

The Permanent Diaconate



Diocese of Down and Connor

What is a Permanent Deacon?

Origins and History

The Acts of the Apostles describes how, in the first century, the Church was faced with the challenge of responding to the needs of those who were at risk of being marginalised, either through culture or through material poverty. Keeping in mind the example of Jesus, the Apostles selected and ordained a number of men specifically for this service.

For a number of centuries, deacons ministered in close co-operation with the bishops of the Church, assisting at the Eucharist, preaching the Gospel, and exercising a ministry of charity.

Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Orders, is probably one of the best known deacons, though many tend to assume that he was a priest. Gradually, in the Western Church, the functions of deacons were absorbed into the ministry of the priest, and the diaconate became a transitional order, for those on the way to priesthood. The diaconate continued to exist as a permanent ministry in the Eastern Churches, including those in full communion with Rome.

Renewal

The Second Vatican Council envisaged a renewal of ministry both lay and ordained, in the Church. The Council's Constitution on the Church, *lumen Gentium*, explains that the lay faithful, by virtue of their baptism, are commissioned to an active apostolate and insists that "every opportunity be given them so that, according to their abilities and the needs of the times, they may zealously participate in the saving work of the Church."

The Second Vatican Council also proposed the restoration of the diaconate as a "distinct ministry of service" to be exercised "in communion with the bishop and his group of priests". Many of the functions which deacons perform can also be carried out by members of the lay faithful. The restoration of the diaconate is not intended in any sense to change that situation. The idea is that some of those who already exercise these functions would be "strengthened with the grace of diaconal ordination" and in that way would be designated to be a visible public sign of the Christ the Servant in the community of the Church.

What do Permanent Deacons *Do*?

The first responsibility of the deacon is to be an effective visible sign of Christ who came to serve rather than to be served. Although the ministry of the deacon may be exercised on a part-time basis, he remains at all times a deacon and he is called, in his life-style, to reflect this.

The ministry of the deacon is an expression of his being, as the documents say, *an icon of Christ the servant*. The areas of ministry which may be entrusted to deacons fall under three general headings, *Altar, Word and Charity*.. They include:

Altar

- Assisting the priest at the celebration of the Eucharist
- Bringing the Eucharist to the sick at home and in hospitals
- The formation of altar servers and Ministers of the Eucharist
- Presiding at Exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament
- The celebration of Baptism
- Celebrating marriages (with the appropriate delegation)
- Presiding at funerals

Word

- Proclaiming the Gospel at the Liturgy
- Preaching the homily
- Participating in sacramental preparation programmes
- The formation of Ministers of the Word
- Facilitating study of, and prayer with, the scriptures

Charity

- Facilitating the development of lay ministry
- Visiting the sick
- Visiting prisoners
- Visiting the bereaved
- Youth ministry, and the facilitation of peer-ministry among young people
- Promoting awareness of the social teaching of the Church
- The promotion of justice and human rights

A permanent deacon receives his mission from the Bishop, and will be assigned to work as a member of a team, normally under the leadership of a parish priest. He is called to minister in close co-operation with priests and with members of the lay faithful who are entrusted with various ministries.

Collaborative ministry is already a reality in very many parishes, especially with the development of Parish Pastoral Councils, baptism teams, bereavement support groups etc. Deacons are not intended to replace lay ministers. On the contrary, in many places, they play a key role in the development and co-ordination of lay ministry. Neither are deacons intended to be "mini-priests," making up for a shortage of vocations.

The Vatican Council was quite clear that, alongside the diaconate, the role of the ordained priesthood must continue to be fostered because without the priest there is no Eucharist and without the Eucharist there is no Church.

Who Is Eligible to Become a Deacon?

It is the Bishop who, in the name of the Church, calls a man to ordination as deacon. Any decision to call a man to the order of deacon must follow from a mature discernment. In other words, it is a decision rooted in faith. The bishop needs to satisfy himself that a man, who has already been called by God in the Sacrament of Baptism, is now called by God to ordained ministry, as a further expression of his baptismal vocation.

Candidates for the permanent diaconate may be married or unmarried. The upper age limit for ordination is sixty-five years of age.

Married Candidates:

The Church is concerned that there should be no potential for conflict between the responsibilities of ordained ministry and the need of a couple in the early years of their married life to devote their time and energy to maturing in their relationship and to caring for young children. For that reason, a married man must have reached the age of thirty-five before he can be ordained to the permanent diaconate. He must also have the formal consent of his wife.

Unmarried Candidates:

Unmarried candidates must have reached the age of twenty five before they can be ordained as permanent deacons. In keeping with the tradition of the Church, those who are ordained as single men make a solemn promise of celibacy.

What Personal Qualities are Required?

A prospective candidate for the permanent diaconate must:

- have a genuine sense of vocation to this calling.
- be a baptized and confirmed man who is active in the practice of his Catholic faith.
- be actively involved in the parish or charitable work and highly recommended by his parish priest and parishioners.
- [if married...] have been married at least five years and living in a stable and valid marriage, enjoying the full support of his wife who will participate actively in the formation programme, and be willing to remain celibate if his wife precedes him in death.
- [if single...] enjoy a stable, settled life, a history of healthy relationships, and be able and willing to accept celibacy, understanding the implications of this charism.
- [if widowed...] have had at least two years to heal from the death of his wife.
- possess the human, spiritual and intellectual capacity to participate fully in the formation programme.
- possess natural gifts for ministry, demonstrate maturity and balance, enjoy good physical and mental health with no condition which would impede ministry and have no history of any significant compulsions or addictions.
- be free of all force or pressure in making his application. Be able to sustain an adequate standard of living for himself and, in so far as it is applicable, for his family.
- be able to give the time required for study and service without detriment to his family.
- be willing to be subject to the child protection vetting procedures as required by National and Diocesan Guidelines.
- not belong to any organisation or engage in any work or professional activity that is, according to the norms of the Church and the prudent judgement of the Archbishop, inconsistent with the diaconal ministry. Be free of all irregularities and impediments to Orders.

How do I know if I am Suited to the Permanent Diaconate?

Before he is formally accepted as a candidate for the permanent diaconate an *aspirant* is invited to participate in what is known as the **propaedeutic period**. During this period, which lasts approximately one year, he engages in a process of discernment which is intended to help him to arrive at a better understanding of himself and of ministry in the Church, so as to be able to make an initial decision which is fully free and unconditioned by personal interests or external pressures of any sort.

The propaedeutic period incorporates the formal application process and, as such, it affords the Bishop the opportunity, together with his advisors, to arrive at some initial evaluation of the aspirant as a potential candidate for ordained ministry.

The focus of the propaedeutic period will be on the vocation of the candidate and, in the event that he is married, its implications for his family. Those who are accepted into the propaedeutic period begin a year-long programme that focuses on spiritual and human formation, and on what it means to be a deacon. The programme includes weekends focused on prayer, instruction and reflection, days of reflection, and a retreat. Because this is essentially a time of discernment, the applicant's wife, if he is married, will be asked to take part in at least some of these events:

- ***Focus on the Call to Ministry***
- ***Ministry and Marriage***
- ***Prayer and Spiritual Directions***
- ***Personal Awareness and Development***
- ***Interview***

What Kind of Training is Provided?

Training for ordained ministry is usually referred to as formation, because it is more than just training for a job; it is about preparing for a way of life. Following the propaedeutic period, candidates who are accepted into the formation programme will begin a three year period of preparation for ordained ministry, which includes academic study, spiritual, human and pastoral formation.

The overall purpose of the formation programme is to help each candidate to reach a mature understanding of his faith, and to develop the personal and pastoral skills which will enable him to share this faith with others through the exercise of a ministry of charity which also has a significant liturgical dimension.

Academic Formation

The academic dimension of the programme will include the study of Scripture, Dogmatic Theology (the faith of the Church), Moral Theology (the implications of faith for relationship and for action). Liturgy (how the Church prays as a community), Spirituality, Canon Law, and Ecclesiastical History, as well as relevant elements of philosophy. Evaluation of the candidate from an academic point of view will take into account his performance in the classroom context, the satisfactory completion of regular assignments and the feedback from his tutor. The fundamental courses at least will conclude with an examination and at the end of the three years there will be a comprehensive examination. Successful completion of this programme leads to the awarding of a Diploma in Diaconal Studies from The Pontifical University, Maynooth.

Pastoral Formation

Among the elements included in the pastoral formation programme will be:

- The care of the poor and the work of justice (including familiarity with and involvement in the work of the SVDP and other agencies which give effect to the Church's social concern).
- The pastoral care of prisoners and their families.
- The pastoral care of the sick at home and in hospital.
- Participation in the communal prayer and the liturgical life of the community.
- Participation in the building up of the community, through effective and appropriate involvement in small groups, committees, movements and voluntary bodies.
- Proclamation of the word of God in various pastoral contexts.
- The pastoral care of the bereaved.

While there will be formal workshops, much of the pastoral formation programme will take place in the parish, under the guidance and direction of a named priest. It will be tailored to the individual, and will take account of the stage of formation which he has reached, and the ministries which he has received. Provision will be made for structured reflection on pastoral action and experience.

Spiritual Formation

The spiritual formation of the future deacon will be integrated with his academic formation. It will take into account his previous experience of spiritual life, and will seek to affirm and strengthen it. He will be helped, through prayer, spiritual direction and practical experience to deepen his relationship with Christ, and to develop a spirituality which enables him to offer himself, as Christ did, in the service of his brothers and sisters, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Human Formation

The human formation element of the programme will include some scheduled workshops, but much of it will take place in the context of working together with other candidates, in pastoral placement, and in reflecting on these experiences with his formation director.

The aim of this human formation is to help the candidate to develop the personal skills which will enable him to:

- balance the needs of In's own family with the requirements of ministry.
- develop and maintain appropriate pastoral relationships.
- communicate and work constructively and effectively with others.
- observe appropriate boundaries, and develop the kind of personal discipline which will enable him to establish ministerial priorities, and to care appropriately for his own well-being in body, mind and spirit.

The director of diaconal formation has overall responsibility for the formation programme, and it will be his responsibility in the final analysis, taking account of the evaluation of pastoral and academic tutors to make a recommendation to the Bishop regarding ordination and future ministry. While spiritual direction is an integral element in the formation process, the relationship of the candidate with his spiritual director is a privileged one, and its confidentiality is fully respected.

How Might Diaconate Impinge on my Employment?

The diaconate is an active ministry, not an honorary position. Being a deacon involves a serious level of commitment, both at the stage of preparation and after ordination.

As a general rule, deacons exercise a voluntary, part-time ministry, and the amount of time given to this ministry will depend to some extent on the individual and family circumstances of the deacon concerned. Some deacons, if they have taken early retirement or reduced their work commitments, may be able to offer a greater time commitment.

Deacons who exercise a part-time ministry are entitled to work in their chosen career to support themselves and their families. It is important, however, that their employment is both practically and morally consistent with the exercise of ordained ministry.

It may occasionally happen that, alongside his voluntary service, the full-time employment of a deacon is within some agency or service of the Church. Although he is, at all times, a deacon, a distinction needs to be made between his employment and his voluntary ministry, not least because he may be answerable to different people in respect of each.

From the point of view of remuneration Canon Law distinguishes between deacons who are asked to exercise their ministry full-time, and those who have an income from secular employment. "Married deacons who dedicate themselves full-time to the ecclesiastical ministry deserve remuneration sufficient to provide for themselves and their families. Those, however, who receive remuneration by reason of a secular profession which they exercise or have exercised, are to see to their own and to their families' needs from that income".

Those who exercise a voluntary part-time ministry would normally receive expenses related to the exercise of their ministry, according to an agreed system. Once a deacon has been ordained he will be insured against personal injury sustained in the course of his ministry, and against claims made by third parties, arising out of advice he has given, services which he has provided or failed to provide etc.

How Do I Make an Application?

In the first instance, a man who is considering the possibility of offering himself for service as a deacon in the Diocese of Down and Connor, should make contact with his parish priest.

Following initial discussion at local level, contact may be made with the Diocesan Director for the Permanent Diaconate. An arrangement will be made to meet with him and, where applicable, with his wife, in order to explore any questions he/they may have, and to decide whether it would be appropriate for him to participate in the propaedeutic period.

Applications will be welcomed from:

- men who are living in the Diocese of Down and Connor, or
- men who, though resident in a neighbouring diocese, are significantly involved in some form of pastoral ministry in the Diocese of Down and Connor.

During the initial enquiry stage, a recommendation will be sought from the man's parish priest, or from a priest who has responsibility for some area of ministry in which the man is actively involved.

During the propaedeutic period every effort will be made to accompany the aspirant on his journey of discernment, and to help him to make a mature decision as to whether he should apply to be accepted into the three year formation programme. Acceptance into the propaedeutic programme is not, however, a guarantee of acceptance into formation, or of eventual ordination to the permanent diaconate.

Prospective applicants for the Permanent Diaconate may find it helpful to read: *The Permanent Diaconate: National Directory and Norms for Ireland*, which has been published by Veritas, and which is also available on the web site:

A pdf version of this document is also available on the Diocesan web page:
www.downandconnor.org



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