

## **Permanent Diaconate Handbook (2024 Draft Edition)**

### **Introduction**

This handbook has been produced by the Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark and presents the role of Permanent Deacons within the Catholic Church. It has been written for the purposes of informing parishioners of the historical background and the role of the permanent diaconate within the church and parishes. It is also an invitation to those who may be interested in becoming permanent deacons to discern more fully their call to clerical life.

### **Part 1:**

#### **What is a Permanent Deacon?**

A Permanent Deacon is an ordained man (married or single) called to serve the Church as Christ in a special way through ordination, assisting the bishop through his priests in a parish, deanery and Archdiocese as may be required.

The word deacon derives from the Greek diakonia, meaning "service," thereby indicating that a deacon is called like Christ to be a servant. It is a ministry complementary to that of the priest since the deacon becomes ordained "not unto the priesthood but unto the ministry" (Hippolytus: *Traditio Apostolica*: Lumen Gentium, n.29).

Over the course of time, the order of deacon in the Latin Church evolved from a permanent state into a transitional period prior to ordination to the priesthood, hence the distinction between a permanent deacon and a transitional deacon. The diaconate became like an internship, whereby a man was ordained as a deacon and made the promise of celibacy, and then continued final studies for the priesthood and served in a parish for practical experience until the time of ordination to the priesthood.

Several similarities and differences exist between transitional and permanent deacons. Transitional deacons make the promise of celibacy at the time of their ordination. The permanent diaconate may be conferred upon married men as well as single. Most permanent deacons are married. However, the discipline of celibacy would be retained and taken for a single man when ordained as a permanent deacon or accepted by the married permanent deacon upon the death of his spouse.

#### **What is the background to the Permanent Diaconate?**

In St Luke's Acts of the Apostles (6:1-6) he describes how the twelve apostles were busy among the Jews in the Temple spreading the Good News. But with some among their number unable to speak Greek, complaints arose that Greek-speaking widows who gathered around tables rather than in Temples, were being neglected by the apostles. To address this shortcoming, it was suggested that seven men of good standing be appointed to give service to the widows.

Ignatius of Antioch wrote how the early Church was organised, with the bishop representing God the Father, the clergy or presbyter representing the apostles, while the deacons were entrusted with the diakonia, sharing in Jesus' ministry of humble and constant service to others. Furthermore, Justin Martyr writing around the period 150 AD described the role of deacons in distributing "*the bread and wine and water over which the Eucharist has been spoken*" (Cummings et al, 2004:40)<sup>1</sup>.

In the third century AD, the Roman theologian Hippolytus gives an account of the earliest ordination rites of deacons and how the "bishop alone lays hands on the deacon at ordination *because "he is not ordained to the priesthood but to serve the bishop"*" (Cummings et al, 2004:4).

By the fourth century the role of the deacon was in decline, due in the main to the expansion of the Church and the development of presbyters (priests) who were given the role of looking after congregations rather than just bishops, as had previously been the case. The decline ended in the diaconate surviving only as a transitional stage for men preparing for priestly ordination (The Permanent Diaconate, 2005:13).

At the Council of Trent in 1563 a call was made for the restoration of the ministry of deacons. No further action was taken until Vatican Council II (1962-1965). In the document *Lumen Gentium*, (#29) authorised the restoration of the permanent diaconate "*as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy*", conferred upon men of more mature age, even upon those living in the married state, or single. For the married man, the law of celibacy must remain intact.

Since the restoration of the permanent diaconate to the Latin Rite Churches (Note that the Eastern Rite Churches had maintained the permanent diaconate), local conferences of Bishops with the approval of the Holy Father have established programmes for the formation and ordination of permanent deacons.

In the Archdiocese of Southwark, it was on 14th June 1975 that the first permanent deacon Ted Driscoll, an unmarried man, was ordained by Bishop Charles Henderson. Seven months later, on 6th January 1980 Philip Garment, a married man, was ordained by Bishop Michael Bowen. By 1999 the Archdiocese had 89 Permanent Deacons, one of the largest numbers in England and Wales<sup>2</sup>. In 2024 the Archdiocese had 87 Permanent Deacons. The numbers seem to have remained steady over the last 25 years<sup>3</sup>. However, Archbishop John Wilson's vision is to see a Permanent Deacon in each of the 179 parishes in the Archdiocese.

### **What does a Permanent Deacon do?**

The Basic Norms For the Formation of Permanent Deacons (1998, n.8, n.9), explains that a deacon is ordained by the Bishop and in communion with the priest is called to serve the People of God and to proclaim the scriptures and exhort and

---

<sup>1</sup> Theology of the Diaconate: The State of the Question by Owen F. Cummings, William T. Ditewig and Richard R. Gaillardetz (2004).

<sup>2</sup> A Road to the Permanent Diaconate including its history in Southwark 1980-2000 by James Patrick Foley.

<sup>3</sup> Archdiocese of Southwark Catholic Directory 2024.

teach the people. Secondly, as a call to administer the sacrament of baptism, distribute the Eucharist, bless marriages and conduct funerals. Finally, it describes a deacon's ministry as that of charity and helping those in the community who are disadvantaged and are in need. In undertaking this three-fold ministry, the deacon works collaboratively, assisting the bishop by serving alongside and helping the priest.

### **How does a Permanent Deacon demonstrate their service?**

The three munera (duty to teach, duty to sanctify, and duty to shepherd) are expressed in the three-fold ministry of the permanent deacon as follows:

**Ministry of the Word** – In this ministry, the deacon proclaims the Gospel, and also preaches, thereby teaching the faithful the belief of the Catholic Church in accordance with scripture and the Magisterium of the Church (Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons, n.23). He serves by relating the Word of God to daily life through preaching, and often calling upon his lived experiences in the world thereby being able to connect the secular and sacred

**Ministry of the Altar**– The deacon acts as a minister of the mysteries of Christ and the (Ordination Rite for Deacons, 1990, n.199). The deacon acts as a link between the faithful and Christ, by representing them on the altar, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist presided by the priest. Guidance on the permanent diaconate says, *“Deacons assist the bishop and priests in the celebration of the divine mysteries. They should therefore work to promote liturgical celebrations which involve the whole assembly”*.

**Ministry of Charity** – The deacon is a driving force for the Church's *diakonia* (Ordination Rite for Deacons, 1990, n.99, n.207), reminding the People of God to live out the spiritual and corporal works of mercy in the world, empowering by example and leadership in bringing Christ into every area of life. The deacon serves “all the faithful without discrimination, while devoting particular care to the suffering” (Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons, n.38). This includes the poor, the sick and those in prison. The deacon may also be called upon to support people in marriage difficulties or bereavement.

## **Part 2:**

### **Who can become a Permanent Deacon?**

**Single or Married Man in Good Standing** - Anyone considering the Permanent Diaconate must be a Catholic man, either single or married, in good health, self-supporting, in good standing with the Church, sincerely living out his faith, and leading a moral life according to the teachings of the Church. He must be a person of prayer, inclined to being a person who serves.

In scripture we hear:

*“.....deacons must be respectable, not double-tongued, moderate in the amount of wine they drink and with no squalid greed for money. They must hold to the mystery*

*of the faith with a clear conscience. They are first to be examined, and admitted to serve as deacons only if there is nothing against them” (1 Timothy 3: 8-10).*

**Marital Status and Family-** For a married man it is essential that he is legally married, both in terms of Civil law and Canon law. The wife must be supportive of her husband’s intention to become a permanent deacon.

The Church considers marriage and family as an important vocation which must not be impacted on negatively, as scriptures says:

*“Deacons must be husbands of one wife and must be people who manage their children and households well” (1 Timothy 3:12).*

The man must be accepting of the celibacy requirements of ordination should his wife die. For an unmarried man, he must understand and accept celibacy requirements of ordination that he must remain celibate.

**Baptism and Confirmation** - It is essential that the applicant has been both baptised, or received into the Catholic Church, and confirmed in the Catholic Church. If the applicant was received into the Church as an adult, this must be 3 years or more before Formation can start. In the Archdiocese of Southwark it is preferred that this period is 5 years to meet with the requirement that the applicant must have been active in the life of his parish prior to enquiring to become a deacon.

**Age Limit** - In the Archdiocese of Southwark, the lower age limit is 21 years if unmarried and 30 if married. The upper age limit 58 years at the point a person starts the process of enquiring to become a permanent deacon. At ordination the person must be at least 26 years old for an unmarried man, and 35 years for a married man. The upper age limit at ordination is 65 years for all.

## **How do you become a Permanent Deacon?**

**A call requiring discernment** - The Permanent Diaconate is a vocation and a call that requires discernment. In the Archdiocese of Southwark there is Pre-Selection Period which lasts for a minimum of 12 months. During this period, the applicant will undertake to regularly see a Spiritual Director to assist with their discernment of the feeling of being called to the Permanent Diaconate.

The applicant will also undertake some form of service within their community. This will be on a volunteer basis and must be something different from any existing service that they already undertake. At the end of this period a review meeting will take place and they will be invited, if deemed appropriate by the Formation/ Vocations team, to submit a formal application for selection.

**The Selection Process** - The applicant is invited to complete a national application form. Upon receipt of the completed application form the Director of Formation will review the details of the form, highlighting any discrepancies as appropriate. The references are then sought by the relevant Assistant Director and an application pack compiled consisting of:

- Completed national application form.
- Copies of requisite documentation e.g. certificates of baptism, confirmation, marriage, education (all certified by the Assistant Director as copies of the original).
- Statement of vocational journey.
- Completed returned references.
- Written Consent of wife of the applicant (if married) to commence formation.
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) consent form.

The application pack will then be reviewed by the Formation team. If everything is in order, the applicant and his wife (if married) will be invited to attend a Selection Advisory Panel, for a series of themed interviews.

Subject to a satisfactory outcome of the Selection Advisory Panel interviews, the applicant will then be invited to complete the following:

- Psychological Assessment
- Medical Assessment
- Diocesan Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check

Subject to satisfactory completion of the above, a file is prepared by the Director of Formation for the Permanent Diaconate for presentation to the Archbishop. The applicant and his wife (if married) are then invited to a decisive meeting with the Archbishop. Following approval from the Archbishop, the applicant is formally invited to join the Formation Programme.

### **The Formation Programme**

The Southern Diaconate Formation Programme was developed by the Archdiocese of Southwark. It forms deacons for the archdioceses of Southwark, Westminster the dioceses of Arundel & Brighton, Brentwood, East Anglia and Northampton, and the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham.

There is an initial Aspirant Year prior to being admitted on to the core programme for an additional three years. The core programme consists of eleven Formation Days at St Mary's University Twickenham, two residential weekends at the High Leigh Conference Centre in Hertfordshire, and a weekend residential retreat. The breakdown by year is as follows:

#### **Aspirant Year:**

Sept – June run by the Formation Programme

Leading to admission to Candidacy - The applicant is authorised by the Archbishop to begin the core programme below.

## **Years 1 and 2:**

Sept – June run by the Formation Programme in conjunction with St Mary's University leading to award of Foundation Degree in Pastoral Ministry. (FdA).

End of Year 1 – Participant if successful is accepted to the Ministry of Lector.

End of Year 2 - Participant if successful is accepted to the Ministry of Acolyte.

## **Year 3: Leading to Ordination as a Permanent Deacon**

Sept – June run by the Formation Programme in conjunction with St Mary's University comprising first year of studies towards MA in Catholic Social Teaching (CST)

The programme outlined above consists of intellectual, spiritual, human and pastoral elements, all of which are interlinked. There may be additional formation to help develop skills essential to a deacon's ministry such as homiletics, liturgy, the sacraments and the ministry of charity.

It is important to emphasise that formation not just an academic or training programme where students are awarded degrees. It is the process of change that takes place in the life of the person participating in the programme and also the wife (for the married) who is welcome to attend the sessions alongside their husband. The wife's attendance is not compulsory nor is she assessed

## **What happens after Ordination?**

Once ordained the deacon is incardinated into the Archdiocese, appointed or assigned to a parish. A deacon is appointed to wherever there is a need. This may not necessarily be in the deacon's home parish.

There is expectation that after ordination the deacon will engage in ongoing formation and attend Diaconal Days, days, retreats, and other activities arranged by the Ongoing Formation Team.

There are various Deacons' Support groups across the Archdiocese that deacons are encouraged to attend for mutual support. This is in addition to support provided by the deacon's Spiritual Director.

The retirement age from ministry 75 years. The process of retirement involves writing to the Archbishop and by mutual agreement setting a date for when to retire. However, post retirement, the deacon (and their wife, if married) is still part of diaconal community and will continue to be supported as appropriate.

## **A Prayer for deacons and for those discerning the diaconate<sup>4</sup>**

God, Father of all Mercies,  
Provider of a bountiful Harvest,  
send Your Graces upon those  
You have called to serve as Deacons;  
preserve and strengthen them in their lifelong service of you.

Open the hearts of those contemplating becoming Permanent Deacons;  
that they may discern Your Holy Will;  
inspire in them a love and desire to surrender themselves  
to serving others in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ.

Teach all Your faithful to follow their respective paths in life  
guided by Your Divine Word and Truth.  
Through the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary,  
all the Angels, and Saints, humbly hear our prayers  
and grant Your Church's needs, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

### **Frequently asked questions**

1. **What academic qualification must I have?** There is no stipulated academic entry requirement but must be proficient in English and in reading, writing and able to undertake self-directed learning.
2. **Must I be a British citizen?** You do not have to be a British citizen but must be legally a permanent UK resident.
3. **What if I do not have the original or copies of the documents required (e.g. certificates of birth, marriage certificate, baptism, confirmation)?** This will be discussed on a case-by-case basis, and consideration will be given to other reliable sources of evidence.
4. **Does it matter how old my children are before I join?** There is no age stipulation for how old your children must be. Family welfare comes first and therefore your children must be of the age that will not pose a problem for the family when you take time out to attend the formation programme and conduct your ministry once ordained.
5. **What if my wife is not a Catholic?** It does not matter if your wife is not a Catholic but you need to have been married in Church. Moreover, you must have the full support and written consent of your wife.
6. **Are deacons paid?** Permanent deacons who are employed or who have been employed are bound by Canon Law to support themselves from their own funds.
7. **Are deacons an answer to the growing shortage of priests?** This is not the primary reason for having permanent deacon.

---

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from <https://catholicsstrivingforholiness.org/prayer-for-vocations/#:~:text=God%20our%20Father%2C%20we%20thank%20you%20for%20calling,to%20respond%20generously%20and%20courageously%20to%20your%20call>

**Questions to consider when discerning the diaconate** (mostly culled from the Diocesan website)

1. Does the thought of following the path to become a Permanent Deacon fill you with joy?
2. Do you feel a sense of personal calling from God?
3. Do you feel called to follow Jesus even more closely and bring others to Him?
4. Do you care for others and have an ability and patience to listen to people?
5. Do you wish to serve others without discrimination?
6. Do you have a desire to live your Christian faith deeply and wholeheartedly?
7. Do you live by the teachings of the Catholic Church?
8. Do you lead a life of prayer and reflection and wish to deepen this?
9. Have other people said you would make a good deacon?
10. Will you be able to balance your daily life commitments (e.g. work, family/caring etc) with the demands of the diaconate on your time?
11. How will becoming a deacon affect your family and friends?

If you require further information regarding the Permanent Diaconate in the Archdiocese of Southwark, kindly contact:

Revd. Ian Black  
Director of Formation For the Permanent Diaconate  
[ianblack@rcoas.org.uk](mailto:ianblack@rcoas.org.uk)