

# Diakonia for the Domestic Field Hospital

Deacons are in a unique position to lead married couples to a deeper understanding of their call to be the domestic church

[Dr. Roland Millare](#)



The great crisis, which has been unveiled during the COVID-19 pandemic, is that so many of the faithful are not prepared to embrace their mission as a domestic church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes, “The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason it can and should be called a domestic church” (No. 2204).

For several months during the pandemic, households have been separated from regular sacramental ministry of their churches. Consequently, families were often left to their own devices to pray, to engage the liturgical year as a household, and to celebrate the Lord’s day without the public celebration of the Mass. While some families were able to take advantage of the crisis and used it as an opportunity for growth in the exercise of the baptismal offices of priest and prophet, most families did not know where to even begin. There is a great need to focus on how permanent deacons can assist bishops and the pastors of parishes to serve on the front line to assist families in their vocation.

## Bridges

By the very nature of their identity, deacons serve as bridges between the Church and the world. Liturgical theologian David Fagerberg articulates this with creative clarity:

“The deacon is a bilocating man. ... He stands with one foot in the sacred and one foot in the profane, bilocated, ushering Christians into the sacred and accompanying Christians in the profane. He is a mediator, which means an ordained minister of the Church. He unites the ministries of altar, word and charity. He rides that river of liturgy from the altar to the street outside, which he serves by rubbing shoulders with the People of God in their secular life. He

climbs the mount of Zion while drawing people from the streets and byways of the world to the source of eternal life, which he serves at the altar.”

Every member of the Body of Christ is called upon to make of their lives a living sacrifice (cf. Rom 12:1). The deacon, who lives between the altar and the world, has the unique ability to assist the lay faithful to become stronger domestic churches through word, sacrament and mission.

The Church within the family “fulfills its prophetic role by welcoming and announcing the word of God” (*Familiaris Consortio*, No. 51).

Deacons, through sacramental catechesis and their preaching, can offer their insight for families to receive and to live out the word within their homes and beyond. Most deacons, based upon their experience as husbands and fathers, have an invaluable role and insight into the joys and travails of family life.

They can assist families in fully embracing the Church’s teaching on marriage, the gift of sexuality and the Gospel of Life. Deacons can help form the faithful in sanctifying their homes through regular engagement with Scripture, teaching couples how to pray and guiding them through the peaks and valleys of married/family life.



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## Married Couples

The Christian couple has access to grace through the merit of the Sacrament of Matrimony: “The gift of Jesus Christ is not exhausted in the actual celebration of the sacrament of marriage, but rather accompanies the married couple throughout their lives” (*Familiaris Consortio*, No. 56).

Many Christians are ignorant of the full implications of marriage as a sacrament. Difficulties in marriage and family life could be avoided or worked through if the faithful took advantage of the access they have to grace via the sacrament.

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## Pastoral Work of Deacons

“[Deacons’] responsibility extends not only to moral and liturgical matters but to personal and social matters as well. They must support the family in its difficulties and sufferings, caring for its members and helping them to see their lives in the light of the Gospel. It is not superfluous to note that from this mission, if it is exercised with due discernment and with a truly apostolic spirit, the minister of the Church draws fresh encouragement and spiritual energy for his own vocation too and for the exercise of his ministry.” — *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 73

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A deacon, the “bilocating man” described by Fagerberg, can lead the couple to recognize the holy Eucharist as the “very source of Christian marriage” (No. 57). The holy Eucharist teaches each couple how to love one another in an act of self-giving love for the other. The deacon, by his service at the altar, through marriage preparation and counseling, and by his lived witness, can help couples to understand how marriage is “interiorly structured and continuously renewed” by the Eucharist (cf. No. 57).

Every individual and every household is constantly engaged in a battle against sin, which has wounded each member of the faithful. Consequently, Pope Francis has likened the Church to a field hospital. The pope maintains, “The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity.” He also pointed out that “in pastoral ministry we must accompany people, we must heal their wounds.”

### **Sacramental Preparation**

Deacons, in their role to prepare children and their families for first reconciliation, can direct the faithful to the Sacrament of Penance as a fount of God’s loving mercy. In their preaching, deacons can address the wounds caused by serious sin. In pastoral counseling, deacons can offer insight to individuals struggling with addiction, infidelity, parenting, or to simply navigate the need for balance on the domestic front.

Deacons can accompany couples in irregular situations to find a way to participate in the life of the Church to the fullest extent possible. Deacons can help these couples discern the path between the objective reality of sin and the mercy of the Father available to all his children.

### **Demonstrating Charity**

Deacons, by the nature of *diakonia*, can demonstrate the true meaning of charity for the family. Pope St. John Paul II emphasizes that the families “has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love” (*Familiaris Consortio*, No. 17). Deacons are called to imitate the love of Christ the servant, which is an invaluable witness for couples who are called to selflessly love one another and the children they may be blessed with. In a culture dominated by autonomous individualism and utilitarianism, the mission of the family to give witness to authentic charity is more important than it ever has been.

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### **‘FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO’**

Pope St. John Paul II’s 1981 apostolic exhortation on the role of the Christian Family in the modern world speaks of the precious value of marriage and the family, the Church’s teaching on life, the integral vision of the human person and his vocation, the rights of parents regarding education and the Christian family’s societal responsibility. *Familiaris Consortio* is as relevant today as it was in 1981.

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St. John Paul II prophetically promised the Church that the “future of humanity passes by way of the family,” so the Church must dedicate a substantial part of its mission in service to the family. One of the specific ministries for permanent deacons, cited by the National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States, is the pastoral care of families. Deacons — bilocating men — are in a unique position to lead married couples to a deeper understanding of their own call to be the domestic church.

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### **Sanctifying Mission of the Diaconate**

The adage *Nemo dat quod non habet* (“you cannot give what you do not have”) underscores the need for deacons and others within the Church to help the faithful to appreciate the sanctifying mission of the family. We expect parents to be the primary educators of their children and to serve as the first school of virtue and prayer, but have we done enough to equip families to become what they are?

Ongoing formation needs to be given to our deacons so they can better serve families, who are suffering, wounded or simply wandering without guidance. The deacon is in a privileged position to serve the faithful and guide them from the world to the altar, so they can be transformed by their encounter with the love and mercy of God. The hour is overdue to send more deacons to assist families in need of healing within the field hospital of a throwaway culture. — Dr. Roland Millare

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