The essence of a deacon’s role in the Catholic Church can be found in the Greek words from which the English word ‘deacon’ is derived – *diakonos* – servant, and *diakonos* or *diakone* or service to others. “A deacon is an icon of Jesus as servant,” said Deacon Frank Iannarino, director of the diocesan Office of the Diaconate. “Given the grace of Holy Orders, a deacon helps the Church in its ministry of Word, Altar, and Charity, helping the bishop fulfill his pastoral charge.”

The order of deacon goes back to the earliest days of the Church, when deacons assisted in preaching, taught the community the faith, and offered help to the sick. They helped the Church carry out the pastoral mission of the bishop. At that time, they also assisted in the celebration of the Eucharist. A deacon’s role was often one of service, which is why the English word “deacon” is derived from the Greek word for service, *diakonos*. Deacons were also known as *doxoloi* or *doxolo* – servants of praise, who were responsible for carrying out the worship of God.

Today, all men who are ordained priests are first ordained as deacons, serving in that role usually for a year. The diaconate also includes laymen for the Church’s first 500 years or so, but lay deacons essentially disappeared from the Church for the next 1,500 years or so. In 1974 at Sacred Heart Seminary in Shelby, with the ordination of the first permanent deacon in the Archdiocese of Columbus, the diaconate was restored in the United States. “It’s no accident that the diaconate is the first of the Holy Orders,” Deacon Iannarino said. “If you talk to most deacons in the diocese, they say they already had been serving their parish for years, were looking for a way to extend that service to the universal Church, and wanted to help others embrace the idea of being servant ministers.”

That’s why Deacon Roger Pry, who on March 25, 1975, became the first permanent deacon ordained for the Diocese of Columbus, was integral in the diaconate. “I knew I wasn’t called to the priesthood, but I wanted to serve God in some way,” said Deacon Pry, who in his 45 years as a deacon has served Columbus St. Augustine Cathedral and Holy Spirit Parish. “In 1974, we received the Heart Semester training program from the Pontifical College of the Sacred Heart in Rome.”

“In those days, people had many questions concerning what a deacon does – whether he was able to bless things, for instance,” Deacon Pry said. Deacons indeed can bless religious items, move furniture, lead liturgies at weddings, baptisms, marriages, and funerals, with pastoral permission. At Mass, deacons assist the priest at baptisms, marriages, and burials, and distribute Communion at Mass and hearing what’s on their minds. The people also are clerics – there is no such thing as a lay deacon – but you also have a profession and are part of a community of people who are ordained through RCIA, presiding at Catholic marriage ceremonies and those in which civil marriages are validated by the Church, delivering Communion at hospitals and homes, or just talking to people after Mass and hearing what’s on their minds. The people I minister to also minister to me as I see the depth of their faith.

“Probably my biggest challenge comes in preparing for the homilies I deliver on certain Sundays. There’s a strong awareness that your talk is to break open the Word of God. This is something I always take seriously in the hope that through the Holy Spirit’s work, that’s what we’re going to do. Once I deliver the homily, it’s out of my hands. It’s the Holy Spirit’s work.”

Deacon Kelly, Deacon Johnston, and Deacon Iannarino interviewed for the story all said the importance of having a strong, supportive family in allowing them to fulfill their calling. A deacon’s wife has to be a practising deacon’s wife. “Knowing that your wife and children are backing you up is indispensable,” Deacon Kelly said. “As a deacon, your first vocation is to be a husband and father. If the wife and children are not on board, it won’t work. Sometimes I have to be away from home or leave my job and head straight for church. They understand this, and they contribute to whatever success I have as a deacon by their patience and willingness to share me with the Church.”

“You (deacons) are part of two worlds,” Bishop Frederick Campbell said last year as he delivered the keynote speech to the National Association of Diocesan Directors convention in Columbus. “You are clerics – there is no such thing as a lay deacon – but you also have a profession and are part of a community in which your faith commitments may not be widely shared. So understand what a deacon is and what a vocation to the diaconate is about. A deacon is not a ‘junior varsity priest,’ as I’ve heard in some descriptions.”

Bishop Campbell has been a strong supporter of the diaconate throughout his 33 years as archbishop of the Diocese of Columbus and the five years before that when he was auxiliary bishop of St. Paul-Minneapolis. He was chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ committee on the diaconate from 1993-2000 and is a member of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ committee on the diaconate.

“Prospective deacons, also known as inquirers, must be endorsed by the pastor of their home parishes,” Bishop Campbell said last year as he delivered the keynote speech to the National Association of Diocesan Directors convention in Columbus. “You (deacons) are part of two worlds,” Bishop Frederick Campbell said last year as he delivered the keynote speech to the National Association of Diocesan Directors convention in Columbus. “You are clerics – there is no such thing as a lay deacon – but you also have a profession and are part of a community in which your faith commitments may not be widely shared. So understand what a deacon is and what a vocation to the diaconate is about. A deacon is not a ‘junior varsity priest,’ as I’ve heard in some descriptions.”

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In 1968, after the close of the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States requested the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent order in this country.

Among the reasons for the request were that the many diaconal ministries already present would be enriched and strengthened by the sacramental grace of Holy Orders; a new group of devout, competent men would be enlisted in the church’s ministry; charitable and liturgical services would be extended in rural and urban communities; and the official and sacramental presence of the church would be provided in communities where priests were not readily available.

Pope Paul VI responded favorably to the request, but it was not until 1972 that he issued the apostolic letter Ad Pascendum, establishing norms for restoration of the diaconate around the world. Because the apostolic letter was not released until 1972, Bishop Clarence Elwell of Columbus decided not to proceed with restoration of the diaconate as a permanent order in the diocese.

Bishop Elwell died in February 1973 and was succeeded by Bishop Edward Herrmann, who initiated the program in the diocese by appointing Father Ralph Huntzinger as its first director. Father Huntzinger began to initiate the formation slowly and was succeeded in 1976 by Father Thomas Shonebarger, who began to develop the order through his assignment as diocesan vocations director.

Under Father Huntzinger and Father Shonebarger, any candidate interested in becoming a permanent deacon had to travel and study with the deacon candidates of the Diocese of Toledo on one weekend a month at Sacred Heart Seminary in Shelby, approximately 120 miles northeast of Columbus. The formation program was a two-year process. The first two permanent deacons of the diocese, Deacons Roger Pry and Jack Rankin, were ordained in the spring and fall of 1975, respectively.

The training took place in Shelby until 1982, where the program was transferred to the Pontifical College Josephinum under the direction of Father Joseph Hendricks, who established the Diaconate School of Theology for the diocese. The school later was directed by Father John Cody, with Deacon Joe Farry as associate director, until 1990.

By this time, approximately 50 deacons had been ordained over a 16-year period. Bishop James Griffin, who succeeded Bishop Herrmann, placed a moratorium on new entrants while the program was evaluated and restructured.

In 1992, Bishop Griffin appointed Deacon Frank Iannarino as diocesan director of the diaconate and established the Office of the Diaconate, which maintains a central location for diocesan diaconal administration and study at The Catholic Center in downtown Columbus.

Under Deacon Iannarino and the newly established diocesan Diaconal Council, the formation process was studied; the course of study was rewritten; and the formation program was re-established in 1993. According to the current Guidelines for Deacons in the Diocese of Columbus, the formation process is based on a four-year cycle, with each class being ordained before a new class of candidates begins formation.

The Diaconate School of Theology continues to exist at the Josephinum, where it maintains all formation and academic classes under the direction of the bishop of Columbus, who serves as vice chancellor of the Josephinum. The formation process has a well-developed inquiry, aspirancy, candidacy, and post-ordination component reflecting the Vatican’s 1998 Basic Norms for the Formation of Deacons.
Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States.

Soon after his appointment as bishop, he began to implement the directory’s guidelines throughout the diocese.

The Josephinum, as the center for diaconal studies throughout the United States, hosts various summer institutes related to the directory. The Josephinum also houses the office of the National Association of Deacon Directors; publishes a theological journal on the diaconate; and maintains the Josephinum distance learning program to enhance online classes for deacons throughout the world.

With ordination of the 12-member class of 2016, the Diocese of Columbus has 107 permanent deacons. It has 10 deacon candidates in their second year of formation who hope to be ordained in 2020. Although a few of the deacons are retired and a handful work full-time in parishes or schools, the majority have jobs in the secular world and work in parishes, hospitals, schools, and prisons at other times.

Although they assist the bishop and parish priests in proclaiming the Word, administering sacraments, and assisting in charitable works, they are most importantly an image of the Servant Jesus to the church throughout the world.

Applications for a new diaconate class are accepted at least one year before the start of its four-year cycle. Since the current cycle began this year, 2021 is the next year men of the diocese can apply to be part of a class.

The first-year of the diaconate school’s cycle is known as the aspirancy period. During this time, all necessary forms are completed, including a criminal background check and having a deacon candidate complete the diocesan Protecting God’s Children program if he has not already done so.

Each candidate also takes a set of psychological inventories and participates in an interview with a counseling professional. He (and his wife, if needed) also take part in a series of extended interviews conducted by the Office of the Diaconate. A team of clergy and laypersons evaluates the prospective deacon. The bishop of Columbus ultimately makes the decision on whether a man is accepted as a candidate for ordination to the diaconate.

Once a man is accepted into the Diaconate School of Theology, there is no guarantee he will be ordained a deacon. Like the formation program for a seminarian, the diaconate formation program is a period of discernment. The candidate may find as he learns more about himself and the diaconate that he is not called to ordained ministry.

Periodic evaluation of each man by his pastor and teachers, in addition to regular self-evaluation, allows the formation staff to assist each individual in the discernment process. These may result in either the student or the formation faculty suggesting that the formation relationship be ended.

The four years of formation for the diaconate are not only academic, but also spiritual and ministerial. A man in diaconate formation meets regularly with a spiritual director. He and his wife also develop a mentoring relationship with members of the diaconate community.

Diocesan candidates, following the same path as men studying for the priesthood, are installed in the ministries of reader and acolyte in due time following their acceptance as candidates.

Before each installation, they take part in ministry projects in their parish which are related to the deacon’s threefold ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Charity.

Classes for the Diaconate School of Theology take place at the Pontifical College Josephinum in the winter, spring, and fall.

During the summer of their second through fourth years of formation, deacon candidates go on retreat and take part in individual assessments and conferences. The fourth-year conference is an individual interview with the bishop.

At the end of the fourth year of formation and before ordination, a candidate must sign an oath of freedom and a profession of faith and formally petition to be ordained, saying he is about to receive the order of the diaconate freely and of his own accord. A married candidate’s spouse also must sign a statement of consent. Unmarried candidates are required to take a vow of celibacy. Ordination of deacons for the Diocese of Columbus in recent years has taken place at the cathedral in late November.

“If you are thinking of studying for the diaconate, there are some questions you may want to ask, including whether God is calling you to a special life of service in the Church, how being a deacon would affect your wife and family, whether you already are doing diaconal ministry, and whether you are able to make the time commitment necessary to prepare for ordination,” Deacon Iannarino said.

“Praying and spiritual direction are also an integral part of the journey.

“If you feel you might be called to the diaconate, I would be happy to have the opportunity to speak with you. Write me an email at iannarino@columbuscatholic.org or contact me at the diaconate office at (614) 241-2545.”