



## *Becoming a Deacon*

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*A Personal Journey from Lay Life to the Clergy*



*The Vow of Obedience*

## INTRODUCTION

Before I get into the real substance of this book, I want to put it into context. It is January, 2007. I was ordained a permanent deacon on June 3, 2006. The reason for writing this book at this time is because the experience is so fresh and the reality of the change of life so real. I think it is in the best interest of all those discerning the Diaconate to have the benefit of the experience of someone who has just lived the “process”. For me the

process lasted seven years. However the spiritual growth, maturity and development will never end. Well, not until the Lord calls me home.

## THE CALL

At this time in my life, I was a church going man. I went to church every Sunday and regularly read the Bible. I guess I was a little more spiritual than most. But this day, this Sunday was different. As I sat in church before mass, my eyes moved toward the brown rafters of the ceiling. The sunlight had come through the upper windows and formed a cross on the wall above the sanctuary.

As I sat with my wife Darlene and our three children, I continued to focus on the cross formed by the sunlight. Suddenly I heard a voice. I looked around, but it was obvious that no one else had heard the voice. “Jodi” I heard again. I soon realized that somehow that it was the voice of God.

You must understand that I had never heard the voice of God nor have I heard it again. Despite this fact, somehow I knew it was “Him”. It was God, speaking to me. I was very uncomfortable and tried to ignore the voice thinking it must be my imagination. But, there it was again, “Jodi”. Then I heard something that startled me. “Jodi, why have you been ignoring me?” I shook my head trying to clear my mind thinking that I was imagining this voice, but I wasn’t. It was the voice of the Lord. “Jodi, why have you been ignoring me? I have been trying to get your attention for five years!” Wow! Five years. I was stunned. I sat there motionless knowing that something was happening, but not knowing exactly what was occurring.

Then, I heard the voice say, “I want you to go through the process of becoming a deacon.” He didn’t say, “Become a deacon”, or “I want you to be a deacon”. No, he invited me into the process. But what was this “process”? I had no idea.

I did not hear the voice again. Mass started and we worshipped. Then we all went home. As Darlene and I were changing out of our Sunday clothes, I told her the story. At first, I was nervous because I had never heard God actually speak to me in words, in a voice. I did not know how she would react. To my surprise, Darlene believed me immediately and advised me to go directly to our pastor.

### **WHAT IS THIS “PROCESS”?**

Prior to that day, the day that God called me, I had really “gotten into” reading the Bible regularly. I had been attending a Christian Business Man’s luncheon every week and one of the speakers had inspired me to read the Bible from cover to cover. I had also been watching various Christian television evangelists discuss the Bible. So, I was not unaware of the word, nor was I unaware of the Diaconate.

For some time I had felt something inside—what I might call a sort of curiosity concerning the Diaconate. I thought it was interesting that deacons could preach. I also remembered that a Deacon had baptized our daughter in 1984. I had not; however felt a call from God to inquire any deeper. I came to realize that I knew very little about the Diaconate. That was about to change.

I called our pastor, Father Mike Collins for an appointment. He asked about the purpose and, when I told him, he directed me to the deacon in charge of the program for our diocese. I called and tried to make an appointment. So began a very frustrating process that probably would have run off someone without a true call. The deacon was going away for a conference for three weeks so I had to wait until his return for an appointment. Upon his return our schedules conflicted and it was actually nearly five weeks from that Sunday morning until we had our first meeting. The time delay did not shake the actual way that I felt as I heard that voice talking to me. As time passed, I became more and more confident and convinced that God had spoken to me in words.

Before I tell you about the interview or meeting, I must say that I have come to know this deacon and he is nothing like what I encountered that first day. This indicates to me even more that the Holy Spirit was at work. He is a kind, warm and truly a God fearing warrior for the Lord. But this day, he and I, well, let’s say we did not hit it off.

### **THE INTERVIEW**

The interview began with the perfunctory questions concerning my Catholic background. It proceeded to the questions regarding my marriage. He asked if I or my wife had ever been divorced. He wanted to know all about our marriage. I was somewhat perplexed. My wife and I have a good Catholic marriage and that is all that we know. I have come to see that these questions are very important because men are called to the diaconate from many various backgrounds.



*The Litany of Saints*

The interview continued with many inquiries into my faith life. The questions were very thorough, very deep and probing. In general, I had no problem with them. If there is some impediment to ordination, the earlier it is discovered the better. Everything seemed to go well until I told him that my son was attending Notre Dame University. He made some comment

about why I hadn't made him attend LSU.

Well, I must admit that his comment

rubbed me wrong. You see, Notre Dame is a Catholic University with an outstanding academic curriculum. Although I am a big LSU fan and a graduate of the LSU system, I consider it an honor to have a child attend Notre Dame. I tried to overlook this comment as the interview proceeded.

There is a program in the Diocese of Baton Rouge called the Religious Studies Institute, RSI for short. It is a course of study that gives undergraduate college credit from St. Joseph's Seminary College and prepares the participants to serve the church in ministerial roles such as teaching religion at Catholic Schools, serving as a catechist in a parish or simply working in the diocese. It is a three year program consisting of nine courses that earn the student three credit hours each. At the end of the three years, a certificate is awarded. You cannot be a degree candidate at St. Joseph's Seminar College unless you are "qualified" for priestly ordination. At the time of my inquiry, there was a requirement that at least one year of the program must have been completed prior to entering the Diocesan Diaconate Program.

When the deacon in charge of the Diaconate program asked me if I had completed any of the RSI program, I had to say no. I had actually never heard of the program. He described the program and told me that I should expect to complete more than one year because I had to wait three years to enter the diaconate program. Our diocese only runs one diaconate class at a time and a new class has just begun. (The class is the academic part three years long consisting of six semesters of study at the same seminary that offers the RSI courses.) Another class would not begin until the candidates were ordained. That meant I had to wait three years to begin the formal academic part of the diaconate formation program.

Here is where the fun started. I suggested that a course of study that would lead to a master's degree in theology would be better than 27 random hours of undergraduate work earned in RSI. I further told the deacon that I had already earned a graduate degree from Loyola University and that I could easily have a master's degree in theology completed within the three years that I had to wait for another diaconate class to start. No such luck! After an intense conversation it became clear to me that I had no choice, if I was to enter "the process," but to apply for and commit to RSI. Although I was not happy, I told the

deacon that I would pray about it. I promised to get back to him since I had several months before the next RSI class started.

At the end of the interview, the deacon asked “Why do I want to be a deacon?” I told him that I did not come to see him because I wanted to be a deacon, but because God called me. He told me everyone says they are called, but why do I want to be a deacon. After I repeated my statement, he got frustrated and told, he didn’t care if God talked to me, “why did I want to be a deacon.” This interaction was very intense. I never wavered, because I was telling the truth. I think he finally believed me, because he went on to the next question.

The final question concerned what I wanted to do as a deacon. I took this to be a question about my particular gifts and talents. I suggested that evangelization would be a good place to be because it would take advantage of my talents. He proceeded to tell me a story about how one deacon was assigned to a parish with a pastor that did not like deacons. That pastor had assigned his deacon to taking care of the grass and gardens. I looked at the deacon and asked him to explain his point. He told me that deacons serve



*Laying on of Hands*

the bishop and must be obedient. He told me that since I was a lawyer, the bishop could ask me to do legal work. He went on to stress that I had no say in the matter. Well, if there is such a thing as a “frowny” face, I must have had one, because he questioned my ability to be obedient. I respectfully suggested that we take one step at a time and let me process the RSI question first. We can cover post ordination matters way down the road.

I never knew why this deacon was so hard on me. I now know that is not his nature. Further, none of my diaconate classmates had a similar experience. I think in retrospect it was the beginning of the “process” and the Holy Spirit was beginning to work on me.

## **MY BACKGROUND**

When I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, there was a debate held at my grammar school. The topic was, “Chores for Children, Necessary or Not?” I was on the side of “chores are not necessary”. At this time in my life, I was in a band. We played the sixties rock and I was a part time bass player, part time singer and tambourine player. I had all of the clothes, the high boots, hip hugger slacks, mock turtle shirt and the belt with the big buckle. I wore one of my band outfits to the debate. As the debate progressed, it was just your usual academic exercise. Then, the questions from the audience portion of the program began. The audience was primarily the Mother’s Club. One mom presented this hypothetical: “What would you do if your wife is in the hospital having a baby and you

are at home with the other kids. How will you know how to take care of the house and the kids if you have not had any training?"

I quickly replied, "Well, I would call my mother in law!" The entire audience busted out in a combination of laughter and applause. I was the hit of the debate. From that day forward, everyone in my grammar school thought I would become a lawyer. I was encouraged in many various ways to pursue a legal career. The only problem was that I didn't even know what a lawyer did. I had never met one. I was raised by my great-grandmother and we were very poor. The only lawyer I ever "knew" was Perry Mason. However, the seed had been sown. I went to high school and always said I wanted to go to law school. When I started college, it was with the end game, law school, in mind. I interrupted my college to spend some time in the military, but I never lost the "dream". That little bit of encouragement formed a life long ambition in me to attend law school.

My dream of going to law school was supplemented after I returned from military service with a desire to go into politics. I had done well with my studies in my major, Political Science. One day I knew I would be an elected official using the skills and gifts that I had to that career. Well, I became both a lawyer and a politician in various degrees, but at the time of the "call" I was actually doing well in my career as a corporate lawyer. My political aspirations had been replaced with a desire to provide for my family and being a corporate lawyer was not a bad place to be.

The reason for my writing about all these events is to point out that a seed sown very early can mature into a person's life-long career and that certain talents can be used for various careers, ministries or vocations. The seed sown in me to become a lawyer manifested itself in actually becoming a lawyer. I truly believe that if we as Catholics sow similar seeds in young boys that we would have more vocations to the priesthood. Also, as it relates to gifts and talents, those mothers at my 6<sup>th</sup> grade debate recognized the gifts that God had given me. They saw them as gifts that would work well for a lawyer. They were correct. However those same gifts would work very well for a priest, or a DEACON. And that is the point of this entire section. God has blessed me with gifts and talents. How I use them is my choice. For many years they have served me well in my legal career, but now I use them in ministry.

I obviously made it to ordination, and now I am assigned to Christ the King Catholic Church and Student Center at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. The pastor is also the Chancellor for the diocese. Because we are an on campus church and many of our parishioners are students, we have masses at 6 pm, 8 pm and 10 pm to accommodate their schedules.

I've been at this parish for six months and for logistical reasons, have preached at these evening masses. Today is different. It's shortly after the 10 am Mass and, as Father and I greet those leaving, many more than usual come over to me instead of Father. You see, this is the first Sunday that I preached at the morning Mass. "Deacon Jodi, I enjoyed your talk," said one lady. Another said, "Deacon you did a fine job." "Deacon I enjoyed your

sermon, you made sense,” from another. And so it went. To every one I tried to say thanks, it’s the Holy Spirit you know, or something like that. Then one couple who I have come to know well pulled me aside and really bent my ear about how I am blessed and I have talent and I should preach more and on and on and on. To them I simply said, I am blessed and it is a gift from God, and that is why I became a Deacon.

As I walked back to the Sacristy to purify the vessels, I recalled that first interview when I told that deacon that my gifts could be used for evangelization. And, so it is!

## **RELIGIOUS STUDIES INSTITUTE**

The diocese of Baton Rouge really does have a fine program in the Religious Studies Institute. Anyone that wants to be a part of religious education has a way to get “certified” and you get college credit for it. The program is well thought out and consists of nine courses—New Testament Studies, Old Testament Studies, Vatican II Documents, Church History, The Catechism, Morality, Spirituality, Liturgy and Church Doctrine. In addition to the academic portion of the program, there is an annual retreat for all students. While I was not very happy to enter the program, I submitted because I realized it was part of the “process”, to which I was called. As I completed the program, I came to realize that more than an academic exercise, it became for me a spiritual formation process in which I grew into a more well-rounded person.

My complaint was never with the Religious Studies Institute. My complaint was that the Church should welcome people who offer to obtain advanced degrees in theology into the diaconate rather than stifling that dedication to self improvement. In fact, after I completed the entire Religious Studies Institute program of studies and was awarded my certificate, I wrote to the Bishop and suggested two slight changes. First, I suggested that at Master’s Degree in theology or Catholic Pastoral Studies be allowed to substitute for the requirement of one or two years of RSI. Second I suggested that the actual Diaconate Academic courses be coordinated with Loyola University which could add some additional course requirements to allow the courses to be credited toward a master’s degree. In response, the Bishop agreed with the first proposal to accept the Master’s Degree in lieu of the RSI requirement. The Bishop however did not want the Diaconate academic courses to somehow be upgraded thus making the Diaconate less achievable for a man without a college degree. I am glad that the men discerning the Diaconate after me can now enroll in a graduate program, and I do think that eventually the courses will be recognized by some college offering to count them toward the pursuit of a degree. Like most things in the Catholic Church, change happens slowly.

## **DISCERNMENT**

Included in the preparation for admission into the formal Diaconate Academic and Formation Program was a discernment opportunity. Although the “formal” discernment was ten weeks, one night a week, the actual discernment for ordination commences at that first meeting and ends on ordination day. It too is a process. In Baton Rouge, however we did have the benefit of a somewhat formal program. We read a book written

by now Archbishop Hughes of New Orleans written when he was an auxiliary bishop in Boston. It is a good book that really focuses on the discerning the priesthood. Discerning the Diaconate is somewhat different.

Discernment involves making a choice. The choices between good and bad are usually easy. There are more difficult choices to make when the choice involves making a decision between two good things. In the case of a priestly discernment, it is a choice between celibacy and marriage. Both are great and both are sacramental choices. The choice is a wholly personal one. In the case of a married man discerning the Diaconate, consideration must be given to his wife. In our case, our wives attended our discernment program with us. Our program consisted of reading Bishop Hughes' book, but we also studied Father Anthony De Mello and his techniques of mediation and contemplation. We watched his tapes and I highly recommend them to anyone discerning their vocation in life. The purpose of the techniques is that we were trying to listen to the "will of God". To hear God, we must quiet ourselves. We must be open to his guidance in our lives. We found out later that many of our classmates ignored the techniques. They were in the program not as much because of God's will in their lives, but because of their own will to be a deacon. The "process" eventually weeded them out.



### **THE ONE YEAR WAIT**

As the three year RSI program was coming to an end, and we were preparing for the ceremony where certificates would be awarded, we were told that there would not be a new Diaconate class beginning in the fall as we all expected. This was due to the fact that our Bishop was elevated to Archbishop and moved to New Orleans. The new bishop did not want to just jump into a new class until he could evaluate the program as well as the candidates.

#### *The Book of the Gospels*

I was not alone in the disappointment that I felt when I was told that there would not be a diaconate class beginning in the fall. One of my closest diaconate friends is Don Musso. I thought we would "tread water" together while we waited for the next class. That was not to be the case. Don actually had two more classes that he could take to actually complete the RSI program, so he continued in class. I, on the other hand just waited. I spent the year in my usual way, working in ministries within the parish and taking some time off. I must say, it taught me to acknowledge that I was not in control. That was good preparation for the actual Diaconate program that began one year later. I kept telling myself that it is the process. I was not going for ordination, but that God had called me to the process.

It is important to note that it was during this year that it became crystal clear to me that I had not really wanted to be a deacon. Deacons are servants. I was not really interested in going to hospital, or prisons or hospice or any of the usual places deacons serve. I really was just going through a process. This realization served me well later.

## DIACONATE CLASS

As the one year of waiting ended, I received a letter from the deacon in charge of the program inviting me to a meeting which was in fact the first day of class. In our diocese, the actual diaconate formation class is three years of class work or six college semesters. The classes are done on extension from St. Joseph's Seminary College just as the RSI classes are. A group of just over 20 men and our wives showed up the first day of class. We were given a folder with forms to fill out and told that we are beginning the actual class work on a provisional basis. We were told that this first semester would also include interviews and a psychological examination. It would conclude with an interview at the end of the semester with the Diaconate Board. All in all, I found the classes to be enjoyable, some very beneficial to what I anticipated diaconate work to be and some not so. Notice I said, "what I anticipated diaconate work to be." The focus of that first semester however was the interview process.



*Welcoming Embrace*

The first interview was with a deacon who had replaced the deacon that had run the program for many years. He was the deacon with whom I had my first meeting on the Diaconate. He asked that I come to visit with him at his home. My wife, Darlene did not accompany me. I later found that that had been a mistake in communication. The interview followed a script. I answered the questions and felt very comfortable with my answers. He did not challenge my "call" as the earlier deacon had done. He also seemed to respond well to my answer to the question, "Why do you want to be a deacon?" Of course, I told him that I did not want to be a deacon, but rather I had been called to the process. This was to be a pattern that followed me through virtually all of the interviews.

The second interview was much like the first except that Darlene accompanied me and it was in front of a panel consisting of a priest, a deacon, a deacon's wife and a psychologist. They followed a script much like the first interview. It seemed to go well. Then there was the psychological exam. We were to go to the office of a psychologist and spend the better part of a day.

As it turned out, two candidates are scheduled at the same time on the same day. One of us does one set of tests before lunch while the other completes a different test. Then, after lunch the two of us swap tests. All in all, we spend nearly eight hours there. I will not comment on the actual test except to say that I felt it necessary in light of the scandals that have rocked the church in recent years.

As the semester was drawing to a close, the final interview with the Diaconate Board was scheduled. Once again, Darlene and I were both invited. The interview was going well until one of the members, the wife of a deacon asked about the ministries that I was involved in. Well, we began to roll them off, RCIA, Altar Server Training, Extraordinary

Minister, Knights of Columbus with multiple responsibilities, Confirmation Catechist, Confirmation Retreat Team as well as many of unofficial things we did around the church. We thought it would be good to be very involved in ministry. WRONG! One of the members of the panel informed me that I should back out of my ministry work because they don't want deacons to look like the old regulars only with a "merit badge". Rather, they want us to be re-introduced to our parish after ordination as an ordained minister. I must admit, that I was shocked, but I obliged and began to withdraw from several ministries. Of the twenty plus in our class, only 18 were invited to continue. There were many reasons, but primarily it was that the Board did not see the "call" at this particular time. One additional member of our class dropped out on his own. As we began the second year another class mate withdrew for health reasons. We were now down to sixteen.

In the second year of class work, we had similar interviews and then the final year approached. All sixteen made it through the second year. In the final year, we had homiletics and classes more directly related to functioning as deacons—Canon Law—Marriage and administration. These classes were more practical. In the final semester, we had an interview with the Priest Personnel Board. The only difference between our interview with the Personnel Board and what priests experience was that the deacon in charge of the program sat in on the interview. At this meeting, our assignments were discussed. All of a sudden it was becoming too real. I had not thought of actually being ordained. It was after all a process.

My home parish had two candidates for ordination, my good friend Don Musso and myself. This is good for our parish. However because we already had a deacon assigned to our parish, it was highly unlikely that Don and I would both be assigned to our parish. At my interview, Darlene and I were questioned about our ministries, our interests, our background and also where we would like to be assigned. We told the Board that we would like to be assigned to our home parish but that we knew that getting that assignment was highly unlikely. So, we talked about young adult ministry. We talked about the fact that we lose a lot of young adult Catholics because we have no institutional activities for them. The head of the Board was the pastor at The Catholic Center at Louisiana State University. He became very interested in me being assigned to his parish. The bishop withheld information of our assignments until the week before ordination. As it turned out, most of the newly ordained deacons were assigned to their home parishes, and the ones assigned elsewhere were placed in just the right place to take advantage of our talents and skills.

I was surprised how easily the movement from "process" to ordination was. We had become readers, acolytes and then candidates. We had moved through the academic portion as students almost not noticing the formational part that had taken over. We had been formed and hardly realized it. We looked up and our ordination day was a few weeks away. All of a sudden it was a busy time of albs, stoles, books, gifts and all sorts of ancillary activities that are essential in planning an ordination. We had invitations to get out and we had to make sure that family was included. It was almost like a second

wedding. But we got busy and before we knew it we were at rehearsal, and tomorrow was the day!

## **ORDINATION**

Despite the ups and downs of formation, ordination is a celebration that is only positive. The energy of the Holy Spirit dictates the movement of the service, and when the Bishop places his hands on your head, the Holy Spirit takes over. The grace that comes with ordination is almost immediate. What I mean by that is that after ordination you are blessed with God given authority. Some deacons use it and some don't. I remember running into a deacon at a restaurant about a year before ordination. After our conversation, he gave us a blessing. I remember being very thankful for the blessing. I have found that a blessing from an ordained minister is special. And, after ordination, I now had the authority to grant a blessing.

I have found however that I have been humbled since ordination. Before ordination I was anxious to participate in liturgies. I wanted to serve at the altar. I was happy to be an acolyte. I was doing communion services and loved it. In retrospect, I think it is somewhat innate that we want to learn what to do. And, before ordination was a good time to learn because there was no pressure. So, there was an anxiousness to have the opportunity to "practice". Now, after ordination, it is different. I am not anxious at all. I am actually humbled to have the opportunity to serve. I hardly tell people I am a deacon until it is necessary for ministry or service. I just live my life differently. It is important that we be a good example to others, not only those discerning the diaconate, but all people. After ordination, we do live in a "glass house" and are seen differently. Integrity is how you act when no one is looking and it is important to maintain our integrity. The grace of ordination helps.

At one of the later interviews, I was asked about the grace of ordination. I told them that I hope I get a lot of it because I would need all that I could get. I was right. Humble service to the Bishop is not easy. We must let go of our own ego and lean on the grace of ordination for humility.

## **FINAL MESSAGE**

To all that discern the diaconate, please know that it will not be your decision, but rather a movement of the Holy Spirit that leads to ordination. I have seen it too often where a man pursues the diaconate for personal, selfish reasons. Remember, it is a call, not a search. If you feel the call, follow it. Do not search for it, seek it. The Lord will reward your obedience with confirmation of the call. We can all benefit from learning how to quiet ourselves and to listen intently to the Holy Spirit within us. God has a way of getting what he wants. It took him five years to get my attention and then it took a strong voice. Now, however I have learned to quiet myself and to listen to that “quiet” voice of God which is really the movement of the Holy Spirit within.

Deacons are becoming more and more important in our Church. Deacons are needed. Remember, however, a man does not become a Deacon because of his own desire to be a Deacon. A man becomes a Deacon only because GOD wants him. If God wants you, He will find a way to let you know. Go in peace to discern God’s will for you.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deacon Jodi Moscona was born in New Orleans and attended Catholic schools. He graduated from St. Rose de Lima Elementary School and Brother Martin High School. He holds a BA degree in Political Science from the University of New Orleans and a Juris Doctorate from Loyola University of the South. He also holds a certificate from the Religious Studies Institute and a Diaconate Certificate from St. Joseph's Seminary College at St. Benedict, Louisiana. He moved to Baton Rouge nearly 20 years ago where he currently lives with his wife Darlene and their daughter Alicia, a 2006 graduate of LSU.

Deacon Jodi and Darlene also have two sons, Brian a graduate of the University of Notre Dame and Matthew a graduate of the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. Brian lives in Atlanta and works at Holy Spirit Prep where he teaches and coaches. Matthew is a radio personality in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Deacon Jodi is assigned as Deacon Associate at the Christ the King Catholic Church and Student Center on the campus of Louisiana State University. Although a public university, LSU has over 16,000 Catholic Students. In addition to his duties at Christ the King, Deacon Jodi is a retreat master and part of the Manresa Retreat Team. Deacon Jodi has delivered retreats throughout Louisiana. Deacon Jodi has also authored many articles and is currently writing a book focusing on the need to include God in our successes.

Deacon Jodi has taught classes at all levels and brings his expertise as a teacher to his role as catechist. He has taught classes on church history, sacraments and sacramentals, the Creed, marriage and marriage preparation and also heads up the Confirmation Program at Christ the King. In addition to his law practice, he is regularly invited as a guest speaker and lecturer. He can be contacted at [jmoscona@diobr.org](mailto:jmoscona@diobr.org), and feel free to visit his website at [www.deaconjodi.com](http://www.deaconjodi.com).