

REFLECTIONS ON THE PERMANENT DIACONATE FOR THE CHURCH IN PITTSBURGH

REVEREND JAMES A. WEHNER, S.T.D.
DIRECTOR, OFFICE FOR THE DIACONATE



Envisioning Ministry for the Future: The Diaconate and the New Evangelization

The late John Paul II frequently described the Church as being in a new springtime of evangelization. Addressing bishops in 1992, the Holy Father explained: “New times demand that the Christian message reach people today through new methods of apostolate and that it be expressed in language and forms that are accessible.” This characterization of how to preach the Gospel in our present age can be understood as the *new evangelization*.

The Church in Pittsburgh, like dioceses all over the world, is examining and revitalizing its ministries to meet the challenges of the new millennium. Several years ago the Diocese of Pittsburgh convened the 19th Diocesan Synod to evaluate all of the institutions and structures of our diocese to determine how best we can carry on the mission of Jesus Christ considering the historical context of our local society.

“How can we, as a diocesan Church, reach out to others to invite them to the Table of the Lord?” the synod asked. “And, how can we teach and lead the faithful who already gather there to deepen their faith?” In answering these questions, the synod suggested that deacons take a prominent role.

After a yearlong consultation with diocesan offices, consultative bodies, and the clergy, Bishop Paul J. Bradley, Diocesan Administrator, approved recommendations that the Diocese of Pittsburgh call for a new class of deacons which is to begin with the application process in Fall 2007. Bishop Bradley confirmed these recommendations in light of the Envisioning Ministry process that parishes and institutions within the diocese are using to determine the viability of ministry in light of the pastoral demands of our day.

So, how do we understand the diaconate? First, the diaconate is an ordained ministry, like the priesthood. However, deacons are not priests. Diaconal ministry is not a replacement of either the priesthood or even lay ministry. Secondly, deacons serve a particular function and meet specific needs, as the scriptures testify to.

The first reference to deacons in the life of the Church comes early in the *Acts of the Apostles*, when the number of converts to the faith was quickly outpacing the ability of the apostles to meet their needs.

“It is not right for us to neglect the Word of God to serve at tables,” the apostles told their fellow believers. “Select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:2-4).

The diaconate is a ministry of service and charity. Deacons, as Pope John Paul II noted, are servants as Christ was a servant—“living signs of the servanthood of his Church.” By their service, deacons assist the Church in such a way that priests and bishops can fulfill their own ministerial functions. At the same time, the witness to service is also one of benefit for the laity who assume their responsibilities by carrying out the mission of the Church in the social order of life. The ministry of the deacon therefore becomes a sign and witness for both the clergy and the laity.

In our time, diaconal ministry emphasizes evangelization. Evangelization—bringing the Good News to people who are in most need—is a theme evident in the life of a deacon. The *Acts of the Apostles* tells the story of how Saint Philip, one of the first deacons, was instrumental in the conversion of an Ethiopian. Saint Philip taught him, baptized him and, in the process, helped bring the Gospel to Africa.

Evangelization in the Church today takes several forms. There is the classical form of evangelization, where Christians share the “Good News” with non-Christians through charity and service. The new evangelization reaches out to inactive, marginal, and nominal Catholics, and encourages deeper spirituality and participation among practicing Catholics.

How do permanent deacons promote the new evangelization? Their ministries vary as the needs of the Church vary. Some find themselves bringing Christ to young people in detention centers or to men and women in prisons. Others find themselves ministering to patients in hospitals and nursing homes. We find deacons promoting the culture of life through the

ministry of charity and justice. Many others work in the parish, assisting with RCIA, and serving where they are most needed.

The vision of the diaconate is expansive. They welcome strangers, seek justice, and minister to an increasingly diverse community. As married or single men, deacons have the opportunity to be a presence of Christ in their workplaces, homes, and communities.

Diaconal ministry is vast because the scope of evangelization is vast. Like Saint Philip, who brought the Gospel to Africa, deacons serve in order to bring the Gospel to the whole world. Envisioning ministry, therefore, begins with the individual Catholic. They ask themselves—what contribution can I make to the Church? How can I live my faith in a transforming way? How am I at the service of my sisters and brothers? From these questions, some men are asked by the Lord to answer a special calling by serving the Church as an ordained minister.

As the Church in Pittsburgh continues to envision ministry, bring the Gospel to every sector in society, revitalize the faith of Catholics, and meet the needs of the marginalized, may all in the Church heed the call of the new evangelization. May the men of our diocese listen attentively to the Word and consider the possibility of diaconal ministry.

Why Does the Church Need to Ordain Deacons?

People who do not know much about the diaconate often have misconceptions about what it is and how it relates to the priesthood. While the diaconate and the priesthood are similar in that they are both degrees of Holy Orders, they differ both in function and in being.

It is the teaching of the Church that Jesus Christ instituted three offices of ordained ministry for the good of the People of God: Order of Bishop, Order of Presbyter, and Order of Deacon. The Church teaches that men constituted in Holy Orders are invested with a sacred power to further its mission. The episcopacy and the presbyterate—bishops and priests—are higher

orders of the priesthood of Christ. They are configured to Christ as head of the Body. Deacons are configured as servants to the Body of Christ.

Deacons are not priests. Deacons are not a replacement for the priesthood. Men who have considered the priesthood but deny the ability of living priestly celibacy should not see the diaconate as a stepping stone to priesthood. Deacons enrich the mission of the Church with their own contribution that is distinct from both priestly ministry and the ministry of the non-ordained members of the Church.

The spirituality of the deacon flows from his theological identity as one who serves as Christ served. The model for the deacon is Christ himself, who lived totally at the service of the Father for the good of all people and the salvation of the world. Pope Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical to the Church, *Deus Caritas Est*, wrote that deacons are not just a “group to carry out a purely mechanical work of distribution: they were to be men full of the Spirit and of wisdom. With the formation of this group of seven (the diaconate) became a part of the fundamental structure of the Church” (21). We can therefore understand that diaconal ministry does indeed offer its own contribution to the Church.

However, diaconal ministry, while distinct, must nevertheless be understood in the context of the ministerial priesthood. All in ordained ministry—bishops, priests, and deacons—are entrusted with the triple function of teaching, sanctifying, and governing. We see in Christ, the Eternal High Priest, how pastoral ministry is exercised. While priests and bishops are ordained to carry out the sacramental ministry of the Church, deacons are ordained for ministry of service and charity. Bishops, priests, and deacons, then, are constituted in Holy Orders, each carrying out their own sacred functions in the one priesthood of Christ for the service of the Church.

Deacons are called to teach by proclaiming the scriptures and instructing the faithful. This may include occasional preaching, but the normative forms of teaching for deacons include assistance with RCIA, religious education classes, preparing couples for marriage, offering formation to parents prior to the baptism of their children, assisting with the catechesis of candidates for the Sacrament of Confirmation, and teaching, when appropriate, in the workplace and home. Much

of the extensive training during the formation of deacons is dedicated to helping the deacons interpret and pass on the sacred Deposit of Faith.

The sanctifying mission of the deacon is expressed in prayer, the celebration of baptism, distribution of Holy Communion, assisting at and blessing marriages, presiding at funerals, and in the administration of sacramentals. Deacons exercise the mission of governance in directing the works of charity in the community and other sectors of Church life, especially regarding the apostolate of the laity. It is in this ministry that we come to understand the unique contribution of the diaconate.

Diaconal ministry involves all three functions of ordained ministry. Diaconal ministry may emphasize some areas more than others depending on the assignment of the individual deacon. In fact, throughout history, the service of deacons has taken on many forms, depending on the needs of the community at a particular time.

Regardless of their ministry, deacons promise obedience to their bishop. Deacons, like all priests, receive assignments and direction from the diocesan bishop. Though his primary responsibility is to family and employment, the deacon listens carefully to the needs of the Church as spoken by the bishop.

The diocesan bishop, therefore, should be free to appoint and assign deacons to ministry anywhere in the diocese. This can sometimes be difficult for deacons, depending on their family responsibilities and employment or their own gifts and strengths. Yet, deacons must understand that the pastoral needs of the Church always take priority in the consideration of a diaconal assignment.

The gift of obedience, when understood in its theological context, can allow the Christian community to appreciate the importance of diaconal ministry. The diaconate is more than “social work” or a “job” someone performs in the Church. It is a vocation and a way of life. Men considering the diaconate need to understand the lifelong commitment of diaconal ministry and the significant contribution deacons make in the life of the Church.

Who Is a Permanent Deacon?

Saint Stephen was a deacon. Saint Francis of Assisi was one, too. Saint Lawrence was martyred as a deacon. Saint Ignatius of Antioch could not imagine the Church without deacons.

But what do deacons exactly do? As the Diocese of Pittsburgh begins the process of calling future classes of deacons, understanding the roles deacons have played throughout the history of the Church is important for one who is discerning the possibility of ordained ministry.

The name “deacon” comes from the Greek work *diakonos* meaning “servant” or “minister.” Since the early Church, deacons have assisted in the day to day ministries of charity and administration. They have prepared catechumens for baptism, assisted with the liturgy, organized the temporal affairs of the Church, and coordinated charitable outreach to the marginalized.

The diaconal ministry is a threefold ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Charity. Deacons are called to preach the Gospel in the way they live their lives; to assist during the celebration of Mass and administer the sacramentals of the Church; and to reach out in Christian love to people who are in need. The distinct character of diaconal ministry is the unique way in which deacons are able to live the Gospel in the social and temporal spheres of society where priesthood itself is not usually lived.

The Order of Deacon was an essential part of the Church’s hierarchy until the fifth century. For various reasons, though, the diaconate began to experience a slow decline until it became only an intermediate stage for candidates preparing for priestly ordination. The Council of Trent encouraged the restoration of the diaconate however it was not until after the Second Vatican Council that the Order of Deacon would be restored. In 1967, Pope Paul VI issued norms to establish the diaconate as a permanent rank of the hierarchy.

In 1987, Pope John Paul II addressed an audience of deacons explaining the important role of diaconal ministry. “The sacramental grace of (a deacon’s) ordination is meant to strengthen him and to make his efforts fruitful, even as his secular occupation gives him entry into the temporal sphere in a way that is normally not appropriate for other members of the

clergy.” The Holy Father continued, “At the same time, the fact that he is an ordained minister of the Church brings a special mention to his efforts in the eyes of those with whom he lives and works.”

The Church in America faces unprecedented challenges that include abortion, euthanasia, eroding social values, technological advances, an aging population, racism, and poverty to name just a few. Deacons have access to areas where other ordained ministers do not carry out ministry. Because deacons work in the marketplace, they can bring Christ into their working lives. While the laity have a special responsibility of transforming society with Gospel values, deacons, as ordained ministers, bring a unique witness of service and charity to the People of God. We see evidence and example of this in the pages of the *Acts of the Apostles*. The care for widows and orphans is certainly the responsibility of the entire community. But what we see in the scriptures is the authority by which ministry is carried out in the name of the apostles. It is by that same apostolic authority deacons exercise ministry among the faithful in society.

Additionally, deacons exercise important ministries related to the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. Deacons are not marginal figures or substitutes for priests. Rather, deacons are an important part of the hierarchy who bring an awareness to all in the Church of the realities of society itself. For example, at the end of the Mass when the priest blesses the faithful, it is the deacon who offers the dismissal urging the assembly to go in peace, to love and serve the Lord. This gesture sends the Church out into the world to preach the Good News in a world in need of such witness. So appropriate is the dismissal given by the deacon for it is his ministry that encourages the ministry of service and charity in society.

Diaconal Ministry in the Diocese of Pittsburgh

The bishops of Pittsburgh have ordained two classes of deacons, first in 1974 and then again in 1999. The men in these classes have served well the faithful in parishes, prisons, nursing homes, and many other settings.

Pittsburgh's former bishop, Donald W. Wuerl, called for a class of deacons in a pastoral statement that was released in Summer 2005 as a response to recommendations made by the 19th Diocesan Synod. There are currently over forty aspirants in the deacon formation program.

Through the Envisioning Ministry for the Future project, the Diocese of Pittsburgh is currently evaluating its needs in light of the overall decline of priests and the pastoral challenges confronting this local Church. The Envisioning Ministry process has been a significant instrument in determining how diaconal ministry might unfold in the diocese. The current aspirants in the deacon formation program will be trained to undertake specific responsibilities in parishes and institutions of the diocese.

As the diocese continues to call men into the deacon formation program, we are looking for candidates who have the qualities and skills that are suitable for specific ministry. During their formation, the candidates will be given pastoral experiences during the Summer months to complement the theological training received in the classroom. The purpose of the deacon formation program is to expose as much as possible the men to the realities of diaconal ministry. The context of the formation program involves both the theological and spiritual training necessary for ordained ministry as well as the pastoral insight of how to minister in a loving way.

Upon ordination, deacons can be assigned in a variety of ways. First, deacons can be assigned to the ministry of service and charity at a particular parish identified by the bishop. Secondly, deacons could be assigned to an institution such as a detention center, nursing home, or hospital. Thirdly, the deacon could be assigned to a cluster of parishes supervising ministry that might include marriage preparation, coordinating the RCIA program for several parishes, working with the Saint Vincent de Paul Society or Ladies of Charity, or coordinating youth ministry programs. Fourthly, a deacon could be assigned to a diocesan office where he can assist in specialized ministry. Finally, the deacon might be appointed as a parish life collaborator supervising ministry in a parish in the absence of a priest.

In all cases, diaconal ministry is in service to both the clergy and the laity. The assignment given by the bishop reflects how the needs of the faithful are being met in a most practical way. The deacon, for his part, receives

the assignment in obedience to the bishop and the needs of the Church. Diaconal spirituality therefore presumes the candidate's understanding that the needs of the Church are always greater than our own personal needs.

Diaconal ministry in the Diocese of Pittsburgh will continue to be dynamic. Like the first deacons of the Church, deacons in Pittsburgh will serve wherever and whenever they are required, constantly searching for new and important ways to preach the Good News to those most in need.

How Does the Church Determine the Suitability of Candidates?

What makes a good deacon? What are the characteristics required for ordained ministry? What should the inquirer consider in his discernment? These are important questions. Ordained ministry is a vocation in the life of the Church which derives from God and is confirmed by the Church. To discern a vocation, therefore, requires a process which involves both the inquirer and the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "No one has a right to receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed no one claims this office for himself" (1578).

Men who experience a call to the diaconate should examine themselves spiritually and personally to discern if they are capable to exercise diaconal ministry. Becoming a deacon involves a long journey of discernment, prayer, learning, and growth. Those who feel called to serve the Church as deacons begin the journey by first becoming an inquirer. Inquirers seek knowledge about the diaconate and discuss their sense of call with family and friends, their pastor, and with the parish community.

As the inquirer considers his calling, he should keep in mind that no one has a right to be ordained. Initial discernment involves a self-evaluation. The inquirer might ask: What is my motivation for even considering diaconal ministry? How loyal am I to Church teaching? Does ministry excite me? Does getting involved in the life of other people inspire me? Do I understand that the needs of the Church are often greater than my own needs? Initial discernment involves from the inquirer the ability to answer these questions.

Additionally, because deacons are called to meet specific needs and serve in particular ministries, the inquirer should also discern the whole idea of obedience and availability to the bishop. Is this the right time in my life? Can I devote enough time to the formation program in light of my responsibilities to family and career? Am I presently involved in parish ministry? Does my pastor even know me? These are also important questions that require answers.

In general, though, men thinking about the diaconate need to meet some basic criteria. Candidates can either be married or unmarried. If they are unmarried, the candidate must consider the ability to live lifelong celibacy. If the individual is married, he must consider lifelong celibacy if his spouse should be called home to the Lord. Inquirers should, of course, be Catholic men with a solid faith and a good reputation. They should have a deep spiritual life. Inquirers should be psychologically and emotionally healthy and have the ability to communicate well.

Because they will be asked to take leadership positions, deacons need to be responsible, prudent, and self-directed. They should be able to work well with others and listen to other points of view. They should have an understanding of the diverse pastoral situations that require the ministry of the ordained.

Applicants must be between the ages of thirty-one and sixty in order to be considered for the deacon formation program. Inquirers should already have obtained at least a bachelor's degree or its equivalent. Men inquiring about the diaconate should also determine whether there are any canonical impediments or irregularities that would hinder them from ordination. This information is reviewed more closely during the application period.

If they are converts, or if they have returned to the Church, inquirers should wait three years before applying to the formation program. Recently married or widowed men should also wait at least two years before beginning the process.

Men considering their call should examine their marriage or singleness. If they are married, the marriage should be healthy and stable. If they are

single, they should be comfortable living a celibate life. Once ordained, deacons cannot marry or remarry. Married men need to have their wives' consent to both enter the program and to be ordained. Wives are required to participate in some aspects of the formation program.

In addition, men considering the diaconate also need to discern whether they are ready to respond at this particular point in their life. The formation program involves five years of study, reflection, and pastoral experience that requires several nights and weekends. Though their primary responsibility is to family, deacons pledge obedience to the bishop. They should also be able to answer the call wherever and whenever it comes.

The requirements of the diaconate may be intimidating but they are all important. Men considering the diaconate should pray and consider the expectations while discussing all of this with family, friends, and their pastor. Once this initial discernment is completed, inquirers may continue with the application process.

Application Process and Formation Program

How does one actually become a deacon? What all is involved with the application process? What are the requirements of the formation program? Over the next five years, ending with their ordination in January 2013, the men who will be ordained deacons participate in a process of discernment, learning and reflection, study and research, and involvement with pastoral experiences. All of these experiences will deepen their faith and prepare them for ordained ministry. Becoming a deacon begins with the individual seeking the will of God. Men sensing a call to the diaconate should seek information and discuss their discernment with their pastors and families. Every priest in the diocese has been given information which can be reproduced and distributed to inquirers. One can obviously contact the Office for the Diaconate to receive more information.

Pastors have an important role because they have the responsibility to invite and nominate men to the formation program. As a result, men

should first contact their pastor before any other determination is made. Because the formation program requires many evenings and weekends, married men need to be sure their wives and families are in support.

From September through December 2007, pastors will nominate men to the formation program. After some initial screening, men who meet the canonical and educational requirements will be invited to submit an application.

All materials related to the application process must be submitted and received by December 31, 2007. After further administrative screenings, applicants will then participate in two interviews with diocesan staff. The process will conclude in May 2008 when recommendations are given to the diocesan bishop regarding who can participate in the formation program.

From June through December 2008, men will participate in what is called the “Propaedeutic Period” which is a thirty-week experience involving workshops and days of recollection. The presentations will emphasize the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral requisites of candidates who are pursuing ordained ministry.

In addition, the aspirants will meet with a spiritual director and formation advisor on a regular basis. The wives will also be asked to participate in special sessions in which more information is shared and exchanged.

In December 2008, the diocese will confirm through an evaluation process which aspirants will advance to the Candidate Formation Program. Beginning in January 2009, the candidates will participate in the four-year formation program which involves twenty-four academic courses structured over five-week mini-terms. At the conclusion of each semester, an examination will be administered.

In addition to the academic coursework, candidates will participate in eight one-day pastoral workshops, eight days of recollection, and five retreats. The candidates will also continue meeting with their spiritual director and formation advisor on a monthly basis.

Finally, candidates will develop ministry skills during the Summer by completing four ten-week pastoral experiences in the parish, institutional set-

tings, and other pastoral settings. Once the coursework, examinations, and pastoral experiences are completed, the candidates for the diaconate will be nominated for ordination which is slated for January 2013.

Becoming a deacon is challenging because serving as a deacon is challenging; deacons must become servants, as Christ was a servant. But for the men who make the journey, the rewards of ministry are worth the challenge. If you are considering the diaconate, I urge you to speak with your pastor.

In conclusion, the Church continuously renews herself in the celebration of the sacred liturgy. It is here that we come to understand the mystery of God's love for each of us. The fruit of the Eucharist is our discipleship and carrying out the mission of the Church. All the baptized share in this mission, each in our own way. Holy Orders brings to the life of the Church the assurance of sacramental ministry and the living Word of God as contained in the sacred Deposit of Faith. Deacons, in their own way, bring to all the faithful a witness which is in service to the Gospel. While the formation process is a long, arduous experience, it nevertheless brings about a joy that words cannot describe.

Prayerful best wishes to our current deacons in active ministry, to the aspirants participating in the formation program, and to all those inquirers who are considering a vocation to the Order of Deacon.



**OFFICE FOR THE DIACONATE
2900 NOBLESTOWN ROAD
PITTSBURGH, PA 15205**

**SISTER PATRICIA ROGAN, O.S.F.
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
(412) 456-3067**

**REVEREND JAMES A. WEHNER, S.T.D.
DIRECTOR
(412) 456-3124**