

Becoming a Deacon

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A deacon is a minister of the Church and as such his vocation needs to be discerned and affirmed by the Church. Ultimate responsibility for affirming a vocation as a diocesan priest or deacon belongs to the diocesan bishop. Normally he will entrust the process to priests or deacons who lead the formation process. Although practices for discernment and formation vary a little between dioceses the basic outline is the same.

The formation program for deacons (1998), outline by the relevant Vatican bodies, is modelled on the formation program for priests.

A single man can be ordained at the age of 25 and a married man at 35. The first stage is enquiry, where a man would contact the local vocations team or director of diaconate. If after a time of enquiry he wants to enter a process of formal discernment to decide if God is calling him to this ministry, the director will meet with him and assign him a spiritual director to ponder more deeply his potential call.

If he is married the enquirer's wife will also be invited to discuss her husband's potential vocation. If he enters a formal program later, she will be included in some formation or interviews along the way. No married man can be ordained without his wife's written permission.

Men who believe that they might have a vocation as a deacon might already be highly involved in parish or other aspects of Church life. They might also be men who have or are developing a more structured spiritual life with a commitment to prayer and meditation. There may be a number of signs of a potential vocation that others recognise.

Normally a panel of clergy and lay people assist in the discernment period and will recommend to the bishop that a man may be suitable for the formation process. If the bishop admits him to formation he has a further three or four years in which to continue his discernment.

He has to be capable of university level study. He will commence a Bachelor of Theology degree either full or part time. The degree is the major part of the intellectual dimension of formation. If he has prior theological qualifications some alternative program of academic formation is arranged with the director of formation. As preachers of the word and ministers of the church, deacons need solid theological foundations.

The other three dimensions of formation are; the human, the spiritual and the pastoral. Formation in these dimensions takes place over a three to four year period. Normally these require attendance at formation weekends. There may be seven or more weekend formation sessions each year over this three year period. The man in formation also needs to make time for regular spiritual direction, about once each month during his formation.

Human formation includes psychological assessment and reflection on personality. Formation helps the man to understand his characteristic ways of behaving and communicating and working with others. He will focus on a range of relationships, including his marital and family life, if he is a married man.

Spiritual formation includes developing a deep prayer life and awareness of the movement of God's Spirit in his life. This dimension tries to integrate the human, pastoral and intellectual into a coherent expression. An annual retreat is part of this dimension.

Pastoral formation includes pastoral and liturgical ministry. He will learn about ministry and pastoral practice both theoretically and practically. Where possible he will have some ministry placements or assignments in which to observe or practice aspects of pastoral and liturgical ministry. He will also be introduced to praying the Liturgy of the Hours.

Throughout the formation process he will have opportunities to review his progress with the director or a member of the formation team. Each review presents a fresh opportunity for him to ask is this the right vocation for me? Is this what God asks of me? Those responsible for formation will be asking the same question of the man in formation.

At any stage during the formation period a man may decide to leave the program or he might be asked to leave. Entry into formation requires prayerful discernment at every step of the journey.

During formation he is admitted to the ministries of lector (reader) and acolyte (server). Both of these ministries help in his formation process.

Toward the end of formation, normally the final year, he is admitted as a candidate. This means that the Church has some firmer idea that he may indeed be called to the sacrament of Holy Orders. Formation continues but now with a greater focus on potential ordination. The man and the formation team need to come to a clear resolution in this year that God has called him to ordination before a recommendation is made to the bishop.

The bishop will probably have met with those in formation several times and each individual a few times. Normally the bishop will personally interview the candidate once he has received the petition for ordination from him, along with letters of recommendation from the director of formation and the permission of the wife (if married).

Only the bishop decides if the petition for ordination is to be accepted. He will do so when he is satisfied that all criteria have been met. The most important criterion is that he has recognised that the Holy Spirit has given the Church a gift in the person of this man as a sacred minister. In the name of the Church he accepts the gift.

Ordained ministry is a service in, for and with the Church. It is not a personal possession but a gift the Holy Spirit gives to the Church through the sacrament of Holy Orders. It is for this reason that formation always happens in dialogue between the man who feels called and the Church that will receive the gift of ministry. It is always a movement of the Spirit in the Church and requires careful discernment.

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