

The Diaconate, a "plastic" ministry

A program of ongoing formation for deacons and spouses in the Dioceses of Turin and Susa

by Deacon Giorgio Agagliati
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Abstract

This experience concerns a three-year ongoing formation program for the deacons of the Dioceses of Turin and Susa (Piedmont, Northwest Italy), along with their spouses, focusing on **two fundamental elements: diaconal spirituality and a "plastic" conception of ministry.**

The program started in 2023/24 pastoral year and was inspired by a speech by Cardinal Roberto Repole, Archbishop of Turin and Bishop of Susa. During a diocesan convocation on June 9, 2023, while presenting the theological and pastoral guidelines for diocesan development in the coming years, he defined the permanent diaconate as a "plastic ministry."

The report reveals a significantly "unprecedented" approach, combining more "traditional" contributions (biblical, theological, ecclesiological) with contributions from "secular" expertise, in the belief that today the ministry of the deacon and the witness that he and his spouse are increasingly called, both within and outside the ecclesial community, to address a profoundly changing reality, which requires spiritual soundness and pastoral creativity.

About the Author

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1. Ongoing Formation: a strong point

The Diocese of Turin reinstated the permanent diaconate over half a century ago, among the first in Italy, in implementation of Lumen Gentium 29, at the urging of then-Archbishop Cardinal Michele Pellegrino.

From the beginning, alongside the formation of candidates and their spouses in the discernment process toward ministry, much attention has been paid to the ongoing formation of deacons in service and couples.

The experience presented here therefore follows a well-established path, a journey that has followed the evolution of the implementation of this "rediscovered ministry" with attention to the signs of the times.

Formation meetings typically take place between October and June, with four to five sessions, in addition to the annual spiritual exercises and specific programs for spouses.

The design and implementation of the formation programs is the responsibility of the Bishop's Delegate for the Permanent Diaconate and the Coordinating Body, elected by the deacons and assisting him. The Coordinating Body also includes two wives.

In this context, I have been entrusted with the task of designing and preparing the program for deacons and couples, which I do with the help of a small commission, while the two wives, along with some others, develop specific formation programs for the wives of deacons (that are not covered in this paper).

2. A challenging novelty

On May 7, 2022, Roberto Repole was ordained Bishop, after Pope Francis designated him Archbishop of Turin and Bishop of Susa in February (the two neighboring dioceses are thus united *in persona Episcopi*).

The following year, Archbishop Repole (later appointed Cardinal in 2024) convened an interdiocesan assembly to present the pastoral guidelines for the coming years and the theological and ecclesiological criteria that inspire them.

In this context, he defined the ministry of permanent deacons as follows:

"The ministry of deacons should be thought of as a flexible ministry, that is, one that envisages different ways of implementing it, also in relation to the possibilities and talents of each individual. One can imagine a ministry that is primarily at the service of nurturing that fabric of relationships between believers and between believers and others, which in the past was taken for granted and constituted the basis of Christian communities, and which in the current context, however, must be continually recreated."

The Archbishop established flexibility as the key to interpreting the diaconate in a Church that is renewing itself and rediscovering its synodal nature.

This approach, in some ways unprecedented, has attracted attention and even raised some questions among the deacons of the two dioceses.

Conceiving the diaconate in terms of plasticity could, in fact, be disturbing to those conditioned by an institutional vision of precisely delineated and jealously guarded roles, prerogatives, tasks, and powers, according to a typically clerical attitude.

If a deacon allows himself to be influenced by this attitude, the creativity evoked by the image of a plastic ministry can frighten or even annoy, that is, it can be misinterpreted as yet another sign—in the brief history of the restoration of the permanent diaconate to the Church by Vatican II—of a difficulty in conceiving it and applying it to the concrete life of the Church.

This is not the case. Indeed, the very concept of the plasticity of the diaconate appears to guarantee that the role of the deacon—and alongside him, that of his spouse—is not conceived in a reductive and/or indefinite manner, but it is rather seen in an open and creative way.

2.1. Spirituality and Plasticity

Hence the idea of dedicating a structured period of ongoing formation for deacons and couples to exploring the theme of plasticity, combining this strand with that of spirituality, also seen in its various aspects in the life of deacons and couples.

The underlying concept is that plasticity requires cultivating some very concrete skills, but it is not merely a practical way of implementing ministry: it is also, and above all, an ecclesologically grounded conception of the diaconate; in turn, spirituality cannot be disembodied, separated from the context and concrete experience of ministry, which it must, indeed, inspire.

The proposal is based on an in-depth reflection on the plasticity evoked by the Bishop's intervention. This reflection draws on Acts 6, with the designation of the Seven read from a non-reductive perspective, that is, not confined to charitable works, the management of ecclesial structures, and the liturgy.

A reductive reading of Acts 6 is, unfortunately, not uncommon. And it risks making us forget that Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned not for setting the widows' table, but for how he proclaimed the Good News. And that it was Philip who opened the "table" of the Word to

Candace's eunuch and administered baptism to him. Yet he too had been chosen to serve at tables.

It is precisely in Philip that we see the embryonic form of ministry. The Spirit brings him back where he needs to be, and when he has completed the task assigned to him, he "transfers" him to a new place and to a new service (see Acts 8:26-40).

The action of the Spirit in Acts is described as a physical intervention, in which Philip is literally moved from one place to another and it is the Spirit who decides for him what needs to be done. But what interests us is **the core of truth** that is valid everywhere and always: the capacity for discernment that the Spirit activates and sustains in those who allow Him to work within them. Let us not forget that the requirement of the Seven is to be "filled with the Holy Spirit," a fullness invoked and mediated by the laying on of hands by the Apostles (Acts 6:3-4).

The ministry of the deacon is flexible also and above all in this sense. And this means that in being available, an important role is played not only by being available to the bishop, the presbytery, and the community, but above all by being available to the discernment triggered by the Spirit. That is, the deacon himself sees what needs to be done, plans how to do it or have it done by awakening and enhancing the talents of others, and engages in discussion and suggestions.

2.2. The Skills of Plasticity

This dynamic of plasticity undoubtedly includes **two dimensions of ministry**, which are not always adequately valued: **active presence in the world**, from work to the social spheres in which the deacon and his family regularly interact, and the ability to **open new avenues and devise new initiatives** for an outgoing Church.

This theological and pastoral reading of ministry must clearly engage with the characteristics and skills that characterize plasticity, which we can borrow from the sciences and the arts. In particular, the following should be considered:

- from the field of **materials physics**, the ability to change in response to stress, while remaining true to themselves;
- from that of **embryology**, the ability of cells to orient themselves toward "destinies," or rather, destinations different from those previously envisioned or traditionally seen as predetermined;
- from **neurophysiology**, the ability to adapt to changing internal and external conditions: a trait that appears specifically suited to nurturing relationships.
- from the **figurative arts**, the ability to highlight the presence of the Church through one's own presence. This last point is delicate, as it must not become a quest for self-prominence. It includes, along with the previous one, a talent scouting role, the ability to identify and nurture talents and to animate the community.

Identifying and cultivating the skills of ministry plasticity requires taking them into account in the curriculum for ministry preparation and ongoing formation, and, above all, in the approach to the theology of ministry and ecclesiology.

3. A Three-Year Program

Thus, the project for a three-year ongoing formation program for deacons and couples took shape, aiming to develop the dimensions of **spirituality** and **ministry plasticity** in parallel, viewed in their interrelationship.

In the first year (2023/24), spirituality was given primary focus, centering it on the powerful theme of **fraternity** proposed by the Archbishop to the entire diocesan community.

The theme of plasticity was introduced in the first year and expanded in the following year (2024/25).

The third year (2025/26, ongoing) brings spirituality back to the forefront in its concrete forms for deacons and couples.

Each year's program is divided into four to five half-day meetings, plus a five-day series of spiritual exercises. The final meeting is held with the presence of the Bishop, while the other four focus on presentations by qualified experts on the topics covered.

First year, 2023/2024: Fraternity and Communication

In the first year, fraternity was explored as an experiential, evangelically grounded approach in four areas: in the couple, in the family, in the parish community and/or in another ecclesial service to which one is sent, in the context of life and relationships (social, work-related, etc.). These four areas were considered in every speaker's presentation and in subsequent group work.

1. Christ our "better brother," we brothers and sisters of Christ

Guided by our Auxiliary Bishop, we reflected on the fraternity of Christ and in Christ along this "path":

- a. Christ is like us in all things except sin.
 - b. The Son lives the fatherhood of God in two dimensions: "my Father," as the Only-Begotten Son; "our Father," as the "Son of Man."
 - c. The Father is always "ours."
 - d. Fraternity flows from this; it is not the beginning, but the consequence.
- It is therefore a fraternity that is not sentimental or social, but existential.

2. The Eucharist, Center of Fraternity

The convening of a diocesan conference on "Eucharistic Centers" was providential. We participated as a diaconal community, and the conference focused on the possibility of offering the celebration of the Eucharist in the community, taking into account situations where the continuous presence of priests is not possible. This calls into question, also on a practical level, the exercise of fraternity to allow everyone to participate in the community's central and founding moment.

3. Brothers and Sisters Among Us in Christ

We asked a permanent deacon from Rome, who is also a renowned psychotherapist, to illustrate *"The Need for Fraternity and How to Find It in Today's Society"*. Through dialogue and group work, we explored the manifestation of this need and the possible responses of deacons and spouses in their specific settings.

4. Communicating in the Jungle

In the fourth meeting of the year, plasticity came to the fore, with an initial focus on the importance of mastering the new and complex universe - or, indeed, "jungle" - of social communication: social media, the metaverse, augmented reality, and applications of artificial intelligence were illustrated and concretely exemplified by a pair of super-experts.

5. Spiritual Exercises: "The Three Times of Jesus"

The spiritual assistant of the Diaconate Community in Italy led the spiritual exercises, focusing on Jesus' division of time into three parts:

- time with the Father, alone and apart
- time for his friends, moments of teaching, conviviality and restoration, reserved for the disciples
- time for everyone, that is the crowd and individual personal encounters.

Second year, 2024/2025: Developing the Plasticity of Ministry

Consistent with the overall plan outlined above, in the second year we reversed the relative "weights," giving greater space to the dimension of the plasticity of ministry, understood as the declination of the presence of the deacon and the couple in the different contexts of life and the animation of the communities.

The spiritual component focused, in turn, on the theme of Jubilee 2025 and, specifically, on the declination, from a diaconal and diaconal couple perspective, of being pilgrims-witnesses of hope.

1. Hope and the Challenge of Reality

The theological virtue confronts the contingent hopes and concrete challenges of the experiences of those the deacon encounters and of the life of the deacon and the couple itself.

2. Understanding Economic Dynamics

With the scientific director of a leading Italian social research firm, we explored, using concrete sociological data, the perceived importance and influence of economic dynamics on people's lives.

3. Deacons in the New Diocesan Structure

A process has been initiated that, in the coming years, will lead to a redefinition of the presence of the Church on the territory and will involve the coordinated involvement of clergy, religious, and appropriately trained lay people in establishing territorial pastoral teams. What is the role of deacons, and which plasticity skills will they be called upon to deploy? We sought answers in a meeting and interview with the Episcopal Vicar for the territory, asking him questions previously collected from the deacons and clustered by theme.

4. Spiritual Exercises: The Word, a Torch of Hope

As an ideal complement to the Jubilee theme addressed in the first meeting, a deacon and his spouse from our diocese, with extensive experience in accompanying aspirants to the diaconate and their wives and equally extensive experience in ministerial life, led the meditations of the exercises, focusing on the interior dimension of hope, where the Word of God is a lamp that illuminates us and helps us recognize the true meaning of the hope we are called to be pilgrims and witnesses of.

Third year, 2025/26 (ongoing from October 2025): The Dimensions of Diaconal Spirituality

The third year of the training program focuses on spirituality, examining it not in the abstract, but as an essential and concrete element of the life of the ordained minister and the married couple.

The program therefore offers four sessions, which examine the topic from different perspectives, with the aim of offering a comprehensive overview.

1. Doing Mercy

Recognizing the strong involvement of deacons and spouses in pastoral actions and activities, which require very concrete know-how and practice, we propose a process of correlation between the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, drawing on authoritative

biblical and patristic sources (for example, Origen's contribution in deducing spiritual works from the corporal works listed in the Last Judgment in Matthew 25 is well known).

The goal is to highlight, on the one hand, the **spirituality of corporal works of mercy** and, on the other, the concreteness of **spiritual works of mercy**. We will do this with the help of a biblical scholar.

2. Sources, Labors, and Fruits of Diaconal Spirituality

With a presentation by a qualified expert from the Pious Society of St. Cajetan of Vicenza in the discernment, formation, and accompaniment of deacons and couples, and in light of the experience and guidance on diaconal spirituality provided by the principal magisterial documents, we will examine the three characteristics of the title, taking into account the three states of life: celibates, couples, and widows/widows.

3. The Two Facets of Spiritual Accompaniment

The proposal concerns not only the spiritual accompaniment that the deacon and his spouse receive, but also the aspect—very little discussed in general—of the accompaniment that the deacon can offer to others. For both topics, the speakers belong to the Diaconate Community in Italy.

The two areas mentioned above are explored according to the following interpretations:

- **the spiritual accompaniment of deacons, spouses, and couples**. Objective: To develop criteria for evaluating the characteristics of a deacon's spiritual accompaniment, thus also to assess and identify the best personal references.
- **the spiritual accompaniment of lay young people and adults by the deacon**. This is a little-explored dimension of the diaconal ministry and deserves greater attention.

4. The spiritual dimension in discernment prior to and during ministry

In a meeting coordinated by the Interdiocesan Delegate for the Permanent Diaconate of Turin and Susa, and in the form of a round table with other diocesan delegates, various current experiences will be compared.

This will be followed by a group discussion—using the method of Conversation in the Spirit—on the spiritual journeys independently pursued by the deacons and couples, with the aim of exchanging insights and inspiration to strengthen this dimension, which will also be the focus of the spiritual exercises (currently being finalized).

Final remarks

At the end of the third year, we will be able to make an overall assessment of this ongoing formation project.

What we can already assess along the way is the involvement of the deacons and spouses in a journey that is in many ways unprecedented, in which the more "traditional" contributions have been complemented and integrated by contributions from "secular" expertise, serving the development of what we have called *the skills of plasticity*.