

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

Deacon Dominic Cerrato, Ph.D.



Celibacy: The Gift of an Undivided Heart

Few of us know exactly what our “yes” to God will eventually require. We say yes at particular moments—at baptism, in marriage, at ordination—but the full meaning of that yes unfolds over a lifetime. God receives the gift we offer and, often in ways we could never have anticipated, invites us to give ourselves more deeply.

For some permanent deacons, celibacy is part of that “yes” from the beginning. They enter formation unmarried, knowing that ordination will mean embracing celibacy for the sake of Christ and His Church. For others, the call comes in a way they never expected. We enter the diaconate as married men, sharing our vocation with the woman we love, only to discover, perhaps many years later through her death, that our “yes” to Christ now asks something new of us.

The marriage that shaped our lives has reached its earthly completion. The woman with whom we shared our joys and sorrows, raised our children, prayed, struggled, laughed, sacrificed, and grew older is no longer physically beside us. And amid the grief, we find ourselves standing before the Lord once again, being asked to place our lives into His hands. These are very different paths, but they eventually meet at the same place: self-gift.

This is important because celibacy can easily be understood primarily in terms of what it requires us to surrender. For the man entering the diaconate unmarried, it means relinquishing the possibility of marriage and family life. For the widowed deacon, however, the experience is quite different. He hasn’t relinquished the possibility of marriage; he has lived it. He has given himself to his wife and received her gift of herself in return. He knows from experience the joys, struggles, intimacy, forgiveness, fidelity, and sacrifices of married love.

Her death doesn’t make that love meaningless. Nor does celibacy somehow require him to leave that love behind. Rather, everything married love has taught him can now become part of the gift he offers to Christ. The tenderness learned through marriage, the patience forged through years of living with another person, the sacrifices made for children and family, and the fidelity tested through suffering can all deepen his capacity to love and serve the people of God.

In either case, then, the deepest meaning of celibacy is discovered not simply in what has been surrendered, but in what is being given.

At the heart of every Christian vocation is self-gift. Jesus tells us, “He who loses his life for my sake will find it (Mt 10:39).” This is the great paradox at the center of the Gospel: we discover ourselves not by grasping our lives more tightly, but by giving them away in love. The Second Vatican Council expresses this beautifully when it teaches that the human person “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself (Gaudium et Spes, 24).”

For the deacon, this takes on a particular sacramental significance. Through ordination, his life is permanently ordered toward service. He is configured to Christ, who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45; cf. CCC, 1570).” That last phrase is essential: “to give his life.”

Diaconal ministry, therefore, can never be reduced simply to performing acts of service. We proclaim the Gospel, assist at the altar, baptize, witness marriages, accompany the grieving, visit the sick, serve the poor, and carry Christ into places of human need. But beneath all these ministries lies something deeper. Before service is something the deacon does, service is something he becomes. His life itself is being made into a gift.

Seen in this light, celibacy possesses a distinctly diaconal character. It creates within the deacon an availability that isn’t merely a matter of scheduling. It is an availability of the heart. His time, affection, energy, prayer, suffering, and solitude can become places in which he gives himself more completely to Christ and His Church. But this kind of celibacy cannot be lived merely through determination.

Celibacy without communion can become isolation. Celibacy understood only as an obligation can become a burden reluctantly carried. Celibacy lived as communion with Christ, however, can become freedom—a widening of the heart so that there is room within it for the needs, wounds, joys, and hopes of God’s people. This is why the interior life is indispensable.

A deacon cannot simply remain busy enough to avoid loneliness. Nor can ministry substitute for intimacy with Christ. Activity, even holy activity, cannot fill the place in the human heart that belongs to God alone. The celibate heart must continually return to the One for whom it has ultimately been given.

This is particularly important for the widowed deacon. Grief itself can become part of his offering. The empty chair, the quiet house, the memories awakened unexpectedly by a photograph or familiar place—these aren’t obstacles to his vocation. Brought into prayer, they can become places where love is purified and offered anew.

What was once expressed uniquely through the communion of marriage can now open into another form of availability. The heart that learned fidelity through loving one woman is not asked to become less loving. It is invited to allow that fidelity to deepen its communion with Christ and its capacity to serve His people.

Whether celibacy was embraced before ordination or received through the painful passage of widowhood, its deepest invitation is therefore the same: to allow Christ to gather the whole of our lives into His own self-giving love. Perhaps this is where celibacy and the diaconate meet most profoundly.

The deacon stands sacramentally before the Church as a servant. Celibacy asks him to let that service penetrate even more deeply into the sanctuary of his own heart. It asks him to hold nothing back—not because what he has surrendered is unimportant, but precisely because love makes the gift costly.

In the end, celibacy isn't principally about what the deacon can no longer have. It is about whom he is becoming. It is the gradual opening of an undivided heart to Christ the Servant.

And there, in the quiet communion between the servant and his Lord, the deacon discovers again the mystery spoken at the beginning of every vocation: the more completely we give ourselves away in love, the more completely we become who God created us to be. With Christ the Servant, the celibate deacon learns to make of his whole life a simple prayer: I am yours. Take everything I am, everything I have loved, everything I have lost, and everything that still lies before me—and let it all become a gift.

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