



Men of good reputation, endowed with the Spirit and prudence

by Father Luis García

"Dear deacons, do not be afraid to be servants of Christ" - Pope Francis.

The origin of the diaconate in the Catholic Church dates back to the first century of the Christian era when the community of faith inspired by the Holy Spirit selects seven men of good reputation. The word deacon originates from the Greek word (diakonos) which means servant. These

men are chosen by God for the service of the community (Acts 6:1-6). The apostles ordained these men through the imposition of hands and the prayer of ordination. The needs of the communities were growing, and the apostles could not attend to them and for this reason the need for the diaconate arose. The deacons were ordained for the service of the most in need such as widows, orphans and foreigners.

Following the Second Vatican Council in 1967, Pope Paul VI reestablished the permanent diaconate allowing both single and married men to be ordained. Two years later, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) received authorization to reinstate diaconal formation. The Diocese of Grand Rapids restarted its diaconal formation program five years ago after a period of review. This formation is based on four pillars: spiritual, academic, community and pastoral. Donato Perez is one of the permanent deacons ordained by Bishop David

Walkowiak this past Jan. 8, 2022 and with whom we had the opportunity to dialogue in an interview about some of these formative pillars.

Aspirants and candidates receive different tools to be used during their discernment process. Each of them is asked to find a spiritual director who will help them discern the call and the different stages of the formation process. Donato has been in contact with Father René Constanza's advice and comments: "Every time I met with Father René he recommended me the constant reading of the Sacred Scriptures and he recommended me to listen to and read the Gospel of the day. I search for the Mass on YouTube every day and pay special attention to the Gospel." The objective of the spiritual direction is to help the candidate to improve his relationship with God, to improve his prayer life, meditation and theological reflection.

Additionally, the candidate learns to pray the liturgy of the hours and different methods of prayer such as Lectio Divina. "When we started the formation, it was very difficult for me to follow the liturgy of the hours mainly because of the handling of the breviary, however with the use of technology I have been able to do it in a simpler way. I have understood the importance of prayer. This prayer is very broad since one prays not only for our own intentions but prays for the whole world".

At the academic level, aspirants and candidates must take their classes online through the University of Notre Dame (Indiana). "This has been a new experience for me, which brought many challenges to my life. I did not know how to operate a computer or write a paper for college. Fortunately, I had the support of my family." Pastoral care is another key aspect of the training. Our program provides intellectual and practical opportunities in different areas such as prison ministry, hospital ministry, multicultural ministry, and social ministry. One of the days that has impacted the deacons the most was when they had the opportunity to visit the Division Avenue area in Grand Rapids and help the community in need. Social ministry is one of the most important aspects of the deacons' lives. Father Stephen Dudek helps the candidates to understand the richness of the communities and their ethnicity. When we talk about the Latino community it encompasses a variety of cultures such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan,

among others. For example, Donato is of Guatemalan origin and although he speaks Spanish, his native language is Mam, a dialect of Mayan origin.

The contribution and support of family is important in formation. Maria and Donato's five children are an example of this. Maria has been very active during the diaconate formation. She attended every monthly spiritual formation day. "One of the experiences I have enjoyed the most is the spiritual retreat, getting together as a couple and being able to pray for the needs of our families and communities has been very rewarding. Also, I have had the opportunity to talk to the wives of the deacons and hear what their own experience has been like. My children are very happy and I try to support him with his activities in the parish. I tell him to remember that I also work and have to do many things around the house." Donato knows that he is the one who was ordained as a deacon but at the same time he recognizes the value of his wife in his diaconal ministry.

When the candidate is ordained by the Bishop, he is assigned to a parish. Permanent deacons report directly to the supervision of the Bishop's office. "The Bishop assigned me to the Parish of Saint Francis Xavier - Our Lady of Guadalupe. There I have been involved in pastoral ministry in various ways, for example, I assist Father during the Mass with the reading of the Gospel, the prayer of the faithful, the preparation of the altar, among other things and once a month I have the honor of preaching. Also, I am helping with the formation of lectors, eucharistic ministers, hospitality, musicians, altar servers, catechists, etc." The Diocese of Grand Rapids recognizes the pastoral work that deacons of Hispanic/Latino origin Zenon Cardenas, Carlos Gutierrez, Martin Zapata, and Edwin Gonzalez have done in the Hispanic community and we thank God for having the help of deacon Donato Perez who is received as a blessing for our local Church.

Call to Action:

If you feel a call from the Lord to the diaconate you may approach your pastor, or contact Deacon Jerry Roersma at his email address (jroersma@grdiocese.org). As a member of the Permanent Diaconate formation team, I can also assist you with any questions and concerns about this vocational discernment process - fatherluis@saparish.com