

## The Permanent Diaconate – Getting Started

The following pages provide the basic information necessary to understand and to apply to Aspirancy, the first formal element of Diaconal Formation Program. The descriptions, guidelines and schedules contained in these pages are taken from *The National Directory for Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States (The National Directory)* and Bishop Thomas G. Doran's letter and attachments announcing the new Formation Program dated July 31, 2002.

### A. Overview of Responsibilities:

It is the responsibility of the Formation Director and those chosen to teach in the Diaconal Formation Program to provide a healthy and challenging program for the formation of deacons to serve the needs of the Diocese. In accordance with Bishop's directive and under the supervision of the Vicar for Clergy, the Formation Director and those involved in the Diaconal Formation Program are charged with providing a practical and relevant education infused with the proper spirituality for forming deacons. In addition, the Formation Director, working with the Scrutiny and Admissions Committee and the program teacher, has the responsibility of recommending to the Vicar of Clergy aspirants for admission to candidacy and candidates for promotion to the order of deacon. (BNFPD, #21)

While participants in the Diaconal Formation Program can expect quality formation, guidance, support and education from their faith community and the staff involved in their formation, each man must also take personal responsibility for his individual spiritual and academic development. Formation involves education, training, spiritual growth and, most importantly, ongoing conversion. Change takes effort and emotional energy, and learning and training take time. Those applying for diaconal formation must realize that the preparation and training necessary for becoming a deacon demands significant time, self-discipline and real effort. While the program is designed with a "family perspective," it is the job of the participant to plan and organize his life to avoid conflicts, minimize stress on himself and his family and continue to meet his responsibilities as a husband, parent and employee while in the program. Simply put, preparation for serving the needs of a parish involves serious academic study and the development of skill through direct experience of a variety of ministries. Those asking the Church to recognize their call as deacons must be willing to actively pursue the knowledge, skills and depth of faith necessary to fulfill the deacon's call to the ministries of word, charity and liturgy.

Along with the academic work and training for various ministries, those pursuing the diaconate are expected to actively pursue their own spiritual growth. Spiritual maturity is

a requirement of serving the Church as an ordained minister. Being a deacon is a life long commitment requiring a strong underpinning of faith to keep it alive and dynamic. Daily prayer and participation in the sacraments are necessary parts of formation and post-formation. Those involved in the diaconate are also asked to work with a spiritual director to help guide their growth. (The National Directory, #194)

Expenses for the program are for the most part covered by the diocese. There are some expenses shared by the participant. Before entering Aspirancy, applicants are required to have a psychological assessment with a psychiatrist. The cost of this exam and consultation is split between the diocese and applicant resulting in a cost of approximately \$250 to the applicant. Participants will also spend approximately \$200 over the course of the formation program to purchase books and materials.

### **B. Discernment:**

Discernment for the diaconate begins on a personal level and then quickly moves to a family level for the majority of permanent deacons since most permanent deacons are married. The Church puts so much value on the input of the wife and

family in the discernment process that a married applicant cannot be considered without his wife's informed, written consent at each step.

The pastor and parish community also participates in the early stages of discernment. The pastor must see a need for diaconal service in the parish or in the Diocese at large and the probability that the applicant can fulfill the identified need in order to recommend a particular applicant from his parish.

Finally, the Bishop and those he appoints to select and form diaconate candidates for ordination, must also determine the presence of a call, the capacity to fulfill it, personal readiness, and the willingness to serve the Church in an applicant. Along with the applicant's family, the Church must also agree that the time is right for the applicant given his family and work circumstance and the needs of the diocese. While an individual may feel a strong personal call, it is important to keep in mind the ecclesial nature of the call to ordained ministry.

*All ministry flows out of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts are given to the People of God not for the benefit of the individual minister but for the benefit of the Church. As a result, any discernment of gifts and charisms must involve the ecclesial community...This is especially true for ordained ministries of the Church. An individual who presents himself for ordination to the diaconate is accountable to the Church, who mediates—confirms—his vocation. (The National Directory, #152)*

### **C. Diaconal Character:**

While becoming a deacon does involve training and the gaining of new knowledge, men pursuing the diaconate share some common pre-existing traits. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, "Grace builds on nature." Certainly, concern for others, especially the marginalized,

is paramount, but there are others as well. The following list is not exhaustive, but it does provide food for thought for those considering the call to diaconal service.

- † A call to serve
- † Deep faith and love for the Church
- † A love for the Word
- † Psychological and Spiritual Maturity
- † An interest in theological reflection
- † Financial Stability
- † Ability to maintain commitments
- † Strong Interpersonal and Communication Skills
- † Share faith with tolerance
- † Respect for others
- † Prudent
- † Capacity for obedience and fraternal communion
- † Stable married life or mature celibate state
- † Leadership Skills
- † Ability to collaborate
- † Ability to motivate others
- † Public Speaking Skills
- † Generous
- † Good Christian reputation
- † Active in service ministries
- † Active in one's own faith and spiritual development
- † Punctual in matters of importance

#### **D. Readiness and The Selection Process:**

Readiness takes on two aspects: preparedness and timeliness. In both cases as is stated above there are many people involved in the assessment of readiness. Prior to entering Aspirancy and throughout the program, the applicant will need to work with his wife, family, pastor, and formation staff to determine if he is ready and the real circumstances of his life are right for becoming a deacon.

First, the applicant, working with his wife and family must determine if this is the appropriate time to “answer the call to serve.” A careful consideration of one's current commitments must be made to determine if the necessary time for studying, preparing and ultimately serving is available.

It is the responsibility of those charged by the Bishop with selecting applicants to determine that the required amount of preparedness is present at the time of application. The first determination of readiness is established by a thorough review of the material provided in an individual's application. This review will be done prior to inviting applicants to attend the Pre-Aspirancy period of inquiry comprised of three monthly informational meetings on the diaconate and the formation program.

After this, if an applicant is chosen to be considered for Aspirancy, six additional assessments will be made: **The Deacon Perceiver, MATE Marriage Inventory, Psychological Exam, IFG-Inventory of basic Catholic teachings and beliefs, and a personal interview with the Committee on Admission and Scrutinies.**

Those who are determined to be ready for Aspirancy will be asked to join the Aspirancy Class. This is a two year period of further discernment and exploration involving both self-examination and further assessment by the Diocese. It is possible that during or even after finishing Aspirancy, a man may either self-select to delay or discontinue his pursuit of the diaconate or be asked to do so by the Diocese.

Both those responsible for the selection of men to be formed as deacons and those seeking formation must keep in mind Paul's advice to Timothy, "deacons should be tested first: then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons." (1 Timothy 3:10) Beyond testing, it is also the job of Church to determine if there is a viable need to be met.

#### **E. Academic Prerequisites:**

An applicant must have completed Ministry Formation within the past six years or be currently enrolled in Ministry Formation in order to be considered for admittance to the Diaconal Formation Program. This provides perspective applicants with the opportunity to participate in Aspirancy and Ministry Formation concurrently or apply after finishing Ministry Formation.

Men who have finished a similar formation program to Ministry Formation in another diocese or have earned a Masters Degree in Theology, Pastoral Studies or a related field may submit their transcript to the Permanent Diaconate Office for consideration.

Those who completed Ministry Formation prior to six years before the date of their application may also ask for a review of their status and special consideration.

#### **F. The Application**

First, the applicant must receive his pastor's recommendation. Once the Permanent Diaconate office has received the pastor's initial recommendation and has been notified in writing by the applicant of his interest in entering the Aspirancy program, he will receive an application packet. It is the applicant's responsibility to insure that the following documents are received by the Permanent Diaconate Office ahead of the application deadline.

- ✚ Record of Sacraments in the form of a Parish issued Baptismal Certificate issued in the last six months
- ✚ Official Birth Certificate
- ✚ Proof of legal residence in the Diocese
- ✚ Completed General Information Form (husband and wife)
- ✚ Signed Consent and Release Form
- ✚ Autobiographical (Spiritual) Statement

- ✠ Recent Photographs of you and your spouse
- ✠ Wife's personal handwritten consent and support letter
- ✠ Pastor's Inquiry Form
- ✠ Employer's Recommendation form
- ✠ 3 Non-related Parishioners' Recommendations
- ✠ Pastoral Staff Member's Recommendation
- ✠ Police Background check (The office will order this.)
- ✠ Certification of "Good Health" by your doctor dated within 3 months
- ✠ Record of Annulment(s) if applicable
- ✠ Statement by the proper authority for those who have participated previously in deacon formation program or other religious formation

On the basis of the recommendations, information contained in the application and consideration of Diocesan and parochial needs, a group from the applicants will be chosen to attend a series of informational meetings. It is from this group that the Aspirancy class will be chosen.

In addition to these documents, those selected for consideration for the Aspirancy program will be directed on how and when they will complete the six assessment tools listed in section D that are required to complete their file for admission to Aspirancy.

### **G. Criteria**

The selection of Aspirants is based on a number of factors. It is unlikely that each man selected will meet all of the criteria, but there are obvious similarities among the members of any particular class. Generally, aspirants are men who have provided service to their parishes and to the community at large, especially in the area of social justice and direct services (Corporal Works of Mercy). They are men who have a love for the Word and the Church. In addition, they are men:

- ✠ of faith and compassion who strive to live the Beatitudes
- ✠ who have a call to be deacons
- ✠ who have been practicing Catholics for at least five years
- ✠ who have a mature, well integrated spirituality
- ✠ who are willing to meet the demands of a serious formation program
- ✠ who are willing to make a life-long commitment to service in the Church
- ✠ who are able to work collaboratively with men and women of all races
- ✠ who, if married, have been in a stable marriage for five years and have their wife's support
- ✠ who, if single, are capable of living a celibate life
- ✠ who have received the appropriate sacraments for their station in life
- ✠ who are either retired or employed, but have economic stability
- ✠ who are at least 30 years of age before applying
- ✠ who have the endorsement and support of their pastor
- ✠ who are capable and willing to give serious attention to theological study, spiritual formation, and ministry

- ✠ who are willing to actively pursue their studies and take personal responsibility for their academic and spiritual development
- ✠ who are willing to be obedient and flexible enough to meet the changing needs of the Diocese and their parish

## **H. Purpose of Aspirancy**

Aspirancy is primarily a time of investigation and discernment on the part of the aspirant and his wife and a time of assessment and discernment on the part of the Diocesan Church. During this period of discernment, the aspirant is introduced to a more thorough study of theology and to a deeper knowledge of the spirituality and ministry of the deacon in order to provide a basis for meaningful and informed discernment to occur. Although some aspects of Aspirancy may be linked to other ministerial formation, Aspirancy must be a separate program that provides for a thorough discernment of a diaconal vocation. In the end, the purpose of Aspirancy is for the aspirant and those charged with the responsibility of selecting men for Candidacy to identify if he is truly called and ready to serve the Church as a deacon.

## **I. The Dimensions and Content of Aspirancy**

There are three distinct but integral parts in the formation of a deacon: Aspirancy, Candidacy and Post-ordination training. Each of these periods of formation can be broken into four elements: Human Dimension, Spiritual Dimension, Intellectual Dimension, and Pastoral Dimension. Through these four paths, the following academic, spiritual and inter-personal topics will be covered during the two years dedicated to Aspirancy: Diaconal Ministry and Life, Marriage and Diaconate, Diaconal Spirituality, Discernment (personal and ecclesial), Theology, Christology, History of Christian Religion, The Creed, and Ecclesiology.

### **I. Human Dimension:**

The human dimension during Aspirancy will focus on developing a high degree of self-knowledge and self-esteem to help the aspirant to develop his confidence for diaconal ministry and understanding of his call. Time spent on analyzing the dynamic relationship between family and diaconal life as well as other interpersonal and relationship matters will provide ample opportunity for the aspirant and his wife to assess the current state of their marriage, family life and the ramifications of his possible ordination to the diaconate on their family life. Ample attention will also be spent on helping the single aspirant discern his capacity for celibacy.

### **II. The Spiritual Dimension**

The spiritual dimension of Aspirancy will assist the aspirant in the ongoing process of configuring oneself to Christ. The very goal of spiritual formation is “putting on the mind of Christ;” (The National Directory, #191) therefore, this

aspect of the program will nurture attitudes, habits and practices that provide opportunity for this type of growth. To enhance this growth, this portion of formation will involve classes on understanding diaconal vocation, the meaning of obedience, celibacy and simplicity, matrimonial spirituality, and spiritual writings from the Catholic tradition. Along with community activities facilitated by the Formation Program staff, individuals are expected to actively participate in the following:

- ✠ Daily Mass (when possible)
- ✠ Sacrament of Reconciliation
- ✠ Liturgy of the Hours, meditation and private prayer
- ✠ Lectio Devina
- ✠ Spiritual Direction

### **III. Intellectual Dimension**

The intellectual dimension is not isolated from the other elements of Aspirancy. In fact, it draws the other dimension together and helps to clarify and increase their purpose by providing a deeper understanding of the spirituality and human aspects of formation while also providing practical knowledge to support the development of pastoral skills. Academic classes during Aspirancy include Theology, Christology, systematic study of the Catechism, doctrinal study of the diaconate and its particular charism, ministries and tradition, application of the Church's social teachings, Church history and operation, and traditional Catholic spirituality.

Beyond the goal of providing a common base for the class to work from in Candidacy, the intellectual aspect of Aspirancy helps the aspirant to develop his understanding of his own call and the necessary vocabulary to discuss it. Because teaching aspirants the fundamentals of theological reflection improves their ability to discuss their call, it makes evaluating their readiness all the more possible for those charged with discerning its presence. The aspirant's performance in these basic academic classes also provides a strong indications as to whether the aspirant is prepared (and willing to make the effort) for the academic rigors of candidate formation. (The National Directory, #196)

### **IV. Pastoral Dimension**

This dimension's focus is ultimately the discernment of the aspirant's gifts for the threefold ministry of Word, Liturgy and Charity and his capacity to make a lifelong commitment to these ministries. This is also a time to learn about appropriate tolerance and the need to apply all the Church's teaching on social justice. Classes in this area will concentrate on developing the necessary interpersonal skills for ministerial work in a multi-cultural Church.

By introducing the aspirant to the realities of the ministerial life, the pastoral dimension provides the information and time for the aspirant and his spouse to consider carefully the impact of having diaconal ministry as part of their family's priorities. This insures that the aspirant's wife can give informed consent and support to his desire to pursue being a deacon. Likewise, this aspect of formation also allows for the external assessment of the readiness of the aspirant's wife and family to give their full consent and support.

### **J. Time Commitment**

The Aspirancy program as outlined in the Bishop's letter is two years in length and runs concurrently with Ministry Formation. Aspirancy runs from September to June with no more than one Saturday (6 hours) and two weekday evening sessions (3 hours) per month. The schedule is designed to avoid conflicts with Ministry Formation. There is one three day weekend during Aspirancy.

Candidacy classes likewise run from September to June and are constructed of evening weekday classes and weekend classes. During Candidacy weekday evening classes will meet on average four times a month and there may be as many as two Saturday (6 hours) classes per month. Each summer of Candidacy, candidates are required to do internship in ministry and participate in liturgical practicum.

### **K. Wife's Participation**

Wives are required to be present during the entire Aspirancy program. Participation is required during Aspirancy to insure that spouses have ample opportunity to ask questions and gain a clear understanding of the diaconate before being asked to give their informed consent for the husband's continued participation.

Participation in Candidacy is encouraged and at times required. During the course of both Aspirancy and Candidacy, specific seminars will be offered for wives to provide a forum for discussion and support. The material of these seminars will be decided by the wives to make sure it is relevant, timely and helpful.

### **Bibliography of Related Readings**

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