

## How Many Are There?

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Whether it's the gold medal count in the Olympics, days over 100 degrees or the average income of some profession, people always want numbers and demand accuracy. We are a culture obsessed with counting things and comparing figures; and often it comes down to "the more, the better" – unless of course it's your golf score.

This emphasis on numbers is something I am all too familiar with in my secular profession as a Wyoming Game & Fish Department wildlife biologist. People always want to know how many deer, or elk, or mountain lions there are in an area. And, they're often disappointed when I cannot give them an exact figure. "What's the matter, can't you count them all?" Unfortunately no, that's impossible. All I can do is generate estimates from the data collected.

So, it is kind of with an inner joy in my part-time work as director of diaconal formation that I can now give folks some precise answers to the number questions I have been receiving lately. Namely, figures related to the number of men inquiring into the possibility that God is calling them to the permanent diaconate, and how many will be starting diaconal formation this fall.

Over the past year, the Diocese began the process that, God willing, will lead to a group of men being ordained permanent deacons in early summer 2021. For those of you beginning to keep track of numbers in this article, that's about six years after the start of our program.

The last 12 months have been a period of inquiry, during which the Diocese tried to disseminate information about the permanent diaconate and encourage men who may be called to this unique ministry. It has been a time for qualified men to begin to consider and study this vocation, and what it takes to become a deacon. As part of the inquiry period, the Diocese hosted five informational meetings around the state, which were attended by 40 men and many of their wives. An additional 10 men who did not make it to these meetings contacted me personally about the order of deacons and our formation program, bringing the official total number of inquirers to 50.

Applications for entry into the next step of diaconal formation, Aspirancy, were due at the beginning of May, and a 45-day extension was later provided by the Bishop. 25 men submitted applications, and I have to commend each and everyone them. For the application process was not easy, and really required these men to look into their lives, relationship with the Lord and their families, then put it out there for others to review.

At this point, none of these men were expected to have decided if they are called to the diaconate. That is something that can only come about after a long, prayer filled and directed process. However, they had to honestly consider if God was asking them to at least take their first solid step in discerning a call to a life of ordained service.

After extensive and serious consideration by the diaconal formation board, a list of men recommended to begin Aspirancy was given to the Bishop. Bishop Etienne then prayerfully and thoughtfully reviewed this list, and selected 16 men to begin Aspirancy.

For the next two years as diaconal aspirants, these men will meet with the formation team and their instructors one weekend each month of the school year in Casper. The current academic year will be dedicated especially to learning more about the permanent diaconate, and developing the spiritual tools and prayer life needed to begin a deep vocational discernment. The 2017-18 academic year will see our Aspirants move more into formal theological study, which will continue for three more years after that.

Because these men are just beginning their long journey of formation and discernment, we are not publishing their names. They need an initial time with minimal external pressures to delve deeply into what God may be calling them to, and asking of their families. It is very likely some may come to realize they are perhaps not called to this ministry, or the Church may discern such. So we need to respect their privacy in this very fluid time of initial discernment.

That said, you can probably appreciate now when folks ask me, “how many new deacons will we have?” I cannot answer them. My crystal ball is not nearly as clear as the Lord’s. But, I pray every day, and I ask each one of you to pray as well, that those men God is calling to serve our diocese as permanent deacons will answer His call, and those charged with their formation may receive and use the necessary graces to raise up a group of holy deacons to serve our state.