

July 12, 2009 - SPECIAL FEATURE

The Order of Deacon By DEACON GENE CUMMINS

The first deacons were seven men ordained by the apostles to provide food and care for the widows and orphans of the Christian community, so that the apostles could concentrate on prayer and preaching. As the early Church grew, the deacons were emissaries of the bishops. They were the bishop's working arm. They represented him to the local communities of Christians. The diaconate flourished and grew until about the time of the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.

After Nicea the order of priesthood began to develop. Priests, or presbyters as they were called then, began to share the most important function of bishops, the celebration of the Eucharist. But they didn't have deacon servants to assist them. Deacons were still envoys of bishops. Friction developed between the presbyters, who considered themselves equal to the bishops, and the deacons, who considered themselves as the bishops' special assistants. As this friction increased, the role of deacons waned until, by the middle ages, the order of deacon had ceased to exist as a permanent state. It was a purely ceremonial role, a symbolic state of transition to the priesthood.

Pope Pius XII favored a restoration of the order of deacon, to include married men, but felt that the time was not yet ripe. Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council which, in 1964, made it clear that deacons were a needed part of the Church's structure. In 1967 Pope Paul VI issued an apostolic letter actually restoring the order. The bishops' in the United States voted in 1968 to restore the order and the first permanent deacons in America were ordained in 1971. Today there are over 16,000 permanent deacons actively serving the Church in the United States, including about 140 in the Archdiocese of Washington.

The modern permanent deacon has a three-fold ministry: he is minister of the Word, of sacrament, and of service. These functions are to be blended by the deacon into his role within his family and in his job. The diaconate is not usually a full-time job. Most deacons work full-time at some "lay" occupation and work at their ministry part-time.

As minister of sacrament, the deacon performs several liturgical functions. He is most visible in his role of assisting the priest at Mass, particularly in giving out Holy Communion. He may, in some circumstances, preside over a Eucharistic celebration outside the Mass (e.g., in hospitals and prisons). Lay people can also do this. The deacon cannot say Mass, however, since he has no power to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Nor does he have the authority to forgive sins in the sacrament of reconciliation. The deacon does routinely perform baptisms, marriages, funeral rites, and sacramental and ritual blessings. As minister of the Word, the deacon reads the Gospel at Mass and sometimes preaches the homily. As minister of service, the deacon's duties are

limited only by the human imagination. Just a few examples: Deacons serve as chaplains in prisons, hospitals, and nursing homes; they serve in soup kitchens and in programs for alcoholics; they serve as chaplains to police and fire services.

As minister of the Word, of sacrament, and of service, the deacon is the Church's bridge between the ordained clergy and the lay people of the Christian community.

Deacon, priest, and bishop are three unique and distinct orders in the Church. All three share the common bond of being clerics and all three share the common ministries of service, sacrament, and Word. All three receive the sacrament of Holy Orders, and are ordained to teach, to sanctify, and to govern the people of God. But the priest is primarily minister of sacrament — most especially of the Holy Eucharist. And the bishop is primarily teacher — minister of the Word. The deacon is primarily servant.

For centuries, the priest was the only representative of the institutional Church routinely encountered in society, and he will always be the foremost representative. Permanent deacons, however, can project the church into the workaday world, the market place, the community, the family. We deacons have more frequent exposure to some situations than do priests.

In the work environment, the deacon is an ordained clergyman, an "official" representative of the Church, right there at the next desk or workbench. The priest doesn't fit this situation because he isn't there. With the deacon the Church is coming into the workplace. Sometimes deacons can help with family matters because they themselves usually have families, too.

Certainly lay people have a right and obligation to bring the Church into the workplace and into the family. But deacons have the authority of orders; they represent the Church in a way that the laity don't share. Deacons can be a bridge between the laity, especially the unchurched, and the full-time clergy. To some, priests are "holy men." We deacons are just "regular guys." Ideally, the deacon should be an example, a leader of the laity. We usually fall short of the ideal. But in working as the bridge, we can at least be useful servants.

**A Welcome Dinner for our New Pastor,
Fr. LaHood is being organized. It is
tentatively scheduled the weekend of
July 18 or 25.**

**Watch for more announcements as we
finalized the date and venue. Please
continue to sign-up if think you can come.
We thank you for your patience and
understanding.**