

Meeting of the Deacon Council of Diocese of Erie

December 10, 2020

Via Zoom Platform

Members Present: Deacons Robert Ball, Denis Coan, Timothy Good, Kevin Kunik, Willam Saborsky, Jerry Sobrowski, Richard Shewman, Steve Washek. Father Mark Nowak

Administration Present: Bishop Lawrence Persico, Msgr. Edward Lohse, Fr. Nicholas Rouch.

Invited Guests: Deacons Ronald Fronzaglia, Thomas McAraw, Raymond Sobina.

Meeting called to order 4:00 PM

Opening Prayer: Deacon Jerry Sobrowski.

- Opening Comments by Bishop Persico
 - Responding to some of the concerns related by the diaconal community, the deacon formation program will continue and move forward.
 - Fr. Rouch has been appointed as the director of clergy personnel and will act as the point person for this effort.
 - Emphasized the need to move in a united manner to address issues with the formation program.
- Comments by Fr. Rouch
 - The deacon planning effort will not go away and will continue with efforts which were identified:
 - The deacon as a pastoral administrator.
 - Formation program.
 - Deacons involvement of the overall diocesan planning effort.
 - Communication issues within the community and diocesan offices.
 - Conversation with the past administrative assistant Chris Prehoda revealed the concern of the focus on the deacons and wives who may feel unappreciated and afloat in their ministries.
 - Comments on planning from the Council
 - The deacon council may be the body that will help to institute the planning effort.
- The Formation Program
 - The initial recommendations by the planning committee were received by the bishop in the Fall of 2019. Conversations were held over the past three months at deanery meetings with the priests and within the presbyteral council.. There seems to be a lack of clarity as to the purpose of the diaconate and needs of our diocese.
 - A new national directory will be released by the USCCB sometime in 2021 and this will guide recommendations for the formation program.
 - A logical approach to revising the formation program would be to:

- Identify the needs of our diocese which can be served well by permanent deacons;
 - Develop a formation program which forms men for those ministerial needs;
 - Strengthen the annual evaluation process during formation to ensure that the candidates are making adequate progress and reaching “thresholds”;
 - Recruit and screen applicants who are likely to succeed in the program and serve well in the ministry.
 - All of the above needs to be guided by a solid theological understanding of the ordained deacon, canon law, and the National Directory.
 - We will not have all this in place by Fall 2021.
 - Bishop Persico does not want to be locked into a preset timeline for the activation of the formation program until all discussions and information can be evaluated. We are looking for the best possible program and not one that is hurriedly produced.
- Discussion among the council members included:
 - The lack of a clear understanding of the diaconate and functions of the deacon. Confusion exists among the community and among the priests/pastors. The initial program did not include teaching about the diaconate to the priests. There appears to be a spectrum of understanding and acceptance by the priest community regarding deacons. What are the proper roles of the deacon and the needs addressed by the deacon?
 - A moratorium of the formation program was done about 10 years ago where revisions were done according to the national directory.
 - Discussing the changes needed to the formation program included the need to adopt good management practices (“best practices”) by looking at other dioceses and their programs. Some members have already sought contacts with the surrounding dioceses. An assessment of needs of the diocese would guide the formation process (administration, chaplaincy, etc.). Identify within the existing community the talents of those already ordained who have experience and training in management. A look at the existing canon laws regarding the deacon’s function and purpose. This may necessitate the need for a “job description” for both deacons and priests.
 - This effort should not suppress any lay involvement in the church.
 - The bishop related that understanding the permanent diaconate is complex as we live in two worlds of marriage and ordained ministry. There needs to be a fundamental understanding of the deacon.
 - The theological understanding of the permanent diaconate is relatively young. All involved need to begin with the *identity* of the deacon. [This is complemented by what our diocese *needs* deacons to do, and what *can* deacons do.]
 - When formation of a candidate is initiated, can the involved pastor be included in this process with the candidate?

- A concrete effort needs to be started now to address the formation program. A suggestion to break down this complex task into smaller segments to ease the process.
- Fr. Rouch is the bridge to the bishop in this effort.
- Transition to a new deacon council
 - The council is comprised of two functions.
 - It is a consultative body to the bishop and the diocesan offices.
 - Issues such as formation, assignments, pastoral planning are part of the council's function.
 - It supplies pastoral support to the diaconal community.
 - There needs to be a balance between these two functions.
 - Discussion by the members included:
 - Need for defined by-laws. There are existing by-laws that will need to be revamped.
 - Wives are included on the council but will not be voting members in the new council bylaws. Their participation in the council is important and can contribute to the support of other deacon wives.
 - The history of the council begins with the formation of a continuing education committee (2005?) which then morphed into the current council. The current by-laws took years to develop during this time.
 - The council may benefit from mirroring changes that have been adopted by the presbyteral council.
 - There needs to be a clearly defined function of the council in consultative and pastoral support.
 - The current "deacon councilor" document can be a basis for this revision.
- Deacon Assignments
 - A review of current files on deacon assignments are spotty. There are some deacons that have changed their assignments without the notification and approval of the bishop. The bishop will require all assignments be through the clergy personnel board. The deacon is not to navigate his own assignment.
 - This issue has been addressed in the formation program and the current channel for requested change of assignment includes the assigned pastor, Fr. Rouch and if necessary, the bishop.
- Continuing formation of deacons.
 - All formation is to go through the clergy continuing formation committee which is currently active.
- Office of the permanent diaconate.
 - A review of the history including Msgr. Robert Smith's tenure. Fr. Rouch is the de facto director for the time being.
 - Bishop relates that the position may well include the appointment of a deacon for this office.
- Other comments

- Msgr. Lohse related that this is the beginning of the discussion and that Fr. Rouch is pivotal in this process. We need to set specific time goals and adhere to them.
- Bishop commends the council for a good discussion. We are to keep the dialogue going to achieve these goals. We will need to look at the by-laws and go from there.
- Meeting ended 5:30 PM with blessing by the bishop.
- Action Items:
 - Look at current by-laws for the deacon council and open discussion as to their changes as defined above.
 - Continue the assessment of the formation program as discussed above.

Submitted by Deacon Timothy Good