

Deacons' wives supportive of ministry

Severna Park resident Keith Chase is well aware he has an understanding and supportive wife.

After all, he is an ordained deacon, and he has a demanding job with a Baltimore financial firm, four children under the age of 9 and a foreign-exchange student living with his family.

"The unsung heroes of the deacons are their wives," said the 42-year-old deacon of Church of the Holy Apostles, Gambrills. "They have to trust your calling and sacrifice for your ministry. They carry the load of the family, allowing us to serve God."

When Deacon Chase told his wife he was considering the diaconate in 2000, Pauline Chase's initial reaction was to question her husband's sanity.

Not only was she pregnant with her second child when he began taking classes required for formation, her husband was working on a master's degree at the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary & University in Roland Park and she questioned the family's worthiness of an ordination.

"I kept thinking, 'We're not holy enough for this,'" said Ms. Chase, a 42-year-old cradle Catholic. "I grew up in a go-to-church-and-leave kind of family. It took me a while to understand his calling."

When their husbands answered the call to the diaconate, many wives of the 167 deacons in the Archdiocese of Baltimore took on additional responsibilities in their

households and their religious lives.

“I’m not an ordained minister at church, but I’ve got a certain amount of responsibility that comes with his ministry,” said Janet Comegna of Catonsville, wife of Deacon John “Skip” Comegna of Church of the Resurrection, Ellicott City. “There are definitely benefits that come with it, and I definitely enjoy a lot of respect from others because of his role in the church.”

The 62-year-old deacon’s wife takes pleasure in the leadership role she has in her parish, running the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program at Resurrection for those wishing to convert to Catholicism, along with her 63-year-old husband.

“We’ve always been involved with our parish,” Ms. Comegna said. “Our faith has always been a big part of us as a couple, as parents and as members of our community. But, when Skip entered formation, our lives definitely changed.”

Though she appreciated and supported her husband’s calling, Ms. Comegna has resented his ministry from time to time when it’s taken him away from her and family functions involving their two grown sons and five grandchildren.

“When your husband goes off and is serving God, it becomes really difficult to justify complaining about it,” Ms. Comegna said. “When you do resent it, then you really start to feel guilty.”

Though there are explicit sacrifices, several wives of deacons say their lives are unquestionably enriched by the vocation of their spouses.

Their husbands are permitted to baptize the children of family members and friends; they can officiate at weddings. The retreats provide deep spiritual cleansing, and their exposure to a society committed to doing good works sets a great example for their children.

“There is a real grace that you experience through all of this,” Ms. Comegna said. “It’s added greatly to our relationship with each other.”

Since her husband is retired from his profession and their children were grown when he entered the diaconate, Ms. Comegna said her burden isn’t as great as the wives of younger deacons with young children, like Deacon Chase.

The wives actually meet as a group on a regular basis, to give each other emotional support, share tips on balancing their family responsibilities with the duties they have as a deacon’s spouse and just to express their feelings.

“There are things that only the wife of another deacon, or a Protestant minister, would understand,” said Ms. Chase, who says this group has helped her adjust. “At first, I was a little intimidated by these women who just seemed like they could juggle so much. It was a relief to find out they are women like me, and they had their doubts like me. It’s been a real bonding experience and a real growing experience. It’s helped me really enjoy my new role.”

During formation years, the wives occasionally attend class with their husbands and proofread their papers.

After ordination they frequently provide input when their spouses draft homilies, offer advice about handling parishioner concerns and sometimes provide criticism when they think their other half didn’t handle a situation with the proper amount of tact.

“As deacons, we have a sounding board in our wives, and I think it’s a huge benefit for us,” Deacon Comegna said. “It’s offered me insight that has only made me better in my ministry. I can also share the sadness of a funeral with my wife and the joy of a baptism or wedding with her. It’s a great outlet.”

Once Ms. Chase's husband completed formation and was ordained, she said his time with the family increased, and they are able to enjoy the spoils of the years of sacrifice.

"You can't have a real appreciation of your blessings," she said, "unless you experience some level of hardship."