

Serving the Suffering Church: Mobilizing the Power of the Holy Spirit Working through Deacons in a Pandemic

By: Deacon Michael Oles

Every deacon knows that Pope Francis has urged us, the Body of Christ, to go out to the peripheries. In our periodic meetings, I am amazed at the innumerable ways the Holy Spirit has inspired deacons in this call to service. Each of us ministers to the People of God in ways that we hope have the greatest impact in our own parishes and communities.

Up until a few weeks ago, most of us had our own routine, and we didn't need to rely on one another so much. We knew the Masses in which we would assist, the pre-baptism or RCIA classes, the hospital calls and how we would balance family, job and ministry. I had my list loaded into my iPhone: simple, straightforward, routine. That was "B.C." — "before corona."

Today, it's all different. Suddenly, lives across the world are in a state of upheaval: markets crashing, businesses and schools closed, Masses and devotions suspended or delivered online. Everything we took for granted about our daily routine has been thrown into a state of uncertainty and anxiety, sometimes even panic.

Being a deacon doesn't protect us from life's headwinds, and COVID-19 doesn't play favorites. As deacons, our lives have been upended, just like everyone else's. Perhaps your job doesn't exist anymore; or your children, parents or extended family are all at home now; or perhaps you and your spouse are wondering what's coming next or how you will make ends meet.

In the midst of all this, we have this indelible seal, the seal of our ordination to the diaconate. We are members of the clergy with profound connections to our pastor and our bishop. And, perhaps even more important, in this, possibly the craziest time in our lives, is our association with one another.

Fellow deacons, in the Catholic Church there is a profound connection, rooted in Scripture — a Scripture as relevant in contemporary society as it was 1,500 years ago — despite the passage of time. As such, I'd like to share with you my personal experiences in the hopes of strengthening our connections and support to and for each other.

In the January/February 2020 issue of *The Deacon*, an article was published about Off the Streets, a ministry in which I serve that helps the homeless get into permanent housing. I wrote the article at the very peak of the economy in the United States. Even then, hundreds of thousands of people were either homeless or on the very edge of becoming homeless, but we had a very clear vision on how to proceed; we have 10 years of experience with five chapters of Off the Streets in Pennsylvania, Connecticut and California, and we are within days of launching our sixth chapter in the state of Washington. Our mission was and is: Help the homeless with Off the Streets, one person at a time.

And now, as of March 2020, a new reality has set in. With the novel coronavirus pandemic, the government is stepping in at all levels to try to stave off catastrophe. As a part of that effort, millions upon millions of dollars are supposedly being earmarked to get the homeless, one of the most at-risk groups, off the streets and into some type of housing, staying evictions and more.

With the government stepping in, what should Off the Streets be doing in this period? Will our work be getting in the way of the emergency efforts? Are we still even needed? There can be little doubt that in every ministry in which we are immersed, the same question arises. What should we deacons be doing in this unsettled period?

For many of us, the roadblocks are everywhere. In the case of Off the Streets, our mission statement is to provide a security deposit and living needs — furniture, bedding, kitchen supplies — to those homeless who have a way to continue paying rent going forward. So far, we have helped more than 4,000 homeless men, women and children into affordable housing. But if the government is going to provide housing, putting the homeless in hotels or other locations, does Off the Streets still serve a purpose?

It should come as no surprise that during this crisis and after, there will be a great need for Off the Streets. After all, even when the economy was at its peak just

a few weeks ago, the homeless needed organizations as a part of the puzzle that can lead the homeless into permanent housing. Rather than wait, fret and assume that the government will really solve this problem alone, this ministry will continue the way it always has: by boosting self-sufficiency and support for homeless men and women to achieve their dream of stable, affordable housing.

It's times like these when we can hit the pause button for a moment and reflect on what really motivates us. For me, looking deep within, I see it is this ministry. And ministries don't die in times of catastrophe, they thrive despite catastrophe.

For most people, the pillars that their lives have been built upon — work, church, family — are facing instabilities. And while deacons have not been spared, we have the tools needed to survive such a time: prayer, reflection and, most importantly, seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit. We ask him, beg him, "How can I serve the People of God in my ministry while adjusting to this new reality?"

We then quietly wait for the response. It may take minutes, or days, even months, but we will get a response. And we seize the moment to minister to that person, the image of Christ himself in our very midst. As I pause in my personal life's rhythms where everything has been thrown into turmoil on a global level, I am inspired to report that our fledgling chapter of Off the Streets in Wenatchee Valley, Washington, was formed at the very beginning of the coronavirus epidemic and has completed all the necessary steps to start the sixth chapter — despite the turmoil. Imagine! I asked Deacon Tom Richtsmeier about starting something that takes immense courage during times of such upheaval. He said: "While wearing a deacon's stole means I've been ordained, if I am not doing charity, how am I going to have the credentials to preach Jesus' Good News? Fortunately, life soon offered up several experiences, including starting a homeless shelter, and that bloomed into many other projects."

Ask and it shall be given, the Holy Spirit in action. Last, I asked my pastor, Father Dan Powell, for his thoughts regarding what deacons might do considering the coronavirus outbreak.

He said: "A deacon is called to service. Sometimes where we are to serve and how is clear-cut, easy to see and easy to implement. Other times, it is not so easy.

This is one of those times. So, what can a deacon do? Stay open to the working of the Holy Spirit, and when one feels called to act, seize the opportunity even if it seems like an impossible task."

Maybe the time has come for us deacons to unite in ways we hadn't before. The deacon could serve as a conduit, to join our (virtual) hands in prayer and share our collective gifts of the Holy Spirit, our joys, our sorrows, our successes, our failures — perhaps in some online forum where we can not only make our way through this period of upheaval but offer to one another and to those we are in contact with practical ways to help one another get through this pandemic while serving the People of God in our ministries. In the process, we bring ourselves and others closer to almighty God. We trust in God. We trust in the Holy Spirit. We trust in ourselves and the strength of our collective diaconate. Trust in the power of one, one, one.

DEACON MICHAEL OLES is a deacon at St. John Neumann Parish in the Diocese of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Pam Lazos and Alice Rowan contributed to this post.

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otsnewchapter@gmail.com