

The Diaconate life

On a recent Sunday morning, I traveled to a conference center on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., where 75 of our permanent deacons were convened for their biennial convocation, along with many of their wives. On arrival, one could sense a very joyful and connected group, having prayed, deliberated and socialized together the whole weekend.

I was to be the “closer” of the weekend, with a brief presentation – an open-floor give-and-take, followed by the celebration of the Eucharist. As I looked over the audience at the start of my talk, I suggested to the assemblage, with more than half the active deacons present in this one place, I was surprised the Archdiocese was still functioning on a Sunday!

I said that half in jest, so very well aware of the valuable contributions of our deacons in parishes throughout the Archdiocese as well as in chaplaincies and other special ministries. More than half of our active deacons were participating in the convocation and I’m sure that in many a parish that morning the question was asked by a good number of our faithful, “Where is Deacon ‘X’ today?”

There are 125 active deacons in the Archdiocese of Baltimore and 39 retired, with the latter group always ready to step up for ministry when called upon. Unless employed in full-time parish ministry, all our deacons are unsalaried. Most parishioners are used to seeing our deacons assisting at the altar. In addition, however, they are “Ministers of the Word”: they preach, instruct and prepare the faithful for reception of the sacraments. Again, their duties as “Ministers of Charity” stem from their role in the Acts of the Apostles as “servants at the table.” And they are often on the first line of action in parishes where the poor and needy seek Christ’s love and assistance.

Uniformly, since the reinstitution of this updated Order of Deacon by the Second Vatican Council and their introduction in our country in the early 1970s, I have found permanent deacons extraordinarily responsive to the Church’s every need. They offer unique witness to the rest of the Church and traditionally have served, in addition, as bridges between the hierarchy and the laity.

Diaconate formation is challenging. While the scheduling of formation days and hours varies from diocese to diocese, largely depending on logistics, the basic formation guidelines are set by the Holy See. Our Archdiocesan requirements would be fairly reflective of the rest of our country:

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