

DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS



DEACON FORMATION PROGRAM

Aspirancy Manual
2023-24



DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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May 15, 2023

Dear Inquirers,

Welcome, and thank you for considering the Ministry of Permanent Deacon in service to the People of the Diocese of Eastern Montana. We are pleased that you are exploring your call to service and entering a propaedeutic (preliminary instruction) period of formation and discernment of the Spirit.

This Fall marks the beginnings of a new cohort of aspirants in formation to the Permanent Diaconate. In June of 2014, the diocese witnessed its first ordination of nine permanent deacons prepared in a local formation program in nearly thirteen years. In 2019 we ordained a second group of six. We currently have six candidates on track for Ordination in June of 2024. Our program today builds on those experiences, along with the experiences of other dioceses like us in size and population.

The Sacrament of Holy Orders, for which you are preparing, carries with it an awesome responsibility ... the responsibility for leading others to Christ. In the ordination rite, the newly ordained is handed the Book of the Gospels with these words:

“Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become.
Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach”.

This Aspirancy Manual is provided to you as a guide to aid you in understanding the details of the formation program, the process of application, the rationale for assessment and the expectations and responsibilities of the aspirant including those regarding the wife of the married aspirant. Its purpose is to prepare you to be the witness and servant for which you are called in ordained ministry.

May God bless you and your family in this wonderful and challenging journey.

Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings

Enclosure

ASPIRANCY

A holy and guided Journey of Investigation, Education, Growth and Discernment

This manual provides the basic information necessary to understand and to apply to **Aspirancy**, the first formal step in the Diaconal Formation Program. The descriptions, guidelines and schedules contained in this manual are distilled from the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*¹ and adapted for use in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings.

While this manual will include some details about the nature of the diaconate and the character of those called to serve, the primary purpose of this publication is to provide information on the application process, requirements, time demands and the selection process directly related to the Aspirancy experience of the Diaconate Formation Program. Further information can be obtained by a review of the National Directory (ND) noted above and *The Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons / Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* (BNFPD).² For further understanding of the spirituality and life of a deacon, please refer to the bibliography at the end of this manual.

- 1) National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States. (ND), USCCB, 2005, ISBN 1-57455-368-2
- 2) Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons / Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons, (BNFPD), USCCB, 1998, ISBN 1-57455-242-2

A. An Overview of Responsibilities:

It is the responsibility of the Formation Director/team, the Permanent Deacon Advisory Board, and those chosen to teach in the Diaconal Formation Program to provide a healthy and challenging program for the formation of deacons to serve the needs of the People of the Diocese of Eastern Montana. In accordance with the Bishop's directive and in consultation with the Permanent Deacon Advisory Board, the Formation Director/Team and those engaged as instructors are charged with providing a practical and relevant education infused with the proper spirituality for forming deacons. In addition, the Formation Director/Team, working in collaboration with the Permanent Deacon Advisory Board has the responsibility of recommending to the Bishop aspirants for admission to candidacy and candidates for the promotion to the order of deacon. (ND, #185 & 284)

While participants in the Diaconal Formation Program can expect quality formation, guidance, support and education from their faith community and the staff involved in their formation, each man must also take personal responsibility for his individual spiritual and academic development. Formation involves education, training, spiritual growth, and most importantly, ongoing conversation. Change takes effort and emotional energy, and learning and training takes time. Those applying for diaconal formation must realize that the preparation and training necessary for becoming a deacon demands significant time, self-discipline and real effort. While the program is designed from a "family-friendly perspective," it is the job of the participant to plan and organize his life to avoid conflicts, minimize stress on himself, his family if married, and to continue to meet his responsibilities as a husband, parent and employee while in the program. Simply put, preparation for serving the needs of a parish involves serious academic study and the development of skills through direct experience in a variety of ministries. Those asking the Church to recognize their call as deacons must be willing to actively pursue the knowledge, skills and depth of faith necessary to fulfill the deacon's call to the ministries of **word, charity and liturgy**.

Along with the academic work and training for various ministries, those pursuing the diaconate are expected to actively pursue their own spiritual

growth. Spiritual maturity is a requirement of serving the Church as an ordained minister. Being a deacon is a life-long commitment requiring a strong underpinning of faith to keep it alive and dynamic. Daily prayer, regular attendance at Mass, both on Sundays and weekdays, and participation in the Sacraments are necessary parts of formation and post-formation life. Those seeking to be deacons are also required to work with a spiritual director to help guide their growth.

Expenses for the program are covered by contributions from the diocese, your parish and your own personal resources. Participants may expect to pay anywhere from \$200-\$400 annually for texts, course fees, and resource materials. Your parish will be expected to provide anywhere from \$400 - \$600 annually in support of their aspirant(s)/candidate(s) each. Before entering Aspirancy, applicants and their wives are required to have a psychological evaluation with a psychologist. The cost of this exam and consultation is shared between the diocese and the applicant resulting in a cost of approximately \$200 per person. All travel expenses, meals while traveling and lodging expenses are the responsibility of each applicant / aspirant. Meals, while attending weekend formation sessions are provided by the diocese.

B. Discernment

Discernment for the diaconate begins on a personal level and then quickly moves to a family level for the majority of permanent deacons, since most permanent deacons are married. The Church puts so much value on the input and consent of the wife and family in the discernment process that a married applicant cannot be considered without his wife's informed, written consent at each step in the formation process.

The pastor and parish community also participate in the early stages of discernment and throughout the formation process. The pastor must recognize a need for diaconal ministry and service in the parish or in the Diocese at large and the probability that the applicant can fulfill the identified need in order to recommend a particular applicant from his parish.

Finally, the Bishop and those he appoints to select and form the diaconate candidates for ordination, must also determine the presence of a call, the capacity to fulfill it, one's personal readiness and the willingness to serve the Church as a deacon. Along with the applicant's family, the Church must also

agree that the time is right for the applicant given his family and work circumstance and the needs of the diocese. While an individual may feel a strong personal call, it is important to keep in mind the ecclesial nature of the call to ordained ministry.

All ministry flows out of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts are given to the People of God not for the benefit of the individual minister but for the benefit of the Church. As a result, any discernment of gifts and charisms must involve the ecclesial community ... This is especially true for ordained ministries of the Church. An individual who presents himself for ordination to the diaconate is accountable to the Church, who mediates—confirms—his vocation. (ND #153)

c. Diaconal Character

While becoming a deacon does involve training and the gaining of new knowledge, men pursuing the diaconate share some common pre-existing traits. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, “Grace builds on nature.” Certainly, concern for others, especially the marginalized, is paramount, but there are others as well. The following list is not exhaustive, but it does provide food for thought for those considering the call to diaconal service:

- † A genuine call to serve
- † Deep faith and love for the Church
- † A love for the Word
- † Psychological and Spiritual Maturity
- † An interest in theological reflection
- † Financial stability
- † Ability to maintain commitments
- † Strong Interpersonal and Communication Skills
- † Share faith with tolerance, respect for others
- † Capacity for Obedience and Fraternal Communion, Collaboration
- † Stable married life or mature celibate state
- † Leadership Skills, Ability to “animate” others
- † Public Speaking Skills, Honest, Trustworthy
- † Generous, Recognized as a good Catholic Christian
- † Active in one’s own Faith and Spiritual development

d. Readiness and the Selection Process

Readiness is comprised of two aspects: preparedness and timeliness. In both cases as was stated earlier, there are many people involved in the assessment of readiness. Prior to entering Aspirancy and throughout the program, the applicant will need to work with his wife, family, pastor, and formation staff to determine if he is ready and the real circumstances of his life are right for becoming a deacon.

First, the applicant, working with his wife and family must determine if this is the appropriate time to “answer the call to serve.” A careful consideration of one’s current commitments must be made to determine if the necessary time for studying, preparing and ultimately serving is appropriate.

It is the responsibility of those charged by the Bishop with selecting applicants to determine that the required amount of preparedness is present at the time of application. The first determination of readiness is established by a thorough review of the material provided in the individual’s application. This review will be done prior to an invitation to appear for an interview with the Director/Team of Formation and members of the Permanent Deacon Advisory Board. These interviews with the applicant and spouse are to be conducted in the months of August through October of 2023.

After this, if the applicant is chosen to be considered for Aspirancy, additional assessments will be made: The Deacon Perceiver Inventory, a Psychological Evaluation to include applicant and wife, and IFG-Inventory of basic Catholic teachings and beliefs. These assessments will be conducted prior to any recommendation to the Bishop to invite the applicant to Aspirancy.

Those invited to join the Aspirancy Cohort will attend an Orientation Weekend in November 2023. This begins a one-year period of further discernment, a time of acclamation into adult learning through a course of study, and exploration involving both self-examination and further assessment by the Diocese. It is possible that during or even after finishing Aspirancy, a man may either self-select to delay or discontinue his pursuit in the diaconate journey or be asked to do so by the Diocese.

Both those responsible for the selection of men to be formed as deacons and those seeking formation must keep in mind Paul's advice to Timothy:

"Moreover, they should be tested first; then, if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons." 1 Timothy 3:10

E. Academic Prerequisites

The Diocese of Great Falls-Billings has no specific academic prerequisite requirements. It is expected that a minimum of a high school education be a part of the applicant's educational history. Most coursework requirements of this formation program will be offered at the undergraduate - freshman college level. One who does not possess an undergraduate degree would benefit from an introductory college writing and / or speech course, as both public speaking and the ability to compose a well written paper in response to course requirements is expected. A typical cohort of aspirants may include those who have completed only some higher education or may have graduate degrees in theology or some other discipline. All applicants should be aware that completion of the full scope and sequence of the program is required regardless of one's initial academic standing upon application.

F. The Application

Before an application form is requested, the inquirer must verbally receive his pastor's recommendation of support. Once the Director of Deacons has received the pastor's written initial recommendation, and been notified, in writing, by the inquirer of his interest in entering the Aspirancy program, he will receive an application packet in written and electronic format. It is the applicant's responsibility to insure that the following documents are received by the Director of Deacons in advance of the application deadline of September 30, 2023:

- Sacramental Record from the Parish of Baptism, issued within the last six months – this record to indicate baptism, confirmation, marriages, annulments and notes on any orders received
- Official Certificate of Birth
- Proof of Legal Residence in Diocese (voter registration)
- Recent photographs of you and your spouse
- Completed Applicant Application Form – signed consent and release forms
- Completed Wife’s Questionnaire and Consent form
- Spiritual Autobiography from both applicant and wife
- Pastor’s Inquiry Form
- Three – Unrelated Parishioners’ Recommendation
- Pastoral Staff or Permanent Deacon’s Recommendation
- Criminal History Background Check – release authorization
- Certification of ‘Good Health” by personal physician dated within last 3 months
- Annulment Documentation (if applicable)

The application will be completed in electronic format and submitted both as a signed hard-copy document and completed electronic format. Applicants are encouraged to retain a copy of the application for their records.

Applicants and wives will be invited to appear in an interview with members of the Deacon Advisory Board.

On the basis of the recommendations, information disclosed in the application and consideration of Diocesan and parochial needs, applicants, upon recommendation by the Permanent Deacon Advisory Board and affirmation by the bishop will be invited to join the Cohort of Aspirants and attend the Orientation Weekend scheduled for November 17-19, 2020, at Great Falls.

In addition to the documents noted above, those selected for consideration for the Aspirancy program will be directed on how and when to complete the assessment tools listed in Section D of this manual that are required to complete one’s file for admission to Aspirancy.

g. Criteria

The selection of Aspirants is based upon a number of factors. It is unlikely that each man selected will meet all the criteria, but there are obvious similarities among the members of any particular cohort. Generally, aspirants are men who have provided service to their parishes and to the community at large, especially in the area of social justice and direct services, i.e. Corporal Works of Mercy. They are men who have a love for the Word and the Church. In addition, they are men:

- of prayer
- of faith and compassion who strive to live the Beatitudes
- who have a call to be deacon
- who have been practicing Catholics for at least five years
- who have a mature, well integrated spirituality
- who are willing to meet the demands of a rigorous formation program
- who are willing to make a life-long commitment to service in the Church
- who are able to work collaboratively with men and women of all races, ecclesiology and temperament
- who, if married, have been in a stable marriage for five years and have their wife's support
- who, if single, are capable of living a celibate life
- who have received the appropriate sacraments for their station in life
- who are either retired or employed, but possess economic stability
- who are at least 31 years of age prior to applying
- who have the endorsement and support of their pastor
- who are capable and willing to give serious attention to theological study, spiritual formation, and ministry
- who are willing to be obedient to their Bishop and flexible enough to meet the challenging needs of the Diocese and their parish

h. Purpose of Aspirancy

Aspirancy is primarily a time of investigation and discernment on the part of the aspirant and his wife and a time of assessment and discernment on the part of the Diocesan Church. During this period of discernment, the aspirant is introduced to a more in-depth study of theology, ecclesial and pastoral philosophy, and to a deeper knowledge of the spirituality and ministry of the deacon in order to provide a basis for meaningful and informed discernment to occur. Although some aspects of Aspirancy may be linked to other ministerial formation, Aspirancy must remain a separate program that provides for a thorough discernment of a diaconal vocation. In the end, the purpose of Aspirancy is for the aspirant and those charged with the responsibility of selecting men for Candidacy to identify if he is truly called and ready to serve the Church as a deacon.

i. The Dimensions and Content of Aspirancy

There are three distinct, but integral parts in the formation of a deacon: Aspirancy, Candidacy and Post-ordination mentoring and training. Each of these periods of formation can be divided into four elements: Human Dimension, Spiritual Dimension, Intellectual Dimension, and Pastoral Dimension. Through these four paths, the following academic, spiritual and inter-personal topics will be addressed in this Aspirancy Year: Diaconal Ministry & Life, Marriage and the Diaconate, Diaconal Spirituality, Discernment (personal and ecclesial), Theology, Christology, History of Christian Religion, The Creed – our Faith, and Ecclesiology.

I. The Human Dimension

The human dimension during Aspirancy will focus on developing a high degree of self-knowledge, and self-esteem to aid the aspirant in developing his confidence for diaconal ministry and understanding of his call. A partnership with a Deacon Mentor will be established. Time

spent on analyzing the dynamic relationship between family and diaconal life, as well as other interpersonal and relationship experiences, will provide ample opportunity for the aspirant and his wife to assess the current state of their marriage, family life and the ramifications of his possible ordination to the diaconate on their family life. Ample attention will also be spent on helping the single aspirant discern his capacity for celibacy.

II. The Spiritual Dimension

The spiritual dimension of Aspirancy will assist the aspirant in the ongoing process of configuring oneself to Christ. The very goal of spiritual formation is “putting on the mind of Christ” (ND #191) therefore, this aspect of the program will nurture attitudes, habits and practices that provide opportunity for this type of growth. To enhance this growth, this portion of formation will involve classes and presentations on understanding diaconal vocation, the meaning of obedience, celibacy and simplicity of life, matrimonial spirituality, and spiritual writings from the Catholic tradition. Along with community activities facilitated by the Formation Program staff, individuals are expected to actively participate in the following:

- Daily Mass (when possible)
- Sacrament of Reconciliation
- Liturgy of the Hours, meditation and private prayer
- Lectio Divina
- Spiritual Direction and fostering a relationship with a Spiritual Director

III. The Intellectual Dimension

The intellectual dimension is not isolated from the other elements of Aspirancy. In fact, it draws the other dimensions together and helps to clarify and increase their purpose by providing a deeper understanding of the spirituality and human aspects of formation while also providing practical knowledge to support the development of pastoral skills. Academic coursework during Aspirancy includes Theology, Christology, systematic study of the Catechism, doctrinal study of the

diaconate and its particular charisms, ministries and tradition, application of the Church's social teachings, Church history and operational organization, and traditional Catholic spirituality.

Beyond the goal of providing a common base for the cohort to work from in Candidacy, the intellectual aspect of Aspirancy helps the aspirant to develop his understanding of his own call and the necessary vocabulary to discuss it. Because teaching aspirants the fundamentals of theological reflection improves their ability to discuss their call, it makes evaluating their readiness all the more possible for those charged with discerning its presence. The aspirant's performance in these basic academic classes also provides strong indications as to whether the aspirant is prepared, and willing to make the effort, for the rigors of candidate formation. (ND #196)

IV. The Pastoral Dimension

This dimension's focus is ultimately the discernment of the aspirant's gifts for the three-fold ministry of Word, Liturgy, and Charity and his capacity to make a life-long commitment to these ministries. This is also a time to learn about appropriate tolerance and the need to apply all the Church's teachings on Social Justice. Courses in this area will concentrate on developing the necessary interpersonal skills for ministerial work in a multi-cultural Church.

By introducing the aspirant to the realities of the ministerial life, the pastoral dimension provides the information and time for the aspirant and his spouse to consider carefully the impact of having diaconal ministry as part of their family priorities. This ensures that the aspirant's wife can give informed consent and support to his desire to pursue being a deacon. Likewise, this aspect of formation also allows for the external, that is, diocesan assessment of readiness of the aspirant's wife and family to give their full consent and support.

J. Time Commitment

The Aspirancy program as outlined, is for one year. The Aspirancy year runs from November 2023 through July 2024 and weekend formation sessions are conducted from 5:00 pm Friday evening through noon on Sunday. The

program begins with the Orientation Weekend in November 2023. Year-round courses of intellectual studies, one class at a time, will be accomplished through the Notre Dame McGrath Institute. Seven face-to-Face additional formation weekends will be held at a various locations around the diocese and will emphasize Spiritual, Human and Pastoral formation. Attendance by both aspirant and his wife is mandatory. An Aspirancy couple's retreat will be scheduled in the summer of 2023.

In addition to the coursework offered during these formation weekends, aspirants will be expected to complete designated coursework on-line through the Notre Dame McGrath Institute virtual learning system. These activities will sometimes require viewing on-line lectures, participating in online group discussions or involvement in chat rooms conversations. This will give you access to instructors and may possibly include online assessments. You will be instructed on how to use the system and how to log on at the Orientation weekend 17-19 November.

Candidacy classes will run from September through May/June following the same weekend format as during the Aspirancy Year. Seven formation weekends are planned each year in addition to a retreat experience in June.

Summer Internship assignments will be made between Candidacy Years 1 and 2 (2022) and again between Years 2 and 3 (2023).

Average weekly time commitment to prepare and participate in classes either in person or on-line should be from 8 – 10 hours.

κ. Wives' Participation

Wives are required to be present during all face-to-face formation sessions. Participation is required during the Aspirancy experience to ensure that spouses have ample opportunity to ask questions, participate in discussions and gain a clearer understanding of the diaconate before being asked to give their informed consent for their husband's continued participation.

Participation in the Candidacy Weekend Formation Sessions is strongly encouraged and at times required. During both the Aspirancy and Candidacy experience, specific seminars and "table-talk" opportunities will be offered for wives to provide a forum for discussion and support. The content and

materials for these seminars will be decided by the wives to ensure that the topics remain relevant, timely and helpful.

I. Applicant Interview

Once your application has been received, the Director of Formation will contact you to set up an initial interview with two members of the Permanent Diaconate Advisory Board/Formation Team and the Director. The interview will be conducted at a location within your vicariate of residence. If you are married, it is imperative that your wife attend as well.

You will be provided with a list of questions to aid in your preparation and our understanding of your vocational call. During the interview, you will have the opportunity to discuss your vocational interest and application in person. The interview is also an opportunity for you to ask questions about the diaconate, the formation process and expectations. Among those topics to be discussed are the following. These are not “test” questions but rather, jumping off points for discussion and getting to know you. Both you and your wife should be prepared to join in the discussion.

Among those topics to be discussed are the following:

- Being a disciple
- Personal prayer life
- Working with people of other cultural, ethnic, religious or economic backgrounds
- Christian Marriage: What does it mean that your marriage is sacramental?
- The Catholic Church’s teaching on sexual ethics
- Serving those in need
- Working with non-ordained ministers and laity
- Your understanding of Holy Orders
- Obedience to the Bishops
- Being asked by the Bishop to serve in a parish or ministry other than your home parish
- Your relationship with Sacred Scripture
- Crafting and preaching homilies
- Relationships with other Christian Churches and religions
- Any questions about discernment and the formation process that you have

Aspirancy Year Schedule

30 Sept 2023	Application Deadline
Aug-Oct 2023	Applicant/Spouse Interviews
Nov 17-19 2023	Aspirant Orientation Weekend – Location TBD
December 2023	Formation Weekend – Location not Great Falls
January 2024	Formation Weekend
February 2024	Formation Weekend
March 2024	Formation Weekend
April 2024	Formation Weekend
May 2024	Formation Weekend
June 2024	Formation Weekend
Summer 2024	Aspirant/Wife Thursday - Sunday Retreat

Class Topics: History and Nature of the Diaconate, Faith and Reason, Sacred Scripture

Three Year Candidacy Program [Subject to Refinement as Necessary]

Candidacy Year I

September 2024	Formation Weekend
October 2024	Formation Weekend
December 2024	Formation Weekend
January 2025	Formation Weekend
February 2025	Formation Weekend
April 2025	Formation Weekend
May 2025	Formation Weekend
Summer 2025	Candidate/Wife Thursday - Sunday Retreat

Class Topics: Diaconal Vocation and Ministry, Homiletics I, Sacraments, Church Doctrine, Moral Theology, Old Testament, New Testament, Public Speaking, Social Ministry Internship, Pastoral Care I, Church History(Early Church Patristics, , Medieval Theology, Contemporary Theology), Apologetics, Spirituality, Trinity, Christology, Discernment I, Charisms - Gifts and Ministry

Candidacy Year II *Received into Ministry of Lector*

September 2025 Formation **Weekend**

October 2025 Formation **Weekend**

December 2025 Formation **Weekend**

January 2026 Formation **Weekend**

February 2026 Formation **Weekend**

April 2026 Formation **Weekend**

May 2026 Formation **Weekend**

Summer 2026 Candidate/Wife **Thursday - Sunday Retreat**

Class Topics: Canon Law, Homiletics II, Liturgy/Liturgical Ministry, Social Justice, The Councils, Marriage & Family Vatican II, Christian Anthropology, Ethics, Forming a Moral Conscience, Pastoral Care, Spirituality, Discernment, Collaborative Ministry

Candidacy Year III

October 2026 Formation **Weekend**

November 2026 Formation **Weekend** – Location not Great Falls

December 2026 Formation **Weekend**

Received into Ministry of Acolyte

January 2027 Formation **Weekend**

February 2027 Formation **Weekend**

March 2027 Formation **Weekend**

April 2027 Formation **Weekend**

May 2024 Advisory Board Discernment

May 2024 Pre-Ordination Retreat

June 2024 Ordination

July 2024 Initial Assignments

Class Topics: Homiletics III, Church Documents, Liturgical Practicum, RCIA, Initiation, Holy Orders, Stable Life Condition, Ecclesiology, Spirituality (Academic perspective, Ecumenism, Church, State and Religious Liberty, New Age and Other Trends, Pastoral Care Practicum, Discernment III, Basic Human Psychology, Discernment of Charisms in Ministry

Bibliography of Suggested Readings

The Heart of the Diaconate, James Keating, Paulist Press, 2015

The Deacon Reader, Edited by James Keating, Paulist Press, 2006

The Emerging Diaconate, William Ditewig, Paulist Press, 2007

The Call to Service: Pastoral Statement on the Permanent Diaconate, Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, Archdiocese of Chicago, 1993

“The Heart of the Permanent Deacon”, St. Pope John Paul II, address to deacons – Detroit, Origenes 17, Oct. 5, 1987

101 Questions and Answers on Deacons, William Ditewig, Paulist Press, 2004

A New Friendship: The Spirituality and Ministry of the Deacon, Edward Buelt, Liturgical Press, 2011

Diaconate: The Legacy of Vatican II, Theodore W. Kraus, Address to NADD – Boston, 1999

May 2023