

COURIER-JOURNAL

NEWSPAPER OF THE DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

Our First Permanent Deacons



Members of the 1982 graduating class of the Permanent Diaconate: seated, from left, John Medico, Anthony Mercadel, William Maune, Dan Abballe, Stanley Douglas, William Dougherty, Anthony Marini. Standing, from left, Steven Carroll, Stanley Zawacki, Kenneth Scarciotta, Robert Solan, John Prave, Daniel

Kinsky, Leo Kester, Patrick Graybill, Nemesio Martinez, Edward Sergeant, Ray Defendorf, Julio Vasquez, James Whitford, Robert Dizer, Eliseo Melendez, Carlos Vargas. Absent from photo: George Welch.

'Call It a Street Ministry'

Msgr. George A. Cocuzzi has been director of the diocesan Permanent Diaconate Program since its inception in 1978. Carmen J. Viglicci, editor of the Courier-Journal, asked him some commonly posed questions about permanent deacons.

Q. What is the historical background of the permanent diaconate?

A. It goes back to New Testament times where you find mention of bishops, presbyters and deacons. All three seem to have evolved very early on in the Church from a whole variety of ministries and all had specific roles in the ordering of the Church — that is in its building up and coordinating the many ministries of the Church.

Q. What kind of ministries?

A. Teacher, prophet — a whole variety of ministries mentioned by St. Paul when he talks about the spirit and a variety of gifts — those who are teachers, those who are prophets, those who give counsel . . .

In the early centuries, in post-New Testament times, the structuring of the Church began to be more clearly emphasized. The bishops and presbyters (priests) had as their chief function the building up of Church community and the deacon's role was to assist the bishop and through him the presbyters. In terms of the specific ordering of the Church, the main thrust of the ministry was always in the area of charity — you might call it a street ministry — it dealt with the needs of the people.

The idea of deacon embodies the whole "servant" aspect of the Church. That doesn't mean someone who serves as a domestic but someone who makes sure others are taken care of. Along with that

servanthood, deacons very early shared with the bishop and presbyters the task of evangelizing and preaching — also baptism and a participatory role in the Eucharist. The bishop needs the deacons to reach out and fulfill the needs of others — he also may send deacons to assist priests in parishes.

For the first five or six centuries in the early Church the diaconate had its own particular dynamism, its own reason for existence. But the servant aspect began to diminish as deacons more and more took on liturgical functions. By the ninth or tenth centuries, all that remained of the diaconate as an order was a sort of liturgical visibility — it came to be viewed as nothing more than a step to the priesthood.

The order always remained permanent, in a sense, but those ordained did not expect to stay in it. It wasn't until the Second Vatican Council that the concept of rectifying the diaconate emerged so that people would be ordained who saw the diaconal ministry as their vocation and an end in itself.

Q. Why did Vatican II take this action?

A. For various reasons. One rather theological reason was that only with a permanent diaconate would the threefold character of Holy Orders become apparent again.

But the Church Fathers also had some practical considerations — 1. With the lack of priests in many areas, the restored diaconate would allow ordained ministry in those places, and, 2. Some people already were de facto deacons but without the grace of ordination.

During the "decline" of the diaconate as

an order, for some reason all ministry came to be seen as the province of the priest. There is a connection between the revival of the diaconate and the rise of the lay ministry through Vatican II — one of the duties of the deacon is to promote the ministry of the lay person — to empower people to perform the general ministry incumbent on all Christians.

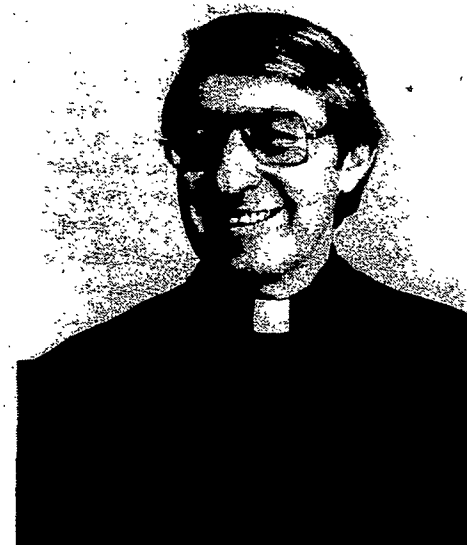
Q. What kind of training are candidates for the diaconate required to take?

A. There are three components. First is the formation of spiritual development on the individual. His own development as to being a Christian in terms of wife and family, if he is married, and as to his relationship with others in terms of service — all leading to a perception of himself as always being a ministry person.

In addition, there is a requirement that each candidate have his own private spiritual director — without this he would not be able to function as a Christian. In most cases, it is a priest, but it need not be.

The second component is the academic part. This consists of basic courses in Scripture, doctrinal and pastoral theology and some professional courses in canon law and homiletics.

The third component is field education. In each of the three summer breaks during the four-year course, the deacon is assigned to work in diocesan institutions for 10 or 12 hours a week under the supervision of the chaplain or pastor. There are two placements in institutions such as jails, hospitals, psychiatric centers or such diocesan departments as the Tribunal, Social Ministries, Family Life, Rural Ministries, etc.



Msgr. George A. Cocuzzi



Sister M. Hilaire Gaelens

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