

The Diaconate: What Is It All About?

By Joann Buhler

Deacons play an integral role in our Roman Catholic church, yet many of the faithful have sketchy information, or are even misinformed, about this ordained position. Perhaps the following information, which includes an overview, some history, as well as specific facts and comments may be helpful for clarification as to just what the diaconate is all about.

Respected Catholic scholars Rev. John Trigilio, Jr., PhD, ThD, and Rev. Kenneth Brighenti, PhD, in their thorough work, *The Catholicism Answer Book*, give a detailed overview noting although priests are ordained, “Deacons are also ordained, and they are called to serve the bishops, priests, and the people of Christ. Biblically, they were called to work among the poor. Even today, many deacons chair the Saint Vincent de Paul Society of the parish. This society’s primary function is helping the destitute. Deacons may also baptize, proclaim, and preach the Gospel, witness marriages, assist at Mass, bury Christians, and conduct Eucharistic celebrations such as benediction. There are two kinds of deacons—permanent and transitional. A permanent deacon is one that will not be ordained any further as a priest or bishop. The permanent diaconate in the Latin Church was reinstated by Pope Paul VI after the Second Vatican Council. The Byzantine and Eastern Catholic Church always retained a permanent, as well as a transitional diaconate. A transitional deacon is one who will later be ordained a priest. Yet, both are clergy and have the exact same functions. A married man may be ordained a permanent deacon, but an unmarried deacon cannot marry after his ordination according to ancient custom. Even the Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox priests who have a married clergy maintain the same custom that matrimony must precede Holy Orders. Married men can be ordained deacons or priests in that tradition, but if one is ordained as a single man, he cannot later marry. Only unmarried deacons or priests in the Eastern Church are ordained and consecrated bishops, hence there is no married episcopacy. The Latin church will make exceptions for married permanent deacons whose wives die while there are still minor children to raise; these deacons may petition to remarry, but that request must be sent to the Pope.” Even when a deacon retires from active ministry, they do not stop being what they were ordained to be.

Historically, the diaconate grew into what it is now. Monsignor Ralph Stansley, Rector of the Diaconate, Diocese of Trenton, furnished a wealth of information on the history of the diaconate, requirements for the diocese, the impact on family life, criteria for entrance, and formal preparation for this important ministry. Highlights in each area include: historically, today’s deacon “traces his roots to the earliest days of the Christian Church. We read of the establishment of the diaconate in Acts 6:1-7. “But, brothers, choose seven men from among you who have a good reputation, and who are full of spirit and wisdom... These they set before the apostles, who offered prayers and placed their hands upon them.” There were rapid and complex changes in the Church in the twentieth century, and Vatican Council II offered “a fresher and deeper understanding of what the Church is and what its mission is. Ministry, both of an ordained nature and a non-ordained one, was seen to be the charge of Jesus, to be undertaken in His name and Spirit for all in need...” In 1968, the bishops of the United States petitioned the Holy See for permission to restore the diaconate, and got it. Guidelines for the formation and ministry of deacons was published by the bishops in 1971, and revised in 1984. “It was early in the 1970’s that Bishop George W. Ahr gave his permission for the establishment of the Diaconate Program in the Diocese. An exhaustive study by Father James P. McManimon indicated that the diocese had a need for the ministry of Deacons. From the beginning, Bishop Ahr, his successors, Bishop John C. Reiss and Bishop John M. Smith, and those committed to guide the program have sought candidates who have a deep and growing faith, have been in active ministry in their parish or in a diocesan office or agency, have at least a high school diploma, feel called to serve the people of God in a special way, are willing to assume responsibility, wish to live sacramentally the Christianity taught by Jesus, agree to take on an in-depth program of studies for further spiritual development and formal ministerial training, and agree to make a life long commitment of service.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in section 1554, tells of the three degrees of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and the diaconate is intended to serve the two degrees of ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ: the episcopacy and the presbyterate. “The diaconate is intended to help and serve them...Catholic doctrine teaches that the degrees of priestly participation (episcopate and presbyterate) and the degree of service (diaconate) are all three conferred by a sacramental act called ‘ordination,’ that is, by the sacrament of Holy Orders: Let everyone revere the deacons as Jesus Christ, the bishop as the image of the Father, and the presbyters as the senate of God and the assembly of the apostles. For without them one cannot speak of the Church.”

Service is key for the diaconate, and understandably, a married man called to such service, which will have an impact on time for his family, must have his wife in agreement with his ministry choice. “The revised Code of Canon Law requires that the candidate’s wife give her consent in writing to his ordination. In the Trenton program, the wife’s assent must be given even before an applicant will be considered for entrance into the program.”

Criteria for entrance are distinctly spelled out for those aspiring to be deacons. These criteria include men be between the ages of 31 and 64, have full support of a pastor/sponsor, are willing to commit oneself in formation for four years, are in adequate physical and psychological health, have financial stability, and have the ability to make time for formation without detriment to quality time with family or interference with work schedule. Other criteria may be obtained from the diocese.

Any man who feels called to serve, and is seeking more information on the diaconate program may call The Office of the Diaconate at (609) 406-7408, e-mail them at decon@dioceseoftrenton.org or write them at Office of the Diaconate, Diocese of Trenton Pastoral Center, 701 Lawrenceville Road, P.O. Box 5147, Trenton, NJ, 08638-0147.

The process of formation for a deacon in our diocese will last four years, and will include study in a broad range of topics: Scripture, theology, the Mystery of God, the role of Our Lady, Christian anthropology, history of the Church, sacraments and liturgy and Christian morality in its personal social dimensions. Classroom work “consists of practical preparation in liturgical functions, review of Canon Law, homiletic training, the writing of an autobiography and four major seminar papers on as many aspects of ministry.”

What about the deacon’s vestments? The deacon wears a vestment called an alb. This is a long, white linen garment reaching to the feet, and symbolizing the innocence and purity that should adorn the soul of the priest (or deacon.) He also wears a stole on his left shoulder going down to the waist on his right side. A deacon may also wear a dalmatic, which is a sleeved outer garment that came to Rome from Dalmatia (giving it its name.) It is worn by the deacon during Mass.

In summation, the diaconate is indeed a vital part of our church. Above all, the deacon is a man committed to service, and this service is most appreciated. Monsignor Ronald Bacovin, Director of Priest Personnel, Diocese of Trenton, aptly states, “Thank God the diaconate is back! It demonstrates the various diversities of the church. The diaconate has a number of wonderful men who are deacons who can reach people who otherwise would have gone unministered to.” He related how sometimes people may approach deacons to discuss a concern before going to a priest, and this is a testament to the degree of comfort many may feel with a deacon. In short, the deacon is a welcome servant to the church, his community, and most of all, his God. Monsignor Bacovin stressed he is “more than thankful for them,” saying, “I can’t imagine a church without a diaconate.”