

## Why are we talking about permanent deacons at St. Nicholas now?

In 2010 a parishioner of St. Nicholas spoke with the pastor explaining that he felt called to enter the Deacon Formation Program. After consulting with staff and Pastoral Council, the pastor scheduled a series of parish-wide listening sessions. Participants were invited to share their thoughts and feelings about sponsoring a parishioner into the Deacon Formation Program. In addition to the listening sessions, four adult formation sessions were provided for those who were interested in learning more about the role, tradition, and history of deacons in the Church. In the course of these sessions, we learned that the issue of ordaining women to the diaconate is an open question in the Catholic Church.

As a result of these meetings a steering committee was formed to further explore the issue of women and the diaconate and three subcommittees were established – Parish Education, Outreach to the Larger Church; and Journeying with a Woman Inquirer (if a woman of the parish wanted to explore a call to the diaconate).

Shortly after the committees were established, a female member of St. Nicholas expressed a desire to explore a perceived call to the permanent diaconate. At about the same time, the man who had approached the pastor entered the Year of Aspirancy, which is a prerequisite to the formal three-year Deacon Formation Program. Since that time, the steering committee has focused on the Permanent Diaconate and how it might include women.

## Have we spoken with the Cardinal yet?

In January 2011, the steering committee, pastor and the female inquirer met with Bishop Francis Kane, Vicar for Vicariate II to discuss this issue. The committee then prepared a written document and submitted it to Cardinal Francis George.

On September 16, 2011, members of the steering committee, now including our parish inquirer, were accompanied by our pastor to a meeting with Cardinal Francis George. It was a very positive and productive meeting. The Cardinal was open-minded on the issue of the ordination of women to the diaconate. He affirmed the strength of several points in our position paper, which we had sent to him ahead of time. He also raised some theological issues that he feels have not yet been resolved. Cardinal George agreed that there would be benefits to having women deacons in the Archdiocese of Chicago and that it would be helpful for Rome to make a final decision on this issue one way or the other. He said he would take this issue to Rome – to both the International Theological Commission (which has looked at it in the past) and to Pope Benedict during his next visit.

*This pamphlet is the first in a series of education pieces that will be provided to parishioners of St. Nicholas. This is intended to be a brief overview and future pieces will cover more detail.*

**Saint Nicholas Parish  
Evanston, Illinois**

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# *Women Deacons in the Catholic Church: An Open Question*

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## What is a deacon?

A deacon is an ordained minister who serves the people of God in the ministry of the Word, of the Liturgy and of Charity, according to the gifts of the deacon and the needs of the bishop. Vatican II restored the permanent diaconate as distinct from a stage in the preparation for the priesthood.

# Women and the Diaconate

## What do deacons do?

Deacons primarily participate in three ministries: the *Ministry of the Word* where they engage in the teaching mission of the Church; the *Ministry of the Liturgy* where their work includes performing baptisms and marriages, conducting funeral liturgies, presiding at wake services and assisting at Mass by proclaiming the Gospel, preaching, leading Intercessions and serving at the altar; and the *Ministry of Charity and Justice*, where deacons care for those in need

## Why do we need deacons?

Deacons help to expand the scope of the bishop's ability to serve God's people in accordance with the Church's teaching. Also, the permanent diaconate is a means to extend ordained ministry into the world of the laity and to bring that experience into the realm of the ordained.

## Are women allowed to be deacons

While there are many women involved in "deacon-like service" throughout the Church, women are not now permitted to be ordained to the diaconate. However, there were women named as deacons in the early Church; the issue of women deacons is an open question within the Church at present.

## Why have women deacons?

Many theologians believe that ordaining women to the diaconate would restore an early Church Tradition. Furthermore, ordaining women deacons would formalize the ministry of women, be an answer to the pressing ministerial needs of the Church, bring the giftedness of women to ordained ministry, and revitalize the Church overall.

## Is this issue related to women priests?

No. The permanent diaconate is distinct from the priesthood. In 2009, Pope Benedict highlighted the distinction between priests on the one hand and deacons on the other.

## What is the difference between a permanent deacon and a priest?

The Sacrament of Holy Orders is three-fold; the diaconate is a distinct expression of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Unlike those ordained as *transitional* deacons prior to priesthood; the permanent diaconate is as named – permanent. The Second Vatican Council restored this distinct and permanent order (first called for by the Council of Trent). The formation and academic path for a deacon is distinct from the priesthood path. The role and function of a deacon is also distinct from that of a priest. The deacon serves the bishop primarily in the role of Christ the *servant*, connecting Word and Eucharist with service *in the community*. The deacon can also preside at the sacraments of Baptism and Marriage and preach and serve at the altar during Eucharist.

## Can deacons be married?

Yes. In the Archdiocese of Chicago more than 90 percent of deacons are married.

## Will deacons diminish the role of lay leadership in the church?

Deacons in no way diminish the role of lay leadership. Part of their responsibility is to encourage and help to develop lay leadership within the community they serve. However, as clerics they maintain a direct relationship to the Bishop, which is not true for lay leaders.

## Have we had permanent deacons at St. Nicholas?

Yes. Through the years we have had permanent deacons in our parish. Currently we have a deacon who has served the Spanish-speaking community for ten years. We also have a parishioner currently enrolled in the Deacon Formation Program.

## What kind of training do deacons receive?

Deacons participate in a four-year program, including the Year of Aspirancy, at the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary that includes four primary dimensions of formation – human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral.

## Who ordains deacons?

The Bishop ordains permanent deacons.

## Do deacons belong to a parish?

A deacon is ordained for the archdiocese. Usually a newly ordained deacon is assigned to his sponsoring parish—which may, or may not, be the deacon's home parish. The Bishop, however, always remains free to make assignments based on archdiocesan need.

## Do deacons serve for a set period of time?

Deacons are usually assigned to their sponsoring parish for a period of 10 years.

## Are there costs involved for a parish?

The archdiocese pays for about half the tuition costs for the Deacon Formation Program and the sponsoring parish is expected to pay the other half. The permanent deacon is not a salaried position within the Archdiocese of Chicago.