

**Permanent Diaconate
Diocese of Buffalo**

FORMATION GUIDE

2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter from Bishop Michael Fisher	3
Introduction	4
Basic Requirements for Admission	5
Dimensions of Formation	8
The Paths of Diaconate Formation	
The Inquiry Path	9
The Aspirancy Path	11
The Candidacy Path	16
Wives Program	20
The Post-Ordination Path	22

Appendices

A – 70 pt. questionnaire	H – Serving as Acolyte
B – Aspirancy Checklist	I – Study Sheet – Liturgical
C – Website	I2 – Liturgical Items
D – Josephinum Register	I3 – Liturgical Needs
E – Five-Year Formation Calendar	J – Profession of Faith
F – St Josephinum Classes	J2 – Oath of Fidelity
G – Letters Written	K – Agreement Form

LETTER FROM BISHOP FISHER

The Permanent Diaconate is a sacramental ministry within the Church vital to help address pastoral needs in today's environment. We are all called to share in the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ, every lay minister, deacon, priest, and bishop. We look to Jesus as our model of the servant leader and strive to be as compassionate and understanding.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Michael W. Fisher". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Michael W. Fisher
Bishop of Buffalo

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest legacies of the Second Vatican Council was its renewal and encouragement of the Order of Deacons throughout the entire Catholic Church. The Council's decisions on the diaconate flowed from the bishops' discussions on the sacramental nature of the Church. As noted in the final report of the 1985 extraordinary synod of bishops, the Fathers of the Council present in concise, descriptive, and complementary images a comprehensive magisterial teaching: The Church is "mystery," "sacrament," "communion," and "mission." The Church is "like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race." "In her whole being and in all her members, the Church is sent to announce, bear witness, make present, and spread the mystery of the communion of the Holy Trinity." This "missionary mandate" is the Church's sacred right and obligation. Through the proclamation of God's Word, in sacramental celebrations, and in response to the needs of others, especially in her ministry of charity, "the Church is Christ's instrument . . . 'the universal sacrament of salvation,' by which Christ is 'at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God's love for men.'" *LG: Second Vatican Council, (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium) (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1964)*

In 1976, the first formation class was established in the Diocese of Buffalo. The diocese ordained its first class for the restored diaconate in 1978 and continues to prepare men for the service of deacon.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR ADMISSION

"...[C]ertain behavioral patterns have been discerned among exemplary deacons: a "natural inclination of service to the . . . Christian community," and to all in need; psychological integrity; a capacity for dialogue, which implies a sense of docility and openness; the ability to share one's faith yet listen respectfully to other points of view; the capacity to listen carefully and without prejudices—respecting people in the context of their religion, race, gender, ethnicity, and culture; good communication skills; a sense of responsibility that includes the fulfilling of one's word and completing one's work; self-directed and collaborative accountability; balanced and prudent judgment; generosity in service; and the ability to lead, motivate, facilitate, and animate others into appropriate action and service... [There are also] certain spiritual and evangelical qualities. Among these are a sound faith; good Christian reputation; active involvement in the Church's apostolate; personal integrity, maturity, and holiness; regular participation in the Church's sacramental life; evidence of recognized, ongoing commitment to the Church's life and service; participation in faith enrichment opportunities (e.g., retreats, days of recollection, adult education programming); a positive and stable marriage, if married, or a mature celibate state of life, if single; active membership in a Christian community; capacity for obedience and fraternal communion; and a deep spirituality and prayer life."

[166-167]

To this end, the Diocese of Buffalo maintains specific minimum requirements for admission into the inquiry path to the permanent diaconate.

1. The inquirer must be between 30 and 55 years of age to begin the program. (Ordained no sooner than his 35th birthday)
2. He must be recommended by the pastor of his family and must already be involved in parish ministry for a period of time.
3. If married, the inquirer should be in a stable marriage.
4. If not married, he must be living in a celibate state and desire to remain celibate his entire life.

5. If divorced, he must have a church annulment.
6. The inquirer must be physically and emotionally healthy and free of any substance dependency.
7. The inquirer must be economically stable and self-sufficient. It is expected that formation [and eventually diaconal] responsibilities will be in addition to secular occupations.
8. If the inquirer was not raised as a Catholic, 5 years must have elapsed since his baptism or full reception into the Catholic Church.
9. Graduation from high school and an associate degree is minimally required, or life experience of leadership in lieu of a college degree.
10. A willingness to commit to all aspects of the formation program is expected. Candidates are expected to complete the necessary studies required during the formation program.
11. The wife of a deacon candidate must demonstrate her support and affirmation of her husband's decision and be willing to participate in those programs and activities where the participation of the candidate's wives is required.
12. Among the many qualities and skills needed for fruitful diaconal ministry, the following characteristics are minimally required for admission to the diaconal formation program:
 - Prayerful desire to grow in the spiritual life.
 - Demonstrated ability to work with and to serve the needs of others.
 - healthy self-esteem
 - responsibility; capacity for initiative; potential for pastoral leadership
 - intelligence and capacity for study

- respect for authority and commitment to the Church
- a balanced understanding of the priorities of marriage and family, secular occupation, and ministry
- a sense of God's call to serve the Church as a deacon.
- Be able to make sound judgments

DIMENSIONS IN FORMATION

"There are two separate but integral paths that constitute a unified diocesan formation program for deacons: aspirant and, candidate. Although this program addresses each piece separately, they nevertheless become one sole organic journey" in diaconal formation. In each path, the four dimensions or specific areas in formation—human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral— are always essential.

One who will serve as a deacon requires a formation that promotes the development of the whole person. Therefore, the four dimensions in formation should be so interrelated as to achieve a continual integration of their objectives in the life of each participant and in his exercise of ministry." [104-105]

Refer to the "The National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States of America" 2nd edition for complete guidelines for the four dimensions. This can be accessed through the diaconate website,

https://www.buffalodeacons.org/uploads/1/5/0/7/150794882/national_directory.pdf

The specific norms and guidelines for ordained deacons in our local diocese can be found at:

https://www.buffalodeacons.org/uploads/1/5/0/7/150794882/2023_norms_and_guidelines_final_3123.pdf

THE INQUIRER PATH

"This initial discernment [has a] particular focus on the applicant's abilities and potential for ordained ministry." [173]

The communal call to the permanent diaconate begins with the inquirer responding to the urgings of an interior call by attending the diocesan information session, perhaps with his wife [if married] and pastor, who ultimately nominates the inquirer and continues with one year of discernment with a series of experiences designed to help the inquirer, his wife [if married] and the church begin to discern his call to the permanent diaconate.

Information Session

An information session is offered where the discernment and formation process is explained. The inquirer is provided the opportunity to pursue the Aspirancy Path, which includes:

1. On-going service to one's parish
2. An application packet for basic information:
 - a. Fill out the 70 pt questionnaire asking for basic personal information. **[Appendix A]**
3. The inquirer, his wife, and family [if married and have family members living in the same household] will be involved in an interview to discuss his readiness to be part of the Aspirancy Path and to help discern his readiness and ability for formation and ordained ministry.

Application

The man and his wife [if married] will then be invited to participate in the Aspirancy Path by filling out the application packet that will be

presented to the diaconate office by a yearly established deadline.
See checklist for application **[Appendix B]**

Website / APP

Participation in Formation to become a deacon requires use of our diaconal APP and Website. To access see **[Appendix C]**

Education

Participation in the introductory course of study with St Josephinum Institute, "Introduction to Catholicism" **[Appendix D]**

On-Going Service

The inquirer is expected to be involved in his parish beyond attendance at Sunday Mass. Liturgically, he is to serve regularly as a Reader [Lector] and an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion. He may also be involved in religious education, the OCIA process, marriage preparation, baptism, or some other agreeable ministry in the parish outside liturgical celebrations.

THE ASPIRANT PATH

"The aspirant path is primarily a time to discern the capability and readiness of an aspirant to be nominated to the bishop for acceptance as a candidate for diaconal ordination." [182]

Upon acceptance into the aspirant path, the aspirant enters a period of discernment for nomination as a candidate. To this end, the aspirant and his wife [if married] will be involved in experiences designed to further their discernment. The first two years of discernment entail Aspirancy I and Aspirancy II

Discernment Sessions

The Aspirant I and his wife [if married] are invited to six discernment sessions on our Saturdays of formation. For a five-year calendar, see **[Appendix E]**. Both the inquirer and his wife [if married] are invited to attend the sessions. Each session will last approximately three and one-half hours starting at 10:00 am and deal with the following areas:

1. Catholic Edition of Living Your Strengths from Gallup (Six Sessions)
2. The Role of and Responsibility of Formation (November)
3. Life and Formation for the Wife (December)
4. The Spirituality of a Deacon (February)
5. Balance in Life as a Deacon (March)

Catholic Edition of Living Your Strengths from Gallup

Both you and your wife will receive a book to read and take a simple test to help you discern your gifts. You can then identify these gifts and explore ways to turn them into talents.

Life and Ministry of the Deacon and wife

The three-fold ministry of the deacon, which is Word, Liturgy, and Charity, will be discussed from the perspective of the deacon's pastoral life and the wife's pastoral life.

The Spirituality of a Deacon

The Aspirant and wife [if married] will reflect on the reality of the vocation of the deacon as the Church's service sacramentalized. They will explore the areas of prayer, spirituality, and spiritual direction. You will discuss this with a spirituality coordinator to assist you in finding a spiritual director. While the wife is not required to have a director, they are encouraged to.

Balance in Life as a Diaconal Candidate

Life as a deacon means balancing family, job, and diaconal formation [later, ministry]. The aspirant and his wife [if married] will explore the many facets of the formation process [later ministerial] and its impact on the other areas of life.

Psychological Assessment

The aspirant and his wife will be interviewed and participate in a series of psychological assessments conducted by the Diocesan Counseling Center for Priests and Religious as another tool utilized in assessing the aspirant's readiness for candidacy.

Theological Studies

During this time, the Aspirant begins his theological training. The Aspirant has a choice as to which track he wishes to follow in his theological training. He may choose the Certificate in Pastoral Studies

or the Master's Degree program, both offered through St Josephinum Diaconal Institute of Studies. While only the aspirant is required to take the course in theological studies, his wife is not. However, she may also take these classes at no cost.

Certificate in Pastoral Studies

If the aspirant chooses the certificate program, he begins his studies during the Aspirant Path. He must satisfactorily complete this course of studies offered as continuing education at St Josephinum Diaconal Institute a complete listing of courses is found in **[Appendix F]**.

Master's Degree

St Josephinum Diaconal Institute offers a Master's degree program. Applicants must have a bachelor's degree. With his academic advisor and Director of Formation, he must ensure that he is following the theological studies program designed for the permanent diaconate.

Prayer-Study Weekends

One weekend of each month, the men in Aspirancy II will gather for prayer-study days or weekends, based upon the schedule Presented each year. The aspirant II must attend from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon on the full weekends and the entire time for the day a sessions. His wife [if married] will be invited to participate in the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday sessions. If she chooses, an aspirant's wife may attend the entire prayer-study weekend.

During this time, the aspirant will explore his readiness for diaconal studies and ministry. Specific classes during the weekends that the aspirant will be involved with include:

Human Relationships

Spirituality

Public Speaking / Prayer

Pastoral Skills

Retreat

The aspirant II group will join the candidates for their yearly retreat in September. Wives are offered a day-long retreat, gathering on a separate weekend scheduled on a yearly basis.

Pastoral Field Education

The aspirant will be expected to continue his liturgical ministry in his parish as he did during the inquiry process. During Aspirancy II, he will be further exposed to some of the outreach ministries currently available in our diocese through a series of workshops where the candidate will learn and reflect on these ministries. Potential field ministries will become known at this time.

Nomination to Candidacy

All interviews, applications, and assessments given during Aspirancy I and Aspirancy II will be reviewed by the admissions committee for nomination by the Director of Formation to the bishop to enter the candidate path. The candidate path is a three-year discernment process.

Candidacy and Letter to the Bishop

If the bishop selects the aspirant to be a candidate for the permanent diaconate, he and his wife [if married] will be invited to handwrite a letter addressed to the bishop of Buffalo asking to be accepted as a candidate. This letter is short and asks for the rite, along with one's willingness to give oneself to the formation process. The aspirant's wife [if married] also handwrites a letter addressed to the bishop, acknowledging her consent to and support of her husband as he moves toward preparation for ordained ministry.

THE CANDIDATE PATH

"The candidate path in diaconal formation is the occasion for continued discernment of a diaconal vocation and immediate preparation for ordination. Throughout this path in formation, the candidate himself assumes the primary responsibility for his discernment and development." [204]

This three-year period continues the discernment process and allows the candidate to hone the skills necessary to serve as an ordained minister of the Church.

During this time, the candidate will continue participating in weekday classes to give him theological training, prayer-study weekends, a yearly retreat, and an annual evaluation.

Theological Studies

The candidate will continue his theological studies through the Certificate or Master's Degree Program, both offered through St Josephinum Diaconal Institute. During the Candidate Path, the candidate will participate in all the Classes as noted in **[Appendix F]:**

Certificate in pastoral studies or master's degree

The candidate will continue in his theological training through participation in the school's prescribed course of studies, choosing courses with the guidance of his advisor and the director of formation. Each class taken is worth two credits. If you decide to do the master's program, you will be enrolled in the same courses as the certificate program, with some exceptions. The master's classes are the same as the certificate, with the expectation of additional reading and additional writing with papers.

Prayer-Study Weekends

During the prayer-study weekends, the candidate is required to be in attendance from Friday evening through Sunday afternoon and his wife [if married] is also invited to join for the same time. If the Aspirant/Candidate does not stay overnight, there is an expectation to be present for designated times.

During this time, a routine of private and public prayer, including the Liturgy of the Hours and Eucharist, are woven together with study to help further the candidate discern and prepare for diaconal ministry. The workshops and classes the candidate is involved with on these weekends include the following: (Other classes will be determined as needed)

Candidacy I

- Pastoral Counseling
- Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion
- Proclamation of the Scriptures
- Spirituality
- Theological Reflection Seminars

Candidacy II & III

- Social Justice Issues
- Homiletics
- Spirituality
- Theological Reflection Seminars
- Liturgical Practicum

Pastoral Field Education

Under the direction of the Coordinator of Pastoral Field Education, the candidate is involved in supervised field ministry. This gives the candidate the opportunity to use and develop the skills learned as well as experience the depth and breadth of diaconal ministry. Candidates are involved in theological reflection to assist them in making necessary connections between the theological training received and the ministry he is involved with. They will be involved on field education as follows:

Candidacy I through Candidacy III

The candidate will be placed in one, two to three different ministries. Each experience is to be 30-36 hours long. The total amount of hours desired is 90. These experiences will allow the candidate to experience the ministry of a deacon and share in the wisdom and insight of the deacon in his lived ministerial reality. This exposure will broaden the candidate's view of ministry and its many possibilities in the Buffalo diocese. It will also allow the candidate to explore his strengths and limitations regarding ordained ministry.

The Rite of Candidacy, Institution as Reader, Institution as Acolyte, and Ordination to the Holy Order of Deacon

Each candidate must celebrate three rituals [Candidacy, Lector, and Acolyte] in accordance with the law of the Church to be ordained a deacon. Candidacy is celebrated at the beginning of the year designated Candidacy I. Aspirant is required to write a letter **[Appendix G]**. The same format is also required for Rite of Lector and Acolyte.

Lector is celebrated during the Spring of the year designated Candidacy I. Acolyte is celebrated during the year designated as Candidacy II. A letter addressed to the Bishop of Buffalo asking to be accepted into the ministry is required for each rite. This letter is short and asks for the rite along with one's willingness to give oneself to the ministry. The aspirant's wife [if married] also handwrites a letter addressed to the bishop acknowledging her consent to and support of her husband as he moves toward preparation for ordained ministry.

Ordination to the Holy Order of Deacon is celebrated at the end of the year and is designated as Candidacy III. Each candidate will observe a five-day retreat prior to ordination as required by the law of the Church. At the retreat, the third-year candidate will handwrite a letter addressed to the Bishop of Buffalo asking to be accepted for ordination. This letter asks to be ordained a deacon for the Diocese of Buffalo and explains why he feels he is ready to be ordained a deacon. The aspirant's wife [if married] also handwrites a letter to the bishop acknowledging her consent to and support of her husband as he moves on to ordained ministry.

You can find the duties of the Acolyte in **[Appendix H]**.

Yearly Evaluation

At the completion of each year for Candidacy I and II, a formal evaluation by the formation team is conducted for each candidate. The team assesses the candidate's readiness to move on to the next year. The Director of Formation gives a summary of this evaluation and the specific vote for each candidate to the bishop. The bishop then decides who should move on for further discernment toward ordination. A similar evaluation is held mid-year for those candidates in the year designated Candidacy III. Their evaluation revolves

around readiness for the sacrament of Holy Orders. A summary is given to the bishop, who then calls worthy candidates to the Holy Order of Deacon.

Upon the decision to move on to further discernment, the Director of Formation meets with the candidate to review the evaluation and establish goals for the next year.

Participation of the Candidate's Wife

For the married candidate, the support of his wife is essential. In fact, without her complete demonstrated support the Church cannot ordain her husband to the Holy Order of Deacon. Marriage is their primary sacrament and there must be a strong covenant to sustain the added responsibility both formation and ordained diaconal ministry will bring.

To support and foster loving and life-giving marriages, wives are expected to support their husbands in the process of formation. To that end, wives are expected to attend certain portions of the program of formation. In general, candidates' wives are invited to be present each formation weekend and for the celebration of ordination each year. Other times of presence may be included as well. Wives will be afforded their own prayer time and learning with the wives coordinator of formation.

Wives' Program

The wife of a candidate in diaconal formation has a program designed specifically for women's spirituality.

The wife is invited to attend the prayer-study weekends with their husband. The prayer-study weekends take place from Friday evening through Sunday afternoon. They are designed to focus on private and public prayer, along with the presentations of topics to help discern the

full scope of the commitment required of a permanent deacon and discover new aspects of ministry in the church. A wife who joins her husband on the prayer-study weekend experiences a unique time of fellowship.

The wives have a coordinator of formation that will provide the following:

- Friday – Wives’ group spirituality
- Saturday – Wives group morning program
- August - Wives retreat

The wives’ coordinator of formation attends the full prayer-study weekend to support wives and candidates.

The candidate’s wife participating in formation weekends can expect to join her husband in joint programs offered on Saturdays. On Sunday mornings, wives are valuable participants in theological reflections presented by the candidates. Lastly, wives have time to reflect on the immensity of God in their lives in a retreat-like environment.

There are 8 formation weekends. Five Days are Ministry days with learning component, and three are full weekends. We realize not all wives can attend the entire weekend from Friday through Sunday. Therefore, wives should attend the activities associated with their husbands’ candidacy year for the portion of the program they are expected to participate in as a minimum, notably when the bishop is present. These will be identified by the director of diaconal formation.

There are many benefits of participating that are not clear until you have the chance to experience it for yourself. To know that other women share this distinctive journey is among those benefits..

PREPARATION TO ORDINATION

Prior to Ordination, there is work that needs to be accomplished.

[Appendix I] is a cheat sheet for what the deacon is to say at mass and what his parts are.

[Appendix I2] is a chart with the Liturgical Items used at Liturgy.

[Appendix I3] includes vestments and other various needs for ministry.

Just prior to ordination, typically the last weekend in May, A Candidate will make their Profession of Faith **[Appendix J]** and declare their Oath of Fidelity. **[Appendix J2]** – These are made on the last weekend of formation in front of the community. They declare your faith to the church and fidelity to the Bishop with your hand on the Bible.

POST ORDINATION PATH

The post-ordination path in diaconal formation "is first and foremost a process of continual conversion."

The goal for this path in formation is to responsibly address the various aspects of a deacon's ministry, the development of his personality and, above all, his commitment to spiritual growth. "Ongoing formation must include and harmonize all dimensions of the life and ministry of the deacon. Thus . . . it should be complete, systematic and personalized in its diverse aspects whether human, spiritual, intellectual or pastoral." The primary source for post-ordination formation is the ministry itself. [239]

Upon Ordination, the newly ordained is expected to sit down with their pastor, who is their immediate supervisor, and fill out the agreement from **[Appendix K]**

Once ordained, the deacon must continue to grow in all areas of his life. To this end, the Office of the Permanent Diaconate offers many growth opportunities, some of which are required.

Every year, a deacon must go on a retreat and complete 12 hours of continued formation over the year. This may be through the

St Josephinum Institute, an approved online learning platform, or in-person learning experiences.

The specific norms and guidelines for ordained deacons in our local diocese can be found at:

https://www.buffalodeacons.org/uploads/1/5/0/7/150794882/2023_norms_and_guidelines_final_3123.pdf

Appendices