

Be careful what you say!

*The following is an edited version of a column in the June 2011 issue of **In Stephen's Footsteps**, a newsletter published by the Office of the Diaconate.*

Never say never – or at least hardly ever. You never know when a nice turn of phrase, a short and pithy response – or a barbed response might come back to bite you.

Some years ago, a veteran freelance photographer was assigned to cover the Ordination of deacons for our diocesan newspaper. As a wedding photographer, he was quite comfortable in a church setting, but he had never shot an Ordination before so he wanted a rundown of what was going to happen, along with photo suggestions.

Using the program as a guide, I told him the men, wearing albs, would enter in the procession and be seated with their families. At the beginning of the Ordination ceremony, they would be called by name and enter the sanctuary, where they would individually come before the Bishop, place their hands in his, and promise obedience and respect to him and his successors.

Since there were about 15 men to be ordained, I said, they would line up in the center aisle and prostrate themselves for the Litany of the Saints. (“Good photo from the back or front of the aisle, but don’t get between the people and the action.”) Rising from that position, each man would come before the Bishop again, this time the Bishop would impose hands in silence, ordaining him to the ministry of deacon.

Another occasion for a good photo would be when the wives of the newly ordained deacons bring their vestments to the center aisle so their pastor-sponsors could vest them in stole and dalmatic.

Now vested as a deacon, each man would again kneel before the bishop, who would present to him the Book of the Gospels.

“And then they go back to the pew?” asked the photographer. “No,” said I, “They never go back.” That was it! A quick and pithy response, a good sound bite, true, but more than once the photographer, who is now himself a deacon, has reminded me of my comment.

Was I correct? Not really. There are many married deacons who make it a point to schedule times to go to Mass with their families, and in some parishes with several deacons they schedule the deacons’ Mass assignments to make that happen.

Does the deacon have to assist at every Mass he attends? Of course not. There are special events and occasions when he is not serving as a liturgical minister, and times when he is vacationing or visiting with his wife and family.

As important as the liturgical role of the deacon is at Mass, he is not there for his own sake, or simply to be of assistance to the priest. The reasons for his presence are his ministries of word and charity. It is the deacon who in his person and in his service integrates the threefold ministry of liturgy, word and charity and brings the needs of the community before the community gathered in prayer.

The deacon is a servant and a witness. He has made a public and permanent commitment to serve God and His people. For the married deacon – and his wife -- there must be a special grace in the intersection of the Sacraments of Marriage and Holy Orders that inspires and empowers the deacon to give witness his faith by his life, and there can be no greater witness to his love of God and His people than striving to be the best husband and father he can be.