

CTSFW Deaconess Formation: Knowledge, Skills & Virtues

James G. Bushur, Director of Deaconess Formation

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“The mission of Concordia Theological Seminary is to form servants of Jesus Christ who teach the faithful, reach the lost, and care for all.” CTSFW fulfills this mission in two ways—the formation of pastors to baptize, to preach, and to administer the Lord’s Supper, and the formation of deaconesses to serve the church through mercy toward those in need. The verb, “to form,” comes from Genesis 2:7, where it refers to God’s formation of man from the moistened dirt of Paradise. From the beginning, God’s relationship to man is described in terms of a sculptor who waters the dirt so that he can shape it with his own hands. “Your hands have made and fashioned me,” sings the psalmist, “give me understanding that I may learn your commandments” (Psalm 119:73). Thus, formation at CTSFW is theological both at its foundation and in its orientation. CTSFW understands its mission to be a participation in the Father’s own work of forming humanity in the image and likeness of his Son through the power of his Spirit.

“And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image and after our likeness’” (Gen. 1:26). These words express the mission of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to give human beings a place within their own fellowship of love and communal life.

Throughout the scriptures, God's interaction with humanity displays his philanthropy or love for mankind. From the moment his hands embraced the dirt of Eden, the Father has sought to bring humanity into the intimacy of divine Sonship in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. God's philanthropy is revealed in Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, who was "born of woman...that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). Through baptism, we are "born from above," (John 3:3) receive "the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying 'Abba! Father,'" (Gal. 4:6) and become "fellow heirs with Christ" of his glory (Rom. 8:17). "Beloved, we are the children of God now," writes the Apostle John, "and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Within God's philanthropic formation of humanity, CTSFW recognizes the distinction between the pastoral office and all other auxiliary offices such as the deaconess vocation. Pastors are formed for a unique place within God's love for mankind. They are formed to take their place within the Father's generation of his own children at the baptismal font, to give voice to God's own Word in the pulpit, and to be the Father's own hands in the giving of Christ's body and blood from the altar. In this office, pastors bear a unique responsibility before God for what is preached, administered, and confessed in their congregations. The deaconess vocation seeks to support the pastoral office by facilitating and cultivating the bonds of fellowship and love that unite diverse members into the one body of Christ. While the pastoral office bears responsibility for the giving of Christ through preaching and the administration of the sacraments, the deaconess vocation is concerned with the church's reception of Christ in a fellowship of love, mercy, forgiveness, and peace.

In the Gospels, *diaconia* is associated with *koinonia* and describes one who serves tables and cultivates the fellowship of those who partake. At the Last Supper on Holy Thursday, Jesus identifies himself with the one who serves. “For who is greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27). While pastors are occupied with the administration of this service from the altar, deaconesses seek to cultivate the bonds of fellowship among those who “recline at the table.” The deaconess works so that the church imitates Christ in her love for the neighbor and her service to the lowest and “least of his brethren” (Matt. 25:40). The deaconess treats the needy as those Christ identifies with himself: “Truly I say to you, as you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Mat.t 25:40). Therefore, the deaconess vocation is not merely practical, but deeply theological and Christological. She labors so that “God’s chosen ones...forgive each other...and put on love which binds everything in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:12-14); she seeks to facilitate the fellowship of the Spirit, in which God’s children “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

CTSFW recognizes that the deaconess vocation cannot be reduced to certain functions or tasks, but consists in the commissioning of women for participation in Christ’s own service to the needy ones, which embodies the Father’s love for humanity. Thus, the formation of students for the deaconess vocation must do more than merely prepare them to perform certain temporal functions. Rather, at CTSFW, deaconess formation seeks to cultivate a *diaconal habitus* or identity that is grounded in Christ and oriented toward bringing humanity into the eternal fellowship of the Holy Spirit. CTSFW accomplishes this formation with special attention to three modes of student growth—intellectual knowledge, practical skills, and spiritual virtues.

Intellectual Knowledge

“In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The holy Christian Church has always affirmed that language has its origin in the Holy Trinity. The Father is a preacher from eternity; the Father’s very being is constituted in his generation of the Word in the Spirit. Thus, his formation of humanity in his own image and likeness includes the gift of the contemplative mind and the capacity for linguistic communication. Both the man and the woman were made to participate in theological conversation with the Holy Trinity. In their call to preach the gospel, pastors are given a unique place within this theological conversation. They have responsibility before God for what is preached, confessed, and practiced in the congregations they serve.

While deaconesses do not bear the responsibility of pastors for the church’s theological confession, they are expected to participate in the church’s theological conversation by supporting pastors and encouraging laity in their confession and practice of the true faith “once for all handed over to the saints” (Jude 3).

Deaconesses follow the example of Mary who questioned Gabriel (Luke 1:34), the Canaanite woman who showed profound wisdom as she persevered in her petition to Jesus (Matt. 15:21-28), and Mary Magdalene who was chosen to be the first to bear the joyful news of Jesus’ resurrection (Jn 20:11-18). Thus, CTSFW insists that deaconess students study the rich theological tradition that undergirds the ecumenical creeds and confessions of the LCMS. This theological formation takes place through a rigorous curriculum that begins with the study of scripture and proceeds to engage the history and theology of the ecumenical creeds and the *Book of Concord*.

Practical Skills

“Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). Mankind was not merely formed with a mind, but with a body that God’s own character might be revealed in his actions. “The body...is meant for the Lord,” writes St. Paul, “and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor. 6:13). John Chrysostom describes the body as a musical instrument designed to be “full of movement, with the ability to display its own skill through the movement of its limbs.”¹ Gregory Nazianzen claims that man is made both for contemplation and for practical action. Through contemplation, one is led “to the Holy of Holies;” and, through practice, one “receives Christ as his guest...revealing the spell of love by its works.”² God’s philanthropy is not merely an idea for intellectual deliberation, but a life to be lived in the flesh. The *diaconal* life commences with Jesus who comes “to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28).

Thus, in addition to intellectual knowledge, deaconess formation at CTSFW consists in the development of the practical skills especially useful for the deaconess vocation. This practical formation involves the study and research of effective strategies for *diaconal* care, which takes place in practical courses. It also involves the supervised training of our students through field education, internship assignments, and practicum experiences. The training and development of *diaconal* skills focuses on five areas essential to the deaconess vocation. These five areas include the following:

¹ John Chrysostom, Homily 13.9; *FOC* 74

² Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration 14: On Love of the Poor 4*, in *Gregory of Nazianzus*, translated by Brian Daley, (London: Routledge Press, 2006), p 78.

Visitation: The cultural inclination toward fragmentation has made visitation of the sick, the shut-in, and the estranged a growing need for the church. While pastors minister by preaching the Word and serving Christ's body and blood, deaconesses seek to support the pastor's ministry by connecting those in need to the fellowship of the church. First, effective visitation calls for deaconesses to take the initiative to seek out those separated or estranged from the church's fellowship. Second, the efficacy of visitation depends on the ability to listen and to perceive the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of individuals. Perceiving these needs, deaconesses need the skill to encourage their brothers and sisters in the faith as well as to offer prayers on their behalf. Finally, once the needs are known, deaconesses seek practical and effective ways to respond with the resources of the church community.

Counseling: While visitation is concerned with those who are isolated from the church's fellowship, counseling focuses on those who are experiencing confusion, doubt, anxiety, and distress that call for spiritual attention and care. While visitation generally requires encouragement and comfort, counseling often requires the additional need for discernment and guidance. Both visitation and counseling involve the ability to perceive the needs that require attention. However, counseling calls for the additional ability to discern how the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh seek to afflict God's children and to move them away from God and his church. As the deaconess hears and discerns, she, then, must be able to respond with wisdom from scripture and with prayer. Finally, the deaconess must always seek to connect the distressed to the pastoral administration of the forgiveness of sins and to the fellowship of the church.

Catechesis: As the world becomes more hostile toward orthodox Christianity, the need for sound catechesis in the church grows in importance. Pastors have the unique responsibility to supervise the content of what is taught in their congregations. Deaconesses seek to contribute to sound catechesis by resisting divisions and promoting confessional unity in the fellowship of Christ's body. To fulfill this work, deaconesses need the ability to create lesson plans and offer instruction concerning the basics of the Christian faith. She should seek the ability to expose the lies of the devil as promoted in the world and to orient student learning toward the fellowship of the church and communion with Christ. Finally, she should be able to support students in a life of holiness and to encourage them to love their neighbor.

Leadership: The whole of the church is called in Holy Baptism to a life of mercy and love toward those in need. Deaconesses are called to support the church in her life of mercy and, when required, to lead the church in fulfilling her testimony to God's love for mankind. This leadership involves the ability to perceive the needs arising in congregations and the communities they serve. Perceiving these needs, deaconesses should take initiative to make these needs known in the church and offer possible responses for the church to consider. Effective leadership also involves the ability to collaborate with others to develop an effective response that testifies to God's love and mercy. Finally, the deaconess should demonstrate a perseverance that seeks to bring the church's mercy work to a successful end.

Building Community: St. Paul identifies the church with the body of Christ. Healthy bodies require strong ligaments and tendons that bind diverse members into one. The deaconess vocation, above all else, seeks to facilitate the bonds of love and mercy that resist the forces of fragmentation and division. Building

community calls the deaconess to seek out those on the edge of the community who are most in danger of being estranged or severed from the church's fellowship. To encourage unity, the deaconess should show no partiality, resist being involved in partisan contentions, and seek to promote peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Finally, the deaconess should make every effort to know every member of the church so that she can encourage the sympathy and compassion that bind one member to another. The deaconess facilitates a spiritual harmony where the whole church "rejoices with those who rejoice, and weeps with those who weep" (Rom 12:15).

Spiritual Virtues

Christ's "divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called you to his own glory and virtue...For this reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue..." (2 Peter 1:3-5). God created man as the union of body and soul; yet, within the soul is, not only the power of the reasoning intellect, but also the power of desire or passion that drives the human being toward some goal. The passions of hunger and thirst dwell below one's intellect and willing faculty and move him to seek the food and drink that are necessary for his own life. Before the fall into sin, human desire was meant to find fulfillment in communion with God. Immediately after God creates male and female in his own image and likeness, he gives them the trees of the garden for food (Gen. 1:28). Man is created with a hunger that God alone can satisfy. The fall into sin consists in the orientation of human desire and passion away from God toward creaturely things as ends in themselves. Thus, original sin is experienced by humanity as a slavery in the passions that continuously seeks fulfillment in created things that cannot satisfy. This passionate slavery the psalmist recognizes when he

cries out, “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1).

In the Gospels, Jesus’ righteousness is more than merely an external, practical obedience to the law; it is the orientation of all his passions and desires away from false fulfillments toward the only true fulfillment in communion with his Father. When tempted in the wilderness to turn stones into bread, Jesus turns away from the devil’s seductive lie. “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). The fullness of Jesus’ righteousness is displayed in Gethsemane when Jesus denies his own desire to avoid the cross and embraces the desire of his Father for the salvation of the world (Matt. 26:39).

Thus, the scriptures reveal the passions to be powerful movements that can serve sin, but can also serve righteousness in communion with Christ and his Spirit. St. Paul speaks of this struggle as the battle between “the desires of the flesh” and “the desires of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16-17). When we seek fulfillment of our desires in something other than God, these passions become carnal and take the form of various vices. Paul refers to the vices as “the works of the flesh” displayed as “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, etc....” (Gal. 5:19-21).

However, when Christ brings his human passions to fulfillment in God, these human passions become spiritual and take the form of virtues, that is, “the fruit of the Spirit,” which Paul lists as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). The virtues are just as passionate as the vices and are cultivated when human desire is oriented in communion with the Spirit through Christ toward the Father as the only true fulfillment of our human nature.

The CTSFW deaconess program recognizes the profound significance of this spiritual battle for the formation of our deaconess students. The acquisition of spiritual virtues cannot be evaluated or quantified in the same way as intellectual knowledge or practical skills. Nevertheless, it would be foolish to ignore the importance for the deaconess vocation of this spiritual growth in a life of holiness, virtue, and love. Thus, the CTSFW deaconess program attends to the cultivation of virtue in deaconess students in three ways. First, the virtues have their origin in God and are communicated to man through the mystery of Christ's body and the sanctification of the Spirit. The CTSFW mentoring program recognizes that these divine virtues can only be received through communion with God centered in the hearing of the Word, the partaking of Christ's body and blood, and prayer. The mentoring program calls students to contemplate the virtues displayed in Jesus and in the lives of the saints in order to encourage their imitation of Christ and the forms of his righteousness. Second, students are given opportunities to display virtue in their field education, internship assignments, and practical experiences. Third, field education, internship and practicum supervisors are asked concerning their observations of the student in terms of the virtues. In order to give form to this emphasis on the virtues, the CTSFW deaconess program has identified five core virtues especially associated with the deaconess vocation. These five virtues are as follows:

Humility: Christ “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). Humility is more than mere obedience to those in authority; humility has its origin in God who is subject to no authority. In God, humility is the first form of the Father's love for the Son, which begins as a movement away from self toward His Beloved. This divine humility has its perfect

form in Jesus whose righteousness begins with his voluntary self-denial.

“...Nevertheless, not as I will,” Jesus prays to his Father, “but as you will” (Matt. 26:39). The free movement of one toward another in love begins with the denial of oneself. “If anyone would come after me,” Jesus exclaims, “let him deny himself...” (Matt. 16:24). The perfection of humility embodied in Jesus cannot be achieved in us this side of the resurrection. Nevertheless, deaconess students are expected to seek this virtue, to recognize its foundational significance as the first-form of God’s love for humanity, and to begin putting it into practice by repenting of their sins and “counting others as more significant than themselves” (Phil. 2:3).

Hospitality: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). The “Lord’s favor” can be translated as the “Lord’s hospitality,” which Jesus displays by dining “with tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 5:30). If the first-form of the Father’s love is self-denial, then the second form of His love is the complete openness of Himself to His Son. This voluntary opening of the self to another is the essence of hospitality, a virtue given its perfect form in Jesus as he welcomes the diseased, the despised, the repentant sinner, even the thief on the cross into his own fellowship. “Today,” Jesus exclaims, “you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). This divine hospitality means that as Jesus welcomes sinners to his table, he opens his own life to their sins, sufferings, and sorrows. Deaconess students are called to the imitation of God’s hospitality. They are called to seek the virtue of hospitality and to practice it by seeking the lost, befriending the least among the brethren, and receiving the suffering and distressed with the love and mercy of Christ.

Compassion: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). Love

is the Virtue of all virtues and consists in the movement through which one subsists in union and communion with another. Humility describes this divine love in terms of the relationship to oneself. The movement of love entails a detachment from oneself, a self-denial that initiates the movement toward the beloved. Hospitality describes this love in terms of the relationship to the beloved. Turning from the self, love opens itself to the other, feely receiving all that the beloved is and has. While hospitality entails a certain passive or receptive character, compassion emphasizes the active and dynamic character of God's love. Christ comes not merely to welcome sinners, but to actively "bear their sins in his own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). The language of "bearing" comes from Is 53:4 and entails a mystical sense. Christ makes our sins his own by means of the holy incarnation and his union with our human nature. Because he partook of our flesh and blood, he is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb. 4:15). Christ knows our sin and suffering because he has become one with us and shares in the fullness of our passionate experiences. Thus, in Christ, God himself suffers together with us and is even active in our sorrow with the power of his resurrection. The deaconess is called to be an instrument of Christ's compassion; she seeks to embody God's active sympathy or compassion by her presence with those in distress, her empathy for the sorrowful, her intercessions for the suffering, and her persistent care for all in need.

Prudence: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners! Yet, wisdom is justified by her deeds'" (Matt. 11:19). Humility describes love in relation to oneself. The movement of love toward the other begins with self-denial. Hospitality and compassion describe love in relation to the beloved. The movement of love calls for an openness to the other and an active sympathy that

bears all that the other is and has. Prudence or wisdom describes love in relation to the eschaton. Prudence consists in a clarity of vision that sees the path that leads to redemption and fellowship with God. Prudence is the prodigal son “coming to himself” and planning a return to his father’s house (Luke 15:17-19). Prudence is the clever steward following a course that ensures his place in the community (Luke 16:1-9). Jesus embodies this prudence when he sees the path that leads to salvation and “sets his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Deaconesses must seek the virtue of prudence or wisdom so that they can serve those in need. Effective service depends on theological deliberation and practical reflection concerning the present condition of the needy and the best course of action that will lead toward redemption and communion with Christ. Prudence is both theological and practical; deaconesses demonstrate prudence when they consider the most effective way that moves the needy toward fulfillment in communion with the Holy Trinity.

Patience: “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:13).

Prudence consists in a clarity of vision that sees the path that leads to redemption; yet, patience or long-suffering is needed to follow the path to its proper end. Both prudence and patience begin with the most optimistic confidence that in Christ there is always a path that leads to redemption for every individual. With prudence, the path is considered and seen with clarity. With patience, the path with all its joys and sorrows is walked and endured. Patience embodies divine hope that stretches out for fulfillment in communion with God. The perfect form of patience is found in Christ when he refuses to resist arrest. “Put your sword into its sheath,” Jesus admonishes Peter, “Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me” (John 18:11)? Patience is perfected in Jesus’ silence as he refuses to come down from the cross and give voice to his righteous wrath. Yet, Jesus’ patience is not driven by a

fear to act or a despair concerning his enemies; it is driven by his confidence in his Father and his undying hope in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Deaconesses must seek patience so that their care of the needy does not fall short due to a lack of faith in God or a failure to hope in the coming victory over sin and death. Deaconesses must never give up on those they serve, never cease praying, never allow sin, death, the world, or the devil to dampen their confidence in the victory of Christ. As St. Paul writes, “Love is patient...love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

Conclusion: The Love of God and the Needs of the Neighbor

The deaconess vocation is driven by two powers—the love of God and the needs of the neighbor. The deaconess vocation is a theological vocation precisely because it originates in the divine movement of love, in which the Father sends his Son for the life of the world. Within this divine philanthropy, the pastor has his unique call to baptize, preach, and administer the Lord’s Supper. “As the Father has sent me,” Jesus says, “even so I am sending you” (John 20:23). In the Word and the Sacraments, the spiritual power of the Father’s love is present shaping and forming humanity in the image and likeness of his Son in communion with the Holy Spirit. The deaconess vocation supports the pastoral office and participates in God’s love for humanity by facilitating and cultivating the communal bonds that connect diverse members into the one body of Christ. Thus, the formation of deaconess students must be grounded in the theological, Christological, and ecclesiological foundations of the scriptures, the creeds, and the confessions of the holy, Christian church.

In addition to the power of God's love for humanity, the deaconess vocation is also shaped by the needs of the neighbor. The needy are not merely passive recipients of God's love and the church's mercy. Rather, the cries of those in need bear a spiritual power that moves God to act through his people. The cry of Abel's blood moves God to enact his justice (Gen. 4:10). The groaning of those in Egyptian bondage compels God to remember his covenant with Abraham and to work out their salvation (Ex. 2:23-25). The intercession of Christ's blood "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Heb. 12:24) and bears the power of reconciliation for the world. In the same way, the deaconess is called to attend to the needs of the neighbor and receive them as the voice of Christ himself calling for the church to act in love and mercy. "For I was hungry and you gave me food" (Matt. 25:35). Jesus calls the church to hear the cry of the needy brother as his own call for the church's compassion and mercy. Thus, the formation of deaconess students is not only theological, but also deeply practical and consists in the sensory perception of humanity's needs and the opening of one's heart to respond with compassion.

Therefore, the final goal of deaconess formation at CTSFW is to cultivate a student's knowledge, skills, and virtues so that she has the capacity to love those in her care. Theological knowledge gives deaconess students the intellectual resources to respond to the needy with wisdom and to testify concerning the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Practical skills give deaconess students confidence that they can serve the church effectively both exposing the devil's lies and facilitating the fellowship of the Spirit. Finally, spiritual virtues give deaconess students the capacity to love the one in front of them regardless of their need or their circumstances. St. Maximus the Confessor claims that "love alone...proves

that the human person is in the image of the Creator.”³ St. Paul teaches that love is “the greatest” among the things that abide (1 Cor 13:13). Finally, St. John exhorts us “to love one another, for love is from God and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God...because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). At CTSFW, deaconesses are formed for participation in God’s love for mankind.

To Christ be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.

³ Maximus the Confessor, *Letter 2: To John the Cubicularius*, in *Maximus the Confessor*, translated by Andrew Louth, (London: Routledge Press, 1996), p 86.