

Answering the call to the diaconate

EDDIE WHITE gives some advice to those considering the permanent diaconate ahead of his own ordination on Saturday

WITH a baby only six weeks old, I went to visit my diocese vocations director to discuss a draw towards the permanent diaconate. I was only just old enough—married men must be 35 or older—to become a candidate—and my wife and I were happy that the time was right.

That said, why would a man in his late thirties, with a full-time job and three young children, want to take on four years of intensive study and various residential stays?

I am a maths teacher in East Lothian and my children are now 13, nine and seven years old. My secular vocation is one of service in education. In fact, the diaconal candidates have more people in such careers than you would statistically expect. Nurses, doctors, teachers and charity staff are all represented in the mix of around 15-20 candidates.

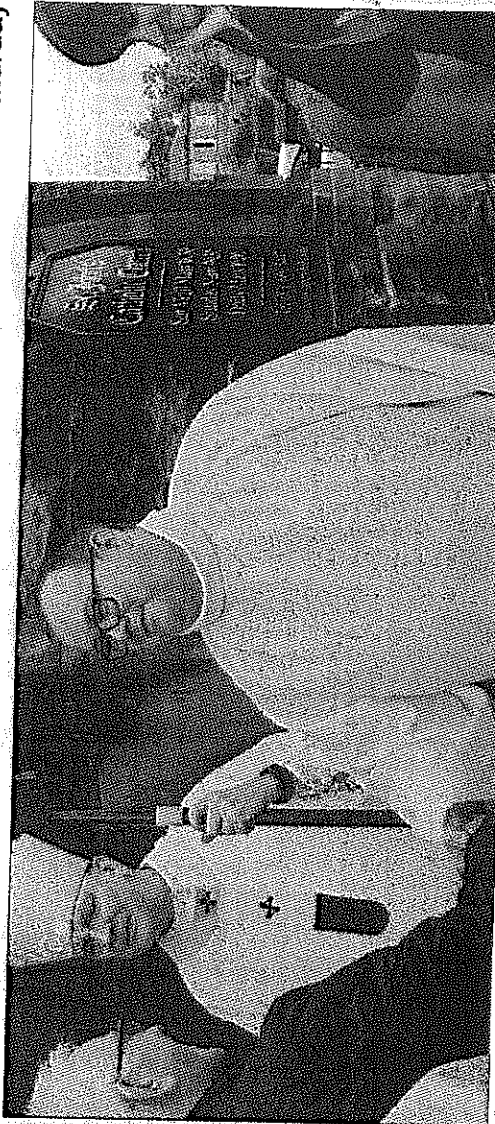
I am nothing special: I am a committed Catholic and so is my wife—who is also a teacher—and we met at the Cànmore

Catholic Society in St Andrews over 20 years ago. However, being drawn to the service of others is something that defines a deacon. Diaconal service of charity, helping and visiting those who need extra support in hospital, at home or in whatever way is required, is a uniquely defined part of the call.

A draw to the diaconate, though, is not the same as a draw to the priesthood. I have had many colleagues and even parishioners ask me if I would want to become a priest. I rather mischievously remind them I am married. That is always a good time to point out that I don't believe the diaconate is a good place for people who wished they'd become priests in their younger days.

A priest's ministry, although it still includes service, is more towards the Altar and the Word. Deacons and priests share all three of these ministries but in very different ways.

I grew up in a small parish in Dundee so big gold things and fancy expensive garments didn't make up much of my early



Eddie White with Archbishop Leo Cushley outside St John the Evangelist Church, Portobello

church experience and I think that has had a lasting impact. If, like me, you are a man over 35 and would like to find out more about the diaconate, I think it would be a good idea to pursue it. There is no real assumption that deacons get dressed

up in particularly over-the-top vestments, although some choose to. A simple plain alb, a stole and even a plain dalmatic suits day-to-day. The dalmatic is the over vestments like the priest's chasuble.

The dalmatic has sleeves, because the deacon had historically been a businessman and this is what a business suit looked like in the early Church (and no pocket for your phone!)

I would happily have a discussion with anyone who is considering a call to the diaconate. Perhaps, however, I wish I had been more prepared for the family impact. Each year I needed to take a one-week residential. I also needed to take four residential study weekends which are very intensive and rarely finished before 9.45pm each day, which was too late for saying goodnight to the children and makes for a late night for my wife.

Not too surprisingly, my wife and I like to keep in touch when I am away and these weekends have a impact when you are working full-time, going straight off to Kilmovill Monastery on the Friday evening and then home after lunch on the Sunday, ready for another full week at work.

Does that mean I wish I had not done it? Not at all. Does it mean my wife wishes I had not

The diaconate is not a calling just for retired people at all, far from it. It is obvious that there are a lot of demands and so I can see exactly why so many are older when they start but I would not want to wait 20 years to begin ministry.

I would hope other younger men would take time to discern if this is a calling they could see themselves involved in.

It isn't all about Baptisms and weddings and funerals, although I am looking forward to helping when those situations arise.

It isn't all about preaching the Word, although I am enjoying that as it makes me think harder and deeper. I don't know if people like listening to me but it is helping my own knowledge of the Word.

It isn't even all about the charity and service. It is,