

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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A Changing Diaconate in a Changing World

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In the spiritual journey of any deacon, the importance of the diaconal community cannot be overstated. Rooted in the tradition and teachings of the Church, the formation and sustenance of deacons transcend individual spirituality, embedding itself in the fertile soil of communal life. This emphasis on community is echoed in my book, *Encountering Christ the Servant*, where the intertwining of personal vocation and communal fellowship serves as a cornerstone for effective diaconal ministry.

Community, as understood in the context of religious life, is more than a mere gathering of individuals; it is the living embodiment of the Church's communal nature as articulated in the documents of Vatican II and reinforced by subsequent teachings. The permanent diaconate, restored by the Council, draws its vitality from this ecclesial vision, fostering a spirituality that is both deeply personal and profoundly communal.

The regular assembly of deacons within deaneries offers a concrete manifestation of this communal aspect. So, for example, in the Diocese of Joliet, we instituted quarterly gatherings of deacons for this very purpose. Unlike most of our other events, these gatherings do not include the wives as deacons need time by themselves to strengthen bonds within the diaconal community. It is important to note that these gatherings are not administrative meetings but occasions for fellowship, worship, mutual support, and ongoing formation. This is crucial for our spiritual health, ensuring that our ministry is not carried out in isolation but is nourished by the strength and wisdom of our brothers. Such unity not only supports the individual deacon but also strengthens the diaconate as a whole, enhancing its service to the Church and the world.

Mutual support among deacons is indispensable for our endurance and effectiveness within our multifaceted roles of family, secular work, and ministry. This synergy is particularly crucial as it offers a robust framework of encouragement and practical assistance, which is vital for sustaining the fervor and dedication inherent to our ministry. Such communal backing takes on added significance for celibate and widowed deacons, for whom the ecclesial community often serves as an extended familial network, providing emotional and spiritual companionship that might otherwise be lacking.

Celibate deacons, by virtue of their commitment to chastity, embody a unique witness to the Kingdom of God, living out their vocation in a manner that is countercultural and deeply evangelical. Widowed deacons, through their experience of loss and continued commitment to

service, offer a powerful testament to resilience, faith, and the redemptive aspect of suffering. The support network among deacons encourages open dialogue about these experiences, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's particular gifts and crosses.

Ongoing formation is another critical aspect of communal life for deacons. The Church recognizes that formation for ministry is not limited to the period prior to ordination but continues throughout a deacon's life as one sole organic progress. By coming together for educational and spiritual enrichment, deacons ensure that their ministry remains vibrant, informed, and responsive to the needs of the times.

Likewise, progress in the interior life is inseparable from the communal dimension of the diaconate. We are called to a life of holiness that is both nurtured within the community of the Church and expressed in service to that community. This dual movement of receiving from and giving back is at the heart of the diaconate. We receive spiritual nourishment and support from the Church community, which, in turn, empowers us to minister more effectively to the faithful. Our service – whether it be through liturgical duties, pastoral care, teaching, or works of charity – is a response to the grace we have received. This service is not only an expression of our personal commitment to Christ but also our unique contribution to the life and mission of the Church. Through our ministry, we become conduits of God's grace, facilitating encounters between Christ the Servant and those in desperate need of His saving love.

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