

This article was originally printed in the January 2012 issue of New Earth, the newspaper for the Diocese of Fargo.

Diakonia: Promoting vocations to the permanent diaconate

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It is customary for the church to make a special effort at different times of the year to highlight the need for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life. While most Catholics are familiar readily enough with efforts to promote vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, the promotion of vocations to the diaconate seems to be less familiar. This is due to the fact that the reinvigoration of the permanency of the diaconate is relatively recent in church memory.

After many centuries of lapsed practice in this regard, the Second Vatican Council discerned the need to embrace the ancient practice and incorporate fully the permanent character of the diaconate in the life of the church. Given the conciliar decision, it is important to do all that is necessary to promote vocations to this life of ministerial service.

While it is laudable to promote diaconal vocations in the usual ways (eg. prayer, personal encouragement of those who seem to possess the necessary qualities, etc.), we could also ask how this can be done in a way that is specific to the diaconate.

When the apostolic community was challenged by needs of the community, their discernment led to the ordination of the first deacons (cf. Acts 6:1-7). The apostles desired to fulfill the mandate given to them by Christ to be of true service to all the members of his body but needed others to assist them in this "diakonia" of Christ (cf. Acts 6:1,4).

Since then the permanent diaconate has embodied and signified for the church in a visible and ministerial way the call to service that is universally the vocation of every baptized Christian. So how can this original ecclesial experience offer to us a model of promoting vocations? By following in the footsteps of the apostles, we can engage in a three-step effort that can result in an encouragement for men to answer this call.

First, it consists of a conscious and intentional effort to be aware ourselves of the real authentic needs of our brothers and sisters around us. As disciples of Christ, we should be striving to see them as Christ sees them, noticing what is lacking in their lives or where they need help in some way.

Second, as we become aware of those needs, we should be seeking to understand them as Christ knows them by the light of his wisdom. Seeking that wisdom through prayerful reflection and the discernment of spirits leads us to perceive the situation truthfully and deeply. Why is this important? It is because needs are best met when met at the deeper level of their causes rather than simply at the level of their symptoms. We should desire to provide a service that is of true and lasting assistance at this more profound level.

Third, with the gift of that understanding, we are called to give of ourselves generously to Christ as he carries out his loving service to our brothers and sisters in their need. By associating ourselves with Christ the Servant in his mission of goodness, we become motivated to desire that all the needs of others are met. Since for that to happen the church would need deacons to lead that service, we are inspired to promote new vocations to the permanent diaconate. In other words, by being "diaconal" ourselves we are best situated to promote new vocations in the life of the church.

May the Lord of the harvest hear the prayer of our generous service to others and call men to the permanent diaconate.

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