

Dear Fr. Kerper

What is a lay deacon?

►► **Dear Father Kerper:** My parish now has a lay deacon who has taken over some of the work once done only by our priest. He baptizes babies and even gives the homily at Mass sometimes. I understand that things can change in the church, but how can priests suddenly be replaced by lay deacons?

This is an excellent question, and certainly one whose time has come. There is no such thing as a “lay deacon.” In recent years, the Catholic bishops of the United States have ordained more than 15,000 men to the permanent diaconate. About 25 serve in New Hampshire.

Though permanent deacons seem new, the order of deacons is one of the church’s oldest institutions.

Notice that I use the term “order of deacons.” The word “order” means that a particular group within the church has a sacred origin and is an essential part of the church’s permanent structure. Men become deacons through *ordination* – “being ordered” – by the bishop. As such, all deacons are members of the clergy, along with bishops and priests.

In Acts 6:1-6, St. Luke describes how the Apostles themselves established the diaconate, a term derived from the Greek word *diakonos*, meaning domestic service. In fact, waiting on tables was the original task of deacons. As the church developed, deacons became the official dispensers of charity. We see this most clearly in the story of Saint Lawrence, the Roman deacon who outraged the emperor by giving the goods of the church to the poor, rather than the state.

While service has always been the deacon’s primary ministry, tradition indicates that deacons were also ministers of word and sacrament. For example, Saint Stephen, deacon and first martyr, preached publicly. And tradition shows that deacons distributed the precious blood at Mass. Today, deacons can also baptize, serve as the church’s official witness at weddings, and offer blessings.

Deacons appear to be “new” because, for many centuries, the priesthood embodied all forms of official ministry. The distinctiveness and diversity of the triple form of ordained ministry – bishop, priest, and deacon – became virtually invisible. Then the Second Vatican Council restored the diaconate as a perma-

nent order, thereby recovering the diversity of ordained ministries present at the church’s origins. As such, deacons are not “half-priests” or “vested laity” who fill ministerial gaps. Rather, the visible presence of deacons in parish life shows forth the variety of distinctive ordained ministries working together in the body of Christ.

The Diocese of Manchester has just begun a process to expand the order of deacons within New Hampshire. The following document explains our vision of the diaconate.

— Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth.



If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail editor@parablemag.com.

Who is a permanent deacon and what does he do? The Identity and Ministry of the Permanent Deacon

All members of the Catholic Church are called to share their gifts as Christ did. By virtue of baptism, each and every member of the Catholic Church enjoys new life in Christ, a sharing in His divine life. In light of this participation, all the baptized share in His mission and priesthood – to sanctify, to teach, to guide, that is, to minister to others, according to the gifts each has received.

Ministry is a tapestry. We need all the threads to appreciate the richness and diversity of the whole, and each of these threads is woven together in Christ. We are a diocese that encourages *all ministries*, lay and ordained, for the building up of the Body of Christ.

God calls some men through the Church to ordained ministry: bishops, priests, and deacons. Bishops and priests are ordained to the ministerial priesthood; deacons are ordained for a ministry of service. All receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

Thus, the deacon is an ordained minister of the Church. He is neither a layman nor a priest. The deacon is a cleric ordained for the service of God’s people in communion with the bishop and his body of priests. He works collaboratively with bishops, priests, and existing staff members of a parish or institution. They work together to build up the Body of Christ.

All ordained ministers in the Church are called to serve