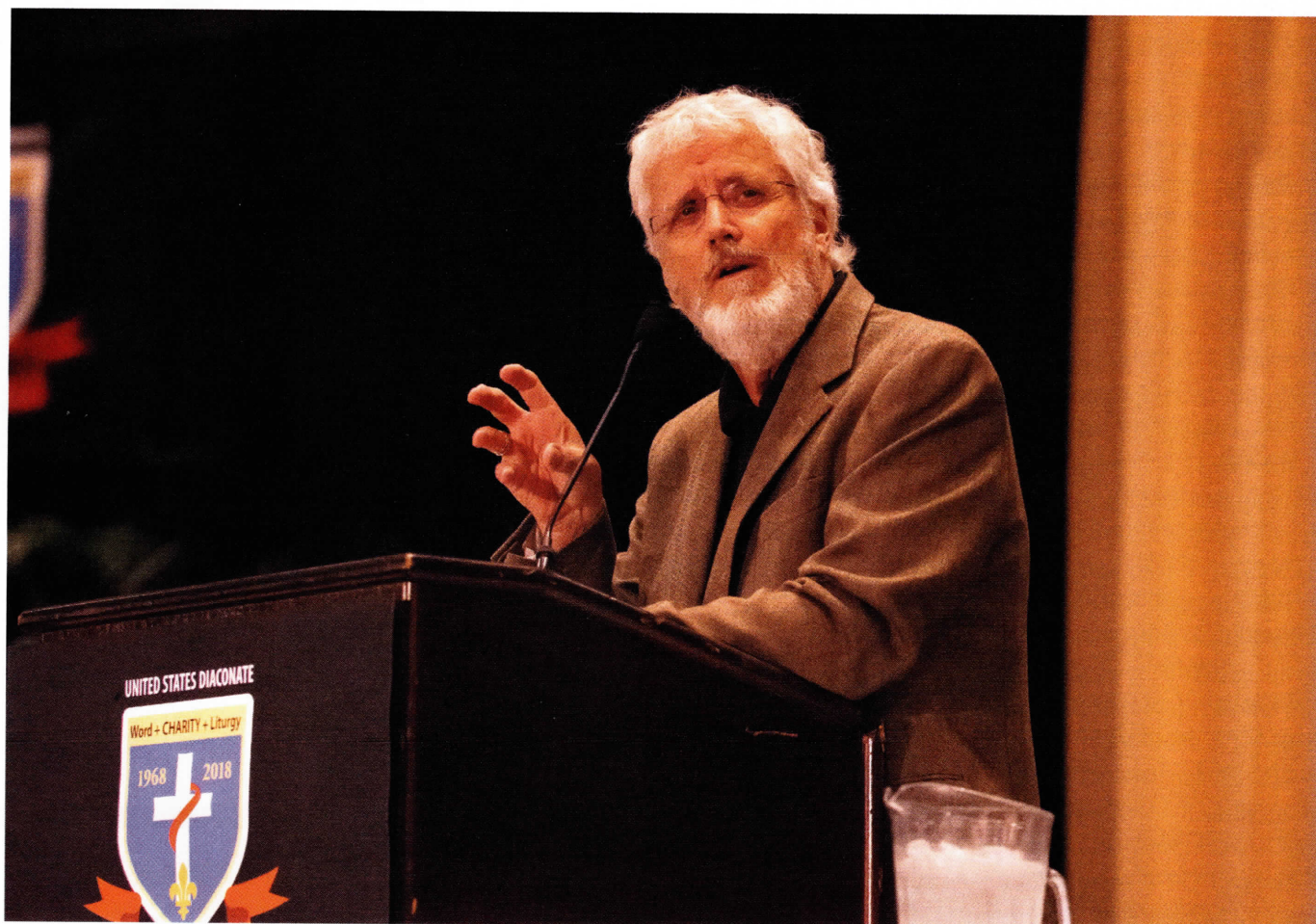


State of the Diaconate

Deacon James Keating reveals the diaconate's state of affairs and offers innovative and practical formation advice



OSV file photo

By Carlos Briceño

Deacon James Keating, Ph.D., is a member of the formation staff and professor of spiritual theology at Kenrick-Glenon Seminary in St. Louis. He has a doctorate in moral and spiritual theology from Duquesne University. He has given more than 800 presentations over the last 30 years, including more than 40 talks and

retreats for bishops, vocation directors, diocesan priest gatherings, deacons and married couples since 2017.

In an interview with Carlos Briceño, a Catholic journalist in the Midwest who produces and hosts a Catholic variety show called “Guardians of Beauty” (medium.com/guardians-of-beauty-podcast), Deacon Keating talks about the state of

the permanent diaconate in the United States today and shares some innovative and practical ideas about ways to help improve diaconal formation.

The Deacon: How would you describe the overall state of the permanent diaconate today, as compared to, say, 25 years ago?

Deacon James Keating: Overall, in

the U.S., I think the diaconate is spiritually healthy, but, as with all ecclesial realities, we have to be alert for tendencies that may undermine spiritual and vocational health. It is good to note where we might be becoming “set in our ways,” especially regarding formation and ministerial creativity. I am always amazed at the number of men who are welcomed into formation in our country. I don’t believe mimicking any “model” for priestly vocational recruitment is apt for our own vocation.

Our need for deacons is not equivalent to our need for priests. We need deacons to carry the grace of ordination into the folds of day-to-day existence. But, without priests, we have no Mass, no reconciliation, no anointing. These are urgent and substantial ecclesial needs.

Deacons serve in various ways, but none of our service rises to the essential gifts of the Eucharist, reconciliation and anointing. Can we rethink our motivation to campaign for so many deacons? Men in the U.S. — and particularly men who make up the majority of the chronological demographic of today’s diaconate — were “joiners” and recruiters in their younger years. In some dioceses, the diaconate was akin to a Church movement or retreat campaign: “I made this retreat or joined this prayer movement; you should join, too, Bob.”

The diaconate was modeled after this enthusiasm. Remnants of this recruitment model still exist in dioceses. Some local churches have recruitment evenings or vocation posters or structures for inviting large groups of men to consider the diaconate. My own sense is that we have to be more discerning in how we “recruit” and to whom we “send” an invitation.

If the diaconate is to mature and even continue to exist, I think it needs to keep selecting members from the ranks of spiritually mature men who are committed to Catholicism as laymen, rather than laymen seeing diaconate as a way to become more Catholic.

Deacons are animators of lay life, but only if they themselves were deeply committed to holiness as laymen. As I have suggested elsewhere, some characteristics of a spiritually mature layman would be: strong, faith-filled, married or committed to celibate living; evidence that his wife wants him to be ordained, not simply that she “lets” him; a deep prayer life; daily Mass attendance; dedication to the praying of Scripture; and evidence of good fatherhood by children who can testify that they experience their dad as present, affectively available and a leader in faith in the home.

Beyond fatherhood, there should be a track record for prudent and integrated service to parish or community (not a workaholic, not a showboater, not a needy activist); also, a history of theological curiosity (what books is he reading?); and testimony from priests that they would want this man’s assistance in diocesan leadership. Finally, someone who realizes that the diaconate is not a “step-up” to anything but simply “a way” to serve Christ as one open to being used by his Spirit.

TD: What is the number one issue — good or bad — that you feel the permanent diaconate faces in today’s Church?

Deacon Keating: The number one issue is finding men who are truly fascinated with God, possess a deep prayer life, love Scripture and serve others out of these foundations.

The second issue is to invite the bishops to really take the diaconate seriously and put it on their agenda to discuss at their annual meetings and retreats. They should be asking the following questions: Why do I need deacons in my diocese? How will I transmit my vision of ministry to them? And what are the concrete ministries I need them to do so that my vision of service is instilled in the diocese?

After 50 years of the permanent diaconate in the U.S., it is time for a “synod” on deacons. We are poised to grow, not in numbers necessarily — it’s not about

TOP DIOCESES IN NUMBERS

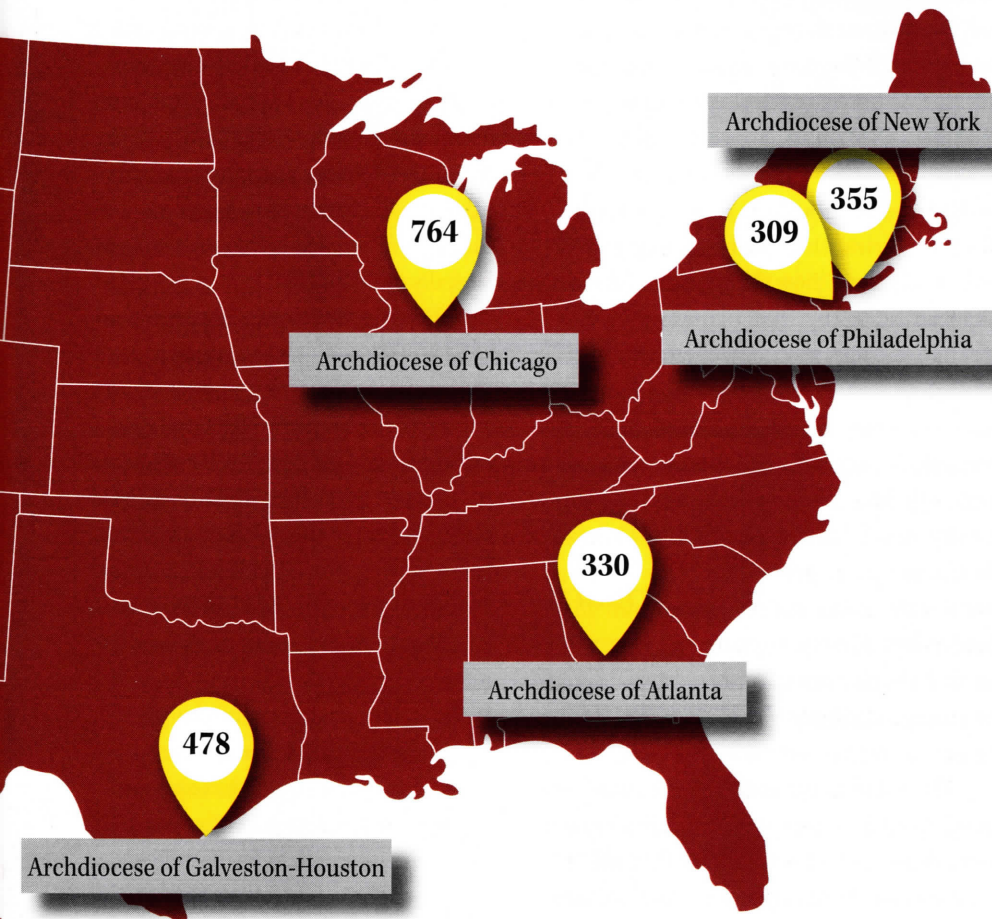
The map shows the archdioceses with the largest



numbers — but in confidence that diaconal ministry has an identity rooted in doctrine and worship. The diaconate can’t go on to reach its deepest potential if it is a sacrament looking for an identity and purpose.

Many laity still do not understand the diaconate, even on simple terms. Many bishops wondered how to “use” deacons during the current COVID crisis but came up with very little, sidelining deacons to think, “If my ministry is not useful during a national crisis, what is its true effective-

bers of permanent deacons. The numbers are taken from the 2019 Official Catholic Directory.



— CARA report in “A Portrait of the Permanent Diaconate: A Study for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2019-2020”

ness?”

There is a new National Directory on the Diaconate coming out soon. It would be good for each individual bishop to pray with it and see what local conditions present in his diocese warrant a new way of calling deacons or forming them. Also, we need to invite bishops to consider their own vocation to the diaconate. What was his experience of being a deacon before it was enfolded into priesthood and episcopacy?

TD: Diaconal formation today varies

across the country. Overall, what do you admire about the formation of deacons and what do you think needs improving?

Deacon Keating: I most admire the stamina and courage of the men in formation. Some are being formed by “traveling theologians,” others by a combination of real-time formation and remote video. Some are getting acceptable theological formation but weak human formation or spiritual formation. Some have strong pastoral leaders, but others simply have “ad-hoc” staff who come in and do their best.

The conditions of formation are not ideal, but the condition of the deacon is not that of a celibate. (And, economically, the deacon is not as vital an investment as a priest). The deacon candidate works full time, is married and is a father. So how can we gather men who may only be available on weekends or weeknights to give them consistent high-quality formation?

I often wondered if we could set up regional diaconate formation houses similar to regional seminaries and have the men in diaconal formation commit to a two-week formation program every summer in the area of human and spiritual formation. The academic portion of formation can be accomplished during evenings or weekends, but the Church would greatly benefit from those in formation gathering with psychologists and spiritual directors and superb deacon married couples to intentionally attend to human and spiritual formation.

When deacons are rejected or underutilized by the laity ministerially, it is usually because he is deficient in some human or spiritual characteristic and is deemed “unattractive.” If priests are unattractive personally, we still have to “put up with them” because of their essential ministry in the cause of our salvation. I don’t have to “like” the priest on the altar, I just have to be grateful he is there; or, the same for the priest in the confessional — just grateful he is there.

But the deacon has to be “liked” if people are ever going to choose him to baptize their babies or do their marriage prep or seek him out for prayer or counsel. This is one vital reason for deacons to learn how to preach well and for them to preach on regular occasions, allowing the congregation to get to know the deacon’s relationship with Christ.

In this way, they can learn to trust the deacon. Human formation is our weak link in diaconal formation, and we should be very careful at the “gate” before we let more men in who need affective healing of

their personalities.

TD: You just said, "I often wondered if we could set up regional diaconate formation houses similar to regional seminaries and have the men in diaconal formation commit to a two-week formation program every summer in the area of human and spiritual formation."

That kind of innovative way of thinking is refreshing. What are other ideas you've wondered about that aren't being done/considered now that might be helpful to the diaconate — meaning, things that might add texture and/or spiritual depth to those in formation or those already ordained to the permanent diaconate?

Deacon Keating: What is most needed is permanent spiritual directors assigned to the men in formation but also a director for the wives of these men and the formation and teaching staff. I was particularly impressed to see new spiritual life come to the wives when the program I oversaw hired a female certified spiritual director for them. It also helped that this particular woman director was the wife of a deacon. So many questions, fears and wonderments about life with a deacon were healed or answered.

This call for spiritual directors entails making the formation of directors a priority for dioceses. Some are heading in this direction; others do not yet see the value of having spiritual directors among them. For me, it is the difference between maintenance and mission. Programs that make spiritual direction a priority enable men to hear the Lord speak a mission to them, know they are loved by God personally — and from within that intimacy they are sent.

TD: What have you learned over the years as a deacon that you wish you knew back when you were on the path to becoming one?

Deacon Keating: I wish I knew that a deacon's greatest gift to the Church is his own love and knowledge of Scripture. This has to be emphasized more in formation. The deacon curriculum should not mimic a seminary curriculum. Such is not needed. Deacons need to know Scripture; how to pray with people; a theology of prayer; liturgical theology; theology of marriage; homiletics; baptism; social doctrine; the Catechism.

After ordination, as deacons discern the ministries, their bishops really need to understand how they can perhaps "specialize" — by that I mean they can get more training in catechesis or spiritual direction or parish administration. Ongoing formation in the diaconate is an

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unmet need. Many deacons find their true and one ministry only after ordination and need the support of the Church to assist in their competency.

TD: Share an encounter you've had in your ministry that led you to say to yourself: "Yes! This is why I became a deacon."

Deacon Keating: To hear the silence of the congregation drop a bit further into the depths after prayer-inspired homilies over the years. To receive the gratitude of a parishioner after praying with them in the church parking lot after Mass. To sense the joy of a couple after a "breakthrough" marriage-prep session filled with healing from the Holy Spirit.

TD: Who is someone who has inspired

you — either dead or alive; saint, priest, religious, deacon or layperson — as a permanent deacon and why?

Deacon Keating: My greatest inspiration is the pastoral ministry of Blessed Father Solanus Casey, OFM Cap. He embodies the contemplative commitment of a cleric yielding the fruit of deep availability to the pain of his people. From such contemplation comes a confidence in the Lord, which we clergy need to embody before the flimsy footing of our popular and political culture serves up to our people as supposedly meaningful.

TD: How do you think the permanent diaconate is impacting the Church today?

Deacon Keating: The impact of the diaconate is the impact of the ministry of Christ as he continues to send men out from the Eucharistic liturgy to the highways and hedgerows with this order: Compel them to come in; I want my house full (see Lk 14:23).

The genius of the permanent diaconate is its pragmatically tricky but spiritually effective hybrid of a life: it is a cleric living a lay lifestyle. Here within the ordinary, the place Americans find most difficult to exist within, a grace of Christ himself emerges: a man who prays; counsels; serves you right within your neighborhood, your office building, your school, your truck stop; humbly leads you to the supernatural from within the ordinary. No priest can reach that deep into the fabric of daily life.

The deacon is God's secret envoy sent like the Incarnation into the Nazareths and Bethlehems of the world. It is a hidden ministry mostly, and its power is due to that. **TD**

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