

Diaconate History/Bulletin Announcements

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – A Brief History of the Diaconate (Part 1 of 10)

Throughout the first centuries of the Church, the deacon served as “the ears, mouth, heart, and soul of the bishop.” (*Didascalia Apostolorum* 2) Baptizing, taking communion to the sick, and caring for the poor, the deacon’s ministry was truly one of service. The Council of Nicaea (325) subordinated deacons to presbyters (who represented the bishop in local communities and presided at the Eucharist), thus signaling the beginning of the end of the ministry of permanent deacons in the early Church. As the number of men who wanted to remain deacons all their lives decreased, the diaconate evolved into a brief, final “step” in preparation for priesthood. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) did propose the restoration of the permanent diaconate, but it was not until the 1964 that the bishops at Vatican II approved its restoration. In 1967, Paul VI issued guidelines for the permanent diaconate and gave permission for national bishops’ conferences to restore the diaconate. The United States’ bishops did so in 1971 when they published guidelines for the ministry and formation of permanent deacons. In our archdiocese, the first class of permanent deacons was ordained in 1976.

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – Who are Deacons? (Part 2 of 10)

Who are deacons and what do they do? The Second Vatican Council tells us that strengthened by sacramental grace, deacons are dedicated to the People of God in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel, and of works of charity. (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* #29)

Men who are ordained deacons receive the first of three degrees of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the other degrees being that of priest and bishop. At the ordination of deacons the bishop lays hands on the candidate signifying the deacon’s special attachment to the bishop in the deacon’s ministry of service. Thus, deacons share in Christ’s mission and grace in a special way. Through their ordination they are configured to Christ who came “as one who serves.” (Luke 22:27)

“Deacons are ministers ordained for tasks of service of the Church; they do not receive the ministerial priesthood, but ordination confers on them important functions in the ministry of the word, divine worship, pastoral governance, and the service of charity, tasks which they must carry out under the pastoral authority of their bishop.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1596)

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – What Can Deacons Do? (Part 3 of 10)

“It is the task of deacons to assist the bishop and priests in the celebration of the divine mysteries, above all the Eucharist, in the distribution of Holy Communion, in assisting and blessing marriages, in the proclamation of the Gospel and preaching, in presiding over funerals, and in dedicating themselves to the various ministries of charity.” (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* #29)

The deacon’s liturgical ministry includes:

- (1) assisting the bishop and priest at Mass
- (2) witnessing marriages and presiding at baptisms and funerals outside of Mass and at the Liturgy of the Hours
- (3) blessing objects and persons usually within liturgical celebrations
- (4) proclaiming and preaching the Word of God
- (5) providing pastoral care of the aged, sick, and dying

Deacons also play an important catechetical role, often being involved in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and in preparing parents for infant baptism. His liturgical ministry of proclaiming and preaching the Word of God is often extended beyond liturgy to parish meetings and religious education sessions.

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – Transitional and Permanent Deacons (Part 4 of 10)

Since Vatican II (1962-1965), the Roman Catholic Church has restored the diaconate “as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy.” (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* #29) The Eastern Churches have always maintained it. The permanent diaconate, which can be conferred on married or single men, is for men who make a lifelong commitment to serve as a deacon. In our archdiocese, men who have completed the Lay Pastoral Ministry Program (or its equivalent) can apply for admission to the Deacon Formation Program. As they discern the call to the diaconate, they gather every other weekend at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary for three years of formation and study.

The *transitional* diaconate is for men who intend to become priests, thus transitional deacons must be single men. Seen before Vatican II as a “brief stepping stone” to priesthood, the transitional diaconate has also been restored so that men preparing for priesthood ordination would become deacons and exercise diaconal ministry for several months before becoming priests. In our archdiocese, men discerning a call to the priesthood enter a five-year program of formation and study at the seminary and are normally ordained deacons about one year before they are ordained priests.

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – The Ordination of a Deacon (Part 5 of 10)

After the gospel reading at an ordination Mass, those to be ordained as deacons are called forward. A priest, usually the one in charge of their formation, asks the bishop, on behalf of the Church, to ordain these men who have been found worthy and suitable. After the bishop’s homily, the candidates make a commitment to celibacy (if married, this commitment means that a permanent deacon cannot marry after his wife dies). Next the candidates make a promise of obedience to the bishop and his successors. And finally, the candidates promise to pray the Divine Office, i.e., the Liturgy of the Hours, daily. The candidates then lie prostrate as the litany of saints is sung. The bishop alone lays hands on each candidate and then says the prayer of consecration over them. The deacons are then vested with stole and dalmatic, and given the Book of the Gospels with the words, “Receive the gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach.” The newly ordained deacons then receive the gifts of bread of wine and assist the bishop at the altar as the Mass continues.

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – Sacraments and other Rituals (Part 6 of 10)

Deacons can preside at celebration of the sacrament of baptism and witness the sacrament of marriage. They cannot celebrate Mass, but they can preside at celebrations of the Eucharist outside of Mass, for example, exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Deacons cannot hear confessions or anoint the sick, but are often involved in visitations and communion to the sick, as well as giving Viaticum (the final reception of communion before death.) Deacons can also lead all the Rites of Christian Burial apart from Mass, e.g. prayers at a visitation/wakes, memorial services, and cemetery burials.

A deacon is given the unique liturgical role of thrice singing “Christ our Light” as he carries the Easter candle into the darkened church at the Easter Vigil; the deacon then sings the great Easter proclamation (*Exsultet*). Normally deacons sing the ancient petitions of the Good Friday liturgy. Liturgical rubrics also indicate a preference for deacons to sing the Roman Martyrology (at Christmas Midnight Mass) and the Epiphany proclamation.

Having promised to pray the Divine Office daily, it is most appropriate that a deacon preside at communal celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours, especially Morning Prayer (*Lauds*) and Evening Prayer (*Vespers*), when a priest is not available to preside.

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – The Introductory Rite (Part 7 of 10)

Vested in an alb, cincture, and stole (over his left shoulder) the deacon would normally walk before the priest in the entrance procession carrying the Book of Gospels. (Deacons may also wear a dalmatic over their alb and stole. The dalmatic, usually in the same color and material as the priest's chasuble, has wide, short sleeves, is open at the side, and reaches below the knees.) If the Book of the Gospel is not carried in procession, the deacon walks to the right of the priest in the procession. Upon reaching the sanctuary and reverencing the altar with the other ministers, the priest and deacon kiss the altar and then proceed to their chairs. The deacon can lead the people in the invocations of the penitential rite.

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – The Liturgy of the Word (Part 8 of 10)

During the Liturgy of the Word, as the gospel acclamation begins, the deacon stands in front of the priest, bows, and asks for his blessing. The words of the priest's blessing to the deacon are: "The Lord be in your heart and on your lips that you may worthily proclaim his gospel. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The deacon then proceeds to the lectern, carrying the Book of the Gospels if there is a gospel procession. After proclaiming the gospel, the deacon kisses the book from which the gospel was read. In certain cases, if he has faculties, the deacon may then preach the homily. After the Profession of Faith, it is the role of the deacon to announce the general intercessions, i.e., the prayers of petition.

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – The Liturgy of the Eucharist (Part 9 of 10)

The deacon, or one of the other ministers, can prepare the altar; then the deacon receives the gifts of bread and wine from the faithful, and prepares the gifts at the altar or credence table. As part of this preparation, the deacon pours a little bit of water into the wine, saying silently, "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity." During the Eucharistic Prayer, the deacon will kneel from the time of the epiclesis (the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine) until after the words of consecration. At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, the deacon elevates the chalice while the priest elevates the Host and sings the words of the doxology, "Through Him, with Him, in Him..."

DEACONS: Ministers of Service – The Communion Rite and Concluding Rite (Part 10 of 10)

During the sign of peace, it is the deacon's role to invite all present to exchange a sign of peace. As an ordinary minister of communion, during the singing of the Lamb of God, the deacon assists the priest in preparing the vessels for the communion of the faithful by pouring the Precious Blood into communion cups and breaking and distributing the consecrated Hosts to communion plates. Receiving communion from the priest, deacons may then help minister the Eucharist to the extraordinary ministers and hand the extraordinary ministers their vessels to minister the Eucharist to the people. During the communion procession, the deacon normally ministers the Blood of Christ to the communicants. After communion, the deacon may repose any Hosts remaining in the tabernacle.

At the end of Mass, the deacon (or another minister) may make brief announcements to the people. If there is a solemn blessing or prayer over the people, the deacon invites all to "Bow down for the blessing." After the blessing, the deacon dismisses the people. He then kisses the altar with the priest, makes the appropriate reverence, and walks to the right of the priest in the closing procession.