the metropolis of Johannesburg-Pretoria or the desert oasis of Pella. Both the one who is set apart as a missionary and the other who quietly bears witness to Christ through gestures of love are “on mission”. The Word becomes flesh in the loving example of the Gospel lived out among relatives, friends and neighbours. The Word becomes flesh through the service of charity. In each of these forms, when the Word is carried to the life of another who does not know or needs to be reminded of the Word, then mission is done.

5. The appropriateness of *missio inter gentes* to the diaconal missionary vocation

The primary Christian vocation to evangelise has had to take on new forms because the many incarnations of globalisation have broken down borders: “... *the ‘gentes’ are ... around us ...*” (Pernia 2014:15). With the changing face of the world, the Church has changed, growing in significance in Africa, Asia and the Americas (Agenzia Fides 2020), making Catholicism a Church of the global south. As the Church has become implanted globally, those to whom the Good News should be addressed are no longer found in far flung locales. The “professional” missionaries, too, are increasingly from Africa and Asia, not from Europe or North America.¹³ William R. Burrows’ observation that in the Asian situation mission work is overwhelmingly being undertaken by Asians can be applied to Africa and the Americas, too (2001:15). Burrows’ term – “*missio inter gentes*” – describes this localised missionary reality better than does “*missio ad gentes*” (2001:15).¹⁴

13 As missionary vocations from Europe and North America have declined (Agenzia Fides 2020), pastoral responsibility has been thrust on missionaries from the global south or east. The Archdiocese of Pretoria serves as a case of a territory now reliant on missionary priests from other “mission territories”: of the 89 active priests in the Archdiocese (2021 statistics), approximately 13,5% are European, 7% are Asian, and 31,5% are from African countries outside of Europe. The remainder are South Africans. When comparisons of the profiles of missionaries are made to those of the past, the seismic shift to missionary priests from Africa and Asia is evident.

14 The FABC does not explicitly use the term “*missio inter gentes*” in its documents (Tan 2004:84).

Enlivened by the global mission, the unique religious situation of Asia, and by the challenge of Vatican II to share “[t]he joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties ...” of the world’s people (GS, §1), the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) reconfigured their missionary approach (Prior 2014:401). In AG, the Council Fathers give account of the life project of missionaries among the nations in the “pre-preaching phase”: “... [A]s Christ Himself ... so also His disciples ... should show the people among whom they live ... what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations ...” (§11).

The plurality of Asian religions is the most significant challenge faced by the FABC, and it required the sensitive extension of AG’s first phase into a more permanent state of doing mission through dialogical methodologies (Tan 2004:65, 68).¹⁵ In some Asian contexts, actively preaching the Gospel is illegal (Global Legal Research Centre, 2017). For many Asian Christians within families and broader neighbourhoods, different religions must coexist rather than defeat one another (2004:70, 82–83).¹⁶ Considering these concerns, the first plenary assembly of the FABC (1974), envisioned that the Church embed itself “... with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply ... whose ... life it gladly makes its own ...” (FABC, I, 12 in Tan, 2004:73). Herein evangelisation does not cease; Christian mission is undertaken in a contextually suitable modality in building the Kingdom of God by peaceably witnessing to Christ through living the Gospel as opposed to proselytising for conversion (Tan 2004:74, 84, 90):

[T]o proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbours [sic] of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds – this is the first call to the Churches in Asia (FABC, V, 4.1 in Tan 2004:74).

15 Relativism may be launched as a critique of pluralism like that of *missio inter gentes*, however, it is not the content of the engagement that is imperative in this interpretation, but that there is encounter at all (Tan 2004:72, 88).

16 2020 demographic data on religions in Asia reveal that it is the most diverse continent: 21.7% of Asians are ethnoreligious, 27.4% are adherents of Islam, 22.8% are Hindus, 11.6% Buddhists and 8.2% Christians (Johnson & Crossing 2020:175–176, 179).

More than a decade earlier than the FABC, the Holy See's Secretariat for Non-Christians had elaborated on dialogue as the approach to engagement with those outside Christianity (1985:519): “[d]ialogue is ... the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission ... whether one speaks of simple presence and witness, service or direct proclamation” (1985:521). Through dialogue, encounters between persons is possible (Pernia 2014:16–17). Moreover, when these encounters occur in a context wherein the missionary disciple has become embedded, the dialogical encounter is not a fleeting insertion but a lasting engagement which bears the credible witness of sharing life's richness with those among whom one is *in mission* (2014:17). Encountering others in dialogue also implies a reciprocity of evangelisation (2014:23). Thus, an appropriate response to the embedded reality of Christianity in Asia has manifested in following the example of Jesus, who lived among his people who he redeemed, in mission taking the credible form of *inter gentes* (FABC, I, 12 in Tan 2004:73; Tan 2004:65, 75, 83).¹⁷

No argument is made here for any theology of mission for large tracts of the Church. Assuming plurality, our focus is on the theology of mission that is possible in view of the circumstances of the permanent deacon, which is proposed as being most suitably *missio inter gentes*. This is so because the diaconal form of life places deacons in enduring dialogical encounters within multiple modes of existence: inserted with their families in usual domestic situations, inserted in the professional world as people with careers, and inserted in parish communities and in other pastoral contexts for the sake of direct ministry. John Paul II (1993b) highlights the missionary vocation of the deacon as part of the reason behind the restoration of the permanent diaconate:

A deeply felt need in the decision to re-establish the permanent diaconate was and is that of a greater and more direct presence of

17 Illustrative of this approach to mission, the international Fraternity of the Little Sisters of Jesus, lived among the people of Kabul, Afghanistan from 1956–2017 (Asianews. it 2017). The former chaplain of the Italian Embassy, Giuseppe Moretti, described the Little Sisters as “... *Afghan among Afghans* ...”, for they were protected from the religious police by mullahs and permitted by the Taliban to pray in the Italian Embassy Chapel (2017).

Church ministers in the various spheres of the family, work, school, etc., in addition to existing pastoral structures.

With their secular careers, deacons find themselves employed in settings wherein most priests, bishops, and religious would not be able to enter. Usually, deacons are not appointed to their work because they are ordained; they are not employed in secular professions to teach or preach the Good News, to guide the people or to sanctify. However, as “go-betweens”, through their availability to colleagues in dialogue and by their bringing Gospel values into the workplace by their outstanding moral conduct, deacons become silent signs to Christ. Deacons may, thus, be named as missionaries *inter gentes* in the realm of secular work.

By working amid their peers, deacons salaried incomes fund their domestic arrangements. Most often, deacons and their families are not resident in ecclesiastical accommodation. Instead, their homes are found integrated as neighbours amid neighbours in the ordinary settings of families. As homeowners, deacons would usually remain resident in particular locations for extended periods of time. Engaging in multifaith neighbourhoods, as family men alongside others, the deacon is not necessarily imagined by neighbours as a cleric. There is a blessed anonymity in this domestic context, merely being a resident with the usual neighbourly interest in the dynamics of that place. By their vocation as Gospel-bearers, here too, deacons can be missionaries *ad gentes* within social settings comprised of followers of all religions and none. Carrying the Good News into their neighbourhoods, deacons have opportunities to animate dialogue, to be agents for the oppressed and marginalised as they silently witness by example to Christ in a setting not falling within the sphere of any ecclesiastical authority or structure.

Dwelling among the people of God, deacons who are set apart as heralds of the Gospel of Christ, are “... *leaven – ... the soul of human society – so that society may be renewed by Christ and transformed into the family of God*” (John Paul II 1987).

6. Conclusion

Formed in the crucible of the early Christian experience, the identity of the diaconate – as a restored grade of the Sacrament of Orders – has been established by drawing upon its consistent importance for the life of the Church because it is the living icon of Christ the Servant. In all men ordained to the diaconate, anyone who encounters or observes them – in marriage, family, work, or ecclesiastical ministry – should experience the deacons as “... *living signs of the servanthood of his* [i.e. Christ’s] *Church*” (John Paul II 1987) who proclaim the Gospel through every aspect of their lives. However, the diaconate does not match seamlessly with the theology of mission of Vatican II’s AG. While the basic Christian mission of evangelisation cannot be abandoned, by adopting a pluralist paradigm, it is argued that the form in which the Christian undertakes evangelisation needs to be tailored to the context. Thus, the contention made that when the embedded circumstances of the deacon are considered – usually lived out among people of similar familial situations, as well as social and professional settings – the theology of mission most apt to the permanent deacon is *missio inter gentes*. Wherever deacons are and whatever responsibilities they carry – whether “on duty” as the deacon of a mass, as a husband and father, or as a worker – the diaconate of deacons always remains: the deacon is a missionary of the Gospel *among the people*, for the sake of building up God’s Kingdom.

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