

A Quest For Excellence

A Case Study Of The Diaconal Formation For The
Men Of The First Cohort Of Deacons For The
Archdiocese of Indianapolis

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Introduction

The quest for perfection is always a venture in which failure must be the ultimate result. The acceptance of mediocrity is the bane of true educational and personal growth and as such is never acceptable. It is the pursuit of excellence that leads one to reach beyond who they are in search of who they could become. The pursuit of excellence of the formation program was the goal for the initial class of deacon candidates for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. The class of 2004-2008 was the prototype for the cohorts of men who were to follow. The experience gleaned from the implementation and observation of the formation of these men would be the bellwether of future formation classes.

The quest for excellence is not the same as the achievement of excellence. The quest is the journey which is observable while the final achievement itself can be more nebulous in nature as it is often based on opinions or results that may take years to fully develop and assess. As the post-ordination hallmark of one decade is approaching, we have the luxury of the time elapsed to examine the results of the formation of the deacons spawned by the programs to be reviewed. The examination that ensues is a case study spotlighting a microcosm of diaconal formation of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis for purposes of evaluation of the programs offered. This review of the programs offered to the first class of candidates seeks to highlight the excellence achieved and plumb the depths of any mediocrity that is discovered. It is through the acknowledgement, study and review of missteps that true excellence is to be fostered and achieved to the betterment of future cohorts of diaconal candidates for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis.

Prelude to Formation

The years immediately following the Second Vatican Council were times of change and challenge for the Catholic Church. One of the changes that came about was the reinstatement of the permanent diaconate within the Roman Catholic Church. On June 18, 1967 Pope Paul VI promulgated through the papal *motu-proprio Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* the restoration of this third level of clergy to the Church. He declared that the “rights and obligations we confirm and declare to be in force also for those who will remain permanently in the diaconate”.¹ The easy part of the process was now complete. What was to follow varied greatly from diocese to diocese as each local Ordinary struggled to discover and develop the best policies and procedures for the implementation. Some dioceses opted to postpone reinstatement of the permanent diaconate, preferring to observe and study the ensuing successes and missteps of others. This deferment helped to mitigate issues in areas such as vetting of candidates, class size, best practices for human and spiritual growth etc.

One of the dioceses that chose to watch and learn was the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. In January of 2002 Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein OSB appointed a committee to plan the process of implementation after consultation with several priests of the diocese and the Council of Priests.² Archbishop Buechlein brought his decision to the attention of the faithful in his weekly article “Seeking the Face of the Lord” in the February 8, 2002 edition of the *Criterion*. In this article titled “Implementing the permanent diaconate in our diocese,” Archbishop

¹ Pope Paul VI. “Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem” in http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19670618_sacrum-diaconatus.html (accessed October 31, 2017).

² Father Bede Cisco, OSB. “Reflections on Forming Deacons and the Deacon Community.”

Buechlein outlined the steps he undertook in the decision making process. He went on to briefly explain and describe the permanent diaconate along with his vision of the ministry. The Archbishop stated that the Archdiocese "...will review successful programs already in existence in other dioceses."³ As we approach the ten year anniversary of the ordination of the first cohort of deacons, it is time to take a look in the rearview mirror with a critical eye and consider both what was and what could have been.

Intellectual Formation

Intellectual development was understood at the onset of program planning to be an essential element for thoughtful discernment and effective ministry. A well-worn axiom reminds us that it is not important to always know the answer. What is important to know is where to find an answer and then to get that information back to the inquirer. However, it becomes problematic if a deacon consistently responds, "I don't know the answer but I will find out and get back to you." It is implied through ordination that a deacon has been educated and therefore knows something. If it is routine for that deacon not to have the answers, then people will stop asking under the presumption of "Why ask him? He won't know the answer anyway."

The goal of the intellectual formation of the candidate was to identify and provide the educational opportunities necessary for producing a knowledgeable deacon who was approachable by the laity. It was expected that one avenue through which the laity would develop confidence in the deacon was because of his ability and knowledge to respond to their

³ Archbishop Daniel Buechlein, OSB. "Seeking the Face of The Lord," *The Criterion* 42, no. 47 (2002): 4.

questions. Therefore “The intellectual dimension of formation must be designed to communicate a knowledge of the faith and church tradition.”⁴

The planning group selected by Archbishop Buechlein relied extensively upon the expertise and experience of St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology to achieve this result. As described on the website, the Saint Meinrad Permanent Deacon Formation Program is based on monthly weekend meetings from September through June for academic course work and formation sessions. This program was initiated in 1999 and with this expertise the Benedictine monks of St. Meinrad were a wellspring of information and inspiration in all areas of formation. Their experience in forming seminarians as well as deacons from other dioceses was an essential element in a curriculum of educational excellence for this program. After the selection process had taken place and the men were chosen, the deacon aspirants were invited to gather at St. Meinrad for an informational meeting. At that time the educational schema was presented and reviewed. The prologue to the program of that day was a comment by a monk who stated there were “no job openings for dumb deacons.” It was said tongue-in-cheek, and all were amused, yet there was an underlying element of frankness and a tone of sincerity at the heart of the otherwise amusing comment. His comment echoed in my memory during the four years of formation and well beyond. The aspirants were simply being advised that intellectual formation, one of the four pillars of their overall formation, was considered crucial for success of the men and the program.

⁴ *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), 118.

It was made abundantly clear to the aspirants that the educational challenges would be daunting but critically important and was to be taken seriously. “Intellectual formation is a necessary dimension of diaconal formation insofar as it offers the deacon substantial nourishment for his spiritual life and a precious instrument for his ministry”.⁵ This statement from the Congregation for Catholic Education document *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Diaconorum Permanentium* indicates that excellence in education is an expectation at the highest echelons of the Church.

The men of the class of 2004-2008 were often reminded of the relevance of their intellectual formation and the importance of remaining current in their studies. The educational studies commenced September of 2004. All had been told that the studies would be challenging and that they were to be graduate level classes. Still many were surprised and some dismayed at the levels of effort, and concentration required during the lectures. Some were surprised at the volume of reading that was required as well as the papers that were to be written after each monthly weekend session. The studies were exacting and the schedule was demanding when united with the demands of ministry, work and family life. Ultimately, as in most of life’s endeavors, the effectiveness of the educational formation was directly proportional to the effort expended by each man.

For the purposes of this paper a survey was prepared and forwarded to the members of the class. There was general unanimity in the responses pertaining to the questions regarding the effectiveness and overall excellence of the intellectual formation. All were in complete

⁵ Catholic Church. “Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Diaconorum Permanentium” in *Compendium of the Diaconate*, ed. Enzo Petrolino (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), 258.

agreement that the educational opportunities afforded us were exceptional overall. The topics the classes included Sacred Scripture, Church history, Christology et cetera. They were generally well presented, and typically the content was of the finest quality. Several of the presenters were monks and instructors for the seminary furnished by St. Meinrad, but many others were brought in from across the country, including graduate students and doctoral candidates from Catholic University of America. One of the men replied to the questionnaire query with the response “excellent instructors for the most part,” however “one or two were dreadful”. Generally that sentiment was reiterated by the other respondents.

The opportunities for intellectual growth and excellence were only constrained by limits imposed by time, effort expended, family and work schedules. All respondents were in full agreement that the classes met all the criteria set forth by the Catholic Church pertaining to the intellectual formation of deacons. Adequate focus was placed on the “preparation and presentation of a systematic, comprehensive and integrated intellectual formation, faithful to the Magisterium of the Church”.⁶ During a recent interview with Fr. Bede Cisco OSB, director of deacon formation for the class of 2004-2008, he shared that he was very pleased with the overall intellectual formation of the men. Fr. Cisco felt that the classes were of a high quality and generally well presented. The consensus of the contemporary director of formation and the respondents to the survey was that the available resources for intellectual formation were of an excellent quality. The one exception involved the class on Pastoral Care. One deacon simply described this class as “needing improvement” another described it as “underwhelming” and as “having little to do with the real world of pastoral care”. Yet another lamented “the

⁶ *National Directory* 124.

practical aspects needed to be addressed much better”. It was observed that there appeared to be a disconnect between the theory presented in the class and the reality of ministry.

The intellectual formation was seen by most as a remarkable opportunity to learn more about the Faith we love. With only occasional exceptions, it was well received, appreciated and utilized by the men as they journeyed toward ordination and carried on through post ordination continuing education.

Human Formation

As the aspirants gathered for the first time to begin classes, it was generally understood that we would be undergoing intellectual formation, spiritual formation and pastoral formation. This reality was clear in retrospect; however it was doubtful that any of the men gave any particular consideration to the notion that we would also be undergoing human formation. After all, we were who we were, and nothing was going to change that. In actuality that notion could not have been more incorrect. The very act of experiencing formation demanded that the person must change and evolve. This is in response to the intellectual, spiritual and pastoral growth being experienced. Personal growth espoused by the first three tenets of formation required a corresponding development in terms of positive human formation. This is a direct result of experiencing the cumulative effects of the aforementioned tenets of formation. The candidates develop a new awareness of self, and others and the interrelationship of all with God. This introspection is the very essence of the human formation and any resulting individual changes and personal growth. The Catholic Church understood and anticipated this fact as revealed in the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and*

Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States. “A participant comes to formation with a history of interrelationships with other people”.⁷

The development of a person is to some degree influenced by those who are important and involved in the life of that person. The idea that we are a product of our environment is often debated. Suffice it to say that we are at least influenced and our human formation is impacted by our environment and those who surround us. The same could be said for the men seeking to be ordained to the diaconate. The very fact that we were of like mind and goals did not mean that we were of like background or environment. There was a considerable diversity of experiences, education, ethnicity, career choices et cetera which offered a wealth of opportunity to expand our individual understanding and appreciation of our brother aspirants. This is an important factor in human formation.

When the element of human formation is added to the mix of effective intellectual, pastoral and spiritual formation, the result is a more effective and well rounded deacon, who is enabled to minister to the ignored and forgotten of society. In an article for the *Criterion*, Fr. Bede Cisco OSB, explained human formation as the “growth in the gifts and skills that the person brings to the program”.⁸ Fr. Cisco went on to state “We expect people to have a good range of gifts and hopefully through the program those will develop further”.⁹ Human formation assisted the men in developing a greater appreciation and acceptance of the differences that existed not only within our diaconal community but also among the people to whom we will minister. The

⁷ *National Directory* 106.

⁸ Evans, Brandon A. “Archdiocese to Hold Meeting For Men Interested In Becoming Deacons,” *The Criterion* 42, no. 47 (2003): 1.

⁹ Evans, Brandon A. “Archdiocese to Hold Meeting For Men Interested In Becoming Deacons,” *The Criterion* 42, no. 47 (2003): 1.

differences of gender, race, religious preference and any other human distinction faded into obscurity. The human formation we experienced as aspirants and candidates was an essential element in our desire to promote justice for the forgotten and the marginalized that we were to serve as deacons. It began to prepare us to be more understanding and accepting of others in order to permit and encourage us, as Pope Francis implores, to have the smell of the sheep. This type of closeness to and affinity for those we serve can only be realized when we accept them for who they are and where they are in their spiritual life. This is human formation, a critical step in the development of a deacon.

This element of formation “aims to enhance the personality of ministers in such a way that he becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ”.¹⁰ We were enveloped in human formation without our realizing it. For one weekend every month for four years we were inseparable. We lived and ate together. We went to lecture together. We prayed and worshiped together. Outside of that weekend we studied together in small groups. We came to know each other very well, and in doing so each of us became a better person as we allowed the defensive walls which we erect around ourselves to protect our vulnerability to crumble and be replaced by an openness to self disclosure. The element of human formation that called for a better understanding of those we were to serve was also addressed. The depth and breadth of this evolution of understanding was as varied as the twenty-five men being formed and therefore difficult to quantify but was none the less palpable. This transformation was further energized through our individual ministries of charity. Very early in our four year program, we each chose a ministry of charity by which we began our journey to become more

¹⁰ *National Directory* 109.

involved and begin to take on the smell of the sheep. In addition each of the formation weekends included a session during which we were exposed to existing areas of social justice and charitable operations in order to be better aware of what was going on throughout the Archdiocese. However, two of the respondents to the survey felt very strongly that an even greater emphasis and insistence should have been placed upon the men to broaden their base of experience in the ministry of charity. They felt that a more diverse background of ministry of charity experiences would have enhanced the overall formation experience. My personal experience causes me to agree with their observation. During my four years of formation I was involved with ministering to inner city children at a local youth center. It was a very fulfilling and enlightening ministry, but it left what I later observed to be some voids in my preparation for the realities of the diaconate. It was after ordination that I came to be involved in prison and jail ministry as well as hospital and hospice chaplaincy. I now am aware that more exposure to a wider range of charity ministries during formation would have been of greater value to me as an actively involved deacon.

One area in the realm of human formation seemed to require elaboration: the understanding of the meaning and importance of obedience. At the time of our ordination each candidate was asked by the Archbishop, “Do you promise respect and obedience to me and my successors?”¹¹ This was a promise that each of us had already considered and could easily and sincerely respond with “I do.”, but there is more to obedience than simple fidelity to this promise. There also exists the responsibility to adhere to the promise of praying the

¹¹ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. *The Rites of The Catholic Church, Volume Two*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 54.

Liturgy of the Hours. “Permanent deacons are required to include as part of their daily prayer those parts of the Liturgy of the Hours known as Morning and Evening Prayer”.¹²

There is also a responsibility for obedience in the prompt and accurate preparation and completion of required documents such as ministry agreements and annual reports. The simple courtesy of responding to e-mails or phone calls from the director of deacons is also an element of obedience that some seem to find challenging. Fr. Bede Cisco OSB, the director of deacon formation for the first cohort of candidates reflected upon this topic during a recent interview. Fr. Cisco commented that although he felt formation in general went well he later realized that greater energy and effort should have been directed toward achieving a more comprehensive understanding of obedience.¹³

One particular element of human formation that may not receive the acknowledgement it should is the impact that the family, particularly the wife, has upon the candidate. The first cohort of candidates numbered not only twenty-five men but also twenty-five wives who accompanied their husbands on the journey. Sometimes that fact was overlooked or undervalued. Two of the respondents made a particular point of the need for more and richer opportunities for spiritual and human formation specifically directed toward the needs of the wives during the weekend gatherings. There were not only twenty-five men but also twenty-five wives who underwent four years of formation and training. It has been voiced by several members of the first cohort including this author that the involvement and support of the wives was instrumental in the extraordinary percentage of men successfully completing the four years

¹² *National Directory* 90.

¹³ Fr. Bede Cisco, (Order of Saint Benedict), interviewed by Steve Gretencord at Saint Meinrad, October 5, 2017.

of formation. The first class of candidates for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis experienced the ordination of 100% Of the men who began formation four years earlier. Certainly the rigorous vetting protocols were invaluable in achieving this unusually high percentage of ordainments, but the support of the family, particularly the wives, must not be ignored or undervalued. The Church celebrates the sanctity of the sacrament of matrimony and acknowledges the great importance the support of the wife has upon successful formation. “The wife must declare her consent for his petition to enter into candidacy formation; she also should clearly state her understanding of the meaning of diaconal ordination and ministry and its impact on their marriage and family”.¹⁴ Therefore in addition to the informational sessions and the many interviews prior to acceptance into the program, the wife was also required to write a letter of understanding and acceptance prior to candidacy. The active involvement and consent of the wife along the continuing path to diaconal ordination was always at the forefront of discussions.

The emphasis that the Church places on the importance of the consent and support of the wife is highlighted and culminated in the requirement of a hand written document that she must prepare prior to the ordination of her husband. “For someone to be promoted to sacred orders the following documents are required...if the one to be ordained to the permanent diaconate is a married candidate, testimonials that the marriage was celebrated and the wife consents”.¹⁵ The hand written note from the wife serves as a declaration on her part that she

¹⁴ National Directory- 93.

¹⁵ Canon Law Society of America, *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York, New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 1050.

does not anticipate ordination to pose any threat to the marriage.¹⁶ The requirement for the written permission of the wife for her husband to be ordained was an opportunity for open and engaging conversations not only about the ministry but also about their marriage. In fact during the entire process of admission into the program and the four following years of training and formation, my conversations with my wife, Kathy, were perhaps the most forthright and candid in our marriage to date. It was the introspective nature of the admission process and later the formation program itself that evoked the soul searching on the part of both my wife and myself that led to these remarkably open and frank conversations. Many of the deacons expressed very similar comments about their discussions and conversations with their wives. The open and honest conversations and reflection during the ride home were so engaging as to cause the time to fade away and the miles to disappear.

The other side of the coin was that the requirement for the wife's consent could occasionally prove to be an expensive proposition. For example, a deacon related the following story. "On more than one occasion during the trip home from a formation program Kathy would mention how nice it would be to go out for supper. If I was as foolish as to suggest that I was too tired because of the weekend, she would simply remind me that I needed her consent to be ordained, and we would laugh and then go to her favorite restaurant". Many of the wives faithfully attended nearly every formation weekend for four years. Their presence during the hundreds of hours of lecture was a living and vibrant testament to their dedication to the support of their husbands and of the diaconate. Their active involvement spoke volumes about their loving support and commitment to their husband and to the vocation to which he was

¹⁶ *Canon Law* 1050.

being called. The wives were a crucial component in the success of the human formation of the candidates. The balance of the family also served as an important element involved in the human formation of the candidate. The entire family became an important source of affirmation, support and encouragement for the candidates who sometimes struggled under the load of giving, living and learning.

Overall the human formation of the candidates was seen as being quite successful. One deacon described it as “a journey of self discovery”. During the years of preparation for ordination, the men discussed changes they experienced in their view of the world and the people it contained. All the men involved seemed to be more tolerant, accepting and forgiving. We felt a greater sense of empathy and urgency in matters of social justice as well as the fair treatment of individuals. The men of the first cohort of the deacon community credit this enhancement of caring and the greater willingness to help those in need to the human formation we were blessed to receive during the four years of journey toward ordination.

Spiritual Formation

One of the fundamental requisites for acceptance into the diaconal program was that each man “demonstrated that he is already living a life of mature Christian spirituality”.¹⁷ Entry into the program without the knowledge and support of the pastor was not likely. This was a crucial element because the pastor is well aware of who is active in the life of the parish, both spiritually and in terms of physical presence; the pastor would be aware of who participates in the Mass. The pastor has a very good idea whether the necessary foundational spirituality is present in a potential candidate, but that is not an endpoint; rather it is only the beginning.

¹⁷ National Directory 111.

Please note that I referred to foundational spirituality, which opens the discussion into how we build a solid spiritual house on that foundation.

The basis of Christian spirituality is the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ and the dogmas of the Catholic Church. In addition spirituality is “the network of human experiences that form a lived faith commitment.”¹⁸ With these definitions in mind, it becomes clear that any cookie-cutter form of Catholic spirituality could never exist. Each person’s spirituality would be nuanced by their interpretation and understanding of both scripture and dogma while being flavored by their individual experiences. For this reason a variety of avenues for spiritual formation was made available.

Each year of study commenced with a three day retreat. During the monthly gatherings the men and the wives present prayed morning and evening liturgy of the hours and all attended Mass daily. There was time available to facilitate private prayer, sacrament of Reconciliation, and personal reflection. Each of the men chose a spiritual director to join them and guide them on his spiritual journey. The candidates were supposed to visit their spiritual directors on a regular basis. It was of vital importance to the spiritual formation of the candidate that he chose a spiritual director with whom he can communicate freely and clearly. “It is the particular task of the spiritual director to assist the candidate to discern the signs of his vocation, to place himself in an attitude of ongoing conversion, to bring to maturity the traits proper to the spirituality of the deacon, drawing on the writings of classical spirituality and the

¹⁸ Richard P. McBrien, ed., *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco, HarperSanfrancisco, 1989), 1215.

example of the saints...”.¹⁹ The candidates became very close to their spiritual directors and relied upon them heavily as not only a director but a trusted confidant. In excess of ten years later, many of the deacons of the first cohort still retain their original spiritual director as both mentor and adviser. My spiritual director, the late Fr. Bernard Head, was one such man in my life. I could talk to him about anything that was bothering, puzzling or confusing me, and he just had a way of bringing clarity to the murkiness of life and assisted me in finding the presence of God in the midst of that murkiness. All of the candidates had spiritual directors and were part of small reflection groups both of which were essential elements in their spiritual formation.

A great deal of attention was given to the formation to ensure the candidates had every reasonable opportunity to grow spiritually in their Faith and in their ministry of service to others. “The element which most characterizes diaconal spirituality is the discovery of and the sharing in the love of Christ the servant, who came not to be served but to serve”.²⁰ “The model par excellence is Christ the servant, who lived totally at the service of God, for the good of men”.²¹ The image of Christ as servant must always be the centerpiece of diaconal spirituality and was always front and center in the spiritual formation of the class of 2004-2008.

The respondents to the survey were unanimous in their opinion that the opportunities for spiritual growth and formation were varied and of excellent quality. One responding deacon stated it most eloquently “...the fact that it stretched our faith and broadened my

¹⁹ *Ratio* 258.

²⁰ *Ratio Institutional* 256.

²¹ *Ratio Institutional* 235.

understanding of it. It challenged me to examine what my faith was not just what I was raised to accept without question".²² This statement echoed the sentiments mentioned by the other respondents. They relished the chance to examine their self-understanding of spirituality and employ the results of this examination as a springboard for personal growth.

The man tasked with the responsibility for the formation of the group, Fr. Bede Cisco OSB, was generally pleased with the overall thrust of the spiritual formation effort and its results. Fr. Cisco described the formation process as a means of building upon the existing prayer life of the candidates, thereby preparing the man for ordained ministry. Attention and dedication to spiritual formation prepares one for "a life of serving others and a relationship with Christ in prayer" which becomes the basis on which a man can grow in the image of Christ the servant".²³ Fr. Cisco was generally pleased with the overall structure and results of the spiritual formation process; however his critique of the program cited room for improvement. He felt that "the formation itself went well, but more emphasis should have been placed on the reflection groups".²⁴

The reflection groups consisted of five deacon candidates with a leader from outside the diaconal group. It was the responsibility of the leader to keep the discussions of the men on topic. During each monthly session, a candidate would present, discussing a topic or situation that had arisen in his life. The topic was presented with a focus on the presence of God, possibly in the situation itself, its solution, its impact on the candidate or someone else. The gathering generally gave rise to interestingly spirited yet respectful and prayerful discussions as

²² *Deacon Survey* (2017).

²³ Father Bede Cisco, OSB. "Reflections on Forming Deacons and the Deacon Community."

²⁴ Fr. Bede Cisco, (Order of Saint Benedict), interviewed by Steve Gretencord at Saint Meinrad, October 5, 2017.

we challenged each other on issues of personal concern. We would discuss topics such as our interpretations of Church social teaching, various opportunities of assisting the marginalized, individual spiritual challenges and struggles with our intellectual formation. The wide variety of topics was a reflection of our personal impasses and struggles. Our discussions were more than simply five men chatting about a topic of mutual interest. The discussions were more closely akin to *accompaniment* than to conversations. I refer to accompaniment in the sense of “fraternity and companionship in service” as espoused by Jesuit spirituality.²⁵ The notion of accompaniment also has recently been advocated by Pope Francis with actions if not words when he accompanied twelve Syrian refugees on his widely reported return trip to Rome from Lesbos, Greece on April 18, 2016. Specifically however, I make allusion to accompaniment between five men on unique and yet often parallel journeys as they accompany each other on the road to ordination, and as such conversed with and listened to each other fraternally. The time that was spent together always passed far too quickly. Several of the respondents to the diaconal survey expressed a wish that the reflection groups could have met more often since they were so engrossing and engaging. The dynamics of the group with which I was associated was always respectful, sincere and demonstrated that there was a genuine concern and fondness for one another.

Pastoral Formation

“An integral formation must relate the human, spiritual and intellectual dimensions to pastoral practice”.²⁶ The nature of the pastoral approach to interacting with the faithful is multifaceted

²⁵ *Catholic Encyclopedia* 694.

²⁶ *National Directory* 126.

and widely diverse. It includes evangelization and ecumenism and care of the aged and the poor. The idea of quality pastoral care calls for assisting the alienated as well as the ignored and marginalized of society. An effective pastoral approach involves caring for prisoners and the ill, teaching children, youth and young adults. The pastoral approach to the human condition is a never ending kaleidoscope of new experiences that can best be addressed from a foundational approach based on faith and a solid education of pastoral formation. The permanent deacon needs to be prepared to deal with a wide variety of pastoral situations in the parish and in the rest of the world. In the parish setting after Mass a deacon may well be faced with questions ranging from parishioners dealing with the impending death of a loved one to talking to a second grader about how to make the sign of the cross.

Issues such as addiction, abuse, imprisonment and a wide variety of other issues plaguing humanity will at times need to be addressed by the deacon either during his ministries of charity or employment in the secular world. The permanent deacon will be seen and recognized as someone to go to in order to obtain help or advice. It was the contention and strong belief of the formation director that the person in need was often better served when the deacon avoided the temptation to offer counseling which was best left to professionals. This was a topic that was often broached and reiterated during our weekend formation. This sentiment is not shared by all professionals in the counseling arena, notably authors Eugene C. Kennedy PHD and Sara C Charles MD. It is their contention that the “appreciation of our shared foibles remains the greatest strength of those with common sense, if not formal training, to be

counselors.”²⁷ Academic discussion and disagreement aside, we were taught to avoid the temptation to try to address problems when the solutions or approaches to the situation at hand were recognized as beyond our abilities and best addressed by those trained in counseling.

During our pastoral formation sessions it was stressed that often times the person in need wasn’t approaching in search of a solution to their situation but simply seeking someone to listen to them. Still I was somewhat surprised to discover how correct they were. Time and time again, as a person is pouring out their heart to me, I begin to consider how best to help them before they simply say “Thank you for listening to me,” or “It was good to get that off of my chest.” They are typically not looking for solutions for their situation, but rather they are seeking a sympathetic ear. The first cohort of deacons for the Archdiocese, which includes me, was well trained to listen with our ears and our hearts. We were repeatedly reminded that we were to be sympathetic and caring while keeping our opinions regarding treatment or problem solving to ourselves. Many of the candidates did not realize at the time how important the concept of listening really was.

There is no activity that speaks more loudly or clearly the charisma of *diakonia* than the deacon’s ministry of charity. The quintessential purpose and function of the deacon is “exercised in dedication to works of charity and assistance...”²⁸ The respondents to the survey questions regarding pastoral formation were in agreement that our pastoral formation in

²⁷ Kennedy, Eugene C and Charles, Sara C. *On Becoming a Counselor: A Basic Guide for Nonprofessional Counselors and Other Helpers*. (University of Michigan: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001.) vii.

²⁸ Catholic Church. “Ratio Fundamentalibus Institutionis Diaconorum Permanentium” in *Compendium of the Diaconate*, ed. Enzo Petrolino (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), 234.

regard to the ministry of charity was of a very high caliber. Although as previously mentioned, some felt an even greater emphasis should have been placed upon the ministry of charity. One of the deacons felt that a more robust, diverse and active involvement in ministry by the candidates should have been insisted upon.

As I sat down to continue the reflection necessary for the preparation of this paper, I was struck by what I have just encountered in the area of pastoral service. On Thursdays, I minister to the inmates of the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute which consists of the camp, prison and penitentiary including the offenders on death row. I have been visiting these men for just over six years, and that has been a privilege and a joy for me. On Saturdays, I conduct Communion services for both the male and female inmates incarcerated at the Vigo County Jail Terre Haute Indiana. The service on October 21, 2017 for the female offenders was particularly moving, not only for them but also for me.

The women actively discussed the readings of the day and very reverently received communion, except for one woman who sat quietly to the side with tears streaming down her cheeks. I mention this experience because the authoring of this paper has given me pause to reflect upon my formation, my vocation and my ministries of charity. Without the quality of pastoral formation that I received, I would be hard pressed to envision myself as effectively ministering to the incarcerated. It has been during moments of ministry such as the ones I just described that the goals of pastoral formation as laid out by the USCCB have been realized through the continuing efforts of thousands of deacons including myself throughout the world.

The National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States gives a very clear description of the goals of pastoral formation. It states that in the area of pastoral formation “the qualities to be developed ... are as follows: a spirit of pastoral responsibility and servant-leadership; generosity and perseverance; creativity; respect for ecclesial communion; and filial obedience to the bishop”.²⁹ The pastoral formation that we experienced led us to be generous with our time and our talent and caused us to be more munificent with our treasure. It helped us to realize that there would be times when we have to set aside traditional methods and be creative in our approach to ministry. We came to recognize perseverance was a necessary component in our ministerial endeavors. These qualities and many more were espoused and augmented by our pastoral formation.

It is clearly the opinion of the responding deacons from the class of 2004 – 2008 that each of these goals was achieved and the results eclipsed their hopes and expectations. Two of the twenty-five men ordained in 2008 have since left the diaconate, but the remaining deacons are very happy in their vocation. They continue to be actively involved in many areas of ministry to those who are marginalized and often forgotten by society. The men are motivated to be the servant-leaders the bishops envisioned, but most importantly there is a widespread feeling among the deacons of the class of 2004 -2008 that they are making a difference in the world. It was the consensus of those responding to the survey that the pastoral formation we received met the objectives of the bishops of the United States. Their vision and desire was the pastoral

²⁹ *National Directory* 126.

formation “should strengthen and enhance the exercise of the prophetic, priestly and servant-leadership functions Already lived and exercised by the participant....”³⁰

The Deacon – Formation in Action

A permanent deacon is the culmination of the effectiveness of the dimensions of formation to which he has been exposed. The four pillars of formation serve as the foundation that supports the threefold ministry of the diaconate. The ministries of liturgy, word and charity are the very essence of the diaconate. The human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral dimensions of such formation coalesce in unison to slowly bring about the metamorphoses of an aspirant developing into a candidate with the final stage yielding an ordained permanent deacon. “One who will serve as a deacon requires a formation that promotes the development of the whole person. Therefore, the four dimensions of formation should be so interrelated as to achieve continual integration of their objectives in the life of each participant and of his exercise of ministry.”³¹ As formation proceeded the progression of the “development of the whole person” became less of a conceptual ideal and more of a new way of experiencing life. The change that occurred was slow and was often not perceived by the men involved. The root of the evolution was not solely from the formation of the group en masse but also through the personal growth of the individual for “...in formation the candidate himself assumes the primary responsibility for his discernment and development.”³² As an example, a brother candidate began formation as somewhat timid or at least unsure of himself when speaking English. When employing his native tongue of Spanish he was an effective and self-confident

³⁰ *National Directory* 127.

³¹ *National Directory* 105.

³² *National Directory* 204.

speaker, but when he spoke in English, he was far less confident and self-assured. His volume would drop to a level at which his words became barely discernible, which often left the listener clueless as to what had been said. At the beginning of our third year of formation, my candidate brother had occasion to stand before our class to speak. The change in his confidence level was not only obvious; it was mesmerizing. During his presentation he was self-assured and spoke with knowledgeable authority. His English was still a bit halting, but what an incredible change he had undergone!

The effects of the formation he was experiencing were self-evident and remarkable. I made mention of this event to my wife Kathy and her response was surprising and puzzling. She remarked to me, “You really don’t know, do you?” I had no idea what she was talking about and asked her what she meant by that question. Her response was quite unexpected and even a bit shocking. She told me that I had changed just as much as all other candidates. She observed that my level of confidence was notably enhanced as was my willingness to speak publicly as well as my openness to accepting leadership roles. All of the diaconal candidates were evolving as a direct result of the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral elements of formation, although they were not necessarily aware of it.

This process of change was fostered and nurtured by the diaconal community itself in conjunction with the parish, family and workplace communities.³³ It was through the collaborative efforts, intentional or otherwise, of these respective communities in conjunction with the desire of the candidates themselves to experience a *metanoia*, a turning from sinfulness toward God, that effective deacons were produced. This process of change and

³³ *National Directory* 207.

development was anticipated and expected in Canon 236 when the bishops speak of “those aspiring to the permanent diaconate are to be formed to nourish a spiritual life and instructed to fulfill correctly the duties proper to that order.”³⁴ Regardless of the degree of the effectiveness of the four dimensions of formation as they impacted and changed the candidates, “they must be predisposed to continuing formation after their ordination And be open to programs of ongoing formation.”³⁵

The evolution from deacon aspirant to ordained permanent deacon is not complete after four years; it is just getting started. “The post-ordination path must provide the deacon with ample opportunities to develop and integrate the dimensions of formation into his life and ministry.”³⁶ It is the formation of the men that causes them to evolve into permanent deacons who “strengthened by sacramental grace are dedicated to the people of God....”³⁷ This type of spiritual and ministerial evolving was and is being experienced by myself and my candidate brothers forming the first cohort of deacons for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. The preponderance of the feedback furnished by the responding deacons from the previously discussed survey clearly and forcefully indicates in unison their overwhelming support and agreement with my conclusion.

The human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral tenets of our formation which were thoughtfully conceived, effectively applied and generally enthusiastically received were of

³⁴ Canon Law Society of America, *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York, New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 307.

³⁵ Catholic Church. “Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Diaconorum Permanentium” in *Compendium of the Diaconate*, ed. Enzo Petrolino (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), 266.

³⁶ *National Directory* 114.

³⁷ Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 397.

paramount importance. The effective application of the four tenants of formation was the bedrock upon which rested the foundation of diaconal preparedness. The result of the formation was men who were motivated and well prepared intellectually, spiritually and “strengthened by sacramental grace are dedicated to the people of God.”³⁸ The only perceived serious chink in the armor of formation, as overwhelmingly indicated in the deacon survey, was the quality of the preparation, content and presentation of the liturgical and sacramental practicum.

Liturgical and Sacramental Practicum

As the class of 2004 – 2008 entered into the final year of formation prior to ordination the men participated in two weekend sessions of practical liturgical and sacramental training. Unfortunately most of the areas of this training were not well covered and were incomplete. This important element of our formation was poorly provided and badly underserved. The failure to provide solid training, and aid the acuity of understanding yielded unproductive results. This area of training failed to support the practical aspects of our liturgical and sacramental responsibilities.

The first weekend session was eagerly anticipated. It was expected to be a pleasant break from the typical rigorous hours of lecture, and it was to have afforded us the chance to experience hands on practical applications of our studies. The result of the first weekend of practical training of the men in respect to the deacon at Mass was lackluster and disappointing. There was little practical training relating to “The gestures and bodily posture of both the

³⁸ Catholic Church. “Lumen Gentium” in *Vatican Council II The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 42.

Priest, the Deacon Must be conducive to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity...".³⁹ In addition to a lack of exposure to the nuances and purposes of liturgical gestures and postures, we were not informed of the prayers during the liturgy that were proper to the role of deacon. The shortcoming of the class seemed to be in the preparation more than in the presentation. It did not appear that the presenter had given much consideration or attention to the topics he was going to cover and to share prior to the beginning of that weekend class. The overall impression of the weekend was one of disappointment.

The responses to the question on the survey "how well did the practicum prepare you to assist at your first Mass" were all very similar in content. One deacon succinctly responded "I prepared myself for the first Mass". Another brother deacon stated "I was prepared to assist at my first Mass however I am not sure that the practicum was instrumental in preparing me". Another respondent to the query concerning the state of preparedness to assist at Mass replied "Not well at all. We were not even taught the prayers or why we say them". Another deacon responded that the "practicum did a below average rating to prepare me for my first Mass to assist. I had to learn most of it on my own." I was fortunate in the respect that my pastor was quite willing to spend several hours with me reviewing the role of deacon in the Mass and, equally importantly, the meaning behind what I was to do and to pray. One deacon summed up the overall opinions stated by the rest when he wrote "The practicum needed more structure; each candidate needed to have more hands-on."

³⁹ Catholic Church. "General Instruction of the Roman Missal" in *The Roman Missal*, (Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), 21.

Two months later was the second practicum during which we received training in the administering of the sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony. The experience was only marginally improved, although the presenter seemed to have given more thought to what he was going to discuss. The primary perceived shortcoming of that weekend centered on very little individual training or practice. When asked, one deacon in the survey about the state of preparedness responded “Very poor. I had to learn as I administered these sacraments.” Another deacon simply stated “the practicum did not prepare me well for Baptism and Matrimony”. A third deacon was a bit more upbeat in his comment when he stated, “I did feel ready to take part in these sacraments although we could have been better prepared with more practice.” I echo the sentiments of the third deacon in that I felt comfortable in administering the sacraments but not because of the practicum. I felt comfortable because the sacramental process is so clearly laid out in the rite books. The practicums can best be described as two weekends during which the quest for excellence took a back seat to the convenience of mediocrity.

The deacons were not the only ones who could have been better prepared for the Mass. One priest made the unfortunate comment that the deacon “concelebrated” the Mass with him. This was not only erroneous but a serious misstatement which could cause additional confusion among the laity as they grappled with the newness of the diaconate in the diocese. A respondent to the survey summed up his experience “I was better prepared than the priest I assisted.” There were other deacons who referred to the state of unpreparedness of their respective pastors. In fairness to the director of formation, Fr. Cisco had prepared and forwarded helpful information regarding the role of the deacon in the liturgy to each pastor

whose parish had a new deacon. It appears in some instances the information was simply not read. However, in other instances, including my own, the pastor was well informed, helpful and supportive of the new deacons and the first Mass went very smoothly.

Homiletics

The study of homiletics is “the branch of pastoral theology dedicated to the art and science of effective preaching.”⁴⁰ When understood to be a science as well as an art, homiletics can be both studied and assimilated. The styles and methods the preacher employs can be polished and honed through practice and study in the quest for excellence. The systematic approach to the study of effective preaching was presented to the candidates during eight days of the summer of 2007. The topic was approached from the aspect that “preaching is pastoral, displaying a sensitive and concerned knowledge of the struggles, doubts, concerns and joys of the members of a local community”.⁴¹ What was experienced by the candidates was the application of what had studied the previous three years, namely various aspects of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

We had been well schooled in the theory, background, history and social implications of the Gospel; now it was time to begin to grapple with the complexities of proclaiming the Good News. The homiletics class lecture was well prepared and professionally executed. The facilities for the practice of the homilies at St. Meinrad School of Theology were excellent. The overall impact of the eight days of training was to help us to understand how effective preaching “enables people to hear the Word of God as good news for their lives and to respond

⁴⁰ O’Collins, Gerald S.J. and Farrugia, Edward G. S.J, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000), 109.

⁴¹ “Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly(1982)” in *The Liturgy Documents Volume One*, ed. David Lysik (Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004), 392.

accordingly”.⁴² The overall experience was one of professionalism, excellence and prayerful attention to the elements necessary to produce well prepared and well presented homilies. The only undercurrent of disappointment that was discernible was the occasional lament from the responding deacons that there could have been more intensive use of the time available. It was suggested that a larger number of smaller groups could have produced more practice opportunities and individual guidance. That aside, all found the experience useful, helpful, effective and of the very highest quality. All of the responding deacons expressed a gratitude for the opportunity and a sense that their expectations had been exceeded.

Conclusion

The preparation of this document has been a time of reflection and recollection. It has been a time to revisit the memories of the evolution of a group of individuals into a community of deacons. This evolution was the direct result of a four year span of formation emphasizing the aspects of intellectual, pastoral, human and spiritual growth of a group of men who were experiencing a call to the vocation of deacon. As indicated throughout this document the class of 2004-2008 was molded and fashioned via a process of formation based on the goal of striving for excellence.

Twenty-five men entered formation in September of 2004, and on June 18, 2008 the same twenty-five men were ordained. In the typical class of candidates there is the anticipation that men will be leaving. Sometimes they are asked to leave because of academic difficulties or

⁴² “Fulfilled in your Hearing”, 411.

inadequate homiletic skills. Sometimes it is the failure to fulfill liturgical standards that prompts their required departure “because the burden of proof of readiness for ordination lies with the candidate, and doubt is resolved in the favor of the Church”.⁴³ The men may choose to leave for any number of personal reasons including a desire to postpone ordination.

The unusual accomplishment of a one hundred percent retention and completion rate not only speaks well of the vetting and selection process but also of the quality of the formation. The program offered was found to be comprehensive and demanding but was also engaging as the men were challenged to excel and succeed. This was a fundamental component implicitly necessary for the impressive retention rate.

It was apparent from the outset of investigation that the three dimensions of ministry, liturgy, word, and charity, were generally strongly supported through the content of the formation programs. As previously discussed, there existed only one area of training which was conspicuously sullied by the mediocrity found within the preparation and presentation of the class. I might even go so far as to say that it bordered on failure. Overall however, the first cohort of deacons for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis was the recipient of a very high quality of formation. Things were not perfect and of course they never will be. There were times when a different instructor would have likely been more beneficial or appropriate. There were instances when the chosen textbooks were not as helpful as they could have been. Even with these missteps the diaconal formation offered to the men of the class of 2004-2008 was exceptional. The experience gained by the observation and scrutiny of the formation and the

⁴³ *National Directory* 230.

resulting ministries of this group of men in addition to the findings of this investigative treatise will serve to further enhance the quest for excellence for future classes.

Excellence is not a concept or even a word to be bandied about carelessly. It is a state that is only achieved through attention to detail in planning and in the execution of that plan. This is a concise definition and a true statement, but there is one additional ingredient required, and that is a sincere belief that the product to be yielded is of value. The excellence that was discovered and confirmed in the research for this paper left no doubt that there existed throughout the planning and implementation of the plan a sincere belief in the value of the permanent diaconate. The result of the overall excellence discovered formed a group of men into a community of permanent deacons in the image envisioned by St. Polycarp. His vision of deacons was “let them be merciful, and zealous and let them walk according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all”.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Catholic Church. “Lumen Gentium” in *Vatican Council II The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 42.

Appendix A

Deacon Survey Questionnaire Class of 2004 - 2008

- 1). What were the strengths of the educational* programs?
- 2). What areas of the educational* programs needed bolstering?
- 3). What do you feel was missing that would have enhanced the educational* programming?
- 4). What were the strengths of the formation** program?
- 5). What areas of formation** program needed bolstering?
- 6). What do you feel was missing from the formation** process?
- 7). What is your opinion of the practicum?
- 8). How well did the practicum prepare you to assist at your for Mass?
- 9). How well did the practicum prepare you to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony?

* The term education is understood to include intellectual and doctrinal understanding

** The term formation is understood to include human, spiritual and pastoral development.

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Fr. Bede Cisco OSB

Director of Deacon Formation for the class of 2004 – 2008

- 1). What was your vision for the diaconate in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis?
 - a. How did that vision influence the educational format offered to the candidates?
 - b. How did that vision influence the formation opportunities offered to the candidates?
- 2). You were involved with the interview process of other diocese. How did their responses influence the program for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis?
- 3). What is your opinion of the overall effectiveness of the four year program?
- 4). Did your view of the effectiveness of the programming evolve over the course of the four years?
- 5). Viewing these four years in retrospect what do you wish you could change, add or eliminate in the educational aspect of the program?
- 6). Viewing these four years in retrospect what do you wish you could change, add or eliminate in the formational aspect of the program?
- 7). How did your Benedictine background influence the education and formation of the first cohort?

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