

## **THE ORDER OF DEACONS: THE ROLE OF THE PERMANENT DIACONATE TODAY**

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*This is the third 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 history of the order of deacons is long and convoluted, and its restoration as a permanent form of ministry is relatively recent. When Vatican Council II (1962–1965) permitted the ordination of permanent deacons once more, it decreed that local needs and conditions should determine whether this would take place, and what role deacons would play. For these reasons, the evolution of the diaconate continues, as does the theological understanding of it.

In delineating the responsibilities of permanent deacons today, the Church seeks to avoid two pitfalls. The first is the tendency to reduce the diaconate to its practical functions, such that who deacons are is based on what they do, rather than vice-versa. The second pitfall is to view deacons as miniature priests: Deacons can do everything priests can do, except celebrate Mass, hear confessions, and anoint the sick.

A better approach is to recognize that the varied functions of a deacon flow from a unique identity: He is a consecrated “servant” (Greek: *diakonos*) of the Church who embodies the service of Christ. Having received a particular share in the sacrament of Holy Orders, the permanent deacon fulfills various duties that have traditionally been classified in terms of a threefold “ministry” or *diakonia*: (1) service to the Word of God, (2) service at the liturgy (worship), and (3) the service of charity.

Most permanent deacons carry out their ministry in parishes. There, they teach (for example, preparation for the sacraments and adult education), and occasionally preach at Mass or other liturgical rites. In addition, deacons assist at Mass, and assist or preside at Baptisms, weddings, blessings, and funerals. They also pray a portion of the Liturgy of the Hours (the official prayer of the Church) each day. Finally, deacons visit the sick and help with social outreach. In performing this ministry, some permanent deacons are employed full-time by a parish, while others have secular occupations and fulfill their ministry part-time as volunteers.

To be equipped for this work, candidates for the permanent diaconate, like candidates for the priesthood, undergo human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation. Whereas training for the priesthood is full-time and typically lasts six years, diaconal formation is part-time and lasts five years. Currently, there are 18 men in formation for the permanent diaconate in the Diocese of Richmond (not counting those to be ordained shortly).

According to the directive of Vatican Council II, men who are already married may be ordained as permanent deacons. (Those ordained to the diaconate as single men must promise to remain

celibate; and deacons who become widowers are not permitted to marry again.) The minimum age for being ordained a permanent deacon is 25 if he is single, and 35 if he is married. (The minimum age for ordination as a priest is 25.) A married man must have the consent of his wife to be ordained a deacon, since she will share in the sacrifices of his ministry and help him to carry out his service to the Church.

Regarding practical matters, permanent deacons may, as members of the clergy, and with the permission of the local bishop, wear clerical attire (the Roman collar). This permission applies to permanent deacons in the Diocese of Richmond when they are engaged in official ministry.

Twenty men will be ordained permanent deacons for the Diocese of Richmond on September 15. The ordination rite expresses the significance of this event: God has called them to serve the Church in a special way, and he will strengthen them to fulfill this ministry—their diaconate—in imitation of Christ. In this way, the order of deacons will make a valuable contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel and to the salvation of the world.