

The Permanent Diaconate

History of the Diaconate

The origins of the diaconate as a ministry in the Church can be traced back to the Acts of the Apostles (6.1-6). While not referred to as deacons, Stephen and his six companions, “full of the Spirit and wisdom,” were called forth by the apostolic community to serve the needs to marginalized among them. They were empowered to give sacramental witness to this ministry of charity by the Apostles, who “prayed and laid their hands on them”.

Diaconal ministry was taken seriously by the early Church. In his First Letter to Timothy, St. Paul emphasizes that “Deacons...must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons.” (Timothy 3.8-10)

Deacons have always been associated with the ministry of the Bishop, in whose name they serve. In the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, it is recorded that deacons are “not ordained to the priesthood but to the service of the bishop...” In the third century *Didascalia Apostolorum*, they are described as the “bishop’s ear, mouth, heart and soul”.

Until the fifth century, the Order of Deacons flourished and evolved to meet the needs of the Church. Diaconal responsibilities expanded to include ministry of Word and ministry of Sacrament, while never losing the focus on ministry of Charity, always defined as self-emptying service to those in greatest need, as a sign of the baptismal call, of every Christian, to *diakonia*.

Over the following centuries, the role of the deacon became restricted to assisting at liturgy and was, typically, exercised only by those in formation for the priesthood. However, at the Second Vatican Council, the diaconate was restored as an equal and distinct order within the Church and was opened up, as a permanent ministry, to both single and married men. Pope Paul VI implemented the recommendations of the Council, emphasizing, once again, the importance of the deacon’s ministry of Charity. Over the past 40 years, the diaconate has been introduced in many countries all over the world. The first permanent deacons in Canada were ordained in 1973. London’s first diaconate class was ordained by Bishop Fabbro in November 2005.

Diaconate Ministry

There are three offices of ministry, or *munera*, associated with the diaconate.

Ministry of Charity has to do with service to the poorest of the poor. In today’s society, there are many forms of poverty. Many people lack the basic necessities of life and require assistance to obtain adequate housing, food and clothing. Others may have social needs – the physically or mentally challenged, those in long term care facilities and those who are imprisoned are, frequently, forgotten by their families and by society. Still others may be spiritually impoverished.

Some have abandoned their faith practice; others, for whatever reason, do not feel they are nourished in the typical parish environment.

The deacon is not only called to provide direct service to those who are marginalized, but is also expected to uncover needs not currently being addressed and to animate those in the diocese and in his parish community to respond in whatever way is required.

Ministry of Word involves proclamation of the Gospel and preaching at Mass and in other circumstances, in the name of the Church. What is unique about diaconal preaching is that the deacon is to use these opportunities to bring back to those to whom he preaches his experience of his ministry of Charity. By increasing awareness of those in the assembly about the needs of the poor and marginalized through his preaching, he links the Word to the responsibility of all Christians to live out their Baptismal call to *diakonia*, self-emptying service to others.

Ministry of Sacrament includes assisting the priest at Mass. The deacon has specific roles within Mass. Besides proclaiming the Gospel, he proclaims the intercessions of the Universal Prayer, is an ordinary minister of Holy Communion, invites the assembly to the Sign of Peace and dismisses them at the conclusion of Mass. The deacon may also preside at baptisms outside Mass, witness wedding vows at marriages outside Mass and preside at vigil services and funeral services at funeral homes. Deacons cannot preside at Mass, celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation or administer the Sacrament of the Sick.

Diaconate Formation

The Permanent Diaconate Formation & Study Program is five years in duration. It begins with the **Aspirant Year**, during which the Admissions process continues. This year features three Days of Prayer and Discernment, attended by aspirants and their wives. These gatherings and the exercises surrounding them offer opportunities for members of the Admissions Committee to come to know the potential candidates and for the Aspirant couples to develop an appreciation of the nature and expectations of the ministry of the permanent deacon and an understanding of the formation process. At the end of this year, following discernment by both the Admissions Committee and the Aspirant and his wife and family, the Bishop determines that those who are to proceed are formally admitted into Year I of the Formation & Study Program.

During the four **Formation Years**, on one weekend a month from September to June, candidates, and their wives, if possible, gather at St. Peter's Seminary in London for a **Formation & Study Weekend**. *Spiritual formation* is foundational, not only to these Weekends, but to all Formation & Study activities. Candidates finish each Formation Year with a retreat. *Human formation* occurs within the milieu of the Weekend activities. Each Weekend has a theme, around which *intellectual formation* is provided. *Pastoral formation*, especially with regard to collaborative ministry, is promoted by a sharing of the intellectual formation sessions with participants in the Certificate for Pastoral Ministry Program, and continues with ministry of Charity and parish placements over the course of the formation process.

Candidates, and their wives, in each geographic area gather two evenings a month. At these **Home Meetings**, they share Evening Prayer as well as the discuss assigned readings for the next Weekend's theme, offer support to one another and take time for socialization and the development of deepening relationships.

The entire Formation & Study Program is a time for discernment about the call to diaconal ministry by both the candidate and the members of the Discernment & Evaluation Team. A **formative evaluation** each December offers affirmation and encouragement as well as an opportunity to address any areas of concern. A **summative evaluation** each May leads to recommendations for the Bishop with regard to whether the candidate will proceed to the next Formation Year and will be allowed to petition for the ministries of Lector and Acolyte, for admission to Candidacy and for Ordination.

The **wives** of candidates are encouraged, to whatever extent possible, to attend all Formation & Study Weekends and Home Meetings and, especially, to participate in the formation activities particularly designed for them. (Taken from ORDINATION TO THE DIACONATE November 7, 2015. St. Peter's Cathedral Basilica, London, Ontario.)