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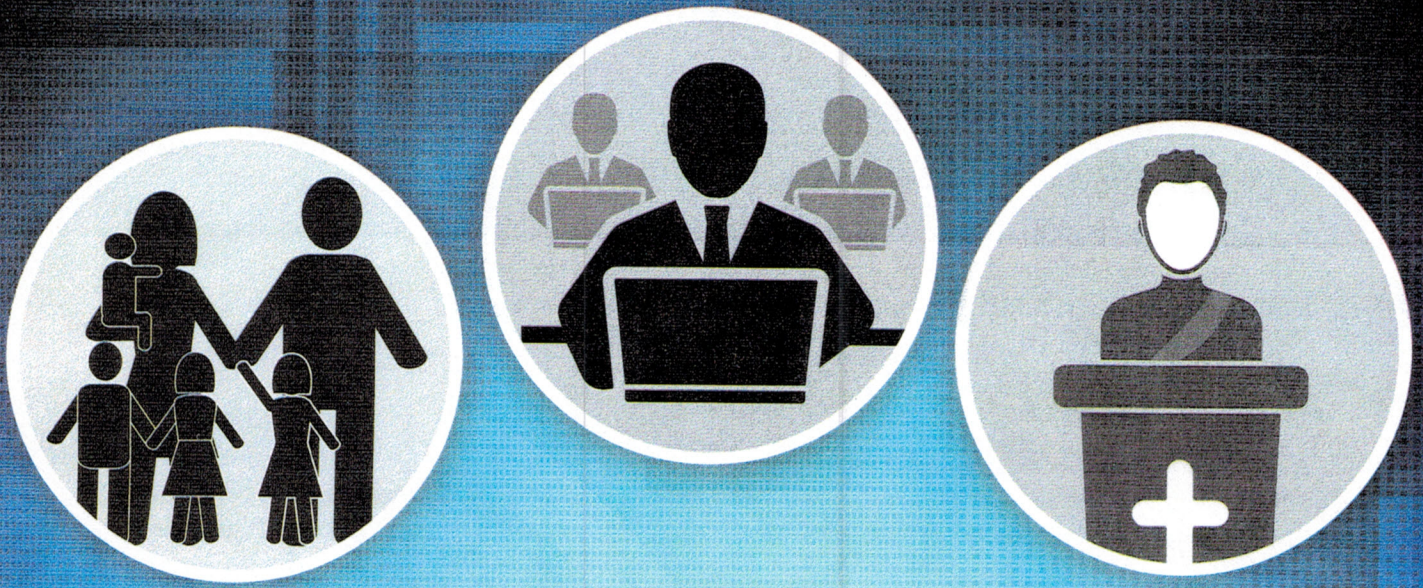

FINDING BALANCE

Being rooted in Christ helps to navigate challenges of life as a deacon

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Merciful Like the Father

A deacon's key role in the domestic Church is to love like Christ

By Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers

Divine mercy is the Father's merciful love — a love that becomes visible in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Those who seek and find mercy in the Lord Jesus are experiencing God's own divine mercy and love through Christ's words and actions, by his death on the cross and in his resurrection. Mercy, then, in the person of Jesus, is love's response to evil and suffering both in the universal Church and in the family, the Church of the home.

Jesus teaches that "whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:26-28).

In his book "The Sacrament of Service: Understanding Diaconal Spirituality" (Alt Publishing Company, 2000),

Martin and Margaret Wojtulewicz pray with their children Mateusz, Magda and Jasiu at their home in Crystal Lake, Ill. Karen Callaway/Katolik

Father William T. Donovan wrote: "By virtue of sacramental ordination, the deacon acts in the name of the whole Church and of Christ, and raises the meaning of service to an efficacious sign of grace. ... The deacon is not someone who performs sacramental signs; the deacon is a sacramental sign of Christ the Servant. ... In living out this commitment in such a public, consecrated and permanent way, the deacon stands forth as a sacramental witness that the kingdom of God, made visible in Jesus Christ, has arrived." The deacon, therefore, as the icon of Christ the Servant, also serves as an icon of mercy and the linchpin of the New Evangelization in the family.

The deacon must be the catalyst for conversion and healing in the family by being the hands and heart of God's mercy.

Role as a Father

The deacon is the head of the domestic Church precisely because he is the principal servant of his family. A deacon's role as husband and father necessarily means that he must sacrifice everything for the sake of his wife, children, the Church and the culture. Living diaconal fatherhood by the example of Christ crucified is what separates boys from men, what separates the men who are merely daddies from the real men who are truly fathers. Just as Christ emptied himself in *kenosis* (self-sacrifice) for the sake of helpless sinners, so the deacon — whose lifestyle sacramentalizes this reality for the sake of the whole Church — is called to find his true self by emptying himself and taking on the needs of the family as its chief servant.

The evangelizing witness of the deacon is rooted in sacramental marriage through which he strives to sanctify his family. The Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons explains it this way: "The Sacrament of Matrimony ... is a gift from God and should be a source of nourishment for the spiritual life of those deacons who are married. ... In marriage, love becomes an interpersonal giving of self, a mutual fidelity, a source of new life, a support in times of joy and sorrow: In short, love becomes service. ... The married deacon must use it as a stimulus of his *diaconia* in the Church" (No. 61). The deacon, as a grace-filled sign of God's presence through a life of service, becomes the bridge of the Father's evangelizing mercy, connecting God's infinite, compassionate love to authentic healing in the family.

How does the deacon do this? By exercising generous and selfless responsibility for all human life from the moment of conception until natural death. By taking a more active role in — and making a more serious commitment to — his children's education and prayer life. By working hard to balance family, work and ministry so that this inherent tension is never the cause of division within the family, but instead promotes and provides for its security and unity. Finally, and most importantly, by being a living witness and example to his children of what it means to live and act as a man of God, showing his children firsthand what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and how that relationship is lived out daily by loving the truth, goodness and beauty of the Catholic faith.

Extending Mercy

The family also is the place where,

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With his children or grandchildren, a deacon should be a reflection of God's love in the home. Shutterstock

sadly, hearts can be closed to God's love because of hurt and resentment from the past. The deacon must recognize that most people have been hurt in some way by someone we love — especially other family members — and all too often they remain bound and oppressed by the resulting negative emotions and feelings. We cannot simply forget when someone hurts us deeply, but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and transforms the hurt into a prayer for those who harmed us.

The deacon must be the catalyst for conversion and healing in the family by being the hands and heart of God's mercy by lovingly directing family members toward the merciful embrace of Christ in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Families ask God for forgiveness so that, with clean hearts and steadfast spirits, they can be free to engage in the difficult task of forgiving other members, which may be difficult but not impossible, as "for God all things are possible" (Mt 19:26).

Forgiveness was so essential to the mission of Christ that when the apostles asked Jesus how to pray, he gave them the Our Father, in which we ask God to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Jesus knows the human heart, and when our hearts are angry and bitter, when we harbor deep resentment, even though it might be justified, there is a part of us that is imprisoned by hate — a hate that can diminish or even block being open to forgiveness from others and receiving forgiveness from God. The evangelizing ministry of the deacon helps families to recognize the very strong and direct link between God's forgiving us and our forgiving others.

Finding Forgiveness

The truth is that families cannot begin the process of healing until they face this Goliath in their lives. If they do not, the pain and resentment will remain in their hearts, making their lives miserable and familial relationships difficult or even impossible. The deacon, as minister of the Good News, must help family members to understand that, in order to truly heal, two things must happen. First, there must be unconditional forgiveness toward the person who hurt us. Second, we must ask for pardon and forgiveness from the person who hurt us. In this way, family members open the graves of our hearts and rise to new life in Christ. Working in and through the deacon, Jesus will let the fire of his merciful love burn away everything that turns the family's hearts away from him, which will allow each member of the family to become a vehicle of mercy to others.

When the deacon extends mercy through his ministry of evangelization, families become both recipients and providers of God's mercy in a wonderful exchange of life-giving communion and intimacy. When families encounter the merciful God in this way, the paralyzing grip of sin will give way to the peace of blessed assurance. When families have the courage to forgive, the fire of the Spirit will heal them. Through the sacrifice and service of the deacon, may families always choose to be the face of Jesus who, through the spirit of forgiveness, will lead us from sorrow to joy, from despair to hope and from death to everlasting life. **DD**

DEACON HAROLD BURKE-SIVERS, M.T.S., is an internationally renowned speaker, author and preacher. He is the author of "Behold the Man: A Catholic Vision of Male Spirituality" (Ignatius Press, $17.95).

'LIVING EXAMPLE' OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

"The deacon and his wife must be a living example of the fidelity and indissolubility in Christian marriage before a world in dire need of such signs. ... They strengthen the family not only of the Church community but the whole of society. ... They show how the obligations of family, work and ministry can be harmonized in the service of the Church's mission."

— Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin,
at the 2018 National Diaconate Congress in New Orleans