

The Sacrament of Service

The Catholic Review

Vocations come in many forms.

When we talk of vocations, our Church consistently focuses on vocations to the priesthood and religious life, rightly praying for their increase. But there are other vocations that are integral to our Catholic lives and to the life of our Church. Married life is one such vocation (I'll be focusing on marriage in a future column) as is single life. Another is the Sacrament, the Holy Order of Deacon.

Deacons can trace their roots to the earliest days of the Church. Like the 72 disciples who joyfully came together from the various lands to which Jesus had dispatched them, so do the 16,000 deacons serve today in the Catholic parishes of our nation.

Often serving in their home parishes—the very communities which encouraged them toward ordination, our permanent deacons, most of whom are married, begin their ministry first as ministers to their own families. Then, these husbands and fathers bring the example of Christ's love and fidelity to serve the larger family of God's people.

Pope Paul VI, upon restoring the permanent diaconate following the Second Vatican Council, called deacons "A driving force for the Church's service or 'diaconia' toward the local Christian communities, and as a sign or sacrament of the Lord Christ himself, who 'came not to be served but to serve.'"

In fact, the very word "diakonia" in Greek means service. Allowed by the Holy Spirit to blossom into its fullest expression, the diaconate provides a challenging ministry for those dedicated to Gospel lives of justice and charity.

How diverse and far-reaching is the ministry of deacons? They:

- lead the faithful in prayer;

- proclaim the Gospel;
- preach the Good News;
- administer Baptisms;
- witness marriages;
- distribute the Eucharist;
- bring communion to the sick and dying;
- and officiate at funeral and burial rites.

Throughout the country, permanent deacons are presiding over the prayer and worship of the faithful, but they are also serving in Catholic Charities-led senior housing facilities, leading prison ministries, organizing the building of homes with Habitat for Humanity and leading ministry to seafarers. Again, their hallmark is service.

Here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, we have one of the best-formed diaconates in the nation: spiritually, theologically and pastorally. In addition, the vast variety of human gifts and professional talents which our 160 active and retired deacons possess is a treasure we must better employ. From my observation, the utilization of deacons in our parishes and other institutions is spotty at best.

Our needs are many and I've addressed them in recent columns. Most urgent among them is the reality of an aging and decreasing population of our priests which demands all hands on deck!

Grateful to our many good and holy deacons for their faithful service in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, we must ask still how their gifts might even better be utilized. What specific talents are out there and how can these match the developing needs of our communities?

I have had the privilege to speak to many of our deacons and those who have heard me, know of my high regard and respect for the permanent diaconate. Having met many of them and their supportive wives and families, I am convinced that a significant potential awaits us, with many riches for the faithful of our Archdiocese, by a closer look at our diaconate membership, and by offering our deacons a challenge to greater service.

I know you show our permanent deacons your appreciation in many ways as you minister beside them. Please pray for more like them in years to come.