

Tennessee deacon suffering from cancer is a model of 'the icon of Christ who came to serve'

Deacons are ordained to serve the Church and the world, and sometimes the greatest service one can offer is through personal suffering. A recent ordination in the Diocese of Knoxville, Tennessee, put this form of diaconal service on full display.

On Sept. 25, Ken Conklin was ordained a deacon by Bishop Richard F. Stika – nine months ahead of his fellow candidates in the diaconal formation program in the Diocese of Knoxville. While his classmates will not be ordained until next June, Bishop Stika made the decision to ordain Deacon Conklin now, as cancer has caused his health to deteriorate rapidly, and he has entered hospice care. After discerning and accepting his vocation, and working hard toward it for years, Bishop Stika wanted to ensure Deacon Conklin had the opportunity to live *diakonia* – the service that is at the heart of the diaconate.



Deacon Conklin and
Bishop Stika. Photo
courtesy of Gabrielle
Nolan/The East
Tennessee Catholic

Bishop Stika celebrated Mass with the new deacon's family, as well as his classmates. The ordination took place beneath a beautiful blue sky on the deck of Deacon Conklin's home, which overlooks the Smoky Mountains. "It was not the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, it was the cathedral of nature," Bishop Stika said.

Deacon Conklin was diagnosed with cancer of the small bowel in April 2018. He had a brief remission after about six months of treatment, but the illness came roaring back. During a surgery to remove a large section of bowel, the surgeons discovered his stomach was riddled with tumors as well. It was determined that he would begin hospice care upon returning home.

Deacon Tim Elliott, director of the diaconate and deacon formation for the Diocese of Knoxville, informed Bishop Stika of the situation. The bishop decided that if it was possible, he would ordain Deacon Conklin ahead of schedule.

"I assured [the bishop] that he was ready as far as the requirements go, and spiritually as well," Deacon Elliott told Our Sunday Visitor. Once the bishop's earliest availability was determined, preparations began.

Bishop Conklin was instructed to write his letter of petition to the bishop to be ordained, and his wife was asked to write her own letter giving her husband permission to be ordained. (Canon law allows a candidate's wife a sort of veto to help ensure that the two are on the same page.)

"In that letter, I told the bishop how proud I was of Ken at the very beginning when he wanted to enter into this," Diane

Conklin, Deacon Ken's wife, told Our Sunday Visitor. "I had some hesitation, because we were going to be retiring soon and this was going to change some of our retirement plans, but God knew what he was doing when he called him for this."

Deacon Conklin and his classmates began their formal "inquiry" discernment process in August 2016. The formation process in Knoxville takes years to complete, and Deacon Conklin's class of around 20 men began classes in September 2017. His illness first surfaced about two years later. Initially, it did not slow him much.

"Ken never failed to amaze us," Deacon Elliott said. "He continued his studies and was present with us at every meeting. His condition would seem to improve, and he would gain strength, and his stamina at times was incredible."

Even when his cancer treatments made him too weak to attend, Conklin would join via Zoom and participate virtually.

His illness caused his classmates to rally around him, and helped the whole group grow closer. "They were learning about pastoral care in a very real and beautiful way," Deacon Elliott said. "I can honestly say that Ken brought the subject matter of pastoral formation and pastoral care home to us all."

"We as a Church believe in redemptive suffering, especially when we combine it with the Lord himself," Bishop Stika said. "So Deacon Ken's witness is giving a witness of faith, determination and prayer. Those are all components of the diaconate – witnessing charity and giving comfort to other people."

"He is a model of who the deacon is," Deacon Elliott said. "Ken lives *diakonia* in his everyday life. He is that model of the servant leader – the icon of Christ who came to serve, not to be served."

Paul Senz writes from Oklahoma.