

The Deacon: Servant in a Servant Church

Deacons are one of the three groups, or “orders,” of ordained ministers in the Church: bishops, presbyters (priests) and deacons. They are ordained to the diocesan Church as a sacramental sign of Christ, who came “to serve and not be served.” Through baptism, the entire Church is called by Christ to serve, but the deacon, in virtue of his ordination and through his various ministries, is called to be a sacramental sign of the servant in a servant-Church.

The service of deacons in the Church is documented from apostolic times. A strong tradition sees the origin of the diaconate in the institution of the “seven” mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (6:1-6), who were called forth to minister to the Greek widows and orphans. The diaconate flourished in the western Church up until the fifth century when, for various reasons, it experienced a slow decline which ended in its surviving only as an intermediate stage for candidates preparing for priestly ministry (transitional diaconate.)

The Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965), however, authorized the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent Order of ministry. So, while students for the priesthood are still ordained deacons prior to their priestly ordination, there are more than 13,000 deacons in the United States alone who minister in this Order permanently. There is no difference in the sacramental sign or the functions between these so-called “*transitional*” and “*Permanent*” deacons.¹

All ordained ministers in the Church are called to functions of Word, Sacrament, and Charity, but bishops, presbyters, and deacons exercise these functions in various ways. As ministers of Word, deacons proclaim the Gospel, preach, and teach in the name of the Church. As ministers of Sacrament, deacons baptize, lead the faithful in prayer, witness marriages, and conduct funeral services. As ministers of Charity, deacons are **leaders** in identifying the needs of others, especially those who are without power or voice at the margins of society, then marshalling the Church’s resources and animating the faithful to meet those needs. Deacons are also dedicated to addressing and eliminating the structural and institutional causes of such needs. The deacon is to inspire, promote and help coordinate the service ministry that the whole Church must undertake in imitation of Christ as servant. This prophetic role of social criticism and reform can be carried out in specific lay ministries, but deacons, who generally have secular occupations and families, also have many opportunities to carry it out in their everyday work places.

Becoming a deacon in our diocese is a very rewarding journey of study and discernment. Currently, we have 21 men who, with the support of their wives and families, are discerning a call to the diaconate. Please pray for these men and their wives as they prepare themselves to be servants in a servant-Church.

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¹ USCCB Committee on the Diaconate. Frequently asked Questions about Deacons.