

Deacons' role increases; candidates' numbers drop

By Ines Pinto Alicea
NC News

WASHINGTON — A new report shows that the number of permanent deacons in the United States has nearly doubled in the last eight years and that deacons are playing an ever increasing role in Catholic ministry, said an official at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The report also showed, however, that the number of candidates for the diaconate dropped during the same time period.

Constantino Ferriola, a deacon and executive director of the NCCB Secretariat for the Permanent Diaconate, said that as the picture of ministry in the church changes with the shortage of priests, deacons are playing a greater role.

"I encourage people to pray for vocations to the priesthood," Ferriola said. "Permanent deacons can never be substitutes for priests. But people are quite naturally turning to deacons and lay ministers because those two ministries are growing."

The report, prepared by Ferriola's office, showed that the number of deacons rose from 4,656 in October 1980 to 8,719 in October 1988, while candidates for the diaconate dropped from 2,514 to 1,828 during the same time period.

"The number of deacons rose because each year more and more dioceses have (diaconate) formation programs," Ferriola said. "Three dioceses started new programs in 1988."

The decrease in candidates can be attributed in part, he said, to several dioceses

Council rules on auxiliary offices

By Agostino Bono
NC News

VATICAN CITY — A Vatican legal council has ruled that auxiliary bishops cannot be presidents of national bishops' conferences or regional groupings that have some of the powers of a national conference.

"You could say, without intending to offend, that they are second-class members" of bishops' conferences, said a statement on the ruling written by Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara, president of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts.

The ruling was made by the council on Jan. 19, 1988, and approved by Pope John Paul II on May 23, 1988. It was made public March 9, 1989.

The three-sentence ruling said auxiliary bishops cannot be elected as conference presidents nor to any post in which they would serve as acting president in the absence of the president.

The ruling applies to all national bishops' conferences and regional groupings within a nation that have been granted the powers of a bishops' conference by the Vatican.

Accompanying the ruling was a five-page statement by Cardinal Castillo Lara. It said auxiliary bishops cannot be presidents because they do not head a diocese or equivalent jurisdictions and that the function of the bishops' conference is to be a pastoral extension of the diocese.

Only bishops have "direct, immediate and personal pastoral responsibility for the section of the people of God under their care," said Cardinal Castillo Lara.

"The task of the auxiliary bishop is to help," he added.

"Auxiliary bishops as such do not have any autonomous pastoral responsibility in dioceses," he said.

The cardinal cited Canon 454, which says that auxiliary bishops do not have deliberative votes in bishops' conferences unless so granted by conference statutes.

It is "illogical and, I would say, incompatible to entrust to an auxiliary bishop the responsibility of heading the bishops' conference because he has never been a member in full right," he said.

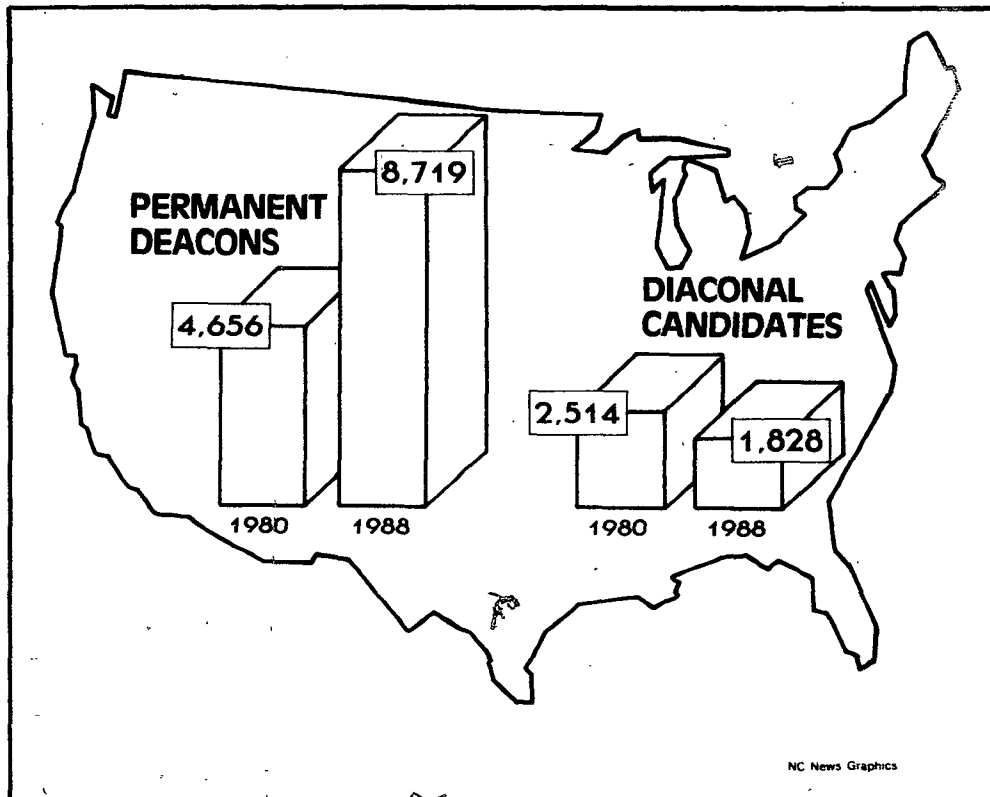
whose diaconate programs were created in the early 1970s having stopped accepting candidates while they evaluate and modernize their programs.

"That's a healthy sign that we're looking at what we're doing and making sure that what we are doing is for the good of the church," Ferriola said. "It's a natural growth process."

Another reason is that 56 dioceses, 11 more than last year, have developed integrated programs for lay ministers and deacons, Ferriola said. Men who want to be deacons first go through the lay-minister program, delaying their entry into the diaconate program.

Ferriola said he expects to see more "collaborative teams" in the church, consisting of a priest, deacon, lay ministers and religious who would work together to serve several parishes.

Ferriola said 26 of the 145 dioceses with permanent-diaconate programs account for 50 percent of the deacons in the United States, with the Archdiocese of Chicago having the most at 536. Ferriola said the reason for the concentration of deacons in certain areas is that some dioceses have more resources for a large diaconate program and others have older programs.



Decreasing numbers of candidates for the permanent diaconate contrast with their ever-increasing role in church and parish ministry, according to a new report from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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