

The Vocation of the Deacon

When a Calling Takes Root

How God's call, the Church's encouragement, and a man's discernment can lead to the permanent diaconate.

When the Second Vatican Council restored the permanent diaconate in the 1960s, its participants envisioned men who would stand sacramentally in the midst of God's people as living signs of Christ, who came "not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

What compels a man to begin listening for that call to service?

For some, it's the earnest and eager suggestions from church leaders and other deacons who see true potential for selflessness and compassion.

For others, it is the loving, confident voice of God, urging them into a deeper commitment.

No matter how the seeds are planted, when they fall on fertile soil, their roots and branches can grow deep and wide, for deacons often have a profound effect on the communities they serve.

Planting the seeds of service

Deacon Clarence DeCaires, Jr. had been a police officer for over 20 years by the time he was ordained in 1987. He had worked as a patrol officer in specialized units – including traffic fatalities, which helped him learn to offer comfort to grieving families – and in internal affairs.

In 1981, leaders at Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Pearl City asked DeCaires to consider

becoming a deacon himself. "However, our two children were young and required my attention, and my job as a police officer didn't allow me to attend formation classes," he recalls.

Finally, with encouragement from Father James Drew and Father Alan Nagai, DeCaires decided to join Cohort #3. "Our third child arrived just as God told me He was the boss, and not me!" he chuckles.

In 2011, Dcn. DeCaires was appointed the first Director of Permanent Deacons for the Diocese of Honolulu by Bishop Larry Silva. He retired from that position in 2024, but continues on in the diaconate.

For Deacon Renier Torres, the combination of deep reflection and external affirmation proved impossible to ignore. Torres first began to sense that God might be calling him to the permanent diaconate through a growing desire to share his faith with others. "Over the years, I discovered how deeply fulfilling it was to accompany people who were searching for a closer relationship with their Maker," he says. "Whenever I found myself talking with someone about faith, something in me came alive."

While Torres was stationed in Alaska with the Air Force, the Bishop of Fairbanks invited him to consider the diaconate. At the time, he thought he would live out his vocation solely

as a husband and father, in his own "domestic church."

But his desire to share the faith, repeated invitations from the Church, and the fulfillment he felt in helping others draw closer to God, all began to form a pattern Torres couldn't deny. And everything seemed to be drawing him toward deeper service.

Gentle movements of grace

"Over time, I realized that these weren't coincidences but gentle movements of grace, nudging me to consider that God might be inviting me to serve in a more intentional and sacramental way," Torres explains. "My sense of call didn't come as a whisper in the night, like Samuel, nor as a flash of light, like Saul on the road to Damascus. Instead, it unfolded slowly — small pieces of a puzzle coming together over many years."

He found joy and purpose in multiple ministries, like teaching OCIA (the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults, the process of conversion and initiation into the Catholic Christian community), as well as serving as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, heading the altar server ministry, and serving on his parish council.

"Yet even in the midst of that service," says Torres, "I felt a quiet tug, an inner restlessness,



Dcn. Renier Torres



Dcn. Clarence DeCaires and wife, Violet

Alongside the Call

Wives and families play an important role in the discernment, formation and journey toward the permanent diaconate.



Brassie, Rommel, and little Benedict
Courtesy Photo

A wife's role in the diaconate journey -- discernment, formation, ordination, and in service -- cannot be underestimated, as her support and participation are crucial at every stage.

In fact, married men who wish to pursue the diaconate must obtain their wives' written consent before they enter the program -- and at each major step, all the way through ordination.

Discernment can be a transformative process for the couples who share it. "It's an opportunity to let the Spirit guide us together in determining if the diaconate is what God is calling us to do, because it involves the whole family," says Amy Zick, wife of Jared Zick, now in his fifth year of formation as a member of Cohort 11.

The effects of discernment have been quietly profound for this couple. "We take the opportunity to discuss and evaluate how this shared ministry will impact our lives," says Mrs. Zick. "It brings us together into a deeper prayer life. This journey has made our relationship stronger."

For Brassie Ofalsa and her husband Rommel, an aspirant in Cohort 12, discernment began when they attended an "inquiry weekend" -- a retreat for men exploring life and ministry as permanent deacons, and their wives, if they are married.

"At that time, I was five months pregnant, and we were unsure if formation was something that could be done with a little one," Mrs. Ofalsa recalls. "We were

blessed to have others around who went through it with small children. They told us it's not easy, but it's possible."

Childcare has long been a challenge for young families. Cohort 12 is the first that has offered on-site childcare during formation weekends. "'We've been attracting younger men to the diaconate, many with young families,'" reports Dcn. Keith Cabiles, who has co-directed the Office of Permanent Deacon Formation with his wife, Hazell, since 2024. "Providing childcare during formation weekends has been a direct response to that that growing trend."

"It's an opportunity to let the Holy Spirit guide us together"

"The 'babysitting' team is amazing and the kids love them!" says Mrs. Ofalsa. "Our family is blessed to go through this process with our little one. He joins us during these weekends, and it's such a special time."

Finding balance

The term "domestic church" represents the idea that a family practices faith together in everyday life, making the household a tiny church within the home.

"Formation helps us see how important the domestic church

is," Mrs. Zick observes. "It reinforces that the husband's first and highest vocation is his marriage and family."

For the sake of those relationships, time management skills are helpful -- even vital -- for families on the path to the diaconate. "It's essential to find balance between dedication to discernment, family, ministries, and careers," Mrs. Zick says. "The whole family needs to be aware of the amount of time that's involved, and how it will affect them."

Each candidate must undergo five years of intense academic training designed to prepare them for community service and liturgical responsibilities. Couples also commit to attending weekend retreats for nine months each year, plus a spiritual retreat each December, for the five-year formation period. Mrs. Ofalsa believes it's important that couples make formation weekends a priority, even when it means missing other life events.

"The weekends are such a blessing," she says. "They give you the opportunity to connect with your spouse and other formation couples. They also give you the chance to deepen your knowledge about our faith."

Topics for discussion

Deacon John Coughlin once described formation as a "couple's journey" -- one that provides support and resources for the candidate and his wife to thrive as a family, and as active members in ministry.

Both Mrs. Zick and Mrs. Ofalsa offer suggestions for questions

“Are you, as a couple, willing to give your time to the church?”

that couples should ask themselves, and each other, as they consider the diaconate. “Are you willing to go where our Bishop tells you, possibly leaving the ‘comfort’ of your own parish?” Mrs. Ofalsa asks. “Are you, as a couple, willing to give your time to the church, and to work with all types of people? As

a wife, are you willing to be understanding of the demands your husband will face?”

“Couples should discuss whether they are able to make the commitment – not just to formation, but to lifelong service after,” says Mrs. Zick. “They should have a conversation about how they’ll handle the stressors that come with the journey, because those stressors are inevitable.”

Preparing for the journey

As Mrs. Ofalsa reflects on the first “inquiry weekend” she and her husband attended, she describes it as helpful and instructive. “Everyone was very upfront and clear about what is expected from both husband and wife, and what the process looks like,” she says.

Mrs. Zick agrees. “I think the Office of the Permanent Deacon Formation did an excellent job of preparing us through inquiry weekends, interviews, and counseling,” she says.

There was an unexpected twist, however. “The one thing I was NOT prepared for was how it would overhaul my personal spiritual life,” she says.

The brothers and sisters of the cohort, she adds, have become her ‘ohana. “We share an unbreakable bond, and that can only be through the work of the Holy Spirit.”



Amy & Jared Zick
Courtesy Photo



Cohorts 11 and 12 in fellowship
Courtesy Photo

Community of Formation

An ‘ohana that accompanies, discerns, and forms.

The formation of a deacon is never the work of one person.

On a typical formation weekend, more than 90 people may come together — men in formation and their wives, their children, formation team members, staff, professors, clergy, musicians, kitchen and childcare teams, and Chaminade students.

Those who serve in formation are carefully and prayerfully selected for more than their knowledge and experience. Just as important are their faith, character, humanity, selflessness, and willingness to accompany others with patience, care, and charity.

For a man discerning the diaconate, that means he does not have to discern alone. Formation surrounds him with people who will listen, ask difficult questions, encourage growth, offer honest feedback, and help him recognize more clearly where God may be calling him.

Together, this ‘ohana accompanies, discerns, and forms — helping each man and his wife grow as human beings, spiritually, intellectually, and pastorally, as they discern and prepare for ordained ministry.

90+ People

One Typical Weekend.
One Ohana. One Mission.

29 in Cohort 12

17 In Cohort 11

16 Core Team Members

6 Formation Staff

4 Professors

1 Priest Celebrant

1 Sunday Musician

5 Children

3 Childcare

3 Kitchen Staff

1 Chaminade Master’s Student

So, how does one even begin?

A vocation to the diaconate often begins quietly — through prayer, encouragement from others, or a growing sense that God may be calling you to something more. Discernment means listening carefully and allowing the Church to help you understand that call.

Pray

Speak honestly with God about what is stirring in your heart. Take time to listen and allow the Holy Spirit to guide you.

If married, include your wife from the beginning. Her support and consent are essential.

Explore

Learn about the diaconate through trusted Catholic resources, such as books, articles, videos, and websites.

Seek

Talk with your pastor, a deacon, or others who know you well. Sometimes others recognize a vocation before we do.

Pray (more!)

Discernment takes time. Keep praying and listening as you consider whether God may be calling you to the diaconate.

Take the next step

If that sense of call remains, attend one of our Deacon Formation Inquiry Weekends.

For more information, visit www.catholichawaii.org/formation

For aspiring deacons, discernment unfolds one step at a time

Learning to Listen

For men who are considering the diaconate, discernment is the active process of praying and listening to determine whether one is genuinely called by the Holy Spirit to the sacrament of holy orders, and if they are able to fulfill that calling.

As Jay Bautista and his wife ChristLe continue through formation, they have learned that discernment does not happen all at once.

“It takes time, prayer, patience, and honesty,” observes Bautista, a member of Cohort 12 and of Christ The King Church in Kahului. “We might want God to give us a clear answer right away, but He often speaks quietly through prayers, Scripture, other people, our families, and everyday events.”

Trust the process

Aspirant Josh Kapika, a pastoral associate at St. Michael Parish in Waialua who is also in Cohort 12, agrees. “When I first began this journey, I think there was a part of me that expected discernment to give me a clear answer,” he says. “Instead, I am learning that discernment is much more about listening and being willing to allow God to lead the way.”

He still brings his own hopes to prayer, but says he is more willing to set aside expectations and simply listen for the Lord to reveal His plan. “I may not always get a clear answer right away, but I’m becoming more comfortable with that,” Kapika says. “I’m learning

to trust the process and recognize that God can be at work, even while I’m still searching and asking questions.”

“Having doubts does not always mean God is saying no,” Bautista concurs. “Sometimes it means I need to slow down, listen more carefully, and trust Him one step at a time.”

Let go and listen

Bautista admits that he’s had to relinquish his compulsion to be in control. He and his wife have cut back on leisure activities to make time for prayer, study, formation, and service.

“At the same time, I’ve learned that formation affects the whole family, especially my wife,” he says. “This is not a journey that I take alone. It’s important for us to talk openly, listen to each other, and make time for our marriage.”

“Having doubts does not always mean God is saying no.”

On the eve of his third year of formation, Bautista sometimes wonders whether he has enough wisdom, patience, and strength for what lies ahead, and how he’ll balance his marriage, family, work, formation, and ministry.

“I don’t have all the answers,” he says. “But God doesn’t call us because we are perfect; he calls us because He sees something in us and is willing to help us grow.”

And even if the journey doesn’t lead to ordination, it can still be transformative. “The time spent praying, learning, and growing can help you become a better husband, father, servant, and follower of Christ,” Bautista says.

Making room for understanding

Both men recommend openness and receptiveness at every stage. “Be honest about your questions, fears, strengths, and weaknesses,” Bautista counsels. “Take time to pray and listen. Talk openly with your spouse and family. Ask questions, accept guidance, and don’t be afraid to admit when you are struggling.”

“Don’t enter formation with too many preconceptions about what it’s supposed to look like, or where it’s supposed to lead,” Kapika advises. “Allow yourself to experience the process.”

He also suggests that aspirants develop a willingness to be challenged. “There will be things that affirm what you already believe about yourself, but there may also be things that cause you to see yourself, your ministry, or even your calling, differently,” he says. “Being open to the process gives us the freedom to respond, wherever God may ultimately be calling us.”

Formed through the Fire

How challenge and sacrifice shape men for the diaconate.

According to diaconal candidate Cliff Villareal, who began with Cohort 11 in January 2022, the most challenging aspect of formation hasn't been the time commitment, or the intense theological studies.

"The real challenge has been learning to serve when I feel exhausted from work, or on a night I'd rather just be with my wife Irene and my children, or when I have nothing left to give but my presence," says Villareal. "Those are the times when I'm closest to what Christ is actually asking of me: to serve without needing to be seen."

This, Villareal believes, is how a candidate actually gets formed. "It's not when I feel called and capable, but in those moments I feel depleted and still choose to serve with love," he says. "Christ didn't wash feet because it was convenient. Christ knelt in the dirt and served the ones who would, within hours, abandon Him."

For candidate Emilio Macalalad, the physical journey that formation requires of him has been at least as challenging as the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the process.

That's because Macalalad lives on the island of Molokai, a half-hour flight from Oahu. As apostolic

nuncio Archbishop Gabriele Caccia said after a recent visit, "It is not an easy island to get to." And after making the trip once a month for almost five years as a member of Cohort 11, Macalalad, who teaches biology at Molokai High School, knows all too well that the flight is not always dependable.

"After spending a busy week of teaching, getting on a delayed flight was the last thing I wanted to do to start my weekend," he says. "There were times I would be sitting at the airport not knowing if or when I would get to Oahu, or home to Molokai. I had to keep reminding myself that this was not for me; it was an offering to God and His Son Jesus Christ for all that they did and continue to do for us, His children."

Rewarded with real connections

For both men, the greatest rewards of the experience come with the connections they have made in formation.

"It was never a solo journey," says Villareal. "My wife has carried real weight, supporting me through the busy nights, the tired days, the time formation takes from our family." The experience has made them closer. "We've learned to lean on each other, forgive each other faster,

and to see our marriage as part of our calling."

Beyond his own home, Villareal says formation has been a shared journey with his brothers and sisters in Cohort 11. "We are a community being formed together, carrying each other's burdens, praying for each other, showing up for each other's growth," he explains. "The diaconate formation doesn't just form deacons; it forms lifelong bonds of friendship. For that, I am deeply grateful."

Macalalad, who as an educator has sadly seen many families broken by addiction, crime, and pleasures of the flesh, agrees. "Discovering groups of men who share my love and passion for Jesus Christ has been one of the most rewarding parts of formation," he says. "Surrounding myself with these men and their wives, devoting themselves to serving others, inspires me to know I'm not the only one willing to do God's will. Formation has gifted me with experiences I will treasure, and bonds I will carry with me forever."

Refinement by fire

Because he answered the Call, the Holy Spirit guided Emilio Macalalad to do things he never thought he was capable of doing

-- cantoring before the congregation at St. Damien of Molokai, lecturing from the ambo, organizing youth group trips, ministering in hospice, all on top of his job teaching and the academic requirements for formation.

"Formation has helped me realize gifts I never knew I had, gifts that God continues to shed His light on, and sharing those gifts with others has been even more rewarding," he says. The knowledge I gained helped deepen my faith. It has led me to moments of pure joy and elation. None of what I did would have been possible without the past five years of my life."

When he looks back, Cliff Villareal sees that God was preparing him for the diaconate long before he knew it. He'd already had a career in social services; he knew how to listen to people in crisis, and uphold dignity for those who are often overlooked.

"God is now simply continuing that work in cleaning up my heart, teaching me to walk humbly, and nourishing the seeds of service He planted in me long ago," he comments. "He is turning what was already there into something I get to offer back to Him. I'm overwhelmed with gratitude just to finally realize what God has been doing in me all along."



Men and wives of Cohort 11
Courtesy Photo

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as though God was inviting me to something more. Over time, I realized that this wasn't just my own desire to serve — it was God patiently revealing a call, one piece at a time."

Still, Torres says men shouldn't wait for absolute certainty before answering the call of a vocation. "Our faith is full of examples of individuals whom God called, yet they hesitated because they felt unworthy or unsure. Fun fact: none of us are worthy — and that's exactly the point."

Here, he mentions Paul's letter to the Romans: "And those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:30)."

"God does not choose people because they are already righteous; He calls people first," Torres says. "Those whom He calls, He then justifies — makes righteous. Certainty rarely comes in a dramatic moment. More often, it comes through prayer, conversation, discernment, and the gentle confirmation of the Church."

Waiting for perfect clarity can sometimes become a way of avoiding the very call God is trying to place on one's heart, Torres says. "Trust the movement of grace, take the next step, and allow God — through the Church — to reveal Himself."

"To all those men with excuses: it's God's decision, not yours, when He calls you to serve," says Dcn. DeCaires.

Discern a Vocation of the

DEACON



The Permanent Deacon Formation Program prepares men to answer God's call to serve. Let the Spirit speak and work in you as you discern where God may be calling you. You're invited—along with your wife, if married—to attend one of three Inquiry Weekends and take the next step in exploring the vocation of the deacon.

To begin your journey toward the diaconate, inquirers must attend one Inquiry Weekend before applying for admission to Cohort 13, our next group of deacon aspirants.

Visit our website for information about the Inquiry and Application Process, and to select an Inquiry Weekend to attend.

Inquiry Weekends in 2027

● April 9-11

Deadline to register:
March 18

● May 14-16

Deadline to register:
April 23

● June 11-13

Deadline to register:
May 21

www.catholicahawaii.org/formation