

# Permanent Deacons: An Idea from the Past Rejuvenating Church

By Beth Spring  
Religion Today

Washington — Reviving a church program last seen in the fifth century sounds like a far-fetched way to rekindle interest and participation in a congregation.

But with their permanent diaconate program, restored in the United States in 1968, Roman Catholics have done just that.

In fact, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops reported recently that "the number of ordained permanent deacons in the United States rose by nearly 1,000 from 1978 to 1979." On Oct. 31, 1979, there were 4,028 deacons in the country as well as 2,621 candidates for the diaconate.

Most of these men — the program is not open to women — are married and hold full-time secular jobs. Sam Taub, a deacon since 1973 who works for the Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, said a deacon's first priority is his wife and family; next, his job; and third, his diaconal ministry.

Deacons who have their priorities in order "stimulate the laity to get more involved," Taub said. Primarily, they set an example through an active service ministry and often through delivery of the Sunday homily. An ordained deacon can perform every function of a priest with the exception of hearing confession, celebrating Mass, and anointing the sick.

Fully one-third of the deacons in the United States are active in ministries to the sick and aged, according to Taub. A growing number reach out to jail inmates and families of the incarcerated.

Deacons average 47 years of age, and are generally "well-established" in their churches and communities, Taub said. He said his office does "amazingly little recruiting. Where deacons exist, they attract others to the program."

Once he is attracted, a candidate undergoes three years of training, mainly of evening classes. The training process culminates in ordination, and it may include an internship with the deacon-to-be's parish.

The account of the first deacons in the Christian community occurs in Chapter 6 of Acts, when the number of believers was increasing tremendously and the Greek widows began complaining that the Hebrew widows were receiving preferential treatment.

The disciples agreed among themselves that their preaching of God's Word could not be neglected while they looked after other needs in their midst. So, seven men were selected and ordained by the laying of hands, and were charged with ministries of service.

By the second and third centuries, Taub explained, the role of the deacon often evolved into a close relationship with the bishop, and this led to competition between priests and deacons.

"In Rome, deacons held the church's pursestrings, and

quite a bit of friction developed over that," Taub said. Eventually, as religious orders emerged in the fourth and fifth centuries, "deacons became little more than liturgical ornaments," and finally faded completely from the church hierarchy.

People see the deacon at Mass, and might assume he's just a "mini-priest," Taub said, without being aware of his wider areas of ministry.

But for the most part, deacons are welcomed into fellowship and service by priests who cannot be everywhere at one time.

The ministry of the diaconate was restored to the Catholic Church by the Second Vatican Council in 1964. Four years later, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops asked the Pope to authorize restoration of the program in the United States, and permission was granted within months.

Fr. Paul J. Cuddy



On the Right Side

## Congregations All Marked By Diversity

Do you find preaching difficult?

The main difficulty is in fitting a discourse to the receptivity of a diverse people. Consider the diversity in an ordinary parish, in knowledge, comprehension, interests, skills. Msgr. Hartley taught us: "The purpose of the pulpit is to encourage people to take one step forward in the spiritual life. The diverse housewives, parents, teachers, athletes, factory workers, hotcha teenagers, children: all have a common nature. Under God's grace each can be moved by good and repelled by evil. Each person has the same problems inherent in our fallen nature from the seven deadly sins: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, envy, gluttony, sloth. We have to adapt the message to the diversity of hearers."

What advice would you give to a young priest about preaching?

None. Few people are receptive to even well-intentioned suggestions. We priests lose out greatly because no one candidly critiques our talks. The best advice I ever got about preaching came from Father Stafford of Ovid over 30 years ago. He said, "A good

sermon is like a moving picture, a continuous series of pictures." The concrete illustration surely helps listeners to understand the theme.

What do you think of humor in the pulpit?

That depends on the preacher. The late Abp. Hickey was a magnificent and inspiring preacher, but humor would not fit his style. Abp. Sheen, and even more so, the English Jesuit Father Bernard Basset, use humor effectively. In all congregations there are people with tensions, worries, indecisions, hostilities. Humor touches the will as well as the intellect, making the listener more receptive of the theme. For example: many people do not examine their consciences very well before going to confession. In an instruction on the Examen I like to preface it with a story I picked up in Ireland. "A new priest came to the parish. Two crafty Cork men decided to test him for confession. So Pat said to Tim, 'You go first and try him out.' Five minutes later Tim came out of the confessional beaming broadly. 'How was he, Tim?' 'Clever. One of the cleverest. Sixty seconds more in there and he'd have had something on me.'" The humor better disposes people for the doctrine, the instruction and the practice.

## Adoration Rites Set

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament will be held at Blessed Sacrament Church, beginning at noon, on Thursday, May 1.

The devotions open with exposition of the Blessed

Sacrament, followed by recitation of the rosary at 12:15 p.m. Benediction is celebrated at 5 p.m. preceding the parish's regular 5:20 p.m. celebration of Mass. The devotions include prayers for the fidelity of priests.

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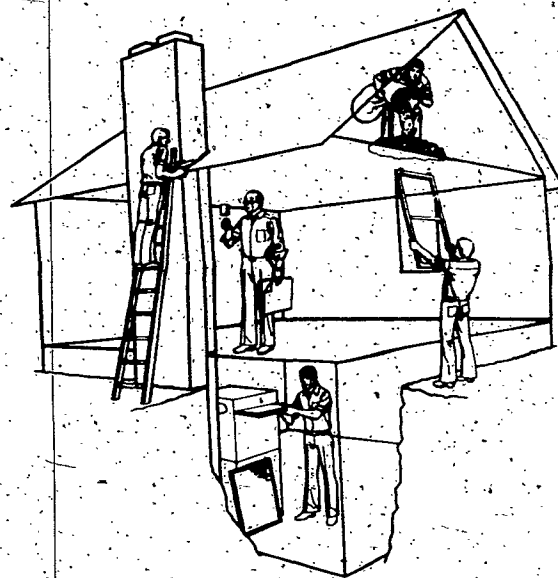
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\*Includes income from all sources, including Social Security for all persons, related or unrelated, residing at the applicant's address, who are over 18 and not full time students.

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