



# Do you have a heart for others?

DIOCESE OF PITTSBURGH DEACON FORMATION PROGRAM

# What is a deacon?

A deacon in the Roman Catholic tradition is a member of an order of ordained ministry with its roots in the earliest days of the Church.

In the New Testament, we read that, when faced with the need for help, the apostles prayed and laid hands on certain men to designate them for special service to the community (Acts 6:1–6).

The title “deacon” derives from the Greek word *diakonos*, meaning “servant” or “minister.”

Strengthened by sacramental grace, in union with the bishop and his priests, deacons are called to serve the people of God in the three-fold ministry of liturgy, word, and charity.

By their spirituality and ministry, deacons should exhibit a heart for others and be a source of inspiration, motivation, and example for all of the faithful to provide humble, loving service to those in need.



# How did the ministry of deacons begin?

As noted, the origins of the diaconate are found in the Acts of the Apostles, which recounts how the apostles, overwhelmed with the growing needs of the people, specially designated seven men, including Stephen and Philip, to perform works of charity and service.

Deacons filled important administrative roles in the Church until the fifth century; subsequently, for various reasons, the diaconate in the Latin Church began to experience a slow decline until eventually it became a stepping stone on the path to the priesthood. However, the Church has never been without the ministry of deacons in some capacity.

The Second Vatican Council reinvigorated the diaconate as a permanent ministry in the Latin Church and, for the first time, opened it to married as well as single men. Since 1967, when Pope Saint Paul VI issued *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, which laid out the general norms for this ministry, the permanent diaconate has flourished in many parts of the world. Today, the Church has approximately 47,000 permanent deacons worldwide, about 40 percent of them are in the United States.



# Why do we need deacons?

Service has always been at the heart of the Church's ministry. At the Last Supper, in washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus said, "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (Jn. 13:15).

At the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, Pope Saint Paul VI affirmed this mission, saying that "the Church has declared herself the servant of humanity." The notion of the Church-as-servant finds concrete sacramental expression in the diaconate.

While all of the faithful, by virtue of their Baptism, are called to serve others, particularly those in need, Pope Saint John Paul II once said, "The service of the deacon is the Church's service sacramentalized." Furthermore, he added, the diaconate is not just one ministry among others, but it is truly meant to be a driving force for the entire service of the Church.



# What are the functions of a deacon?

A deacon has liturgical duties, which he performs primarily in church. In addition, his service to the people of God can be expressed in a wide range of non-liturgical ways. Some examples might help:

- Liturgically, deacons assist the priest at Mass. They proclaim the Gospel, preach on occasion, and serve as ordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Deacons also may be called upon to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism; witness marriages; preside at funerals and burial services; lead the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic adoration, and benediction; offer blessings in the name of the Church; and administer sacramentals.
- Outside of church, deacons might be found bringing the love of Jesus Christ to people in hospitals and nursing homes, jails and prisons, or food pantries and soup kitchens. They might work with immigrants, youths and young adults, those in special need, or those on the fringes of society. An important facet of diaconal ministry is to share the faith by evangelizing as well as by teaching in RCIA, religious education, and sacramental preparation programs. Some deacons also facilitate bereavement groups and assist people going through the annulment process.

Basically, anywhere and everywhere people are in need of the Gospel is where deacons can — and should — be found.



# How do the roles of priest and deacon differ?

While both priests and deacons are ordained ministers, and they share some liturgical functions, their primary roles in the Church are distinct.

Above all else, priests stand *in persona Christi*—in the person of Christ—to consecrate the Eucharist during the celebration of the Mass and to share the compassionate mercy and healing of God in the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick. Deacons never perform these sacred functions.

In the words of the Second Vatican Council, deacons are ordained “not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service,” which, as noted, can take many possible forms and fill numerous needs in the Church. Deacons are to be a sacramental sign of Christ the Servant. Their role is to be—in the words of Pope Saint Paul VI—“a driving force for service,” which is an essential part of the Church’s mission.



## Are deacons an answer to the growing shortage of priests?

No. While deacons can alleviate some of the effects of having fewer priests by assuming administrative or sacramental duties that might enable priests to focus more exclusively on their sacred ministry, the answer to the shortage of priests is to promote and pray for more vocations to the priesthood.

The reason for ordaining deacons should not be because the Church needs more priests but, rather, because it needs more deacons.



## How do deacons relate to active laity in the Church?

Just as deacons are not “junior priests,” they also are not “super laity.” Theirs is a distinct ministry that, while sharing some characteristics with that of both priests and laity, is in direct relationship with the diocesan bishop, under whose authority they exercise their service to God’s people.

More than ever, the Church needs the full and active participation of all its members. Deacons should support and encourage the service of the laity, first of all, by their example of service and, secondly, by collaborating with the faithful who answer the call to serve. Because deacons typically hold secular jobs and have personal and family obligations aside from their ministry, they can be a witness and example to the laity about how to integrate their baptismal call into everyday life and live out their Christian faith in society.

To truly be what Bishop David A. Zubik calls *The Church Alive!*, we need both a healthy, vibrant clergy — bishops, priests, and deacons — as well as a healthy, vibrant laity, working together to build up the Kingdom of God on earth.





## Is the diaconate open to married and unmarried men?

Yes. In revitalizing the diaconate as a permanent ministry in the Church, the Second Vatican Council also gave it a new dimension: “This diaconate will be able to be conferred . . . even upon those (men) living in the married state.”

An aspirant who is married must be in a stable, well-established marriage. Given the time commitments of the formation program, a man’s wife and family should be fully involved in the decision-making process about him applying for and, if accepted, continuing in the program. A married aspirant’s wife must provide written consent to his participation and should be prepared to join him in some aspects of the formation program.

It’s important to note that, once ordained, a deacon cannot marry or remarry. Consequently, unmarried candidates must discern their willingness to embrace a life of permanent celibacy, and married candidates must consider if they could accept celibacy in the unfortunate event they lose their spouse or their marriage ends following ordination.



## How are wives involved in the diaconate?

First of all, wives are encouraged to participate in various aspects of the formation program, to attend days of recollection and annual retreats with their husbands, and to bond with the wives of other candidates and with wives of men already serving in diaconal ministry.

In some cases, wives work closely with their husbands in ministry after ordination, helping prepare couples for marriage, for instance. Often, however, a spouse's role is best expressed through total, prayerful support, especially at those times when formation or ministry becomes particularly demanding and time-consuming.

“In terms of official ministry, there is no specific role for the deacon's wife,” according to the book *101 Questions & Answers on Deacons* by Deacon Bill Ditewig. “The deacon's ordination does not confer any ministerial role to the deacon's wife. . . . Some wives choose to be extremely active in ministry based on their own qualifications and interests; other wives prefer to remain engaged in activities not related to official ministry.”

Overall, however, diaconal formation and ministry can enrich the spiritual life of not only candidates and deacons but also wives and families.



## How and where are deacons assigned?

At ordination, deacons promise obedience to the diocesan bishop and his successors. This promise shapes a deacon's ministry because deacons, like priests, are assigned by their bishop, who may appoint a deacon anywhere in the diocese.

As a practical matter, where a deacon lives, his family situation, employment obligations, and personal talents — along with the needs of the Church — are all taken into consideration.

For liturgical service, deacons typically are rooted in a parish, which may or may not be their home parish. In addition, deacons are assigned to a ministry of service and charity, perhaps in a parish, but sometimes in an institutional setting or in conjunction with a diocesan program or agency.



## Are deacons paid for their service?

Diaconal ministry most often is exercised as part-time voluntary service to the Church, which is why a deacon is expected to either have a job or other financial means to support himself and his family. Deacons working in some aspect of ministry, either in a parish or elsewhere, typically obtained those jobs on their own. In those cases, their employment should be considered distinct from their diaconal assignment.



# How does a man prepare to serve as a deacon?

Formation for the diaconate involves a program of education, training, spiritual growth, personal development, ongoing conversion, and discernment.

The formation experience should be powerful and challenging and, at the same time, practical and relevant. It requires significant time, trust, discipline, self-surrender, obedience, and true effort.

Specific elements of formation for aspirants/candidates include classes, workshops, days of recollection, spiritual direction, formation sessions, parish involvement, an annual retreat, and pastoral experiences.



# What are the basic qualifications?

In the Diocese of Pittsburgh, an aspirant for the diaconate must be

- between the ages of 30 and 59 upon admission to the formation program,
- living a strong Catholic faith in full conformity with all of the Church's moral teachings,
- a college graduate with at least a bachelor's degree,
- fully initiated into the sacramental life of the Church and free of all canonical impediments and irregularities,
- in good physical, emotional, and psychological health, and
- able to support himself and his family with a reliable source of income or other financial means.

In addition, a recently married man should live out his vocation of marriage for five years before applying to the Deacon Formation Program.

A convert to the Catholic Church or someone who has returned to the full practice of the faith after a prolonged absence should wait five years before his acceptance into the program.

Likewise, for a recent widower, at least three years should elapse before he is accepted into the program.



## What personal characteristics are needed?

As servant leaders in the Church, deacons must be responsible, prudent, and self-directed. They should be able to work well with others, listen to other points of view, and interact comfortably with a diversity of people.

Accordingly, a candidate for the diaconate should be

- a man of solid faith, deep spirituality, and good character and reputation who exhibits a caring heart for others,
- generously willing to serve the diocesan Church with a spirit of humility, patience, and obedience,
- capable of assuming a leadership role when needed, always mindful of his relationship with his bishop and the priests of the diocese as well as the lay faithful and other members of society.

The deacon, as a herald of the Gospel, must be willing and able to minister broadly based on the needs of others and how he might help meet those needs. In the words of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), “The deacon is ordained precisely for service in both the sanctuary and the marketplace.”



## Is there a “typical” deacon?

Not at all. Deacons are as varied in their backgrounds, personalities, occupations, and talents as any other group of individuals.

Some are single; most are married. They are husbands, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, and uncles. They come into ministry with a wide range of academic and professional experiences and talents. They are attorneys, teachers, engineers, bankers, and orthodontists; they come from careers in marketing, insurance, health care, finance, and many other fields.

Most are lifelong Catholics; some are converts to the faith. All have a tremendous love for God and his people, a natural inclination and deep desire to serve others, and a firm commitment to walking with the Lord.





## How does the application process work?

An inquirer should first discuss the idea of applying to the Deacon Formation Program with members of his immediate family—particularly his wife, if he is married—to determine their level of support. They should be prayerful in their discernment.

He then should speak with his pastor, who must nominate him for the program in order to begin the application process. If the inquirer accepts his pastor's nomination, he would receive the application materials. If he meets the program's basic norms and requirements, next would come personal interviews, a psychological evaluation, a visit to the applicant's home, assessment by the admissions board, and, ultimately, consideration for approval by the diocesan bishop.

Acceptance into the Propaedeutic Period of the formation program depends on the successful completion of all these steps.



# What is the Propaedeutic Period?

The word “propaedeutic” refers to preparatory or introductory instruction. *The National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, which was developed by the USCCB, calls for such a period prior to the core formation program.

In the Diocese of Pittsburgh, the Propaedeutic Period consists of classes and other events to help aspirants deepen their understanding of diaconal ministry and the formation program. Wives are welcomed and encouraged to share in various aspects of this experience.

At the end of the Propaedeutic Period, aspirants are evaluated to determine who will continue into the Deacon Formation Program.



# What is the Deacon Formation Program like?

Formation for ministry encompasses four key dimensions of development: intellectual, spiritual, pastoral, and personal, all of which are essential and interwoven.

- Candidates attend academic courses on topics ranging from theology and scripture to canon law, Church history, liturgy, and catechesis, among others. These courses are held one night a week at the Diocesan Pastoral Center. In addition to these courses, which typically run throughout the spring, fall, and winter, are periodic day-long Saturday workshops.
- For spiritual formation, candidates are assigned a spiritual director with whom they are to meet regularly for confidential guidance in the growth of their personal relationship with the Lord. Complementing this facet of formation are periodic days of recollection and a weekend retreat each year, which wives are welcome to attend.

- Each summer, candidates are assigned to engage in some aspect of pastoral ministry at a parish, hospital, nursing home, jail, food pantry, or other institutional setting where diaconal ministry is likely to occur.
- Throughout the program, candidates work with a formation advisor for guidance in the personal aspects of their own human development and for support and direction in all aspects of formation.

Diaconal formation promotes the development of the whole person and his individual gifts and talents. At the end of the formation program, if a candidate has completed all of the requirements with proven competence, he is recommended to the diocesan bishop, who makes the final determination about whether a man should be called to ordination.



# What does discernment to the diaconate mean?

The application process and formation program require all participants to submit to the Church's two-fold discernment experience.

- On his part, a man is expected to use this time to honestly, sincerely, and prayerfully evaluate the genuineness of what he believes to be a calling by God to diaconal ministry. He should reflect on his primary responsibilities to his family and career and assess whether this is the right time in his life to undertake such a commitment. Since a deacon pledges obedience to the diocesan bishop, a man interested in this ministry must also pray about being at the disposal of the Church and the needs of the people.
- On the Church's part, because no one has an inherent right to ordination, prayerful discernment also takes place throughout the application and formation processes about the individual's suitability for ministry; his motivation, genuineness, and sincerity; his growth in the pertinent areas of development; and, eventually, his readiness to undertake the duties and responsibilities of diaconal ministry.



# How long is the formation program?

The overall Deacon Formation Program, including the Propaedeutic Period, involves at least five years of study, prayer, and pastoral experiences that typically occupy aspirants/candidates one evening a week and some Saturdays and weekends. Additional time is required for reading and assignments.

Therefore, men discerning a call to the diaconate must seriously weigh the effects of this time commitment on their family as well as on their career and other responsibilities. They should freely engage their spouse, if married, and other members of their family in this important decision.

Formation does not end with ordination, however. Deacons are expected to participate in ongoing opportunities to grow in each of the dimensions of formation throughout their ministry, particularly in the early years following ordination.



## Are there any financial obligations?

An inquirer is responsible for fees related to the application process (academic transcripts, safe environment clearance documents, etc.). During formation, candidates pay a modest tuition, the cost of any required books, and the room/board expense of the annual retreat. However, inability to pay is never a barrier to participation in the program.



## Is the diaconate a permanent commitment?

Yes. “Underlying the restoration and renewal of the diaconate at the Second Vatican Council was the principle that the diaconate is a stable and permanent rank of ordained ministry,” according to the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*.

A man ordained as a deacon is not making a temporary or reversible commitment, as he might do in lay ministry and other forms of volunteer service to the Church. He is embracing a true and distinct vocation — strengthened by the sacramental grace of Holy Orders — that becomes part of his identity all day every day.





# How can I learn more about the diaconate?

Several books that someone who is exploring the diaconate might want to consider include:

- *101 Questions & Answers on Deacons*  
by William T. Ditewig  
Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah, New Jersey, 2007.
- *The Deacon Reader* edited by James Keating  
Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah, New Jersey, 2006.
- *The Emerging Diaconate: Servant Leaders in a Servant Church* by William T. Ditewig  
Paulist Press, New York/ Mahwah, New Jersey, 2007.
- *The Heart of the Diaconate* by James Keating  
Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah, New Jersey, 2015.

Finally, inquiries can be directed to the Deacon Formation Program of the Diocese of Pittsburgh:  
deacons@diopitt.org or 412-456-3124.