



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF
PITTSBURGH



Q&A

Deacons: Common Questions and Answers

WHAT IS A DEACON?

In the Catholic tradition, a deacon is a member of an order of ordained ministry with its roots in the earliest days of the Church. The New Testament relates that the apostles prayed and laid hands on certain men to designate them for special service to meet the needs of the faith community (Acts 6:1-6). "Deacon" comes from the Greek word diakonos, meaning "servant." 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.

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). While all Christians, by virtue of their Baptism, are called to serve others, Pope St. John Paul II said, "The service of the deacon is the Church's service sacramentalized." Furthermore, he said, 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 diaconal service can be expressed in a wide range of non-liturgical ways. Some examples might help:

- Liturgically, deacons assist the priest at Mass, where they proclaim the Gospel, preach on occasion, and serve as ordinary ministers of the Eucharist. 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 providing pastoral care to people in hospitals, nursing homes, and other health care institutions; jails and prisons; food pantries and soup kitchens. They might be called upon to 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 teaching in RCIA, religious education, and sacramental preparation programs. Some deacons also have administrative duties in the Church.

HOW DO THE ROLES OF PRIEST AND DEACON DIFFER?

While both priests and deacons are in ordained ministries, 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 in the celebration of the Mass and to share the compassionate mercy and healing of God in the sacraments of Reconciliation and the 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.”

ARE DEACONS AN ANSWER TO THE GROWING SHORTAGE OF PRIESTS?

No. While deacons can alleviate some of the effects of the shortage of 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 pray for and foster more priestly vocations. 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 MEMBERS OF THE LAITY?

Just as deacons are not substitute priests, they also are not “super laity.” More than ever, the Church needs the full and active participation of all its members. Deacons should support and encourage the role of the laity, first of all, by their example of service and, secondly, by collaborating with the faithful who answer the call to serve. To truly be what Bishop Zubik calls On Mission for the Church Alive!, we need both a healthy, vibrant clergy—bishops, priests, and deacons—and a healthy, vibrant laity, working together to build up the kingdom of God on earth.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PERMANENT AND TRANSITIONAL DEACONS?

Seminarians in formation for the priesthood are ordained as deacons in their final stages of preparation. They are sometimes called transitional deacons, compared to permanent deacons, who are not advancing to the priesthood. However, the difference is in name only; their diaconal ministry is the same.

HOW ARE DEACONS ASSIGNED?

At ordination, deacons promise obedience to the diocesan bishop and his successors. Deacons, like priests, receive their assignments from the bishop, who may appoint them to any pastoral ministry throughout the diocese.

IS EVERY DEACON ASSIGNED TO A PARISH?

In the Diocese of Pittsburgh, deacons typically are rooted in a parish for liturgical service; however, depending on relative needs and other factors, the parish to which a deacon is assigned may or may not be his home parish. If a deacon is not assigned to his home parish, consideration is given to keeping him relatively close to home.

DO DEACONS SERVE OUTSIDE OF A PARISH?

Each deacon is assigned to some ministry of service and charity, which may coincide with his parish assignment. In those cases, the deacon's service and charity assignment is focused on the parish and its various programs and initiatives. Quite often, however, a deacon is assigned to pastoral work involving outside institutions, agencies, or programs. Consequently, a deacon might be assigned to a particular parish for liturgical service and, at the same time, to provide pastoral care at a hospital, nursing home, jail, or elsewhere, or to engage in some other aspect of ministry outside of the parish. A deacon's family situation, employment obligations, and personal talents are considered in the assignment process, which always starts with identifying the needs of the Church.

ARE DEACONS PAID FOR THEIR MINISTRY?

For the most part, deacons in this diocese perform their ministry on a part-time, voluntary basis. As part of a pilot program, the bishop has appointed several deacons as administrators of one or more parishes; these are full-time paid positions. Other deacons who are engaged in ministry-related jobs obtained them on their own, not by appointment of the bishop.

HOW DOES SOMEONE BECOME A DEACON?

Men who believe they might have a vocation to diaconal ministry should discuss the idea with their wife, if married, and family. They also should meet with their pastor. It is the pastor's nomination of an inquirer that initiates the application process. Admission to the formation program occurs only after rigorous evaluation.

WHAT ARE THE BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR THE FORMATION PROGRAM?

Applicants should be psychologically and emotionally healthy; men of solid faith, deep spirituality, and good character; and generously willing to serve the diocesan Church. Applicants also are expected to have at least a bachelor's degree and be able to financially support themselves and their family. Formation involves an intensive, multi-year program of course work, personal and spiritual development, and practical experience in pastoral ministry.

CAN A MAN APPLY TO THE FORMATION PROGRAM AT ANY TIME?

No. It's up to the diocesan bishop to determine if and when he wants to call for a new class to begin the Deacon Formation Program. His decision to do so will begin the nomination and application process.

IS THE DIACONATE OPEN TO MARRIED MEN?

The diaconate is open to both married and unmarried men. A married applicant must exhibit a stable marriage and family life. A man's wife must consent for him to enter and advance in the formation program. After ordination, a deacon cannot marry or re-marry. Consequently, if admitted to the formation program, unmarried aspirants/candidates must be willing to embrace a life of celibacy, and married aspirants/candidates must consider if they could accept celibacy in the unfortunate event they lose their spouse after ordination.

IS THERE AN AGE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DIACONATE?

Yes. Based on the minimum age established by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops for ordination to the permanent diaconate and the length of the diocesan formation program, an inquirer must be at least 30 years old to be nominated. Likewise, based on the maximum age established by the Diocese of Pittsburgh for ordination to the permanent diaconate and the length of the formation program, an inquirer must be no more than 59 years old to be nominated.

IS BECOMING A DEACON A LIFELONG COMMITMENT?

Yes. A man ordained as a deacon is not making a temporary or reversible commitment. He is embracing a distinct, permanent vocation, strengthened by the sacramental grace of Holy Orders, to a ministry of service in the Church.