

The Permanent Deacon

The second Vatican Council established that “it will be possible for the future to restore the diaconate as a proper and permanent rank of the church...(and confer it) even upon married men, provided they be of more mature age..., in accordance with constant tradition. Three reasons lay behind this choice: (i) a desire to enrich the Church with the functions of the diaconate, which otherwise, in many regions, could only be exercised with great difficulty; (ii) the intention of strengthening with the grace of diaconal ordination those who already exercised many of the functions of the Diaconate; (iii) a concern to provide regions, where there was a shortage of clergy, with sacred ministers. Such reasons make clear that the restoration of the permanent Diaconate was in no manner intended to prejudice the meaning, role or flourishing of the ministerial priesthood, which must always be fostered because of its indispensability. The decision to introduce the ministry of permanent deacon in Ireland was a decision of the local Episcopal Conference. At parish level the service of the deacon will always be in conjunction with the local priest and bishop. The National Directory and Norms for Ireland identifies the diaconate as a “distinct ministry of service” and not a substitute for any of the other ministries already in existence in the parish, lay or ordained. The directory also identifies three areas of service where the deacon will be involved, the Word of God, Eucharist and Works of Charity. The Word of God: Preaching the Word is the primary function on the church and cannot be neglected. The deacon may be required to take up such duties that would release the priest to carry out this function. The deacon may also be required for activities which promote the Word of God, areas such as Lectio Divina, prayer meetings, parish faith communities, etc. These are opportunities where the deacon can make the Word of God more accessible to the community.

Eucharist: at the celebration of the Eucharist the deacon has a clearly defined role assisting the priest, reading the gospel, deliver the homily when requested and leading intercessory prayer. The deacon also takes communion to members of the community who are not able to attend the mass. It is important to state here that most of these services provided by the deacon can also be provided by lay ministers.

Works of Charity: In all parishes there are people in need, this is a fact of life. Every parish offers different opportunities to serve the needy. The deacon participate in whatever programmes are currently running in the parish. There are a number of other ways the deacon can be of service to a parish, by supporting the bereaved, helping out with baptisms and marriages, visiting the sick at home and in hospital and bringing Holy Communion to the house bound.

What do Permanent Deacons Do?

The first responsibility of the deacon is to be an effective visible sign of Christ who came to serve rather than to be served. Although the ministry of the deacon may be exercised on a part-time basis, he remains at all times a deacon and he is called, in his life-style, to reflect this. The ministry of the deacon is an expression of his being, as the documents say,

an icon of Christ the servant. The areas of ministry which may be entrusted to deacons fall under three general headings, Altar, Word and Charity.

They include:

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
- The administration of Church property

A permanent deacon is not a “lone ranger.” He receives his mission from the Archbishop, and will be assigned to work as a member of a team, normally under the leadership of a parish priest. He is called to minister in close co-operation with priests and with members of the lay faithful who are entrusted with various ministries.

Collaborative ministry is already a reality in very many parishes, especially with the development of Parish Pastoral Councils, family-mass groups, baptism teams, bereavement support groups etc. Deacons are not intended to replace lay ministers. On the contrary, in many places, they play a key role in the development and co-ordination of lay ministry. Neither are deacons 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.

Who Is Eligible to Become a Deacon?

It is the bishop who, in the name of the Church, calls a man to ordination as deacon. Any decision to call a man to the order of deacon must follow from a mature discernment. In other words, it is a decision rooted in faith. The bishop needs to satisfy himself that a man, who has already been called by God in the Sacrament of Baptism, is now called by God to ordained ministry, as a further expression of his baptismal vocation. Candidates for the permanent diaconate may be married or unmarried. The upper age limit for beginning the formation programme is sixty years of age.

What Personal Qualities are Required?

A prospective candidate for the permanent diaconate must: have a genuine sense of vocation to this calling.

- be a baptized and confirmed man who is active in the practice of his Catholic faith.
- be actively involved in the parish or charitable work and highly recommended by his parish priest and parishioners.
- [if married...] have been married at least five years and live in a stable and valid marriage, enjoying the full support of his wife who will participate actively in the formation programme, and be willing to remain celibate if his wife precedes him in death
- [if single...] enjoy a stable, settled life, a history of healthy relationships, and be able and willing to accept celibacy, understanding the implications of this charism.
- [if widowed...] have had at least two years to heal from the death of his wife.
- possess the human, spiritual and intellectual capacity to participate fully in the formation programme.
- possess natural gifts for ministry, demonstrate maturity and balance, enjoy good physical and mental health with no

condition which would impede ministry and have no history of any significant compulsions or addictions

- be free of all force or pressure in making his application.
- be able to sustain an adequate standard of living for himself and, in so far as it is applicable, for his family.
- be able to give the time required for study and service without detriment to his family.
- be willing to be subject to the child protection vetting procedures as required by Our Children our Church.
- not belong to any organisation or engage in any work or professional activity that is, according to the norms of the Church and the prudent judgement of the Archbishop, inconsistent with the diaconal ministry
- be free of all irregularities and impediments to Orders
- be an Irish citizen or, if a citizen of another country, be lawfully resident in Ireland for a period of not less than two years