

# Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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## Ready To Serve

Several years ago, I had the privilege of teaching a graduate course in moral theology to a group of seminarians in the Caribbean. Excited about the opportunity, I looked forward with great anticipation to the experience.

When I arrived at the airport, two brothers with broad smiles dressed in white habits greeted me and took my bags. We entered a small car and began our journey around the harbor road to the monastery. As we raced on, I couldn't help but wonder whether traffic laws in the small island country were mere suggestions. At one point, we came so close to a street-side coconut vendor that I could tell what he had for lunch.

Arriving at the monastery, a big steel gate opened and the car entered the courtyard. I was then taken to what can be described as a large dormitory with metal bunkbeds shrouded in mosquito netting. As I was shown my bunk, a bell rang indicating night prayer. We gathered in the chapel and after night prayer was over, one of the brothers read the next day's gospel, as is their tradition. It was Mt 16:18, "Peter you are Rock." I remember thinking that some lucky guy gets to preach on this pivotal reading tomorrow.

Later that evening, I climbed into my bunk, adjusted the netting, removed my glasses and began to fall into a deep sleep. At some point I heard a voice. "Deacon, would you mind preaching one day this week." I opened my eyes to two white figures blurred by my poor vision and the dim light. Since I'm not accustomed to angelic visitations, I quickly realized it was two of the brothers. I responded with something like, "Sure, just give me a heads-up so I can reflect on the readings."

The next morning, I made my way down to the chapel for morning prayer and Mass. Dressed only in clerics, I sat in the pew. The superior of the order, whom I met once before, was celebrating Mass that day. As the time came to read the Gospel, the superior nodded at me. At first I thought, "Oh, he must recognize me," so I nodded back because that's what clerics do. He then pointed to the ambo and my heart dropped. He wanted me to read the Gospel.

Believing it imprudent at the time to discuss why such an invitation is liturgically problematic, I left the pew, approached the ambo and proclaimed the Gospel. Without vestments, I felt completely exposed. Continuing, I read the familiar words, "Peter you are Rock." It was at that point, I recalled my thoughts the night before about the lucky guy who would preach and my heart even dropped further.

Upon finishing the Gospel, I turned to the celebrant and, with a smile he said, “Go on,” indicating that I was to preach. Surrendering to the moment (I could do little else), I stepped out in front of the altar and began to preach. Fortunately, I had taught on this passage many times before and, by God’s grace, I was able to pull things together.

As I later reflected on this situation, I began to realize that diaconal ministry, in fact all ordained ministry, must be constantly available to the needs of the moment as they arise. This is not to suggest that we ought to spend the time and effort preparing a homily for a Sunday we’re not scheduled to preach. Rather, it means that, should we be called out of the blue to exercise a form of diaconal ministry, whatever that ministry might be, we must be open; willing to surrender and rely on the grace of our orders. This openness allows our Lord to stretch us well beyond our comfort zone to become more than we are, revealing Christ the Servant in ways we never thought possible.

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