



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC LETTER
GIVEN MOTU PROPRIO

SACRUM DIACONATUS ORDINEM

GENERAL NORMS FOR RESTORING
THE PERMANENT DIACONATE IN THE LATIN CHURCH

June 18, 1967

Beginning already in the early days of the Apostles, the Catholic Church has held in great veneration the sacred order of the diaconate, as the Apostle of the Gentiles himself bears witness. He expressly sends his greeting to the deacons together with the bishops and instructs Timothy⁽¹⁾ which virtues and qualities are to be sought in them in order that they may be regarded as worthy of their ministry.⁽²⁾

Furthermore, the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, following this very ancient tradition, made honorable mention of the diaconate in the Constitution which begins with the words "Lumen Gentium," where, after concerning itself with the bishops and the priests, it praised also the third rank of sacred orders, explaining its dignity and enumerating its functions.

Indeed while clearly recognizing on the one hand that "these functions very necessary to the life of the Church could in the present discipline of the Latin Church be carried out in many regions with difficulty," and while on the other hand wishing to make more suitable provision in a matter of such importance wisely decreed that the "diaconate in the future could be restored as a particular and permanent rank of the hierarchy."⁽³⁾

Although some functions of the deacons, especially in missionary countries, are in fact

accustomed to be entrusted to lay men it is nevertheless "beneficial that those who perform a truly diaconal ministry be strengthened by the imposition of hands, a tradition going back to the Apostles, and be more closely joined to the altar so that they may more effectively carry out their ministry through the sacramental grace of the diaconate."(4) Certainly in this way the special nature of this order will be shown most clearly. It is not to be considered as a mere step towards the priesthood, but it is so adorned with its own indelible character and its own special grace so that those who are called to it "can permanently serve the mysteries of Christ and the Church."(5)

Although the restoration of the permanent diaconate is not necessarily to be effected in the whole Latin Church since "it pertains to the competent territorial episcopal conferences, with the approval of the Supreme Pontiff, to decide whether and where it is timely that deacons of this kind be ordained for the care of souls,"(6) we therefore consider it not only proper but also necessary that specific and precise norms be given to adapt present discipline to the new precepts of the Ecumenical Council and to determine the proper conditions under which not only the ministry of the diaconate will be more advantageously regulated, but the training also of the candidates will be better suited to their different kinds of life, their common obligations and their sacred dignity.

Therefore, in the first place, all that is decreed in the Code of Canon Law about the rights and obligations of deacons, whether these rights and obligations be common to all clerics, or proper to deacons--all these, unless some other disposition has been made-- we confirm and declare to be in force also for those who will remain permanently in the diaconate. In regard to these we moreover decree the following.

I.

1. It is the task of the legitimate assemblies of bishops of episcopal conferences to discuss, with the consent of the Supreme Pontiff whether and where—in view of the good of the faithful—the diaconate is to be instituted as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy.
2. When asking the Apostolic See for approval, the reasons must be explained which favor the introduction of this new practice in a region as well as the circumstances which give well-founded hope of success. Likewise, the manner will have to be indicated in which the new discipline will be implemented, that is to say, whether it is a matter of conferring the diaconate on "suitable young men for whom the law of celibacy must remain intact, or on men of more mature age, even upon those living in the married state," or on both kinds of candidates.
3. Once the approval of the Holy See has been obtained, it is within the powers of each Ordinary, within the sphere of his own jurisdiction, to approve and ordain the candidates, unless special cases are concerned which exceed his faculties.

Let the Ordinaries, in drawing up the report on the state of their diocese, also mention this restored discipline.

II.

4. By the law of the Church, confirmed by the Ecumenical Council itself, young men called to the diaconate are obliged to observe the law of celibacy.

5. The permanent diaconate may not be conferred before the completion of the 25th year. Nevertheless, an older age can be required by the episcopal conferences.

6. Let young men to be trained for the diaconal office be received in a special institute where they will be put to the test and will be educated to live a truly evangelical life and prepared to fulfill usefully their own specific functions.

7. For the foundation of this institute, let the bishops of the same country, or, if advantageous, of several countries according to the diversity of circumstances, join their efforts. Let them choose, for its guidance, particularly suitable superiors and let them establish most accurate norms regarding discipline and the ordering of studies, observing the following prescriptions.

8. Let only those young men be admitted to training for the diaconate who have shown a natural inclination of the spirit to service of the sacred hierarchy and of the Christian community and who have acquired a sufficiently good store of knowledge in keeping the custom of their people and country.

9. Specific training for the diaconate should be spread over a period of at least three years. The series of subjects, however, should be arranged in such a way that the candidates are orderly and gradually led to carrying out the various functions of the diaconate skillfully and beneficially. Moreover, the whole plan of studies can be so arranged that in the last year special training be given for the various functions which deacons especially will carry out.

10. To this moreover should be added practice and training in teaching the elements of the Christian religion to children and other faithful, in familiarizing the people with sacred chant and in directing it, in reading the sacred books of Scripture at gatherings of the faithful, in addressing and exhorting the people, in administering the sacraments which pertain to them, in visiting the sick, and in general in fulfilling the ministries which can be entrusted to them.

III.

11. Older men, whether single or married, can be called to the diaconate. The latter, however, are not to be admitted unless there is certainty not only about the wife's consent, but also about her blameless Christian life and those qualities which will neither impede nor bring dishonor on the husband's ministry.

12. The older age in this case is reached at the completion of the thirty-fifth year. Nevertheless, the age requirement is to be understood in this sense, namely, that no one can be called to the diaconate unless he has gained the high regard of the clergy and the faithful by a long example of truly Christian life, by his unexceptionable conduct, and by his ready disposition to be of service.

13. In the case of married men care must be taken that only those are promoted to the diaconate who while living many years in matrimony have shown that they are ruling well their own household and who have a wife and children leading a truly Christian life and noted for their good reputation.(7)

14. It is to be desired that such deacons be possessed of no small learning about which we have spoken in numbers 8, 9, 10 above, or that they at least be endowed with that knowledge which in the judgment of the episcopal conference is necessary for them to carry out their specific functions. Consequently they are to be admitted for a time in a special school where they are to learn all that is necessary for worthily fulfilling the diaconal ministry.

15. Should this be impossible, let the candidate be entrusted for his education to an outstanding priest who will direct him, and instruct him and be able to testify to his prudence and maturity. Care must always and emphatically be taken that only suitable and skilled men may be admitted to the sacred order.

16. Once they have received the order of deacon, even those who have been promoted at a more mature age, can not contract marriage by virtue of the traditional discipline of the Church.

17. Let care be taken that the deacons do not exercise an art or a profession which in the judgment of the local Ordinary is unfitting or impedes the fruitful exercise of the sacred office.

IV.

18. Any deacon who is not a professed member of a religious family must be duly enrolled in a diocese.

19. The norms in force with regard to caring for the fitting sustenance of priests and guaranteeing their social security are to be observed also in favor of the permanent deacons, taking into consideration also the family of married deacons and keeping article 21 of this letter in mind.

20. It is the function of the episcopal conference to issue definite norms on the proper sustenance of the deacon and his family if he is married in keeping with the various circumstances of place and time.

V.

21. According to the above-mentioned Constitution of the Second Vatican Council it pertains to the deacon, to the extent that he has been authorized by the local Ordinary, to attend such functions:

- 1) To assist the bishop and the priest during liturgical actions in all things which the rituals of the different orders assign to him;
- 2) To administer baptism solemnly and to supply the ceremonies which may have been omitted when conferring it on children or adults;
- 3) To reserve the Eucharist and to distribute it to himself and to others, to bring it as a Viaticum to the dying and to impart to the people benediction with the Blessed Sacrament with the sacred ciborium;
- 4) In the absence of a priest, to assist at and to bless marriages in the name of the Church by delegation from the bishop or pastor, observing the rest of the requirements which are in the Code of Canon Law(8), with Canon 1098 remaining firm and where what is said in regard to the priest is also to be understood in regard to the deacon;
- 5) To administer sacramentals and to officiate at funeral and burial services;
- 6) To read the sacred books of Scripture to the faithful and to instruct and exhort the people;
- 7) To preside at the worship and prayers of the people when a priest is not present;
- 8) To direct the liturgy of the word, particularly in the absence of a priest;
- 9) To carry out, in the name of the hierarchy, the duties of charity and of administration as well as works of social assistance;

10) To guide legitimately, in the name of the parish priest and of the bishop, remote Christian communities;

11) To promote and sustain the apostolic activities of laymen.

23. All these functions must be carried out in perfect communion with the bishop and with his presbytery, that is to say, under the authority of the bishop and of the priest who are in charge of the care of souls in that place.

24. Deacons, as much as possible, should have their part in pastoral councils.

VI.

25. Let the deacons, as those who serve the mysteries of Christ and of the Church, abstain from all vice and endeavor to be always pleasing to God, "ready for every good work"(9) for the salvation of men. By reason, therefore, of the order received they must surpass by far all the others in the practice of liturgical life, in the love for prayer, in the divine service, in obedience, in charity, in chastity.

26. It will be the task of the episcopal conference to establish more efficacious norms to nourish the spiritual life of the deacons, both celibate and married. Let the local Ordinaries, however, see to it that all the deacons:

- 1) devote themselves assiduously to reading and meditating on the word of God;
- 2) frequently, and if possible every day, participate actively in the sacrifice of the Mass, receive the sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist and devoutly visit the Sacrament;
- 3) purify their souls frequently with the sacrament of Penance and, for the purpose of receiving it worthily, examine their conscience each day;
- 4) venerate and love the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God with fervent devotion.

27. It is a supremely fitting thing that permanent deacons recite every day at least part of the Divine Office, to be determined by the episcopal conference.

28. Diocesan deacons must, at least every third year, attend spiritual exercises in a religious house or pious institution designated by the Ordinary.

29. Deacons are not to neglect studies, particularly the sacred ones; let them read assiduously the sacred books of the Scripture; let them devote themselves to ecclesiastical studies in such a way that they can correctly explain Catholic teaching to the rest and become daily more capable of instructing and strengthening the minds of the faithful.

For this purpose, let the deacons be called to meetings to be held at specified times at which problems regarding their life and the sacred ministry are treated.

30. Because of the special character of the ministry entrusted to them they are bound to show reverence and obedience to the bishop; the bishops, however, should in the Lord highly esteem these ministers of the people of God and love them with the love of a father. If for a just cause a deacon lives for a time outside his own diocese he should willingly submit to the supervision and authority of the local Ordinary in those matters which pertain to the duties and functions of the diaconal state.

31. In the matter of wearing apparel the local custom will have to be observed according to the norms set down by the episcopal conference.

VII.

32. The institution of the permanent diaconate among the Religious is a right reserved to the Holy See, which is exclusively competent to examine and approve the recommendations of the general chapters in the matter.

33. Let the Religious deacons exercise the diaconal ministry under the authority of the bishop and of their own superiors, according to the norms in force for Religious priests; they are also bound by the laws to which the members of the same Religious family are obliged.

34. A Religious deacon who lives either permanently or for a specified time in a region which lacks a permanent diaconate may not exercise diaconal functions except with the consent of the local Ordinary.

35. The provisions in nos. 32-34 regarding the Religious must be regarded as applying likewise to members of other institutes who profess the evangelical counsels.

VIII.

36. Finally as regards the rite to be followed in conferring the sacred order of the diaconate and those orders which precede the diaconate, let the present discipline be observed until it is revised by the Holy See.

Finally, after issuing these norms the desire springs spontaneously from our heart that deacons in performing their arduous functions in the modern world follow the examples which we propose for their imitation; the example of St. Stephen the protomartyr, who as St. Irenaeus says "was the first chosen for diaconal service by the Apostles,"(11) and of St. Lawrence of Rome "who was illustrious not only in the administration of the sacraments but also in the stewardship of the possessions of the Church."(12)

We order, then, that what has been established by us in this letter, given "motu proprio," be firm and valid, all things to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter's on the feast of St. Ephrem the Syrian, June 18, 1967, in the fourth year of our pontificate.

POPE PAUL VI

NOTES

1. Cf. Phil. 1:1.

2. Cf. 1 Tim. 3:8-13.

3. Cf. A.A.S. 57 (1965) p. 36 n. 29.

4. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree: Ad gentes, n. 16; A.A.S. 58 (1966) p. 967.

5. Cf. A.A.S. 57 (1965) p. 46.

6. Ibid. p. 36

7. Cf. 1 Tim. 3:10-12.

8. Cf. canons 1095 n. 2. and 1096.

9. Cf. 2 Tim 2:21.

10. Canon Law of the Eastern Church, Concerning Persons, canon 87, A.A.S. 49 (1957) p. 462.

11. Adversus haereses 4.15. 1, PG 7:1013.

12. St. Leo the Great, Sermon 85, PL 54:436.