

# Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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## Hidden but Not Forgotten: The Diaconate and the Catholic Imagination

As deacons, we share a sacred bond. Our vocation calls us to a life of quiet, humble service, often operating invisibly within the broader life of the Church. Yet, a shared experience can provoke unease or sorrow: moments when, during prayers or liturgical events, every vocation is acknowledged – except the diaconate.

To suggest that this experience is nearly universal among deacons is not an exaggeration. Fifty-six years after the restoration of the permanent diaconate by the Second Vatican Council, our vocation has yet to fully enter into the Catholic imagination. This reality touches the essence of who we are as ordained ministers and the unique witness we bear to Christ the Servant.

This challenge can be traced back to the restoration of the diaconate. The Council Fathers envisioned a vibrant ministry rooted in Scripture and Tradition. However, the theology that emerged was fragmented, shaped by influences not fully aligned with the Catholic understanding of Holy Orders. John N. Collins, in *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources*, notes that early theology surrounding the diaconate was influenced by the 19th-century Lutheran Deaconess Movement, which viewed the deacon primarily as a social worker.

This approach, though well-intentioned, failed to capture the fullness of the diaconate as envisioned by the Church. It focused more on doing than on being, emphasizing social roles at the expense of the diaconate's sacramental and liturgical identity. This led to a fundamental misunderstanding of the diaconate, not only among the faithful but even among clergy.

One day, while preparing to process at Mass, an elderly lady approached me. Not recognizing the difference between a chasuble and a dalmatic, she addressed me as "Father." When I explained that I was a deacon, she asked, "When will you be ordained?" I responded that I was already ordained as a deacon. She replied, "I mean really ordained." Despite my efforts to clarify, she walked away confused.

This encounter reflects a broader issue: a lack of catechesis and understanding of the diaconate within the Church. The diaconate, as a distinct and permanent order, has yet to be fully integrated into the Catholic imagination. This challenge is compounded by the fact that many bishops and priests, who were themselves ordained as deacons, received little formation on the diaconate during seminary. Without a deep understanding of their own diaconal identity, it is difficult for them to fully appreciate the permanent diaconate and recognize the Church herself as a servant Church.

Yet, despite these challenges, we must remember the wisdom of Deacon James Keating, who said, "While our ministry is often hidden, we should never be forgotten." When we, as deacons, are forgotten, it is not merely an oversight. It is, in a profound way, a forgetting of Christ the Servant, whom we are called to represent. Our humble, unseen ministry is vital to the life of the Church because the Church is, at her very core, a servant Church.

When we feel overlooked, rather than succumbing to frustration, we have an opportunity to offer our angst to Christ, uniting it with His suffering for the Church we serve. By doing so, we can transform our experience into a prayer for the Church, asking that the true nature of the diaconate – rooted in service, sacrifice, and profound union with Christ – be more fully recognized and embraced.

Let us continue to serve faithfully, knowing that our witness to Christ the Servant is not hidden from the One who called us. And let us trust that, in time, the diaconate will find its rightful place in the Catholic imagination, not for our recognition, but so that Christ the Servant may be known and loved more deeply.

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