

THE DIACONATE - A THEOLOGICAL DIALECTIC

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THE DIACONATE IN HISTORY.

The ancient order of deacon is developing in new ways to meet the changing needs of the contemporary church. Restored to its permanent state by the Second Vatican Council, (whose emphasis was on the permanence of the order and not so much on its renewal),¹ there is an emerging need to bring it back more closely to its original roots.

The diaconate started out in history as seven men ministering to the Greek speaking Jewish Christian widows in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-7). And it is popularly accepted that as they ministered, they were engaging in a two way process of evangelization: in a spiritual sense by proclaiming the word of God, and in a physical sense, by attending to their material needs.² But is this entirely accurate? There is some debate.

Modern scholarship disputes the belief that "...the distinctive character of deacons is that they are servants called to the charitable and social justice ministry in the Church"³. The whole issue of emphasizing charity as the foundational function of the diaconate has been questioned, because, it is argued, it tends to distort the basic understanding of the diaconate, and restricts the full nature of the restored order⁴.

The problem arises with the English translation of Acts 6:1-7, where some liberties have been taken with the Greek text,⁵ and especially with the word *diakonia*, normally translated as "ministry". Anthony Gooley writes⁶:

If we take the Greek text ... we are able to construct a better picture of what is happening in Acts 6:1-7. The Greek speaking Christians are complaining that their widows are being neglected in the daily "diakonia". In [this context of] Acts, "diakonia" is the proclamation of the gospel.⁷ They are neglected for two reasons; the Aramaic speaking Apostles predominately concentrate their proclamation in the Temple, and the widows, who cannot comprehend the language and for social reasons are mostly restricted to the home, are overlooked in this "diakonia". The solution proposed by the Apostles and agreed to by the whole Church, is to appoint seven from among the Greek speaking community to do that daily "diakonia" in the homes of the Greek widows, or as the expression in Greek has it, "to minister tables".⁸ Both the Apostles and the Seven had been entrusted

¹ William T Ditewig "Charting a theology of the diaconate: An exercise in ecclesial cartography." in Owen F Cummings et al, *Theology of the diaconate: the state of the question*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 49

² Edward J Enright, "The history of the diaconate", in *The Deacon Reader*, James Keating ed. (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2006), 8

³ Anthony Gooley, "Deacons and the servant myth", in *The Pastoral Review*, (The Tablet Publishing Co. Ltd., November 2006)#2

⁴ John Collins, *Deacons and the Church: making connections between old and new* (Harrisburg PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), 12

⁵ Ibid., 47-58

⁶ Gooley, "Deacons and the servant myth"

⁷ John Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, 52

⁸ John Collins, *Diakonia: reinterpreting the ancient sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), as quoted in "Deacons and the servant myth". Collins' ground breaking study of the whole family of *diakon*-words in the Bible and extra biblical sources, indicates that service and charity are simply not part of the field of meaning for the word *diakonia*, and that the phrase "minister tables" had a particular

with the same “diakonia” which is to minister or proclaim the word... The one thing we do not see the Seven do is charitable works or distributing food or funds to the widows.

RESTORED BY VATICAN II.

So why were the Council Fathers so keen to reinstate the diaconate? Was it primarily to distribute food to the poor and to help widows and orphans? Despite the falling numbers attending mass regularly, the population explosion of the last century has seen the number of Catholics grow rapidly, and the shortage of priests become more pronounced.⁹ So was it reinstated to fill a need due to the declining number of priests, in order to do pastoral work in a parish?

Many of the bishops at the council were prompted to renew the diaconate as a permanent order because of the ancient understanding that the Church herself was diaconal. John Paul II, in an address in 1987 to a gathering of Deacons in Detroit said:

The service of the deacon is the Church’s service sacramentalized. Yours is not one ministry among others, but it is truly meant to be, as Paul VI described it, ‘a driving force’ for the Church’s diakonia. You are meant to be living signs of the servanthood of Christ’s Church.¹⁰

The “Directory for the ministry and life of permanent deacons” goes further:

In every case it is important however, that deacons fully exercise their ministry in preaching, in the liturgy and in charity to the extent that circumstances permit. They should not be relegated to marginal duties, be made merely to act as substitutes, nor discharge duties normally entrusted to non ordained members of the faithful. Only in this way will the true identity of permanent deacons as ministers of Christ become apparent, and the impression avoided that deacons are simply lay people particularly involved in the life of the Church.¹¹

What is clear is that there has been a change in emphasis in the way in which the deacon’s ministry is seen in the contemporary Church. What is needed now is a better understanding of how bishop, priest and deacon can work together as fellow clergy. A deacon should not seek to take over the priest’s ministry of leadership; he should not be an emergency replacement as priestly numbers become fewer. His task is different, and his ministry should not be identified merely by its function. The deacon should represent the church and be present in those areas where no one else from the church would ordinarily have access, exercising the *diakonia* of Christ.¹²

In scripture, the Greek word *diakonia* is translated in non specific terms as ministry, and its particular English meaning is usually arrived at by the context in which it is used. But if we say that service is its distinctive quality, where does this leave the

resonance with the Greek speaking community as a sacred duty by which one was delegated to perform a ministry of significance, and was not confused in Greek usage with the ordinary meaning of servers of food and drink.

⁹ Lawrence Boadt, “Foreword” in *Theology of the diaconate*, vii

¹⁰ John Paul II, “Allocution to the permanent deacons and their wives given at Detroit, MI (19 September 1987), in *Origins* 17 (1987): 327-9

¹¹ Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the ministry and life of permanent deacons* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), #40

¹² Walter Kasper, “The Diaconate”, in *Leadership in the Church* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 38

service dimension of the other ordained ministries, and indeed, the mission of the Church herself? The deacon has no monopoly over service; it is the calling of every disciple of Christ. This is not to say of course, that deacons have no charitable or service role at all. Some focus their whole pastoral ministry in areas of charity and social justice, and this is as it should be. But it cannot be seen as the exclusive and distinctive character of their ministry.

Lumen Gentium, uses *diakonia* in the context of the ministry of the bishop without any sense that the word is restricted to social justice or charity:

That office [of bishop] however, which the Lord committed to pastors of his people, is, in the strict sense of the term, a service which is called very expressively in sacred scripture a 'diakonia' or ministry.¹³

An important part of the second Vatican Council's new way of thinking involved the way we see the very nature and mission of the Church herself.

We stress the teaching of the Council is channeled in one direction, the service of humankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need. The Church has declared herself a servant of humanity at the very time when her teaching role and her pastoral government have, by reason of this Church solemnity, assumed greater splendor and vigor. However the idea of service has been central.¹⁴

More than thirty years have passed since Vatican II, and still much in the theological understanding of the ministry of the diaconate remains confusing and unclear, and indeed, a matter of theological dispute.¹⁵ Even in Canon Law, there is no real clarity. For instance, nowhere does it articulate the permanent deacon as "a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy" in a similar way to priests and bishops. Rather, they are treated as exceptions to the norms for priests.¹⁶

A KENOTIC MINISTRY.

Walter (now Cardinal) Kasper uses the following interesting language to describe the diaconate:

"This 'downwardly mobile career' is described in the Christological hymn in the Letter to the Philippians (2: 6-11), which prescribes the basic Christian virtue, as the spiritual tradition teaches, namely the attitude of humility, which is a willingness to serve. This must be 'a fortiori' the basic attitude of the deacon."¹⁷

Kasper seems to be saying that the deacon's ministry must be recognizable as a form of service inviting and empowering others to serve in a way that communion with God and with God's people, are natural corollaries. God's gift of faithful love, strengthened by holy orders, calls him in that same kenotic love¹⁸; to follow the example of Christ the servant who assumed the condition of a slave for the love of

¹³ Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November, 1964, #24

¹⁴ Paul VI, *Hodie concilium*, AAS 58 (1966):57-64.

¹⁵ Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 13.

¹⁶ James H Provost, "Permanent Deacons in the 1983 Code". In *Canon Law Society of America Proceedings* 46 (1984): 175

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 39

¹⁸ Jean Corbon, *The wellspring of worship* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 106-7

the Father and all human kind.¹⁹

It needs to be emphasized here too, that deacons have no more a monopoly on kenosis than on *diakonia*. All disciples of Christ, by virtue of baptism, are called to empty themselves in imitation of Him, and those who are subsequently ordained take on permanent and public leadership responsibilities for those whom they serve. So it is just as easy to speak of the kenotic leadership of priests and bishops as well as deacons.²⁰

One of the challenges for the diaconate today is to understand the effect of this kenosis. It means that deacons should avoid attitudes and behaviors that point to clericalism or the acquisition of power or authority for its own sake. Excessive concern over the wearing of clerical attire or clerical forms of address, or an attitude that certain ministries may be “theirs” by right of ordination, may indicate a basic misunderstanding of the kenotic nature of the diaconate.²¹ *Diakonia* simply means ministry; there cannot be an implied suggestion of authority unless it implies the authority of Christ himself; an authority to wash the feet of his disciples, to care for others; an authority to die for his friends.²² Edmund Hill describes “ministerial authority” as “...a contradiction in terms. If it is not to be that, then it has to involve either a radical, revolutionary recasting of the idea of authority, or an evaporation of the idea of ministry, of service.”²³

DEACON AND BISHOP.

The deacon has a unique relationship with his bishop. Unlike the ordination of bishops in which all bishops present lay hands on the new bishop, or the ordination of a priest where both bishop and priests lay hands on the new priest, only the bishop lays hands on the new deacon. He is ordained “...to serve the bishop and to carry out the bishop’s commands...”²⁴ The priest represents the bishop *in situ*, in a parish, where he has governance of his parish and where he presides at the Eucharist. The deacon on the other hand, is the “eyes, ears and arms” of the bishop *in situ in diakonia*, in those areas where there is a need to take the church to the people. So in a general sense, it can be said that the priest ministers to his community “gathered”, and the deacon ministers to his community “scattered”.

The ancient document *Didascalia Apostolorum*, composed in Syria during the third century,²⁵ talks about the relationship of bishop to deacon, of the deacon’s responsibility to the people, of the source of his authority and his exercise of governance. Much of the spirit of this document is still very relevant today, and it is worth concluding this brief overview with the following extract from it:

Let the bishops and deacons, then, be of one mind; and do you shepherd the people diligently of one accord. For you ought both be of one body, father and son; for you are in the likeness of the Lordship. And let the deacon make known all things to the bishop, even as Christ to his Father. But let him order such things as he is able by himself, receiving power from the bishop

¹⁹ The directory for the ministry and life of permanent deacons, #47

²⁰ William T Ditewig, “The kenotic leadership of deacons”, in *The Deacon Reader*, 249

²¹ William T Ditewig, “Charting a theology of the diaconate”, in *Theology of the diaconate*, 46-47

²² Edmund Hill, *Ministry and authority in the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988),

11-12

²³ Ibid, 12

²⁴ Burton Scott Easton, trans. and ed., *The Apostolic tradition of Hippolytus: Translated into English with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 38-39, as quoted by William T Ditewig, “The kenotic leadership of deacons”.

²⁵ See B. Steimer, “Didascalia”, in Dopp and Geerlings, *Early Christian Literature*, 171-72, as quoted in Ditewig, “The kenotic leadership of deacons”.

as the Lord did from his Father...But the weighty matters let the bishop judge. Yet let the deacon be the hearing of the bishop, and his mouth and his heart and his soul; for when you are both of one mind, through your agreement there will be peace in the Church... Let the deacon be ready to obey and submit himself to the command of the bishop. And let him labor and toil in every place whither he is sent to minister or to speak of some matter to anyone. For it behooves each one to know his office and to be diligent in executing it. And be you [bishop and deacon] of one counsel and of one purpose, and one soul dwelling in two bodies.²⁶

CONCLUSION.

Frequently, past discussions of the diaconate have tended to dwell too heavily on the question of its function and the argument that the distinctive character of deacons is that they are servants called exclusively to the charitable and social justice ministry of the Church. But recent scholarship has shown otherwise, and breaking down this myth is an important precondition for opening up creative possibilities for diaconal ministry, and thus restoring an authentic diaconate in the life of the Church. It is clear too that the notion of the diaconate as having a monopoly on service is equally false, and it is not altogether surprising that this aspect of the servant myth has influenced some bishops, priests, religious and lay people to oppose its restoration, sometimes quite vigorously.

The key to understanding this “downwardly mobile career” lies in its kenotic nature and in the unique relationship between deacon and bishop. It is the bishop whom the deacon serves, and like the bishop his *diakonia* is to build up the community of faith, to reach out to the Christian diaspora and to those who have not yet heard the gospel. And it is from the bishop that he receives his authority to do so

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R. Hugh Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version* (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1929), 109, 148, as quoted in Ditewig, “The kenotic leadership of deacons”.