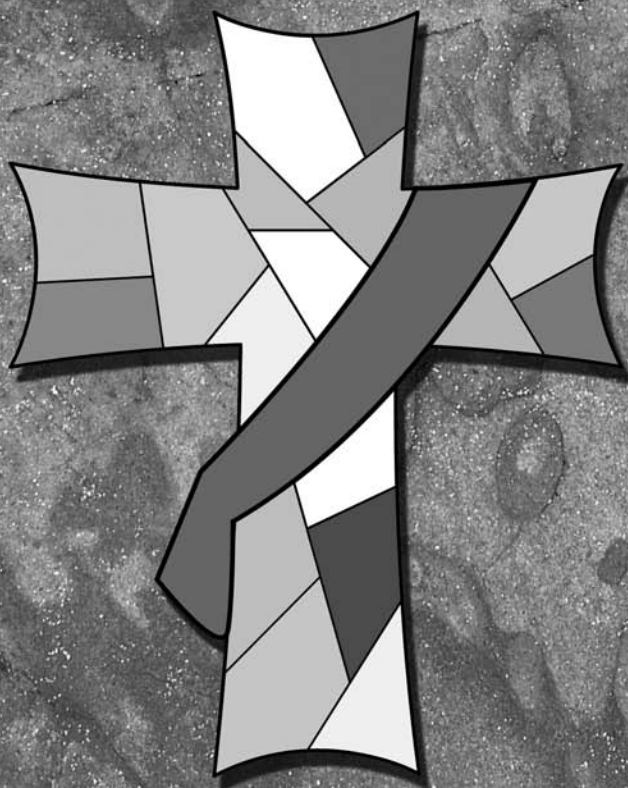


# DEACON FORMATION PROGRAM

INFORMATIONAL TOOL  
FOR PRIESTS, DEACONS AND  
PASTORAL ASSOCIATES



Office for the Diaconate  
DIOCESE OF PITTSBURGH

## **1. What is a deacon?**

A deacon is a man who has been called by God through the Church for ordination to the ministry of service to a particular diocese. The service of deacon is documented from apostolic times with its origin and institution recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles* (6:1-6). At the initial grade of sacred hierarchy deacons have always been greatly esteemed in the Church.

The diaconate must be considered like every other Christian identity from within the Church which is understood as a mystery of Trinitarian communion. Since a man is ordained into holy orders, the diaconate imprints a character and communicates a specific sacramental grace for the purpose of service. The spirituality of service is a spirituality of the whole Church however this becomes particularly evident in the deacon. The spirituality and ministry of the deacon can therefore be a source of inspiration, motivation, and example for all the faithful in the Church. He, in a most special way, exudes the spirituality of service and acts as a minister of Christ the Servant.

## **2. What does the deacon do?**

The ministry of the deacon is characterized by the specific service the deacon provides that is distinct from but nonetheless related to the priesthood. The threefold function or office of the deacon includes the *munus docendi* (teaching), *munus sanctificandi* (sanctifying), and *munus regendi* (ruling). The three contexts of diaconal ministry, depending on certain circumstances, are expressed in varying degrees in the assignment given to the deacon by the diocesan bishop.

In the Diocese of Pittsburgh the deacon is ordained to meet the specific pastoral needs of the local Church. The deacon is ordained primarily for ministry of service and charity providing ministry to the faithful through specific means of responsibilities. The deacon will also be involved with ministry of word and sacrament in a parish identified by the diocesan bishop.

## **3. How does a deacon differ from a priest?**

There are three degrees of the Sacrament of Holy Orders—the episcopacy, the presbyterate, and the diaconate. The term *sacerdos* in current usage denotes bishops and priests but not deacons. The bishop and priest are ordained in the person of Christ as head of the Church while the deacon is

ordained in the person of Christ as servant of the Church. With the ordination of a priest and bishop there is an ontological change configuring the minister to the person of Christ for the exercise of *potestas sacra*. The diaconate imprints a character and does indeed communicate a specific sacramental grace. The diaconal character is the configurative and distinguishing sign indelibly impressed on the soul which configures the deacon as servant. Thus, the deacon receives a specific sacramental grace, which is strength, *vigor specialis*, a gift for living the new reality wrought by the sacrament of ordination. Bishops and priests are ordained in the person of Christ for sacramental ministry; the deacon is ordained in the person of Christ for service and charity.

#### **4. Where will the deacon minister?**

The right of ordination for a deacon includes a promise of obedience to the bishop. In making this promise the deacon takes Christ, obedient *par excellence*, as his model. He shall conform his own obedience in listening to the needs of the Church and offering a radical availability to serve Christ.

The diocesan bishop should be free to appoint and assign a deacon to pastoral ministry throughout the diocese. Candidates for diaconal ministry will need to discern very seriously their ability to submit to the needs of the diocesan Church alongside existing responsibilities to family and employment. While the diocesan bishop will take into consideration the charisms of the deacon through dialogue, consultation, and prayer, the deacon will need to understand that the needs of the Church take priority in the consideration of a diaconal assignment.

#### **5. Will applicants be assigned to their home parish?**

The diocesan bishop carries the burden of responding to the pastoral needs of the diocesan Church. The assignment of a deacon is a matter of significant importance to the spiritual wellbeing of the local Church. With this in mind, the clergy of the diocese join the bishop in approaching appointments in a spirit of prayerful discernment. Similar to the appointment of priests, the bishop will assign deacons according to the ministerial needs of the diocese. In many cases, the deacon may be assigned to the home parish for ministry of word and sacrament however this is not a primary motivation in a consultation process. The needs of the Church always outweigh the needs of the individual cleric.

## **6. What qualities should we seek in a candidate?**

The Church will only promote to sacred orders men who have sound faith, are motivated by right intention, are endowed with the requisite knowledge, enjoy a good reputation, who have moral probity, proven virtue, and physical and psychological qualities appropriate for ordained ministry. The inquirer must be able to demonstrate human and evangelical virtues necessary for diaconal ministry. The spirituality of service implies a man's ability to offer selfless contribution to the mission of the Church.

Some behavioral attributes might include a natural inclination to serve, a capacity for dialogue, good communication skills, collaborative accountability, balanced and prudent judgment, and ability to lead, motivate, facilitate, and animate others into appropriate service. Some spiritual attributes might include sound faith, active involvement in the parish, personal integrity, maturity and holiness, regular participation in the sacramental life of the Church, evidence of recognized, ongoing commitment to evangelization, participation in faith-enrichment opportunities, capacity for obedience and fraternal communion, and deep spirituality and prayer life.

## **7. How can I promote the diaconate in my parish?**

The Office for the Diaconate is distributing to each priest a folder of materials that includes bulletin announcements, sample intercessions, brochures for wide distribution, and other catechetical materials. Moreover, since the promotion of vocations involves the entire Church, the pastor should begin working with the Pastoral Council and the pastoral staff to begin a process of discernment in the possible identification of men who might be interested in serving the Church as a deacon.

The priests and parish leadership should also be encouraged to make personal contact with those men who demonstrate qualities for ordained ministry. Since the hallmark of diaconate ministry is service to the community, you may already be aware of men who demonstrate qualities, actions, or involvement consonant with the diaconate. This is the man who might be a lector, extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, a leader in the RCIA program, an usher or greeter, a member of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, a member of the Knights of Columbus or Serra Club, or a man assisting with catechetical programs.

Similar to the promotion of priestly vocations, special care should be given to not force or push so as to distance the possible candidate away from discernment. Yet, this can also be a wonderful opportunity in the parish to encourage men to reflect very seriously about the possibility of diaconate ministry.

## **8. Does the pastor or parish life collaborator have a special role in the application process?**

According to the norms issued by the bishops of the United States and confirmed by the Holy See, all applicants must be nominated by the pastor or parish life collaborator of the parish. Nomination forms will be provided. It is not the responsibility of the pastor or parish life collaborator to screen or determine who should be a deacon rather it is their role to nominate all those inquirers who express an interest in the deacon formation program. However, no inquirer should be nominated unless he has first been informed by the pastor or parish life collaborator, discussed the possibility with his family, and consents to the nomination.

If the inquirer is accepted into the application process, the pastor or parish life collaborator will then have an opportunity to specifically express their opinion about the qualifications of the applicant. If the applicant is accepted into the propaedeutic period, the pastor or parish life collaborator will once again be consulted. At every stage of the process the pastor or parish life collaborator is consulted until the ordination of the candidate.

## **9. Can inquirers make direct application through the diocese?**

The Office for the Diaconate will ask every inquirer to speak with his pastor or parish life collaborator concerning issues of discernment. The Office for the Diaconate will only receive nominations if the pastor or parish life collaborator refuses to cooperate with the application process. Otherwise, all nominations must come from the pastor or parish life collaborator of the parish.

## **10. Is there any financial obligation from the parish?**

Similar to the priestly formation program of the diocese, the Parish Share Program will assume most of the costs associated with the formation program. The applicant will be responsible for most of the costs associat-

ed with the application process such as the physical examination and psychological testing. The candidate will also be responsible for class tuition and materials. The parish will not be directly responsible for financing the individual applicant or candidate.

## **11. How long does it take to become a deacon?**

At the conclusion of the application process, the Deacon Application Board will convene and offer recommendations to the diocesan bishop regarding the selection of applicants. According to particular law associated with the deacon formation program, aspirants must participate in a propaedeutic period. The propaedeutic period is a thirty-week orientation program that delineates the spiritual and theological history, ministry, and applicability of the permanent diaconate. At the conclusion of the propaedeutic period, the Deacon Formation Board will make recommendations to the diocesan bishop regarding the final selection of candidates for the formation program. The deacon formation program is a four-year formation program involving courses, workshops, and retreats. Therefore, once the application process concludes, it will take about four and one-half years until ordination.

## **12. What is involved in the deacon formation program?**

The program mirrors the goals and guidelines of the priestly formation program. The four pillars of formation include the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions of formation to ordained ministry. All of these pillars are rooted and grounded in the ecclesial framework that contextualizes the nature and purpose of diaconal formation.

The propaedeutic period involves thirty workshops and two days of recollection addressing the spiritual and theological aspects of diaconal ministry. The four-year formation program involves twenty-four courses, eight workshops, eight days of recollection and five retreats.

## **13. How will you handle a man who already has theological training?**

The process of formation for diaconate ministry requires a commitment to the entire timeframe. Since formation is not exclusive to academic pursuit anyone called to ordained ministry must commit to the entire program. The participation of his wife, the interaction of the fellow candidates, dis-

cernment that involves both spiritual direction and formation advising are all constitutive elements of the formation program. The call to Holy Orders requires confirmation not only by the diocesan bishop but also by the community, hence a wider context to formation must be understood.

#### **14. What is the role of the wife and family during the application processes?**

It is particular law for dioceses in the United States that wives must consent not only for an inquirer's application to the program but also their petition for ordination. The wife and family of the applicant or candidate will be consulted in the various stages of the program. The wives will also be encouraged to attend various workshops, retreats, and programs throughout the duration of the formation period.

#### **15. What are the general application requirements?**

The Office for the Diaconate will provide extensive information, however some general information can be helpful to you now. The applicant can only be nominated to the formation program at the minimum age of thirty-one and the maximum age of sixty. He must be in full communion with the Church and free of all canonical impediments and irregularities. Three years should elapse between a convert's initiation into the Church or a returning Catholic's reconciliation to the Church. A married applicant should live out this vocation for at least three years prior to making application. Two years should elapse before a widower is nominated to the program. All applicants should possess at minimum an undergraduate degree from an institution of higher learning or its equivalent with professional certification.

The nomination of an applicant to the program cannot be accepted for one who has committed the delict of apostasy, heresy, or schism. The application cannot proceed for one who has committed voluntary homicide or has been involved in procuring an abortion. Applicants must also comply with all pertinent regulations in Canon Law.

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