

BROTHERS AND SISTERS TO US

Supportive Outreach to the Diaconal Community

**Permanent Diaconate Office
Diocese of Erie, Pennsylvania**

Introduction

The *Brothers and Sisters to Us* program is a supportive ministry to the deacon community of the Diocese of Erie. It is meant to offer supportive presence to single and married deacons ordained four or more years and for their families. Essentially it is a ministry of caring presence. Church ministers need encouragement, affirmation and personal communication to allow for growth in ministry.

Brothers and Sisters to Us is an extension of the *Continuum* and *Mentoring Newly Ordained Deacons* programs. The three programs together form a continuum of care and support that runs through formation - to early ministry - and beyond.

Mission Statement

Brothers and Sisters to Us provides personal presence and support to single and married deacons and their families. Among other things the support envisioned includes affirmation, careful listening, opportunities to share, discuss and yes, to dream, simply put, prayerful and human interaction that will assist the deacon family to mirror the face and make real the love of Christ to those whom they serve.

Bothers and Sisters to Us is the Bishop's way of saying "I care." It is a way for him to reach out to those who are some of his closest collaborators in ministry.

Who Are Brothers and Sisters to Us?

Brothers and Sisters to Us is a single deacon or married deacon couple appointed by the Bishop charged with the privilege to visit by request or regularly, by appointment, each deacon and his family.

About the Program

A vibrant diaconal ministry seeks to integrate, among other things, three interrelated components, namely, the marital/celibate, the ministerial and the pastoral.

1. The Marital Component

a. The Married Deacon

The National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States speaks of the importance of the Sacrament of Matrimony by stating –

“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. When lived in faith, this family service is for the rest of the faithful an example of the love of Christ. The married deacon must use it as a stimulus of his diakonia in the Church.”¹

Married deacons have as their primary source of support the loving presence of their wives and family. By their love for each other, the deacon couple is called to mirror the face of Christ and to be Christ for others. *“No one has ever seen God,”* the author of 1 John writes, *“yet if we love one another, God dwells in us and his love is brought to perfection in us.”* (1 John 4: 12)

Support of the sacrament of marriage is a focus of *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. It will encourage couples to nourish their marital relationship through retreats, seminars and days of reflection centered on marriage and the family.

Although not a counseling program, *Brothers and Sisters* may serve to assist the couple seeking direction and/or advice about their relationship. The wisdom of addressing marital problems through the assistance of competent professionals is recommended in the Directory:

“Some deacons, because of a strong desire to function in their diaconal ministries, may dismiss valid areas of concern and conflict with their spouse and family. This dismissal must be avoided. A married deacon and his family must be instructed on how to request help early when they experience a need.”²

¹ *“National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States”*. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Washington, D.C. 2005. p. 116.

² *Ibid.* #244. p. 115.

b. The Celibate Deacon

The celibate deacon also mirrors Christ. He is ordained to the service of Christ and the Church and is called to have his life consecrated to this work with an undivided heart. The celibate deacon takes as his spouse the Church. *Brothers and Sisters to Us* is meant to assist him in deepening and sustaining a meaningful relationship with Christ and his spouse, the Church. The Directory states:

“If the celibate deacon gives up one kind of family, he gains another. In Christ, the people he serves become mother, brother, and sister. In this way, celibacy as a sign and motive of pastoral charity takes flesh.”³

2. The Ministerial Component

The deacon’s ministry is an invitation to a life of service. It is a source of grace for him and for the Church.

Service to the body of Christ is fulfilling and life-giving. It can also be a source of anxiety and stress to the deacon and the family.

Brothers and Sisters to Us is meant to stimulate growth in ministry. Continuing education programs, retreats and days of reflection will be encouraged as necessary adjuncts for human and spiritual growth. Opportunities for time together with the larger deacon community will also be encouraged. The formation of support groups, reflection groups, book study groups and self-guided study programs will be encouraged.⁴ These groups and programs will be comprised of deacons and their families living in the same geographical area. *Brothers and Sisters to Us* will initiate their formation with a view to their becoming self-sufficient.

When the Deacon Community gathers in faith, friendship and fellowship, it is there that we find Christ who first called us and who continues his call to us. We need one another!

The Directory states:

“Ongoing formation must include and harmonize all dimensions of the life and ministry of the deacon. Thus ... it should be complete, systematic and personalized in its diverse aspects whether human, spiritual, intellectual or pastoral. The primary source for post-ordination formation is the ministry itself.”⁵

³ Ibid. #71. p. 35.

⁴ Ibid. #256. p. 120.

⁵ Ibid. #239. p. 115.

3. The Pastoral Component

Diaconal service is at the will of the Bishop and by his appointment and pastoral plan for ministry in the diocese. *Brothers and Sisters to Us* will listen and counsel regarding present and future ministry needs and concerns, if requested. The center of diaconal ministry is Jesus Christ. The Directory speaks to this precisely:

“Pastoral formation constantly encourages the deacon ‘to perfect the effectiveness of his ministry of making the love and service of Christ present in the Church and in society without distinction, especially the poor and to those most in need. Indeed, it is from the pastoral love of Christ that the ministry of deacons draws its model and inspiration.’”⁶

⁶ *Ibid.* #249. p. 117.