Deacons: Common Questions and Answers

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At the conclusion of the Vatican Council in 1965, Pope Paul VI said, “The Church has declared herself the servant of humanity.” In the years since then, the idea of the Church-as-servant has found concrete expression in the diaconate, so much so that Pope John Paul II said deacons are “configured to Christ in his servant role” and, therefore, are “meant to be living signs of the servanthood of his Church.”

Although permanent deacons have served the Church of Pittsburgh in many facets of ministry since 1974, public awareness of who deacons are, what they do, and how they serve is still somewhat limited. Therefore, here are answers to some fundamental questions about the diaconate.

What is a deacon?

A deacon is a member of an order of ordained ministry with its roots in the earliest days of the Church. The New Testament relates that the apostles prayed and laid hands on certain men to designate them for special service to meet the needs of the faith community (Acts 6:1-6). “Deacon” comes from the Greek word diakonos, meaning “servant.” Strengthened by sacramental grace, in union with the bishop and his priests, deacons are called to serve the people of God in the three-fold ministry of liturgy, word, and charity.

Why do we need deacons?

Service has always been at the heart of the Church’s ministry. At the Last Supper, in washing the feet of his apostles, Jesus said, “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (Jn. 13:15). While all Christians, by virtue of their Baptism, are called to serve others, Pope John Paul II said, “The service of the deacon is the Church’s service sacramentalized.” Furthermore, he said, the diaconate is not just one ministry among others, but it is truly meant to be a driving force for the entire service of the Church.

What are the functions of a deacon?

A deacon has liturgical duties, which he performs primarily in church. In addition, his diaconal service can be expressed in a wide range of non-liturgical ways. Some examples might help:

- Liturgically, deacons assist the priest at Mass, where they proclaim the Gospel, preach on occasion, and serve as ordinary ministers of the Eucharist. Deacons also may be called upon to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism; witness marriages; preside at funerals and burial services; lead the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic adoration; and benediction; offer blessings in the name of the Church; and administer sacramentals.
- Outside of church, deacons might be found providing pastoral care to people in hospitals, nursing homes, and other health care institutions; jails and prisons; food pantries and soup kitchens. They might be called upon to work with immigrants, youths and young adults, those in special need, or those on the fringes of society. An important facet of diaconal ministry is to share the faith by evangelizing as well as teaching in RCIA, religious education, and sacramental preparation programs. Some deacons also have administrative duties in the Church.
Basically, anywhere and everywhere people are in need of the Gospel and the love of Jesus Christ is where deacons belong.

**How do the roles of priest and deacon differ?**

While both priests and deacons are in ordained ministries, and they share some liturgical functions, their primary roles in the Church are distinct. Above all else, priests stand *in persona Christi*—in the person of Christ—to consecrate the Eucharist in the celebration of the Mass and to share the compassionate mercy and healing of God in the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick. Deacons never perform these sacred functions. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, deacons are ordained “not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service.”

**Are deacons an answer to the growing shortage of priests?**

No. While deacons can alleviate some of the effects of the shortage of priests by assuming administrative or sacramental duties that might enable priests to focus more exclusively on their sacred ministry, the answer to the shortage of priests is to pray for and foster more priestly vocations. The reason for ordaining deacons should not be because the Church needs more priests but, rather, because it needs more deacons.

**How do deacons relate to lay ecclesial ministers and active laity in the Church?**

Just as deacons are not substitute priests, they also are not “super laity.” More than ever, the Church needs the full and active participation of all its members. Deacons should support and encourage the role of the laity, first of all, by their example of service and, secondly, by collaborating with the faithful who answer the call to serve. To truly be what Bishop Zubik calls “the Church alive,” we need both a healthy, vibrant clergy—bishops, priests, and deacons—and a health, vibrant laity, working together to build up the kingdom of God on earth.

**What is the difference between permanent and transitional deacons?**

Seminarians in formation for the priesthood are ordained as deacons in their final stages of preparation. They are sometimes called transitional deacons, compared to permanent deacons, who are not advancing to the priesthood. However, the difference is in name only; their diaconal ministry is the same.

**How are deacons assigned?**

At ordination, deacons promise obedience to the diocesan bishop and his successors. Deacons, like priests, receive their assignments from the bishop, who may appoint them to any pastoral ministry throughout the diocese.

**Is every deacon assigned to a parish?**

In our diocese, all deacons are rooted in a parish for liturgical service; however, depending on relative needs and other factors, the parish to which a deacon is assigned may or may not be his home parish. If a deacon is not assigned to his home parish, consideration is given to keeping him relatively close to home.
Do deacons serve outside of a parish?

Each deacon is assigned to some aspect of service and charity, which may coincide with his parish assignment. In those cases, the deacon’s ministry is focused on the parish and its various programs and initiatives. Quite often, however, a deacon is assigned to pastoral work involving outside institutions, agencies, or programs. Consequently, a deacon might be assigned to a particular parish for liturgical service and, at the same time, to provide pastoral care at a hospital, nursing home, jail, or elsewhere, or to engage in some other aspect of ministry outside of the parish. A deacon’s family situation, employment obligations, and personal talents are considered in the assignment process, which always starts with identifying the needs of the Church.

Are deacons paid for their ministry?

Deacons in this diocese generally perform their ministry on a part-time, voluntary basis.

How does someone become a deacon?

Once a bishop determines a need for deacons in his diocese, men who feel they might have a vocation to this ministry are invited to apply for admission to the formation program, which occurs only after a rigorous evaluation process. They should be psychologically and emotionally healthy; men of solid faith, deep spirituality, and good character; and generously willing to serve the diocesan Church. Candidates are expected to have a college degree or its equivalent and be able to financially support themselves and their family. Formation involves an intensive, multi-year program of course work, personal and spiritual development, and practical experience in pastoral ministry.

Can a man apply to the Deacon Formation Program at any time?

No. It’s up to the diocesan bishop to determine if and when he wants to call for a new class to begin the formation program.

Is the diaconate open to married men?

The diaconate is open to both married and unmarried men. A married candidate must exhibit a stable marriage and family life. A candidate’s wife must consent for him to enter the formation program and, ultimately, to be ordained. After ordination, a deacon cannot marry or re-marry. Consequently, unmarried candidates must be willing to embrace a life of celibacy, and married candidates must consider if they could accept celibacy in the unfortunate event they lose their spouse once they are ordained.

Is there an age requirement for the diaconate?

The Church has established 35 as the minimum age for a married or unmarried man to become a deacon. The maximum age is set by each bishop for his diocese. In the Diocese of Pittsburgh, the maximum age for ordination as a deacon is 65.

Is becoming a deacon a lifelong commitment?

Yes. A man ordained as a deacon is not making a temporary or reversible commitment. He is embracing a distinct, permanent vocation, strengthened by the sacramental grace of Holy Orders, to a ministry of service in the Church.