

Permanent Catholic Deacons: Balancing Work, Family Life, and Ministry

William L. Smith, Georgia Southern University

Abstract

Permanent Catholic deacons and their wives from a southern mission diocese participated in personal semi-structured interviews regarding balance in their lives. Role imbalance has been a problem for some of these deacons. Sixty percent of the deacons indicated they were successful in putting their marriages, family responsibilities, and work lives ahead of their ministry, while forty percent were not successful. Fifty-five percent of the deacons' wives said their husbands were successful at putting their marriages, family responsibilities, and work lives ahead of their ministry, while forty-five percent said their husbands were not successful. Ninety percent of the deacons were satisfied with their marriages, family responsibilities, work lives, and ministry. Ten percent were not satisfied. All of the wives were satisfied with being a deacon's wife and with the impact the diaconate has had on their marriages and families. The adult children of the deacons were surveyed online and eighty-three percent of them indicated their fathers were successful in balancing the various roles and obligations related to their marriages, family responsibilities, work lives, and ministry. The deacons and their wives noted that their experience with the permanent diaconate has strengthened their marriages and spirituality.

Key Words: permanent Catholic deacons, married clergy, role balance

The primary purpose of this project was to study a small group of permanent deacons who serve within a southern Catholic mission diocese. A mission diocese is a place where Catholics are a religious minority and often spread across a large geographic region. This research is important because it will contribute to our knowledge of how permanent deacons weave together three key areas of their lives: their professional work lives, marriage and family responsibilities, and ministerial duties. This project will be of interest to deacons across the Christian community, regardless of denomination, and to those of other faith groups and religious traditions. Unlike transitional deacons who become priests, permanent deacons

remain deacons for life and do not become priests (U.S. Catholic 2014). Permanent deacons are one of three types of clergy within the Catholic Church: deacons, priests, and bishops. Clergy are those who have been ordained for the sacred ministry and their status or state is considered different from that of the laity (“the people,” otherwise known as the faithful).

While there is a growing body of literature on the permanent diaconate, much of it is written by deacons (Cummings 2004; Ditewig 2004, 2007; Ditewig and Tkacik 2010; Ferrari 2015, 2017; McGrath 2010). There is a scarcity of social scientific literature on the permanent diaconate (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate 2018; Ferrari 2015, 2017; Ferrari and Guerrero 2017; Ferrari and Guerrero 2018; Gautier 2004; Gautier and Saunders 2014; Kobal 2004; Latcovich 1996, 2006). Ferrari (2015), Fichter (2015), and Latcovich (1996) have called for more research on various aspects of the permanent diaconate, because not only are permanent deacons understudied, but so too are their wives (Luedtke and Sneed 2018). A recent article in a major Catholic newspaper called attention to the challenges deacons face in finding a balance between their various roles and obligations (Fenelon 2016). While permanent deacons reported extremely high levels of satisfaction with the diaconate, thirty-one percent admitted it was difficult to balance their home life and ministry (Wiggins 2018).

The role of the permanent diaconate in the Catholic Church drew significant international attention in 2016 when Pope Francis announced that a papal commission would be established to study whether women should be considered for the permanent diaconate (Schlumpf 2016; Tillman 2018; Wooden 2016; Zagano 2000, 2016; Zauzmer 2016). Women are currently not eligible for ordination to the permanent diaconate or priesthood. Seventy-five percent of U.S. Catholics support the ordination of women as permanent deacons (D’Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013). While the issue of female deacons is not the focus of this study, the attention given to it highlights the significance of the permanent diaconate. As a result of the lengthy and steady decline of vocations to the priesthood, there are fewer priests serving in Catholic parishes today than in the 1970s. Thus, according to McKnight, “the temptation is strong to use permanent deacons simply as priest stand-ins or ‘mini-priests.’ Instead, we should be looking at what is unique and necessary to the charisms of deacons as ‘ordained to the ministry, not the priesthood’” (2018:253).

The permanent diaconate was reactivated by the Second Vatican Council and it was officially reinstated in the United States in 1968 by Pope Paul VI (Gautier 2018). Since then there has been a steady increase in the number of men ordained as permanent deacons. There were 18,792 permanent deacons in the United States in 2016 (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate 2017). Zech et al. concluded that “if current trends continue, the total number of permanent deacons is likely to surpass the total number of diocesan priests in the next few years” (2017:29). Even though permanent deacons provide invaluable services to the dioceses and communities where they work and reside, their lives and ministry are often not fully recognized and frequently misunderstood (Ladcovich 2006). For those permanent deacons who

are married, and most of them are, their wives usually play a significant role in their ministry to the extent the deacons and their wives are often referred to as “diaconate couples” (Latcovich 2006; Fichter 1992).

Meehan noted that, in reference to deacons’ wives, “There are very few official requirements of the wife but many unwritten expectations” (2006:232). Based on a study conducted in the Diocese of Cleveland, “Being a deacon’s wife was perceived by the majority of the respondents to be an informal ministry unto itself” (Meehan 2006:237). The deacons’ wives who Wallace (2003) studied indicated they did not have role models to look to for direction, but instead created their own role scripts, including informal ministries. Meehan concluded that deacons’ wives found their “participation in the diaconate ministry to be a truly satisfying and enriching experience” (2006:243). Gray (2018) found deacons’ wives were very supportive of their husbands’ vocation and ministry, although there were also challenges to being a deacon’s wife, including being a ‘deacon widow’ which refers to sitting by themselves at Mass. Regarding deacons’ children, Wallace noted they “tended to be positive about their experiences in the parish, and proud of their father’s new role” (2003:138).

Deacons can also be found in other Christian denominations, but their status (whether considered clergy or laity) and duties vary widely. They too, like other clergy or those lay men and women who perform the same duties, often encountered similar life experiences (Darling, McWey, and Hill 2006; Hileman 2008; Lee 1999). Darling, McWey, and Hill (2006) found that congregational expectations created stress for clergy and their families, as did the issue of time management related to balancing work and family obligations. Interestingly, they concluded that “the quality of life was similar for clergy families with and without children in the home” (Darling, McWey, and Hill 2006:459). Lee (1999) noted congregational intrusiveness negatively impacted clergy attitudes toward ministry and family wellbeing. Hileman (2008) concluded that emotional dissonance was frequently an occupational hazard of ministry and often reinforced clergy families’ resistance to counseling. Latcovich found the diaconate couples he studied in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland experienced some of the same negative stressors as Protestant clergy, but they “did not see the diaconate as their major stressor. Rather, they identified communication with each other, their lack of time for one another, and conflict in their personal schedules as the primary stressors” (2006:218). Ferrari and Guerrero (2017) concluded Catholic deacons were committed to their religious beliefs despite the stress from balancing their work lives, marriage and family responsibilities, and ministerial duties.

Theory

The micro-level theoretical approach of role balance theory is used here to study deacons and their families (Neuman 1997). “Role balance is the tendency to become fully engaged in the performance of every role in one’s total role system, to approach every typical

role and role partner with an attitude of attentiveness and care” (Marks and MacDermid 1996:421). Greater role balance is associated with lower role strain and higher levels of role ease, well-being, and self-esteem (Marks and MacDermid 1996).

Methods

Guided by the symbolic interactionist perspective, this is a qualitative, interpretive, and exploratory study. I used purposive sampling because I was more interested in gaining a deeper understanding of a select group of deacons than in generalizing my findings to all deacons (Neuman 1997). I was interested in understanding the lived experiences of a small number of permanent deacons, especially how they made sense of and integrated their work lives, families and marriages, and ministry. I focused on how the deacons described in their own words these areas of their lives since they were an integral part of their identity. I conducted personal semi-structured interviews with 10 members from the same diaconate ordination class who had recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of their ordination to the permanent diaconate. I am acquainted with one of the deacons from this ordination class, and he assisted me in recruiting his fellow deacons for this project. Twenty-two men were ordained permanent deacons in this class. Several of them are no longer deacons, several are inactive, and several no longer reside in the diocese. The remaining deacons from this ordination class were not interested in participating in this study. Currently there are 85 permanent deacons (11 of them ordained in May 2018), nearly the same number as there are active priests in this diocese. All of the deacons interviewed for this project are in good standing with the diocese. Nine of them are assigned to parishes within the diocese and one deacon is affiliated with a nonprofit organization he helped to create.

The interviews were conducted at the deacons’ homes or parish offices scattered throughout the diocese, and in one case an interview was conducted in my university office. The interviews lasted approximately ninety minutes each and were digitally recorded. The first part of the interview was devoted to gathering basic demographic and biographic information, while the second part of the interview addressed the issues of each deacon’s work life, marriage and family, and ministry. This project also included the deacons’ wives and their adult children because it was important to inquire about their thoughts regarding how the permanent diaconate impacted their family life. The wives of nine deacons participated in a separate forty-five minute personal semi-structured interview conducted in their homes or at their husband’s parish office. In one case, an interview was conducted in my university office. One deacon’s wife declined to be interviewed for this project. Interviews for the deacons and their wives were conducted from May through August 2018. Nine of the ten deacons have children and nineteen adult children were surveyed via Qualtrics during September 2018. The

survey consisted of mostly open-ended questions. Seven adult children from five of the nine deacon families with children completed the survey.

The major research question of this project was: How successful are permanent deacons in integrating their work lives, marriage and family responsibilities, and ministerial duties? In addition to questions assessing and probing these three key areas, the deacons were asked questions about their religious identity, position on the ordination of women as deacons, and whether they would have considered the priesthood if celibacy was not a requirement. The deacons' wives were asked questions about the impact of the permanent diaconate on their family, their religious identity, and whether they were supportive of women as deacons. The adult children of permanent deacons were asked to share their experiences of being the child of a deacon, and to assess how successful their fathers have been in balancing their various roles and obligations.

Selected Demographic Characteristics of Participants

One deacon was in his 50s, seven were in their 60s, and two were in their 70s. Among their wives, one was in her 40s and eight were in their 60s. Among the deacons' adult children, one was in their 20s, five were in their 30s, and one was in their 40s. Five of the deacons' adult children were married and two were single and never married. All of the deacons were white, but they were from a variety of ethnic ancestries including Slovak, German, Polish, Irish, Hungarian, English, French, Lithuanian, Czech, and Puerto Rican. Eight of the wives were white and one was mixed race. The deacons' wives were also from a variety of ethnic ancestries including Polish, Hungarian, Czech, Scottish, English, French, Italian, Irish, Creole, French Canadian, Swedish, Austrian, German, Maltese, and black. One deacon did not have children, but the remaining nine had 23 children, 22 of whom were 18 years of age or older. Eight of the deacons had earned an M.A. in Pastoral Studies. Two deacons did not have bachelor degrees, but they completed the coursework for an M.A. in Pastoral Studies anyway, which was part of the diaconate formation requirements. They were not awarded the degree. Eight of the deacons had bachelor degrees, five had master degrees, and two had doctoral degrees. Six of the deacons' wives had bachelor degrees, three had master degrees, one had a specialist degree, two had doctoral degrees, and one had some college, while another wife was a licensed practical nurse. All of the deacons' adult children had earned a bachelor's degree and four had earned a graduate/professional degree. Seven of the ten deacons were retired or semi-retired at the time of the interviews. They worked in the following occupations: one was an administrator, three had served in the military, two were in the medical field, two were educators, one was in sales, one in agriculture, and one was in information technology. Five of the deacons' wives were retired or semi-retired at the time of the interviews. Five of them were educators, two were in the medical field, one was in information technology, two were involved with small businesses, and one was in the legal field.

Findings

Deacons

The deacons were asked to reflect on how being a permanent deacon had impacted their lives, and not surprisingly they had a variety of responses. Most of them acknowledged that the five-year formation period prior to ordination was stressful, in some cases very stressful. Three of them took short leaves of absence from the formation program due to work conflicts. The majority of the deacons noted they are now more patient, sensitive, introspective, and thankful than they were prior to becoming deacons. They stated they were more at peace with themselves and others, more religious, more spiritual, and stronger in their Catholic faith than ever before, and several saw themselves as being better people. Most of them either stated directly or implied it in their responses that the last fifteen years (five in formation and ten as clergy) had been a transformative experience in their lives. Most of them felt being a deacon had strengthened their marriages and made them better husbands and fathers. One deacon responded that being a deacon had no negative impact on his life and there had been no changes in his marriage since it was strong and good from the beginning.

The majority admitted that at times it had been difficult to achieve a balance between their various roles (work/family life/ministry), especially their work roles. Those who were retired said it became noticeably easier to do so once they retired. Several of them mentioned they had neglected their wives and children; they had not been there for their families when they were needed. Several noted they devoted too much time to their ministry and that their wives often had to remind them of their marital and family responsibilities. It should be noted that, during their formation period, the deacons were reminded numerous times that they should always put their family life and work ahead of their ministry. One deacon noted, "It is almost impossible not to put the diaconate ahead of family life and work." Another deacon said he never looks at how much time he spends on his ministry. The majority of deacons found it challenging to achieve some sense of balance between their various roles and obligations. They frequently revealed that their roles and obligations did not always fit together smoothly. One deacon stated, "Sometimes being a deacon is difficult...I feel torn and guilty when I have to say no I do not have time to do something for the church." This quotation reflects how painful it can be at times, especially since this deacon readily admitted that "I have gone too far overboard with my ministry because of my passion for it."

The deacons were asked how successful they were in putting their marriages and family responsibilities, along with work, ahead of their ministry. Six of them said they were successful, but several hesitated and reported that most of the time they were successful, but occasionally they were not. Four of them said they were not successful in putting their marriages and family responsibilities, along with work, ahead of their ministry. One of these deacons said this

situation created “subtle resentment on his wife’s part.” Another deacon replied he earned “A complete zero, an F” for not putting his marriage ahead of his ministry. They were also asked how satisfied they were with their marriages, work lives, and ministry. Nine of them stated they were satisfied with their marriages, work lives, and ministry, although three of these deacons were not as satisfied with their work lives. Another deacon was not satisfied with any of these roles.

The deacons reported they had generally very positive and rewarding relationships with fellow deacons, priests, pastors, and parishioners, although four of the deacons had poor relationships at one time or another with a pastor. One deacon had on several occasions told priests that they were racist and that they needed to get better educated about diversity in the church and society. Most of the deacons commented that some priests have problems with deacons particularly acknowledging them as fellow clergy and permitting them to perform their canonical duties. One deacon said, “Some priests hate deacons and see them as priest wannabes.” Another deacon stated, “Some priests are afraid of deacons because some deacons work harder than some of the priests.”

Nine of the deacons believed they and their wives considered themselves to be diaconal/diaconate couples. One deacon did not believe he and his wife were a diaconal/diaconate couple primarily because she is not very involved in church activities due to other commitments. Two of the deacons who considered themselves and their wives to be diaconal/diaconate couples mentioned their wives were not very involved in church activities at the moment, but they still considered themselves to be a diaconal/diaconate couple. Another deacon who considered him and his wife a diaconal/diaconate couple stated, “Sometimes my wife does not want it to be so because at times she is tired of always doing church things.” Two deacons noted they and their wives were not certain about the definition of a diaconal/diaconate couple. They had questions about what were the expectations of diaconal/diaconate couples, and commented the deacon’s wife’s role was not clearly defined. Nine of the deacons said their pastor and the priests (if there were any) in the parish considered them and their wives diaconal/diaconate couples. One deacon stated he thought his pastor, the other priests in the parish, and the parishioners did not consider him and his wife a diaconal/diaconate couple. Five deacons reported many of their fellow parishioners did not know they and their wives were diaconal/diaconate couples.

In response to the question of whether knowing what you know now about the diaconate, would you have done anything differently, most of the deacons said they would not have done anything differently. One deacon mentioned he would have liked becoming a deacon earlier than he did because he loves the ministry so much and has found it very fulfilling.

Five of the deacons would have pursued a call to priestly ministry if celibacy had not been an impediment. Five of the deacons were not interested in becoming priests. Five of the

deacons were supportive of women being ordained as permanent deacons and five were not supportive. Several of the deacons who were not supportive of opening the permanent diaconate to women stated they were not supportive of women's ordination to the permanent diaconate for theological reasons. If women were ordained permanent deacons, several deacons noted, it would call into question the next step which is could women eventually be ordained to the priesthood. One deacon responded, "This would be a mistake and cause a lot of confusion since the priesthood began with the Apostles (all males)." Another deacon noted, "The reality of Holy Orders would be changed if women were ordained. A woman cannot act in place of Christ (persona Christi)." The deacons were asked to identify themselves as either a traditional, moderate, or liberal Catholic. Most of them did not hesitate in responding. Several of them wanted further clarification on the meaning of the labels. In those cases I read a short passage from Starks' (2013) research where he briefly defined those terms. Five of the deacons identified themselves as traditional Catholics, three as moderate Catholics, and none as liberal Catholics. Two of the deacons said they preferred not to be labeled and found none of them applicable. They considered themselves just Catholics. Two of the deacons who identified themselves as traditional Catholics admitted they were leaning somewhat toward being moderate, while two who identified themselves as moderate Catholics were leaning somewhat toward being liberal.

Deacons' Wives

All of the deacons' wives were supportive of their husband's ministry as a deacon. Five of the wives identified themselves as 'deacon widows,' 'pew widows,' or 'Mass widows' since they no longer sit together with their husbands at Mass. This was not a trivial point for any of them. Some of the wives are still adjusting to this change years later. Several of the wives do not see themselves as having much of a role as the deacon's wife. One wife stated, "I am not a deaconess!" Another wife feared she would be seen as a go-between for parishioners and her husband, but fortunately that has not materialized, while another wife felt that she is seen as the deacon's wife and no longer as her own person.

When asked what impact the permanent diaconate has had on their husbands and families, most said it has had a very positive impact on both. Several mentioned it has not negatively impacted their husbands nor their families. The wives commented that their marriages have grown stronger and they are closer than ever before with their husbands. The wives also mentioned that they have grown spiritually, along with their husbands. One wife said the permanent diaconate has humanized her husband; he is now more social and more patient with others. Several wives noted there have been occasions where their husbands' ministry has negatively impacted or caused strain in their lives. For example, it was not uncommon for wives to mention their husbands were sometimes not available for family functions and activities, and

some noted they spent too much time at church and with ministry related duties. One wife noted that her husband was “consumed with his ministry.”

The wives acknowledged it was certainly a challenge, possibly the hardest challenge, for their husbands to get some sense of balance or to get the pieces (marriage/family responsibilities, work, and ministry) of their lives to fit together. Their husbands are sometimes not successful at accomplishing this important task. One wife noted, “Life is messy sometimes” and minutes later she laughed and said, “They have a healthy mess.” Several wives noted their husbands struggled with time management, and it was difficult for them to compartmentalize their duties and responsibilities. Several wives said these challenges have not been successfully resolved. One wife noted she and her husband have always been very active in the church and they have never faced any challenges that could not be overcome.

Five of the wives stated their husbands were successful at putting their marriages and family responsibilities along with work ahead of their ministry, although one of these wives noted her husband was not as successful putting his work ahead of his ministry. Four of the wives said their husbands were not successful, although two of them acknowledged that their husbands were getting better at it. When asked how satisfied they were with being a deacon’s wife and with the impact the diaconate has had on their marriages and families, all nine of them reported they were satisfied.

All of the deacons’ wives stated they had generally positive and very good relationships with pastors, priests, deacons, and parishioners. Three of the wives acknowledged their husbands had poor relationships at one time or another with a particular pastor. One wife reported she attended another Catholic church for a year due to how poorly her husband was treated by a former pastor.

All of the deacons’ wives who were interviewed believed they and their husbands were diaconal/diaconate couples. Three wives said they were not very involved in church activities due to other commitments. All of the wives reported they and their husbands were considered diaconal/diaconate couples by their pastor and other priests in the parish, if there were any. Four of the wives mentioned that many parishioners did not know they were deacons’ wives. One wife stated, “Most parishioners do not know I am the deacon’s wife. We were not introduced to the parish as a diaconal/diaconate couple.”

In response to a question about whether they would have done anything differently knowing what they know now about the diaconate, most of them said they would not have done anything differently. One wife noted she wished her husband would have pursued the diaconate earlier than he did because it has been such a very fulfilling experience for both of them.

Six of the wives indicated they would be supportive of their husbands pursuing a call to the priestly ministry if it was not for celibacy being an impediment. One of them said she would not be supportive and two were uncertain. Several wives commented they had mixed feelings

about supporting their husbands if they wanted to be priests. These wives were concerned about the amount of time priests spend ministering to parishioners. Most priests spend more time dealing with parishioners and parish affairs than do deacons, and these wives already sacrifice, from their point of view, enough time away from their husbands. Five of the wives were supportive of women becoming permanent deacons and four were not. None of them expressed an interest in becoming a permanent deacon if the church changed its policy allowing women to be ordained. Most of them said the major reason that they were not interested in it was they were not called to this type of vocation.

The wives were also asked to identify themselves as either traditional, moderate, or liberal Catholics. Like their husbands, most of them did not hesitate responding, although two of them asked for some clarification and I read them Starks' (2013) definitions of the three labels. Three of them said they were traditional and six identified themselves as moderates.

Deacons' Adult Children

Five of the seven deacons' adult children were in their twenties, one was in their late teens, and one was in their late thirties when their fathers were ordained permanent deacons. Six of the seven adult children mentioned they felt proud of their dads at the time of their fathers' ordination. One of adult children stated, "I really felt honor and at the same time pressure. It was not a bad feeling of pressure, just that I needed to make sure I was making my parents proud of my actions." Another adult child noted, "I didn't realize the commitment and the amount of work and formation that went into it." They were split regarding whether they were held to higher ethical and behavioral standards at the time of their fathers' ordination because they were the children of permanent deacons. None of them believed they were held to higher ethical and behavioral standards today because of their fathers' position in the church.

Only one adult child believed there have been times since their father was ordained a deacon that he did not devote enough time to deal with familial obligations. This adult child works full-time during the week and has their own family. This respondent's father and mother are very busy, especially on the weekends, with Mass and other church functions. It is difficult for them to visit each other. This respondent stated, "I have found frequent phone calls help, but it's not the same." Five of the six adult children (eighty-three percent) who responded to the question believed their fathers were successful in balancing the various roles and obligations related to his marriage, familial responsibilities, work life, and ministry. One respondent said, "I have never heard him complain about his responsibilities as a deacon. I believe that since he was called to his ministry, it brings him much joy and allows him to balance his time well." The sixth respondent had a mixed answer, "I think he does a great job at balancing all things, especially since retiring from his regular job...I think their marriage is stronger now that they are so involved in the church, but our relationship is not."

Since their fathers' ordination, two of the adult children noted their parents' marriage had not changed either negatively or positively. Two of them indicated that they noticed positive changes in their parents' marriages, and one adult child had mixed feelings about it. One adult child stated, "I do believe it has gotten much better. I feel he did not value my mother growing up as he should have. He was a very selfish person, from my point of view, and I have seen him more committed to his family since his ordination." Another respondent concluded, "Their marriage is definitely stronger and that's been cool to observe."

When asked if they had any additional comments to make regarding their experience as the child of a permanent deacon, two comments stand out among the others. One adult child said, "I think my experience may have been different if the ordination happened when I was a child, but since he was ordained when I was an adult, the overall impact in my life has been minimal. It has, however, impacted my children's lives." It should be noted that at the time of their ordination only one deacon, among those who participated in this project, had elementary school-age children. The other notable comment was "I remember dad telling me the story about how his family wanted him to become a priest when he was growing up, but dad wanted a family. He felt called to the church but wanted love and children. I think dad has been able to do all these things and I couldn't be happier for him."

Discussion

Role balance has been an issue for most of these couples at one time or another in their marriages since they became involved with the permanent diaconate program. Most of the couples have either resolved or partially mitigated the challenges of role imbalance by improving communication in their relationship. Many of the deacons noted they were currently experiencing fewer stressors in their role as deacons than they did in the first several years of their diaconates. This finding coincides with role balance theory, which states that greater role balance is aligned with less stress, lower role strain, higher levels of role ease, well-being, and self-esteem (Marks and MacDermid 1996).

One important reason for conducting this study was to gather information from not only the deacons, but also from their wives and adult children, since they have been understudied. The deacons, their wives, and adult children were asked to reflect on how successful the deacons were in putting their marriages, family responsibilities, and work lives ahead of their ministerial duties. In three families, all of the respondents (deacon, wife, and adult child) were in agreement the deacon was successful in putting his marriage, family responsibilities, and work life ahead of his ministry. In one family both the deacon and his wife noted he was successful in this endeavor, but one of their adult children was in agreement and another one was not. Two couples were in agreement that the deacon was not successful. In one couple, the deacon indicated that he was not successful while his wife said he was successful. In two

couples, the deacons noted they were successful while their wives said they were not successful. Family members in four families had different opinions on how successful the deacons were, while family members in five families had the same opinion on how successful the deacons were in putting their marriage, family responsibilities, and work lives ahead of their ministerial duties.

Several deacons noted permanent deacons should be allowed to do more things that priests do, such as administering the sacrament of the sick (anointing the sick), last rites, even possibly the sacrament of reconciliation (penance). They already assist at Mass by reading the Gospel, preaching, and distributing the Eucharist. Deacons also perform baptisms, preside at weddings and wake/funeral/burial services, direct RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) and marriage preparation programs, and work in hospital and prison ministries, among other duties.

Four of the deacons and their wives mentioned they have children who are either no longer active in the Catholic Church or who do not believe anymore. This has caused them much heartache and dismay, but they are hopeful these children will eventually return to the church. Regardless of whether their adult children return to the church or not, all of the deacons and their wives love them and maintain relationships with them and their families. Two of these deacons have baptized grandchildren from these families.

Latcovich (2006) found among the deacon couples he studied from the Diocese of Cleveland that the stressors in their marriages were most frequently linked to poor communication or the lack of it with each other, and a lack of time for one another due to conflicts in their personal schedules. The couples I interviewed said they resolved the challenges they experienced through better communication. They focused less on poor communication and more on a lack of time for one another due to conflicts in their personal schedules. Latcovich (2006) further noted the majority of deacons and their wives did not see the diaconate as their major stressor. Sixty percent of them stated the stressors were already present in their marriages prior to becoming active in the diaconate. Based on my interviews with the deacon couples, I am not able to conclude that for the majority of them the diaconate was not a major stressor in their marriages. All of the wives and most of the deacons indicated the amount of time the deacons devoted to ministerial duties did at times negatively impact their marriages and family responsibilities. The deacons revealed that it was very common for their wives to remind them of their family commitments when their wives and children felt the deacons were spending too much time with their ministerial duties. Latcovich noted, "At least seventy-five percent of the wives said that their marriage was enhanced through ordination" (2006:228). All of the wives I interviewed acknowledged their marriages were strengthened due to the diaconal experience, even though, as previously stated, their husbands' ministerial duties often negatively impacted their family life.

Luedtke and Sneed (2018) studied nine Wesleyan pastors' wives and concluded that stressors in the wives' lives outnumbered protective factors such as faith in God and their husbands' calling to the ministry. One of the stressors they identified was sacrifice of time, and how these wives struggled with "balancing home life with ministry, which puts a strain on their everyday experience" (2018:68). These wives had similar experiences as the wives interviewed for this project. For example, one of the wives in the Wesleyan study said, "People need him and he's there for them. The hardest thing is trying to figure out the balance, of not being jealous of the ministry. Trying to communicate that it's my time now rather than sharing him with everyone else." While none of the wives I interviewed said they were jealous of the ministry, most implied they were not necessarily happy with the extent the ministry dominated their husbands' lives. Luedtke and Sneed also noted the pastors' wives exhibited "an overall acceptance of their position as a supportive helpmate to their husbands" (2018:17). While none of the wives I interviewed referred to themselves specifically as a helpmate, most of them acknowledged one of their major duties as the wife of a deacon was to support him in whatever manner was needed to help him in his ministry. For example, several of the wives reviewed their husband's sermons/homilies before he delivered them, while others acted as a sounding board on a variety of issues their husbands faced in their ministry.

Conclusion

The deacons exhibited mixed results on how successful they were in integrating their work lives, marriage and family responsibilities, and ministerial duties. Role balance is a challenge, and it continued to evade some of the deacons. Nevertheless, this small group of deacons and their wives are strongly committed to the permanent diaconate. The deacons' wives are very supportive of their husbands' vocation, and they too, along with their husbands, have benefitted in many ways, especially spiritually, from this experience. Both the deacons and their wives have commented on how this experience has strengthened their marriages even though there have been times when for some it has strained their relationship. Nearly all of the deacons were satisfied with their marriages, family responsibilities, work lives, and ministry. All of the wives were satisfied with being a deacon's wife and with the impact the diaconate has had on their marriage and family. Nearly all of the adult children indicated their fathers were successful in balancing the various roles and obligations related to their marriage, family responsibilities, work lives, and ministry.

While the majority of the deacons have positive relationships with their pastors and other priests and deacons, it would be beneficial for the church and social researchers to study the issue of discontent between deacons and pastors. Wiggins found one area that deacons see that needs improvement is "the relationship between supervising priest and deacon" (2018:107). This is really not a new issue, since historically there have been cases of discontent

or poor relationships between pastors and curates/parochial vicars/assistant or associate pastors (Fichter 1965, 1968; Greeley 1986; Hall and Schneider 1973; Hoge 2002; Hoge, Schields, and Griffin 1995). The difference here is that, while deacons are clergy, they are not priests and they have unique charisms (ministries of the word, liturgy, and charity). Also, in addition to their unique charisms, most are employed in a secular position and are married with children and grandchildren. Their role in the church, while similar in many ways to a priest, is somewhat different. Deacons need to have their lived experiences understood and respected for what they are. These men are not mini-priests nor quasi-priests.

More empirical studies are needed on the impact the permanent diaconate has on parish life in the Catholic Church. For example, how successful are pastors in maximizing the talents and limited time commitment of permanent deacons? It would also be helpful if scholars would investigate to what extent parishioners understand the purpose of the permanent diaconate and the ministries of permanent deacons.

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Direct correspondence to Dr. William Smith at wmlsmith@georgiasouthern.edu