

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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The Devil and the Diaconate

Many years ago I had an encounter with a young man that shook me to my core. It was after the last Mass on a Sunday and the youth group was gathering in the commons. I was straightening up when the celebrant asked me to chat with a young man who seem quite disturbed. For the sake of anonymity, we'll call the young man Billy. To make a long and rather frightening story short, Billy, a Baptist, was instructed by a friend to run to the nearest Catholic Church and seek help. After chatting with him and learning that he had been heavily involved in diabolical activity, I asked if he would like to be prayed over. He agreed and, with the celebrant in a quiet place, we prayed. Before doing so, the celebrant went over to the sink, filled up the holy water bucket and blessed the water. Though it seemed rather odd, I didn't think much of it at the time.

What happened next was so bizarre that it defies complete description. Billy began to twitch spasmodically and curse at us using the most vial words. His voice became low and guttural while the physiognomy of his face changed. What followed were bodily contortions that bugged the imagination. I will spare you much of the details, but I can tell you I was frightened to my core. I prayed fervently and invoked every saint I could. Through it all, my fear was tempered by a profound empathy for Billy. This is true even when this Baptist boy spoke Latin and another unknown language indicating that I would die.

The celebrant used holy water to subdue Billy which was quite effective. Eventually he calmed down and was completely unaware of what went on. The celebrant, another priest and I, took Billy home to his mother and explained, best we could, what happened. Upon leaving we pledged our prayers and support, but after later meeting with Billy's therapist at the request of his mother, I never heard from them again.

Shocked at my experience, no one seemed to be able to explain the event. Though I have an undergraduate, graduate and post graduate degrees in theology along with diaconal formation, I had only two or three classes that covered diabolical activity. Seeking to understand what happened better, and with the permission of my bishop, I attended a course on deliverance and exorcism at the *Regina Apostolorum* in Rome. I did so not because I'm called to this ministry, but because I encountered something I was ill prepared to handle. Sure, grace helped me through the moment, but grace becomes far more effective when we cooperate with it.

Though I'm not involved in deliverance and exorcism ministry, I am a deacon. As such, I must be prepared for whatever comes my way because that's what servants do. Billy needed help

and I couldn't let my fears, as real and palpable as they were, impede what Billy so desperately needed even though it was just temporary relief.

As I give retreats around the country on the diaconate, I also include my "bonus feature," a talk on diabolical activity and the Church. As a deacon theologian, I want to make my brother deacons aware of what they might encounter in whatever form this may take, from possession to temptation. True, our Lord has already defeated Satan and his demons by His passion death and resurrection. However, we await the end of time until they are completely vanquished. Until then, with grace, we fight the good fight and continually prepare ourselves by growing in intimate communion with Christ the Servant to whom we were configured on the day of our ordination. He is our help, our strength, our salvation.

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