

A Vision Of Ministry



This week the clergy of the diocese will be introduced to the permanent diaconate program which shortly will be launched in the diocese. Msgr. George Cocuzzi, former Vicar for Urban Ministry was chosen at the start of the year to direct the program. The Courier-Journal spoke with him last week about some aspects of what the program will mean for the Christian ministry in the diocese.

By JOHN DASH

These are days of expectancy, of the fruition of a dream more than 10 years old. These are the days immediately prior to the full-fledged opening of the permanent diaconate program in the Diocese of Rochester, and Msgr. George Cocuzzi, director of the program, seems restless in anticipation.

In an interview last week he described the history of the permanent diaconate, from its restoration in theory by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to the present moment.

"After the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council," he said, "the Fathers called for recognition of those already doing diaconal work. It was their intention, he noted, that emphasis should be laid on the whole diaconal role of the Church, as theologians emphasized a note of the Church as the priesthood of the people. The bishops wanted to give a personal expression and recognition to that point, he said.

He recalled that several years later, when he himself was president of the diocesan Priests Council, Father Theodore Metzger made a presentation on the ministerial needs of the Church. In the course of that presentation, he said, "They recommended very strongly that the (local) Church respond to those needs by establishing the permanent diaconate."

Then, in 1973, Dr. Walter Sullivan, produced an extremely solid document, presented the case extremely well"

for the permanent diaconate locally.

That report, Msgr. Cocuzzi said, provided the theoretical base on which "the shape, the sinew and the bones," of the present program have been developed.

A task force was named and completed its work on establishing the program in early December, 1977. Since that time it simply has been a question of "rewrite and starting implementation."

Msgr. Cocuzzi was named to his post in January.

"No ministry is foreclosed," to the permanent diacon, he said. The Church sees him serving in parish-based ministries, in institutional ministries, and in the special ministries which culture and society have given rise to.

"We define the deacon according to who he is, not what he does," Msgr. Cocuzzi said.

"Because of this," he continued, "the deacon's function can't be specified. His ministry involves creativity. The very life experience the deacon brings to his diaconate will have an impact on the whole range of ministry," in the local Church.

It is Msgr. Cocuzzi's hope that, with the establishment of the permanent diaconate in the diocese, "We will see clericalization" of ministry. He explained that since the permanent deacons "have primary vocations (such as the

St. Bernard's Seminary provides a backdrop for a picture of Msgr. Cocuzzi.

single state, the married state), these will remain with the individual." The charism of the diaconate will be an added dimension to what is already a lay ministry, he said.

Characterizing the permanent deacon, he said, will be a "strong personal experience of Faith. That is essential. Faith in the person of Christ, a Faith that really comprehends the whole diaconal aspect of the Lord's ministry."

Tied to this, he stated, is "the willingness to give a permanent expression of the supreme servanthood of Christ himself as both source and end of the diaconate."

Msgr. Cocuzzi noted that while the training program for the permanent deacons will be headquartered at St. Bernard's Seminary and the faculty and library there will be the program's resources, the actual instructors will be contracted on an individual basis.

"I want to make sure the training program is not completely academic," he said. It is his vision that the training will include personal and social aspects of education as well as the academic.

"By the very nature of the diaconate, there are nuances which make the training quite different from what seminarians experience," he added. "I want to develop a

distinctive program for deacons because they have a distinctive ministry."

As far as minority recruitment into the program goes, Msgr. Cocuzzi noted that "the diocese recognizes the very special needs of the central city. We want to recruit from all different groups that exist there."

"Yet," he cautioned, "this is not a program for the city alone." He pointed out that geographically the diocese is predominately rural, "and we will look there too." And, "the ministry of the deacon is essential in the suburbs, as well."

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