



The

Criterion

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Inside

Archbishop Buechlein	5
Editorial	4
Question Corner	11
Sunday and Daily Readings	11

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The permanent deacon formation program

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 that deacons fulfill in the Church.

By John F. Fink

Last of a five-part series

The deacon must have special qualities if he is to fulfill his threefold areas of service—the ministry of the Word, the ministry of the liturgy, and the ministry of charity and justice. Therefore, he requires special training.

The Archdiocese of Indianapolis plans to work in cooperation with Saint Meinrad School of Theology to develop its permanent deacon formation program. It is expected that the first class will enter the program in September 2004.

The program will address four dimensions, or areas, of formation—human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral.

The human dimension will include the development and support of those personal and interpersonal qualities that allow the participant to maintain healthy relationships with family and colleagues. These will foster a sense of collaboration and help the candidate become a prophetic voice for the needs of the poor and marginalized.

The spiritual dimension will help the participant cultivate his commitment to God's Word and the Church, deepen his prayer life and acquaint him with the Catholic Church's spiritual tradition.

The intellectual dimension will address the academic program of study that provides the theological foundation needed to fulfill the diaconal ministry effectively. This component will be Saint Meinrad's primary responsibility.

The pastoral dimension will strengthen and develop the professional and ministerial skills needed for preaching, liturgical service and leadership, and ministerial leadership.

The formation program will span four

years. Saint Meinrad recommends that the candidates meet one weekend each month, from Friday evening until about 2 p.m. on Sunday. They also will come together for retreats (usually in August), meet regularly with a spiritual director, and gather in small theological reflection groups in locations selected to minimize travel time. The candidates also will take on ministry assignments in which their work is supervised and evaluated by local leaders in ministries of interest to the candidate and to the archdiocese.

Wives are an important part of the diaconal formation, but they will not participate in the program on a month-to-month basis. Rather, they will be asked to attend one session per semester (eight sessions in total), during which they may attend classes or participate in discussions or other workshops designed to meet their interests.

The academic coursework will include Scripture (both the Old and New Testaments), Church history, ecclesiology, sacramental theology, canon law, moral theology, and other things a deacon should know when involved in the ministry of the Word. The courses will be spread out through eight semesters, interspersed with workshops.

Spiritual formation will emphasize the importance of daily Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours and personal prayer. It will include retreats, spiritual direction and participation in theological reflection groups.

Human and pastoral formation will stress the development of skills in preaching, liturgical presiding, parish and diocesan administration and leadership, faith formation and pastoral care. The development of skills will be achieved through monthly formation sessions that address specific ministries or skills and through supervised ministry assignments, especially in service ministries.

Since preaching is such an important part of a deacon's ministry, Saint Meinrad will include an eight-day homiletics work-

shop as part of the formation program.

Here is a listing of the skills the program hopes to develop in its candidates: listening skills, working as a member of a team, doing pastoral/strategic planning and budgeting, working with councils and committees, recruiting and motivating volunteers, using effective work habits, running effective meetings, dealing with difficult people, respecting professional boundaries, and balancing work, ministry and family. Some candidates will arrive in the program with more experience and expertise with these skills than will others.

The formation program will also present overviews of ministry to the elderly and the sick, bereavement, preparing couples for marriage, preparing parents for infant baptism, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults process, outreach to inactive Catholics and preparing liturgies.

It is expected that candidates for the permanent diaconate will be fully prepared to become an important part of the Church's threefold ordained ministry: bishops, priests and deacons. As the number of priests continues to decrease, the ministry of deacons will assume a more visible role in the Church, both throughout the United States and in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis.

Deacons will be prepared to do what is needed, particularly in the ministry of charity and justice. They will not be displacing staff and volunteers currently serving our parishes and agencies, but will enhance the overall ministry of the archdiocese.

The Criterion will continue to be an avenue of information on the permanent diaconate in the archdiocese as our program develops and our future deacons begin formation.

(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.) †