

**PulledQuote:** “The deacons are at the forefront of that new evangelization because of their unique vantage point as ordained ministers who live and work in the same milieu as their neighbors.” –Bishop John Folda

### **Headline: The service of deacons**

Forty years ago, a significant event occurred in the Diocese of Fargo when the first cohort of men was ordained by Bishop Justin Driscoll to the permanent diaconate. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council had called for the restoration of the permanent diaconate after many centuries, and in 1979 we saw the first candidates complete their formation and receive the sacrament of Holy Orders.

This was something completely new for us as a diocese, and for good reason our bishops took their time to put together and implement a program of formation. The diaconate was always understood to be the essential final step before ordination to the priesthood, and so it remains. But in the early years of the Church, the order of deacons stood on its own and had its own character and ministry. St. Luke tells us in Acts 6 that already in those earliest days of the Church, the apostles chose seven men to take on a special role of service, especially for the sake of those most in need. St. Stephen, one of those first deacons, was also the first martyr to give his life for Jesus. St. Lawrence was a deacon in Rome during the era of persecution, and he too gave his life as a martyr for the faith. St. Francis of Assisi, who is known and loved throughout the world, can also be counted among the ranks of noble deacons.

The word *diakonos* means “servant,” and our deacons have distinguished themselves by their lives of dedicated service in the Church. They have the ministry of proclaiming and preaching the Gospel at Mass, and they also assist the priest or bishop at the altar. They regularly are sent by their pastors to bring the Holy Eucharist to the sick and the homebound, and many of our deacons have taken on a ministry of visiting the sick and the elderly in hospitals and nursing homes. Our deacons have ministered to those who are incarcerated in jails and prisons, leading them in prayer and bible studies, and frequently preparing them to receive baptism and the other sacraments. Deacons can preside at weddings and funerals, and our deacons will frequently be seen leading vigil services for the deceased. In keeping with the charge of the apostles, deacons also have a special concern for the poor and needy. They reach out to those who are on the margins, who have little earthly wealth, and they put into action the Church’s work of charity and mercy.

One aspect of the permanent diaconate stands out, and that is the role of their wives and families. While priests in the Roman Catholic Church remain celibate throughout their lives, married men may become deacons. In fact, before a married man can be considered as a candidate for the diaconate, he must consult with his wife and receive her consent. The formation program for deacon candidates also involves the wives, who join their husbands throughout the course of preparation. A deacon is accompanied by his wife and family as he makes his way toward ordination, and they accompany him after he is ordained as well. While the deacon carries out his ministry in his own right, he does so with the support and encouragement of his wife and children. In a very real way, they share their husband and father with the Church, and they participate in his ministry through this sacrifice.

One reason that the Council fathers called for the restoration of the diaconate was the desire for a greater outreach of the faith into the world. I have told our deacons that they may be able to reach individuals and families that I or our priests cannot reach. They might have an ability to connect or engage with souls that might otherwise remain distant from the Church, and their presence in the world gives them a different perspective on the needs of their parishes and communities. Our popes have been calling for a new evangelization, a new missionary impetus even in those places that have already received the Gospel but need a revitalization of their faith. The deacons are at the forefront of that new evangelization because of their unique vantage point as ordained ministers who live and work in the same milieu as their neighbors.

Even now, there are eight men in formation, who for several years have been preparing for ordination as deacons for the Diocese of Fargo. They study Scripture, the sacraments, liturgy, moral theology, Church history, and canon law. They get practical training in various forms of pastoral ministry,

and they learn the basics of preaching the Gospel. A year from now, I hope to see all of them at the Cathedral of St. Mary where I will have the privilege of ordaining them to the diaconate. Please pray for these men and their families as they enter into this final year of preparation and discernment.

On September 14, I had the opportunity to celebrate Mass with our deacons and their wives, along with their parish priests and other members of the faithful. We recalled together the forty years since the ordination of our first class of permanent deacons in the Diocese of Fargo, and I was able to thank them for their contribution to the life and faith of our diocesan family. It was a joyful occasion that allowed us to congratulate those who have served throughout those forty years as well as those who were most recently ordained. We also remembered the deacons who served well and have already been called from this life by our Lord. Most importantly, it was an occasion to thank God, who continues to work through those whom he calls. Let us pray for our deacons, and let's also be sure to thank them for their dedication and service to Christ and his Church.