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Diocese of Palm Beach

FORMATION ASPIRANCY GUIDELINES

ASPIRANCY: PROPAEDEUTIC PERIOD (2 Years) Upon completion of the initial inquiry process, the bishop may accept some inquirers into aspirancy. This aspirant path corresponds to the “propaedeutic period” required by the Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons of the Congregation for Catholic Education. This path is primarily a time to discern the capability and readiness of an aspirant to be nominated to the bishop for acceptance as a candidate for diaconal ordination. The goal of aspirant formation is to enable the aspirant to demonstrate the possibility of a diaconal vocation and an appropriate level of readiness for eventual selection into candidate formation.

The aspirant path of formation is a distinctive program that provides for a thorough discernment of a diaconal vocation. It provides an appropriate initiation into diaconal spirituality; supervised pastoral experiences, and an adequate assessment of the aspirant’s potential to be promoted to candidate formation, and ultimately ordination. This path enables the formation personnel to create an environment in which a wife of a married aspirant can be appropriately prepared to give her consent to his continuation, and more essentially, to ascertain her compatibility with her husband’s diaconal vocation and eventual ministry.

During this period of discernment, the aspirant will be introduced to:

- The study of theology
- A deeper knowledge of the spirituality and ministry of the deacon
- A more attentive discernment of his call
- Regular participation in spiritual direction
- Pastoral ministries of the diocesan Church

This period is also a time to form an aspirant community with its own cycle of meetings and prayer and to assist the aspirant’s family in their support of his formation.

GENERAL CRITERIA FOR DEACON APPLICANTS *“Deacons must be dignified, not deceitful, not addicted to drink, not greedy for sordid gain, holding fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Moreover, they should be tested first; then, if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. Deacons may be married only once and must manage their children and their households well. Thus, those who serve well as deacons gain good standing and much confidence in their faith in Christ Jesus”* (1 Tim 3:8-12; NABRE)

The applicant for the Diaconate in the Diocese of Palm Beach should be a man who shows behavioral patterns (human qualities) that have been discerned among exemplary deacons in the United States (taken from National Directory #166-167):

- A natural inclination of service to the . . . Christian community and to all in need
- Psychological integrity
- A capacity for dialogue, which implies a sense of docility and openness
- The ability to share one’s faith yet listen respectfully to other points of view
- The capacity to listen carefully and without prejudices—respecting people in the context of their religion, race, gender, ethnicity, and culture
- Good communication skills
- A sense of responsibility that includes fulfilling one’s word and completing one’s work
- Self-directed and collaborative accountability
- Balanced and prudent judgment
- Generosity in service; and
- The ability to lead, motivate, facilitate, and animate others into appropriate action and service.

Furthermore, according to the National Directory, the profile is completed with certain spiritual and evangelical qualities. Among these are:

- A sound faith
- Good Christian reputation
- Active involvement in the Church’s apostolate
- Personal integrity, maturity, and holiness
- Regular participation in the Church’s sacramental life
- Evidence of recognized ongoing commitment to the Church’s life and service
- Participation in faith enrichment opportunities (e.g., retreats, days of recollection, adult education programming)
- A positive and stable marriage, if married, or a mature celibate state of life, if single
- Active membership in a Christian community
- Capacity for obedience and fraternal communion
- A deep spirituality and prayer life

Additional criteria in the Diocese of Palm Beach include the following:

- Is formally presented for the diaconate by his pastor
- Has a prayerful disposition
- Is no younger than 30 and no older than 55 years when he submits application for admission to Aspirancy
- Must be physically and psychologically healthy
- If single (not married), is willing to commit to a life of celibacy
- If married, is in a stable, healthy and happy marriage (5 years minimum) and whose wife and children support him in pursuing the diaconate
- Situations of divorce/annulment will require special consideration and approval
- If a convert to the faith; baptism or profession must have been made more than 5 years prior to application
- Has leadership qualities in parish or diocesan ministry for the past 3 years
- Lives within the geographical boundaries of the Diocese of Palm Beach
- Is capable of college level work in theological studies and is open to spiritual and ministerial formation
- Can successfully pass a thorough criminal and background check
- Is capable of giving serious attention and time to theological study, spiritual formation and ministry
- Has a stable work history (5 years min.)
- Is flexible in adapting to the needs of the diocese and must be willing to go where the bishop needs him
- Should demonstrate grateful fidelity to all that the Church teaches

The presence of these qualities, experienced in kindness and humility, may demonstrate a call to the Order of Deacons.

It is expected that applicants have been actively involved in the Church's apostolate in their parish or Catholic agency. This may include programs of educational ministry, liturgical ministry, parish council, social ministry and so forth. Social ministries include serving the poor, the hungry, the sick, the homeless, the handicapped, the elderly, the imprisoned, life issues, etc.

Those men whose first language is not English may have to take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and receive a score that represents an acceptable fluency in English.

DIMENSIONS OF FORMATION

Human Dimension

The goal of a suitable human dimension is to help the deacon develop his human personality in such a way that it becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ. The aspirant path is also a time for a single aspirant to discern his capacity and receptivity for celibacy. For the married aspirant and his wife is a time to assess the quality of their relationship and consider the ramifications of his possible ordination to the diaconate and their married life.

Spiritual Dimension

The aspirant path of formation creates an environment in which the individual is encouraged to grow in his personal relationship with Christ and in his commitment to the Church and its mission in the world. The formation community plays a significant role in spiritual formation. The aspirant path includes the following:

- Celebration of the Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours and Sacrament of Reconciliation
- Time scheduled for private prayer, meditation, and Lectio Divina
- Devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints
- Conferences and workshops on the meaning of authentic obedience, celibacy, and simplicity of life; on a Christian witness in both matrimonial and celibate life to the Church and the world
- An understanding and appreciation of the diaconal vocation, with an ability to articulate this call through the primary ministries of word, liturgy, and charity
- An introduction and experience of the spiritual writings of our Catholic tradition

The goal of spiritual formation is putting on the mind of Christ, thereby establishing and nurturing attitudes, habits, and practices that provide a foundation for the development of an authentic and ongoing spiritual life. It is important that the aspirant and the wife realistically assess how her life, Church service, and family are affected and respected. The enrichment and deepening of the reciprocal and sacrificial love between husband and wife constitute perhaps the most meaningful way the wife of the aspirant is involved in the discernment of her husband's vocation.

The aspirant's spiritual director is critical to the formation process. The director accompanies, supports, and challenges the aspirant in his ongoing conversion. He also assists the aspirant in his relationship with God and his understanding that it is Christ who calls, the Church that affirms his diaconal vocation, and the bishop who responds to that affirmation by the imposition of hands (ordination). Also important in this process is the pastor and the home parish community. The parish and pastor accompany the aspirant and his family in formation, the parish is the primary place to observe the aspirant's relational skills and his practice in pastoral service. The pastor is to provide an assessment of the aspirant and his family.

Intellectual Dimension

The objectives and content for intellectual formation in the aspirant path communicate a deeper knowledge of the faith and church tradition. Aspirants are introduced to the traditions of Catholic philosophy, spirituality, and doctrine, especially the doctrinal understanding of the diaconate, and the three-fold ministry of the deacon. The aspirant learns how to participate in a theological reflection group and how to develop his own ability to apply the Church's teaching on moral matters, especially her social teaching and pressing moral questions that emerge in pastoral ministry. The aspirant is made aware of the needs of the people of the diocesan church and his parish. Workshops on family issues, personal health, time management, caregiving skills, and married and celibate spirituality will contribute to his formation.

Pastoral Dimension

Discernment of the aspirant's gifts for the threefold ministry (word, liturgy, and charity), and of his capacity to make a lifelong commitment to these ministries is the ultimate focus of the pastoral dimension in formation. Pastoral formation introduces the aspirant to the practical services provided by the diocesan church, in particular Catholic Charities. The pastoral placements match the aspirant's experience and need and allow them to explore core issues regarding charity and the social dimension of the Gospel.

ASSESSMENT FOR NOMINATION INTO CANDIDATE FORMATION

The conclusion of the aspirant path of formation is determined through a formal assessment conducted by the Director of Formation and an Advisory board. This takes place when the aspirant, with the consent of his wife and permission of those responsible for his formation, makes a written petition to the bishop for admission to candidacy.

The following documents are to be prepared for petition to admission:

- A personal, handwritten, and signed letter prepared for the diocesan bishop requesting admission to the candidate path of formation, as well as the reception of the Rite of Admission to Candidacy for Holy Orders.
- A personal, handwritten, and signed letter of consent prepared by the married aspirant's wife.

Each aspirant (petitioner) will be interviewed by the Advisory board to appraise his readiness for nomination into the candidate path of formation. The Advisory board also meets with the wife of a married aspirant to ascertain her level of consent and support for her husband's admission into candidate formation. The Director of Formation, on behalf of the Advisory board, will prepare a declaration which outlines the profile of the aspirant's personality and a judgment of suitability. This declaration, accompanied by the individual nomination and rationale of each member of the committee, is prepared for the bishop, who selects those to be admitted to candidate formation.

Rite of Admission to Candidacy

The Rite of Admission to Candidacy for Holy Orders is celebrated as soon as the aspirant is admitted. In this rite, the one who aspires to ordination publicly manifests his will to offer himself to God and the Church to exercise a sacred order. In this way, he is admitted into the ranks of candidates for the Diaconate. The Rite has public character and ecclesial significance. Enrollment among the candidates for Holy Orders is a first official recognition of the positive signs of the vocation to the diaconate, which must be confirmed in the subsequent years of formation.

Academic Study

Academic Study will be conducted at Saint Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary. Classes begin in mid-August and finish in mid-May. Classes will be on Wednesday from 7pm to 10pm for both semesters. One weekend a month for 9 months classes will be held beginning Friday evening 7pm and completed after Mass on Sunday morning around 11:30am. Room and meals will be provided on campus.