

Vocations

Deacons answer call to service

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

As the church deals with a growing priest shortage, some Catholics have already begun to discuss the possibility of permanent deacons taking up some of the slack. They might, some suggest, increasingly take on liturgical functions they already do — such as preaching, witnessing marriages and performing baptisms.

But for now, Deacon Greg Kiley is right where he wants to be.

In jail.

Since 1989, he has been the Catholic chaplain at Cayuga Correctional Facility in Moravia.

As a permanent deacon, he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Part of what feels right about this is I kind of see the origin of the deacons as helping the people who fell through the cracks," observed Deacon Kiley, who was ordained in 1986.

"If anyone is marginalized," he added, "it's the people who are incarcerated."

Deacon Angelo Coccia deals with the potentially incarcerated in his job as a court aide in the bail office of Rochester City Court — thus he can't work with prisoners in his official ministry.

But he, too, has found a way to help people who are marginalized.

As the coordinator of Rochester's St. Francis House — a ministry he created after becoming a deacon in 1988 — he helps to secure and distribute furniture, utensils and clothes for anyone from refugees to Catholic school students.

"We try to help anyone we can in any line we can," he observed, adding, "those who are in need are not necessarily just those who fall into the poverty level."

Deacons Kiley and Coccia are just two of the Diocese of Rochester's 84 active permanent deacons (as opposed to transitional deacons, who are en route to becoming priests).

In reaching out to people on the fringe, they are fulfilling the role set out for deacons by the diocese and the church as a whole.

"It's basically a ministry of service" explained Deacon Tom Cass, the diocese' director of deacon personnel, and a deacon himself since 1992. "Consequently, that service can be directed toward those who are kind of on the margin of our society."

Permanent deacons serve in hospitals, migrant camps, prisons, hospices, soup kitchens, shelters and nursing homes — in both paid positions, like Deacon Kiley's, or through volunteer efforts like Deacon Coccia's.

Service has been the focus of the diaconal ministry since the order was restored in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, observed Deacon Steve Graff, director of deacon formation.

"There was always a sense that the deacon should be active in service," observed Deacon Graff, ordained in 1987.

However, some Catholics are looking forward to some of the approximately 12,000 deacons ordained in the United States becoming more active in the liturgical aspects of their ministry.

In fact, Robert Kennedy, an associate professor of management and director for the Institute for Christian Social Thought and Management at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., directly raised that notion in a Sept. 13, 1997, article in *America*.

Kennedy acknowledged in the article that permanent deacons "are not simply, or even primarily, replacements for priests," but deacons do offer at least a partial solution to some problems the church is facing due to fewer active priests.

"The most significant, and often overlooked, substitutes, ... have been permanent deacons," he wrote in, "Will we ever have enough priests?"

"While the number of priests has dropped since its peak in 1966, the number of clergy (priests and deacons) is now higher," he continued. "In other words, the decline in the number of priests has been partly offset by the ordination of over 12,000 permanent deacons."

At the same time, Kennedy observed, "some confusion often exists about what (permanent deacons') proper roles might be and how best they may contribute to the work of pastoral ministry."

Deacon Cass acknowledged that the role of the deacons in the midst of a priest shortage has been a topic of discussion.

"When I went to the deacon directors meeting back in April (1997), we talked about what I call this 'tension,' about being drawn into more and more liturgical and sacramental ministries because of the decrease (in the number) of priests, as well as maintaining a presence and being an advocate for those on the margin," he said.

He added that while such tension may

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Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Above, Deacon Angelo Coccia speaks through a delivery chute to Sister Barbara Kuhn, SSJ, director of Rochester's St. Peter and Paul Kitchen and Price-Less Clothing Closet, 681 Brown St., after delivering donated clothing Jan. 6. Right, Deacon Coccia unloads donated clothing from his vehicle.



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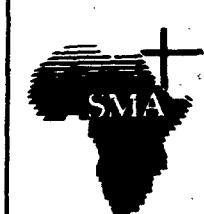
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