



**The**

# Criterion

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## History of the permanent diaconate up to Vatican II

*Editor's note: For the past year, an archdiocesan committee has been studying how to implement the permanent diaconate here. This series looks at the history of the permanent diaconate and the role deacons fulfill in the Church.*

**By John F. Fink**

*Second of a five-part series*

From very early times, deacons were regarded as having a special relationship to bishops. The early Christian document *Didascalia Apostolorum* ("Teachings of the Apostles") described a deacon as "the eyes and ears, the mouth, heart and soul of the bishop." The ordained ministry in the Church was considered to be much like a triangle, with priests and deacons in a complementary relationship to the bishop.

It's possible that the origin of deacons was recorded in the sixth chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles*. The Apostles told the people to select seven upstanding men "filled with the Spirit and wisdom" to help them in works of charity. After the men were selected, the Apostles "prayed and laid hands" on them. Among them was Stephen, a man "filled with grace and power," who was soon to become the first Christian martyr.

Perhaps these seven men were not deacons in the sense we now understand the term, but the account given in *Acts* is in accord with the concept of the diaconate as it soon took shape in the Church.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, around the year 100, said that deacons were "ministers of the Church of God" and explained that their task was nothing less than to continue "the ministry of Jesus Christ."

Ignatius mentioned two specific functions of deacons: writing letters for the bishop and assisting him in the ministry of the word, and serving as his legate from one local Church to another. They also represented the bishop in providing service to the poor and the needy of the community.

Even before Ignatius' time, though,

deacons held responsible positions in the Church. The New Testament's First Letter to Timothy contains this admonition:

"Deacons must be dignified, not deceitful, not addicted to drink, not greedy for sordid gain, holding fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

Moreover, they should be tested first; then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons."

Paul's letter continued: "Deacons may be married only once and must manage their children and their households well. Thus those who serve well as deacons gain good standing and much confidence in their faith in Christ Jesus" (1 Tm 3:8-13).

Undoubtedly, the most celebrated deacon in Catholic history was St. Lawrence, who was martyred in 258. The esteem in which the Church holds him is evident by the fact that the celebration of his life on Aug. 10 ranks as a feast rather than a memorial as is the case for most saints in the liturgical calendar. Lawrence served under Pope St. Sixtus II and was charged with the responsibility for the material goods of the Church of Rome and the distribution of alms to the poor.

So why and how did the diaconate decline? There was no single reason or cause. Basically, it was a matter that both priests and deacons experienced a kind of identity crisis that in some places led to a rivalry that sometimes boiled over into open conflict. By the fourth century, the liturgical role of deacons was stressed at the expense of the ministry of the word (preaching and teaching) and the ministry of charity.

By the fifth century, deacons were doing little except performing liturgical functions. At this time, too, the idea spread that the diaconate was simply an introductory stage in holy orders, a step on the way toward ordination as a priest. Eventually, by the seventh century, the only deacons in the Western Church (as contrasted to the Eastern Church) were men who would soon become priests.

It remained that way until the time of World War II in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Priests who were imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps speculated that permanent deacons might have been able to do much good in their parishes. This speculation continued in Europe after the war and was discussed in articles in Catholic periodicals and in books.

In 1957, Pope Pius XII spoke favorably about the possibility of restoring the permanent diaconate, but eventually concluded that "the time is not yet ripe."

The Second Vatican Council decided that the time was ripe.

*(Men who are interested in additional information on the permanent diaconate are asked to contact the Vocations Office at the Archbishop O'Meara Catholic Center, P.O. Box 1410, Indianapolis, IN 46206.)*

**Next week: Vatican II reinstates the diaconate.†**