

III: THE COMMUNITY OF DISCERNMENT AND FORMATION

“The first stirrings of a vocation to the diaconate are often explored at the personal level... Here, an individual initially reflects upon the nature of his perceived call” (*National Directory*, #169). Yet every vocation exists, not for the one who is called, but for the Church, as St. Paul clearly teaches (I Cor 12:7). The one who is called is a member of the Church, and discerns the call, not in isolation, but precisely within the Church. Likewise, the process of formation is not concerned with an isolated individual, but with a member of the Church, being formed by and for the Church.

The success of both discernment and formation demands not only individual but also communal effort. “An inquiry and eventual application for entrance into diaconal formation is not just a personal and family journey. The Church must accompany it” (*National Directory*, #171). Different members of the Church will have different roles in discernment and formation.

III.1: THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY (DOMESTIC CHURCH)

The primary role of the family – wife, children, possibly extended family – in discernment and formation is “**support and consent**” (see *National Directory*, #170). This support must not be shallow, nor the consent perfunctory, if discernment and formation are to become a strong foundation for the life and ministry of a deacon.

III.1.a: Support for discernment: An inquirer’s family support his discernment in two ways. First, as spiritual companions, they help him remain grounded in the life of the Church, both diocesan and domestic, in his discernment. They help him to see how the possible call to the Permanent Diaconate complements, and does not contradict, his primary vocation as husband and father, and as baptismal prophet, priest, and king. As he begins to grasp the patterns of God leading him to hear and accept the call, they help him to see how those patterns connect with God’s shepherding hand in family and Church life. This companionship is extremely important for the discernment of diaconal vocation; without it, a married man risks the grave spiritual danger of bringing into conflict his existing vocation to family and his possible vocation to Holy Orders, to the detriment of both.

Second, the family members, especially the wife, must discern their own role alongside the inquirer. If God calls a married man to the Permanent Diaconate, He is certainly also calling the wife to be the wife of a deacon. This means that she too, must discern clearly the relationship of the two sacraments, and their impact on her. Just as her priorities, goals, and decision-making changed when they wed, so now again the priorities, goals, and patterns of deciding within the home must be reconsidered, if formation is to move forward soundly.

In this parallel discernment, the wife is not discerning a new sacramental identity. Her identity in Baptism and Holy Matrimony remains unchanged by her husband’s ordination. Yet the complementarity of Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders is such that her charisms may change during formation and after ordination; and the expectations on her as a “deacon’s wife” will certainly change over time. Her discernment must address her own willingness to cooperate in this process; to accept her own baptismal call to serve, perhaps in a new way; and to sacrifice some of her time and interests to support her husband’s second vocation.

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III.1.b: Consent for discernment: The impact that the inquirer's formation for Holy Orders may have on the family must be judged against the family's capacity to include this potential new role. Consent at this time does not have to be formal, but it should be as explicit within the family as initial discernment can grasp. Until all are reasonably certain that the inquirer's wife and family are also willing to make the sacrifices of time, energy, and changing priorities that formation will entail, he should not apply for formal admission to formation.

III.1.c: Support for formation: Once the formation process formally begins with admission to Aspirancy, the supporting role of the family is crucial for its success. "The family is the primary community accompanying the [aspirant or] candidate on his formative journey. For married [aspirants or] candidates, the communion of life and love, established... and consecrated by the Sacrament of Matrimony, offers a singular contribution.... The single candidate's family also contributes to his formation" (*National Directory*, #212).

First, the family – certainly the wife, possibly also children, parents, and/or siblings – **must participate in the formation process**. Formation implies change and growth, especially in the interior life of faith. Just as, within the sacrament of marriage, the spouses grow and change together, lest they grow apart, so too in the formation for Holy Orders, the family must grow and change together, lest they grow apart. "Participation in the formation process" means that the family must know and accept what is happening in the exterior and interior life of the aspirant or candidate; must help discern and foster the growth in holiness and diaconal virtue; and must themselves likewise grow in holiness and suitable virtues. There are several ways in which this participation can happen. Most obviously, the wife can join her husband in all the formation activities and classes, and this is strongly encouraged as far as possible. But since this is not always possible, the wife and other family members may also participate through various kinds of parallel study and spiritual direction. In any case, *strong, clear, and consistent communication* within the family is critical to the family's formative role.

Second, the family **must provide a "small faith community"** for the future deacon. Precisely as domestic Church, the family's shared life of faith, active and contemplative prayer, ongoing discernment, and ecclesial commitment must provide the foundation for interior and exterior growth. Because formation demands a growth in holiness, it may require an aspirant or candidate to re-examine friendships, attitudes, or habits; the family must be able to support such changes. The family must not only bear the potential burden of sorrow and contrition with the aspirant or candidate, but also must be a positive source of strength, renewal, and conversion. It is in the family that the future deacon will learn or extend the practice of daily prayer. It is in the family that discernment can be pushed to its deepest insights. The family is the "school of virtue" for the future deacon, parallel in this sense to the seminary community for a future priest; and his grasp of his diaconal vocation will in part flow out of deepening his family vocation.

III.1.d: Consent for formation: At two points in the formation process, the Bishop requests, formally and in writing, the consent of the wife to allow formation to continue. These two points are admission to Candidacy, and selection for Ordination. Until the wife gives her permission, formation cannot continue. It is therefore very important that this permission be given with full consent and understanding.

She must be free of undue influence or pressure to consent. She must give her consent, knowing and accepting as far as possible what it means that her husband is being called to serve the Church as a Permanent Deacon. She must be willing to offer her husband to this new role, accepting the sacrifices it will require of both of them as their own personal path to holiness. She must be willing to sacrifice her own time and energy in other ways, for the success of her husband's ordained ministry in the Church, not least in accepting the daily commitment to pray for that ministry.

In order to choose freely all that this consent implies, she must know in some sense what these implications are. She must learn from those who have gone before her in formation and ministry, and have her own expectations and choices formed, or at least informed, both spiritually and practically. Therefore her own formation should include the consistent theme of how to offer this support and consent more freely, and more effectively. This also means that the mentoring of the wives of men in formation by the wives of deacons, especially those with greater experience, is a crucial factor in the success of the overall formation program.

For single candidates, there is no such explicit consent by another family member. Yet the consent of the extended family is still important. Their witness to the growth in faith and holiness of the candidate testifies to the truth and strength of the call to serve in Holy Orders, and helps the formation team prepare the single candidate more concretely for his new vocation.

III.2: THE ROLE OF THE PASTOR AND THE PARISH

“The inquirer who seeks consideration for ordination to the diaconate needs to enter into dialogue with his parish community. It is the pastor who initially presents him for consideration into diaconal formation... [as] a practicing Catholic of good repute and in good standing” (*National Directory*, # 174).

Clerics cannot be formed in isolation from the Body of the Church. The ongoing support and advice of the pastor are very important to the formation process, since the inquirer is likely to look to his pastor as the main example available to him of Christ-like service. Especially during the Inquiry phase, an ongoing dialogue with the pastor can serve as a key piece of the inquirer’s discernment, and can greatly help the pastor in presenting the inquirer to the Bishop (through the Office of Deacons application process) as an applicant. Likewise, throughout Aspirancy and Candidacy, the support, encouragement, and advice of the pastor will be invaluable to the future deacon.

III.2.a: The pastor’s roles: First, the pastor offers an example of diaconal and priestly ministry for the future deacon. This example should be well respected by the aspirant or candidate. As an observer of the pastor’s ministry to the poor, the aspirant or candidate should be prepared to learn well from this local experience. The pastor will know the needs of the local community, and support the future deacon’s growing ability to identify and respond to the reality of poverty (in all senses) in his community.

Second, the pastor, by his own sacramental ministry and preaching, has a strong impact on interior formation. This pastoral care is part of a strong foundation for the spiritual growth of the future deacon; and the pastor should therefore be solicitous that the aspirant or candidate assiduously follow the precepts of the Church. Further, since the aspirant or candidate also receives from his pastor the Word and Bread of Life, Christ in service and sacrament, he, the aspirant or candidate, should spend time in prayer and reflection about his own capacity to hear and respond to Christ’s loving call by these means. This will greatly assist him in leading others more and more to hear and respond to the same love in his diaconal ministry.

Third, the pastor will have a mentoring role in certain aspects of the formation program, especially the liturgical and pastoral practica. The pastor is well-placed to help teach the future deacon directly many of the hands-on, practical aspects of service that cannot be fully appreciated in the classroom.

Fourth, the pastor should help the future deacon to be more integrated into suitable parish roles, with a view to his future diaconal ministry. Again, the pastor likely knows best the needs of the community and

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the gifts the future deacon potentially brings. By judiciously fitting the one to the other, the pastor can assist the full exploration of discernment of the diaconal vocation in each of the three areas of ministry. Especially in the development of the candidate as a Lector and as an Acolyte, the pastor's support and guidance will allow the candidate to become confident and poised for his future ministry.

Fifth, the pastor must assist the ongoing process of discernment for the future deacon and his family. This results not only from observation and evaluation of the future deacon by the pastor, but also in the ongoing dialogue which they both should seek with each other. By his active involvement in the preparation of the aspirant or candidate, the pastor will best be able to encourage both those struggling to discern and those not discerning deeply enough.

In all of these interactions with his pastor, the aspirant or candidate should recognize that, while his own formation is very important, the pastor's time and energy are not unlimited. Good communication and planning between pastor and aspirant or candidate will help much in keeping all things in perspective, and will also establish a strong foundation for effective collaboration between the future deacon and the pastors with whom he will potentially work.

III.2.b: The parish's roles: "The parish community is an essential extension of the formation community. Through its prayer and support, the parish 'makes the faithful aware of this ministry, [and] gives to the candidate a strong aid to his vocational discernment'" (*National Directory*, #211).

The most important role of the parish faithful in the formation of the future deacon is prayer. Their continuous spiritual support of his candidacy will greatly deepen the effectiveness of formation and the fruits of his future ministry.

Secondly, the parish supports the discernment of the future deacon and his family by their fraternity. Among the members of the parish will be those close friends and spiritual companions who can support the future deacon and his family, especially in his discernment, by listening, responding to, and affirming the fruits of his ongoing interior transformation.

Thirdly, the parish supports the formation of the future deacon by their acceptance of his ministry-in-training. Their gracious hospitality to his growing liturgical service, especially in fulfilling the various duties of Lector and Acolyte, will help to confirm and deepen the diaconal vocation. Their hospitality, as appropriate, to his growing ministry of charity, will likewise help to confirm and deepen the same vocation.

In these parish relationships, the aspirant or candidate must always remember that he is seeking to imitate Christ, "who came not to be served, but to serve." He should be humbly open to the mutuality of parish life. As a deacon, he is not being set above the laity, but rather below them, as a base or foundation for their own life of faith. He should accept praise, questions, criticism, and possible resentment with the same humble gratitude. Begrudging the possible involvement and opinions of parish members in discernment and formation is clearly in conflict with the diaconal charism.

III.3: THE ROLE OF THE FORMATION COMMUNITY

The "Formation Team" includes all those who contribute formally to the four areas of formation (human, intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral). In addition to the Director of Formation, this includes one's classroom and spiritual instructors, spiritual director, pastor, mentor(s), practica advisors, and wife and family. In addition, the other aspirants and candidates in formation and their families also play an important role.

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The role of the Formation Team in discernment is focused on the application process and the annual review. The Formation Team is represented in practice by the Deacon Formation Review Board (DFRB), whose members are appointed by the Bishop. The DFRB should comprise priests, deacons, and lay members of the deacon community, under the leadership of the Director of Formation. Each applicant is evaluated carefully by the DFRB for “awareness of a diaconal vocation,” personal, family, and ecclesial life, stability of life, and “general aptitude of diaconal ministry” (*National Directory*, #175), on the basis of the application documents, a personal and family interview, and pastor and peer recommendations. Each aspirant and candidate is evaluated carefully for evidence of deepening faith and commitment to the Church, the diocese, and the diaconate; growing diaconal abilities, in each of the four areas of discernment; and compatibility of diaconal and family vocations. The personal interview of the applicant and his wife by members of the DFRB is a critical piece in the Board’s deliberation whether to recommend an applicant for admission.

The roles of the Formation Team in formation are described in more detail in the next chapter. Each member of the Team evaluates the aspirant or candidate annually, and reports in writing to the DFRB and the Director of Formation.

The aspirant’s or candidate’s peers in formation do not report in writing to the DFRB or the Director of Formation. Rather, “The candidate community should become primarily an integrating experience where dialogue and collaborative activity [help] to discern the activity of the Holy Spirit...” (*National Directory*, #208). The integration of the four areas of formation, in the context of an intentional community of the faithful sharing the rigors of being formed for the ministry of Jesus Christ, deepens the insight of reflection and discernment for all together. Peers serve each other in part by the natural process of becoming one community over the time spent together in formation.

III.4: THE ROLE OF THE DEACON COMMUNITY

“The community of deacons can be a ‘precious support in the discernment of vocation, in human growth, in [introducing] the spiritual life, in theological study and pastoral experience’.... Some deacons should be appointed by the bishop to serve as mentors to... candidates...” (*National Directory*, #210).

Mentoring of a candidate and his wife by a deacon couple is critical to discernment and formation. The wisdom and practice of clearer discernment already gained by the mentor should help the aspirant or candidate and his wife deepen and extend their own discernment and formation. The example of a successful outcome of initial formation and discernment, and their ongoing relationship to diaconal ministry, can be both concretely helpful for particular difficulties being faced by a future deacon and his wife, and also inspiring to their family life and ecclesial commitment.

Mentoring also helps integrate the candidate and his family into the community of deacons, in much the same way that shared experience builds those in formation into a community together.

III.5: THE ROLE OF THE BISHOP AND THE PRESBYTERATE

The priests of the Diocese of Sioux City are directly represented in discernment and formation by the pastor, the spiritual director, and by the priests who serve on the DFRB. Priests may also be involved in the formation process as instructors.

The Bishop of Sioux City has the sole authority to admit applicants to the Aspirancy Path, and to advance aspirants to Candidacy, to the Rites of Lector and Acolyte, and to Holy Orders. He is represented by both the DFRB and the Director of Formation, on whose more intimate knowledge of those in formation he will typically rely to decide whom to admit and to advance.