

Homily on “The Diaconate” -- Seven Questions, Seven Answers

His Grace, Michael – Bishop of New York & the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

Question #1: What actually is a deacon?

Answer: The Deacon is the third and lowest degree of the major orders of clergy in the Orthodox Church, following the bishop and the presbyter (or priest). The word deacon (in Greek δῆκονος) means server, and originally it referred to a person who waited on tables.

Question #2: When did the office of deacon begin?

Answer: We find the first ordination of deacons in Acts 6: 1-6. As the early Church grew in numbers, the Apostles needed help in caring for the needs of the widows. Saint Luke tells us that the Apostles instructed the brethren: “Seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom ... whom we may appoint (literally, to set down or ordain) over this business.”

Question #3: Who were these first deacons?

Answer: Stephen (who became the first Christian martyr), Philip (who was an evangelist), Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas a convert from Antioch, “whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on (ordained) them.”

Question #4: Who are some other famous deacons in the history of our Church?

Answer: Tertius and Pomponius who arranged baptisms for catechumens and brought Holy Communion to those who couldn't come to Church. Lawrence of Rome, who cared for the sacred vessels of the Church, and distributed alms (money) to the needy. Athanasius the Great, who would later be Archbishop of Alexandria, but as a deacon attended the first Ecumenical Council and witnessed against the heretic Arius. Saint Athanasius helped to draft the Nicene Creed. Deacon Mark, whom St. Porphyry of Gaza tells us, sold the possessions of the Church for gold to be used for charitable works. Nicephoros, who presided at the 16th century local Council at Constantinople, and defended Orthodoxy against the Uniates.

Question #5: Historically what are some things that deacons do in the Church?

Answer: The first-century deacons were responsible for gathering and distributing food for the poor, serving at the Eucharist celebrations and the agape meals. In third-century Rome, they supervised the Church's support of 1,500 widows and needy persons. In fourth-century Alexandria, they fed 3,000 needy each day! Of course in the 10th century, when the envoys of St. Vladimir visited the Great Church of Holy Wisdom, in Constantinople, they found 150 deacons serving in that magnificent Cathedral, as “an army of censers” – which in part inspired them to say, “we know not whether we were in heaven or on earth.” In the Orthodox Church to this day bishops and priests are called to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word, with other ministries being accomplished by deacons and the laity. Modern-day deacons serve in education, youth ministry, music, outreach and philanthropy.

Question #6: What are the qualifications for a Deacon?

Answer: Saint Paul's first Letter to Timothy 3:8-13 tells us: "Deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus."

Question #7: How does the Ordination of a Deacon happen?

Answer: During the Liturgy, after the Consecration of the Gifts, the candidate is led to the center of the church, then into the sanctuary, and finally around the altar three times by those who are his sponsors. He stops to kiss the four corners of the holy table each time as a sign of his love for the altar, making a prostration each time before the bishop, who is seated on the south side of the altar. The candidate then kneels on his right knee at the north side of the altar, placing his palms in the form of a cross and lays his forehead upon his hands on the holy table. The bishop places the end of his omophorion on the head of the candidate, and blesses him three times. Then, laying his hands on the candidate's head, the bishop prays out loud, so that all can hear: "The divine grace, which always heals that which is infirm, and supplies that which is lacking, ordains the most pious Sub-deacon (name) to be a Deacon. Therefore, let us pray for him, that the Grace of the All-Holy Spirit may come upon him." Both the clergy in the altar and the faithful in the congregation exclaim, "Axios! Axios! Axios!" – which means, "He is worthy!" – as the bishop vests the new deacon in his diaconal vestments for the first time.

Let us thank God for the deacons we have in our parishes, and for those men studying to become deacons, and for those who will be called by the grace of God to join their ranks ... and pray for them that the Lord will guide their every step in the service of His Holy Church!

