

The Permanent Diaconate in Ireland

The Ministry of Jesus

Although he is Lord and Master, Jesus reminds the disciples at the Last Supper that he is among them "as one who serves". His whole life bears witness to this. His service is first and foremost to his Father, whose love he has come to reveal. The love of the Father is reflected in all of Jesus" ministry, but in a particular way in his care for those who are sick, oppressed or excluded.

The Early Church

The Acts of the Apostles describes how, in the first century, the Church was faced with the challenge of responding to the needs of those who were at risk of being marginalised, either through culture or through material poverty. Keeping in mind the example of Jesus, the Apostles selected and ordained a number of men specifically for this service.

For a number of centuries, deacons ministered in close cooperation with the bishops of the Church, assisting at the Eucharist, preaching the Gospel and exercising a ministry of Charity. Gradually their functions were absorbed into the ministry of the priest.

Renewal of Ministry

The Second Vatican Council envisaged a renewal of ministry, both lay and ordained, in the Church. The Council"s Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, explains that the lay faithful, by virtue of their Baptism, are commissioned to an active apostolate and insists that "every opportunity be given them so that, according to their abilities and the needs of the times, they may zealously participate in the saving work of the Church".

The lay faithful are called, first and foremost, to witness to Christ in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life. In addition to this, over the past thirty years, large numbers of the lay faithful have become actively involved in the apostolate in Ireland, not only in liturgical ministries, but in a wide range of other activities including catechetics, baptismal preparation, bereavement counselling, marriage preparation and school management.

Restoration of the Diaconate

The Second Vatican Council also proposed the restoration of the diaconate as a "distinct ministry of service" to be exercised "in communion with the bishop and his group of priests".

Many of the functions which deacons perform can also be carried out by members of the lay faithful. The restoration of the diaconate is not intended in any sense to change that situation. The idea is that some of those who already exercise these functions would be "strengthened with the grace of diaconal ordination" and in that way would be designated to be a visible public sign of Christ the Servant in the community of the Church.

Deacons are not intended to be "mini-priests", making up for a shortage of vocations. The Vatican Council was quite clear that, alongside the diaconate, the role of the ordained priesthood must continue to be fostered because without the priest there is no Eucharist and without the Eucharist there is no Church.

Deacons will be ordained to work alongside priests and lay ministers, not to replace them.

So, are Deacons Ordained?

Yes, deacons receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders by the laying-on of hands. *Lumen gentium* explains, however, that they are ordained "not for the celebration of the Eucharist, but for service".

They are called permanent deacons to distinguish them from those who become deacons as one of the final stages of preparation for the priesthood.

What do Permanent Deacons do?

Among the areas of ministry which are particularly appropriate to deacons (under the three general headings of Altar, Word and Charity) are:

i. Altar

- • Assisting the priest at the celebration of the Eucharist
- • Bringing the Eucharist to the sick at home and in hospitals
- • The formation of altar servers and of acolytes

- Presiding at Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament
- The celebration of Baptism
- Celebrating marriages (with the appropriate delegation)
- Presiding at funerals

ii. Word

- Proclaiming the Gospel at the Liturgy
- Preaching the homily
- Participating in sacramental preparation programmes
- The formation of readers
- Facilitating study of and prayer with the scriptures

iii. Charity

- Facilitating the development of lay ministry
- Visiting the sick
- Visiting prisoners
- Visiting the bereaved
- Youth ministry and the facilitation of peer-ministry among young people
- Promoting awareness of the social teaching of the Church
- The promotion of justice and human rights

Who can become a Deacon?

The following are some of the more important characteristics of a suitable candidate for the permanent diaconate:

- A good general familiarity with the Gospel
- A reasonable understanding of the Church's mission
- A well-founded spirituality and sacramental life
- A capacity to read and to listen, intelligently and critically
- An established capacity to engage and to work constructively with others
- An appreciable level of personal freedom, and the absence of any significant compulsions or addictions
- A love of the Church
- A proven readiness to serve others, even at some personal cost

Candidates for the permanent diaconate will be men who, ideally, are already actively involved in some aspect of lay ministry or leadership in the community.

Can married men be ordained Deacons?

Yes. The Church is concerned, however, that in the early years of their married life a couple should be able to devote their time and energy to maturing in their relationship and to caring for young children. Married men must be thirty-five before they can be accepted as candidates for the permanent diaconate. Since marriage is their primary vocation, the Church requires that a married candidate has the formal consent of his wife. It is also recommended that the candidate's wife should have an opportunity to participate in the formation programme. Unmarried candidates, who make a promise of celibacy, may be accepted at twenty-five.

In order to ensure that deacons have a reasonable opportunity to exercise their ministry after ordination, the upper age limit for ordination to the diaconate is sixty.

What kind of training is provided?

Formation for the permanent diaconate begins with a propaedeutic, or preparatory year, after which those who are considered suitable will be formally accepted by their bishop as candidates for ordained ministry. The admissions process will be similar to that which applies in the case of candidates for the priesthood.

Following admission to candidacy, the three-year formation programme begins. This involves a substantial commitment to the study of Sacred Scripture and Theology (including Liturgy and Canon Law). Alongside this, candidates will be introduced to the rich tradition of Christian spirituality and helped to deepen their life of prayer. During the formation process, candidates will be helped to develop personal and pastoral skills, and will be assigned a pastoral placement in their own diocese.

Can Deacons hold full-time employment?

While some candidates for the diaconate may take early retirement, others will continue to be active in their secular career or profession. The ministry of the deacon is usually exercised on a voluntary part-time basis, but it is important to be clear that he is a deacon at all times and in all circumstances. It is important that there is no practical or moral conflict between the deacon's professional occupation and his responsibilities as a deacon.

Expenses associated with ministry would normally be paid by the parish in which a deacon ministers. A deacon may occasionally be employed by the Church to undertake a specific full-time ministry, which corresponds to his professional skills and experience. In such cases he would be paid.

How can I apply to become a Deacon?

It would be appropriate, in the first instance, to discuss the possibility with a priest in your parish. An application to be considered as a candidate for the permanent diaconate should be made to your bishop and should be supported by the recommendation of a priest of your diocese to whom you are well known.

The above is the text of a pamphlet entitled "Among You as One Who Serves" produced by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. A more detailed presentation of the Permanent Diaconate can be read by clicking on [The Permanent Diaconate: National Directory and Norms for Ireland](#).