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WHAT...

and WHY

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PERMANENT DEACONS: WHO, WHAT AND WHY

By RUSSELL SHAW



A 44-year-old man, married and the father of three children, helps out in a busy suburban parish on Sundays by distributing Communion and performing other functions during Mass. He is not a priest, but he is not a layman either.

A 37-year-old black social worker, a married Army veteran with four children, organizes the welfare programs of an inner-city parish and represents the Church in a number of civic and community organizations. He is not a priest, but he is not a layman either.

A 50-year-old widower in a rural Southern diocese, where there are few priests, travels country roads bringing religious inspiration and a sense of Christian "community" to the scattered Catholics of the diocese. He is not a priest, but he is not a layman either.

Who are these men who are neither priests nor laymen but who seem to do some of the work of both and perform genuine ministerial services as official representatives of the Church?

They are permanent deacons.

The idea of the permanent diaconate is very new—and also very old. It is one of the "innovations" of the Second Vatican Council. And it is an office that dates back to the very earliest days of Christianity.

Because the permanent diaconate in the United States—and indeed in most parts of the Catholic Church throughout the world—is so new, the three examples of diaconal service cited above are made-up ones. That does not mean they are purely fictitious. Training centers for permanent deacons already are in operation in several parts of the country and candidates for the diaconate are undergoing preparation there. Quite soon—perhaps by 1971—permanent deacons in sub-

stantial numbers will begin their work in dioceses and parishes throughout the U.S.

Most Catholics are familiar with the diaconate as a stage on the way to ordination to the priesthood. The *permanent* diaconate, however, is something else again. It is not just a step on the way to something else. As the name implies, it means a lasting commitment to this particular form of ministerial service in the Church.

Because the permanent diaconate is both very new and very old it requires explanation. Catholics naturally ask about the history of this ministerial office: When did it come into existence in the Church? Why did it disappear (for all practical purposes) in later centuries? Why did Vatican II recommend that it be revived?

There are other important questions, too. What does a permanent deacon do? What is his special contribution to the Church and to society? How is he different from a priest? From a layman? What qualifications are required for the office? What training does a man need and how does he go about getting it?

This pamphlet will answer, briefly, these and other pertinent questions about the permanent diaconate. In recent years theologians and others have written a good deal about the subject but the ordinary Catholic is hardly aware of what they have said. Their ideas—and those of the Council and of the Pope and of the U.S. Bishops—shed much light on the diaconate.

It remains true, nevertheless, that not too many hard and fast rules and regulations can be laid down now to describe the work of permanent deacons. We will speak often of the “restoration” of the permanent diaconate, and it is a fact that Vatican II “restored” this office in the Latin Church. But everyone who has thought seriously about the subject recognizes that the restored diaconate in the 20th century cannot be merely an antiquarian oddity—an interesting idea rescued from the dustbin of history and refurbished for the benefit of theologians and scholars.

On the contrary, one of the demands of the present moment is to define the permanent diaconate in practical, contemporary terms. This can only be done in action, as particular needs of the Church become apparent and deacons move to fill them. It will require patience, flexibility and mutual understanding on the part of all involved—the deacons themselves, bishops, priests, religious and laymen.

One thing is certain. From the beginning service has been the hallmark of the diaconate and it will remain so in the future. The permanent diaconate has been aptly described as a "ministry of service." We have already seen a few of the forms this service may take: helping out in the liturgical functions of large parishes, focusing the Church's concern for social justice in inner-city areas, compensating for the shortage of priests in places where there are not enough of them to go around. Many other possibilities exist for diaconal service. Time and experience alone will make it clear what they are.

DEACONS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The term "deacon" comes from a Greek word—*diakonos*—which means "servant" or "helper." It occurs a number of times in the New Testament and sometimes is applied to Christ Himself.

Many scholars trace the origin of the diaconate to an incident recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (6: 1-7). A dispute arose within the Church in Jerusalem between the Greek-speaking Christians ("Hellenists") and the Aramaic-speaking Christians ("Hebrews"). The Hellenists complained that some needy people in their group were not getting their share of the material goods which the Christians of Jerusalem shared among members of the community who required assistance.

When the argument came to the attention of the Apostles, the leaders of the community, they replied that it would "not be right for us to neglect the word of God so as to give out food." Instead, they told the Christians to select seven men "of good reputation, filled with the Spirit and with wisdom," to take over this task of material service. This was done, and the Apostles "prayed and laid their hands on" the seven who had been chosen. Among the original seven was Stephen, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit," who later was to become the first Christian martyr.

Some writers question whether these "seven" were deacons in the full sense of the term. What is certain, however, is that the diaconate became a separate office in the Church in the very early years of Christianity, at least by about 57 A.D. That is the date assigned to St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, in which he makes specific reference to deacons as a recognized order in the Church.

St. Paul's most detailed treatment of the diaconate occurs in his first epistle to Timothy (3: 8-10, 12-13) where he writes of the qualifications required for this office.

In the same way, deacons must be respectable men whose word can be trusted, moderate in the amount of wine they drink and with no squalid greed for money. They must be conscientious believers in the mystery of the faith. They are to be examined first, and only admitted to serve as deacons if there is nothing against them. . . . Deacons must not have been married more than once, and must be men who manage their children and families well. Those of them who carry out their duties well as deacons will earn a high standing for themselves and be rewarded with great assurance in their work for the faith in Christ Jesus.

In the years and centuries that followed, the diaconate became a recognized and important office in the Church, a full part of the three-fold hierarchy of orders—bishops, priests and deacons. The deacons performed many functions; but, as the contemporary theologian Karl Rahner says, underlying all of their activities was the understanding that they were “to help those who direct the Church.”

More specifically, deacons operated chiefly in three major areas: liturgical, doctrinal and charitable. In regard to the liturgy, they performed such functions as reading or chanting the Gospel at Mass, assisting the celebrant at the altar, distributing Communion and directing the prayers of the congregation. The teaching duties of deacons included giving instructions to the Christian community and to the catechumens, the prospective converts to Christianity. In regard to charity the deacons' work included ascertaining the material needs of members of the community and distributing assistance to them. In many respects the deacon was, as one writer says, “Primarily a social worker with pastoral responsibilities.”

It is clear that at all times and in the performance of all his duties the deacon maintained a special link to the bishop and was in a special sense his agent. A third century work, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, describes the deacon as the bishop's “hearing . . . and his mouth and his heart and his soul.” The deacon is envisioned as a true minister of service and a living link between the bishop and the community, reporting to the bishop on the condition of the community and in return bringing the response—and the assistance—of the bishop to those in need of aid.

THE DECLINE OF THE DIACONATE

Even as the diaconate flourished in the early centuries of the Church, the seeds of its decline began to appear. There were a

number of reasons why the diaconate fell into decline. The ambition of the deacons themselves was one. Not content with their special ministry of service, they sought to establish their full equality to the "presbyters"—the priests. Some maintained that the priest could not offer Mass without the assistance of a deacon, and in other places, it seems the deacons themselves actually attempted to offer the Eucharist (a practice which was eventually specifically prohibited by several Church councils).

In part the problem seems to have been the "sacralization" of the diaconate—an over-emphasis on the deacon's liturgical role at the expense of his other functions. At the same time the charitable work of the diaconate began to be taken over by priests and lay people. In the midst of all this the special role of the deacon was lost sight of and the need for the office became less and less clear. Although the permanent diaconate lingered on for many centuries, by the Middle Ages the diaconate had become for all practical purposes what it has remained until very recently—a preparatory stage for the priesthood. The office became, as Rahner says, very close to a "legal fiction," inasmuch as it was rarely more than a step on the way to becoming a priest.

THE RESTORATION OF THE DIACONATE

Interest in the restoration of the permanent diaconate dates back at least to the time of World War II. Priests imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camps discussed the difficult situation of the Church and conjectured that permanent deacons—married or single men with a formal lifetime commitment to the work of the Church—could have accomplished much good. The assignment by the U.S. armed forces of lay assistants from the military to chaplains likewise gave concrete evidence of how valuable such service could be.

Interest in the idea continued after the war. It was taken up by theologians and scholars, particularly in Europe, and treated in a number of articles and books. By the time of Vatican II there was a substantial movement underway advocating restoration of the diaconate.

At the Council the restoration of the diaconate was advocated chiefly as a solution to the shortage of priests in many areas, especially Latin America. The argument was that where priests were lacking, permanent deacons could perform many of their functions,

particularly building up a sense of Christian "community" among Catholics who otherwise would have little formal contact with the Church or its representatives. As one writer, speaking of the situation in Latin America in particular, puts it, "Latin American Catholics lack an experience of a Christian community through lack of a priest to gather them together and give them the character of a Church." Permanent deacons, it was said, would provide an answer to this problem.

Of course it is evident that the shortage of priests is not itself a rationale for the permanent diaconate if it is taken to imply that the diaconate is an expedient—a temporary solution—which can be dispensed with whenever there are enough priests to go around. The central fact about the diaconate is, rather, that it is an intrinsic part of the triple hierarchy of orders—bishops, priests and deacons—and therefore has its own reason for existence even apart from any current problems or needs in the Church. Nevertheless it is true that the shortage of priests in many areas of the world does provide a compelling argument for restoration of the permanent diaconate at this time, and it was this which weighed heavily with the Fathers of Vatican II.

The Council's principal statement on the diaconate is contained in the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, #29). Because of its importance in providing a basis for what has happened since, the passage is worth quoting in full:

At a lower level of hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed "not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service." For strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the bishop and his group of priests, they serve the People of God in the ministry of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity. It is the duty of the deacon, to the extent that he has been authorized by competent authority, to administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside at the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, and to officiate at funeral and burial services. Dedicated to duties of charity and of administration, let deacons be mindful of the admonition of Blessed Polycarp: "Be merciful, diligent, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all."

These duties, so very necessary for the life of the Church, can in many areas be fulfilled only with difficulty according to the prevailing discipline of the Latin Church. For this reason, the diaconate can in the future be restored as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy. It pertains to the competent territorial bodies of bishops, of one kind or another, to decide, with the approval of the Supreme Pontiff, whether and where it is opportune for such deacons to be appointed for the care of souls. With the consent of the Roman Pontiff, this diaconate will be able to be conferred upon men of mature age, even upon those living in the married state. It may also be conferred upon suitable young men. For them, however, the law of celibacy must remain intact.

Specific directives for implementation are contained in a *motu proprio* on the permanent diaconate (*Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*) issued by Pope Paul VI on June 28, 1967. This document makes several important points: first, it is up to national bishops' conferences to decide, with papal approval, whether the diaconate is to be restored in the territory over which they have jurisdiction; second, in seeking approval for restoration from Rome, the bishops' conferences must set out their reasons and the details of the plans they propose to follow; third, once the Holy See has approved the plan of a particular national hierarchy, it is up to individual diocesan bishops to decide whether the diaconate will be restored in their dioceses, to examine candidates for the office and to ordain them. Thus many checks and balances—centralized decision making on some points, decentralized on others—are built into the program.

Pope Paul outlines eleven specific tasks which a bishop can assign to a deacon. They are as follows:

1. Assisting bishops and priests at liturgical functions;
2. Administering baptism;
3. Reserving the Eucharist, distributing It (to himself and others), taking It to the dying, giving Benediction;
4. Acting as the official witness at weddings where a priest is not present;
5. Administering sacramentals and presiding at funerals and burial services;
6. Reading the Scriptures to the people and preaching;

7. Presiding at services of worship and prayer in the absence of a priest;
8. Conducting services of the Word, especially in the absence of a priest;
9. Performing charitable and administrative duties and works of social welfare "in the name of the hierarchy";
10. Administering scattered communities of Christians "in the name of the parish priest and the bishop";
11. Encouraging and promoting the lay apostolate.

Most of these activities relate to the liturgical functions of the deacon. His administrative and charitable activities are left rather vague, no doubt on the sound principle that circumstances will determine these and it is far too early to attempt to set down in great detail what deacons will and will not do in these areas.

THE RESTORATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Even before the appearance of Pope Paul's *motu proprio*, the question of restoring the permanent diaconate had been taken up by the Bishops of the United States organized as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. A committee, headed by Bishop Ernest Unterkoefler of Charleston, S.C., was appointed to study the matter and make recommendations. The subject was considered at several general meetings of the bishops as well as at meetings of the Administrative Committee of the NCCB.

On April 23, 1968, during their semiannual meeting, the bishops overwhelmingly voted to ask the Holy See for permission to restore the permanent diaconate "for married and unmarried men of mature years in those areas needed." Permission was granted on August 26, 1968.

Since that time the NCCB has established a Standing Committee under the chairmanship of Bishop Unterkoefler to oversee restoration of the diaconate. The committee has met regularly, and plans for the restoration are in full swing. Six training centers for permanent deacons are now in existence and candidates for the office are now being prepared. As we have seen, permanent deacons in some numbers will begin appearing on the U.S. scene very soon. (As early as mid-1969 there was already at least one permanent deacon

at work in the country—a married former Episcopalian priest who was ordained by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen of Rochester, N.Y., and was in charge of the diocesan pre-Cana program and Family Life Bureau.)

What are the details of the permanent diaconate program envisioned by the U.S. bishops? While it is true that the precise role of the deacons will be determined by local needs, it is important to know the general points on which agreement has been reached.

First of all, the permanent diaconate in the United States has been restored for “married and unmarried men of mature years.” This means in practice men 35 years or older. (But a *candidate* for the office does not have to be 35. Younger men could begin training for the diaconate several years earlier.)

The diaconate is open to both married and single men. However, unmarried deacons and married deacons who become widowers after their ordination will be required to observe the rule of celibacy: that is, they will not be able to marry.

The diaconate will be a *permanent* office but not necessarily *full-time*. As a matter of fact, it is expected that many if not most deacons will support themselves from their earnings in everyday occupations and will perform their specifically diaconal duties only on weekends, at night or on special occasions. The economic reasons for this are obvious. The demand for deacons is likely to be greatest in precisely those areas where the Church would be least able to support them financially on a full-time basis—for example, in scattered rural dioceses and disadvantaged inner-city areas. Furthermore, by working in secular jobs, deacons will help to establish a visible link between the Church and the secular society, a function which could be one of their most important services in the modern world.

The growth of the permanent diaconate will be a grassroots movement. Leaders in the restoration effort have stressed again and again that it will be up to local bishops to decide whether the diaconate will be restored in a particular diocese and to determine the work the deacons will perform.

At the same time, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops will provide continuing services to dioceses which elect to restore the diaconate. A secretariat for the diaconate has been established at

NCCB headquarters in Washington, D.C. (1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005). As one writer has summarized it, "the NCCB has assumed responsibility for approving diocesan or regional plans for the utilization of the diaconate, for formulating a full program of spiritual, doctrinal, and pastoral formation, for implementing this program, . . . and finally for servicing the bishops with regard to special questions on the diaconate and details of the diaconate vocation."

Just as no hard-and-fast blueprint for the restoration of the diaconate has been established, so there will be flexibility in the training and formation programs for permanent deacons. Already training centers have been established in several parts of the country. (A list of these appears at the end of this pamphlet.)

Generally, it is expected that full-time training for diaconal candidates will last about two years. On the other hand, exceptions could be made in special cases, where an individual already has the background required for ordination. And there will also be part-time training programs, including correspondence courses and weekend and summer institutes, for candidates who find it impossible to attend a full-time program. (Naturally, a part-time program is likely to extend over a considerably longer period of time than a full-time program.)

The NCCB has indicated that it would be desirable for candidates for the diaconate already to have earned a bachelor's degree from an accredited college. At the same time, the lack of a degree will not keep an otherwise qualified man out of the program. Bishop Unterkoefer has written on this point that "candidates may be either college graduates or not. But those without college training must have sufficient education, native ability and talent to qualify. . . . A higher- and lower-grade diaconate based on educational background or academic achievement could drive a wedge of discontent, pride and humiliation into the program. Equality of the order gives the same office, grace, dignity and power of service to all."

The training of deacons is likely to cover such things as the Old and New Testaments, moral theology, parish sociology and public speaking. Pastoral psychology, religious education and spirituality will be treated. Doctrinal areas like Christology, ecclesiology, sacramental theology, liturgy and canon law will be covered. And of course there will be specialized training for candidates headed for

work in special apostolates—as, for example, black diaconal candidates preparing to work among black people in inner-city areas.

In the case of married candidates for the diaconate, it will be essential that their wives agree to and support the step their husbands propose to take. The rigors of the diaconate are likely to place many parallel demands on the wives of deacons. Therefore as a matter of fairness—as well as common sense, since the wives will be involved—they should be consulted and their agreement obtained from the very start.

WHY THE DIACONATE?

For many people the basic question about the diaconate is—why? Between them, priests and laymen can do everything that permanent deacons will do. So why is it desirable to restore the diaconate in the Church?

Many answers have been given to this question. Just about all of them have some validity. It is certainly true that there is a critical shortage of priests in the world, especially in areas like Latin America, and permanent deacons could provide at least a partial solution to this problem by performing liturgical and other functions that Catholics would otherwise have to do without. In addition, the special challenges and opportunities of the permanent diaconate are likely to appeal to some men who might not be attracted by the priesthood, and thus one can hope that new vocations will be gained. In addition, the presence of permanent deacons will presumably relieve priests of some not specifically “priestly” jobs and free them for duties which they and only they can perform.

All these are good reasons for restoring the diaconate, but they do not go to the heart of the matter. The central reasons were summed up by the U.S. bishops in their resolution on permanent deacons when they stated that they wished to introduce the permanent diaconate into the United States “both to complete the hierarchy of sacred orders and to enrich and strengthen the various diaconal ministries at work in the United States with the sacramental grace of the diaconate.”

The first of these reasons—“to complete the hierarchy of sacred orders”—refers to the fact that the diaconate is an integral part of the ministerial hierarchy (bishops, priests and deacons) originally established for Christ’s Church. This point was to a great extent lost sight of during the centuries in which the diaconate was in eclipse.

Yet the diaconate is clearly a part of the Sacrament of Orders. Restoration of the diaconate as a permanent office in the Church is not an innovation in the sense of being something brand-new (for the diaconate, as we have seen, dates back to the very earliest days of the Church) nor is it an exercise in antiquarianism (since there are plenty of pressing and highly contemporary jobs that need doing by deacons). Rather, it is a serious attempt to see the ministerial hierarchy in the Church as the apostolic founders intended it and to restore it accordingly.

The second reason—the desire to “strengthen the various diaconal ministries at work . . . with the sacramental grace of the diaconate”—is equally important. It is a recognition of an important truth about the sacramental order so important to the life of the Church. As Karl Rahner remarks, it is a “governing principle” that “when the office and the divine assurance of the grace necessary for fulfilling the office can be given in a sacramental manner . . . then they should be given in this way.”

Father Rahner and others note that diaconal functions are now being performed in the Church by laymen and have been for some time in the past. “There are laymen,” one writer says, “who are fulfilling the office of deacon by total commitment of themselves as Christians to the service of others or to the internal administration and ordering of the Church under the guidance of the hierarchy.” Such people, it has been suggested, could well be described as “anonymous” deacons.

Since the possibility of ordination to the diaconate exists, however, there is no reason why such men should not take advantage of it—and thus receive the graces for the performance of their work through the sacramental means of ordination. As Rahner says, “whenever the sacramental communication of grace is within the bounds of human possibilities and of what can reasonably be done, then it should be permitted to take place.” Furthermore, the fact that laymen either are now doing or can do most of what will in the future be done by ordained deacons is no argument against the diaconate. Rather it supports the argument “that such office-bearer ought to be given that ecclesiastical and . . . sacramental ordination which exists or existed in the Church precisely for these offices.”

Vatican II put it this way in its Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes*, #16):

Where Episcopal Conferences deem it opportune, the order of the diaconate should be restored as a permanent state of life, according to the norms of the Constitution on the Church. For there are men who are actually carrying out the functions of the deacon's office, either by preaching the Word of God as catechists, or by presiding over scattered Christian communities in the name of the pastor and the bishop, or by practicing charity in social or relief work. It will be helpful to strengthen them by that imposition of hands which has come down from the apostles, and to bind them more closely to the altar. Thus they can carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate.

The permanent diaconate in the United States has great potential—a potential limited only by the creativity and the dedication of those who will be participating in its development. Already, for example, a workshop on black deacons has spoken of the special contribution that black deacons will be able to make in the black community. “Because of the deacon's work within the community, the missionary role of the Church will be greatly enhanced, and as a natural result many people will come to view the Church under a different perspective and will be desirous of becoming a part of it.”

As we have seen, work among minority groups is only one possibility for the deacons. Busy and understaffed urban and suburban dioceses, priest-short rural areas, social welfare and catechetical apostolates—all these and other areas of need and opportunity offer a fruitful field for diaconal service. As members of a “ministry of service,” it is unlikely that deacons will ever find themselves having to hunt for things to do—but only for ways to do them better.

NATIONAL SECRETARIAT

Men interested in the possibility of becoming permanent deacons should contact their local bishops to see whether there are plans for the restoration of the diaconate in their dioceses. Additional information may be secured from:

Rev. William Philbin
Executive Director
Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate
1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

DIACONATE TRAINING PROGRAMS

At the present time the following training programs for permanent deacons exist in the United States:

1. Permanent Diaconate Program
Josephite Center
1200 Varnum St., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20017
(Rev. Paul A. Downey, S.S.J., Director)
2. Permanent Diaconate Program
St. John's University
Collegeville, Minn. 56321
(Rev. Kieran Nolan, O.S.B., Director)
3. Permanent Diaconate Program
Aquinas Institute of Theology
2570 Asbury
Dubuque, Iowa 52001
(Rev. George Doherty, O.P., Director)
4. Permanent Diaconate Program
Orchard Lake, Mich. 48034
(Rev. Anthony Kosnik, Director)
5. Permanent Diaconate Program
Archdiocese of Detroit
305 Michigan Avenue
Detroit, Mich. 48226
(Rev. Edward J. Baldwin, Director)
6. Permanent Diaconate Program
Archdiocese of Atlanta
Atlanta, Ga.
(Rev. Francis Ruff, Director)

