

II

CHARACTERISTICS OF CANDIDATES FOR THE PERMANENT DIACONATE

*Ecclesial
discernment*

29. "The history of every priestly vocation, as indeed of every Christian vocation, is the history of an *inexpressible dialogue between God and human beings*, between the love of God who calls and the freedom of individuals who respond lovingly to him".³¹ However, alongside God's call and the response of individuals, there is another element constitutive to a vocation, particularly a ministerial vocation: the public call of the Church. "Vocari a Deo dicuntur qui a legitimis Ecclesiae ministris vocantur".³² The expression should not be understood in a predominantly juridical sense, as if it were the authority that calls which determines the vocation, but in a *sacramental* sense, that considers the authority that calls as the sign and instrument for the personal intervention of God, which is realised with the laying on of hands. In this perspective, every proper *election* expresses an *inspiration* and represents a choice of God. The Church's discernment is therefore decisive for the choice of a vocation; how much more so, due to its ecclesial significance, is this true for the choice of a vocation to the ordained ministry.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 36: *l.c.*, pp. 715-716.

³² *Catechismus ex decreto Concilii Tridentini ad Parochos*, pars II, c. 7, n. 3, Turin 1914, p. 288.

This discernment must be conducted on the basis of objective criteria, which treasure the ancient tradition of the Church and take account of present day pastoral needs. For the discernment of vocations to the permanent diaconate, some requirements of a general nature and others responding to the particular state of life of those called should be taken into account.

1. General requirements

30. The first diaconal profile was outlined in the *First Letter of Saint Paul to Timothy*: "Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then if they prove themselves blameless let them serve as deacons...Let deacons be the husband of one wife, and let them manage their children and their households well; for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith which is in Jesus Christ" (1 *Tim* 3:8-10,12-13).

*The profile
outlined by
Saint Paul*

The qualities listed by Paul are prevalently human, almost as if to say that deacons could carry out their ministry only if they were acceptable models of humanity. We find echoes of Paul's exhortation in texts of the Apostolic Fathers, especially in the *Didachè* and Saint Polycarp. The *Didachè* urges: "Elect for yourselves therefore bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, meek men, not lovers of money, honest and proven",³³ and Saint Polycarp counsels: "In like manner should the deacons be blameless before the face of his righteousness, as being the servants of God and Christ, and not of men. They must not be slanderers, double-tongued, or lovers of money, but

*The indications of the
Fathers of the
Church*

³³ *Didachè*, 15, 1: F. X. FUNK (ed.), *Patres Apostolici*, I, *o.c.*, pp. 32-35.

temperate in all things, compassionate, industrious, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who was the servant of all”.³⁴

The requirements of the Code of Canon Law

31. The Church’s tradition subsequently finalised and refined the requirements which support the authenticity of a call to the diaconate. These are firstly those which are valid for orders in general: “Only those are to be promoted to orders who...have sound faith, are motivated by the right intention, are endowed with the requisite knowledge, enjoy a good reputation, and have moral probity, proven virtue and the other physical and psychological qualities appropriate to the order to be received”.³⁵

Human qualities and evangelical virtues necessary for “diakonia”

32. The profile of candidates is then completed with certain specific human qualities and evangelical virtues necessary for *diakonia*. Among the human qualities which should be highlighted are: psychological maturity, capacity for dialogue and communication, sense of responsibility, industriousness, equilibrium and prudence. Particularly important among the evangelical virtues: prayer, Eucharistic and Marian devotion, a humble and strong *sense of the Church*, love for the Church and her mission, spirit of poverty, capacity for obedience and fraternal communion, apostolic zeal, openness to service,³⁶ charity towards the brothers and sisters.

Active membership within a Christian community

33. In addition, candidates for the diaconate must be active members of a Christian community and already have exercised praiseworthy commitment to the apostolate.

³⁴ ST POLYCARP, *Epist. ad Philippenses*, 5, 1-2: F. X. FUNK (ed.), *Patres Apostolici*, I, o.c., pp. 300-302.

³⁵ C.I.C., can. 1029. Cf can. 1051, 1^o.

³⁶ Cf PAUL VI, Ap. Lett. *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem*, II, 8: l.c., p. 700.

34. They may come from every social grouping and carry out any work or professional activity, providing that it is not, according to the norms of the Church and the prudent judgement of the Bishop, inconsistent with the diaconal state.³⁷ Furthermore, such activity must be compatible in practice with commitments of formation and the effective exercise of the ministry.

Work or professional activity

35. Regarding the minimum age, the *Code of Canon Law* prescribes that: “the candidate for the permanent diaconate who is not married may be admitted to the diaconate only when he has completed at least his twenty-fifth year; if he is married, not until he has completed at least his thirty-fifth year”.³⁸

Minimum age

Lastly, candidates must be free of irregularities and impediments.³⁹

Irregularities and impediments

³⁷ Cf C.I.C., cans. 285, §§ 1-2; 289; PAUL VI, Ap. Lett. *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem*, III, 17: l.c., p. 701.

³⁸ C.I.C., can. 1031, § 2. Cf PAUL VI, Ap. Lett. *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem*, II, 5; III, 12: l.c., pp. 699; 700. Can. 1031, § 3 prescribes that “Bishops’ Conferences may issue a regulation which requires a later age”.

³⁹ Cf C.I.C., cans. 1040-1042. The irregularities (perpetual impediments) listed by can. 1041 are: 1) any form of *insanity* or other *psychological infirmity*, because of which he is, after experts have been consulted, judged incapable of properly fulfilling the ministry; 2) the offences of *apostasy*, *heresy* or *schism*; 3) *attempted marriage*, even a civil marriage; 4) *wilful homicide* or actually procured *abortion*; 5) *grave mutilation* of self or others, and *attempted suicide*; 6) *illicit completion of acts of order*. The simple impediments, listed by can. 1042, are: 1) the *exercise of an office or administration forbidden to, or inappropriate to, the clerical state*; 2) the *state of being a neophyte* (except when the Ordinary decides otherwise).

2. Requirements related to the candidate's state of life

a) Unmarried

"Undivided heart"

36. "On the basis of Church law, confirmed by the same Ecumenical Council, young men called to the diaconate are obliged to observe the law of celibacy".⁴⁰ This is a particularly appropriate law for the sacred ministry, to which those who have received the charism freely submit.

The permanent diaconate, lived in celibacy, gives to the ministry a certain unique emphasis. In fact, the sacramental identification with Christ is placed in the context of the *undivided heart*, that is within the context of a nuptial, exclusive, permanent and total choice of the unique and greatest Love; service of the Church can count on a total availability; the proclamation of the Kingdom is supported by the courageous witness of those who have left even those things most dear to them for the sake of the Kingdom.

b) Married

Positive family experience

37. "In the case of married men, care should be taken that only those are promoted to the diaconate who have lived as married men for a number of years and have shown themselves to be capable of running their own homes, and whose wives and children lead a truly Christian life and have good reputations".⁴¹

Consent of the wife, and her character

Moreover. In addition to stability of family life, married candidates cannot be admitted unless "their

⁴⁰ PAUL VI, Ap. Lett. *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem*, II, 4: *l.c.*, p. 699. Cf ECUM. COUNCIL VAT. II, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, 29.

⁴¹ PAUL VI, Ap. Lett. *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem*, III, 13: *l.c.*, p. 700.

wives not only consent, but also have the Christian moral character and attributes which will neither hinder their husbands' ministry nor be out of keeping with it".⁴²

c) Widowers

38. "Those who have received the order of deacon, even those who are older, may not, in accordance with traditional Church discipline, enter into marriage".⁴³ The same principle applies to deacons who have been widowed.⁴⁴ They are called to give proof of human and spiritual soundness in their state of life.

Human and spiritual soundness

Moreover, a precondition for accepting widowed candidates is that they have already provided, or have shown that they are capable of providing adequately for, the human and Christian upbringing of their children.

d) Members of institutes of consecrated life and of societies of apostolic life

39. Permanent deacons belonging to institutes of consecrated life or to societies of apostolic life⁴⁵ are called to enrich their ministry with the particular

Integration of charism and ministry

⁴² *Ibidem*, III, 11: *l.c.*, p. 700. Cf *C.I.C.*, cans. 1031, § 2; 1050, 3°.

⁴³ PAUL VI, Ap. Lett. *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem*, III, 16: *l.c.*, p. 701; Ap. Lett. *Ad pascendum*, VI: *l.c.*, p. 539; *C.I.C.*, can. 1087.

⁴⁴ The Circular Letter, Prot. n. 263/97 of 6 June 1997, of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments envisages that one only of the following conditions be sufficient for obtaining dispensation from the impediment found in can. 1087: the great and proven usefulness of the ministry of the deacon to the diocese to which he belongs; that he has children of such a tender age as to be in need of motherly care; that he has parents or parents in law who are elderly and in need of care.

⁴⁵ Cf PAUL VI, Ap. Lett. *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem*, VII, 32-35: *l.c.*, pp. 703-704.

charism which they have received. In fact, their pastoral activity, while being under the jurisdiction of the local Ordinary,⁴⁶ is nevertheless characterised by particular traits of their religious or consecrated state of life. They will therefore commit themselves to integrating their religious or consecrated vocation with the ministerial vocation and to offering their special contribution to the mission of the Church.

⁴⁶ Cf IDEM, Ap. Lett. *Ecclesiae sanctae* (6 August 1966), I, 25, § 1: AAS 58 (1966), p. 770.