

The Permanent Diaconate

A Short History



The service of deacons in the Church is documented from apostolic times. A strong tradition, attested already by St. Irenaeus and influencing the liturgy of ordination, sees the origin of the diaconate in the institution of the “seven” mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (6:1-6). Thus, at the initial grade of sacred hierarchy are deacons, whose ministry has always been greatly esteemed in the Church. St. Paul refers to them and to the bishops in the exordium of his *Epistle to the Philippians* (cf. *Phil* 1:1), while in his first *Epistle to Timothy* he lists the qualities and virtues which they should possess so as to exercise their ministry worthily (cf. *1 Tim* 3:8-13).

From its outset, patristic literature witnesses to this hierarchical and ministerial structure in the Church, which includes the diaconate. St Ignatius of Antioch considers a Church without bishop, priest or deacon, unthinkable. He underlines that the ministry of deacons is nothing other than “the ministry of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father before time began and who appeared at the end of time”. They are not deacons of food and drink but ministers of the Church of God. The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the Fathers of subsequent centuries, the various Councils as well as ecclesiastical praxis all confirm the continuity and development of this revealed datum.

Up to the fifth century the Diaconate flourished in the western Church, but after this period, it experienced, for various reasons, a slow decline which ended in its surviving only as an intermediate stage for candidates preparing for priestly ordination.

The Council of Trent disposed that the permanent Diaconate, as it existed in ancient times, should be restored, in accord with its proper nature, to its original function in the Church. This prescription, however, was not carried into effect.

The second Vatican Council established that “it will be possible for the future to restore the diaconate as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy.... (and confer it) even upon married men, provided they be of more mature age, and also on suitable young men for whom, however, the law of celibacy must remain in force”, in accordance with constant tradition. Three reasons lay behind this choice: (i) a desire to enrich the Church with the functions of the diaconate, which otherwise, in many regions, could only be exercised with great difficulty; (ii) the intention of strengthening with the grace of diaconal ordination those who already exercised many of the functions of the Diaconate; (iii) a concern to provide regions, where there was a shortage of clergy, with sacred ministers. Such reasons make clear that the restoration of the permanent Diaconate was in no manner intended to prejudice the meaning, role or flourishing of the ministerial priesthood, which must always be fostered because of its indispensability.

With the Apostolic Letter *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem* of 18 June 1967, Pope Paul VI implemented the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council by determining general norms governing the restoration of the permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church. The Apostolic Constitution *Pontificalis Romani Recognitio* of 18 June 1968 approved the new rite of conferring the Sacred Orders of the Episcopate, the Presbyterate and the Diaconate and determined the matter and form of these sacramental ordinations. Finally, the Apostolic Letter *Ad pascendum* of 15 August 1972 clarified the conditions for the admission and ordination of candidates to the diaconate. The essential elements of these norms subsequently passed into the *Code of Canon Law* promulgated by Pope John Paul II on 25 January 1983.

