

The Permanent Diaconate - A call to service.

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Are you a man drawn to serving others? If so, the Holy Spirit could be leading to consider the permanent diaconate. After all, ordination to this clerical state strengthens one to become an icon of Christ the servant, who “did not come to be served, but to serve...” (Mk 10:45). In this, the first of several articles to be published on the permanent diaconate, we’ll begin to unpack the life and ministry of the permanent deacon and provide details on formation for the next class of deacons to be ordained in our Diocese.

The permanent diaconate is a ministry of liturgy, word, and charity. If your parish is blessed with permanent deacon, you may see him most often in his liturgical roles. Some of which include assisting at Mass, delivering a homily, conducting baptisms, witnessing weddings, and conducting certain funeral liturgies. However, behind the scenes you’ll probably find him spending more time serving the members of your church and community in other ways.

Deacons are involved in service and works of charity through teaching and sacramental preparation; ministering to the elderly in assisted living along with the home bound and hospitalized; visiting prisons; working in food banks, homeless shelters and clothing distribution centers. But, these are only some of the ministries performed by the deacons in our Diocese - Ministries nourished by the deacon’s liturgical duties.

As a minister of charity, deacons are ordained chiefly for the benefit of those whom they serve. Thus, they are strengthened by sacramental grace to serve the people of God in communion with their bishop and the priests. It is a ministry born of service flowing from the ministry at table assigned to the first deacons: “*Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task of daily distribution.*” (Acts 6:1-7).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) describes the diaconate as follows:

CCC 1570 Deacons share in Christ's mission and grace in a special way. The sacrament of Holy Orders marks them with an imprint ("character") which cannot be removed and which configures them to Christ, who made himself the "deacon" or servant of all. Among other tasks, it is the task of the deacons to assist the bishop and priests in the celebration of the divine mysteries, above all the Eucharist, in the distribution of Holy Communion, in assisting at and blessing marriages, in the proclamation of the Gospel and preaching, in presiding over funerals, and in dedicating themselves to the various ministries of charity.

CCC 1571 Since the Second Vatican Council the Latin Church has restored the (permanent) diaconate "as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy," while the Churches in the East had always maintained it. This permanent diaconate, which can be conferred on married men, constitutes an important enrichment for the Church's mission. Indeed it is appropriate and useful that men who carry out a truly diaconal ministry in the Church, whether in its liturgical and pastoral life or whether in its social and charitable works, should "be strengthened by the imposition of hands which has come down from the apostles. They would be more closely bound to the altar and their ministry would be made more fruitful through the sacramental grace of the diaconate.

To be ordained a permanent deacon one must first have an active and healthy relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. Everything a deacon is and does pours forth from this relationship. Of course there are also requirements set in Church law such as being a baptized and confirmed Catholic man at least 35 years of age who is validly married, or single, and in good standing with the Church. If a man is married, his wife must also consent to his entering into formation and later to his ordination. So too, he must be free of canonical impediments and properly formed. It is also a Diocesan norm that a man is no older than 60 at the time of his ordination.

The majority of permanent deacons are married, and their wives play a significant supporting role through their involvement in various ministries. Because marriage is a married deacon's first and primary vocation, his wife and their marital relationship are integral to the well being of the couple's spiritual life, their witness to the Gospel, and joint effectiveness as servants to the people of God.

The permanent diaconate is a distinct vocation. It is not a step to priesthood (as with a transitional deacon). In fact, should a married, permanent deacon find himself no longer bound by marriage he can neither marry again, nor be ordained a priest - except in extremely rare and limited circumstances with Vatican approval.

If you are qualified and feel in the least bit called to the permanent diaconate, or the idea of being strengthened by God to better serve others in Christ appeals to you, I would strongly encourage you to learn more about this ministry.

Begin conversation with your wife, and talk to your parish priest. Explore your hunger and the interest to serve. Initiate and continue conversations about this with your pastor. Pray regularly and be active in receiving the sacraments and use of sacramentals. Examine your heart and current works of service. Study and learn about the diaconate and what it entails (a list of resources follows). Visit with deacons and their wives, and talk to your family and friends.

Bishop Etienne recently approved a timeline for the next class of permanent deacons to be ordained in the Diocese, with each phase beginning as follows:

- Fall 2015: Inquiry - A year of information dissemination and gathering.
- Fall 2016: Aspirancy - A year of monthly meetings exploring the life and ministry of the diaconate and discerning the call.
- Fall 2017: Formation - Four years of formal theological studies, practicum and continued discernment.

The next article in the Register will cover the inquiry phase in more detail. But in short, its purpose is to provide information to those men who feel they may be called to a vocation of diaconal ministry. During the year of inquiry, men and their families begin to intentionally explore the possibility of a call to the diaconate, and an informational session will be held in each deanery. These meetings will inform those interested about the essentials and characteristics of diaconal ministry, aspirancy, formation, and requirements for admission to the formation program.

Questions about deacon life or becoming a deacon? Contact:

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Other Resources

“I Like Being in Parish Ministry: Deacon. Mystic,” Baker, Thomas. CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2002.

“101 Questions and Answers on Deacons.” Ditewig, William. New York: Paulist Press, 2004.

“The Sacrament of Service: Understanding Diaconal Spirituality.” Donovan, William T. Green Bay, WI: Alt Publishing Company, 2000.

“Every Man a Deacon? Who is called to ordination as a Roman Catholic deacon?” Pilger, Rex. On Pilgrimage Publishing Company, 2014. (avail. In Kindle format)