

Reflected in the Light of Holy Orders: *Vocation for the Wives of Permanent Deacons*

by Mary Gannon Kaufmann
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I was at a retreat when a man in formation for the permanent diaconate began sharing. His eyes glistened as he looked toward heaven and he said, "It was so moving to step up on the altar with the archbishop, leaving our women behind. Our women have to get used to letting us go so we can serve God." His comments drew me to offer it up and ask, "Is that what it means for a man (and a woman) when he ministers as a permanent deacon, 'to leave his woman behind?'" He motivated my reflections about what it means to be a woman in the Church who is married to a permanent deacon or one in formation.

It is not just about staying back in the pew and being quiet. Diaconal formation is a graced summons for the woman, too, to cultivate her baptismal gifts in service to her family, the world, and, in her own distinct way, the Church. For each era of the Church, the Holy Spirit moves to present Christ and his Church with new efficacy for the age. The Holy Spirit is teaching us — deacons and wives — to recognize and integrate our distinct gifts into a synthesis of love and vocation in service of the Kingdom.

With the graced stroke of the pen, the Fathers of Vatican II (in *Lumen Gentium*, §29) and, subsequently, Blessed Paul VI (in his *Apostolic Letter Containing Norms for the Order of the Diaconate*, §30)¹ reinstated the permanent diaconate. But then we were led to ask how married men and their wives bring the Sacrament of their state in life — marriage — together with the grace and sacrament of their service to the Church — for the men, the Sacrament of Holy Orders; for both, the sacraments of Baptism/Confirmation?

In the mystery of God's providence, God gives us a distinct vocation and unique grace of personal mission from baptism. These graces are hard to overlook as, in the words of Hans Urs

von Balthasar, they "open up for humans a field of activity" and create in the heart "a center of gravity within the personality that draws all the forces of our nature into a clear and definite pattern. They form in our nature a task or station that we each undertake that is pleasant and rewarding."²

Responding to Grace

As women who are spouses of permanent deacons (or those in formation), we are undoubtedly responding to a unique grace of personal mission that comes to us as a result of our baptism, that works in harmony with our state in life, and is impacted by our gifts and talents. The Holy Spirit guides us uniquely in a path toward holiness, and utilizes everything about us and in us, including our husbands' gift of orders and diaconal ministry, to accomplish his will through us. Drawing from insights from *Personal Vocation: God calls Everyone by Name* by Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw, we see that the grace of personal vocation is a movement of grace that draws us at three levels of our lives, like three gift boxes that fit one inside the other. Each aspect focuses and strengthens the others.

At the most basic level, the baptismal level of vocation, we each share a universal summons

to follow Christ and form the community of his body on earth, the Church. He calls us to emulate him through living the Beatitudes and to embrace the Cross. We are all equipped with the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit and the virtues, while our task is to follow Christ as disciples and avoid sin.

Next, as members of the Church, the second level of our vocation, we each receive an invitation into a particular state in life, which sounds simple: are we called to marriage, to religious life, to ordination, or to generous single life? God knows that, in this particular station in life, we can most effectively serve him and grow in holiness.

Lastly, God offers us unique gifts, training, experiences, and charisms, and conforms our inmost being to his heart with a specific imprint of his love for others. At this intimate and third level, we have unwrapped the gift of our vocation to discover our personal attributes. God pulls together our life experiences, human and spiritual gifts, and charisms into a life of service and love.

As women, accompanying our husbands in a life of diaconal ministry, we are developing or exercising gifts from our baptism and something more. Like all the baptized, we receive gifts of service for the community, or charisms, that can synergize with our husbands' to extend our contribution to the Church/world. Yet, because our husbands have received the gift of Holy Orders, and we are sacramentally united to them, we are graced and augmented with our charisms in a particular way.

Charisms have been described as a call to serve others in a particular way.³ As wives of permanent deacons, women living in the reflected light from holy Orders, we must be encouraged to discern our charisms. These charisms are real and exert an effect that impacts our station

in life. We can recognize and learn to rely on our charisms by listening to feedback, noticing where we are most effective in the lives of others, and where we are energized to serve them without undue strain. While charisms focus us on the needs of others, they also build us up and draw us to praise God. By developing the virtues of our baptismal call, being faithful to the demands of our state in life, and living out our unique charisms, we grow in holiness, serve the Church, and support the vocations of our husbands.

Growing in Holiness Together

We grow in holiness together with our ordained husbands by witnessing to the power of the Spirit in our age. Our marriages reflect the evangelizing power that comes when the laity and ordained ministers live and work together closely. Cardinal Yves Congar calls this mixture "the new and basic cell of evangelization ... for the clergy have a way of learning and the laity, a way of teaching which is very effective wherever it is wholeheartedly carried out."⁴

As a visibly married couple, with our charisms, we are "explicitly called to bear witness to spousal and procreative love," writes Saint John Paul II in *Theology of the Body*,⁵ and through our faithfulness we become agents of redemption for others. Through our reciprocal union, as man and wife, we are to relish our state in life as a graced sign of "Christ's spousal love of the Church."⁶

The recent experiences of the families of the newly ordained permanent deacons in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis seem to confirm this wisdom. Laura Wagner, at the 2012 diaconal ordination of her father, Rick Wagner, reflected: "Seeing the relationship of my mom and dad grow [through the deacon formation program] has inspired my fiancé and myself to

make sure that our relationship is Christ-centered.” Her fiancé added, “With him just being ordained, it’s a tremendous witness. It sort of sets the bar for us who are trying to be witnesses to other people through our marriage.”⁷ In fact, earlier that same day, before the ceremony at the cathedral, soon-to-be-ordained Deacon Wagner and his wife Carol spent time in prayer, during which she gave him a new wedding band. “It has three braids on it because God’s always been a part of our marriage,” Carol said, holding back tears after the ordination. “But now, we are really braided together.” Joyce Roberts added, in response to her husband’s ordination the same day, “Although we have been married for more than half a century, my husband becoming a deacon has given us new blessings. It’s broadened our interest in Christ and brought us closer together in prayer, [a closeness] that we didn’t have before.”

As wives of permanent deacons, as lay people, we are leaven in the world. We are not women left behind, but women exercising a threefold vocation living in the graced reflection from our husbands’ gift of Holy Orders.

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¹ Pope Paul VI, August 15, 1972

² Urs von Balthasar, Hans, p. 72.

³ Haughey, John, S.J., p. 6.

⁴ Congar, Cardinal Yves, p. 85.

⁵ John Paul II, *Blessed, man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Pauline Books, Boston, 2006, 102:8.

⁶ John Paul II, *Blessed*, TOB, 101:3.

⁷ Gallagher, Sean, *The Criterion Online Edition*, “Christ’s Hands in the World,” Archdiocese of Indianapolis, June 29, 2012.