

Only the deacon, by virtue of his unique vocation, can manifest Christ the Servant in a way the others cannot. In this respect, the deacon acts in the person of Christ the Servant, bearing an essential witness and fulfilling an essential role. Thus, in terms of clergy, the complementary nature of the three grades of holy orders (bishops, priests, and deacons) together represent the “whole Christ” to the world.

Given this understanding, what then is the role of the deacon? Quite simply, it is to bear witness to Christ the Servant. Just as all the faithful participate in the one priesthood of Christ, each in their own way, so too all are called to participate in the one diaconate of Christ. That said, the deacon is called to bear witness in a particular way, expressed in ecclesial ministry and his own personal life. He is, by virtue of his ordination, an envoy or emissary of the bishop through the threefold gifts of liturgy, word, and charity. In this way, he inspires the laity, priesthood, and episcopacy with a zeal for service by his life and ministry.

This service, rather than being reduced to any one single ministry, can best be described as “a gift of self that wills the good of the other for the sake of the other.” What the deacon witnesses to the world is that authentic ministry is not



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something we do, but rather someone we give, our very selves. This is precisely the example Our Lord expressed most beautifully on the cross: “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

Following the Lord and inspiring others, the deacon does not merely function in a cold and dispassionate way, but relates to those he meets in such a way that he not only brings Christ to them but sees Christ in them. In the exercise of his ministry, in the living of his life, he gazes at the suffering Christ before him and is transformed in love. This contextualizes his ministry as a participation in the divine love begun in an encounter and deepened in accompaniment. In this way, along with bishops and priests, he makes his own unique contribution so that, together, the saving love of God can be known to all.

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# What Is a Permanent Deacon?



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For many, deacons are a bit of a mystery. We see them at Mass, in various ministries, at the supermarket and with their families, but they don't quite fit into the Church categories many of us grew up with. Are they junior priests or some form of religious brothers? Are they clergy, laity or perhaps a kind of hybrid? In light of this confusion we can ask, just what are permanent deacons?

Like bishops and priests, deacons are members of the clergy who receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders — not to the priesthood, but unto sacred service. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Deacons share in Christ's mission and grace in a special way. The sacrament of Holy Orders marks them with an imprint ("character") which cannot be removed and which configures them to Christ, who made himself the "deacon" or servant of all. Among other tasks, it is the task of deacons to assist the bishop and priests in the celebration of the divine mysteries, above all the Eucharist, in the distribution of Holy Communion, in assisting at and blessing marriages, in the proclamation of the Gospel and preaching, in presiding over funerals, and in dedicating themselves to the various ministries of charity. (1569)

Although the Second Vatican Council restored the diaconate to its permanent place within the hierarchy, its roots stretch back to apostolic times. The first seven deacons were instituted to assist the apostles in the mission of the Church (see Acts 6:1–6). Stephen boldly proclaimed the Gospel and was the first martyr (Acts 6:8–15; 7:54–60). Philip, known as the Evangelist, catechized and baptized (Acts 8:26–40). In his letter to Timothy, St. Paul describes the qualities of a deacon:

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Let deacons be the husband of one wife, and let them manage their children and their households well; for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith which is in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 3:8–10,12–13)

Later, during the patristic era, they became the bishop's righthand man, often given the responsibilities of financial management along with the distribution of food and alms to the poor. According to St. Ignatius of Antioch, writing in A.D. 108:

Deacons, too, who are ministers of the mysteries of Jesus should in all things be pleasing to all men. For they are not mere servants with food and drink, but emissaries of God's Church. ... Similarly, all should respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as all should regard the bishop as the image of the Father, and the clergy as God's senate and the college of the apostles. Without these three orders you cannot begin to speak of a church. (Letter to the Trallians)

By the early Middle Ages, the importance of the diaconate grew, especially in Rome. Of the thirty-seven men elected as pope between 432 and 684, only three were ordained to the priesthood prior to their ascent to the papacy. The remaining thirty-four were cho-

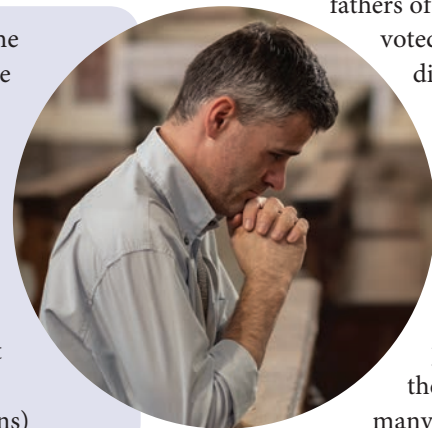


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sen from the diaconate. Despite this influence, by the eighth century the diaconate shifted from a permanent to a transitional order, becoming a preparation stage to the priesthood. While some suggest this was the result of deacons abusing their office, history is unclear on the matter.

In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent (1545–63) sought to restore the diaconate, but, given the larger concerns associated with the Protestant Reformation, it was never implemented. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century, during World War II, that the question of restoration would be taken up again. This time the discussions would occur in what was the largest religious community in Europe, the infamous concentration camp at Dachau in Germany. There, Jesuit Father Otto Pies, along with his companions, speculated what the Church would be like after the war if a married diaconate was restored. These discussions were written down and circulated after the war, eventually finding their way into theological journals. The question of restoring the diaconate was posed to Pope Pius XII in 1957, who remarked, "The idea, at least for today, is not yet ripe."

Shortly thereafter, the time became ripe, and the fathers of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) voted to restore a married permanent diaconate while maintaining a celibate transitional diaconate for those going on to the priesthood. Both forms of the diaconate are sacramentally and canonically equal.

Despite the many decades after the restoration and the number of permanent deacons continually rising, the diaconate still remains a mystery for many. Its absence from the Church for more than a millennium has led to an underdeveloped theology. Along with its placement as a final step in the path to priestly ordination, in the minds of many it is seen as an incomplete order. As a result, deacons are often perceived as "half-baked" priests. Lost in such a misperception is the beauty and grandeur of the order



Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic

itself and, perhaps most regrettably, a diminishing witness of Christ the Servant to the Church.

Regardless of this lack of theological development in the past, recent insights have helped provide a deeper understanding of the nature and mission of the diaconate. Studying the biblical term *diakonia*, from which we derive the word "servant" or "deacon," some scholars have concluded that, far from simply helping the needy, the term was used to describe those taking on a special apostolic mission to take the Word of God abroad. Here, the deacon is primarily seen as an envoy or emissary of the apostles and acts with boldness in the exercise of his ministry. Of course, none of this precludes the deacon as a minister of mercy to the poor. That, too, is part of the apostolic mission.

Because deacons, like bishops and priests, have a specific role in imparting the sacred deposit of faith, their place in the plan of salvation is grounded in God's will for his Church. Moreover, because it has its own distinct character, the transitional diaconate can't be "swallowed up" by the episcopacy or priesthood. While they, too, share in the order, having been previously ordained deacons, their subsequent ordinations mean they now express this diaconate, this servanthood, as bishops and priests.