

Catholic

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Being a Permanent Deacon WORD, ALTAR, AND CHARITY

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We need to be in tune to God's call to us to be more Christlike. Following Christ's example as a disciple and placing ourselves in and among the lives of others can unveil a path of ministry and discipleship. It is here that God is more fully revealed to us and we are given the privilege to open the eyes of others to God's infinite goodness and mercy.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DEACON LEX FERRAUIOLA

Above all else, a deacon is a servant of Christ's love.

My Journey to the Diaconate

My life journey has been very blessed. My vocation has four dimensions: I am a husband, a father, a grandfather, and a Catholic deacon. My wife, Wanda, and I were high-school sweethearts and continue to be in love. We were married forty-eight years ago, on the day of my twenty-first birthday. Wanda was nineteen at the time. God has blessed us with four children to love, nurture, and share our life with.

For forty years, I worked as an information technology executive. It was a fulfilling career that provided well for our growing family, but I felt the Holy Spirit tapping me on the shoulder. In 1984, I felt called to serve God and my brothers and sisters as a deacon. After eight years of discernment and formation, I received the sacrament of holy orders and was ordained a permanent deacon for the Archdiocese of Newark, NJ, by Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, who is now a cardinal.

What Are Deacons and How Did They Get Here?

The diaconate, as a permanent state in life, had its origins in the early Church. From the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of St. Paul we learn that the first Christian communities had two orders: the episcopate (bishops) and the diaconate (deacons). Later, as the Church grew too large for a bishop to be personally present to the members of the local communities (parishes), the order of presbyterate (priests) developed.

The Book of Acts tells the story of the apostles choosing seven people to serve the social welfare needs of the early Christian community and to carry the gospel into the marketplaces and the trenches of society:

At that time, as the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them.

—ACTS 6:1–6

Saint Stephen was one of those seven. He was also the Church's first martyr: He was stoned to death while preaching in the city square. Perhaps the best-known deacon in history is St. Francis of Assisi.

Somewhere in the Middle Ages the Church ceased to foster the role of deacon as a permanent state in life and made the diaconate a transitional step on the way to the priesthood. But in the late 1940s, a group of priests, who had been imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, discerned the need to bring back the role of deacon as it was originally intended—to carry the gospel and the ministry of loving service into prisons, hospitals, marketplaces, and out onto the fringes of society. They petitioned the pope to restore the ordained ministry of the permanent deacon.

In 1967, following the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI restored the permanent diaconate and opened it up to married as well as single men.

The Pathway of Permanent Deacon

A deacon is a deacon, but there are two pathways—based on marital status—in which this vocation to holy orders unfolds. Seminarians in formation for the priesthood are first ordained as transitional deacons for several months to a year before ordination to the priesthood.

Permanent deacons come from all walks of life. A man may be married when ordained, but if his wife predeceases him he is not permitted to remarry. If single at ordination, he must remain so.

Through the sacrament of holy orders, permanent deacons are ordained as clergy within the Church for a threefold ministry of the word, the altar, and charity.

The deacon strives to live the gospel in all circles of life in which he is present: with his family, friends, and co-workers; in the parish; at his workplace; and in the marketplace. While you may see the deacon assisting at the altar or preaching at Mass, his primary work is charity—service through various outreach ministries—to the poor, the sick, the troubled, and otherwise marginalized members of our human family.

It is my opinion that those deacons who are married, like myself, are doubly blessed: We are called to serve the Lord as ordained ministers of the Church and we are called to love and be loved as husbands, fathers, and grandfathers.

Balancing the needs of family life and a job with ordained ministry can be

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Look: How do you carry yourself as a servant of Christ's love?

Judge: Are you fully applying the concept of genuine loving service?

Act: Consider how you and your family can better live the gospel in all circles of life.