

The Permanent Diaconate in Mumbai, India (Dr. Gilbert de Lima, Director 'Commission for the Permanent Diaconate', Mumbai)

Ten years ago, on January 22, 2006, Bombay was the first and only diocese in India to introduce the permanent Diaconate when, Cardinal Ivan Dias, the then Archbishop of Bombay ordained two permanent Deacons. With the introduction of the permanent Diaconate in the archdiocese, stated Cardinal Oswald Gracias, the hierarchical structure of the Church in Bombay is indeed, complete! Today we have 14 permanent deacons and 8 student-candidates. We also have one deacon from Mumbai now engaged in his diaconate ministry in Goa and another deacon working in Pune. Despite our efforts to promote the diaconate through diocesan newsletters in different dioceses in India, the burgeoning number of vocations to the priesthood, is a deterrent for dioceses to opt for the permanent diaconate.

Pope Benedict XVI in his address on "The Importance of the Permanent Diaconate", in Rome (February 13, 2008) declared, "While the deacons are always in communion with the bishop and the parish, there can be applications and activities of the diaconate that are very different. Various possibilities arise, depending on the needs which manifest themselves in their context, as well as depending on the professional preparation that the deacons have."

In this perspective, the permanent Deacon while assigned to sacramental ministry to a parish, are also involved in a ministry in their respective deanery depending on their charisms. Each of them is also assigned to a similar apostolate at the Archdiocesan level through his appointment in a Commission. Consequently, the different Archdiocesan Commissions they are engaged in are, Youth Ministry, Marriage Enrichment programmes, the Family Apostolate, the Involvement of the Laity through Small Christian Communities, and the Biblical Commission. Their ministry is multi-lingual, since many of them are fluent in three or more languages!

Although the Archdiocese ran a special four year long programme for candidates to the Permanent diaconate, the Bishops and the Staff of St Pius X College, which ran the programme, strongly felt the candidates would benefit immensely if they were part of the regular programme of formation at the Diocesan Seminary. Consequently, since the past six years we have candidates participating in the Archdiocesan Seminary programme of formation which lasts four and half years. On an average we have three candidates enrolling for the permanent Diaconate annually. These students have monthly meetings with the Moderator of the permanent Diaconate Programme and, in consultation with him, explore areas of Pastoral involvement, as well as 'skills training' that would empower them for their future ministry. They have acquitted themselves very favourably thus far and are full of praise for the training received! However, if circumstances permit, we would seek to revive the specially prepared permanent Diaconate programme in Bombay.

One perceives that the permanent Deacons in Mumbai have made vast strides in the space of just a few years. They are vigorously involved in their ministry within an ecclesial setting. However, by virtue of his distinct identity, the Deacon is an intermediary who bridges the bread of the Eucharist and the bread of charity. The Deacon consequently perceives his social involvement as an integral component of his diaconate ministry! It follows then that the permanent Deacon would be also deeply involved in civic and social issues so that through his ministry, he can shed the light of the Gospel on society.

In this perspective, from June 2012, the Permanent Diaconate of the Archdiocese of Mumbai has been working in close collaboration with the Health Promotion Trust, as also some community-based organizations who seek to empower the poor and marginalized. This involvement gave the deacons first-hand experience of the poor irrespective of their caste, creed and religion, assess their woes, and make necessary interventions in their working communities. To ensure systematic implementation of the work Quarterly meetings were also organized. The positive collaboration between the Deacons and the Health Promotion Trust (HPT) won international recognition during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the International Diaconate Centre (IDC), Rome, (2015) when they won the "Best Initiative" Award.