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Theology of the Diaconate

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Introduction

Of the threefold office of ministers in the Anglican Church, the Order of Deacons is the most enigmatic. Scholars recognize that a clear theology of the vocational (permanent) diaconate is often lacking.¹ Without a clear theology of the diaconate, distortions will ripple throughout the threefold office. The aim of this paper is practical. First, it will synthesize a theology of the diaconate from church history and modern scholarship. Second, based upon a proper theology of the diaconate, the present role of the deacon will be considered. Finally, the formation of deacons will be discussed.

Theology of the Diaconate

Historical Considerations

The diaconate emerged from the New Testament era as a permanent, stable order in its own right. The era from 100-600 A.D. was known as the Golden Age of the diaconate.² During this time, deacons performed a variety of functions including: participation in the ruling council in some churches (*Didache*, also Ignatius and Polycarp); servant ministry to the poor (*Shepherd of Hermas*); liturgical functions at the Eucharist (Ignatius, *Didache*); administering Bread and Wine to those present and to those absent from the assembly (Justin Martyr); baptize on par with presbyters (Tertullian); and bidding prayers of the people at the Eucharist (*Apostolic Constitutions*) are just a few of the roles deacons fulfilled.³ Occasionally, deacons would even preside at Eucharist in the absence of a bishop or presbyter but this was eventually forbidden at

¹ O.F. Cummings, "Theology of the Diaconate: The State of the Question," in *Theology of the diaconate: the state of the question : the National Association of Diaconate Directors keynote addresses, 2004*, ed. O.F. Cummings, W.T. Ditewig, and R.R. Gaillardetz (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 2.

² J.M. Barnett, *The Diaconate--a Full and Equal Order* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

Arles in 314 A.D.⁴

Gradually, the diaconate was absorbed into the presbyterate. It did not disappear, but became a transitional step along the way to priesthood. The Rev. Edward J. Enright OSA, STD describes the decline this way:

Increasingly, from the late third century into the fifth century and thereafter, the importance of an individual order called “deacon” became less and less important. There is, if you will, a reduction from a threefold ministry to a twofold ministry...As Christianity increased in size and began to move out into the countryside, however, the bishop, who remained in the city, needed to provide for the celebration of the Eucharist; he therefore began to assign presbyters to take over the priestly role that once was solely his in the small city congregations. The deacon, by his very ordination, being assigned to the bishop, did not accompany the presbyters out into the countryside. Thus, eventually the diaconate ceased to be a distinct permanent ministry and became a step to the priesthood.⁵

Additionally, the Church borrowed organizational concepts from the Roman Empire, which further contributed to the decline of the diaconate. According to Barnett, “The decline of the diaconate springs more from the development of the idea of the *cursus honorum* than from any other single factor.”⁶ The *cursus honorum* viewed the threefold office as a succession of grades from lower to higher. The previous, organic nature of the Church became increasingly vertical and hierarchical.⁷ Instead of a permanent, Sacred Order of Deacons alongside the presbyterate, one would now progress in a series of steps from lay person, to deacon, to priest, to bishop.⁸ The diaconate became a vestigial order, existing only as a transitional stage on the way to the

⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁵ Edward J. Enright, “The History of the Diaconate.” J. Keating, ed. *The Deacon Reader* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 17.

⁶ Barnett, 104.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

priesthood and largely remained so until the 20th Century. For Anglicans, the Lambeth Conference of 1958 sought to restore the diaconate⁹, as did Vatican II in the Roman Catholic Church during the 1960s.¹⁰

Relationship to the Bishop

The above laundry list of tasks that deacons performed before their eventual decline illustrates an important point: it is disastrous to attempt to define the diaconate in terms of its functional role in the Church. Instead, a proper theology of the diaconate should reflect *who* deacons are and their fundamental relationship and ordering to the larger Church. Proper functions can then be deduced from that organic relationship.

Examination of the writings of the early Church gives us some clues as to what this proper ordering among the threefold office should be. Ignatius of Antioch likened the bishop to God the Father, the presbyter to the College of Apostles, and the deacon to Jesus Christ. Polycarp also compared the deacon with Christ, particularly Christ the servant.¹¹ We see here the offices of presbyter and deacon unified under the authority of the bishop. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* further describes the deacon as a servant of the bishop, literally as his hearing, mouth, heart, and soul. Direct obedience to the bishop, not the presbyter, is also prescribed.¹²

The bishop represents the fullness of the threefold office, while the presbyter shares in the bishop's role as "*in persona Christis capitis* ('in the person of Christ as head'), but not the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰ For a complete discussion of the restoration of the diaconate at Vatican II, see chapter 5 of Dcn. William T. Ditewig's *The Emerging Diaconate: Servant Leaders in a Servant Church*, Paulist Press, 2007.

¹¹ William T. Ditewig. "The Kenotic Leadership of Deacons." In Keating, ed., 263-264.

¹² *Ibid.*, 264-265.

deacon.”¹³ Rather, the deacon fulfills the episcopal role of Christ the servant by being sent forth by the bishop into a ministry of service.¹⁴ The bishop and presbyter form, together, Apostolic ministry. The bishop and deacon form, together, the ministry of Christ the servant. The proper ordering of the relationship between bishop-presbyter and bishop-deacon is characterized by a correct understanding of the *sacra potestas*.

Sacra Potestas

The sacred power (*sacra potestas*) conferred at ordination upon the presbyter and deacon by the bishop is a single genus with two species. Dcn. William T. Ditewig describes the relationship this way:

Just as the presbyter shares in the sacred power of the priesthood with the bishop, so too does the deacon share in the kenotic [self-emptying] power of the diaconate with the bishop. In other words, I am suggesting that *sacra potestas* may be reflected in two ways: *sacerdotal* and *kenotic*.¹⁵

As an aside, Ditewig also notes that if a local parish is absent either a presbyter or deacon, it is not sacramentally whole.¹⁶

To summarize, sacramental ordained ministry is represented in both sacerdotal and non-sacerdotal forms in the offices of presbyter and deacon, respectively. Both extend from the fullness of the bishop. The deacon serves (*diakonia*) the community through self-emptying

¹³ R.R. Gaillardetz, "On the Theological Integrity of the Diaconate," in *Theology of the diaconate: the state of the question : the National Association of Diaconate Directors keynote addresses, 2004*, ed. O.F. Cummings, W.T. Ditewig, and R.R. Gaillardetz (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 90-91.

¹⁴ Ibid., 97.

¹⁵ William T. Ditewig. "The Kenotic Leadership of Deacons." In Keating, ed., 256.

¹⁶ Ibid.

(*kenosis*¹⁷) love.¹⁸ The deacon is, therefore, the icon and “sacramental focus for the *diakonia* of the entire community.”¹⁹

Present Role of the Deacon

Often, the question is asked as to what deacons can or cannot properly do. From the discussion above and understanding the sacramental, yet non-Apostolic and non-sacerdotal nature of the office, we can begin to construct the proper role of the deacon today. As noted earlier, we should not restrict the types of ministry that deacons do. Church history proves that diaconal ministries have been many and varied. The proper role of a deacon stems from *who* the deacon is and not merely from a functional understanding of the office.

First, deacons should not normally preside at the Eucharist, baptize, or preach regularly. These functions are Apostolic and sacerdotal in nature. Deacons should also not be assigned as “deacon-in-charge” of a new or struggling parish. As we have seen, these functions are related to Apostolic ministry rightly belonging to the bishop and presbyter. Moreover, something real is lost if the deacon fulfills these roles. It is not that the deacon is incapable, but the sacramental self-emptying role of service will be minimized if the deacon is made to serve as a presbyter. The parish will become sacramentally unbalanced; just as many are now that have priests but no deacons.

¹⁷ The *locus classicus* for kenotic (self-emptying) ministry is found in Philippians 2:5-8.

¹⁸ W.T. Ditewig, "Charting a Theology of the Diaconate: An Exercise in Ecclesial Cartography," in *Theology of the diaconate: the state of the question : the National Association of Diaconate Directors keynote addresses, 2004*, ed. O.F. Cummings, W.T. Ditewig, and R.R. Gaillardetz (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 44.

¹⁹ William T. Ditewig. "The Kenotic Leadership of Deacons." Keating, ed., 256.

Second, deacons traditionally serve in ministries of “word, sacrament, and charity.”²⁰ The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* also affirms these ministries.²¹ The ministry of word is more than reading the Gospel at Mass, but affirms the deacon’s role in teaching and engaging in study of Holy Scripture.²² The ministry of charity is vital to understanding the deacon’s sacramental role in the Liturgy and cannot be understood apart from it. Dcn James Keating describes the relationship between charity and Liturgy:

The deacon is sent by the Holy Spirit to the forsaken. This is why it is crucial for the diaconate to remain a liminal vocation. The deacon lives at the doorstep between the culture and the liturgical mysteries *so that he can see and hear the cry of the poor* and lay these needs at the foot of the altar and the pastor. The deacon is also an *ecclesial porter*, opening the gates of mystery to those who desire to have their spiritual needs satisfied by God, and unbolting the doors of society to other clerics who may want to more deeply understand lay life.²³

Liminality is an excellent word to describe the deacon’s ministry. He stands between the church and the world, has a foot solidly in each, and interprets the needs of the world to the Church.²⁴

The deacon’s liturgical role also reflects this liminality. The deacon is between the priest and the people in the Liturgy. He descends from the ambo to read the Gospel, offers the people’s oblations and prayers, assists in the ministration of the Sacrament, and dismisses the assembly to go into the world to serve. If the deacon merely serves at the altar without a corresponding liminal role in the world, the symbolism in the Liturgy is a mere empty form.

²⁰ Cummings, 20.

²¹ BCP (1979), 543.

²² Cummings, 20.

²³ Dcn. James Keatin. “The Moral Life of the Deacon.” In Keating, ed., 131-132.

²⁴ The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* acknowledges this role on page 531, “You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.”

Third, because the deacon is deeply embedded in the world bridging the Church and world together, deacons should be non-stipendiary and earn their living in the secular world. Exceptions may include diocesan administrative ministries or other special jobs, but generally speaking the deacon at the parish level should not be paid by the church. To do so would be to restrict the liminal nature of the deacon and make him more like a presbyter.

Formation of Deacons

Scholars disagree about the proper education and training of deacons. Some, like Dcn. Charles A. Bobertz argue for formal theological education since the diaconate is, after all, ordained ministry.²⁵ Others, including James Barnett, see theological education beyond a solid, basic Christian formation as overkill.²⁶ Regardless of these polar opposite positions, scholars are in agreement about specialized training in the world to make diaconal ministry effective. Again, Dcn. Ditetwig says

Increasingly, ministries involving health care, prisons, and other areas of social concern are becoming more specialized, with stringent professional standards for their practitioners. Deacons assuming leadership roles in such areas will not only need the personal gifts and talents to serve in these areas, but will often need diocesan support to attain the appropriate professional credentials to enable their participation in them.²⁷

The right answer seems to have both professionally competent deacons in their area of secular expertise and easily accessible theological formation and training. It simply is not reasonable to expect highly educated and trained professionals to drop what they are doing to go to seminary for 2-3 years to become a deacon. That said, quality theological education and diaconal training are a must. Creative programs offered on the diocesan/parish level would be one way of meeting

²⁵Charles A. Bobertz. "Theological Education and the Diaconate." Keating, ed., 142-143.

²⁶ Barnett, 211.

²⁷ Ditetwig, 62-63.

this need. For example, online educational platforms like Moodle can be used by dioceses to do their own education and training on a shoestring budget. Alternatively, special diaconal licentiate programs offered at seminaries through distance learning are another good option.

Conclusion

Deacons are not mini-priests or ecclesiastical non-commissioned officers. Deacons embody the self-emptying (*kenotic*) sacrificial service (*diakonia*) of Jesus Christ. They stand between the Church and the people and encourage the community of the faithful to engage in *diakonia* while interpreting the needs of the people to the Church. Deacons have a special relationship with the bishop as his non-sacerdotal, servant ministry to the community just as presbyters reflect his sacerdotal ministry. All Christians, whether bishop, priest, deacon, or laity are called to self-sacrificial service. The deacon is the icon of that service to the Church, which is sacramentally incomplete without his presence.

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