

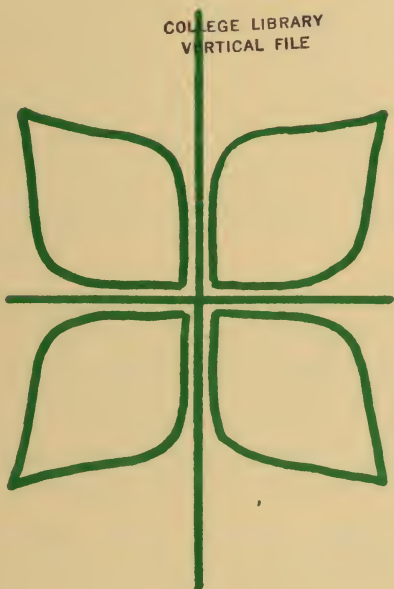
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# PERMANENT DEACONS

by Russell Shaw

Catholic Church - Clergy -

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# PERMANENT DEACONS

By Russell Shaw



It wasn't widely recognized, that day in early fall, but the decision was to have dramatic consequences. In four separate votes on September 29, 1964, the Second Vatican Council approved the restoration of the permanent diaconate. Much remained to be done to carry out this decision. But, subject to ratification by Pope Paul VI, approval had now been given in principle to returning to the Church a form of ordained ministry which flourished in apostolic times but virtually vanished from the scene centuries ago.

The Council did not intend restoration of the diaconate as an exercise in antiquarianism. It saw it as a response to today's realities and needs. So it has proved to be. In the United States deacons constitute a significant and growing force in the Church's ministry of service to the Christian community and the world.

Much has been written about the diaconate in modern times, but the first job description for a deacon—and still one of the best—was composed long ago. "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," St. Paul said in his first letter to Timothy. "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." (1 Tim. 3:8-13)

Nineteen centuries later Vatican II took an equally elevated view of deacons. "Strengthened by sacramental grace," the Council said, "they are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity." (*Constitution on the Church*, 29) Noting the virtual impossibility of a full diaconal ministry as long as the diaconate was only a transitional stage on the way to the priesthood—as for many centuries it had been in the Western Church—the Council envisaged its restoration as a "proper and permanent rank" within a three-fold ordained ministry: bishops, priests, and deacons.

Nowhere, in the years since then, has the permanent diaconate caught hold and come alive more than in the United States. A decade after its restoration was requested by the U.S. bishops and authorized by Pope Paul, the number of permanent deacons in this country was approaching 3,000 with about the same number of candidates in training. Deacons, most of them married men with fulltime secular occupations over and above their Church work, are prominent in the life of the Christian community throughout the country. Defining its identity as it goes, facing and answering questions as it explores the dimensions of contemporary ministry, the permanent diaconate holds promise of being an authentic success story of the Church in the United States following Vatican II.

What are the diaconate's origins and history? Why did this ministerial order, so important in the early centuries of the Church, decline and eventually all but disappear? What reasons prompted the Church in our times to restore the permanent diaconate? What is a deacon? What do deacons do? And what does it take to become one? These are some of the questions which this overview will try to answer.

## THE DIACONATE IN HISTORY

Sometimes permanent deacons are called "lay" deacons. It is an understandable mistake. Except when performing liturgical functions, deacons don't wear distinctive garb; they are called "Mister," not "Father"; most are family men who work fulltime five days a week in a broad spectrum of secular occupations and settings.

But despite appearances, the deacons aren't laymen. They are ordained ministers, as priests and bishops are. From the very earliest days of the Church they were understood to occupy a special place in the Christian community, set apart along with the 'presbyters' (bishops or priests) for a special role modeled on that of Christ himself. The first definite reference to deacons in this sense—perhaps as early as 53 A.D.—occurs in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is addressed to "all the holy ones at Philippi, with their bishops and deacons in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 1:1)

Some hold that the very origin of the diaconate is recorded in the New Testament—in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. There we read of a dispute which arose in the Church of Jerusalem between Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking Christians, the former complaining that some of their poor weren't getting a fair share of the goods which the Christian community divided among people in need of help. When the argument came to the attention of the Apostles, the leaders of the community, they declined to become directly involved, explaining: "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables." Instead they told the people to select for this charitable work seven upstanding men "acknowledged to be deeply spiritual and prudent." The seven candidates were presented to the Apostles, who "prayed over them and then imposed hands on them." Among them was one Stephen, "a man filled with grace and power," who for his courage in proclaiming the Good News of Christ soon became the first Christian martyr. (Cf. Acts 6-7)

Whether or not these seven early Christians were deacons in the full sense, the account in Acts accords with the understanding of the diaconate as it emerged and evolved in the Church. 'Deacon' comes from a Greek word—*diakonos*—which means servant or helper. It occurs frequently in the New Testament and is sometimes applied to Christ himself. But like the Apostles, for whom it was "not right . . . to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables," the deacons soon came to be understood as helpers in more than a material sense—"not servants of food and drink, but ministers of the Church of God," as St. Ignatius of Antioch put it around 100 A.D., adding that the deacon's task was nothing less than to continue "the ministry of Jesus Christ."

In a special way deacons were considered to be 'helpers' of the bishop. St. Ignatius specifically mentions two functions of this sort: writing letters for the bishop and generally assisting him in the ministry of the Word, and serving as the legate of the bishop from one local Church to another. In addition, deacons often rendered assistance—on the bishops' behalf—to the poor and needy of the community. The special relationship between deacons and bishops was emphasized, among other places, in a third century Christian document which speaks of the deacon as being ordained "for the ministry of the work designated by the bishop as being necessary to the Church's ministry." Similarly, the contemporary German theologian Karl Rahner says that central to all that deacons did was the fact that they were "to help those who direct the Church." It has been suggested that, in current terminology, one might say deacons, though they share certain basics in common, can be thought of as 'specialists' available for assignment by the bishop to very specific tasks.

Even as the diaconate flourished, the causes of its eventual decline and disappearance began to appear. This happened as early as the third century. But the process itself was a complex one which extended over many cen-

turies. No single reason suffices to explain what happened. In general, it appears that both priests and deacons experienced a kind of identity crisis which caused them to engage in a rivalry that occasionally boiled over in open conflict and finally became the diaconate's undoing. There were problems and failings on both sides. This failure to comprehend and appreciate the special value of the diaconate in its own right eventually resulted in its collapse.

That, however, was a long time happening. Part of the process, evident by the fourth century, was that ever more emphasis came to be placed on the liturgical role of deacons, at the expense of the ministry of the Word and the ministry of charity. By the fifth century, it seems, most deacons did little except perform liturgical functions. By this time, too, the idea had begun to gain currency that the diaconate was no more than an introductory stage in Orders, a step on the way toward ordination as a priest. Its value as an integral part of the hierarchy of Orders—deacons, priests, bishops—was obscured. By the Middle Ages the office of deacon was, according to Rahner, close to being a “legal fiction.”

## RESTORATION OF THE DIACONATE

So it remained for many centuries. There were deacons in the Western Church, but they were men on their way to becoming priests. Few people imagined it being any different.

Revived interest in the permanent diaconate dates back at least to the time of World War II. Priests imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps, reflecting on the difficult situation of the Church, speculated that permanent deacons—married or single men with a formal, stable commitment to the work of the Church—could have accomplished much good. Interest in the idea continued after the war, when it was taken up by theologians and scholars, especially in Europe, and discussed in a number of articles and books. In 1957 Pope Pius XII spoke favorably of a restored permanent diaconate, although concluding that “the time

is not yet ripe." The idea was very much in the air by the time of Vatican Council II.

Among the reasons for restoring the diaconate advanced during the Council was that this step would help alleviate the shortage of priests in various parts of the world. Deacons, it was reasoned, would be able to perform many of the functions of priests and would help to create and sustain a sense of Christian community among people who rarely saw a priest.

This consideration is valid and even compelling in particular situations. But it is not a satisfactory rationale if it is taken to imply that the diaconate is merely an expedient, a temporary solution to a problem, for which there would be no particular need or reason if there were enough priests to go around. On the contrary, the central fact about the diaconate is that it is an integral part of the three-fold hierarchy of Orders, with its own intrinsic reason and right to exist, quite apart from the circumstances of a particular era and place which may give it special timeliness.

Vatican II's principal statement on the restoration of the permanent diaconate appears in the *Constitution on the Church*.

[D]eacons . . . receive the imposition of hands "not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry." For, strengthened by sacramental grace they are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity. It pertains to the office of a deacon, in so far as it may be assigned to him by the competent authority, to administer Baptism solemnly, to be custodian and distributor of the Eucharist, in the name of the Church, to assist at and to bless marriages, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and the prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, and to officiate at funeral and burial services. Dedicated to works of



charity and functions of administration, deacons should recall the admonition of St. Polycarp: "Let them be merciful, and zealous, and let them walk according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all."

Since, however, the laws and customs of the Latin Church in force today in many areas render it difficult to fulfill these functions, which are so extremely necessary for the life of the Church, it will be possible in the future to restore the diaconate as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy. But it pertains to the competent local episcopal conferences . . . with the approval of the Supreme Pontiff, to decide whether and where it is opportune that such deacons be appointed. (*Lumen Gentium*, 29)

Pope Paul gave specific directives for implementing the restoration of the diaconate in an apostolic letter published in 1967 and followed this up with further "norms" in 1972.

In the United States the National Conference of Catholic Bishops voted at its general meeting in April, 1968, to ask the Pope to authorize restoration of the diaconate in this country. Permission was granted in August of the same year. Within the NCCB there is now a Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, supported by a secretariat with fulltime staff at conference headquarters in Washington, D.C.

## WHY DEACONS?

In deciding to ask the Pope to authorize restoration of the permanent diaconate here, the U.S. bishops pointed to two reasons—"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."

As we have seen, 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 Church's three-fold ordained ministerial hierarchy (bishops, priests, deacons). It is true that bishops and priests are able to do everything that deacons can

(and that deacons can do many of the things priests and bishops can), but that is not the point. The point, rather, is that the ordained ministry in its fullness includes all three Orders. Restoration of the permanent diaconate recognizes this fact. In this connection it deserves mention that deacons aren't to be understood as priests' assistants—though in practice they do render important assistance to many pastors and priests. Rather, as noted, deacons were from very early times regarded as having a special relationship to the bishop (one writer, echoing others, refers to the deacon as “the eyes, the ears, the heart and the mouth of the bishop”). Thus, the ‘hierarchy’ in question does not so much run in a descending line—from bishop to priest to deacon—as it is triangular, with priests and deacons in a parallel, complementary relationship to the bishop.

As for the second reason—“to enrich and strengthen the various diaconal ministries . . . with the sacramental grace of the diaconate”—this expresses the importance of the sacramental principle in Christian life. As Rahner puts it, “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.” Although it is possible for a lay person with proper authorization to do most of the things a deacon does (“the various diaconal ministries”), ordination to the diaconate officially recognizes, strengthens, and confirms one who does diaconal work as a life-long commitment. Vatican II put it this way:

It would help those men who carry out the ministry of a deacon—preaching the word of God as catechists, governing scattered Christian communities in the name of the bishop or parish priest, or exercising charity in the performance of social or charitable works—if they were to be strengthened by the imposition of hands which has come down from the apostles. They would be more closely bound to the altar and their ministry would be made more fruitful

through the sacramental grace of the diaconate. (*Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, 16)

To understand diaconal ministry it is essential to see deacons in the context of the three general areas of service—the ministry of the Word, the ministry of the liturgy, and the ministry of charity—with which they have traditionally been associated. Everything a deacon does as a *deacon* is done in this framework.

In the first category, the deacon's most solemn functions are to read the gospel and preach (which is a way of expounding the gospel message). But the ministry of the Word also extends to many other activities by which Christ's Good News is proclaimed and taught. So, typically, one can find deacons engaged in adult religious education, convert instruction, campus ministry, and the religious instruction of children and young people. Others are involved in programs for engaged couples, in marriage and family enrichment activities, and in programs of sacramental preparation.

As for the ministry of liturgy, the deacon has a number of official functions within the eucharistic liturgy besides reading the gospel and preaching. Also, deacons are ordinary ministers of the Eucharist, may officiate at Benediction, administer sacramentals, solemnly administer baptism, witness and bless marriages, officiate at wakes, funerals, and burial services. Typically, deacons bring Communion to the sick and elderly confined to their homes or to institutions. In the absence of a priest they organize and preside over prayer services and scripture services. Others engage in liturgical planning and coordination.

With regard to the ministry of charity the possibilities are virtually limitless. Deacons appropriately minister in such settings as hospitals, old people's homes, schools and campuses, community centers, prisons, and rehabilitation facilities. They engage in social work and in many forms of social action on behalf of the needy and the disadvantaged. They may use their talents in performing ad-

ministrative duties in diocesan or other church-related offices and agencies. In the United States there has been much emphasis on the importance of having deacons who belong to minority racial and ethnic groups—Hispanic, Black, American Indian, Eskimo, etc.—minister to those same communities.

In the final analysis, however, permanent deacons should be understood not in terms of what they *do* but what they *are*. (The same might be said of the members of any group in the Church, since functions absolutely unique to a particular order or state of life—things *only* bishops can do, *only* religious can do, *only* lay people can do, etc.—are few in number and give a very inadequate picture of those who do them.) Also, although all permanent deacons are involved in some way in the three general areas of diaconal ministry—Word, liturgy, charity—their specific activities can vary so much that a detailed functional description applicable to all is out of the question. Essentially, the U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate has commented, the permanent deacon is a person "with a special mission requiring special relationships within the community of God's people." The committee adds that, however much individual deacons' activities may vary, the central elements of diaconal identity are the same in all cases: the invitation of the Spirit, public expression of and response to this call through ordination, sharing in fraternal accountability for the realization on earth of God's kingdom, acceptance by the community they are called to serve, and complete self-commitment to service in Christ's name and that of the Church.

A crucial aspect of the permanent diaconate is the fact that the deacon is a link—between clergy and laity, between liturgy and everyday life, between the Church and the world. As mature men—most of them married, with children, and engaged in secular occupations—deacons bring to the ranks of the clergy new and valuable insights based on personal experience into the attitudes, problems, and aspirations of lay people. Again, as ministers whose

service at the altar is an essential part of their ministry yet who also minister through and in a wide range of other activities and settings, deacons dramatize in a special way the fact that worship, far from being isolated from life, is—or should be—intimately linked to it. (As one writer puts it, “with one foot in the sanctuary and the other in the midst of God’s needy people, [the deacon] proclaims in himself the unity of liturgy and life.”) Finally, as ordained ministers who are leaders and servants of the Christian community yet who also, in most cases, live and work in secular surroundings, deacons have unique opportunities to bring Christian values into the world.

### THE DIACONATE TODAY

Within a decade after the bishops requested and Pope Paul approved restoration of the permanent diaconate in the United States, deacons had become an important part of the life of the Church in this country. The number of dioceses with permanent deacon programs was nearing 120, while as noted, the number of deacons approached 3,000 with close to 3,000 candidates in training.

In ethnic background, education, and occupation these deacons are a mixed group. About three out of four are Anglos, 15 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Black, and the rest are divided among other groups (American Indians, Eskimos, Chinese-American, Nisei, etc.). A majority have at least some college education, and about 15 percent have done graduate work. However, by no means is the diaconate restricted—either in theory or practice—to men who have experienced higher education. More than a third of the deacons in the U.S. have not pursued formal education beyond the high school level, and some have an 8th grade education or less.

The number of ‘fulltime’ deacons (those engaged in fulltime work of a religious or church-related nature) is very small, and most of them are in education—as parish directors of religious education, teachers, etc. A few work on chancery staffs, and a few more as fulltime

ministers in correctional facilities (a considerably larger number work in such institutions on a part-time basis). However, the overwhelming majority of deacons perform diaconal service on a part-time basis on week ends and after work.

The official minimum age for ordination as a permanent deacon in the United States is 35 (though dispensations permitting ordination at 32 and a half can be granted with the approval of the Holy See). Candidates can of course begin their studies before then. Most training programs last two to three years—in some cases, two years before ordination and one year after—and many offer or require continuing education following ordination. Training generally includes studies in theology, scripture, homiletics, canon law, communication skills, counseling, etc., as well as field experiences. Spiritual formation is an integral and critically important part of every program. Deacons may be either married or single. If single, however, they are not permitted to marry following ordination; and, if a married man becomes a widower after being ordained, he is not permitted to remarry.

Wives have a crucial role in relation to the ministry of married deacons. A supportive attitude on the part of his wife is necessary for the admission of a married candidate to a diaconate program. In addition, such programs make it a point to offer wives opportunities to share in their husbands' experiences of study and spiritual formation as well as their ministry.

Men interested in learning more about the diaconate should contact their pastors or local chancery office. Information is also available at the national level from the Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005



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