

A brief history of the Permanent Diaconate

Servants of the Church; Proclaimers of the Gospel

Since the time of the Apostles and the early Church, deacons have played an important role in the life and ministry of the Church (Acts of the Apostles, 6:1-6) with the Apostles establishing the Order of Deacons, ordaining seven men to help with the care of the Greek widows of the Church.

Derived from the Greek '*diakonos*' meaning 'servant', a deacon's ministry is one of service and the proclamation of the Word of God.

While deacons appear in the early and middle history of the Church, they disappeared in the latter centuries as a "permanent" state, becoming "transitional" for those men being formed for the priesthood.

The Council of Trent (1545 - 1563) called for the restoration of the Permanent Diaconate, but ultimately, time ran out and the restoration was not discussed. However, the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 1965) made honorable mention of the diaconate in the Constitution which begins with the words "Lumen Gentium," where, after concerning itself with the bishops and the priests, it also praised the third rank of sacred orders, explaining its dignity and enumerating its functions.

Then, in 1967, Pope St Paul VI released his Apostolic Letter Given Motu Proprio, *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, declaring the general norms prompting the restoration of the Permanent Diaconate.

As part of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the Order of Deacon is an integral part of the Sacrament of Holy Orders and can be conferred on a single or married man, though he must already be married before receiving the Diaconate.

By virtue of their ordination, they are united to each other by a sacramental fraternity, dedicated to a life of ministry in service of the Church.

The deacon is an active apostle of the New Evangelisation, this is because most Permanent Deacons work in civil positions, hence they are well placed to serve as a bridge between leaders of the Church and the wider community; serving as a Sacramental presence.

The principal function of the deacon, as outlined by the Congregation for the Clergy's *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, is to collaborate with the bishop and the priests in the exercise of a ministry which is not of their own wisdom, but of the Word of God, calling all to conversion and holiness.



This is done by:

- proclaiming the Gospel to believer and unbeliever alike
- presiding over public prayer
- baptising
- assisting at and blessing marriages in the absence of a priest
- giving viaticum to the dying
- leading the rites of burial
- performing works of charity in the name of the bishop once consecrated
- faithfully celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours for the Church and the whole world

In his message to men ordained to the Permanent Diaconate in 1987, Pope St John Paul II told the permanent deacons present that they belonged to the life of the Church that goes back to the saints - like Lawrence, Stephen and his companions, whom the Acts of the Apostles consider "deeply spiritual and prudent". (Acts 6:3)

"In your lives as deacons you are called to hear, guard and do the Word of God, in order to be able to proclaim it worthily," he said.

"This is at the very heart of the Diaconate to which you have been called: to be a servant of the mysteries of Christ and, at one and the same time, to be a servant of your brothers and sisters.

"That these two dimensions are inseparably joined together in one reality shows the important nature of the ministry which is yours by ordination."

The permanent deacon therefore, he said, has a special sacramental witness to give.

"The sacramental grace of his ordination is meant to strengthen him and to make his efforts fruitful, even as his secular occupation gives him entry into the temporal sphere in a way that is normally not appropriate for other members of the clergy," Pope St John Paul II said.

"At the same time, the fact that he is an ordained minister of the Church brings a special dimension to his efforts in the eyes of those with whom he lives and works."

Referencing Christ's own words in the Gospel, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) states to the deacons of the first century, "Let he who wishes to be great among you, make himself your servant, in the same way as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many, you deacons must do the same, even if that means giving your life for your brothers and sisters, because of the service which you are bound to fulfil".

This call to life-giving service is appropriate even for those who are called today to the Permanent Diaconate, urging preparation with great dedication for their future role and ministry in the life of the Church.

