

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 school principals in the Catholic education system. This has provided a wonderful opportunity to explore with future Catholic leaders how they, as lay Catholics, can contribute to the sanctification and transformation of the world by infusing Catholic values into their homes, communities, and schools. We read and discuss key sections of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Letter,

United States. Formation programs were created in dioceses across the country and, as we know, significant growth occurred in the number of permanent deacons.

#### 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 dioceses 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<sup>1</sup> and 1996<sup>2</sup> 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

## 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 diaconate 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 *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* 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.

The Church in the U.S. was swift to respond to the restoration of the permanent diaconate and received permission from the Holy See in 1968 for its institution in the

*Octogesima Adveniens*, as well as homilies by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. A careful examination of these documents provides future Catholic school leaders with powerful insights on integrating their faith into all aspects of their lives.

Many of my fellow deacons involved with sacramental preparation programs, who have experienced rigorous theological preparation including the historical development of each of the sacraments, have reported that this preparation has been invaluable in assisting them in catechizing the faithful, preparing those involved in RCIA programs, and in dialogues with people of other religious faiths. One deacon reported he felt sufficiently confident to use the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* as part of an RCIA session dealing with ecumenism and the Church's call to respect others and their religious beliefs.

Other deacons involved with marriage preparation have used documents such as Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *On the Role of the Christian Family in the*

*Modern World (Familiaris Consortio)*, the *Theology of the Body*, and the section on "Marriage and the Family" from the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* in their meetings with engaged couples. Deacons have found that their own study of these documents during their formation has been particularly helpful for both engaged couples and married couples on the covenant of marriage and the family as the "domestic church."

Because most deacons are married, support families, and hold secular jobs, they have an opportunity to infuse a Christian spirit into the world directly or through their influence with the laity. This requires a keen understanding of the papal encyclicals on human work and labor, the documents of Vatican II and the teachings of the U.S. bishops. A solid grasp of the theology of work can help deacons 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 diaconate 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. †

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<sup>1</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A National Study of the Permanent Diaconate in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1981), 48-52.

<sup>2</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A National Study on the Permanent Diaconate of the Catholic Church in the United States 1994-1995* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1996), 11-19.

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