

The State of the Diaconate Today

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1. Thanks. I would like to thank the members of the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, especially its president, Ann Marie Mecera, whom I have known for many years, for this opportunity to address this meeting on the state of the diaconate within the Orthodox Church in America.

2. Theses. I base my remarks on two sources: 1. My capacity as the Master of Divinity program director at St. Vladimir’s Seminary, and, 2. From the hard data on the state of diaconate in the OCA provided to me by Mr. Barry Migyanko, Executive Administrator at the OCA Chancery.

3. Thesis, part 1. In my role as MDiv program director, I oversee in general the program for our MDiv students and those whom we term, “special students,” which refers to seminarians in our MA program, who have received MDiv degrees from other institutions and are taking classes and participating in programs that complement their education. In this capacity, I will address the formation program of seminarians, a program that stands as a basic requirement for ordination, as an entre into the state of the diaconate. In general contour, the MDiv program at SVS is similar to the program at the other OCA seminary, St. Tikhon’s, with some differences admittedly, but similar enough so that we can talk about the one, which I know well, but assume for both. The OCA also has a well-regarded Diaconal Vocations Program, which is not a degree program of any type, but an in-house program for late-vocations. I note that men who come through this program, and those who come up through similar diocesan programs, are considered exceptions to the normal MDiv formation, and require the recommendation of the Board of Theological Education and a blessing by the Holy Synod prior to ordination.

3. MDiv Formation. In sum, the MDiv program is a professional degree, closely akin to an MSW, and intends to provide seminarians with a mix of academic and practical training, formally and informally presented. Concretely what this means is that seminarians receive a broadly conceived formation made of: 1. typical academic classes (i.e., history, biblical studies, patristics, liturgical theology, canon law), 2. practical classes (music, homiletics, liturgics), [a minimum of 90 credit hours] 3. field education (prison and hospital ministry (CPE – 400 hours), parish assignments), 4. chapel life (10-12 hours a week outside of lent, and 14-15 inside), where seminarians attend, sing, read, and serve, 5. community life (formal and informal components). Now, far from being a plug or a commercial for seminaries – and I can do this! –, I offer this the *rule* of formation, which can lead to ordained ministry, in order to sketch out a vision of *what* ordained ministry can look like, diaconal, presbyteral, or episcopal.

3. Seminary Formation. In the first place, seminary formation gives special place to the liturgical services, not only as a vocational setting, but as the place where faith is received and formed. From here, everything that we do finds both its source and its fulfillment. Concretely, this means that an ordained deacon coming from a seminary should be anchored in the faith of the Church as revealed in the vast liturgical vision that the Church provides. Our seminaries also place a high prize on theological education, *education* here meaning the something closely similar to regular academic programs with classes, exams, quizzes, papers, projects, lectures, etc. These classes expose students to the riches of primary texts – biblical, patristic, spirituality, liturgical – and challenge them to engage with the complex secondary literature. Assignments are metrics to see whether they are learning and we are teaching. Here again, another layer of what ordained ministry can look like: anchored in faith, knowledgeable of the tradition, equipped to communicate, to express, to explain this faith. Our pastoral and practical classes pass on to the students training in music, liturgics, and homiletics, all of which we know provide the real public face of ordained ministry in the Church. What has emerged over recent years at the seminaries are commitments to rigorous and hands-on pastoral formation: first in a prison, where students lead bible studies and discussions with

the prisoners, but then they themselves are confronted by their own peers who challenge or commend them for their work. Even more rigorous is our Clinical Pastoral Education where our seminarians spend hundreds of hours in clinical work, face-to-face with real people in real need, and again engage with one another in peer review. A further layer emerges for us: faithful Christians, knowledgeable of the tradition, out in the world equipped with skills and experience engaging with those in need, prisoners and the sick. All of our seminaries also like to transition the seminarians into parochial life by giving them exposure – albeit limited – to parochial life through one to three-year year parish assignments.

4. Reality. Now I am by no means suggesting that everyone who comes through the seminaries excels at every one of these things – although it is awesome when they do. What I am saying is twofold: such programs give us a broad sketch of what we can aspire to as Church and seminaries. If our deacons, priests, and bishops are not adept at these formation components, this does not negate the importance of theological education, but rather underscores it. What the Church needs more than ever is faithful leaders, formed in the faith given at the liturgy, who can engage with, who are articulate in the modern world in all its complexities by remaining faithful to the Church, but who are also trained with exposure to real situations. I note that the seminaries make no difference in formation for men or women, deacons or priests or bishop. If the order of deaconess comes out of its long slumber and were to be revived in the Church, the women who have already gone through the MDiv programs at the seminaries stand as ready testimony as to what can be accomplished.

5. Real World. Within the OCA, we have roughly 690 parishes and 28 monasteries. Serving these communities are twelve diocesan bishops, one auxiliary bishop, and eight retired bishops. There are almost 700 priests serving these communities, with over 100 retired priests occasionally coming out of retirement. As for deacons, their numbers runs upwards of 253. Of these deacons 70 have received theological education in a seminary; ten from the program of the Antiochian Archdiocese, St. Steven's; the education of 36 is unknown by the OCA Chancery, and the rest, roughly half, have gone through the Diaconal Vocations Program, or one of the Diocesan

Programs. The deacons are scattered throughout the OCA and serve cathedrals, parishes, monasteries, and the seminaries. Anecdotally, I note that some deacons do serve as administrators, choir directors, and other roles in the Church. Most, I suspect, are liturgical ministers who have other careers. Just recently in the OCA, we revised our Statute and throughout gave a particular standing to deacons to attend the All-American Councils and Diocesan Assemblies not as laity, which is how they were considered in the previous Statute, but, in recognition of the growth of the diaconate, they now come within a set category as deacons. I would say finally with regard to the state of the diaconate within the OCA, this past year we have seen a passing that is not fully perceptible by an analysis of statistics. Not so long ago, the OCA was blessed by a group of deacons who were adept at almost any service, a real Seal Team Six of the diaconate. Three of them were ordained to the holy priesthood and have taken parishes or pursued their monastic vocation more fully. One, Pdn. Gregory Hatrak, who also managed our seminary press, fell asleep in the Lord unexpectedly last summer. His diakonia in the Church will be greatly missed.

6. Conclusion. I have tried in this brief presentation to sketch out both the rule and practice, following an ancient canonical principle, of the state of the diaconate within the OCA. Admittedly, anecdotes, statistics, and seminary formation only tell part of the story. The Church as the household of God, the Church here in America, as the household of God *here* in America, has deacons who serve faithfully at the table the master has set in conjunction with the others on staff in this house. The low numbers of deacons in comparison to the number of parish would suggest there is more room for diaconal ministry. The number of fine deacons who serve having come from our well-regarded and well-run DVP, nevertheless point to me a limited function of deacons within the Church. In the end, I find myself making the plug that I said I would not make earlier: for a renewal of the diaconate, I see theological education, seminary formation, as an essential component of this renewal.