

*Overview of the*

PERMANENT DIACONATE



ROMAN CATHOLIC  
DIOCESE OF BURLINGTON

## Overview of the Life and Ministry of the Deacon

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### Vocation

Above all else, the diaconate is a calling from God. It is not a ministry that one enters into for a period of time, but a permanent vocation. It requires careful and prayerful discernment on the part of the applicant considering the diaconate, as well as on the part of the Church.

It requires sacrifice on the part of the deacon and his family. Hence, it can only be entered into with the support of the family. Both the formation period and the ministry itself require time.

And, it requires a Vow from the candidate not to marry again if already married, should his wife die before he does. Of course, married deacons continue in the married state until the death of their wife.

### Priorities

The first and foremost priority for a deacon, as for everyone, is to love and to serve God above all else.

Since most deacons are already married prior to entering formation, a healthy and stable marriage is essential. Marriage is our primary vocation in life and falls in line immediately behind our duties towards God. If you have children, they are part of your commitment to marriage.

In order to fulfill your family obligations and to maintain economic security, your secular employment is your third priority.

Finally, with those other priorities getting proper attention, your ministry as a deacon becomes a fourth priority.

Juggling those priorities takes some careful attention on the part of the deacon, and the support and understanding of your wife and other family members.

### Diaconate Ministry

The deacon is called to minister in three specific areas:

- **Ministry of the Word** — includes proclamation of the Gospel at Mass and preaching (if the Bishop conveys that faculty to you). Usually deacons preach on a monthly basis, if granted the faculty to preach. Deacons may also do many other ministries in religious education, catechesis, evangelization (e.g., RCIA), scripture studies, Catholic book discussion groups, etc. They may give personal witness to their faith in routine discussions with friends and family members.
- **Ministry of Sacrament** — includes assisting at the altar, distribution of the Eucharist, Baptism and witnessing the Sacrament of Matrimony. Deacons may also preside at funerals and graveside committal services. Deacons may preside at Benediction and at various prayer services. Most deacons bring Holy Communion to hospital patients, nursing home residents and those confined to their homes. They may also pray over the sick, give blessings and bless religious articles.
- **Ministry of Charity** — is extremely varied. Deacons minister in prisons, nursing homes, hospitals, hospices, soup kitchens, food shelves, homeless shelters, crisis pregnancy support centers, and other institutional settings. They do home visits to the sick and those confined to their homes. Some deacons collaborate with groups such as Habitat for Humanity. Deacons may be involved with various advocacy groups such as peace and social justice groups, pro-life groups, etc. Deacons pray with and for parishioners,

particularly the sick, the distressed and the grieving. They also pray for the dead. Deacons may serve on hospital ethics committees or serve the broader community in a variety of ways.

The Ministries of Charity mentioned above are specific ministries that deacons in the Diocese of Burlington actually perform.

### Service to the Bishop

The deacon serves at the direction of the bishop. He may be assigned to his existing parish or to a nearby parish. Assignments are made in order to meet the needs of the Church.

## Diaconate Formation Program

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The Diaconate Formation Program of the Diocese of Burlington is designed to comply with the Standards set forth in the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States* published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

### Requirements for Admission to Formation

Applicants for admission to the Diaconate Formation must:

- Be men of good reputation with a genuine commitment to serve God and God's people, the Church.
- Be mature men, married or celibate. They will need to be at least 35 years old at the time of ordination. Canon Law provides that the candidates for ordination must not be over 65 years of age at the time of ordination; however, on a case by case basis, the bishop may give a dispensation for a man over 65 to be ordained for good pastoral reasons.
- Have completed the Lay Ministry Formation program offered by the Diocese of Burlington. That requirement may be waived or adjusted if the applicant has completed significant college level courses in theology and philosophy, provided that the program of study is deemed to be substantially equivalent to the Lay Ministry Formation Program.
- Be prepared to take a vow of celibacy. If an applicant is married the marriage must be a stable one, typically of at least five (5) years duration. If ordained, the deacon must agree to remain celibate should his wife pre-decease him. If celibate, the applicant must realize that once ordained, he will need to remain celibate.
- Have appropriate social skills and the intellectual ability to handle the program of study.
- Have significant experience in ministry within his own parish.
- Be able to commit to a serious program of study. (*Please see Details of Formation below.*)
- Be able to commit to significant ministry after ordination.

## Details of Formation

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The total time for the program is five (5) years, of which the first two (2) years are spent in Lay Ministry Formation. Applicants who have already completed a suitable Lay Ministry Formation program or a comparable series of college level theology and philosophy courses may request admission directly to the Diaconate Formation. Courses should have been taken at a Catholic college. The Diaconate Board will review the particulars of the courses involved to ensure that there are no significant gaps in the applicant's education.

The remaining three years of the Diaconate Formation program involves four dimensions.

**Human Formation** — Interpersonal skills, sound relationships with family and parishioners, and an appropriate self-awareness are essential for everyone in ordained ministry. Continual growth in these areas will be encouraged and fostered during various interactions with members of the Diaconate Board.

**Spiritual Formation** — A deepening relationship with the person of Jesus, the Trinity and an appropriate Marian devotion are all parts of your continued spiritual growth. The Mass, Sacraments, on-going spiritual direction, prayer (particularly Liturgy of the Hours), an annual retreat and spiritual reading provide effective support for spiritual growth.

**Pastoral Formation** — Our ministry as deacons requires an understanding of people and the skills and confidence to actually support and encourage others in their journey. Pastoral formation includes two significant elements: Monthly meetings on Saturdays for members of the Board and others to address particular topics relevant to ministering to God's people. These sessions are held in a location that is central and reasonably convenient for all participants.

You will be required to organize and execute one or more pastoral experiences in which you do regular ministry in suitable area of ministry over an extended period of time. The projects may be in areas of evangelization / education or in social ministry; other projects would be considered based upon the needs of your own parish.

**Intellectual (Academic) Formation** — This is done through an on-line program of the Josephinum Diaconate Institute of the Pontifical College Josephinum based in Columbus, OH. The courses are Master's Level courses. Normally they are taken for credit. However, if an applicant has not completed a bachelor's degree, the courses may be taken on a certificate basis. The typical course requires about 5 to 6 hours per week of work. Normally, you would take two courses per semester with each course carrying two credits. The on-line format is complemented by conference calls, reading assignments and written assignments and an opportunity to interact with other students through on-line chats, etc.

There is also an opportunity to discuss the courses and your progress in the course with other members of the formation community and with the Diaconate Director or other Board members during the Pastoral Formation Sessions held once per month.

## **Diaconate Vocation and Ministry**

In addition to the more structured formation dimensions, the applicant must continue to discern the presence of a genuine call from the Lord to continue in formation. The Church needs to continue to discern that call as well. For this reason, you will need to meet with a member of the Diaconate Board annually.

The Director of the Permanent Diaconate and the members of the Diaconate Board are available to help you during your formation.

In addition, a **mentor couple** will be chosen from within the Diaconate Community to provide on-going support to both the deacon aspirant and his wife during the formation period.

## **Further Information**

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