



The Catholic Deacon
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A Deacon is ordained to the first rank of sacred orders, not to the priesthood or the episcopacy. He is no longer a layman, but a member of the clergy.

LOS ANGELES, CA (Catholic Online) – The role of what is called the "permanent" diaconate is all too often misunderstood.

The Catholic Church restored this sacred order as a permanent way of serving the Church (and not just a transitional order for men on the way to priesthood) in the Latin Rite well over 40 years ago.

This was accomplished by an act of Pope Paul VI who decided in 1967 to restore the diaconate as a permanent rank of clergy for the Church in the West. The Diaconate as an order of Clergy has been a part of the Eastern Church from apostolic times without interruption.

In October 1968, the Holy See approved the organization of the Diaconate in America for the Roman Catholic Church. In 1998, the Vatican released two important documents to dispel some of the persistent misunderstandings and confusion and to open up an understanding of deacons as both "sacred ministers" and "members of the hierarchy."

These documents were issued on 22 February, 1998; the Feast of the Chair of Peter. This feast has long been an occasion to honor all the Church's clergy since the first century. It was an appropriate occasion to issue statements regarding the formation and work of permanent deacons, since they are such an important part of the clergy; participating in its missionary and pastoral service.

The extensive documents, "[The Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons](#)" and "The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons," were ordered and approved by Pope John Paul II. They are a part of the Church's magisterial teaching.

They were generally well received by deacons, priests, bishops and the lay faithful and have helped to promote a better understanding of the role of permanent deacons in the Church in this Third Millennium of Christianity. They also led to a growing standardization of diaconal training and increasing clarification of the role of deacons in the liturgical, pastoral, and ministerial life of the Church.

The diaconate has a rich history.

During the Church's first five centuries, this ministry flourished everywhere. But for various reasons, the order declined in the West as a distinct rank of clerical service, and eventually disappeared. It was relegated to a "transitional" order given to candidates on their way to priestly ordination.

Today, we still distinguish between transitional and those called "permanent" deacons. However, this distinction does not create two ranks of deacons, but clarifies the direction in which the deacon is headed. The "transitional" deacon is simply on his way to priestly ordination.

In the Eastern Catholic Church, however, the diaconate remained a part of the permanent rank of sacred orders without interruption from the time of the Apostles until now. It has a clearly defined place in the life of the Eastern catholic Churches.

Many Eastern Rite Catholics refer to their deacons as "Father Deacon," and they have important liturgical, charitable and pastoral roles. We can learn much from our Eastern Catholic brethren as we develop the life and ministry of deacons in the Western Church as an order of Clergy ordained not "unto the priesthood" but unto service.

The Council of Trent (1545–63) called for the restoration of the permanent diaconate for the entire Church. But it was not until the

Second Vatican Council, four centuries later, that this direction was implemented.

The Council Fathers explicitly stated their purpose as threefold: to enhance the Church, to strengthen with sacred orders those men already engaged in diaconal functions, and to provide assistance to areas suffering clerical shortages.

Among those calling for the restoration were the survivors of "The Deacons Circle," priests who suffered at the Dachau death camp during World War II. While suffering, they prayed for the renewal of the Church.

They believed the Holy Spirit was inspiring them to call for a re-institution of a permanent diaconate that could serve sacramentally and vocationally as an order of clergy in the midst of the world.

The priests who survived Dachau continued to meet and pray, and eventually they presented their discernment to the Holy Father and the leaders of the Vatican Council.

On 18 June 1967, Pope Paul VI implemented the Council's decision to re-institute a permanent diaconate for the universal Church with the apostolic letter "Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem". He also established revised norms for the ordination of all clergy, including deacons, priests and bishops. These norms passed into the Code of Canon Law.

According to "The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons," issued jointly by the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Congregation for the Clergy, the deacon is "a sacred minister and member of the hierarchy."

He is ordained to the first rank of sacred orders, not to the priesthood or the episcopacy. He is no longer a layman, but a member of the clergy. Like other clerics, the deacon participates in the threefold ministry of Jesus Christ; the "diaconia of the liturgy, the word, and of charity." He represents "Christ the Servant" in his vocation.

The deacon teaches the Word of God, sanctifies through the sacraments, and helps lead the community in its religious life. He

assists at the altar, distributes the Eucharist as an ordinary minister, blesses marriages, presides over funerals, proclaims the Gospel and preaches, administers viaticum to the sick, and leads Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest.

"The deacon does not celebrate the mystery; rather, he effectively represents on the one hand, the people of God, and specifically, helps them to unite their lives to the offering of Christ; while on the other, in the name of Christ himself, he helps the church to participate in the fruits of that sacrifice," according to the declaration.

Because they receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders, deacons are sent by Christ to serve God's people. They are called to do so out of the depths of an interior life centered in the Eucharist, and fueled by a life of prayer, which proceeds into action. Like other clerics, they recite the Divine Office and cultivate the habit of penance.

They also are called in these documents to link their love for the Lord and His Church to a special love for the Blessed Virgin Mary, who in her "Fiat" represents the full surrender of love to the invitation of God.

Since most deacons are married and have children, they are called to demonstrate the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage and the holiness of a consecrated family life. They are called to "give clear witness to the sanctity of marriage and family."

The wives of permanent deacons are called to support the ordained ministry of their husbands. As "The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons" states, "The more they [deacon and wife] grow in mutual love, the greater their dedication to their children and the more significant their example for the Christian community"

The married deacon makes a unique contribution to the renewal of Christian marriage and family life. At a time when the Church has so strongly emphasized the role of the "Christian Family in the Modern World," of one of John Paul's wonderful encyclicals.

The married deacon also serves as an example of married clergy in the Western Church. In the Eastern Churches, the ancient practice of

calling married men, even to the order of priest, remains in tact, in most places.

The married deacon is challenged to a life of faith, fidelity and example in the married state. His example of clerical service in the married state does not detract from the prophetic and wonderful witness of consecrated celibacy; it is complementary. It is also a way of sanctification for him and witness for those whom he serves.

It is important to note that although the “permanent” diaconate has been opened to married men of mature age; it is also open to and encouraged as a permanent rank of orders for celibate men.

The decision for marriage or celibacy is to be made before ordination to the order of deacon. This is the ancient practice. If a married deacon loses his wife, he pledges to remain celibate. In fact, he could then consider a further call to priesthood if the Lord so moved him and the Church invited him. This has already been demonstrated in the lived experience of the renewed diaconate in the western Church.

The married deacon and his wife are to "show how the obligations of family life, work and ministry can be harmonized in the Church's mission". Deacons and their wives and children can be "a great encouragement to others who are working to promote family life," according to these Vatican documents.

In addition to this important witness, the deacon is distinct in his secular vocation. Often engaged in works of social justice or charity, he is a clergyman in the midst of the secular world. He goes from the altar to the world in a prophetic way, bringing Christ to those for whom He gave His life– and continues to reach out to –through His Body on earth, the Church.

The deacon also engages in the "New Evangelization" which the late Servant of God Pope John Paul II emphasized as an essential task for all members of the Church at this critical point in human history. Deacons do so in a unique way. They are an order of clergy in the midst of the world. They go from the altar and the ambo into the streets.

I found that my work as a lawyer and public policy advocate took on a new depth and meaning after my ordination. However, my service as a Deacon also had a profound effect on me. It has led, here in my second decade of diaconal work, to major life changes including the pursuit of a PhD in Moral Theology in my fifties. When a man says "Yes", the Lord takes it seriously.

Customs have developed which reflect the deacon's role as distinct from both priest and lay minister. For instance, proper liturgical dress for a deacon is an alb, a cincture, a diaconal stole and a dalmatic. He is authorized to wear a cope at baptisms, weddings or while presiding over the exposition of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

However, since he usually pursues secular work, he is not "obliged" to wear clerical garb as are transitional deacons or priests. The custom pertaining to the wearing of a clerical collar differs according to local practice when the deacon is engaged in sacramental, pastoral, or liturgical service.

Similarly, formal and popular titles help distinguish the deacon. Such titles of course, are not badges of honor, but rather "crosses" given to the one who holds any clerical office. They preserve the order of service in the Body of Christ.

Just as we call a priest "Father," and should not presume to call him by his first name, a permanent deacon, like a transitional deacon, should be called "Deacon." In formal writing a deacon, according to custom, often uses the title "Reverend Mr." reflecting in a unique way both his clerical and "secular" role.

Because of the long lack of a real witness of a diaconate in the western Church, the reaction to this ministry by other clergy and lay faithful is sometimes hesitant or confused. Yet, as time unfolds more and more members of the Church have come to understand the role of this expression of Holy Orders as a gift to both the Church and the world.

The role of the deacon does not detract from the vital role of an empowered lay faithful. In fact, it should enrich it. And the deacon also should not be seen as a "threat" to the irreplaceable ministry of the priest.

A vibrant diaconate will enhance and expand the ministry of the priesthood.

Bishops, too, should encourage the diaconate, because it is for them that deacons are particularly ordained. Other than the deacon, only the Bishop is authorized to wear the dalmatic. This custom symbolizes the deep relationship between a Bishop and his deacons.

I have served with love, honor, and humility both as a lay leader and as a deacon. To serve the Lord and His Church is the greatest privilege of my life. My wife and children have been a source of great strength to me on this journey, and I hope our family has been a strong witness to our deep love for the Catholic Church.

When I was called forth to holy orders, my Bishop thought that in my ministry as a layman I was already engaged in "diaconal functions" and that the grace of orders was a part of my ongoing call. He referred to my pro-life work and pro-family apostolate as an example of an "anonymous diaconate."

He thought that this was precisely what the Council Fathers had in mind when they restored this ancient order. I am grateful for his insight and his invitation. I also think it is a helpful insight into how the process of discernment for this vocation should be structured.

I knew the grace of a call to ordained ministry. My ordination was a profound experience. It did indeed create a "mark" on my soul as the teaching of the Catholic Church on the sacrament of Orders so clearly states. My ministry as a deacon is not "better" than my ministry as a lay leader, but it is profoundly different. I now serve as a member of the Catholic clergy in everything I do: evangelization, apologetics, and ecumenism, as well as in my professional life.

I do not believe that it is accidental that the same Church Council that called for a renewed emphasis on the role of the lay faithful also re-instituted this rank of clerical service in the Western Church.

All of us, whether bishops, priests, deacons, lay faithful, or consecrated religious are a part of the one mission of the one Church. Each of us, though all equal in the sight of God, play vitally important, but different, roles in the Body of Christ.

Let us pray for each other that we may all remain faithful to our individual vocations. Let us pray that all deacons – this order of clergy–set aside for Word, service and Sacrament–will flourish in this New Millennium of the Church.

For our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to give such a clear affirmation of the role of deacons during this first week of lent is a great gift for all of us who are called to this vocation.

May deacons take up their role as "Sacred Minister and Member of the Hierarchy." May they go forth from the altar to the world and manifest the presence of Christ the Deacon, who continues to serve all those whom He loves!