

**THE DEACON: ORDAINED FOR THE PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD,
LITURGY AND CHARITY**

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*If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. Psalm 139:9*

For the last fifteen years of my involvement in the Port Ministry, I have seen many changes that have taken place. The Modernization of the Shipping Industry, the Security Issues, the Technological, Economic and Social Development and many more have affected the way we could reach out and welcome, but most of all to provide pastoral care to the people of the Sea. But the more there are barriers, restrictions and limitations to the ministry, a growing and increasing demands, in the time, quality and talents of our caregivers is existent.

We all know, that the seafarers who come and visit our Ports have chosen to sacrifice being with their families or with those whom they love, in order to make a living. Most of them, driven by loneliness and boredom, are in need of homely atmosphere, a change of scenery, encouragement and spiritual guidance from those they meet at the Port.

Most of the seafarers regain their physical strength before they leave, and will, without doubt live through another journey...but not all of them find solace and strength as they try to find some semblance of affirmation of the things they live for – and this, I realized, is what we attempt to provide as Chaplains, and more so as Deacons (as Servants) of this ministry. As Deacons we are called to be true servants – someone who cares, -someone who listens, - someone who gets involved. That is visibly, tangibly and clearly the living image of God.

What I will be sharing with you represent parts of my personal journey with God - a journey that relates to my response to God's call to be a Permanent Deacon, a journey about my response to the call to the Port Ministry, a journey that testifies to God's everlasting faithfulness, mercy and love, and a journey that I hope could bring enlightenment to the seafarers and to others involved in this seafaring ministry.

You did not choose me. I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures, and so the Father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name. John 15:16

When Delia and I decided to migrate to Canada, we spent a lot of time praying whether it was the right decision. But, barely ten days after we filed our papers, we received confirmation on the approval of our application to become Permanent Residents of Canada. There was a lot of fear and anxiety that began to creep on us. Having no family, no relatives nor friends in Canada, it was difficult trying to imagine what our life will be away from our homeland.

When we arrived in Canada, we managed to get to rent a townhouse, which was owned by a Filipino couple. After a couple of weeks of knowing this couple, the husband gave me a folder that has an application form as well as materials about the Diaconate Program. The husband said, "I asked for

an application form thinking this is my vocation, but I realized after meeting you that this form is not for me, but it is for you.” Honestly I did not know what I was getting myself into but after a whole lot of prayers I filed my application.

Less than a year old in Canada, and there I was, engaging the formation process of the Diaconate Program. While adjusting to the culture, the climate and the language I started to learn in the program how to be sensitive to people’s feelings and the whole gamut of listening skills. I began to learn even more about the Catholic faith, the scriptures as well as my personal relationship with God. And it was not an easy transition...

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 2 Corinthians 12:9

While on the fourth year of formation at St. Augustine Seminary I was asked by the local ordinary to explore the possibility of being involved in the Port Ministry because of the strong need to have a “Filipino” Catholic presence in the Port of Toronto. I began asking myself, “is this where the Lord is sending me?” I have always thought of ministering to the elderly, or perhaps in the hospital, where I thought my gifts and talents would be put to good use. But with the Port Ministry, there are so many things I do not know, and I am not sure what I am going to do there. Another thing, I will be working with ministers of other Christian Faith, which I am not sure I am comfortable in doing. But in faith, I took the assignment and immediately called up the Anglican Chaplain if I could work with him at the local Port.

I was warmly welcomed and immediately I was assigned to administer the Seafarer’s Clubhouse on Monday evenings. At first, I thought it was great to have that evening, so I could structure the rest of the week for all my other schedules. But then it turned out that ship arrivals are so irregular...and ever since I started, it seemed like ships prefer to arrive between Tuesdays to Fridays and they leave on Sundays. It was not really giving me much of a chance to meet the seafarers.

And then, one Monday night, there was this very tall Ukrainian man named Boris who came into the Mission House along with a few others. Boris mentioned that he left his family behind five months ago just so that he could support them financially. Five months ago as well, a son was born to him...a son that he had yet to meet. I have never seen a man so heartbroken. He was so much in need of **someone to listen to him... someone to assure him that he will be fine** and that **he was not alone in his struggles**. We had a wonderful conversation for almost an hour. Before he left, he thanked me for the time and comforting words. He asked me to pray for him and his family.

On another occasion, a sailor named Antonio told me that he has been at sea for the last three years... He missed his family terribly, but he could not leave because he was not paid his wages for the last six months. He said his family is so angry and thought he was just telling a lie. He asked me if I could help him contact his family to explain the delay of his remittance because he cannot collect his money from the ship agent. I was able to contact the ship agent and, upon presenting the sailor’s situation, the agent immediately paid off all his outstanding salary. He was jumping with joy and immediately called his family to mention the good news...I talked with his wife who just kept thanking me for all the help I extended. I myself was surprised how that small service I extended had tremendous impact on the lives of Antonio’s family.

There was another time, when I saw a seafarer who looked so desperate. And when I approached him, he just bowled over and cried – telling me that he just received the news that his brother just died, but he just cannot leave because of his contract. He cried on my shoulder for almost thirty minutes...I just sat there beside him likewise with tears in my eyes. I gathered his crew members together, and **I did a prayer service** as a memorial to the brother who died.

During each of these encounters, I realized that by being at the Port, God would use me to remind each seafarer of His presence and His enduring love.

*As scripture says, "Whoever believes in me, streams of life-giving water shall pour out from his heart."
John 7:38*

When I was ordained in June 1994, I was assigned to do Ministry work at the Port of Toronto and my liturgical base at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish. The first thing I did was to develop a team of volunteers to help me at the Port. As deacons, we were taught that **we cannot do everything**, but we can **be the catalyst** to get everything done.

Delia changed her work schedule to that of a four-day week so that she could be with me at the Port every Monday. And **each time that I preach in my Parish and talked about my ministry work**, I got an enormous response of support from the Parishioners. It allowed me to build a group of 10 dedicated couples together with my whole family and the church choir as my Pastoral Team.

Our team was getting good responses from the seafarers whom I noticed would easily open up and discuss their family problems knowing that they were able to tell us about what's on their minds and are comfortable enough to ask us to help them find God in their lives.

Throughout all this time, my efforts were concentrated on the Port of Toronto alone, and it was not until the NAMMA (North American Maritime Ministry Association) Conference held in Toronto in 1995 that I learned and understood that this same important work is also being carried out worldwide. I remember how wonderful it felt to know that every little thing we did, each gesture of kindness, each moment that we reached out to share God's love to the seafarers, was in fact being reinforced and repeated elsewhere in Canada and the world.

Part of my continuing education as a Deacon was to participate a lot more on various conferences where I learned more insights and ideas on how to improve our services at the Port of Toronto. Consultations and sharing of experiences with other Chaplains became a source of strength and understanding about the ministry.

The XXth AOS-World Congress held in Davao City, Philippines, in 1997, was an eye opener for me. There I saw and met 300 participants from 54 countries all actively involved in the Port Ministry. The speeches, the homilies, the workshops and discussions were so meaningful, because it allowed us to reflect on various ways in which we could be more fruitful in facilitating pastoral care to seafarers both at sea and in ports.

Much is required from the person to whom much is given; much more is required from the person to whom much more is given. Luke 12:48

As you all know, the scope of my responsibility has increased through the years. After serving as Port Chaplain for the Port of Toronto for 10 years, I accepted the responsibility as National Director for the Apostleship of the Sea Canada. I believe this again was another calling from God. The role opened a great new horizon for ministry work... because this time I was not only caring for the seafarers but also for those who care for the seafarers.

I remember a basic teaching at the seminary - that Deacons are not parish-centered and their focus is to be "extra-parochial" – they are suppose to look at the systematic and structural needs of the entire community, region and diocese. And also, that Deacons, are not ordained to be parish ministers but to be diocesan ministers.

I realized that in some dioceses, even some with large port activities, the Apostleship of the Sea was considered to be only a peripheral concern and lowest among the priorities. There was an urgent need to make every local church aware of the existence of such ministry...because for the ministry to grow, we need the help and support of the local community.

And so, I launched a quarterly magazine called 'The Morning Star.' The magazine bears witness to God's presence and movement in the Maritime Ministry in Canada. The magazine's name was inspired by no other than the Blessed Virgin, Stella Maris, one who brought Christ into the world by answering God's call. Over the years, chaplains, volunteers and seafarers have contributed to the magazine... bearing witness and giving inspiration to seafarers and fellow chaplains across the seas and continents.

Advancement in technology proved to be very helpful. I could regular communicate and have dialogues with chaplains and their staff. And so a web-site was created and launched to make everyone aware of what is happening in every Port of Canada. Emphasis, were made on the acts of charity which each Port provides.

Another thing, to improve the quality of our service, I conducted Pastoral Care training and workshop for volunteers during my port visits. In these workshops, and in my conversations with chaplains, I constantly emphasized the need to have a strong pastoral presence in their Port of responsibility, and the need to develop a good ecumenical relationship with Chaplains of other Christian Faith.

I know from the tremendous response and support of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) that our efforts are being seen and are getting heard.

And since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. How true it is that a servant is not greater than the master. Nor are messengers more important than the one who sends them. John 13:13-16

My story, in its entirety, is not extraordinary. There had been many who were called to migrate to a foreign land, called to a vocation and called to do an important ministry work. Nevertheless, as I reflected on my journey, I still cannot help but be overwhelmed seeing the hands of God present and at work in every stage of my life – molding me, and using me to bring His message of love, faithfulness and hope especially to the seafarers.

For me, every part of my life and ministry – my marriage, my family life, my work, my relationship with other people contributes to the gentle power of a Deacon's Christ-like image. To be blessed with the opportunity to minister to the seafarers, allowed me to grow and develop my deacon heart; it allowed me to proclaim the word of God and bring the light of Christ to the people of the Sea; the same way, it allowed me to see the face of Christ in every seafarer that I serve.

My prayer is that, although the time spent with each seafarer is limited, they would leave knowing in their hearts that Christ is and has always been with them in their journey... and perhaps they too can share this same comforting knowledge of God's presence and love with their co-workers and friends.

God bless you!