

THE ORDER OF DEACONS: A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE DIACONATE

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This is the second in a series of three articles about the diaconate, looking ahead to the ordination of a class of permanent deacons for the Diocese of Richmond on September 15.

The Acts of the Apostles indicates that the Church grew rapidly after Pentecost. As a result, the Apostles, and eventually their successors, chose persons to assist them in their work. Various books of the New Testament (written between approximately 50 and 150 A.D.) bear witness to an array of such collaborators, who carried out various tasks: missionary preaching, teaching, prophecy, shepherding of communities, administration, and charitable works.

Several New Testament passages refer to these co-workers by the term “deacon,” which is derived from the Greek *diakonos*, meaning “servant” or “minister.” In some cases, the word has a general significance; in other cases, it designates an official minister within a local Christian community. Deacons are mentioned alongside bishops or “overseers,” to whom they were apparently subordinate (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 12). Otherwise, the specifics of this diaconal ministry are obscure. Bearing in mind that terminology at this point was fluid, it seems that women also functioned as deacons (see sidebar).

The New Testament text most commonly associated with deacons is the Apostles’ selection of seven men to conduct the distribution of food to the Jerusalem community (Acts 6:1–6). Responding to the complaints of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians—the “Hellenists,” as they are called—that their widows were being neglected in this charity, the Apostles choose members of that group to supervise the work.

Here, the word “deacon” is not used but rather the related term “to serve.” The Seven are to “serve at table” so that the Apostles will be free to preach the Gospel message: “the service of the word.” Nevertheless, two members of the Seven do subsequently engage in preaching and baptizing. Perhaps this took place because the Apostles did not speak Greek, whereas Christianity was attracting many Greek-speaking members as it spread from Judea (Palestine) to the rest of the Roman Empire.

Following the close of the New Testament era, in the period between 100 and 400 A.D., the diaconate evolved considerably. The various forms of leadership and service in the Church coalesced into three distinct hierarchical positions: A local community was led by a single bishop, with multiple presbyters (priests) and deacons beneath him.

Presbyters and deacons assisted the bishop in different ways. Presbyters formed a group of advisers to the bishop, and celebrated the sacraments (especially the Eucharist or Mass) in his absence. By contrast, deacons exercised a threefold “ministry” (*diakonia*) on the bishop’s behalf:

(1) service to the Word of God (preaching and teaching); (2) service at the liturgy (by assisting the bishop and presbyters, and by ensuring order during worship); and (3) the service of charity (financial administration and care of the poor). Notably, although the diaconate was the lowest rank of the hierarchy, deacons were understood to work directly for the bishop (that is, without going through the presbyters).

During the next epoch, between 400 A.D. and 1000, the diaconate gradually lost its identity, both in the Western (Latin) Church and, to varying degrees, in the Eastern Churches. Two factors were responsible for this development. First, other ministers began to assume the duties of deacons: for example, porters (doorkeepers), exorcists, lectors, acolytes, and subdeacons. Presbyters also absorbed some diaconal roles in the spheres of both liturgy and administration. Second, the functional ministries of porter, etc. became stepping stones to the priesthood: the minor orders. (The subdiaconate would later be recognized as a major order.) Eventually, too, the diaconate itself became a transitional ministry—with the requirement of celibacy—en route to the priesthood.

Vatican Council II (1962–1965) ushered in a new era for the order of deacons. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (known by its Latin title: *Lumen gentium*), the Council decreed that the permanent diaconate could be restored—at the request of bishops to the pope, and with the pope’s approval—and to even ordain married men to it. The Council offered several reasons for this option: the diaconate was part of the hierarchy established by God; permanent deacons could help provide pastoral care (especially where there were not enough priests); and the grace of the diaconate would strengthen those already carrying out diaconal functions, particularly in missionary areas.

Since Vatican II, the ordination of permanent deacons has steadily increased. Today, there are 45,000 of them worldwide (compared to 415,000 priests), with the vast majority concentrated in North America and Western Europe. There are 97 permanent deacons active in the Diocese of Richmond (compared to 167 priests), where they carry out a wide-ranging ministry.

The next article in this series will explore the role of the diaconate today.