

The Joy of Being a
DEACON



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Introduction

YOU will show me the path to life; you will fill me with joy in your presence and everlasting delights at your right hand” (Ps 16:11).

It is said that some books have hearts and souls in their message and production. In this book on joy I hope to reveal the heart and soul of the deacon and his life as servant-leader as well as one of love and joy. These first two gifts of the Holy Spirit are joined together in our ministry. We can't have one without the other.

When Emilie Cerar of the Catholic Book Publishing Corp., invited me to write this book about the joy in the diaconate I was both delighted and fully aware of the need to present a realistic portrayal of the deacon's life. It gave me the opportunity to publicly proclaim in print what we, as deacons, have always known and experienced but may not have always expressed. We really do find genuine joy as servants and leaders as we minister to others. In communicating this message of love and joy I committed my heart and soul to the task because I believe so intensely in the role of the diaconate and the imperative to proclaim the “Good News” with enthusiasm.

This book on joy is not a text on “How to Be a Deacon.” It is about joy, love, and the lifetime commitment of all permanent deacons, married, single, widowed and retired, who experience the normal difficulties in life but possess that special spiritual joy and love as they minister as servant-leaders in their communi-

ties. Those retired deacons who “have borne the heat of the day,” as well as those aging veterans who are “rounding third and headed for home,” will discover their inner joy of service renewed as they peruse these pages.

The message in this book is also directed to those men considering enlisting in the permanent diaconate. They will discover an extensive description of the deacon’s life with its struggles, obligations, and achievements, but above all, the inner peace, joy, and rewards which the typical deacon experiences in his day-to-day ministry. The deacon candidate will join a growing army of committed deacons and servants. As of 2014 CARA (Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate) reports there are 42,104 permanent deacons worldwide; 17,104 in the United States and another 2,018 in various stages of preparation. May their tribe increase!

No one has a monopoly on spiritual joy and certainly the Clergy and Religious do not have exclusive rights to this gift of the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis, in his encyclical “The Joy of the Gospel,” (*Evangelii Gaudium*) writes, “No one is excluded from joy brought by the Lord.” All then who read this book can learn how to possess joy in their own lives. I do focus, however, on the special opportunities deacons are given to develop joy in their various ministries. I also identify the methods to cultivate that special joy as well as the dangers that may destroy it.

Spiritual joy is distinctly different from the conventional concept of happiness. Happiness depends on what happens in our lives, as well as those circumstances, people, and events over which we often have

little or no control. It is fleeting and usually short term in nature. Real joy, however, is that constant, abiding, and personal relationship with God that we experience when we do His will as loving servants. This joy may often be expressed in various outward ways through our enthusiastic demeanor, laughter, humor, and cheerful attitude. To be joyful does not mean we become clowns, buffoons, or comedians. But we still can be identified as “Fools for Christ.”

St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:10 “We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak but you are strong.” Paul does not say we are foolish because we follow Christ’s teachings, but we may appear so and be ridiculed by non-believers. St. Ignatius of Loyola adds laughter to Paul’s narrative when he tells his followers, “Out of gratitude and love then, we should desire to be recounted as fools, laugh and grow strong.”

You will discover in this book the many ways in which the deacon derives joy in his life and ministry. But there is one source, that above all, is paramount and it is the main message of this book. It is the deep and abiding relationship with God and the love of the Holy Eucharist. The Real Presence is not only the “Source and Summit” of our faith but the most powerful source of spiritual grace and joy.

“It is a fount of joy, which enables us to receive everything from the hand of God and contemplate His presence in everything and everyone” (Pope Francis, Address to the 66th Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, May 14, 2014).

Chapter 1

HOW HUMOR AND LAUGHTER ARE EXPRESSIONS OF JOY



“A cheerful heart is good medicine but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.” *Prov 17:22*

Do deacons experience enough genuine joy, humor, and laughter in their ministry? This question may seem needless to most of us. To others it may appear frivolous. But I take humor in ministry very seriously. Joy must play an important role in our ministry or we are missing out on a major part of our vocation.

I think most of us would agree that when we use humor judiciously, we improve our relations with all whom we serve. Many saints, theologians, and spiritual writers throughout the centuries have asserted that the God-given gifts of laughter and humor are essential to a healthy spiritual existence. Humor is also a healing agent, helping us gain humility and see the truth in ourselves.

What the Saints Say about Humor

Saint Philip Neri (1515-1595), founder of the Oratory Order, who could be called the Patron Saint of humor, began his morning prayer, “A joke a day and I’m on my way, with no fear of tomorrow.” He was known for his evangelical simplicity and joyous service to God. His joyful attitude did more to attract people to Christ than any other talent. While I am not suggesting we take our diaconal duties less seriously, we should recall that our joyful demeanor reaffirms our commitment to Christ’s teachings and communicates to others how we rejoice in the “Good News.” Ours is not a morose and gloomy religion, but a triumphant one. I love Saint Teresa of Avila’s comment, “From somber devotions and sour-faced saints, good Lord deliver us.”

Surprisingly, St. Thomas Aquinas, a Doctor of the Church, wrote, “It is requisite for the relaxation of the mind that we make use, from time to time, of playful deeds and jokes.” And later he wrote, “no one can live without joy.”

In the Middle Ages, St. Bernard, Abbot of the Cistercian Monastery in Clairvaux, France, and founder of 163 monasteries, ordered that a special session called “Jucunda,” meaning humor hour, also known as “playful devotions” be scheduled as part of monastic routine. He realized that all prayer and no play make monks dull fellows. St. John Chrysostom,

the Golden Mouth, announced that, “Laughter has been implanted in our soul that the soul may sometimes be refreshed.”

What Theologians and Spiritual Writers Say about Joy and Laughter

“Humor is the prelude to faith and laughter is the beginning of prayer.” *Reinhold Niebuhr, Theologian*

Normally we consider theologians to be austere, serious individuals, preoccupied with the systematic and rational study of religion and spirituality. Humor, generally, is not their forte. I remember attending an annual retreat conducted by the dean of the theology department at a major seminary. We expected several days of dull, boring, theological dissertations. Instead, his eyes glowed with joy and excitement as he opened the “good news” of Sacred Scripture.

Theologian Karl Barth elevated the dignity of laughter when he wrote, “Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.” Soren Kierkegaard followed up when he proclaimed, “Humor is intrinsic to Christianity.” Reinhold Niebuhr adds, “Laughter is the beginning of prayer.” Martin Luther concludes, “You have as much laughter as you have faith.” He humorously adds, “If you are not allowed to laugh in heaven I don’t want to go there.”