

Homily for the Admission to Candidacy for the Permanent Diaconate

June 14, 2024

**St. Francis of Assisi Church
Corpus Christi Priory
Springfield, Illinois**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, aspirants for the Permanent Diaconate, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here for this Mass, during which these six men will transition to their next stage of formation as they look forward to being ordained, God-willing, to the Sacred Order of Deacons. We gather in this beautiful St. Francis of Assisi Church, which just recently celebrated its 100th anniversary of dedication.

In 1924, when this church was dedicated, the Diaconate was quite different than it is today. It was understood exclusively as one of the orders conferred upon men who were preparing for ordination to the priesthood. The idea of the diaconate as the final goal of formation was not something present in the life of the Church at that time. It would not be for another forty years that the topic would be considered, when the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council decided to reestablish the Order of Deacons as a

permanent rank in the hierarchy of the Church. Here in our diocese, the first class of deacons to be formed and ordained into this reestablished permanent rank did not take place until 2007, so in the life of the Church here in our diocese, it is still quite new.

For the past two years, these six men have been in formation in what is known as the Aspirancy stage of formation. The *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons, 2nd edition* describes this stage as “primarily a time to discern the capability and readiness of an aspirant to be nominated to the diocesan bishop for acceptance as a candidate for diaconal formation.”¹ Though this is a short sentence, it is packed with meaning.

I first draw your attention to the word “discern.” When we speak of discernment with regards to a religious vocation, we often think primarily in terms of the person’s relationship with God. As men in formation, you have discerned that the Lord has invited you to consider the possibility of a call to the diaconate. Over the past two years, that discernment has continued as you have been striving, no doubt, to understand if this is the path the Lord is calling you to follow, and by requesting to move to the next stage, you have sensed that the Lord is indeed inviting you to

continue your pursuit of this particular vocation.

But the discernment that is involved is more than just between you and the Lord. The Church has her role to play in discernment. As you recall from your application, you had to provide an ample amount of information so that those responsible for that discernment on behalf of the Church could confirm what you had prayerfully come to understand as the Lord's invitation for you to follow.

Today, the Church once again plays a role in your discernment. You have submitted your petition for acceptance as a candidate for formation. This is not something that is owed to you because you have put in the time. Rather, with humility, you have asked for the privilege of being able to continue along this path.

The next item to note in the quote about this enrollment is that the decision to accept your petition lies with the diocesan bishop. This is another important aspect to consider as we reflect on the diaconate. Being called to the ministry of the diaconate is a ministry always to be understood in relation to the ministry of the diocesan bishop. In the Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, which called for the reestablishment of the permanent diaconate, before

speaking about what a deacon is called to *do*, the Council Fathers articulate who a deacon *is*, namely as one who is “in communion with the bishop and his group of priests.”² Pope St. John Paul II, when reflecting on the diaconate in one of his Wednesday Audiences, observed that, according to an ancient text, the deacon’s ministry is described primarily as “service to the bishop.”³

We see, then, the significance of our celebration this evening as you mark this transition in your formation. It is not so much about checking off another box in the list of requirements necessary for ordination, rather, it is an opportunity to situate your discernment more specifically in the context of communion in the Church. More than just a change in your designation from being an aspirant to being a candidate, it is a deepened awareness of your relationship to the Church, through me as your bishop, and by extension, the priests with whom I collaborate in the pastoral care of the People of God in this local Church.

The *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* notes that “[e]nrollment among the candidates for the diaconate does not constitute any right necessarily to receive diaconal ordination. It 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.”⁴ At first glance, this may sound a bit discouraging, as though you are only just beginning this journey. I assure you that these past two years have not been insignificant, for they have been a time for the seeds planted in your souls to be nourished, as though underground, and now, the seed begins to break through to the surface, the first visible sign of life that has been underway for some time. Moreover, the fact that the language of this liturgical rite not conferring any right to receive diaconal ordination is not meant to leave you with a sense of uncertainty, but rather a humble acknowledgement that every gift of ministry in the Church is one that is received, never simply grasped.

Therefore, as your bishop, I am happy to accept your petition to be enrolled among the candidates for the diaconate. I pray that as you continue to grow in your discernment, you will always keep in your minds and hearts the gift of being called to be a part of the Church, cooperating with God’s many graces which enable you to serve Him and His people, not according to our will, but according to His, for the good of the Church and the salvation of souls.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ USCCB, *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons*, 2nd edition, §190.

² *Lumen Gentium*, §29.

³ St. John Paul II, General Audience “Deacons Have Many Pastoral Functions” (October 13, 1993), no. 1, citing Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*.

⁴ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*, §82.