

THE DIACONATE: SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is some of the history of the restored diaconate?

The Order of Deacons finds its roots in apostolic times, but gradually disappeared from western Christianity—becoming only a step on the way to priestly ordination (“transitional” diaconate). It was restored as a permanent and public ministry in the Roman Church at the Second Vatican Council, in many ways as a response to the terrible suffering associated with the rise of Nazism and World War II. The restoration of the “permanent” diaconate was authorized in the U.S. in 1968. In 2020, there were about 19,000 deacons ministering in more than 193 (arch)dioceses in this country.

What is the difference between a “transitional” and a “permanent” deacon?

Men who are to be ordained priests are first ordained to the diaconate on their way to the priesthood; these are therefore called “transitional” deacons. Men who are ordained deacons and intend to remain in that state for the rest of their lives are called “permanent” deacons. But there is only one Order of Deacons.

What is the ministry of the deacon?

Maybe the best way to answer this question is to ask: what are all of us called to do as baptized Christians? At baptism, we were incorporated into the Body of Christ, and made sharers in Christ’s royal, prophetic, and priestly ministry (or “office”)—each in our own way.

The word “deacon” comes from the Greek, *diakonos*, which means “servant”—and usually referred to the king’s cup-bearer. So deacons are called to be servants—in the world and in the Church.

The Royal Office of Christ: the ministry of charity and justice.

Deacons are called upon to live out the “royal” ministry of Christ—the one who came to serve and not be served (see Matt 20:28)—by reaching out to the poor, the sick, the elderly, the divorced, the imprisoned and others who are voiceless or on the “margins” of the church or society in order to first address their human needs. He does charitable and administrative work and serves as a voice for justice in the name of the Church. While deacons often organize, lead, and support various ministries, they do not replace the special gifts that the laity and religious bring to the Church.

Because of his close relationship with those in need, it is the deacon’s place to pray the intercessions at Mass.

The Prophetic Office of Christ: the ministry of the word.

Deacons are also called upon to be teachers of the faith, by their words and by their actions. For example, deacons may be involved in marriage and baptism preparation or in other forms of catechesis and faith formation.

This ministry includes reading the Gospel and preaching at Mass and at other rites.

The Priestly Office of Christ: sacramental ministry

At Mass, the deacon is called upon to assist the priest, especially at the altar. As an ordinary minister of Holy Communion, the deacon helps with the distribution of the Eucharist—in particular, the Chalice.

The deacon may also bring communion to the sick and dying, and preside over the rites of distributing communion outside of Mass on weekdays and Sundays. He may also lead other rites and sacramental celebrations, such as baptism, marriage, funeral rites, the Liturgy of the Hours, and Eucharistic exposition and benediction.

Is a deacon ordained?

Yes, the deacon is a member of the clergy—but is usually married and lives and works “in the world.” Through Holy Orders, the deacon acquires a special relationship to the bishop - tradition refers to him as "the bishop's man ... the bishop's ears and eyes." While all Christians are called to serve others, the deacon is an official, sacramental sign of this service and he solemnly promises to be a living example of such service for others. At the same time, he is to encourage—and not inhibit or replace—the ministry of the laity (and of priests) in the Church.

What is the difference between a deacon and a priest?

The ministry of a deacon is similar to but different from that of a priest or bishop. A deacon is ordained and missioned by Christ through the bishop to minister to the needy and the poor and to be a minister of Word and Sacrament, working in obedience to his bishop and in close cooperation with priests. Each shares uniquely in the ministry of Christ to His people, the Church.

Only a priest (or bishop) can preside at the Mass, offer absolution of sins in the Sacrament of Penance, Anoint the Sick, or Confirm (the priest only under special circumstances). Only a bishop can ordain.

Can deacons be married?

Married men can become deacons, but are expected to be celibate if widowed (or divorced) after ordination. Single men who are ordained deacons take a promise of celibacy, and may not marry once they are ordained.

What do I need to do if I am interested in exploring a call to the Diaconate?

An applicant for deacon formation must be a Roman Catholic in good standing. He may be married or single, and must be 35 by the time of ordination. A candidate must demonstrate the potential to develop the necessary ministerial skills: relating well to people, speaking well, and being a servant-leader. Those discerning a call to the diaconate ought to be men of prayer and be willing to make personal sacrifices to be a sacramental sign of God’s love for others. They should already be examples of service and leadership in their communities.

For more information, please contact the Director of the Diaconate (Deacon Mike Snyder, 563-888-4256, snyder@davenportdiocese.org) or the Director of Deacon Formation (Deacon Frank Agnoli, 563-888-4257, agnoli@davenportdiocese.org).