

James L. Alt

DEACONS TODAY

Ministers of Service

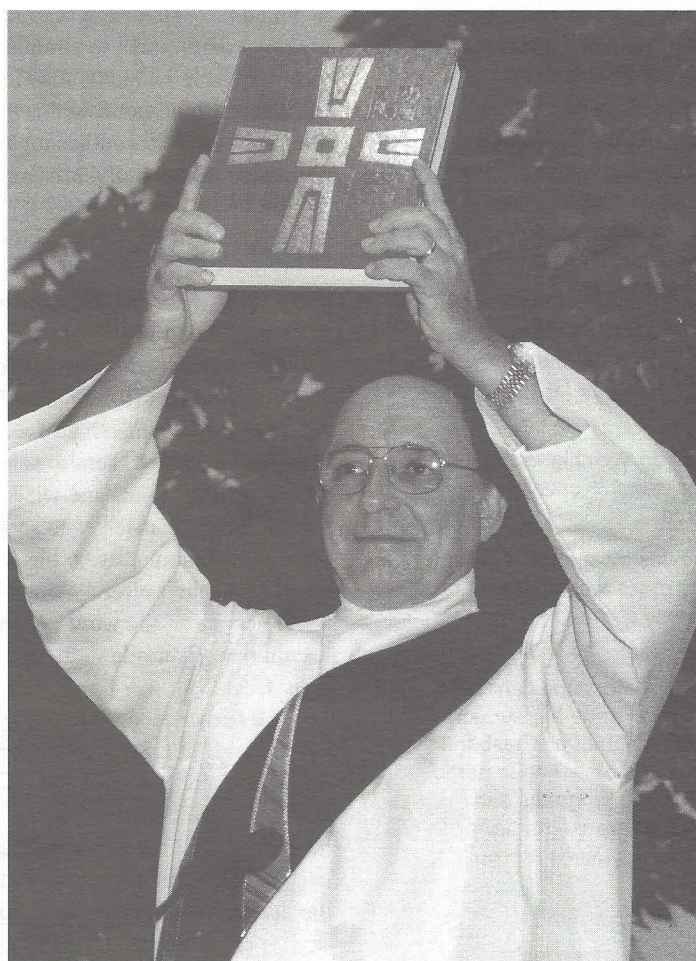
Married, but also ordained? Is this Catholic? For the past 30-plus years, there has been considerable discussion about “letting priests marry,” ordaining women to be priests and numerous other “solutions” to the very real clergy shortage that exists in this country. At the same time all this discussion is taking place, the ministry of permanent deacons is booming, especially in the United States.

Many deacons work, some are retired, most are husbands and fathers, most spend their time in ministry on weekends and in the evening visiting the sick or working in social service programs. On Sundays they are a visible sign of service to their parish community in their role alongside the priest at liturgy. Increasingly, deacons are officiating at Baptisms, weddings and funerals, too. In this *Update* we'll take a look at this ministry that was restored by Pope Paul VI in 1967.

What is a deacon?

In plain language, a deacon is a man who is called to a ministry of service. Like priests and bishops, he receives the Sacrament of Holy Orders. At the same time he is “one among us,” a man who has been called forth to live the Christian life visibly. He is an ordained person living in the lifestyle of the laity.

The deacon's service is threefold: service of the Word, service of the altar and service of charity. He usually serves the community in which he lives. Like bishops and priests, the deacon is a member of the clergy, but he has a distinct role. Bishops, aided by priests, preside over and govern the particular local churches. The role of the



GENE PLASTED, O.S.C.

DEACON REQUIREMENTS



Requirements vary from diocese to diocese but conform to the requirements of canon law. The following are typical guidelines.

1. Dioceses have a minimum and maximum age requirement for applicant.
2. The applicant must be recommended by the pastor of his parish and must have been involved in parish ministry for at least five years.
3. If married the applicant must have been married a reasonable length of time and be in a stable marriage.
4. The applicant should be physically and emotionally healthy and free of any substance dependency.
5. Deacons must be economically stable and self-sufficient. It is expected that diaconal responsibilities will be in addition to their secular occupations.
6. If the applicant was not raised a Catholic, some time must have elapsed since his Baptism or full reception into the Catholic Church.
7. Graduation from high school or the equivalent is usually expected.
8. Candidates must show a willingness to make a commitment to all aspects of the formation program.
9. The wife of a deacon candidate must demonstrate her support and affirmation of her husband's decision and be willing to participate in those programs and activities where the participation of candidates' wives is required.



For more information on the diaconate in your area, contact your diocesan offices or contact the Bishops' Committee on the Diaconate Secretariat, 3211 Fourth St., NE, Washington, DC 20017 (202-541-3038).

deacon is to be a helper of bishops and priests in service to the People of God, proclaiming by his very life the Church's call to serve the needs of others.

Well over 90 percent of deacons are married. Thus the typical deacon attempts to balance three priorities in his life: the responsibility of husband and father, his job or profession by which he earns a living or supplements retirement income and his ministry as an ordained deacon. The springboard of service and spirituality for most deacons is his lifelong commitment to his wife in the Sacrament of Matrimony. A number of deacons are single men and widowers.

Although priesthood candidates still pass through what seems like a temporary stage of the diaconate on their way to the priesthood, the diaconate is not merely a stepping-stone. For a growing number of men it is a ministry unto itself in which the ordained deacon makes a lifelong commitment to a ministry of service. Incidentally, many non-Catholic Christians would not find this a new idea: The role of the deacon has long been prominent in much of Christianity.

A restored ministry

The diaconate is as old as the Church itself. Deacons are first mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (6:2-5). The Twelve Apostles called a meeting of all of Jesus' disciples and asked them to select seven "filled with the Spirit and wisdom" who would devote themselves to serving the poor in the community so the apostles could focus their efforts on "prayer and to the service of the word." Deacons thus had an important role in the life of the early Church.

The early deacons were very committed to their faith. St. Stephen, one of the original seven, is considered the first martyr. As the centuries passed, however, the role of the deacon became less prominent. By the end of the first millennium the decline was very evident: For the next several centuries the permanent diaconate was really a nonexistent ministry.

In the 16th century the Council of Trent discussed the possibility of restoring the diaconate to its once-prominent position in the Church, but it didn't happen. The idea resurfaced at the Second Vatican Council and received support

from a significant number of bishops. In 1967 Pope Paul VI reestablished the diaconate as a permanent ministry in the Latin rite. A few months later the U.S. bishops became among the first to train and ordain deacons.

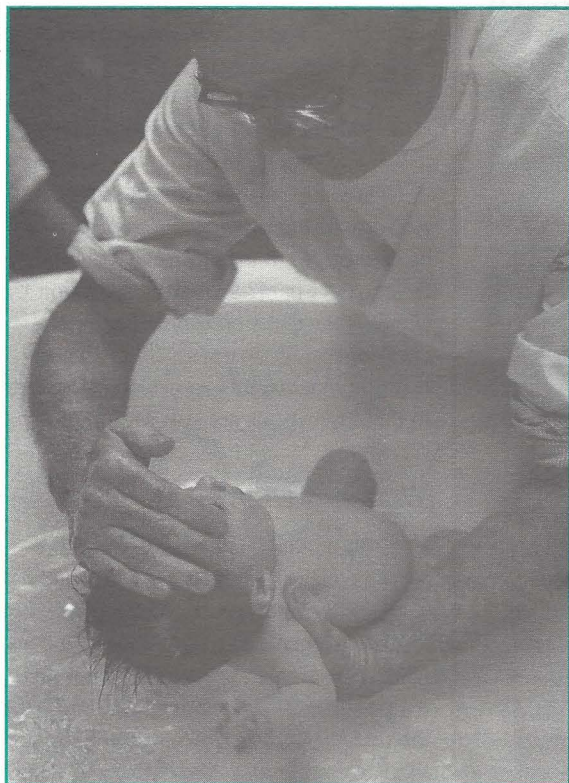
Few could imagine the impact this restoring of the diaconate would have on the Catholic Church, especially in the United States. From just a handful of men in 1968, the diaconate has grown dramatically. In 1996 there were 21,873 deacons worldwide, with more than half of these serving in the United States, and the others serving in 120 other countries.

Service is the key

If there is one word that would identify the deacon, it would be *service*. *Service of the Word*, one of the three basic services provided by deacons, includes proclaiming the gospel message, teaching, conducting retreats, counseling; in other words, "speaking about Jesus" both from the pulpit and at the deacon's daily marketplace job. A deacon's actions at work speak louder than his words at church.

The deacon is probably most often recognized by his *service of the altar*. This is most obvious at Mass, but deacons witness marriages, baptize, preside at wakes and funerals and conduct prayer services, too. Deacons do not consecrate the Eucharist, hear confessions or anoint the sick. These are still reserved for the priest. *Service of charity* is the trademark of the deacon; his proclamation of the Gospel at Mass and assistance at the altar are signs to the community of the indestructible link between word, altar and serving the poor.

Many deacons are involved with providing shelter to the homeless and improving the living conditions of others who see little hope of improving this condition for themselves and their families. Service to others also means giving a voice to those who are silenced. More and more deacons are getting involved in the areas of social justice, taking a stand on issues even though such action may not always be the popular route to follow. Like the earliest disciples, deacons are bringing the values of the gospel to bear on marriage and family life, on the trades and professions and political institutions.



What makes the deacon's work different?

Shouldn't everyone have these concerns? What makes the deacon's work so special? The answer lies in the fact that the deacon is ordained specifically for this ministry of service. He has received and shares in the Sacrament of Holy Orders with the bishop and priest. Once ordained, whatever the deacon does is done not in his own name or by his own authority but on behalf of the Church. He is acting in the

name of Christ to and for the community he serves. He is now an ordained minister called publicly and committed to service in the name of Jesus.

The U.S. bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, in its official guidelines to help dioceses encourage diaconal ministry, describes the role of deacon: "Deacons are not the only Christians involved in caring for the needy. But particularly and officially committed to service, the deacon is to inspire, promote and help coordinate the service that the whole Church must undertake in imitation of Christ. He has a special responsibility to identify to the Church those who are in need and particularly those

who are without power or at the margins in our society....He thus becomes a representative figure in whom the Church reaches out to the needy and the needy challenge the Church" (*Permanent Deacons in the United States: Guidelines for Their Formation and Ministry*, #37).

Perhaps a better way of understanding the uniqueness of the deacon's ministry is to see how his threefold service—of the word, the altar and charity—are interconnected. Pope John Paul II said it best in his 1987 Detroit address to U.S. deacons: "With the deacon these three

services are inseparably joined together as one in the service of God's redemptive plan. The word of God inevitably leads to the eucharistic worship of God at the altar; in turn, this worship leads to a new way of living which expresses itself in acts of charity." Once again, it's the deacon's role as official Church representative that makes his witness unique.

How does the deacon find the time to fulfill his responsibility as a husband and father, and to earn a living at his job? Individual circumstances vary, but deacons are instructed by the Church that marriage and family life have the first priority. It is interesting to note that a recent study on the diaconate reveals that most deacons feel their diaconate ministry has enriched their family, their relationship with their wife and their home life.

What many deacons and their wives reveal is that the development and nurturing of their own marital relationship is essential to a meaningful diaconate ministry. While it is not now possible for women to be ordained deacons, many wives work alongside their husbands in diaconate ministry.

Marketplace ministry

While some deacons are retired, most are still on the job when ordained. These deacons give witness to Christian values while at work. At the office, the plant, the factory or other place of commercial activity, deacons exercise their service as ordained minis-

A MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

"Today, the potential for the deacon's involvement in efforts to bring about structural change through economic, political and legislative strategies is virtually unlimited and sorely needed. This means that working for social justice—striving to overcome such evils as abortion, euthanasia and racism to name only a few—is an integral, vital part of the deacon's ministry of charity or love today....

"When the deacon assists at the Eucharist—or when he serves in the soup line, the prison or the hospital—he is meant to be an eloquent reminder to each of us of what we, too, should be doing, what we must continually strive to become, in accord with our own God-given gift."

—*The Call to Service*, a 1993 pastoral statement on the diaconate by the late Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago



ters of the Church. They are leaders in proclaiming God's word outside of church boundaries. What better way to show what being a Christian is all about than by example, by living and practicing on the job what is preached on Sunday?

You will seldom find the official presence of Church in the workplace, yet this is where you often find the unchurched. By his very presence the deacon has the opportunity to convey to those who cross his path the saving message of Jesus Christ.

Again, we can say this type of witness is the responsibility of all baptized men and women. However, as ordained ministers, deacons are called to leadership in a special way, to find ways to promote justice and support Christian values in the world, in the name of the Church.

Liturgical role of the deacon

Many of the liturgical functions of the deacon were spelled out in Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Letter which restored the diaconate. These include baptizing, bringing viaticum to the dying, witnessing to marriages, officiating at funeral and wake services, proclaiming the Gospel at Mass both by *reading* the biblical text and by *preaching* about it, serving as a pastoral administrator or guide for the community when no priest is present.

His preaching duties take on added significance when the people in the pew realize that one like them is speaking and explaining the message of the Gospel he has just read. His words take on added meaning when what he says is reinforced by his witness with his family and at his job. He can draw on his own life experiences which may be very familiar to those to whom he is speaking.

The U.S. Church and the diaconate

Thirty years after the diaconate was restored, most U.S. dioceses have deacons. The decision of whether to establish the diaconate in a diocese has always been that of the local bishop. Many dioceses now conduct information sessions at which the diaconate ministry is described in detail. Anyone wishing to learn more about the

UPDATE

Question Box

- 1. Besides the priest shortage, why are deacons necessary?**
- 2. What makes the deacon's ministry stand out from lay ministry?**
- 3. Why is diaconate called a "ministry of service?"**

requirements for entering the diaconate program should first contact the director of the diaconate in their diocese.

Continuing education for deacons after they are ordained is stressed by all dioceses, and annual continuing education programs such as the National Diaconate Institute for Continuing Education, held on the campus of Notre Dame University, are encouraged for deacons and deacon candidates.

Deacons have organized themselves into various groupings, such as regional diaconate communities and the National Association of Diaconate Directors, composed of diaconate leadership personnel. Various ethnic groupings of deacons have also been formed, including the National Association of Hispanic Deacons, the Native American Deacon Association and the National Association of African-American Catholic Deacons.

Evolving issues

While great progress has been made in the numbers of deacons ordained and the development of diaconate ministry, not all issues are resolved. As in any ministry, questions arise, mistakes are made, new directions are needed from time to time. For instance, while the diaconate has made great strides in adapting to the ethnic diversity in the Church, there is still a long way to go.

Another issue that often comes under discussion is that of ordaining women to the diaconate. There is New Testament evidence that both men and women were deacons in early Christianity, yet there is some question whether those early deacons set a precedent for deacons today.

Widower deacons raise questions of their own. Deacons are required at ordi-

nation to promise not to marry again. Some theologians reason that if a man's primary calling is to the married lifestyle, should he not be free to remarry if his wife dies?

There are financial questions, too: Are deacons entitled to the same kind of benefit programs as priests? Should deacons get paid? Presently, most don't. Many other questions come up, each a challenge in its own way. Since the restored diaconate is so new, the answers to these questions are still evolving.

Who, not what

The diaconate ministry is more clearly understood when one looks at *who* the deacon is, rather than *what* the deacon does. Christian service as a deacon is not just the performance of actions that satisfy the job description of a deacon. It is a way of living, of emptying the self for the sake of the growth and development of others. The deacon demonstrates an attitude and readiness to help others. The grace of the Sacrament of Holy Orders is found *in* the person rather than in what he does.

When Pope Paul VI restored the diaconate, he spoke of the need of the deacon to be "the interpreter of the needs and desires of the Christian communities, the animator and promoter of the Church's service and a sign or sacrament of Jesus Christ himself who came not to be served, but to serve." Diaconate *is* service. ■

James L. Alt is a free-lance writer and editor who has published Deacon Digest since 1982. Married and the father of two daughters, he and his wife live in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

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(by Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M.)

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