

'Grace-filled' papal meeting affirms local deacons, wives

By Lee Strong

Though their mid-September visit to Detroit was a short one, 16 permanent deacons from the Diocese of Rochester returned with enough memories to sustain them in their ministry for a long time to come.

Meeting with Pope John Paul II and approximately 2,800 other U.S. deacons Saturday, September 19, in Detroit's Ford Auditorium, the group of 32 Rochesterians — including several deacons' wives — participated in a program that included a speech by Deacon Samuel Taub, executive secretary of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate; a videotape presentation on the ministries of U.S. deacons; and an address by the pope.

"I give thanks to God for the call you have received and for your generous response. For the majority of you who are married, this response has been made possible by the love and support and collaboration of your wives," the pontiff said, receiving a burst of applause.

Discussing the event, Rochester participants repeatedly expressed a sense of affirmation in the pope's words and actions. According to Catherine Bergeron, whose husband is Deacon Al Bergeron, the pope "affirmed the role of deacons in the Church," and acknowledged the wives as a vital part of the ministry of the diaconate.

"He gave affirmation to the women — the first real affirmation we've received from the hierarchy," she said. And when the pope embraced Taub following the deacon's speech, "he was in a sense embracing the whole diaconate."

The permanent diaconate is perhaps one of the least-understood ministries in the U.S. Catholic Church. Reinstated by Pope Paul VI in 1967, the order of deacon has a long history in the Church. The apostles' ordination of the first seven deacons — Stephen,

Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas — is recounted in Acts 6:1-6, which also outlines the deacon's role as that of serving the needs of the community, assisting in preaching the Word, and instructing and baptizing converts.

According to the U.S. bishops' guidelines on the permanent diaconate, what distinguishes the deacon from the lay person is not the specific functions to which he is dedicated, but "his relationship to the Christian community that surrounds him." Most permanent deacons do not work full time for the Church, and are unpaid for their many hours of service. Many, therefore, continue to work in secular employment, which results in their being considered neither fish nor fowl by their lay and clerical counterparts.

Thus the words of John Paul II were of special significance to the deacons gathered in Detroit. "The pope reaffirmed us in our ministry, both in terms of my ministry and in terms of the Church," said Deacon Richard Lombard. "He also affirmed the roles of the wives of the deacons as people who not only support the role of the deacons, but as people who are an active part of the ministry."

"He told us that what we were doing was relevant to the work of the Church," commented Deacon Eugene Fuerst. This fact, several other deacons pointed out, is not always widely recognized or accepted.

"The diaconate is so new that people have a hard time placing it," Lombard explained. He noted that a well-known Catholic television personality described the deacons as laymen who serve as a bridge between priests and people. The pope, however, recognizes deacons as clergy "with an important role to play in the Church," explained Lombard. He added that "the fact that we met with the pope will help to focus some attention on diaconal ministry."

Pope John Paul II reminded those



Sixteen permanent deacons of the Diocese of Rochester, as well as several spouses, joined approximately 2,800 deacons from across the United States in a September 19 meeting with the pope in Detroit. Posing with Pope John Paul II are: (front row) Helen Kester; (second row) Rosa Vasquez, Shiela Kinsky, Jean Mercadel, Celia Ono, Marie Fuerst and Ferdinand Ono; (third row) Julio Vasquez, Tony Mercadel, Ronnie Zawacki and Bill Schmitz; (back row) Leo Kester, Dan Kinsky, Gene Fuerst, Stan Zawacki and Nemesio Martinez.

assembled for Saturday's meeting of their three-fold ministry: the Word, the altar, and charity. Of the three, the pontiff emphasized charity. "Today's world is not lacking opportunities for such a ministry, whether in the form of the simplest acts of charity or the most heroic witness of the radical demands of the Gospel," he said.

Before the pope spoke, he saw a film detailing the nature of diaconal ministry in the United States. The tasks taken on the by the deacons shown in the film "are the jobs

no one seems to want — taking care of the sick, the prisoners," Deacon Nemesio Martinez pointed out.

Martinez, who was fortunate enough to shake hands with the pope and to briefly converse with him in Spanish, said that at first, he was nervous about what the pontiff would say. "Deacons are sometimes made to feel that they are not part of the clergy," he said. "The pope encouraged the deacons to be a part of the Church ... together with the

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DINING AROUND THE DIOCESE

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Dining Around the Diocese

The first issue of each month, the Courier-Journal will be featuring some prime dining spots in and around the Rochester diocese. If you, or someone you know would like to have your restaurant included in our Dining Guide, call the Courier-Journal at 328-4340. Look for our Dining Guide in the upcoming months, and pay a visit to the restaurant of your choice, and enjoy a pleasant evening of "Dining Around the Diocese."