Meeting Modern Challenges
A Deacon Reflects on His Work in Robust Intellectual Formation

As an associate director for deacon formation and a fellow deacon, I am involved in a wide variety of parish-based ministries and in designing and executing an academic diocesan formation program created in light of the norms in the National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States. It is my view that the implementation of a robust intellectual formation program, balanced with pastoral and ministerial opportunities, provides the necessary foundation for successful diaconal ministry.

Since the restoration of the permanent diaconate by Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Letter Sacramentum Diaconatus Ordinis in 1967, diaconal ministry has had to confront the challenges of an increasingly complex and changing social environment. Our culture today is heavily influenced by secular forces that place an emphasis on consumerism, materialism, and individualism. In order to be effective servants of Christ in carrying out the diaconal ministry of word, liturgy, and charity, deacons need to be well prepared intellectually to engage today’s society.

Challenges and Opportunities
But, the success and rapid growth of the diaconate in the United States have brought many challenges. One of the biggest is that individual deacons must design and implement their own formation programs, regardless of the resources available to deliver the intellectual component of the program. These formation programs are influenced by numerous factors often beyond the control of the diocese including geographical dimensions, demographics, financial resources, access to educational facilities, availability of qualified instructors, cultural and social diversity, and the educational level of the faithful. As a result, each formation program varies in content, scheduling, and delivery methods.

In the years since its restoration, national studies in 1981 and 1996 confirmed the success of the permanent diaconate in the United States in terms of vocations and service to the parish community. But these studies also reflected some weaknesses and concerns about diaconal formation, including insufficient familiarity with prominent contemporary writings on Catholic social teaching and intellectual training that would benefit from greater balance and integration of theological and pastoral education.

My own discussions with fellow deacons ordained more than 10 years seem to support these conclusions. They indicate that a more rigorous intellectual formation around catechetics, doctrine, as well as deeper theological reflection on important Vatican II and other papal documents, would have been helpful in preparing them to deal with the complex societal issues they currently encounter in their ministries.

The National Directory
A new National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States was promulgated in 2004 to address these and other concerns, leading to the redesign of formation programs across the country to implement the new norms. The implementation of the new National Directory has begun to bear fruit in more rigorous academic programs to train deacons so they will be better able to apply their intellectual formation systematically in catechizing the faithful, preaching, and carrying out their various ministries. Deacons who are solidly grounded in the doctrinal, moral, and social teaching of the Church, through extensive intellectual formation coupled with theological and pastoral reflection on contemporary Church writings, are better positioned to respond to the changing ministerial needs of our modern society.

For example, over the past several years I have participated in team teaching a course on spiritual and servant leadership to Catholic school educators who are preparing to become involved in innovative parish-based services for the unemployed, more relevant prayer services and liturgies, and preaching that addresses real-life issues affecting human dignity with an emphasis on Catholic social teaching.

A Unique Position
Deacons are in a unique position to instill a Christian spirit and mentality in an increasingly secular environment that is rapidly and radically evolving. These present significant challenges to dioceses across the country as they develop and implement their diacronic formation programs. Although the permanent diaconate has been quite successful in terms of the number of vocations and its contributions to parish life, it is clear that robust intellectual formation, rooted in Scripture and contemporary Church documents and doctrine, is a critical element in responding to these challenges.

Deacon Andrew Saunders
The Archdiocese of Newark is the Associate Director for the Center for Diocesan Formation at Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology, Seton Hall University, and serves at St. Luke’s Church in Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ.


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For more information, contact Deacon Andrew Saunders, Associate Director, at andrew.saunders2@shu.edu or (973) 313-6335, or visit www.shu.edu/go/disconcate.