



The

Criterion

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Inside

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

Archdiocese to begin permanent deacon formation program next year

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

First of a five-part series

Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein, after consultation with archdiocesan priests and parish life coordinators, has approved the establishment of the permanent diaconate for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. That doesn't mean, however, that permanent deacons will be common in the archdiocese immediately. It will take time to properly prepare men who are called to this ministry.

Unlike Catholics from the Middle Ages until late in the 20th century, it's not unusual for us today to see deacons participating in Masses when we visit relatives or friends in other dioceses. The permanent diaconate has been part of some dioceses in the United States since shortly after the Second Vatican Council approved the restoration of this ancient office more than 38 years ago.

Nevertheless, Catholics might not fully understand the nature and the function of permanent deacons. From experience in other dioceses, we know that there can be a misunderstanding of what a deacon is, why the Vatican II fathers called for the restoration of this office, and what a deacon can and cannot do. That is why this series of articles is being published.

At the present time, the archdiocese hopes to have a class of diaconal candidates begin a permanent deacon formation program, in cooperation with the Saint Meinrad School of Theology, in September 2004. The formation program will be conducted over a span of four years, which will include one weekend a month and additional sessions. That means that the first deacons to be ordained could be ready for ordination no earlier than late spring of 2008.

It's possible, though, that we will see

deacons in some parishes before that. There are men who are living in the archdiocese who were ordained deacons for other dioceses. These deacons might be incardinated into our archdiocese prior to 2008.

However, from the length of time the program takes (four years), it should be obvious that men who believe they are being called for this ministry should not take that call lightly. Perhaps, in their rush to have deacons after the Vatican II council approved them, some dioceses were not as careful to establish an excellent formation program as they might have been. Experience with diaconate programs has remedied that problem.

Nowhere has the restored diaconate been better accepted than in the United States. Twenty-five years after the U.S. bishops requested the establishment of the permanent diaconate in the United States and Pope Paul VI approved it in 1968, there were 11,000 permanent deacons. That number has increased to almost 14,000. That's why most Catholics have probably seen deacons in parishes outside the Archdiocese of Indianapolis.

There are permanent deacons in three of the other four dioceses in Indiana: Gary, Fort Wayne-South Bend, and Evansville. The Diocese of Lafayette, like our archdiocese, is beginning a formation program for deacons.

So what is a deacon? He is a member of one of the three-fold ordained ministries: bishops, priests and deacons. Once ordained, he is no longer a layman, so it is incorrect to refer to him as a "lay deacon." It's easy, though, to understand why this mistake would be made because, except when performing liturgical functions, deacons do not wear any type of distinctive clerical clothing. Furthermore, most of them are husbands and fathers who work in secular occupations and settings. They are called "Mister," not "Father."

There are two types of deacons: transitional and permanent. A transitional deacon is a man who is preparing for the priest-

hood. The diaconate is the final step before his ordination as a priest. A permanent deacon will not advance to the priesthood.

A deacon is, basically, a helper. The word comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, which means servant or helper. He is to help the bishop or priest in ministering to those entrusted to him.

Deacons perform their ministry in three general areas of service—the ministry of the Word, the ministry of the liturgy, and the ministry of charity and justice. The most likely candidates for the permanent diaconate are men who are presently lectors and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist in their parishes, and who are actively involved in charitable activities such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society or a parish's social action committee.

(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 history of the diaconate †