

IV.1: THE PROCESS OF FORMATION

Formation for the Permanent Diaconate occurs over a certain necessary time, and over four broad areas: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. It spans the phases of Inquiry, Aspirancy, and Candidacy prior to ordination, and continues thereafter with post-ordination formation.

“One who will serve as a deacon requires a formation that promotes the development of the whole person. Therefore, the four dimensions should be so interrelated as to achieve a continual integration of their objectives...” (*National Directory*, #105).

The most fundamental objective of all areas and phases of formation is to prepare one to accept the sacramental grace of Holy Orders, which, building on the graces of Baptism and Confirmation, conforms one to Christ, the Head of the Church, in such a way as to permit Jesus Christ to act in and through the ordained minister in a special way, for the sacramental life of the Church (see *Lumen Gentium*, 21). Permanent deacons, who are ordained “not for the sacrifice, but for service” (*Lumen Gentium* 29; see Jn 21:15-17), are conformed to Christ as the “icon of Christ the Servant” (*Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*, #11), the One who came “not to be served, but to serve” (Mk 10:45). Deacons are not *sacerdotes*, in and through whom Christ continuously offers Himself to the Father as eternal, Paschal Victim, for the salvation of all mankind; rather, they are the “heralds of Christ,” the ones who, like the prophets and John the Baptist, announce the Kingdom of God already present within the world of sin, yet not ruled by sin. As the “Christ who serves,” empowered by the grace of Holy Orders, deacons *are in their own person* frail vehicles of divine love, offering the invitation to hear and accept Jesus Christ’s universal call of holiness which leads to the Eucharist.

Thus, the deacon performs the *kerygma* (proclamation of the Good News) and *diakonia* (acts of proclaiming love) of the Church, both in and outside of Her *leitourgeia* (see *National Directory* #29-30, and footnotes). This diaconal service is expressed in a unified way in the three ministries of Word, Sacraments, and Charity. The world, not yet freed from sin, will most often judge the credibility of the proclamation by the integrity of the one who proclaims. The permanent deacon must have a heart so radically turned to God that the *kerygma* he speaks and the *diakonia* he lives unmistakably radiate divine love.

The process of forming one to accept this burden must necessarily be slow; it must be thorough and heart-felt; and it must involve not only the man in isolation, but also his family, his parish, and his peers in formation and in vocation.

IV.2.A: THE OBJECTIVES OF HUMAN FORMATION

“The Congregation for Catholic Education’s *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* highlights four aspects of human maturity that must be considered [in] formation programs for permanent deacons. These include: (1) formation in the human virtues, (2) the capacity to relate to others, (3) affective maturity..., and (4) training in freedom...” (*National Directory*, #108). The human formation of permanent deacons seeks, first, to deepen their virtues sufficiently to accept the grace of Holy Orders, which configures the ordinand to Christ the Head of the Church, and to deepen also the future deacon’s personal, familial, and ecclesial commitment to struggle for the perfecting of Christ-like virtue, fulfilling the baptismal call to holiness. Formation seeks, second, to develop a capacity for social action and social relations sufficient for the burden of Christ’s ministry in the Church and in the world, building on the

Formation Handbook for Permanent Deacons

lifetime of social experience the future deacon already brings to formation. Formation seeks, third, to deepen the future deacon's affective maturity, especially a profound commitment to marital chastity, an understanding and humble acceptance of the discipline of the Church which prohibits marriage after ordination, and an acceptance of the call to celibacy (explicit for the unmarried deacon, and implicit for the married deacon whose wife might predecease him) linked with Holy Orders in the Roman Catholic Church. Fourth, formation seeks to arm the future deacon with a profound commitment to that freedom from sin to which Christ calls all His children, and a pastoral ability to bring that spiritual freedom into the world in concrete, practical ways in the face of the reality of sin.

IV.2.a.i: Virtue: Mature Christian virtue means a deep, tested, pastoral *faith* in the abiding power of our Lord Jesus Christ to save from sin, and in the articles of faith which the Church in Her wisdom, under divine Providence, has defined dogmatically; and a profound *hope* in Christ's message, in and with the whole Church; and a zealous *charity* for souls, "preferring the good of the other to one's own good" (St. Thomas Aquinas). From these also grow the natural virtues, such as prudence, simplicity, justice, devotion, obedience, gratitude, hospitality, honesty, piety, prayer, zeal, fortitude, patience, perseverance, temperance, abstinence, sobriety, chastity, clemency, generosity, meekness, modesty, and humility. Like all the baptized, the deacon is called to be a model of Christ-like holiness to the Church and to the world; but by virtue of his ordination, the deacon is unable to remain anonymous, to avoid public scrutiny in his modeling of virtue, or in his failures. He will be held as an example, despite his own real, human struggles with temptation and sin. He must be formed, therefore, for the burden of public ministry in the Church. He must be formed for a strong commitment to perfection of virtue. He must be formed to have a deeper love for the Sacrament of Penance. Above all, he must be formed to recognize and resist early and vigorously the temptations to anger, pride, and despair, which most corrosively damage the fruit of his ministry and the ongoing discernment of his vocation.

IV.2.a.ii: Social relations: As a minister of Christ, the deacon who is socially well-formed shows both *hospitality* and *charity* for others, and the ability to recognize correctly the kind of opportunity a given social relationship or situation offers to proclaim in word or deed the Good News. Very often, hospitality takes the form of *listening*. The deacon must be willing and able to hear the story of another, especially of the poor; to respond to it from humility and love for Christ, not from his own history and resources; and to make this response *an invitation to the poor to accept Christ's love* for them in a more tangible way. Charity is partly zeal for souls, but also, especially in the context of listening to the poor, the ability *to devote the whole of one's being to the task* of listening, discerning, and responding in Christ. Proclamation of the *kerygma* must be spoken and performed in ways appropriate to a given context, so as to be inviting and have the potential to be heard and received by the poor as an act of love by Christ.

IV.2.a.iii: Affective maturity: In the broadest sense, "affective maturity" is a humble, accurate, and morally sustainable priority in what one loves and likes: God, neighbor, created goods, and self, in that order. It means to love one's neighbor as oneself, for the sake of God, in order to make more likely the salvation of the neighbor's soul. This purity of Christian love must also mean a proper distinction between love and sex, which is difficult in the modern world. Maturity of sexual appetite means *chastity* in the sense meant by our Lord when He said, "But I say to you, that whoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28). Since the very great majority of permanent deacons are married men, this chastity is "marital chastity," or reserving the whole of one's sexuality, including even unspoken interior desire and the "custody of the eyes," entirely for the total gift of self to his wife, in the grace of Holy Matrimony. However, given the unchanged discipline of the Church from the beginning, that a married man may be ordained but an ordained man may not marry, any ordination of a married man as a permanent deacon contains the implicit possibility of *celibacy*. The future deacon must be formed to understand, subjectively as well as objectively, the full significance of the promise he makes in his ordination that if his wife predeceases him, he will not seek to remarry.

IV.2.a.iv: Freedom: Freedom in Christ is freedom from sin, in order to love more perfectly. It is not autonomy, or freedom to do whatever seems good to one's own judgment. Freedom from sin demands a thorough, systematic, intentional, and life-long commitment to interior transformation (i.e., to rooting out from the heart and mind the enslaving attachments to sin). For the future deacon, learning to live in the freedom of Christ is the most necessary part of performing and leading *kerygma* and *diakonia* within and beyond *leitourgeia*: it shows that radical love which inspires others to accept Him (see Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*). Formation for Christian freedom means, first, accepting completely what the Church teaches about sin and grace; and second, making a commitment to use the means of transformation and growth in holiness, namely, the Sacrament of Penance; daily prayer, including the Liturgy of the Hours, *lectio divina* (a structured, meditative prayer on Scripture), and personal prayer; spiritual direction and companionship; devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary as the pre-eminent model of faith and holiness, and other kinds of devotions that sustain one's new life; and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, especially in daily Mass and in Adoration (both as often as possible). The length of the formation program allows growth in the practices of sustaining faith and holiness to be gradual and solid, since to attempt to do everything at once often ends in failure. Aspirants and candidates, in obedience to their spiritual director and possibly others responsible for their formation, should set reasonable goals each semester or year to build up steadily the practice of these tools. Such growth should also continue in post-ordination formation and spiritual direction.

IV.2.B: THE OBJECTIVES OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

“Human formation leads to and finds its completion in the spiritual dimension of formation....’ A man should not be admitted to diaconal formation unless it is demonstrated that he [with his family] is already living a life of mature Christian spirituality.... Configured sacramentally to Christ the Servant, a deacon’s spirituality must be grounded in the attitudes of Christ.... To attain an interior spiritual maturity requires an intense sacramental and prayer life” (*National Directory*, #110-112).

The goals of spiritual formation are therefore five (see *National Directory*, #113):

IV.2.b.i: To deepen freedom, by confirming the sustainable commitment to use the tools of the Church to free us from sin, just as described above: reception and Adoration of the Holy Eucharist, daily if possible; daily prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours, and *lectio divina*; devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to other saints and devotions; frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Penance. The freer the candidate or deacon is, the clearer his capacity to discern both his call to serve, and the real needs of actual people (*National Directory* #114); and the more credible his *kerygma* and *diakonia* will be to the poor (*National Directory* #115).

IV.2.b.ii: To cultivate and deepen the commitment to service, in each of the three areas of ministry. This especially requires dedication and love for Scripture and for the Church’s liturgical forms, for the Church herself, and for “love of neighbor.” These forms of commitment are cultivated in learning the relevant areas of theology (what the Church teaches about each), and in the pastoral and liturgical practica (doing what the Church teaches).

IV.2.b.iii: To learn (and love) Catholic spiritual traditions, especially so that these may be brought to bear interiorly and in ministry. This means studying the spiritual masters of the faith, and learning to recognize different kinds of charism: the desert (or hermit) and monastic (or communal) *ascetic* traditions, the most important of which are the *cloistered* Benedictine charism and its main offshoots (Cistercian, Trappist, and Carthusian); the *medicant* charisms (Carmelite, Dominican, Franciscan); and

Formation Handbook for Permanent Deacons

the *missionary* charisms (especially Salesian, Lasallian, Jesuit). Recognizing the charism one possesses oneself will help immensely in feeding and sustaining an active life of prayer and interior transformation. Learning the spiritual masters will help immensely in responding to pastoral needs in ministry. Paying attention to the dynamic of one's own spiritual direction will help greatly in being the kind of spiritual companion to the poor that the deacon is often called to be.

IV.2.b.iv: To affirm marital chastity and ordered celibacy, as discussed above.

IV.2.b.v: To ground the deacon in the reality of actual, individual people he will serve in the Church and in the world. The less concrete the needs and people the future deacon is committed to serve, the less capable he will be to effect real change in people's hearts and lives. This reality is especially confronted in the pastoral practica, and in the mentoring of senior deacon couples.

IV.2.c: THE OBJECTIVES OF INTELLECTUAL FORMATION

The Catholic faith and Tradition is exceedingly rich, and study of it offers “substantial nourishment” for the pastoral, human, and spiritual dimensions...,” and a “precious instrument” for effective discernment and ministry” (*National Directory* #118). The future deacon needs to study this richness, which the Church has built up over centuries in many different cultures, so that he will be able to think “theologically,” with the Church and not as an isolated individual. However, it is not the goal to make every deacon a theologian; rather, every deacon needs to be a master catechist, fully able to pass on the faith to, or strengthen the faith of, any given person in any situation, without hesitation or confusion.

Therefore, the goals of intellectual formation are:

IV.2.c.i: To understand the essentials of Catholic doctrine and life, so as to be able to communicate them clearly, accurately, and effectively in the three ministries of Word, Sacrament, and Charity (*National Directory* #119). The content of the faith is not something the institutional Church, much less one person, defines on its own authority; the content of the faith is received whole and complete from Jesus Christ, in revelation and in the Magisterium of the universal Church, and in submission to the Holy Spirit “who will teach you all truth” (Jn 16:13). In order to be the “herald of Christ,” then, the deacon must learn the content of the faith as it actually is received by the unchanging, universal Church from God. To be known thoroughly, the doctrines of the faith must be both *studied* and *lived* purposefully.

IV.2.c.ii: To prepare candidates for pastoral service (*National Directory* #120). Studying and living out the doctrines of the Catholic faith should bear fruit in the pastoral ministry of the deacon. His knowledge of faith, both objective and subjective, is for others, so that they may be brought to the love of Christ which saves.

IV.2.c.iii: To help the deacon shape his performance of *diakonia*, *kerygma*, and *leitourgeia* to meet the particular needs of his own time and place, his own society and culture (*National Directory* #121). The very grave danger implicit in “inculturation” of the Gospel is that the Gospel will be changed by the culture, rather than the culture by the Gospel. ***This must not be permitted to happen.*** Yet it is necessary to present the unchanging Gospel differently to different cultures, in order for it to be heard and accepted, and not rejected out of hand. Hence, the deacon must study and live the doctrines of the faith deeply enough to be able to present them in different ways to different audiences, *without changing the content* of the faith at all.

IV.2.D: THE OBJECTIVES OF PASTORAL FORMATION

In forming men for the permanent diaconate, the final goal of the human, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of formation is better pastoral ministry as a deacon. Pastoral formation builds on these other aspects of formation, and also on the concrete experience of the candidate in his baptismal conformity to Christ as prophet, priest, and king (*National Directory* #127).

The primary structures for pastoral formation are training in pastoral theology, mentoring by senior deacon couples, theological reflection, and the three distinct pastoral practica during candidacy. See below for more information on the practica.