



From the Deacon's Desk

History of the Permanent Diaconate [Part 2 – continued from 12 May]

From 1938 to its liberation in 1945, the Dachau concentration camp held a total of 2,579 priests; 1,034 died there. As reports on the state of the war in Europe reached the priests, they turned their attention to the question of how the church could meet the people's needs when the war ended. Using scripture as their inspiration, they concluded that the church once again needed permanent deacons.

Post war Germany was far worse than the priests imagined. To meet the massive needs, some of the former Dachau priests formed "Deacon Circles" – groups of lay people and clergy who banded together to serve the spiritual and temporal needs of the war's survivors. Their success, and the continued call from other surviving priests, reinforced the potential of the diaconate. In 1957, Pope Pius XII spoke favorably about restoring the diaconate as a permanent order but felt the time wasn't right. Then, when Pope John XXIII called for Vatican II, formal discussions regarding renewal the diaconate began. Some of the Dachau priests were now bishops and would help shape the discussions within the council. The first of those discussions took place in 1963, then on 21 Nov 1964, the church fathers voted 2,151 to 5 to approve *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* which opened the door to the restoration of the diaconate. It defines deacons and their responsibilities in this manner: "At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed "not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service". For strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the bishop and his group of priests they serve in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God".

Pope Paul VI formally authorized ordination to the permanent diaconate in 1967, and the U.S. bishops received permission to renew the order the next year. Now, over 50 years later, there are over 18,000 deacons in the U.S. with some 2,500 men in formation annually. There are 27 deacons in our diocese. Diaconal ministries are as varied as the deacons themselves. You'll find deacons in jails and prisons, working in soup kitchens, hospice programs, nursing homes, marriage preparation programs, and any number of other ministries. You can hear them preach, and watch them officiate at baptisms, weddings and funerals. They serve the people of God in liturgy, word, and charity wherever and however they're needed.

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