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## Introduction

This booklet provides an overview of the Permanent Diaconate Formation Program in the Diocese of Saginaw. It includes explanations of the application and admission process for men aspiring to the order of the permanent diaconate, information regarding the formation program, and some insights into the ministry and life of a permanent deacon.

### A brief history of the diaconate

The diaconate is not new to the Catholic Church. In our ancient tradition, St. Luke identified the beginning of the diaconate in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1-6) in describing the selection of “seven good men” to assist the apostles in their mission. We read about the formal office of the deacon and the characteristics of both bishops and deacons in 1 Tim 3:1-13. Deacons played a prominent role in the early Church as the devoted assistants of bishops and popes. Moreover, the early Church Fathers wrote on numerous occasions about the important role and function of the deacon.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the role of the deacon and priest began to change due to the rapid growth of the Church following the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Priests were given increasing authority over individual faith communities by the bishops, thus creating a greater demand for priests. As a result, deacons became likely candidates for ordination to the priesthood. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, in the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church, the *permanent* order of deacon had transitioned into a *temporary* stepping stone (often for less than one year) on the path to priesthood rather than the more distinct order as had existed in the early Church.

At the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the idea of restoring the diaconate to its more permanent state began to emerge, but ultimately this issue was not addressed given other priorities at that time associated with the Protestant Reformation. Discussions about restoring the permanent diaconate arose again in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including at the priest cell blocks of German

concentration camps such as Dachau during World War II. Many believed that a permanent diaconal presence (i.e., having ordained Catholic clergy living and working directly among the people) would have been helpful in combating the spread of fascism in Europe. Theological discussions continued following the war, especially during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

“One of the great legacies of the Second Vatican Council was its renewal and encouragement of the order of deacons throughout the entire Catholic Church. The Council’s decisions on the diaconate flowed out of the bishops’ discussions on the sacramental nature of the Church.” This nature was to be seen as “missionary” and the sacred right and mandate of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

“Central to the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the Church is the service or ministry bestowed by Christ upon the apostles and their successors. The office of bishop ‘is a true service, which in sacred literature is significantly called a *diakonia* or ministry.’ The Council Fathers teach that the bishops, with the priests and deacons as helpers, have by divine institution taken the place of the apostles as pastors of the Church. Priests and deacons are seen as complimentary but subordinate participants in the one apostolic ministry bestowed by Christ upon the apostles, with Peter as their head, and continued through their successors, the bishops, in union with the Roman Pontiff.”<sup>2</sup>

In *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), the Council Fathers called for the restoration of the *permanency* of the diaconate. In the spring of 1968, the U.S. Conference of Bishops voted to petition the Holy See to restore the permanent diaconate in the United States and received approval on August 30, 1968.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, #1

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* #2

## Vocation & discernment

In a Christian sense, everyone in the Church has a vocation by virtue of their baptism. Each baptized person is called to grow in holiness through God's grace, to share God's love in charitable service to our neighbor, and to carry out the mission of evangelizing the world. This is a *universal call* to all Christians. All spouses have a *particular vocation* by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Matrimony – marriage being their state in life.

The diaconal vocation is one that is open to both married and single men. Prayer and careful discernment clarifies whether the Lord is calling someone to the permanent diaconate. *Proper* discernment is difficult work. It takes time and requires the use of effective discernment methods, the accompaniment of an experienced spiritual director, deep personal reflection and prayer – and ultimately, the affirmation of the Church.

Discernment of a call to Holy Orders is therefore not just personal. It involves personal discernment, family discernment, communal discernment, and it is ecclesial, meaning that it is the Church that ultimately makes a determination regarding a man's sense of a call to the permanent diaconate. Only when a bishop calls a man to Holy Orders and actually ordains him to the permanent diaconate is this vocation definitively affirmed.

### What is the vocation of a deacon?

As has been stated, deacons are ordained to share in the bishop's apostolic mission in all things pertinent to the role of deacon. The bishop represents the fullness of priesthood and servanthood of Jesus Christ to the local Church as a successor to the Apostles. Priests and deacons share in his mission, but in different ways.

Deacons are ordained in the Sacrament of Holy Orders to a threefold ministry – Ministry of the Word as Evangelizer and Teacher;

Ministry of Liturgy as Sanctifier; and Ministry of Charity and Justice as Witness and Guide.<sup>3</sup>

A deacon possesses the grace of Holy Orders to sustain him in this ministry. He makes sacred, lifelong promises of respect and obedience to the bishop in serving the diocese as the bishop chooses for him. Deacons are called to inspire and animate others to grow as disciples of Christ the Servant by their service and example.

Permanent deacons must be financially stable and self-sufficient. They continue to support themselves and their family while offering a minimum of 10-12 hours per week in uncompensated service to the Church. For married men, the vocation to the permanent diaconate is meant to be integrated with, and never a diminishment of, their marital vocation. According to the *National Directory*, his “ministry within the domestic Church... forms the basis of the married deacon’s unique gift within the Church.”<sup>4</sup>

## What does a deacon do?

Using the deacon’s threefold ministry of service as a guide, a deacon may do the following:

**Ministry of the Word** – “The deacon participates as an evangelizer and teacher in the Church’s mission of heralding the word. In the liturgy of the word, especially in the Eucharist or in those liturgies where he is the presiding minister, the deacon proclaims the Gospel. He may preach by virtue of ordination and in accord with the requirements of Canon Law.”<sup>5</sup> The deacon’s ministry may also include catechetical instruction, religious formation of candidates and families preparing for the reception of the sacraments, outreach to alienated Catholics, and counseling and spiritual direction, to the extent that he is properly trained.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. #31-38

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. #66

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. #31

***Ministry of the Liturgy*** – “The diaconate is conferred through a special outpouring of the Spirit, which brings about in the one who receives it a specific conformation to Christ, Lord and servant of all. 'Strengthened by sacramental grace, they are dedicated to the people of God, in conjunction with the Bishop and his body of priests, in a service of the liturgy of the word and of charity.’”<sup>6</sup> In light of this, a deacon assists the priest or bishop at the celebration of the Eucharist as well as at other liturgies, and may lead community prayer or preside at baptisms, weddings, funerals (outside of Mass), communion services, benediction, and blessings – all in the absence of a priest.

***Ministry of Charity and Justice*** – In the words of Pope St. John Paul II: “This is at the very heart of the diaconate to which you have been called: to be a servant of the ministries of Christ and, at one and the same time, to be a servant of your brothers and sisters. That these two dimensions are inseparably joined together in one reality shows the important nature of the ministry which is yours by ordination.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to inspiring and animating others toward the charitable mission of the Church, a deacon is ordained to provide corporal and spiritual works of mercy such as caring for the sick and dying, prison ministry, working with the poor, Hispanic ministry, pastoral counseling, parish or diocesan administration, and any other ministries as assigned and directed by the bishop.

“The deacon's service begins at the altar and returns there. The sacrificial love of Christ celebrated in the Eucharist nourishes him and motivates him to lay down his life on

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. #34

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. #36

behalf of God's people," thus sacramentalizing the mission of the Church in his words and deeds, responding to the Master's command of service and providing real-life examples of how to carry it out."<sup>8</sup>

## **How is a permanent deacon different from a priest?**

As has already been stated, a priest shares in the apostolic mission of the bishop. Being ordained to the ministerial priesthood, the priest acts *in persona Christi Capitis* (in the person of Christ the Head). He consecrates the Eucharist, absolves sins, anoints the sick, baptizes, witnesses marriages, presides at funerals, benediction, blessings, and leads the community in prayer. Some priests become pastors who oversee parishes for the bishop. Latin Rite priests normally cannot be married prior to or after ordination and must make sacred, lifelong promises to remain celibate. Priests are also provided with basic compensation, benefits and housing in order to carry out their sacred ministry for the Church on a full-time basis.

A permanent deacon is "an icon of Christ the Servant," ordained to a ministry of service in the Church. Consistent with the practice of the early Church (1 Tim 3:1-16), he may be married. He must provide for all of his financial needs (including those of his family) while serving in his role as assigned by the bishop. Unlike priests, deacons do not celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of Penance or the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick.

## **How is a permanent deacon different from a lay person?**

Like the laity, permanent deacons live in a secular setting at home and at work. However, permanent deacons are different in that they receive the sacramental grace of *Holy Orders* (through their ordination) to sustain them in their promises of lifelong obedience to serve the bishop and his successors. By ordination, deacons are

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. #37

members of the clergy. By virtue of their ordination, they are also *ordinary* ministers of Holy Communion and may celebrate certain sacraments (Baptism and Matrimony) and liturgical rites (funerals outside of Mass, benediction, and blessings) in the absence of a priest.

Permanent deacons receive substantial formation before being ordained (at least four years), receive continuing education following ordination, and are required by Canon Law to attend annual retreats. They commit themselves to serving where they are assigned in uncompensated ministry, to pray the Liturgy of the Hours daily, and to be open to whatever diocesan or parish ministry assignments as directed by the Bishop. It is critical that permanent deacons are able to properly balance their family life, work, and ordained life.

### **What about a permanent deacon's wife & family?**

A deacon must be at least 35 years of age prior to ordination. An age limit is set forth by the local bishop. Unlike a priest, a permanent deacon may be married before ordination. But he does make a promise not to remarry if his wife dies after his ordination; that is, he promises to live a life of celibacy if he becomes a widower after he is ordained. A married permanent deacon, with the assistance of his wife, must balance the responsibilities of his vocation as a husband (and perhaps a father) along with being a member of the clergy. During the formation program this balance is discussed, practiced and assessed.

The spouse of the deacon aspirant or candidate plays an important role in the diaconate formation process. She must independently consent to the formation process at all stages and eventually to her husband's ordination. Unless she is excused, the wife is required to participate in the diaconate formation program, except for those sessions that are designated as being only for the aspirants/candidates. The support of other family members is also critical to the success of the formation of the aspirant or candidate.



## Key traits of one aspiring to the diaconate

(from the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, 2004 edition)

**“Grace builds on nature.” – St. Thomas Aquinas**

- **approachability**
- human & spiritual maturity
- strong sacramental & prayer life
- healthy life balance
- good Christian reputation
- relates well to others
- respectful
- collaborative
- shares faith positively
- enthusiastic
- authentic
- humble and kind
- open to change
- good communication skills
- good judgment
- listens respectfully
- able to manage time
- psychological integrity
- ready to be formed
- knowledgeable
- faithful to Church teaching
- obedient to Church authority
- good work ethic
- responsible
- self-directed
- generous
- servant leader
- animates others to serve
- able to teach and witness to Christ’s love in the world

## Sacrificial Life of a Deacon

The life of a permanent deacon, candidate or aspirant requires a number of sacrifices. First, the permanent deacon is not compensated financially by the Church with a salary, benefits, education, and a place to live. Nor does he have a religious community to provide support. His service is totally gratuitous. The permanent deacon serves while still providing for his own livelihood, homestead, family, healthcare, retirement, and all other

financial needs. Deacon candidates and aspirants must pay for a portion of their own formation (\$550 per year for four years).

Secondly, just as a priest or consecrated religious makes a gift of themselves to the Church in celibacy, a deacon makes a total gift of self in service of Christ and his Church. Though a permanent deacon's service to the Church may be "part-time" in regards to the hours dedicated to a particular ministry, in a unique way, he represents Christ the Servant in the secular world because of being immersed in his workplace and in the community.

Thirdly, a permanent deacon must also actively balance his time for Church, spouse, children, work and his own self-care. His time for a life of service as a deacon is not secondary to his other commitments, and he must master the balancing of priorities. The man, and his wife and family, must evidence an intense desire and love to serve the Church in radical self-giving and availability.

Finally, a deacon does not choose his ministry. He must be fully at the service of the local bishop. Because the deacon shares in the apostolic mission for the bishop as the successor of the apostles, and makes promises of obedience and respect, he must be willing to accept an assignment to a different parish or ecclesial ministry if, after due consultation with all parties involved, the bishop would decide that this is for the greater good of a particular parish or the diocese. A permanent deacon is never required to leave his homestead, hometown, or position of employment (since this is his means for living); however, he must be open to serving in parishes and places where the bishop assigns, which may be outside his parish of origin.

## **Admissions process**

The promotion, recruitment and acceptance of qualified candidates for the permanent diaconate should be a collaborative ministry between the staffs of the diocesan vocations office and the diaconate office, as well as the diocesan bishop and pastors. In other words, the "call" to serve as a permanent deacon must be affirmed in and

through the Church. The application and formation process are designed to facilitate this period of discernment.

Applicants for the Permanent Diaconate Formation Program enter into the process at the same time to begin formation together as a "class." The start time for each new class begins at the discretion of the diocese. The admission process begins with contacting the Director of the Permanent Diaconate or another official in the Office of the Permanent Diaconate and expressing interest in the permanent diaconate (see the end of this booklet for contact information). The admission process schedule will depend upon when such contact is made and when the next class of permanent deacon applicants is planned by the diocese. At the appropriate time the Director of the Permanent Diaconate or his associate will hold an information session for all those interested in the permanent diaconate. At the end of this session, initial application forms will be provided for those with serious interest. The applicant will then need to gather important background and corroborative materials to submit with the application. The application and interview process is substantial and normally takes at least six months to complete. The Diocese may request additional information or supportive materials not requested on the original application if necessary, in order to make an informed decision about the application for Aspirancy. Applications which are incomplete may be rejected.

Once an Aspirancy Application is submitted, it is reviewed by the Diocesan Admissions Board. After the application has been reviewed and accepted, a personal interview would be extended to the applicant (and to his wife and family, if applicable). The interviews provide the opportunity for the Admissions Board to ask further questions regarding the applicant and his desires to enter into the diaconate formation process. The applicant (and in some cases his wife, if married) will undergo various independent assessments (psychological, marital, etc.). A home visit by several members of the Admissions Board is also part of the application process. The Admissions Board will then make recommendations to the Bishop of Saginaw as to whether the applicant should be admitted into the first year of formation, which is called Aspirancy. A letter will be

sent to notify the applicant of the decision about his application. The entire application, review, interview, and notification process may take up to ten months to complete.

## Admissions criteria

To be considered for admission to the Permanent Diaconate Formation Program in the Diocese of Saginaw, in addition to the traits mentioned earlier, the man must also:

- Be in good standing in the Church
  - Be between 35 and 65\* years of age at the time of ordination
  - 2 years Lay Ministry formation or theology/ministry degree
  - Provide references, including one from his pastor or director of parish life and, when possible, one from his employer
  - Be a high school graduate or hold a GED
  - Be able to handle college level academic coursework
  - Commit to a minimum of 10 years of service to the diocese following ordination (at a minimum of ten hours per week)
  - Show evidence of financial stability
  - If single, promise lifelong celibacy after ordination
  - If married, demonstrate at least 10 years of valid, stable marriage at the time of ordination
  - If there was a prior marriage, must possess a decree of nullity
  - If there are dependent children, demonstrate the ability to provide for their proper care during and after formation
  - Be in good health, both physically and mentally
  - Agree to all of the formation guidelines and policies
  - Provide legal releases for areas such as education, finances, legal background checks, etc.
  - Undergo psychological, marital and other assessments
  - Be trained and certified (or willing to be) in the diocese's Virtus safe environment program for working with minors
  - Pay for his share of the costs of formation
  - Not be subject to any canonical legal impediments
  - Attend all formation classes, retreats, and field internships
  - Meet any other requirements as determined by the Diocese
- \* *Note: Bishops may make exceptions re. the maximum age*

If the applicant is married, his wife must also complete a detailed application and is required to meet many of the same requirements referenced above, except for those only applicable to the man (such as academics, age, etc.). The wife must agree to attend any formation gatherings or retreats which are indicated as mandatory for the wife.

## **Theology Degree or Completion of Years 1 & 2 of Lay Ministry Program Required**

As a man begins the process of discerning a call to the permanent diaconate, if he has not completed the diocesan Lay Ministry Program (at least years 1 and 2) or an undergraduate or master's degree program in theology or pastoral ministry from an accredited university, he should enroll in such programs while waiting for a new permanent diaconate formation class to begin. One who is seriously aspiring to serve the Church as a permanent deacon or lay leader should be seeking as much theological education and formation as possible. **Note:** Although two years of Lay Ministry formation are the minimum time required, men are ordinarily asked to complete all four years and be commissioned or missioned by the bishop as a lay minister

## **Aspirancy Stage of Diaconal Formation**

Once an applicant is accepted into the Permanent Diaconate Formation Program, he will enter into a year of Aspirancy. During this time, he will begin his initial formation with monthly formation gatherings and online classes held between September and June. The focus during Aspirancy is prayerful discernment: Is God truly calling the man to be a permanent deacon? This discernment is carried out by the aspirant (with assistance from a priestly spiritual director); his wife (if married); his pastor/director of parish life; those charged with overseeing diaconal formation; and ultimately the Bishop of Saginaw, who discerns whether to accept him as a permanent deacon candidate and eventually ordain him.

## Formation

In accord with the national standards set forth by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, formation in the diaconate program consists of *five dimensions*:

- ***Human*** – This dimension assesses personality, maturity, self-awareness and developing qualities needed to relate well with others in ministry settings so as to “become a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ.”
- ***Spiritual*** – The goal of this dimension is “putting on the mind of Christ,” thereby establishing and nurturing attitudes, habits, and practices that provide a foundation for the development of an authentic and ongoing spiritual life.
- ***Pastoral*** – The focus of this pastoral dimension is the discernment of the candidate’s gifts for the three-fold ministry of word, liturgy, and charity, and of his capacity to make a lifelong commitment to these ministries.
- ***Intellectual*** – This dimension consists of academic formation in a wide range of theology courses to instill a deeper knowledge of faith and church tradition than the candidate has already attained.
- ***Diaconal*** – This dimension helps the candidate to develop those traits and skills identified and associated with diaconal service in the Church.

The diaconal formation period is a four-year process. The first year of formation is known as Aspirancy, and the three years following Aspirancy are known as Candidacy. During the four years of diaconal formation, the man (and his wife, if married) will attend approximately ten Saturday sessions per year in order to understand more about the vocation of the permanent deacon and to become formed in the human, spiritual, pastoral, intellectual, and diaconal dimensions. He will also have an average of 2-3 online evening classes per month from September to June.

Some of the components of the Saturday formation days include discernment tools, theology, spiritual exercises, homiletics, and liturgical practice.

The permanent deacon aspirant and candidate will need to consult with the Director of the Permanent Diaconate or his associate; his pastor or director of parish life; and his wife (if married) to determine the amount of parish service he will take on during his four years of diaconal formation. For example, a man working a full-time job and/or raising dependent children would need to assess how many parish ministries he can realistically be involved in so as to properly focus on diaconal formation; whereas someone who is retired may be able to continue in many parish ministries while also participating in diaconal formation.

## **Field internships**

Throughout the four years of formation, with input from his pastor or director of parish life, each candidate will be involved in field internships in his parish or in the community (a minimum of 2 hours per week), allowing him to gain necessary experience in various areas of pastoral care. Possible areas include outreach to the sick or dying, prison ministry, work with the poor or homeless, nursing home visitations, marriage tribunal, parish catechesis, etc.

## Formation Timeline

Phase	Duration	Academic	Field Internships	Weekends
Inquiry	1 year	Directed reading list with exam	Minimum 1 hour of service per week for your parish	2-3 Saturday gatherings during the inquiry year
Aspirancy	1 year	2-3 evenings per week Sept-June	2 hours per week Sept-June	1 Saturday per month Sept-June
Candidacy	3 years	(via online classes)		

### How do wives participate in formation?

When a married man applies for acceptance into the Permanent Diaconate Formation Program, his wife has an important part to play – but from a different perspective. She is key to both the discernment process, and later to support her husband’s ministry if he is ordained. Her consent is required for the husband to apply for and enter diaconal formation, and also to be ordained. She herself must grow in her own baptismal and marital vocation. If her husband undertakes a lifelong sacred commitment to the Church in Holy Orders, his vocation will impact their marriage and their family. It is important that his wife understand how and why this is so, and how this impacts her own gifts, talents and service to the Church. Moreover, the ability of the couple to properly balance the demands of marriage, family and the diaconate is critical.



A diaconal marriage requires an expression of marital love that extends itself beyond the couple, becoming a marriage of service in the Church. The wife of a permanent deacon assumes more of a public persona in the Church regardless of her future level of ministry involvement. The reality of being married to a deacon means that his wife must open herself to a new and even more mature life of faith. Wives, therefore, are required to audit formation gatherings, except those specifically designated as only being for their husbands. They are also required to attend any gatherings which are indicated as obligatory for wives. Taking part in formation activities will allow wives to foster a healthy marriage that is able to support their husband's call to diaconal service.

### **Academic & field internship equivalency**

A man aspiring to the permanent diaconate may also receive “equivalency” credit for theology courses taken at an undergraduate or graduate level or for certain field internship experience, as long as the prior academic course or field internship experience complies with diaconal formation program standards. The Director of the Permanent Diaconate ultimately makes such determinations.

### **Cost**

The cost for diaconal formation is shared two ways:

- the man pays \$550 per year for each of the four years of diaconal formation
- the Diocese of Saginaw covers all remaining costs

The current estimate for yearly costs for the Permanent Diaconate Formation Program is \$2200 per person to cover tuition for course instructors, textbooks, lodging, meals, and other program expenses.

## **Interested in knowing more?**

For further information regarding the Permanent Diaconate, or to discuss any points included in this booklet, please contact:

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