



The

Criterion

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Inside

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

What type of man becomes a permanent deacon?

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

Fourth of a five-part series

What type of man is accepting the call to become a deacon? In the mid-1990s, the U.S. bishops' Committee for the Permanent Diaconate made a survey of the 11,000 deacons in the country. (Today the number is about 13,350.) Here's some of what it learned:

An overwhelming 81 percent were Caucasian, but 13 percent were Hispanic, 4 percent were African-Americans and 2 percent were of other ethnic backgrounds (Native American, Asian, etc.).

Forty-five percent were college graduates, including 19 percent with advanced degrees, and another 27 percent had some college education or an associate degree; 26 percent were high school graduates and 2 percent had an eighth-grade education or less. Sixty percent had professional or managerial careers.

The survey found that the median age of deacons was 60, with 20 percent over 70. The official minimum age for ordination as a permanent deacon in the United States is 35, so the minimum age for admission to training programs is 31. In other dioceses, the usual maximum age for entering the program is 61.

Most permanent deacons in the United States are ordained at about age 55. The reason older men are accepting the call is that younger men are usually not yet completely settled in their secular careers and they have young children in their families. This makes it more difficult for them to spare the time required of a permanent deacon than it does for older men whose careers are more established and whose children are grown.

By far, the majority of permanent deacons worked in parishes, combining weekend

and evening activities as deacons with full-time secular jobs. However, 4 percent of the deacons had salaried Church positions, such as administrative posts on chancery staffs; 3 percent were engaged in full-time, salaried positions in parishes; and 6 percent worked full time in parishes (30 hours or more) without being paid. There were also 61 full-time and 39 part-time parish administrators in the group of 11,000 deacons.

Most of the deacons were married, although some were single and some were widowed. Church law stipulates that a permanent deacon may not remarry if his wife dies after he has been ordained. Wives have an important role in the ministry of permanent deacons. The Church requires the wife's consent before her husband can be ordained a deacon, and part of the training program for deacons includes their wives.

The results of the survey showed that 67 percent of the deacons thought that their ministry had enriched their home life, 65 percent said it improved their relationship with their wives, and 48 percent said their relationship with their children had improved.

The specific activities in which permanent deacons are involved vary so much that a detailed job description applicable to all is probably impossible. The bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate says that the permanent deacon is a man "with a special mission requiring special relationships within the community of God's People."

It adds that the central elements of diaconal identity are the same no matter how the activities may vary. They are "the invitation of the Spirit, public expression of and response to this call through ordination, sharing in the fraternal accountability for the realization on earth of God's kingdom, acceptance by the community they are called to serve, and complete commitment of self to service in Christ's name and that of the Church."

(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: The formation program for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. †