

I. 1: THE IDENTITY OF THE PERMANENT DEACON

Who or what is a “Permanent Deacon” in the Roman Catholic Church?

- **A deacon is an ordained minister of Christ.** He is configured by the grace of the sacrament to Christ the Head in such a way that he allows Christ to act in him (“*in persona Christi*”) in the specific ministerial or sacramental acts for which he is ordained.
- **A deacon is ordained, not for the sacrifice, but for service.** A deacon is not a priest to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and the related sacraments of healing; he is a servant (*diakonos*) and a herald (*kēryx*), announcing and making present in his person our Lord Jesus Christ, who came “not to be served, but to serve” (Mt 20:28).
- **Christ’s service prepares someone to receive Christ as Word of life (Gospel) and as Bread of life (Eucharist).** The deacon proclaims the salvation of Jesus Christ in word and example, in the Church and in the world. A deacon’s service has three interlocking parts: the *diakonia* (or “ministry”) of the Word, of Sacraments, and of Charity.
- The **ministry of the Word** means the distinctive role of proclaiming the Gospel, both during the public liturgies of the Church (Mass, Liturgy of the Hours, and other instances of the Liturgy of the Word), and as a catechist (teaching the faith to children and adults, preparing others to receive sacraments, leading retreats and renewal programs, etc.) He may also preach a homily, either in the absence of a priest or as agreed upon by his pastor.
- The **ministry of Sacraments** includes certain roles during Mass, such as leading the Penitential Rite, assisting the priest as an acolyte or altar server, or elevating the Chalice during the Consecration. Deacons are ordinary ministers of Holy Eucharist, for the distribution within Mass, and for bringing the Eucharist and Viaticum to the sick, elderly, imprisoned, etc. Deacons lead communal prayer, such as Eucharistic Adoration with Benediction, or the Liturgy of the Hours. Deacons may also officiate at baptisms, weddings, and funerals.
- The **ministry of Charity** includes other roles during liturgies, such as inviting the people to the sign of peace, leading the prayers of the faithful, and sending the people forth “to love and serve the Lord.” Outside the liturgy, it includes the gamut of ways to help the poor and the needy of all kinds (for example, the “spiritual and corporal works of mercy”). This aspect of deacons’ leadership can sometimes be most influential in the community, as they carry the mission of the Church and the content of the Gospel into the world.
- None of these areas of *diakonia* is exercised in opposition to or isolation from the others. In all these ways integrally, the deacon strives to “bring the poor to the Church, and the Church to the poor” (*National Directory* #37). A deacon’s ministry must always be driven by faith and love for Christ, which is cultivated in the liturgical and sacramental piety appropriate to the deacon, and lived out as faith and love for the poor.

In 1967, Pope Paul VI issued the *motu proprio Sacrum Diaconatum Ordinem*, which restored to the Church the “permanent diaconate,” or more precisely, the permanency of the diaconate as an *ordo* distinct from the priesthood. That is, the Church again ordains men to the permanent state of *committed service*, apart from the intention to receive priestly orders as well. These permanent deacons are “strengthened by the imposition of hands, a tradition going back to the Apostles, and [are] more closely joined to the altar so that they may more effectively carry out their ministry through the sacramental grace of the diaconate” (*Ad Gentes*, 16; see also *Lumen Gentium* 29, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* 17).

The Church, through her people, performs three specific and unique actions: *leitourgeia* (“worship”), *kerygma* (“proclamation”), and *diakonia* (“service”). Each action is the action of Jesus Christ, as the

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Head of His Body and also as the members of His Body. All the faithful, by virtue of their baptismal identity in Christ as prophet, priest, and king, undertake these actions in and with the Church. All the ordained, by virtue of their conformity to Christ the Head in the sacrament of Holy Orders, undertake these actions as Christ the Head present to and leading His Body (“*in persona Christi capitis*”).

This “sacramental grace of the diaconate” participates in the “fullness of orders” of the episcopate, but is distinct from the ministerial priesthood (“*sacerdotium*”) of priests and bishops. Permanent deacons “are ordained not to the priesthood, but to service” (*Lumen Gentium* 29). They share in the same *triplex munera* (threefold duty of preaching, sanctifying, and governing) as priests, in unity with their bishop, but not for sacramental sanctification through the priestly sacraments. Rather, deacons represent and actualize a different emphasis in Christ’s ministry: that of preparation. As Pope John Paul II put it, deacons “sacramentalize the service of the Church.”

Permanent deacons, then, are called by God and the Church to serve the Church, for a precise task, combining *leitourgeia*, *kerygma*, and *diakonia* in a unique way. This unique sacramental identity of deacons is labeled in the ordination rite itself as “the herald (*kēryx*) of Christ.” Filled as Christ was filled with the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, proclaiming as Christ proclaimed the coming and present Kingdom of God, deacons “prepare the way of the Lord.” By undertaking their sacred ministries of Word, Sacrament, and Charity, deacons issue the call to conversion: continuing conversion of heart for those already baptized, and conversion of faith for those not yet baptized.

I.2: THE DIACONATE IN THE DIOCESE OF SIOUX CITY

The Diocese of Sioux City ordained its first two permanent deacons in 1977. In the following three decades, more than fifty deacons have been ordained for the Diocese. Their service has enriched the Church, and has paved the way for still greater service by the next generation of deacons.

As the order of deacons has grown, so too have the opportunities for their ecclesial service. “The poor will be with you always” (Mt 26:11); the need to serve the poor is always greater than the efforts available. Other factors are also increasing the need for permanent deacons. Sharing the burdens of ministry with priests is increasingly crucial. The need for clear evangelization and faithful local leadership is always vitally important. A man ordained to the permanent diaconate in the Diocese of Sioux City today will face the following set of expectations. A man in formation for that calling will also face these expectations, at least in anticipation; in what follows here, “the deacon” generally includes aspirants and candidates as well.

I.2.a: The deacon is expected to lead by example. Like priests, the deacon is a cleric, not a lay person; but unlike the priest, the deacon is very likely to be married, and to have employment outside the Church. The clerical example of a holy deacon is therefore quite distinct from the clerical example of a holy priest.

First of all, in his work and family life, the deacon has an opportunity to show the fruits of his sacramental identity as “herald of Christ.” Just as St. Paul supported himself with the labor of his hands while preaching his way around the Mediterranean, so too the deacon shows humility and generosity in his dedication to his primary vocation as husband and father. The faithfulness to this vocation also becomes a foundation for his diaconal ministry.

Secondly, like all the baptized, but made more explicit and visible because of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the personal holiness of the deacon is a witness to the perfection of Jesus Christ. The deacon is likely to be looked up to as a model of Christian life, and must strive to be worthy of imitation, even when

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humility admits the impossibility of such a task. It is most important that the deacon be a man of prayer, especially contemplative prayer. This prayer will be a source of strength and dedication to meet the demands of his callings with love and joy, not grudgingly or with bad grace.

Thirdly, in his ecclesial ministry, the deacon shows the possibility of loving the poor. In the face of dehumanizing material, moral, and spiritual poverty, he gives evidence to all that Christ loves each person first. The deacon's service must be motivated by love of Christ's "little ones," so that the act itself of service will be inviting to others.

I.2.b: The deacon is expected to be devoted to the Church, the Spotless Bride of Christ, and Her Sacraments, and to Mary our Mother. Service is the foundation of the deacon's duty and witness to the salvation of Christ, but service by itself does not proclaim its own truth. Service must also be paschal: it must be done as explicitly as possible for the sake of Christ. In the context of a man's life lived in and for the Church, that is, the Body and the spotless Bride of Christ, this will tend to be more obvious. Therefore, the deacon must actively love the Church. He must see in Her his "Holy Mother," who gave him life in Her sacraments, by the grace and power of the Word of God in Her.

Love for the Church is expressed powerfully in obedience to Her. Especially in our society of radical individualism, the habit of submission to external authority is difficult to cultivate. The deacon must strive to overcome the bias of the world which is likely to be present. He must trust completely in the Magisterium, especially as it is exercised locally by the diocesan Bishop. He must show in all areas of his life his willingness to be taught by the Church's wisdom and Tradition, and must not accept any sinful transgressions of Her precepts.

Love for the Church is also expressed in living fully the sacramental life of the Church. The deacon must deepen the commitment to live ecclesially, just as he grows in the commitment to serve ecclesially. This requires frequent, "even daily," attendance at Mass and reception of the Eucharist as far as possible, and frequent recourse to the sacrament of Confession. It means growing in appreciation for and dedication to the Liturgy of the Hours, beginning with Morning and Evening Prayer (Lauds and Vespers).

Growing in love for Christ can also be fostered by devotion to the Blessed Mother, as we imitate her love for her Son. Mary is the Icon of Faith, the perfect servant of God whose faithful submission teaches us faith. The perfection of her faith includes diaconal faith: her "*Ecce ancilla*" ("Behold your handmaiden," Lk 1:38) teaches us our willingness to serve, while her "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5) teaches us whom we serve, and how. We have extra reason to model ourselves on Christ's Mother, in that Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe is also patroness of the Americas and of the Diocese of Sioux City.

I.2.c: The deacon is expected to know and love the Faith, and to defend it persuasively. Service is also an explicit witness for Christ, when it becomes a means to proclaim the faith as such. Knowledge of the faith comes first from prayer and Scripture, and secondarily from formal theological training.

Service is often the first step of evangelization. By showing our love in action, the way is often opened to speak of Christ's love directly. Our words about Christ and His Church should show the same character of committed love as our deeds.

Catechesis is itself a service to the faithful, who need their faith built up to maturity. Deacons should strive, especially in their initial formation, to develop and maintain a mastery of catechesis, which not only inspires others to love Christ, but also is capable of forming new catechists for the Church.

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Apologetics is another form of service to those whose faith is weak. Apologetics is the defense of the truths of our Faith against the false ideas, and even outright lies, of those who despise it. Deacons should at least gain a basic apologetic knowledge.

Preaching the Gospel and preaching the Faith require great devotion and preparation by the deacon. Proclaiming the Gospel is the liturgical office most proper to the deacon, and he should always expect to fill this role whenever present at the altar for any Liturgy of the Word. In the Diocese of Sioux City, deacons should also expect to preach homilies at Sunday Masses about once per month, and possibly at weekday Masses, under the direction of their pastor.

I.2.d: **The deacon is expected to support the Bishop of Sioux City, and his presbyterate, with active obedience and fidelity.** During the Rite of Ordination, the new deacon places his hands between those of the Bishop, and swears homage and fealty to him as a vicar of Christ and a successor of the Apostles. The deacon becomes the “Bishop’s man,” in the most literal sense. He becomes for the Bishop another heart, eyes, ears, and hands, so that through his faithful service, the Bishop may better love all the poor, and see and hear their needs, and meet them. Therefore, the deacon must cultivate filial devotion to the Bishop he follows. Again, love is forcefully expressed in obedience, and likewise in hospitality, patience, and support.

The deacon must cooperate with the priests of the Diocese, whose brother he becomes, since priests too are the Bishop’s men. Both priests and deacons serve only to extend the pastoral rule of the Bishop. In most things, the priests, especially the pastors of parishes, will take the lead for deacons and laity alike.

For deacons who are assigned to serve a parish, their relationship with the pastor of the parish becomes more important. Although the pastor does not “hire” the deacon or assign him his ministry, still the pastor is ultimately responsible to the Bishop for the pastoral care of all the souls within his parish. He is therefore also responsible for the pastoral actions of the deacon; and therefore he has some oversight authority for the deacon. The deacon must cultivate the greatest charity and support for the pastor, second only to the Bishop. Ideally, he is always willing and able to help with whatever the pastor may legitimately request from him, for the sake of the pastoral care of the parish. In practice, both pastor and deacon will often need to negotiate and renegotiate the terms of what will be expected from the deacon. A good pastoral relationship will anticipate conflicts and problems before they arise.

I.3: NATURE AND PURPOSE OF DIACONAL FORMATION

Formation in Christ is a process by which one prepares and is prepared to accept a new role or dignity or identity from Christ, through His Church. Initial formation for ordination as a permanent deacon must make one ready to accept the grace and dignity of that sacrament: to become a “herald of Christ.” It requires a thorough examination of one’s whole self, family, work, and life. It will certainly be challenging, and it will demand significant sacrifice, not only of time, but also of previously held attitudes, priorities, and/or goals.

Fundamentally, the purpose of formation is to grow significantly in faith. “Faith” here means three related things: *what* we believe as Catholics; *that* we believe it precisely *as Catholics*; and the *act of believing* itself. All three aspects of faith are explicitly addressed in the formation process. What we believe is developed through intellectual formation, especially the formal study of theology. The Catholicity of believing is developed through human formation in virtue and piety; this is sometimes loosely called “spirituality,” as in “the spirituality of the diaconate.” Believing itself is developed through

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spiritual formation, both individually (spiritual direction) and as a member of the formation class or cohort (“spiritual colloquium”).

All three senses of faith are also engaged in the fourth area of formation, the pastoral. Training in how to serve and how to lead is a practical essential for deacons. These concerns are particularly addressed in the mentored practica during the candidacy path.

These four areas of concentration (intellectual, human, spiritual, and pastoral) are distinct, but not isolated from each other. Just as faith is one, so the four areas must be integrated into one single formation process.

Finally, it is absolutely vital that the family of a man in formation be intimately involved in his preparation. If he is growing significantly in faith, so must his wife and (to a lesser extent) his children. For a married aspirant or candidate, the sacred reality of the spousal sacramental identity already exists, and must always be deemed more important than the putative identity of the diaconate. The Church insists that only those married men can be called to the permanent diaconate, for whom it can be reasonably demonstrated that the sacramental identity of Holy Orders will not conflict with or damage the sacramental identity of Holy Matrimony. Ideally, the two sacraments should reinforce each other; they should never be in conflict with each other. The process of coming to grasp how that complementarity can be lived requires formation for both spouses together.