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## The Diaconate Today in North America (*Deacon Gerald DuPont*)

**Background:** On August 30, 1968 Pope Paul VI granted the petition of the United States bishops for the restoration of the diaconate to its episcopal conference and Canada followed with its request shortly thereafter. A national study in 1981 (10-12 years of experience) acknowledged that the original purpose of the diaconate and its integration into the life of the Church had not been fully realized as of yet. In a very real sense, the diaconate in North America was still in its infancy. The biggest issues raised in the first study was the lack of understanding of the permanent diaconate on the part of the laity with a lack of acceptance, especially on the part of the priests. Other concerns raised by the 1981 Study was the questionable effectiveness of the diaconate in pastoral ministry in the dioceses and parishes, a danger of elitisms and clericalism and the need for better screening prior to admission and better training during formation. However, based on a second national study in 1995, approximately 25 years after the restoration of the diaconate, the study confirmed the success of the restoration of the diaconate in the United States in terms of the number of vocations and its singular and indispensable service to the local parishes. It found that the restored Diaconate was largely parish based, and had been quite successful in the parish setting. However, the ministry of the diaconate had not broadened out to the diocese or the marketplace, nor had the diaconate been a model of ministries of charity and justice within the diocese or the larger secular world.

**Contributions and Challenges of the Diaconate:** There is no doubt that the restored diaconate has been hugely successful as seen by its steady growth in North America over the last 50 years. And the vast majority of deacons have reported being highly satisfied with their ministry and very encouraging to advise others to also pursue the diaconal vocation. For the most part, the deacons themselves find great satisfaction in their parish work, their pastors who are their supervisors find them increasingly indispensable, and the lay parish leaders view the deacons as increasingly necessary aides and helpers to their busy priests.

To the question of what do deacons do, the previous national studies indicate the deacons do the things that priests did unaided before the restoration of the diaconate. The 1995 Study states emphatically that the diaconate has become the unintentional solution to the decline in priestly vocations. In fact, the number of priests in North America is decreasing at approximately the same rate as the number of deacons is increasing. At the current rates the number of deacons will equal the number of priests in approximately 20 years. But it is quite clear that the reinstatement of the diaconate is not meant to be a remedy for the shortage of priests, because it distorts the meaning of both priesthood and diaconate.

The 1995 Study indicated that the focus of ministry for most of the deacons is largely liturgical and sacramental and they perform these expected tasks quite well. This particular focus is understandable since most deacons spend between 10-20 hours a week in ministry, and the pastor needs help in baptismal preparation and baptism, marriage preparation and weddings, funeral vigils and grave sites, home bound and funeral home visitations, as well as teaching in RCIA and helping out on a regular basis in preaching, just to name a few. With the limited number of hours, the deacon has to give among his other responsibilities to his family and his career, the parish needs are perceived as primary over that of the ministries of social justice and charity, thus mooring the deacon even more to the parish and being identified as indispensable to parish life by deacons, pastors, and laity. Therefore, a primary challenge of the diaconate for the future in North America is to "broaden the diaconate ministries beyond its largely successful and increasingly indispensable adaptations to parish life and emphasize more strongly that deacons through ordination, are called to be model, animator and facilitator of ministries of charity and justice within the local diocesan church" (1995 Study, page 13).

In light of this observation, the National Directory has strongly articulated the three-fold diaconate ministry of Servants of the Word, Servants of the Liturgy and Servants of Charity, and the strong connectedness of all three (ND #36-37). In fact, it

states quite clearly that the diaconal ministries of Word, Liturgy, and Charity “are not to be separated; the deacon is ordained for them all, and no one should be ordained who is not prepared to undertake each in some way” (ND #39). With this in mind a growing number of dioceses in North America are making dual assignments at ordination. The deacon is assigned to a parish with the duties and responsibilities of the deacon spelled out in a Parish Ministry Agreement. At the same time, the deacon is also assigned to a special diocesan ministry of charity with the duties and responsibilities of the deacon spelled out in a Special Diocesan Ministry Agreement. This is an attempt to broaden the ministry of the deacon outside of the parish which the deacon in general has been tied even chained for nearly 50 years. It remains to be seen if this will have a lasting effect on the diaconate in North America.

If we were to give a typical profile of a deacon based on the recent demographics on the diaconate, the deacon would be 64 years old, Caucasian, married, college educated, deeply spiritual, and highly motivated toward service. With this image of the typical deacon, the question needs to be asked what the local church should be looking for in their recruitment and selection of future candidates to the diaconate to insure the church’s sacramental service remains a reality. It seems obvious with the average age of the diaconate at 64 that younger men need to be encouraged to apply to the diaconate. Unfortunately, because of family and career responsibilities, younger men are discouraged from applying. Many younger inquirers are actually discouraged from applying if they have young children at home, thus resulting in the rise of the average age of the diaconate from 49 in 1977 to 64 in 2014.

Because of the growth of the Latino population in North America, presently at 28%, more and more dioceses are offering formation programs in both English and Spanish especially in the theological or intellectual component. And this is necessary because the needs of these growing immigrant communities must always be kept in mind. Paragraphs #166 and #167 in the *National Directory* actually extensively list the qualities that should be discerned in the person to consider for the diaconate based on it nearly 50 years of experience. One of the characteristics of an exemplary deacon given is “the ability to lead, motivate, facilitate and animate others into appropriate action and service” (ND #166). With this in mind, it seems advisable to invite second and third generations of immigrant families with particular language skills as well as immersion in a particular culture to come forward to serve those of their brothers and sisters who have more recently arrived in this country. However, the emphasis must be on the uniqueness of the diaconate vocation – not based just on the current needs, but based on the deacons’ ministry of charity and justice, being always true to three-fold ministry of Word, Liturgy and Charity.

<b>Summary of Statistical Data</b>	<b>United States</b>	<b>Canada</b>	<b>Total</b>
Total Population	321,420,000	35,200,000	356,620,000
Catholic Population	71,428,000	12,700,000	84,128,000
Catholic Percentage	22.2%	36.1%	23.6%
Number of Bishops	462	136	598
Number of Priests	38,260	7,283	45,543
Number of Deacons	18,704	1,093	19,797
Number of Dioceses	195	72	267
Dioceses with Deacons	177	50	227
Percent of Dioceses with Deacons	90.8%	69.4%	85.0%
Dioceses with Formation Programs	172	21	193
Percent of Diocese with Formation Programs	88.2%	29.2%	72.3%