

The Vocation of a Deacon



Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana

For further information regarding the Permanent Diaconate,
or to answer any questions about the information provided
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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
A brief history of the diaconate	2
Vocation & discernment	3
What is the vocation of a deacon?	4
What does a deacon do?	4
How is a deacon different from a priest?	5
How is a deacon different from a lay person?	6
Key traits of one aspiring to the diaconate	7
Sacrificial life of a deacon	7
What about a deacon's wife & family?	8
Admission process	9
Admission criteria	10
Academic courses or theology degree desirable	11
Formation.....	12
Field internships.....	14
Why must wives participate in formation?.....	14
What if you are still raising children?	16
Academic & Field Internship equivalency	18
Post Ordination Ministry and Life	18
Cost	19
Interested in knowing more?	19

Introduction

This booklet provides an overview of the vocation of a deacon in the Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana. It includes references to the application and admission process for men aspiring to the order of the diaconate (and their wives, if the man is married), information regarding the formation program, and some insights into the ministry and life of a deacon following ordination.

A brief history of the diaconate

The diaconate is not new to the Church. In our ancient tradition, St. Irenaeus identified the beginning of the diaconate when the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1-6) describes the selection of “seven good men” to assist the apostles in their mission. We read about the formal office of the deacon and how bishops and deacons are to act 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 indispensable role and function of the deacon.

Some prominent deacon saints in the Church are St. Stephen, the first martyr; St. Philip the Evangelist; St. Lawrence of Rome; St. Ephrem, Doctor of the Church; St. Vincent of Saragossa; and St. Francis of Assisi.

By the 4th century the role of the deacon and priest began to change gradually due to the rapid growth of the Church following the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Priests were given increasing authority over local communities in the absence of a bishop, which created a greater demand for priests. As a result, deacons became logical candidates for ordination to the priesthood. By the 7th century, 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 16th Century, the idea of restoring the diaconate to its more permanent and pastoral state began to emerge, but ultimately was not addressed given other priorities at that time associated with the Protestant Reformation. Discussions about restoring the permanent diaconate arose again in the priest cell blocks of German concentration camps 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 horrific spread of fascism in Europe. Theological discussions continued following the war; at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) the bishops, under the authority of Pope John XXIII, revisited the sacramental nature of the hierarchy of Holy Orders in the Church – bishop, priest and deacon. In *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) they permitted the ability to restore the *permanency* of the diaconate. In 1968 the U.S. Conference of Bishops petitioned and received approval to restore the permanency of the diaconate in the United States. In 2001, Bishop William L. Higi, opened the permanent diaconate in our diocese. The first class was ordained in 2005.

Vocation & discernment

Everyone in the Church has a vocation by virtue of their baptism. The universal call of baptism for all Christians is to grow in holiness through God's grace and to share God's love in charitable service to our neighbor. Understanding your particular vocational call involves taking the time to discern how God wants to use your particular gifts and talents in the Church as either a lay leader, consecrated religious, or ordained clergy. The process of understanding your vocation is usually referred to as discernment. *Proper* discernment is hard work! It takes time and requires the use of effective discernment methods, the guidance of experienced spiritual directors, affirmation from the Church, deep personal

reflection, and much prayer. Discernment is ultimately about submitting your will to do God's will, and about whether you are called to a particular vocation such as the diaconate.

What is the vocation of a deacon?

Deacons are men ordained to share in the *bishop's* apostolic mission in all things to which they are assigned *except* the ministerial priesthood. The bishop represents the fullness of priesthood and servanthood 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 of service* in **Word, Liturgy, and Charity**. A deacon receives the grace of Holy Orders to sustain him in this ministry. He makes sacred, lifelong promises of obedience and respect to serve the bishop in the ministry which the bishop chooses for him. Deacons are called to inspire and animate others to service by their example in service and are a pastoral leader in the community. Because deacons must be financially stable and self-sufficient, they continue to support themselves and their family while offering a minimum of ten to twelve hours per week in uncompensated service to the diocese in addition to liturgical and pastoral activities in their parish.

What does a deacon do?

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

- **Ministry of Charity** – the ministry of charity is primary to the vocation of a deacon. 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, diocesan administration, and any other ministries as assigned and directed by the bishop.

- **Ministry of the Word** – A deacon proclaims the Gospel at Mass, and he preaches, teaches, and witnesses the Gospel.
- **Ministry of the Liturgy** – A deacon assists the priest or bishop at Mass and at other liturgies, and may preside at baptisms, weddings, funerals, communion services, benediction, blessings, and leads community prayer – all in the absence of a priest.

How is a deacon different from a priest?

A priest shares in the apostolic mission of the bishop, being ordained to the ministerial priesthood. 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 cannot be married prior to ordination and must make sacred, lifelong promises to remain celibate. Priests are also provided with basic compensation, benefits, and room and board in order to work and live for the Church full time.

A 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; 1 Cor 9:5; Mark 1:29-31; and Titus 1:4-7), and consistent with the two thousand year tradition of the Eastern Rites of the Church, a deacon may be married. He must provide for all of his financial needs (including those of his family) while serving at least ten to twelve hours per week in uncompensated ministry to the diocese while also fulfilling his liturgical and pastoral assignment. A key distinction from priests is that deacons do not celebrate the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Penance, nor the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. Deacons may, in the absence of a priest, perform certain blessings, lead prayer services, baptize,

preside at weddings and funerals (outside of Mass), preach, teach, and counsel.

How is a deacon different from a lay person?

Like the laity, deacons live in a secular setting with their family, their home, and their work. However, 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. Deacons are also ordinary ministers of Holy Communion and may celebrate certain sacraments (Baptism and Matrimony) and liturgical rites (funerals, benediction, and blessings) in the absence of a priest. Deacons receive substantial formation before being ordained (at least five years and over 1,100 hours in duration), receive continuing education following ordination of at least twelve hours per year, and attend annual retreats. Deacons make sacred promises to serve at least ten to twelve hours per week in uncompensated ministry, to pray the Liturgy of the Hours daily, to live in the diocese for life, and to be open to whatever diocesan or parish ministry assignments are made by the bishop. It is critical that deacons are able to properly balance their family life, work, and ordained life.

Key traits of one aspiring to the diaconate

Some key traits include:

- strong spiritual life (prayer, sacraments)
- active in spiritual and corporal works of mercy
- healthy life balance
- good Christian reputation
- relates well to others
- respectful
- collaborative
- shares faith positively
- enthusiastic
- authentic
- kind
- humble
- 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

Some mistakenly believe that the vocation of a deacon is not as sacrificial as that of other vocations in the Church. Like all vocations in the Church, a deacon's sacrifices are not "lesser", but they are "different". First, the deacon is not compensated financially by the Church with a salary, benefits, education, and a place to live, nor do they have a religious community to provide

support. His service is totally gratuitous (not paid like a lay professional), and a deacon must pay the costs of most of his own formation. The deacon serves while still providing for his own livelihood, home, family, healthcare, retirement, and all other financial needs. Just as a priest or consecrated religious makes a gift of themselves to the Church in celibacy, a deacon makes a total gift of service to the bishop without receiving any financial compensation or support.

A deacon's service to the Church is not "part-time". Deacons are an ordained presence of Christ the Servant in the secular world, because the deacon is immersed in his workplace and in the lay community. A deacon must also actively balance his time for Church, spouse, children, work and himself. His time for the diaconal vocation is not secondary to his other commitments, and he must master balancing 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 go and do as the bishop desires because he shares in the apostolic mission of the bishop under sacred promises of obedience and respect. A deacon and his family must also be willing to move from their parish of origin and accept assignment to a different parish from the bishop. A deacon is never required to leave his home, his hometown, or his employment (since this is his means for living). However, he must be open to serving in parishes and places where the bishop directs, which may be outside his parish of origin.

What about a deacon's wife & family?

Unlike a Latin Rite priest, a deacon may be married before ordination; he promises not to remarry if his wife dies after his ordination. With the assistance of his wife, a deacon must properly balance the responsibilities of being a husband and perhaps a father, along with being a member of the clergy. During formation this balance is discussed, practiced and assessed.

Admission process

Serving the Church in Holy Orders is a privilege, not a right. The “call” must be affirmed in and through the Church. The application and formation process are designed to facilitate the affirmation of a vocation.

Deacons are formed in cohorts – groups of men assembled at the same time to begin formation – which will be started from time to time at the discretion of the diocese. Admission into formation for the diaconate begins by contacting and scheduling a meeting with the vocations coordinator (see the end of this booklet for contact information). The schedule of admission events will depend upon when such contact is made and when the next cohort group formation is planned by the diocese. At the appropriate time the vocations coordinator will issue intake forms, initial surveys and potentially a formal application. Once the application is extended the applicant will need to gather important background and corroborative materials to submit with it. The application process is substantial and it may take several weeks or months to complete. The diocese may request additional information or collaborative materials if needed to make an informed decision about the application. Applications which are incomplete may be rejected.

Once an application is submitted, it is reviewed by the diocesan Admissions Committee. A panel interview may be extended to the applicant (and to his wife and family, if applicable) once the application has been reviewed. The interview provides the opportunity for the Admissions Committee to ask further questions regarding the application. The applicant and his wife will also need to undergo various independent assessments (psychological, marital, diaconal, etc.)

Following the application submission and the panel interview, the Admissions Committee will determine whether or not the man is

called to admission into the first year of formation. A letter will be sent to notify the applicant of the result. The entire review, interview, and notification process may take several weeks or months to complete.

In addition to the application process described above, the Diocese may, from time to time, conduct a more formal information session for both the man (and his wife, if married) to attend in lieu of a personal meeting with the vocations coordinator. At this information session there will be an overview of the vocation of a deacon and an explanation of the application process.

Admission criteria

To be considered for admission to formation, the man must possess the traits mentioned earlier and:

- Be in good standing in the Church
- Be a fully-initiated Catholic for at least 3 years
- Be registered in a parish in the diocese for at least 3 years
- Reside within the diocese for at least 3 years
- Provide references including one from his pastor, one from another priest or deacon, and three from those involved in ministry with the applicant
- Be a high school graduate or hold a GED
- Be able to successfully complete college-level academic coursework
- Be between 30 and 60 years old
- Commit to a *minimum* of 10 years of service to the diocese following ordination
- Show evidence of financial stability
- If single, promise lifelong celibacy after ordination
- If married, demonstrate at least 7 years of valid, stable marriage at the time of application
- If there was a prior marriage, possess a decree of nullity at the time of admission

- If there are dependent children or dependent adults, demonstrate the ability to provide for their proper care during and after formation, while balancing diaconal duties
- Be in good health, both physically and mentally
- Agree to all formation guidelines and policies
- Provide detailed background information for areas such as education, finances, legal background checks, etc.
- Undergo psychological, marital and other assessments
- Complete the diocesan Safe Conduct Protocol training for working with minors
- Pay for the costs of formation (for both the man and his wife)
- Not be subject to any canonical legal impediments
- Attend weekly formation classes and field internships
- Attend monthly formation weekends
- Meet any other requirements as determined by the diocese

If married, the wife must also complete a detailed application and is required to meet many of the same requirements mentioned above except for those only applicable to the man (such as academics, age, etc.) The wife must agree to attend all weekend formation meetings, which are mandatory. She must also complete monthly reports and discernment exercises.

Academic courses or theology degree desirable

A man discerning his call to the diaconate should enroll and avail himself of formal academic formation *during any waiting period for a new diaconate class to begin*. Because deacons are formed in cohort groups and classes only begin at certain intervals (usually 5 years apart once a cohort group is ordained), one who is seriously aspiring to serve the Church as deacon or lay leader should also be seeking as much theological education and formation as possible to ensure they are serious about pursuing ordained service to the Church. One who has enrolled and is taking courses such as offered by the University of Dayton Virtual Learning Community

(<https://vlcff.udayton.edu>) or a undergraduate or graduate degree from an accredited university theology program provides the Admissions Committee strong evidence of a *sincere desire* to pursue a diaconal vocation. Also, courses taken from accredited degree programs that match diaconal formation may be granted equivalency in the diaconate program and will benefit the man aspiring by helping to alleviate some of the time associated with the academic requirements during formation.

Formation

Per the national standards set forth by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, formation in the diaconate is conducted in *five dimensions*:

- ***Human*** – assessing personality, maturity, self awareness and developing qualities needed to relate well with others in ministry settings
- ***Spiritual*** – developing and implementing a proper discernment and spiritual life plan in order to live the vocation of deacon in the sound tradition of the Church
- ***Pastoral*** – developing skills to identify and be able to provide works of mercy
- ***Intellectual*** – academic formation in more than 30 theology courses developing the ability to teach, preach, counsel and serve effectively
- ***Diaconal*** – those traits and skills identified and associated with diaconal service in the Church

The formation process begins following acceptance into the program. The first year of formation is known as Inquiry, the second year is known as Aspirancy, and the three years following Aspirancy are known as Candidacy.

Formation Timeline

Phase	Duration	Intellectual	Field Internships	Spiritual & Pastoral
Inquiry	1 year	1 evening per week every year	2-3 hours per week every year	10 monthly weekends every year
Aspirancy	1 year			
Candidacy	3 years			

During the five years of formation, the man (and his wife, if married) will attend approximately ten weekend sessions per year in order to understand more about the vocation of the deacon and to become formed in the human, spiritual, pastoral and diaconal dimensions. Some of the components of the weekend formation include discernment exercises, marriage enrichment, spiritual exercises, theological reflections, catechetical presentation skills, pastoral counseling, homiletics, and liturgical practice.

Intellectual formation is conducted one evening per week for approximately forty-two weeks out of the year. The men take 35 short collegiate-level theology courses (1 credit hour each). Pastoral formation involves a field internship assignment requiring weekly participation. The weekly commitment during formation is similar to what the man will experience once he is ordained – at least 10 to 12 hours per week. Service in parish ministries will need to cease during the formation process unless such ministry activity is clearly compatible with diaconal formation and proper family life balance. For example, a man working a full-time job and/or raising dependent children will most likely need to resign from all parish ministries in order to properly focus on diaconal formation; whereas, someone who is retired may be able to continue in some parish ministry while participating in diaconal formation. At the end of each year of formation there is either a day of recollection or a weekend retreat conducted to facilitate the man's (and his wife's, if applicable) discernment regarding the next phase of formation.

Field internships

Throughout formation the man will be involved in year-long field internships (2-3 hours per week; 80-100 hours annually), allowing him to gain necessary experience in such areas as pastoral care of the sick or dying, prison ministry, work with the poor or homeless, nursing homes, marriage tribunal, parish catechesis, etc. Such field internships are supervised and focus on performing corporal and spiritual works of mercy. These internships not only assess the candidate's willingness and ability to perform the type of ministry he may eventually be undertaking, but they also allow him to grow in his ability to develop and to demonstrate appropriate pastoral skills.

Why must wives participate in formation?

Even though it is the man who enters formation to eventually be ordained a deacon, his wife needs to be formed as well – but from a different perspective. She is key to both the discernment process (affirming the call) and later to support her husband's vocation once he is ordained. She must grow in her own baptismal, confirmation, and marital vocations. As a man undertakes a lifelong sacred commitment to the Church in Holy Orders, his vocation will impact his marriage and his family. His wife needs to understand how and why this is so and how this impacts her own spiritual life and her service to the Church. Moreover, the ability of the couple to properly integrate marriage, family and the diaconal vocation is critical. A diaconal marriage requires an expression of marital love that extends itself beyond the couple to become a marriage of service in the Church. The wife of a deacon assumes 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 develop important skills and open herself to a new and even more mature spiritual and faith life. Wives, therefore, are formed in four dimensions (human, spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual) in order to pursue their proper lay

vocation, and to allow them to foster a healthy marriage able to support a diaconal vocation. Wives do not participate in the men's intellectual formation (academic courses). They will be involved in development of a spiritual life plan and exercises, they will prepare written discernment reflections each month, and they will read basic articles and texts regarding the faith, skills development, and the diaconate.

The candidate's wife must independently consent to the formation process at all stages and eventually to her husband's ordination. She must participate in weekend formation (10 weekends per year for five years) and be involved actively in developing her spiritual life plan and in discernment activities. In addition, the support of other family members is critical to the success of the candidate's formation.

Here is a summary of what is required of wives:

- Mandatory attendance on monthly weekends
- Reading a book on biblical discernment methodology
- Monthly one-page discernment reflection on the reading
- Monthly one-page report on spiritual exercises
- Light reading each month in the form of articles on relevant topics for wives
- Studying the Adult Catechism of the Catholic Church over four years
- No academic papers, exams, or quizzes
- Preparing one group presentation (with the other wives) at the end of formation on "What is a Deacon's Wife"

What if you are still raising children?

A common challenge for those discerning a call to the diaconate in the Church is whether or not to proceed with formation if there are still dependent children living at home. When this is the case a common misstep is for parents to simply conclude on their own whether or not to proceed without first having direct, detailed discussions with the representatives of the formation team on this subject.

There are many factors to consider, and each situation is unique given the size, age of children, available support systems, and resources of the family. The best and most effective way to discern is to become fully informed and discern in concert with the Church. Having direct discussions will help parents get a much better understanding of not only the obligations involved, but how to weigh all the relevant factors properly, which often get overlooked.

Parents tend to be focused primarily on the education and extracurricular activities of their children. However, the single greatest priority of any Catholic, including children, should be to know, love and serve God. In the sacrament of marriage, spouses promise God not only to procreate children, but to order the lives of their entire family to God. This sacred promise is made again at the baptism of each child. A father in pursuit of a diaconal vocation, and a mother supporting him in service to the Church, serve as a preeminent model to the children of making Christ their great priority. St. Patrick, Bishop of Ireland, and one of the most prominent saints in the Church was raised by a father (Calpurnius) who was a deacon in the Church. Even though education, athletics, the arts, and other activities may be edifying for a child's life, none of these compare to the call to pursue holiness and dynamically seek eternal salvation. Sadly, in our culture, it is common for children to be led away from Christ in the pursuit of education, career and extracurricular activities. Asking children to make some personal sacrifices to know, love and serve God as their great

priority in their life should be the primary occupation of all families. The question becomes one of setting proper priorities and achieving balance, and the Church will help you discern this.

It is important to remember that discernment of the vocation of a deacon continues over a period of five years. Parents are not making a lifelong commitment to be a deacon upon submitting an application but are merely beginning the process of discernment. Diaconal formation attempts to mirror the commitments of a deacon upon ordination, so formation is the proper time and method to assess whether or not one is indeed able or not to proceed with the final, sacred promises of ordination. At any time an applicant can discern to exit formation. And if the parents and the Church discern that the time is not right to continue with formation, then a man who is still truly called to diakonia may continue formation on his own by taking courses and/or engaging in ministry experiences (to a lesser extent than regular formation) in order to begin earning equivalency exemptions for a future re-application for diaconal formation (see the section on Equivalency on the next page). The formation team will be happy to provide guidance in such a circumstance to help ensure that proper choices are made and to help with proper balancing of family and work obligations.

Finally, it is important to remember as you discern a vocation to the diaconate that most of the Apostles and first disciples were married men (1 Corinthians 9:5), including St. Peter, (Mark 2: 29-31), all of whom picked up their crosses and followed when Christ called them to service.

Academic & Field Internship equivalency

A man aspiring to the diaconate may receive “equivalency” for theology courses taken at an undergraduate or graduate level or for certain field internship experience (e.g., 100 hours of supervised service in certain pastoral settings) as long as the prior academic course or field internship experience complies with diaconal formation program standards. This may allow the applicant to receive a waiver from certain courses or field internship requirements during formation.

The man will be given the opportunity to apply for such waivers at the beginning of diaconal formation; the waiver will be either granted or denied at that time.

Post Ordination Ministry and Life

Following ordination the bishop assigns deacons to both a parish and a diocesan ministry assignment. A deacon must commit to serve the Church a minimum of ten hours per week of uncompensated service as determined and directed by the bishop.

Cost

The cost for formation is shared, with the man paying approximately 2/3 of the total cost and the diocese paying about 1/3 of the cost. The average annual cost to the man is between \$2,500 and \$3,000, which pays for the course instructors, textbooks, hotel, meals, and other program expenses.

Interested in knowing more?

For further information regarding the Diaconate, or to answer any questions about the information provided in this booklet, please contact:

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Prayer for Deacons

*Father in heaven, through Christ and His Church
You have called certain men
to serve at the altar,
to profess the Good News of your Son,
and to extend His mercy and love
in charity to your people.*

*As living icons of Christ the servant,
bless the deacons of our diocese
with the grace and power of the Holy Spirit,
keeping them ever faithful to their sacred duty
as ordained clergy humbly serving Your people.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen!*

St. Stephen, pray for us

St. Lawrence, pray for us

St. Ephrem, pray for us

St. Philip, pray for us

St. Vincent, pray for us

St. Francis of Assisi, pray for us



“As I have done for you,
you should also do.”

(John 13:15)

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