

II. 1: MARKS OF DIACONAL VOCATION

The Permanent Diaconate is a unique vocation in the Church. It has a particular sacramental identity (the herald of Christ) and a distinctive relationship to the person of Jesus Christ (the icon of Christ the Servant). Everyone who is called by God to this vocation will have a set of natural and supernatural gifts suitable to it, and a set of characteristic attitudes and experiences, even if only partially developed or understood (see *National Directory*, #165-168). Even before discernment begins, those gifts and attitudes will have been used in various ways to serve various people.

In the discernment aspect of the Inquiry Phase (see below), a man with some interest in the Permanent Diaconate reflects on his experience in the Church and in the world, seeking to understand how his life may have been shaped toward the diaconate. An increasing sense of commitment, possibly even joy, in these sorts of personal attitudes and characteristics may indicate the foundations of God's call to serve His people as a deacon. The Lord may be calling you to the diaconate if:

1. You have a **natural inclination to serve** the Church and the needs of all people. This inclination might be expressed in a career of service (teaching, medicine, advocacy, direct service to the poor in some way, etc.), or in an avocation (parish commitments, local service groups of various kinds, volunteering in some way, etc.).
2. You are a man of **prayer**, with a meaningful personal relationship with God the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and a strong sense of the positive fruits of a good prayer life for yourself and those around you. Your prayer life has also led you to a recognition of the reality of the "communion of saints" supporting you, and you have some friendship with at least a few of those recognized by the Church in their sanctity, especially Mary and Joseph, the Holy Archangels, and others.
3. You have **psychological integrity**, i.e., you are well balanced physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This maturity is the crucial foundation for growth and vocational formation. Spiritually, it implies that one has already made the basic choice to love and follow Jesus Christ before all other things. This choice demands **commitment**: to ongoing conversion, to avoiding self-deception, and to living out existing sacramental identities (baptism, confirmation, and likely matrimony). *It does not imply* that one has no more room for human or social growth. If one has not yet made this choice, one cannot begin the process of vocational formation.
4. You have a **sense of docility and openness**, especially for the wisdom of the Church. You are willing to follow the teachings of the Church, even when you do not understand them or agree with them. You do not presume to know everything. You are willing to give up unnecessary opinions, including any **prejudice** against persons or cultures. You are developing a capacity for dialogue, based on an overriding love and hunger for the Truth which is Jesus Christ.
5. You have the ability to **talk about your faith**, and its corollary, a capacity to **listen respectfully to others**. Our Catholic belief in the unity of faith means that everyone has the same basic relationship to Jesus Christ before baptism, and another after baptism. But every person is also unique in their identity and experiences, and so within the overarching unity of faith, there is a great plurality of details, vocations, charisms, choices, etc.
6. You have **good communication skills** for listening, writing, and speaking.
7. You have a strong sense of **responsibility**, in all aspects of your life (family, Church, work, local community), including:
 - Assiduous attention to fulfilling one's domestic and public duties;
 - Accountability to others;
 - Balanced and prudent judgment;
 - Generosity in service;

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- Ability to lead, facilitate, and motivate others to appropriate actions.
- 8. You possess **these spiritual and evangelical characteristics**, and actively seek to develop them further:
 - Sound faith, and a commitment to enrich and enliven that faith;
 - A deepening spirituality and prayer life;
 - A good reputation as a Christian man among your family, peers, and neighbors;
 - Active involvement in the Church's apostolate;
 - Personal integrity, maturity, and commitment to holiness;
 - Regular participation in the sacramental life of the Church;
 - Evidence of recognized, ongoing commitment to the Church's life and service;
 - A positive and stable marriage, or a mature commitment to celibacy if unmarried;
 - A capacity for obedience and fraternal communion.

II.2: THE PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT

Discernment is our attempt to understand the will of God more clearly, especially based on our experiences and the fruits of our prayer life. All Christians seek to discern their path in life at some level. Those contemplating Holy Orders especially must develop a clear sense of discernment, in order to be more useful instruments to our Lord and Master.

II.2.a: The prerequisites for discernment: Good discernment requires several elements:

- *a humble, accurate self-understanding:* Accurate self-understanding comes from seeing oneself increasingly through God's eyes, not through one's own. Human nature includes the very strong tendency to put the best face on everything, especially in matters of spiritual and moral life. We are always our weakest critic in this regard. We learn to see ourselves through God's eyes, especially in the Sacrament of Penance, and in the daily examination of conscience. As we learn to see ourselves through God's eyes, we begin to grasp how the patterns of our experience are leading us to bear the Cross more explicitly, and we begin to cooperate more fully with that process.
- *theological reflection:* Theological reflection is learning to think with the mind and wisdom of the Church. Examination of conscience is in fact a kind of theological reflection, specifically in the moral life. We need to examine the whole of our lives in the same way, with the same regularity. The tools of theological reflection are intimacy with all three Persons of God the Trinity, knowledge of Scripture, submissive love of the Church, and knowledge of self. As we examine our social, ecclesial, and sacramental lives according to the wisdom of the Church, we can begin to see movements of the Spirit at work for us.
- *a strong prayer life:* Intimacy with God and with the communion of saints demands disciplined prayer. This begins with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, at least on every Sunday and solemn feast day, and aspiring to daily reception of the Sacrament of the Eucharist; and with frequent (ideally, at least monthly) use of the Sacrament of Penance. Divine intimacy is further cultivated by regular formal prayer (praying the Psalms each morning and evening is very traditional) and by continual spontaneous prayer. Some aspect of meditative prayer (e.g. the Rosary, *lectio divina*, etc.) and of silent prayer (listening to God, rather than blathering at Him) is also important. On the basis of this personal intimacy, we can begin to hear what God wishes to tell us in our experience, and perhaps more directly.

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- *a spiritual director or companion to discuss things with:* Very few people are so spiritually gifted as to guide themselves through all the pitfalls of learning to love God above all things. Most of us need someone to help us along the way: to help prevent blindness and self-deception in some particular area, and to keep our interior life in contact with the community of believers. For the baptized, a spiritual companion or director can be any baptized Catholic of mature spiritual life, whom you trust. For those formally admitted to formation for Holy Orders, the spiritual director must be a priest, approved by the Diocese of Sioux City.

II.2.b: Discernment in the Formation Process: The basic question of discernment is, “To what is God calling me, here and now?” While the full process of discernment remains ongoing, nevertheless the particular emphasis of this question changes over the course of formation and ordained ministry.

During the **Inquiry Phase** (consideration of a possible calling, up to the point of formal admission to formation), the emphasis is on discerning how one’s prior experience may be preparing one to hear and accept the vocation to the Permanent Diaconate, or to another distinct vocation. Correlating one’s experience with the “Marks of Diaconal Vocation” may help in this process. There may also be negative correlation, or conversion moments (even if drawn out in time), in which we now grasp how our goals or attitudes were significantly malformed, and seek to change them. In general, Inquiry Phase discernment is gathering specific evidence that, *if God is calling you to the Permanent Diaconate*, He has prepared the ground in these precise ways.

During the **Aspirancy Phase** (the first segment of formal formation, typically two years), the emphasis shifts to the call itself. Is God calling you, here and now, to serve Him and His people as a Permanent Deacon? The process of formation itself is geared to help Aspirants answer this question with as much certainty as possible, either yes or no. Intellectual formation sharpens the theological tools that can be used in theological reflection and self-understanding; human formation deepens self-understanding and ecclesial commitment; pastoral formation deepens prayer life and divine intimacy; spiritual formation keeps the process open and ecclesial. This process both builds a foundation for future formation, and clarifies the discernment of vocation.

It must be stressed that discerning that God is not calling you to the Permanent Diaconate (or possibly not calling you now) is not a failure of the formation. If God is not calling you to this, then He is certainly calling you to something else, and that too should be significantly clearer as a result of the Aspirancy formation and discernment. In this respect, the process would be working exactly as it is supposed to work.

During the **Candidacy Phase** (the second segment of formal formation, minimally three years, leading up to ordination), the emphasis shifts to what kind of deacon one is called to be. Each deacon has a unique set of spiritual and practical gifts to offer, and not all deacons minister in the same way. Every deacon has responsibility for all three areas of ministry (Word, Sacrament, and Charity), but within that structure there is considerable variety. Again, the formation process helps achieve clear and accurate discernment, most notably in the pastoral practica (see below).

During the **post-ordination phase**, the emphasis shifts again to ministry as a constant opportunity. Once ordained, being a deacon is not a role or a job, but a state of being. One **is** a deacon, regardless of what one does at any moment. Every moment, then, potentially offers the chance to act on one’s diaconal vocation: to proclaim Christ and the Good News in a meaningful way, in the face of some real poverty of body, mind, or spirit. One must constantly be open to the prompting of the Spirit to serve, in precisely the way in which God is calling here and now, at this particular moment and for these particular people.

In addition to this as-it-were spontaneous ministry, the deacon must continue the discernment of formal ministries in the Church, just as in the Candidacy Phase, bringing to bear all his accumulating experience as a deacon.