

History of Permanent Diaconate

Diocese of Little Rock

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The renewal of the permanent diaconate is one of the greatest legacies of the Second Vatican Council. The service of deacons in the Church is documented from apostolic times. A strong tradition, attested by St. Irenaeus, influencing the liturgy of ordination, see the origin of the diaconate in the institution of the seven mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (6:1-6). Thus, at the initial grade of sacred hierarchy are deacons, whose ministry has always been greatly esteemed in the Church.

St. Paul refers to the deacons and bishops in his letters to the Philippians (Phil 1:1) and also to Timothy (1 Tim 3:8-13). He lists the qualities and virtues they should possess. St. Ignatius of Antioch considers a church without bishop, priest or deacon unthinkable. He underlines that the ministry of deacons is nothing other than the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Up to the fifth century the diaconate flourished in the Church. But after this period it experienced, for various reasons, a slow decline, which ended in its surviving only as an intermediate stage for candidates preparing for the priesthood. The Council of Trent disposed that the permanent diaconate be restored as it existed in ancient times; however it was not carried into effect.

The restoration of the diaconate as a permanent ministry in the Church is one of the great legacies of Vatican II. The council fathers formulated an important principle for renewal, which is applicable to the rediscovery of the unique mission, identity and ministry of the restored permanent diaconate. This principle of renewal was consistently and progressively developed by Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II.

During the years following the conclusion of the council, Pope Paul VI implemented the proposal for the restoration of the diaconate. The council left the restoration of the diaconate to the deliberations of the individual episcopal conferences, and in the spring of 1968 the bishops of the United States petitioned the Holy See for permission to restore the diaconate in our country.

The following August the apostolic delegate informed the U.S. bishops that Pope Paul VI had acceded to their request and in November the bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate was formally constituted by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The first guidelines for the diaconate were issued late in 1971.

Bishop Andrew J. McDonald's interest in and love for the diaconate was evident soon after he became our bishop in 1972. With his approval and encouragement the preparatory work was accomplished regarding all that would be needed in the formation of a diaconate office.

Beginning with the selection process of the applicants and continuing through several years of formation of each class of deacons, Bishop McDonald remained involved with the men and their wives as they went through formation. The first formation group began in 1978 with 16 being ordained in November 1981. In 1986, 18 men were ordained and in 1993 another 18. On Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 1998, 12 men were ordained, and on Dec. 12, 2002, 22, more men became deacons.

At his address to the permanent deacons of the United States (“The Heart of the Diaconate Servants of the Mysteries of Christ and Servants of Your Brothers and Sisters,” Sept. 19, 1987), Pope John Paul II said the permanent deacon’s ministry “is the Church’s service sacramentalized ... This is at the very heart of the diaconate to which you are called: to be a servant of the mysteries of Christ and, at one and the same time, to be a servant of your brothers and sisters.”

The “National Directory for the Formation, Life and Ministry of Permanent Deacons in the United States” promulgated by the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Nov. 15, 2004, contains a statement from the “Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons” in 1998, which said, “The principal function of the permanent deacon, therefore, is to collaborate with the bishop and the priests in the exercise of a ministry (of Word, Liturgy and Service) which is not of their own wisdom but of the Word of God, calling all to conversion and holiness.”

With the approval of the diocesan administrator, Msgr. J. Gaston Hebert, the current diaconate class began in July 2008. With the continuing approval and support of the Bishop Anthony B. Taylor, ordained and installed as head of the Diocese of Little Rock on June 5, 2008, 48 men (20 Hispanic and 28 Anglo) are now attending classes one weekend a month.

Presently there are 78 active deacons in the diocese, with 19 deacons older than 75. These deacons are serving not only liturgically, but also in many other community ministries such as police chaplains, abused woman centers, drug addiction, various ministries to the sick and dying, Cursillo, Life in the Spirit ministry, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, CCD, retreat centers and adult education.

The directors of formation and the minister to deacons provide a unified diocesan formation program in human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions for all permanent deacons (aspirant, candidate and post-ordination).

It is through Bishop McDonald, Msgr. Hebert, and Bishop Taylor’s farsightedness and support that the Lord’s work, a permanent diaconate ministry, continues vibrantly in the Diocese of Little Rock.