



## FROM THE DEACON'S DESK

### **History of the Permanent Diaconate [Part 1]**

Most Catholics know about the first Deacons; Acts 6 tells their story. The Hebrew Christian community had a system in place to support its widows. The Hellenist [Jewish Christians who had long lived in Greece] lacked such a system and felt their widows were ignored. The Hellenists nominated seven men - the first deacons. Among those seven was the church's first martyr [proto-martyr] – St Stephen.

Many people know of St. Lawrence – another deacon and martyr. He lived in the mid-200s. If you've visited Rome, you may have visited the church built over his tomb – it's one of Rome's seven principal churches. He's mostly remembered for his deathbed request. The Roman Emperor Valerian had him placed on a gridiron and suspended over a bed of hot coals. After many hours, Lawrence looked at his torturers and said "It is well done. Turn me over!"

The most well-known of the church's deacons is probably St. Francis of Assisi, although sometimes people are surprised to learn he was a deacon.

Permanent deacons were a vital vocation in the early church. Between 432 and 684, 34 of the 37 popes were deacons at the time of their election. The diaconate remained part of the church hierarchy until the 10<sup>th</sup> century and by the 13<sup>th</sup> century became a step on the path to the priesthood instead of a permanent order. The seeds of the beginning of its restoration were sown in 1940 in Nazi Germany.

It was then that the Nazis decided to imprison all clergy at Dachau [just outside Munich]. As 1945 and the war's end approached, the priests began to talk about what would happen post-war; "How," they discussed, "could the church respond to the great needs of the survivors". They discussed the concrete needs, things like food, clothing, and shelter and wondered how the church could respond. They knew there were too few priests – almost 1,000 of them had perished right there at Dachau – to do everything that would be needed.

Searching for answers, they turned to the first source the church always consults, scripture. It didn't take them long to turn to Acts and read about how the apostles – facing a very similar dilemma – had solved their problem. They returned to their discussion many times, and by the time of their liberation, they were ready to make their appeal to restore the diaconate as a permanent order. It would be two more decades before their vision would take form.

If you would like to receive a notice when a new "Deacon's Desk" is published in the bulletin or the web page, Sign-up for the "Deacon's Desk" Flocknote site.