

The Church's quiet heroes

By M. Regina Cram

When Mass ended, my friend and I made our way outside, seeking shade under a huge beech tree.

"You know what bugs me?" my friend Annie complained, seemingly out of nowhere. "Why do all our clergy have to be celibate? How can they possibly understand marital problems or rebellious teenagers or job loss?" It was clear Annie had been stewing about this for some time.

"But not all clergy are celibate," I began.

"Yes, they are!" Annie interrupted. "Priests cannot be married. Everyone knows that."

"But priests aren't the only clergy in the Catholic Church," I stated. "What about deacons?"

Silence. "Um, what about deacons?" Annie asked tentatively.

"Deacons are ordained clergymen of the Catholic Church," I explained. "They can be married, and have children and grandchildren, and they usually work a secular job. A typical deacon mows the lawn and coaches his kid's soccer team."

"And they're clergy?" Annie asked, incredulous. "I mean, real clergy?"

"They sure are," I assured her. "Deacons go through seminary and are ordained for life by the bishop, just like priests. They preach and assist at Mass. They baptize babies, prepare couples for marriage, conduct wakes and other liturgies, and help the priest in caring for God's people. I think deacons are the Church's quiet heroes."

Annie was still unsure. "You know the guy up front with the sash across his robe? Is he the deacon?"

"That's him," I replied. "The sash is called a stole, and it symbolizes a deacon's vocation."

Annie looked like she was having trouble absorbing all this new information, so I continued.

"Our deacon and his wife work with a team of married couples, including us, in preparing engaged couples for Catholic marriage. Our deacon is a wonderful bridge between the engaged couples and the Church because he's a member of the clergy as well as a married man. I love it when he and his wife are on the team."

Annie was listening intently.

I continued. "My family are all converts, and it was a deacon who first helped usher us into the Catholic Church. He came to our house wearing regular clothes, and he answered our endless

questions. Our kids wanted to know if the new church would teach us more about Jesus, and whether they serve donuts after Mass. Years later, that same deacon prepared our daughter and her fiancé for marriage.

“I’ve seen deacons bring Communion to strangers, console the bereaved, laugh with teenagers, and load the moving truck for mission trips. Once I watched our deacon kneel in front of the tabernacle to pray with a child who was having nightmares. Our deacons are gems.”

“Wow, I had no idea,” Annie admitted.

As I headed home, it occurred to me that as Catholics, we have the best of both worlds: priests who are free to serve unencumbered, and deacons who have the richness of family life. God’s design is perfect.