

Discernment and Application Process for the Permanent Diaconate Formation

“Deacons likewise **must** be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, **but** holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women **must** likewise **be** dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Deacons must be husbands of **only** one wife, **and** good managers of **their** children and their own households. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

1 Timothy 3:8-13

The call to the diaconate is a call to a lifelong pursuit to be a servant in every aspect of our life. This call is more than a desire to serve the Church in ministry, a desire to serve God, or a specific pathway to holiness. The character of a deacon is a calling to a way of life that reflects the nature of Christ - emptying ourselves as a servant to others.

If accepted into diaconal formation in the Diocese of Orlando those desiring to be ordained will spend a minimum of six years in discernment, formation and study as they follow a path toward ordination. This formation journey is structured in accordance with *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, published by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop’s Committee on the Diaconate.

This document outlines (1) The general requirements for being considered for diaconate formation, (2) The overall dimensions of a deacon which are examined as part of the initial discernment of those desiring to enter into formation; and, (3) The phases of discernment and formation on the journey to ordination.

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS/PREREQUISITES FOR DIACONATE CONSIDERATION

1. Candidates should be single or be in a valid Catholic marriage for at least five (5) years before submitting an application to enter the discernment and formation process.
2. Individuals desiring to enter the discernment and formation process must be at least 30 years old and not older than 55 years old when they enter the formation process.
3. Candidates must have received the Sacrament of Confirmation and have been a Roman Catholic for at least five years prior to the submission of an application to enter the discernment and formation process.
4. Candidates must be ready to commit to six years of spiritual and academic preparation prior to ordination and then continue on a lifelong journey of formation.
5. There are no specific college requirements to enter into the diaconate discernment and formation process but the applicant must have graduated from high school or received their GED.
6. A new formation and discernment class commences every other year. Discernment nights are conducted around the Diocese in the Fall of these odd numbered years.
7. Deacons are not paid or employed by the diocese or parish as deacons and no benefits (i.e. medical, housing, retirement, etc.) are available to non-employed personnel.
8. The cost associated with the five years of formation is absorbed primarily by the diocese and parish with a portion of the academic formation by the individual.
9. A prospective applicant must:
 - be emotionally mature and stable
 - possess personal integrity and understands his gifts and challenges (self- knowledge)

- if married, be living in a stable/vibrant sacramental marriage and have the full consent and support of his wife and family. His wife must be willing to support her husband **actively** through formation and in his ministry.
- be actively involved in parish life and have the recommendation and support of his pastor
- be in good physical and psychological health (both applicant and wife, if married)
- be of sound moral character
- have the ability to articulate and explain the moral and doctrinal teaching of the Church effectively
- demonstrate a personal commitment to growing in Christian holiness / an active prayer life / participation in the Eucharistic and Sacramental life of the Church
- have good communication skills (both as a speaker and as a listener)
- have secure employment history and be self-supporting
- if divorced have a valid decree of nullity for at least five years and no previous divorces
- If single or widowed be committed to a lifetime of celibacy
- have a record of ministry leadership and service to the parish and the community
- reside in the Diocese of Orlando
- should not anticipate moving for at least five years after ordination
- be living sound Catholic teaching
- be a citizen of the United States
- have completed both the Diocesan background check and safe environment training prior to submitting an application.

OVERALL AREAS OF DISCERNMENT

Those who feel God is calling them to diaconate ordination should examine the following four dimensions of their lives which are the foundation of every deacon:

1. **Human Dimension** - The goal of a **“suitable human dimension”** is a character and personality that is a bridge and not an obstacle for others as they journey with Jesus Christ. The call of the deacon is to be a servant to all and thus the character of a deacon must be centered on humility and the needs of others.
2. **Spiritual Dimension** – The spiritual dimension of the life of a deacon calls us to **“put on the mind of Christ”**. Our spiritual formation begins at birth and continues through our entire life. Those called to diaconate formation must already exhibit a strong spiritual dimension in their life that demonstrates they have nurturing attitudes, habits, and practices that provide a foundation for the development of an authentic and ongoing spiritual life. This demonstration comes in the form of participation in, for example, various devotions, retreats, days of recollection, and adult education programming. It also includes an established prayer life both as an individual and as a family.
3. **Academic Dimension** – As ordained clergy, deacons preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ primarily through the way we live and the way we speak. Those desiring to enter into diaconate formation must have a good **foundational understanding of Catholic teaching**, embrace this teaching, and be living in communion with the Catholic Church. Prospective applicants should also have a good understanding of scripture and should have participated in scripture study or sharing groups.
4. **Pastoral Dimension** – The model of the ordained deacon is Christ the Servant, who lived totally at the **service of God, for the good of Men**. Those desiring to enter into diaconate

formation must already recognize and have experienced the call to leadership roles in ministering to their brothers and sisters in parish life as well as works of charity in the local community.

These dimensions of diaconal life become the focal discerning points for men who desire to enter diaconal formation and they remain a focus during a process of formation that lasts for the rest of their lives.

PHASES OF DISCERNMENT AND FORMATION ON THE JOURNEY TO ORDINATION

The process of discerning God's call for one to enter into diaconate formation should begin long before a pastor requests an application from the Diocesan Office for the Permanent Diaconate and it should involve the individual, the family, the parish, and the pastor. The following outlines the inquiry phase of discernment that takes place along this journey. Throughout this phase the overall areas of discernment (dimensions of our lives) outlined above should be the focus of discernment and growth.

INQUIRY PHASE – PATH TO ASPIRANCY

The inquiry phase begins with an individual who feels that God is calling him to a lifelong commitment as an ordained deacon.

For the Inquirer: Self-Discovery and Discernment - The first step is to prayerfully examine your call and desire to enter diaconate formation in light of the objective criteria for the selection of men outlined in the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*. The document identifies that the behavioral patterns of one interested in diaconate ordination should include such things as: a natural inclination of service to the Christian community and to all in need; psychological integrity; a capacity for dialogue, which implies a sense of docility and openness; the ability to share one's faith yet listen respectfully to other points of view; the capacity to listen carefully and without prejudices—respecting people in the context of their religion, race, gender, ethnicity, and culture; good communication skills; a sense of responsibility that includes the fulfilling of one's word and completing one's work; self-directed and collaborative accountability; balanced and prudent judgment; generosity in service; and the ability to lead, motivate, facilitate, and animate others into appropriate action and service.

The *National Directory* further identifies the spiritual and evangelical qualities as including: sound faith; good Christian reputation; active involvement in the Church's apostolate; personal integrity, maturity, and holiness; regular participation in the Church's sacramental life; evidence of recognized, ongoing commitment to the Church's life and service; participation in faith enrichment opportunities (e.g., retreats, days of recollection, adult education programming); a positive and stable marriage, if married, or a mature celibate state of life, if single; active membership in a Christian community; capacity for obedience and fraternal communion; and a deep spirituality and prayer life.

These behavioral and spiritual patterns of our life are foundational and, as an applicant, you should prayerfully consider these traits and discuss them with your family and friends. The wife, family and our closest friends have the ability to recognize our character which must be founded on these human and spiritual qualities.

Discernment by the Pastor and Parish Community – If the potential applicant feels the strong call to the ministry and vocation of the diaconate and believes that they possess the human and

spiritual qualities he should discuss this vocation with his Pastor/Rector. The Pastor/Rector should have meetings with you over a period of time, to explore this perceived calling. Note particularly how it relates to his current ministry in the world. The Pastor/Rector should help the individual through a prayerful discernment of the call to diaconate focused on the character of the deacon and the reason the individual feels called. The pastor is the only gateway into the application process. Under no circumstances will an application packet be sent to anyone other than the Pastor/Rector. From his discussion and prayerful discernment, the Pastor/Rector will decide whether or not he feels that the inquirer is called and will recommend that you attend a **discernment night** and continue on with the application process.

Discernment Night - As part of the inquiry phase the individual and his wife, with the concurrence of his pastor, must attend a discernment night conducted by the Diocese of Orlando in the fall of the odd numbered years. The discernment nights are where the characteristics of a deacon are outlined along with the foundational requirements. These discernment nights also provide a means for discussion and the ability to respond to specific or unique questions.

Application Preparation and Submittal - Following the discernment night, if the pastor, the individual, and his wife feel there is a calling to the diaconate, the pastor must request an application from the diaconate office which must be completed and submitted to the diaconate office for evaluation and discernment. Applications must be received by March 1st of the even numbered years where applicants are considered.

The application itself will include the following:

- A completed application that outlines the
- The original annotated baptismal certificate with ALL NOTATIONS on the back including First Eucharist, Confirmation, and, Marriage must be submitted.
- Marriage Certificate and license if appropriate
- Certificate of annulment if appropriate
- The inquirer will submit a detailed spiritual autobiographical essay with a chronological listing of major life events and spiritual discipline. It must include:
 1. A discussion of your spiritual journey through life
 2. Sacramental history and comments
 3. History of ministry and ministry activities
 4. Liturgical activity
 5. Social service activity
 6. Your personal history (anything you think will be helpful)
 7. Articulate what you believe is your call to the diaconate
- Letter of support from your pastor
- Application and spiritual autobiographical essay from your spouse
- Three letters of recommendation
- A picture of the applicant and his wife (if married)

Interview with the applicant and his wife (if married) – An interview is conducted by the Diocese of Orlando Permanent Diaconate Director and the Discernment Review Board to get to know the applicant and his wife and to determine the attitudes about the Church, pastoral care and the program requirements.

Decision to enter into a one-year formal discernment. The recommendation from the discernment board is then assembled with the results of the previous interviews, the deacon perceiver, and the application with a recommendation to the Bishop for final selection to enter into a formal year of discernment. The purpose of this year of discernment is to review the

different dimensions of the deacon's life with the selected applicants and their wives. During this year the discernment cadre of men and their wives meet four times to address 1) the character and mission of the Permanent Diaconate; 2) Stability of relationships; 3) Spirituality, gifts and Catholic knowledge; and 4) Servant leadership and pastoral outreach. Each of the sessions are a mix of presentation, interaction and various instruments to help the discernment team in the Diocesan process of selection for the upcoming class of aspirants. Following the year of discernment, a recommendation package is developed for the Bishop to select the upcoming aspirant cadre.

Phase II – Aspirant Phase. The Second phase of the formation process is the Aspirant Path. If the inquirer is admitted to the aspirant path, which will last two years, he enters a structured period of discernment, study, and spiritual direction. The Aspirant phase is primarily a time to discern the readiness of the participant to be nominated for acceptance as a candidate for diaconate formation. The aspirant phase focuses on the four dimensions of the life of a deacon (human, spiritual, academic and pastoral) which were previously identified as overall areas of discernment. The applicant and his wife will be asked to 1) regularly be involved with a spiritual director; 2) have a deacon mentor who will meet with the couple once a month to help process the formation that is being presented and discuss the aspirants interface into parish life and community service, 3) be involved in specific St. Leo University classes focusing on the diaconate and spirituality. At the completion of the aspirant phase, a discernment review board will meet with the aspirant and his pastor to discuss where he stands on being accepted as a candidate to continue on with formation.

Phase III – Candidacy Phase. The Third phase of the formation process is the "Candidacy phase" which includes an authentication of the individual's vocation, academic, and service preparation. This Candidacy Path is marked by the scrutiny's required before installation into the ministry of Lector and Acolyte.

This three-year phase is characterized by classes taught by St. Leo University, formal training as a Minister to the Sick and Bereavement Minister, and other formation activities, seminars and retreats.

Phase IV – Sacramental Phase. The fifth year is a final preparation year during which time sacramental and liturgical preparation (liturgy practicums) takes place. This phase is characterized classes, ongoing seminars and other formation activities that relate to the practical work of a deacon.

Phase V – Post Ordination Phase. The final, but continuing, path of the diaconate formation process occurs in the Post Ordination Phase. Ongoing formation is mandatory and should provide the deacon with many opportunities to continue to develop and integrate the dimensions and perspectives of formation into his life and ministry. Each ordained deacon is required to participate in 30 hours of formation each year.