



The

Criterion

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Vatican II reinstates the diaconate

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

Third of a five-part series

By the time the Second Vatican Council was convened in 1962, the idea of restoring the diaconate was being widely discussed in Europe and in Third World countries. It was natural, therefore, that it would be brought up for discussion at the council.

Among the reasons the bishops gave was that the permanent diaconate would help alleviate the shortage of priests then being experienced in various parts of the world (but not yet in the United States). That, though, was not considered an adequate rationale for the diaconate because it seemed to imply that the diaconate was merely a temporary solution, a stopgap measure. The basic reason given by the bishops who favored the restoration of the diaconate was that it is an integral part of the threefold hierarchy of orders willed by Jesus.

On Sept. 29, 1964, the bishops at the council approved the restoration of the permanent diaconate. Section 29 of the *Constitution on the Church* is the council's principal statement on the diaconate and it seems appropriate to quote it at length:

"At a lower level of the hierarchy are to be found deacons, who receive the imposition of hands 'not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry.' For, strengthened by sacramental grace they are dedicated to the People of God, in conjunction with the bishop and his body of priests, in the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity.

"It pertains to the office of a deacon, in so far as it may be assigned to him by the competent authority, to administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dis-

tributor of the Eucharist, in the name of the Church, to assist at and to bless marriages, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and the prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, and to officiate at funeral and burial services.

"Dedicated to works of charity and functions of administration, deacons should recall the admonition of St. Polycarp: 'Let them be merciful, and zealous, and let them walk according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all.'"

The council left it up to local episcopal conferences, with the approval of the pope, to determine whether and where deacons would be appointed. In the United States, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops voted in April 1968 to ask the pope to authorize restoration of the diaconate in this country, and Pope Paul VI granted his permission that August.

When they asked Pope Paul to authorize the diaconate, the U.S. bishops pointed to two reasons: "to complete the hierarchy of sacred orders and to enrich and strengthen the various diaconal ministries at work in the United States with the sacramental grace of the diaconate."

The first reason recognizes the fact that the ordained ministry in its fullness includes bishops, priests and deacons. Deacons should not, therefore, be considered simply as priests' substitutes. They have their own role in the ordained ministry.

The second reason given by the U.S. bishops indicates the importance of the sacramental principle in Christian life. Through their ordination, deacons have the power to bestow sacramental graces that lay people do not. Therefore, although it is possible for a lay person to do most of the things a deacon does ("the various diaconal ministries" to which the bishops referred), they cannot do it as an

ordained deacon can.

All permanent deacons are involved in some way in the three general areas of diaconal ministry—the ministry of the Word, the ministry of the liturgy and the ministry of charity and justice. Of these three, the ministry of charity and justice holds a place of priority in the ministry of the deacon.

In the first category, a deacon's most important function is to proclaim the Gospel and to preach. But the ministry of the Word also includes such things as catechetical instruction and other forms of teaching, counseling or conducting retreats.

Deacons have a number of official functions as part of the ministry of the liturgy, as most of us who have attended Mass where a deacon is present have noticed. But they also perform other liturgical roles, such as baptizing, witnessing marriages, bringing Viaticum to the dying, presiding over funerals and burials, presiding over liturgies of the Word, conducting Benediction services, leading nonsacramental reconciliation services, conducting prayer services for the sick and dying, and administering certain of the Church's sacramentals.

As for the ministry of charity and justice, in 1994 the bishops' Committee for the Permanent Diaconate found deacons engaging in service to the sick and homebound, doing drug and rehabilitation work, ministering to convicts and children involved in the court system, and extending a helping hand to the poor, the homeless, and other needy and troubled groups in society.

(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 type of man who becomes a deacon and the formation program. †