

The Permanent Diaconate in the Archdiocese of Southwark



The Diaconate is the third order of ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church, following the Episcopate (Bishops) and Presbyterate (Priests). The term Permanent Diaconate is applied to those who are not intended to go on to the Priesthood but to serve the whole of their ministry as Deacons. It is a ministry of service, as defined by its name, which comes from the Greek word *diákonos*, and derives its origin from the seven men chosen in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1-7) to help serve the community.

It is described as a threefold ministry, meaning that it serves Altar, Word and Charity. Its modern day functions include proclaiming the gospel, preaching to the people, presiding at baptisms, weddings and funerals, taking Communion to the sick, assisting the Priest at Mass and leading non Eucharist celebrations.

The Permanent Diaconate is open to both married and single men, the single men taking an oath of celibacy at ordination, the majority of Permanent Deacons being married men. The Archdiocese of Southwark will consider men aged between 35 and 59 for formation as Deacons. All Permanent Deacons are required to be financially independent, so that many will still be in full time employment. Many will also have families so that there is a balance to be maintained between ministry, work and family but the fact that men cannot devote themselves full time to their ministry should not deter them from considering ministry as they will bring their own life experience to the ministry to its benefit.

There are some basic requirements, in addition to those mentioned elsewhere in this document, for men to be considered for formation for the diaconate. The most important of these are:-

- Applicants must be baptised, confirmed, have received their first Holy Communion and have been a Catholic normally for a minimum of four years;
- Married applicants should have been in a stable and valid marriage for at least 5 years, have the formal consent of their wives to them entering formation and be aware that should their wife predecease them they will be expected to remain celibate thereafter;
- Single men must have a settled, stable life with a good reputation and fully understand the charism of celibacy, to which they will make a lifelong commitment;
- Applicants must have been a member of a parish community or chaplaincy for at least three years and have the full support of their parish Priest (or Minister responsible for chaplaincy);
- Applicants must be orthodox in belief and practice, dedicated to Our Lord in the Eucharist and above all men of prayer and faith.

The call to vocation comes from God but will often be voiced by a Priest or other member of the parish community who see the potential in someone. On some occasions the call will be heard by the person themselves, a quiet voice that speaks to them in the silence of their hearts, but even then a discussion with their Parish Priest will help to discern the nature of the vocation.

Discernment is the first part of the process in becoming a Deacon and may take up to a year from when a man's name is put forward. It may have also taken some time to arrive at this point in less formal discussion. Once the name is put forward the applicant and their Parish Priest will be interviewed by a member of the Permanent Diaconate Formation Team, so that the relationship between applicant and priest must be present. The interviewer will also speak to the wife of married applicants and older children before deciding to issue the formal application form.

Once this is returned references are taken up and the application carefully considered before the applicants are called to the annual **Selection Conference** which normally takes place in May each year. Those successful at the conference will go forward to a **Decisive Interview** with the Archbishop, his decision being final. Medical and Psychological assessments are required for those who are accepted by the Archbishop before candidates can commence their **Propaedeutic Year**.

The Propaedeutic year is the crossover between discernment and formation and concludes with the formal conferral of **Candidacy for Holy Orders**. During this year the formation team will maintain contact with the potential candidates who will also be asked to attend St. John's Seminary at Wonersh, near Guildford, on five occasions, the last of which is induction into formation for the Diaconate. The other sessions are preparation for formation and explore the spirituality of those involved as well as equipping them for the formation programme. The wives of the men in the Propaedeutic Year are actively encouraged to attend the sessions at Wonersh with their husbands.

Following successful completion of the Propaedeutic Year candidates commence a minimum three year formation programme, with a voluntary extension to complete a related degree course. The basic formation programme covers elements of Theology, Liturgy, Scripture, Ecclesiology, Church History and other related subjects. The academic side of the programme includes a requirement to produce essays, for which candidates have the support of a nominated Academic Tutor.

There is training in practical skills required by the Deacon alongside the academic side of the programme covering the rites at which deacons may be called to preside, general serving at the altar, proclaiming the word, safeguarding and pastoral care. It is expected that this training will be supported by activities in the Parish.

The formation programme at Wonersh is carried out over eleven Saturdays commencing at 9am and ending at 5:10pm. There are also two residential weekends held at another location, running from Friday afternoon until midday Sunday, and a retreat each year. Participation in all of these is a mandatory part of the programme and can only be dispensed in exceptional circumstances with the prior permission of the Director of Formation. It is strongly recommended that men in formation step back from parish work whilst in formation, partly to make space for the demands of the programme but also so that the role in which the men will be entering can be clearly seen as something new rather than merely an extension of previous lay ministries.

At the end of each of the first two years of the programme **Minor Ministries** are conferred on those in formation, who become **Lectors** after the successful completion of the first year and **Acolytes** at the end of the second year. **Ordination** to the Diaconate occurs after the successful completion of the third year once the Archbishop's call to ministry has been received.

Wives are encouraged to be part of the community at Wonersh and twice each year specific Wives Days are organised, led by serving deacon's wives. Many wives find it beneficial to attend the programme more frequently, to be closer to what their husbands are doing and to understand more fully what it means to be a deacon.

It is almost impossible to go through formation programme unchanged as the very purpose of the programme is to form men for diaconal service rather than simply being a training programme. This ontological change is a growth in service to both man and God, the very purpose for which the Diaconate exists.

Following ordination there is continued support, mainly in the form of three Diocesan Diaconal Days, one held in each pastoral area of the Archdiocese. These are mandatory for the first three years after ordination and will help maintain contact with the formation team as well as helping the newly ordained become part of the diaconal community in the Archdiocese.