



## **HISTORY OF THE DIACONATE**

**The Permanent Diaconate is new and yet it is very old. The Diaconate had its origins in apostolic times and flourished in the first four centuries of the Church's history. From the beginning, the role of the deacon was associated with service to the members of the church. The deacon performed duties in collaboration with the bishop and priests. More specifically, the deacon in the early church was concerned with three tasks: he assisted in celebrating liturgy; he gave instructions in the faith, and directed charitable work.**

**While the Diaconate continued for many centuries as an effective part of the church's ministry, it was not destined to retain its original importance. During the middle ages, for very complex reasons, the Diaconate as permanent ministry disappeared. In the Eastern Church, the deacon's liturgical roles were fully retained, though the role of serving the needs of the community was gradually obscured. In the Western Church, the Diaconate became a stepping-stone to the priesthood. We call these deacons transitional.**

**It was the second Vatican Council that restored the Diaconate as a permanent ministry in the Church. In the discussion before, and at the council that led to this decision, three primary motives were at work. The first was a desire to restore to the Church the full complement of active apostolic ministries. A second motive was the desire to integrate and strengthen with sacramental ordination and grace those who were, in fact, already exercising diaconal functions. The third goal was to provide ministers for those regions where functions vital to the church's life could not be carried out.**

**In 1967, Pope Paul VI re-established the permanent Diaconate in the Latin Rite, and placed the decision regarding its local restoration in the hands of each nation's Episcopal conference. On May 2, 1968, the U.S. Catholic bishops petitioned the Holy See for permission to establish the permanent Diaconate in our country. They received a favourable response on August 30, 1968.**

**In 1980, the Diocese of Burlington ordained twelve men to the Permanent Diaconate, and many have been ordained since then. Presently there are forty Permanent Deacons who serve in our Diocese. Indeed the Deacons of our Diocese have been participating eagerly and creatively in the Church's pastoral activity. Since it was restored, the Diaconate, especially in the United States, has developed in response to the pastoral needs of the Church. There are presently over fifteen thousand deacons serving in the United States.**

**The Permanent Diaconate in the United States is over 35 years old, and in the life of the church that is considered a short period of time. The newness of the Permanent Diaconate Program is both its challenge and its hope! In a certain sense, the Permanent Diaconate is still in the process of defining itself. The experience of those men already ordained (and their wives and families) is the reservoir for future development. As the restored Diaconate takes root in the community, it will bring many blessings and teach many lessons. As diaconal ministry grows, it will help to deepen in all believers their own baptismal commitment. Ministry is not the privilege of the few, but the vocation of all who, by baptism, share the life of the Risen Christ. Born in the first century and reborn in our own time, the permanent Diaconate is one more way in which the followers of Jesus can continue to love as He did. Vatican II calls all believers to renew themselves with a fresh faith and a generous love. The restoration of the permanent Diaconate brings promise that the new Pentecost, for which Pope John XXIII lived and worked and prayed, will be realized more fully in our day.**