



October 10, 2025
Feast of Paulinus of York

TO THE CLERGY AND LAITY IN THE DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS:

Greetings in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the only name given whereby we men and women can be saved!

I am very pleased to announce that Fr. Alan and Sue Andreas, the directors of Trinity Hall School of Ministry, are beginning to accept women aspirants for Deaconess formation. The lay order of Deaconess has a long and venerable practice within the Church. As you will read in this initial document, we seek to recapture that spirit and ethos for the 21st century.

Women in ministry, and ministry to women, is not simply a blessing for the Church. It is quintessentially necessary. If the Apostolic Succession of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons function like a skeletal system in the Body of Christ, the ministries of women are often akin to sinew holding those bones together.

As a diocese we are working to develop, equip, and foster the work of women. Deaconesses, Religious Sister, and the Daughter's of the Holy Cross are primary venues for the formation of women in our diocesan life.

Would you join me in prayer for the women to be formed now, and for those the Lord is yet to send? Would you join me in prayer for a Canon for the Ministry of Women in our diocese? More information about the work of Deaconesses is in the Customary.

Would that the Lord would be so kind as to raise up more and more Mothers in Israel within our diocese!

All our lives are before the face of God,

The Rt. Rev. Darryl L. Fitzwater, Jr.
Bishop, Diocese of All Saints
Anglican Church in North America

THE DEACONESS

A LAY APOSTOLATE WITHIN THE DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS

In a 1957 address to the Second World Congress of the Lay Apostolate, Pope Pius XII spoke to the 2,000 delegates in attendance, saying, “The Church and the world require the intervention of Lay Apostles. The consecration of the world is essentially the work of laymen; those who are intimately a part of economic and social life.” Within the Church Catholic, these Lay Apostolates are primarily tasked to accomplish two key objectives: (1) to win and (2) to preserve. In other words, the lives of Lay Apostles are God’s instruments to close the gap between Jesus and the world, and to nurture those who drawn within the Motherhood of the Church.

As Pope Pious stated, the Lay Apostolate consists of laypeople—those who are not under vows of Religious Life or in Holy Orders—who exercise a specific ministry within and on behalf of the Church. This can take many forms including community service, education, or advocacy. It can also be carried out in everyday settings like institutions, workplaces, neighborhoods, and homes.

While all Christians are sealed for this kind of incarnational service by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation¹, the Church officially recognizes and commissions particular groups of people to vocationally embody this Apostolate. This includes the high call of Deaconess; women who dedicate themselves to a life of lay service and are trained to serve as able assistants to the clergy and to Christ's Church.

The Deaconess is an ancient vocation for lay women in the Church. As a venue for women who are called to ministerial service, it is both scripturally based and theologically appropriate (Romans 16:1; 1 Timothy 3:11). Deaconesses have been set apart to serve the Church since the time of the Apostles, and they have done so with various degrees of responsibility throughout Church history. In fact, their service to Christ has even come at the cost of their blood. In a letter written from Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan in 112 AD, he sought to provide the Emperor with factual information regarding the nature, practices, and doctrines of Christianity, and to explain its rapid spread across the empire. Much of his information was ruthlessly acquired through the torture of two Bithynian women “who were called deaconesses.” also

In its original form, Deaconesses were intended to minister charity and succor toward the wellbeing of their poorer fellow Christian women and children. They also served as aides in more spiritual service through the instruction and baptism of female catechumens. The Early Church often required catechumens to remove their clothing prior to baptism and, upon emerging from the water,

¹ Our own canons affirm this. Diocese of All Saints, Canon 5 (*Of the Laity*), Section 2, (*Concerning Ministry*), says, “The people of God are the chief agents of the Mission of the Church to extend the Kingdom of God by so presenting Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit that people everywhere will come to put their trust in God through Him,...The effective ministry of the Church is the responsibility of the laity no less than it is the responsibility of Bishops and other Clergy.” This is also affirmed within the *Constitution and Canons* of ACNA; Canon 10, Section 1.

be robed in white garments as a testimony to their death, burial, and resurrection to new life in Christ. Thus, for the anointing of the whole body which preceded baptism, it became a matter of propriety that those functions normally performed by ordained male clergy should be tended to, instead, by women.

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* is the earliest document that specifically discusses the role of Deaconess at length. It originated in Aramaic-speaking Syria during the 3rd century but soon spread throughout the Church in Greek and Latin versions as well. It explicitly directed that the Deaconess was to perform this baptismal function. The *Didascalia* also urged the Bishop with the following instruction:

Appoint a woman for the ministry of women. For there are homes to which you cannot send a Deacon to their women, on account of the heathen, but you may send a Deaconess. Also, in many other matters, the office of a Deaconess is required.

Turning our attention to The *Apostolic Constitutions*, we find that Deaconesses were also tasked with the duty of guarding the doors of the church and maintaining order among women during worship. They were also assigned the role of acting as intermediaries between the clergy and the women of the congregation—an Ombudsman of the Church, so to speak.

While these were all a part of her responsibilities, it was also stipulated that “the deaconess gives no [apostolic] blessing, for she fulfills no function of priest or deacon.” The Councils of Laodicea and Nicaea I are adamant that Deaconesses are to be accounted as laywomen because their setting apart was not equal to the sacrament of Holy Orders. What does that mean?

Although every woman who is brought into this Lay Apostolate is *Ordered* or *Set Apart* for service to Christ in the Church, the Deaconess is not included among the traditional, three-fold office of ministry which constitutes Holy Orders (i.e., Bishop, Priest, and Deacon). Catholic Christian orthodoxy, to which the Diocese of All Saints adheres, holds that these offices are exclusively male. A deaconess, therefore, comes alongside to assist the clergy while not being a member thereof. Her duties and functions do not require those of a priestly ordination or sacramental nature.

Anglican theologians have described this particularly ordering as *sui generis*, or unique unto itself. This position is not intended to diminish a woman’s ability to serve the Church. Quite the contrary. The order of Deaconess provides a matchless office and opportunity for women to carry the heart of Christ to others while remaining within the boundaries of God’s established structure of order and authority. It is not, after all, the question of a woman’s ability which restricts her from Holy Orders, but of how God calls the Church—as a living parable—to best reflect the order of heaven among mankind.

The roles of men and women within the Church are intended to be complementary, not competing. Like the roles of husband and wife within a marriage, biblical Church order is designed to visibly reflect Christ’s headship over the Church (cf., Ephesians 5:22-33). The submission or deference of a Deaconess to those in Holy Orders over her produces a spiritual cover of tremendous protection, allowing her to accomplish the most amazing feats of service within and on behalf of the Church. In this way Deaconesses can, indeed, move mountains!

We can see the dignity and honor invested into the lay order of Deaconess based on the words that early Bishops spoke over the candidates. The 5th century *Apostolic Constitutions* records what the Bishop was required to say:

O Bishop, thou shalt lay thy hands upon her with all the Presbytery and the Deacons and the Deaconesses, and thou shalt say: Eternal God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and woman, Who didst fill with the Spirit Mary, Deborah, Anna, and Huldah; Who didst not disdain that Thine only begotten Son should be born of a woman; Who didst in the Tabernacle of witness and in the Temple appoint women as guardians of Thy holy gates: Do Thou now look on this Thy handmaid, who is appointed unto the office of a Deaconess, and grant unto her the Holy Spirit, and cleanse her from all pollution of the flesh and of the spirit, that she may worthily accomplish the work committed unto her, to Thy glory and to the praise of Thy Christ.

Because of the tremendous utility brought to the Church through its Deaconesses, the order found widespread acceptance across regions, national boundaries, and ecclesiastical Communions, both East and West. Bishops and Patriarchs also experimented with many interpretations of what a Deaconess could do, sometimes drifting into extreme results. Nevertheless, after a millennium of predominantly fruitful service—and as a response to the Church shifting from baptisms by immersion to baptisms by affusion (pouring)—the Deaconess slowly slipped away from ecclesiastical need, and all but vanished.

That was until 1559 when the Damsels of Charity, founded by Prince Henri Robert de la Mark of Sedan, revived the ancient order with what is regarded as the first Protestant association of Deaconesses. Early Mennonites and Moravians also placed much value in having women set apart for this distinctive service. Its full revival was most keenly observed in the mid-19th century in Germany.

It was 1836 when Theodor Fliedner and his wife Friederike Münster opened the first Deaconess motherhouse in Kaiserswerth on the Rhine, inspired by what they saw among the Mennonites. Kaiserswerth Deaconesses obligated themselves for five years of service, receiving room, board, uniforms, pocket money, and lifelong care. There were varieties of duties including preparing women for marriage, training in childcare, nursing, and social work. This model quickly spread to England and Scandinavia. In the Anglican churches, Deaconesses were an auxiliary to the ordained ministry, with the Church of England setting apart its first Deaconess, Elizabeth Catherine Ferard, in 1861. By 1890 there were over 5,000 deaconesses throughout Europe.

The traditional Anglican Order of Deaconesses began to flourish in America in the mid-1800s in the Protestant Episcopal Church. This ministry, however, was not officially a part of the Canon Law in that church until 1889 when the American General Convention passed a canon recognizing their ministry. That canon set standards, qualifications, and duties for those called to serve as a Deaconess.

By 1970, almost 500 American women had been ordered as Deaconesses to care for the sick, the afflicted, and the poor. Their work included instructing others in the faith, preparing candidates for baptism and confirmation, caring for women and children, and organizing and carrying out social work. Deaconess training schools were soon established in New York and Philadelphia. And where the diocese or parish of the Deaconess had adequate resources, it was not uncommon for her to receive a stipend as well as a retirement benefit managed through the Church Pension Fund similar to other clergy and ‘employees’ of the diocese. The Deaconess ministry was eventually carried over from The Episcopal Church into the Continuing Anglican Churches in 1977, with a renewed emphasis on service to women, children, and parishes.

While the Church in Her various monastic vocations has established the vowed roles of Abbess, Prioress, Mother, and Sister, it is the role of Deaconess to serve the local parish as a woman of special grace that equips her to minister to particular needs. Each Communion within the larger body of Continuing Anglican Churches tailors the role of Deaconess to its own particular requirements. However, several commonalities exist between them.

- She is to be a woman of devout character and suitable age.
- She can be single, married, or widowed. If married, she can only serve with the consent of her husband.
- She can be Set Apart only by the Bishop of her diocese.
- Her appointment is to her parish and to serve as an aide to her rector.
- When not Set Apart for the needs of a parish, she is called upon to serve in a particular outreach designated and approved by the Bishop, and under his direct oversight.
- While her traditional role is to assist the Rector in the care of the poor and sick, the religious training of the young and others, and the work of moral reformation, in no case will her performance include any sacramental function which is reserved to those in Holy Orders.
- She must be adequately prepared for her work through sufficient training and proficiency in both the technical and religious aspects of her specific call.

As the Diocese of All Saints prayerfully examines the role of Deaconess within its own ecclesiastical life before Christ and the world, some aspects of this Lay Apostolate are fixed by tradition; others are in keeping with the larger Anglican Communion; and still others will be unique to our diocese and our expression of Anglo-Catholicism. This is our starting place as our Canons and Customary seek to embrace this Office.

Regarding the Office of Deaconess, the Diocese of All Saints affirms the following:

- She is a vowed servant of the Church, ministering *in persona ecclesiae* (Latin, *in the person of the Church*; more specifically, as *a conduit for Christ's action within the Church*) who is called to assist diocesan clergy in Apostolic Succession through works of mercy, catechesis, pastoral visitation, and spiritual formation, especially among women and children.
- The work of the Deaconess is grounded in the witness of Holy Scripture (e.g., Romans 16:1), confirmed in the *Apostolic Constitutions* and the Canons of the Early Church (notably the

Council of Chalcedon, Canon 15), and faithfully exercised in various branches of the historic Church, including the Anglican tradition.

- The Lambeth Conference of 1920, Resolution 48, reads,
 The order of deaconesses is the one and only order of the ministry for women which has the stamp of apostolic approval, and is the only order of ministry for women which we can recommend that our branch of the Catholic Church should recognize and use.

Regarding those women called into service as a Deaconess, the Diocese of All Saints will require the following:

- A Deaconess is a woman Set Apart by prayer by the Bishop for service in the Diocese, with appointment within a specific parish, mission, or ministry.
- A woman discerning a call to serve as a Deaconess must be of devout character, sound in faith, and well-reported for good works (cf., 1 Timothy 3:11; Titus 2:3-5). She shall engage in a time of spiritual discernment under the direction of a priest or spiritual director appointed by the Bishop.
- Candidates shall normally be no younger than 25 years of age and may be unmarried, married, or widowed. Married women may be considered only with the consent of their husband and in consultation with the Bishop.
- Candidates shall complete a program of theological, spiritual, and practical formation approved by the Diocese. Suitable areas of formation may include:
 - Holy Scripture, Biblical Theology, and Anglican Dogmatics
 - Church History with a focus on the Early Church and Anglican Tradition
 - Doctrine and Catechesis (including the Creeds and Catechism of the ACNA)
 - Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction
 - Liturgics, especially the Daily Office and Baptismal Preparation
 - Theological foundations of Christian healing and deliverance
 - Ethics and Moral Theology
 - The Spirituality of the Cross and Resurrection
- The Candidate shall complete a supervised ministry in a parish or diocesan setting under the guidance of a priest and senior Deaconess (if available), with appropriate evaluations and mentorship.
- Upon completion of formation, the Candidate shall be examined in doctrine and practical ministry by a commission appointed by the Bishop. Upon successful evaluation and approval, the Bishop may set her apart for the work of a Deaconess.
- A Deaconess shall live under a Rule of Life approved by the Bishop. This Rule should include daily prayer, frequent reception of the Sacraments, reading of Scripture, the reading of other devotional/spiritual books, the practice of spiritual disciplines (e.g., tithing, fasting, confession, etc.), regular spiritual direction, and works of mercy.

In the Diocese of All Saints, a woman Set Apart to this Lay Order is properly addressed as 'Deaconess.' The appropriate abbreviation for her title is 'Dss.' A Deaconess shall wear a distinctive blue vesture appointed for her Lay Order in witness of her vocation when engaged in the duties of her office and on official occasions. In addition to this vesture, a cross of the Lay Order shall be blessed and placed on her by the bishop on the occasion of her Setting Apart.