

Becoming a Deacon

On the occasion of this year's diaconal ordination, the number of permanent deacons in our diocese rose to 38. What sort of ministerial life do the deacons undertake? Through ordination, the deacon receives the Gospel of Christ, whose herald the deacon is, to believe what he reads, to teach what he believes, and to practice what he teaches. How does a deacon do this? His ministry is based on a threefold life of service to the Word, to the Liturgy and to Caritas (charity in love).

In his Ministry to the Word, a key task of the deacon is to proclaim the Gospel. The deacon is to allow the Word of God, the Good News of the Gospel, to become an ever more intimate part of who he is, so that his perspective on life is grounded fully and deeply on the presence of God in his life. The family and community in which the deacon's vocation is formed and nurtured, his openness to the presence of the Holy Spirit – through his prayer life – are solid foundations upon which the deacon will draw upon his experiences to preach and to break open the scriptures.

A programme of formation provides the student with plenty of material to study and digest! The first year is a propaedeutic year, a year of introduction into a formal prayer life, basic liturgy and a way of thinking with the Church. At the end of this year of discernment, the next step is to be admitted as a Candidate for the diaconate. There follow three more years of discernment and formation focused on the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral development in all the appropriate areas of theology, scripture, catechesis, liturgy, Canon Law and other related subjects. Throughout this four-year period of formation and discernment, an openness to the Holy Spirit allows the aspiring deacon to believe what he reads. The deacon, like all the baptized, is a work in progress: we all need to undergo lifelong discernment and formation in order to draw more closely to God. An open, questioning mind and heart helps us to grow, to learn. Prayerful discernment and continued support of the faith community are vital to helping the person in formation for the diaconate.

Ordination is the next stage on the journey. Once ordained, the deacon continues to discern how he is to live out his ministry, to put into practice what he has learned, and to share his giftedness with others, encouraging and enabling others to fully live out their own giftedness too. How does the deacon do this?

Through imitating Christ the Servant, the deacon is to live a life of loving service in whatever role he is asked to undertake. His Ministry to the Liturgy and to Caritas are of great importance. Supporting the sacramental life of the faithful through performing baptisms, witnessing marriages or conducting funeral services are just three ways in which the deacon does this. Deacons, it has been said, have one foot on the sanctuary and one foot in the pews: this acknowledges that the vast majority of deacons can draw on both working life and family life experiences, in helping them to ground the actions of loving service they undertake to both those gathered in our churches and to those in the wider community. Practically, the deacons of this diocese live out their ministerial calling in a variety of ways: some are parish / partnership based, some work in chaplaincy roles (hospital, hospice, school or prison), some work in areas of social justice (e.g. with refugees), some work with seafarers, some help with sacramental

preparation. There are as many ways to respond to Christ the Servant as there are deacons. Each has his own giftedness, life experiences and own way of living out his ministerial calling.

If any of this sounds appealing, if you think that the Holy Spirit might be prompting you to respond to God's call to consider your vocation to the permanent diaconate, then why not come along to one of the information evenings that are being held across the diocese this autumn? Details of these sessions, which all start at 7.00 pm and last for about 90 minutes, are as follows:

Thursday 19th September

English Martyrs and SS Peter and Paul, Redhill Road, Stockton on Tees, TS19 9BY.

Thursday 03rd October

St Bede's, Catholic Row, Bedlington, Northumberland, NE22 6HS.

Thursday 17th October

St Mary's, Bridge Street, Sunderland, SR1 1TQ

Thursday 07th November

St. Hilda's Resource Centre, West Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE15 7PY.

At each of these sessions, there will be the opportunity to listen to a deacon share his own experience, to hear from the wife of a man who is a deacon what it means for them and family life, a chance to know a more about the formation programme and the application process and, most importantly of all, the opportunity to ask questions. Wives of men who are considering the permanent diaconate are equally welcome to attend these sessions. The prayerful discernment of husband and wife as a married couple is an essential aspect to consider during formation and beyond ordination. We look forward to welcoming you at one of these sessions.