

Diaconate beginnings: a reflection on being part of the first class

The following is one perspective on the diaconal journey in our archdiocese. Last month, Deacon Tom Lang, director of the Archdiocese of Dubuque's diaconate, started the series of articles to update readers and share the gratitude of the diaconate community to the people of the archdiocese. Several other views will be submitted during this 40th anniversary this year.

By Maureen Oates
Special to The Witness

In 1975, for the first time, applications were accepted for the permanent diaconate in the Archdioceses of Dubuque. Father Bill McLaughlin (a Catholic priest from the Archdiocese of Dubuque, deceased 1993) visited St. Patrick Parish in Cedar Falls, and introduced Mike, my husband, deceased 2009, and me to this possibility. We pondered and prayed about this blessing. We applied, were interviewed, took some tests, and were accepted as aspirants to begin diaconal formation in the spring of 1976. Mike and I, along with 15 other men and their wives, and one single man, started our two and a half year journey to become the first class of permanent deacons in the Archdiocese of Dubuque.

Both Mike and I were raised by active Catholic parents and received a Catholic education in New England. Mike and I met in college and were each active in our growing faith and preparation for our careers in education. We married in 1963. Basing our family life in a faith filled environment was very important for both of us. After the births of our two children, and Mike's doctorate degree in Washington, D.C., we moved to Cedar Falls in 1967 to begin his teaching career at UNI.

We were proud to be a part of the diaconate family. The formation team encouraged us to set our priorities, which became our family, Mike's career, and service to the church and others. Our children (then 11 and 10) were especially delighted as they accompanied us to diaconal celebrations such as admission to

Celebrating 40 years The permanent diaconate begins



On May 12, 1975, Archbishop James J. Byrne appointed Msgr. Paul Steimel as director of the permanent diaconate program. A cohort of 15 men was soon formed, resulting in their ordination to the permanent diaconate on Nov. 5, 1978. Sixteen more classes have been ordained over the past 40 years.

candidacy, and institutions of lector and acolyte. At deacon community picnics, Archbishop James Byrne, (seventh archbishop of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, deceased 1996) was often with us, and he thanked our children for loaning their parents to serve in the archdiocese.

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Our formal education had been pre-Vatican II, and we were pleased to be continuing our foundational formation in post-Vatican II studies. We formed friendships with others who shared our priorities, and actively participated in all of the opportunities this experience provided. During these classes we learned about philosophy, theology, participating in the sacraments of baptism and marriage, serving at the altar during Mass and other liturgical rites, and serving our fellow human beings in many different ways with care and compassion. Mike was ordained a permanent deacon with the other men of our class on November 5, 1978.

Mike's ministry included continuing diaconal education, as well as actively working with Cedar Falls' St. Vincent de Paul Society. He also served two terms on the Iowa Catholic Conference. Mike was a talented and gifted communicator, both personally and professionally. This was especially noted in the many homilies he gave at our parish, St. Patrick Parish, Cedar Falls. Mike's gifts were also used when he accepted invitations to give homilies (in French) when teaching in France.

Mike and I were both involved with the sponsor couple program in our parish. In addition, we worked with Marriage Encounter and Marriage Retorno weekends locally and nationally. We were chosen, along with others, to represent our archdiocesan deacon community in Detroit when Pope John Paul II met with an auditorium full of permanent deacons from all over the U.S.

For many years, I served on the Permanent Diaconate Formation Board to guide deacon candidates through their formation journey. As such, my ministry involved interviews with these candidates, teaching human relationship skills classes during their formation process, and enlarging my world through friendships with the faculty and members of the deacon family. I am very pleased and proud to have such a long and meaningful experience with the diaconal formation process. I have great regard for the education and experience they receive, which became a

part of my life. Most of all it was a privilege and honor to make this special journey as a married couple with Mike as my partner.

My life has been blessed and abundantly filled with grace, as a growing child with great parents, as an adult with Mike's love and trust, as a parent of our two capable, caring children and their growing families, as well as our large circle of friends who mentor and affirm us. Participating in the deacon family has been a phenomenal contributor to my ability to continually find encouragement to become a better person each day.

Being aware of those around us who are in need was a constant process that helped Mike and me to be more capable servants. We worked to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Our goal was to contribute our treasure as well as time, gifts and energy to efforts helping others rise above what was concerning them. Of course, we always wanted to walk on water, and we frequently had to be rescued from drowning. We made the effort to be a bit more aware tomorrow than we had been today. We felt the diaconate supported us to pursue these goals.

Through the memories of Mike and how he challenged and affirmed me throughout our 50 years of courtship and marriage, I aspire to continue pursuing these goals. My children and their families have been sources of interesting insights and open communication to keep me healthy and capable to live independently with their love and support. We are grateful for Mike's contributions to our growth and ever-present love for us, as well as his 31 years of service to the archdiocese as a permanent deacon.

Along with our friend's response to our need for their sustenance, their examples of courtesy, kindness and thoughtfulness keep on nurturing us as companions on our journey. Blessings to all in the Archdiocese of Dubuque who have called us to serve beside them. I am grateful for my 50 years in northeast Iowa and my continued association with the deacon community. Please join us in our 40th anniversary celebration. Thank you.



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