

Continuum Program for Deacon Candidates

and

Mentoring Newly Ordained Deacons

**Permanent Diaconate Office
Diocese of Erie, Pennsylvania**

INTRODUCTION

The Continuum Program of the Permanent Diaconate Formation Program of the Diocese of Erie began in September 1997. Its purpose is to assist those called to the diaconate to translate their academic skills and the fruit of their spiritual formation efforts in meaningful ways to the life experiences of God's holy people. Continuum is the shared responsibility of the Diocese and the parish of membership of the candidate.

By the time of ordination, the diaconal candidate is expected to have integrated, personally, prayerfully and professionally, the human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral components of his five years in formation. Continuum is meant to facilitate this process of integration through two separate yet related phases. The first phase, known as the Continuum Program, pertains to the candidate in formation. The second phase, known as Mentoring Newly Ordained Deacons, pertains to the ordained deacon for the three years immediately following his ordination.

CONTINUUM PROGRAM

The National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States¹ considers "engagement in a wide diversity of pastoral field education"² as critical to a candidate's formation for ministry. Pastoral field experience offers the candidate, among other things, an awareness of the needs and mission of the Church and an opportunity to develop his gifts and talents for diaconal ministry.

Essential components of the pastoral field experience in the Diocese of Erie are first, a vital diocesan ministry setting, secondly, opportunities for diverse and meaningful ministerial involvement within that setting – challenging the candidate to translate and communicate the mysteries of our faith in ways that people can know and understand and lastly, theological reflections meant to ground the candidate in an awareness of God's grace and gracious presence in his life and the lives of others. Critical to the success of Continuum is the presence and involvement of the pastor

of the parish and the active involvement of informed and responsive parishioners willing to assist the candidate in developing his pastoral skills.

Continuum begins the summer of the candidate's second year of formation and continues until ordination at which time it ends and the mentoring phase begins.

OBJECTIVES OF THE CONTINUUM PROGRAM

- To provide the candidate a real life experience of ministry in a parish or special ministry setting
- To familiarize the candidate with the practical demands of parish ministry
- To assist the candidate in developing personal and interpersonal skills through collaboration and interaction with parishioners
- To assist the Bishop and his delegates in discerning the competence and readiness for ordained ministry

PERSONNEL INVOLVED IN CONTINUUM

- Director of Pastoral Formation whose duties include assisting the local pastor in the formation of Continuum Teams; meeting and training Team members; visiting Continuum parishes periodically to review Team progress; to receive evaluations and reports from the Team on the candidate and to relay them to the Director of the Permanent Diaconate Program
- Parish Continuum Team whose membership is comprised of the pastor and six (6) parishioners selected by him. Members are chosen for reason of their understanding of Church life, diaconal ministry, pastoral insights, measured objectivity and the practice of their Catholic faith. Various age groupings should have representation.
- Deacon Candidate who responsibilities include scheduling and informing Team members of dates and times of meetings. Other duties include convoking meetings, setting the agenda along with the pastor, preparing and sharing written theological reflection papers for each meeting, forwarding theological reflection paper and evaluation sheets to the Director of Pastoral Formation; keeping the Director of Pastoral Formation informed of progress of meetings

CONTINUUM TEAM RESPONSIBILITIES

- **To serve until the ordination of the candidate**
- **To meet bi-monthly with the candidate until his ordination to the diaconate**
- **To critique, evaluate and provide objective appraisals of the candidate's ministries in the parish**
- **To complete bi-monthly evaluation sheets for the Director of Pastoral Formation**
- **To listen, comment and critique the candidate's bi-monthly theological reflection paper**

MENTORING NEWLY ORDAINED DEACONS

The Diocese of Erie is aware of the critical importance of a deacon's first years in ministry and the need to ensure a smooth transition from diaconal formation to ordained ministry.

Out of genuine concern for younger priests, the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council urged older, more experienced priests to become partners and companions with the newly ordained in helping them grapple with the first and sometimes formidable challenges of their ministry. In like turn, those younger were invited to look to those older and more experienced as brothers to whom they could turn as mentor along the way.

What is true of the priestly community is equally true of our diaconal family. The newly ordained need the wisdom and good counsel of those ordained longer. It is for this reason we begin our Mentoring Program for Newly Ordained Deacons. The goal of the program is quite simple: through the benefits and blessings of brotherhood to companion those entering diaconal ministry so as to enter with ease of mind, heart and spirit.

Mentoring Newly Ordained Deacons is our response to the wise council of our Bishops. In point of fact, the National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States³ calls for the development of just such mentoring programs. In terms of length, the Directory calls for a program of mentoring for a period of three years beginning shortly after ordination. As for objectives, it is meant to assist the deacon in developing and integrating the multiple dimensions of formation into his life and ministry. As for expected outcomes, the hope is that mentoring will grow the spark of the Spirit that first moved the candidate to discern God's call.

The Directory refers to the post-ordination formation as "a human necessity which must be seen in continuity with the divine call to serve the church in the ministry. . . ." ⁴ In other words, continuing formation through mentoring is not an option; ministerial service in the church demands it. Saint Paul's letter to Timothy states: "do not neglect the gifts you have, which was conferred on you through the prophetic word with the imposition of hands. . . Be diligent in these matters, be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to everyone. Attend to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in both tasks, for by doing so you will save both yourself and those who listen to you." ⁵

MENTORING OBJECTIVES

- To continue personal and ministerial support, pastoral and spiritual nourishment begun with the Continuum Program
- To assist the newly ordained in continuing human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral formation
- To assist in developing healthy and effective ministry relationships with the deacon's pastor, the pastoral team and others in ministry with him
- To assist the deacon and his family in developing support systems for prayer, ministry and diaconal fraternity
- To have available to the deacon and his family a steady companion while on the journey

VARIOUS PERSONNEL AND ROLES

- Director of the Permanent Diaconate Program who oversees the program
- Newly Ordained Deacon
- Mentor who is a deacon appointed by the Bishop for this role. Each newly ordained chooses his mentor from the list of those so approved.
- Pastor who serves as the deacon's supervisor unless otherwise specified. The pastor's supervisory role is never usurped by the mentor.
- Spiritual Director is someone other than the pastor and mentor and with whom the deacon meets regularly. Communication with the Spiritual Director is always confidential. Neither the pastor nor mentor is to ever consult or communicate with the Spiritual Director.

MENTORING MEETINGS

- **Meetings should be scheduled bi-monthly or more frequently if desired. The setting should be comfortable but not casual. Although meetings may begin with a meal, a restaurant is never an appropriate setting. Time together should be uninterrupted by phone.**
- **Meetings are confidential. Exceptions to this norm would be if the newly ordained gives his permission for a release of information or if situations would arise involving civil or criminal statutes (child or spousal abuse) or problems of a destructive nature (alcohol dependency, drug abuse, suicide) where the law or good judgment would indicate the need to report the incident.**
- **The Mentor's role is one of listening and offering counsel. He is not a supervisor, an evaluator of performance or a reporter to the Bishop, the regional Dean/Vicar or the pastor.**
- **The Mentor is not a problem-solver nor is he to intervene directly to resolve problems between the newly ordained and his pastor or others. In these situations, he is to encourage the deacon to resolve matters on his own. If problems remain unresolved, he may encourage the deacon to speak with the Director of the Permanent Diaconate Program and/or the Bishop.**
- **The Mentor may inquire of the deacon, among other things, about his health, time off, family life, spiritual reading and prayer life; about the regularity of meetings with the spiritual director; about how things are going in the parish – frustrations, accomplishments? He is also free to share his own experiences of ministry to help the newly ordained see the joys of ministry and sometimes its 'ups and downs.'**
- **Meetings should begin and conclude with prayer.**

END NOTES

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, Washington, D. C., 2005

² *National Directory*, Chapter VI, 219:100; see also Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Permanent Deacons in the United States: Guidelines on Their Formation and Ministry*, 1984 Revision (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1985)

³ *National Directory*, Chapter VII, Section III, 118

⁴ *National Directory*, Chapter VII, Section I, 239:113; see also Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of the Permanent Deacons (Directorium Pro Ministerio et Vita Diaconorum Permanentium)* (Washington, D.C: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), No.71, 63.

⁵ 1 Timothy 4:14 – 16)