



Office of the Bishop
Diocese of Toledo

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31 July 2019

Dear Priests, Deacons, Pastoral Leaders, Consecrated Religious and Lay Faithful,

All good greetings in the Lord! The year 2018 marked the 50th anniversary of the restoration of the permanent diaconate as an active and permanent ordained ministry in the Universal Church. Since 1973 the Diocese of Toledo has been blessed by the generous ministry of many deacons serving throughout our nineteen counties. Currently, our diocese has over 175 permanent deacons, active and retired.

The diaconate is part of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and therefore deacons are members of the Catholic clergy. By their ordination, deacons “are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word and charity” (canon 1009 §3). There is no such thing as a “lay deacon.” The liturgical vesture for a deacon is the white alb, the diaconal stole worn over the left shoulder, and the dalmatic (which is especially appropriate when assisting at Mass).

As members of the Catholic clergy, it is at times helpful and appropriate when exercising a pastoral ministry for deacons to wear clerical attire (in many dioceses it is a gray clerical shirt with white collar). Our diocesan policy for a number of years has been that clerical attire for a deacon is permitted only in very specific situations, such as prison ministry.

This past year our diocesan Council of Deacons studied the matter and recommended that our deacons be given the option to wear a gray clerical shirt for a wider range of ministerial settings—such as when visiting hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, or when officiating at certain liturgical rites such as funerals, marriages, or when participating in ecumenical events. The Council’s reasoning is that the wearing of clerical attire, on certain occasions, helps identify the deacon as a member of the Catholic clergy, improves pastoral access, and helps facilitate his ministry, especially when visiting large health care facilities, prisons, or jails.

As part of its study, the Council of Deacons surveyed 10 nearby dioceses and found that half of them have a policy permitting clerical attire for their deacons. The Council of Deacons also surveyed our own deacons. Out of 125 deacons who responded, 72% were in favor of giving our deacons the option of wearing a clerical shirt in certain circumstances where they thought it would be helpful in exercising their ministry. Further, the Council of Deacons’ proposal was reviewed by the Presbyteral Council in its December 2018 meeting, and the priests on that council, which includes all our deans, elected by their brother priests, were supportive of the proposal that the wearing of a gray clerical shirt be an option for our deacons in certain ministerial situations.

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Therefore, having received the proposal of the Council of Deacons, having heard the support of the Presbyteral Council, and having given the matter due prayer and deliberation, I have revised our diocesan policy regarding ecclesiastical vesture for our deacons, effective August 10, 2019, the Feast of Saint Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr.

Specifically, permanent deacons in the Diocese of Toledo, at their discretion, may opt to wear a gray clerical shirt with collar in the exercise of their office in the following ministerial circumstances:

- Functioning as a deacon at the celebration of Mass, the Sacraments, liturgy, or devotions.
- Officiating at Catholic funeral rites (in church, funeral homes, or at cemeteries).
- Visiting the sick or infirm, making pastoral visits, or serving as a chaplain in health care facilities, nursing home, hospices, prisons, jails, and rehabilitation centers.
- Officiating at Catholic weddings.
- Attending the Funeral Mass for a deceased deacon.
- Participating in ecumenical events or celebrations.

Clerical clothing is not be worn in places of secular employment or in non-ministerial settings.

I want to stress that the permission to wear clerical attire in ministerial settings, if the deacon so chooses, is given not to promote any kind of clericalism. Instead, it is meant to assist the deacon as a visible sign of his ministry of service and to help the faithful recognize the role of deacons in the life of the Church. The decision of a particular deacon to wear clerical attire or not is to be respected. The wearing or not wearing of clerical garb by a deacon should certainly not be used as a point of division or contention among deacons or the faithful.

My heartfelt thanks goes to our Council of Deacons and all our permanent deacons who serve our local church with great generosity and dedication, as well to their wives and their families. Together, with their pastors, parish co-workers, and fellow parishioners, may we continue to walk in the path of Christ Jesus, the Servant of Servants. With prayers for you and your intentions, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Daniel E. Thomas". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Daniel E. Thomas
Bishop of Toledo