

The Catholic Moment

Called to serve: Discerning a vocation to the permanent diaconate

By Deacon Stephen Miller

Knowing God's will is not easy. It involves much prayer and reflection. But even this is not enough. Getting the assistance of the Church is indispensable to properly discern a vocation to holy orders. If a man believes he may be called to the order of deacon, he should not hesitate to contact the vocations office to begin the process of discernment. Despite best efforts, a person who is discerning is often not fully aware of all the issues. Having plenty of time, a sound knowledge of vocation and discernment, as well as the Church's direct involvement, are all necessary.

One of the first challenges in properly discerning a vocation to the permanent diaconate is understanding the vocation and how it relates to other vocational paths in the Church. A deacon, like a priest, shares in the apostolic mission of the bishop, but in a different way. The bishop is a successor to the 12 apostles, and is the chief shepherd of the flock in a particular diocese. It is through the bishop, and his apostolic authority, that priests and deacons receive the sacrament of holy orders. Clergy must make sacred promises to obey, respect and to serve under the bishop's authority in order to be ordained. The bishop oversees the assignment of ministries for clergy. Because of this, someone discerning a vocation to holy orders does not make the decision to be ordained on his own, and must receive the affirmation of the Church. Unlike a layperson, clergy are not free to go and do whatever ministry they please.

Even though there are similarities between priests and deacons, there are also important differences.

Liturgically, priests are ordained to consecrate the Eucharist in the holy sacrifice of the Mass, to forgive sins in the sacrament of reconciliation, and to anoint the sick. Many priests also become pastors of parishes.

Deacons are ordained to lifelong service to the Church in any ministry the bishop designates for them, other than priesthood. Even though deacons may preside at certain sacraments outside of Mass such as baptisms and weddings, or at funerals, a Liturgy of the Word with holy Communion, the Liturgy of the Hours or at blessings, this is done in the absence of a priest. When a priest is present, a deacon's role is to assist him.

Outside of the liturgy, deacons serve in the world as agents of the bishop. Their ministry is not necessarily bound to a parish. Deacons are given sacramental grace to help carry out the bishop's apostolic mission.

A deacon is ordained in persona Christi Servi to be an icon of Christ the Servant, a reminder to all that we are sent to serve and not to be served (Mark 10:45). Once fed with the Body and Blood of Christ, we are sent to share the Good News in the virtue of charity

and help gather others into the fold. Christ made this clear to the apostles in the washing of the feet following the Last Supper.

Because he is bestowed a unique share in the apostolic mission, a deacon (and his wife, if he is married) undergoes extensive formation lasting five years to prepare for holy orders. Formation is not merely education or training, but involves a more comprehensive development in five dimensions: human, intellectual, spiritual, pastoral and diaconal. This is necessary to ensure that a man is truly called and ready for lifelong, sacrificial service to God's people on behalf of the bishop, and that his wife, if he is married, is able to support a diaconal vocation.

When discerning whether a man is called to diakonia, the Church looks for several important traits: a dynamic prayer, sacramental and moral life, already active in works of mercy, radically available to serve, sacrificial, humble, docile, kind, a bridge to Christ for others, obedient to Church teaching and authority, collaborative, able to effectively teach, preach, counsel and witness Christ's love, good work ethic, trustworthy steward, financially stable, good health, a healthy marriage (if married) and the ability to live a life of celibacy (if not married or in the event of his wife's death).

If you believe that God may be calling you to the permanent diaconate, please do not hesitate to contact Deacon Bill Reid, vocations coordinator, at deacons2b@gmail.com or at 317-846-1992, to begin the process of discernment with the Church.

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