

Reader response to *Deacons: Servants of Caritas*

Anthony Gooley

I hope to offer some brief clarifications about my views in response to the article by Nick Donnelly in *The Pastoral Review*, Vol 4/2 in order to advance the excellent and important debate that has opened in the pages of this journal.

Identification of diakon- words with caritas/agape

I do not reject that charity or social service could be the focus of the ministry of a deacon, priest or lay person. I do reject the idea that the primary identification of *all* diaconal ministry is charity and social service. I reject the identity of *diakonia* with *caritas* on the basis of work by Collins, Hentschel, Brodd and others who have studied the *diakon-* and *caritas/agape* words and reached similar conclusions. I also reject it because in the New Testament no one who is designated *diakonos* is identified as being involved in charity and social service.ⁱ The careers of two of the Seven of Acts 6 record activities to do only with, preaching, catechising and baptising. Activities, which are consistent with the interpretation of Acts 6 in Greek which make no mention of food or funds which appear in several English translations.

There is circularity to the argument that those who are committed to or only know of the understanding of the *diakon-* words as meaning charity and direct service should use it in this way. Their modern usage does not tell us anything about the semantic scope of the Koine Greek *diakon-* words. Rahner, Ratzinger, Kasper, Kramer and other Germans, influenced by the use of *Diakonie* as the word to express charitable and social work in German, may bring this semantic notion to bear when they encounter the *diakon-* words in the Greek text. Those who framed the documents of Vatican II on diaconate and later documents were reliant on the commonly accepted definition of the *diakon-* words at that time. If each of these had access to the research of Collins, Hentschel and Brodd, which have only recently become known, perhaps we would have a different way of speaking about the ministry of deacons and their primary orientation.

It is true that in direct service on behalf of the bishop and the local church deacons had pastoral roles in the early centuries of the Christian era. This does not mean that such service was their primary role or that the early church understood *diakon-* words as equivalent in meaning to charity/social service. The central idea of agency, on behalf of the bishop and local church, remained for them a key feature. Deacons are recorded as doing much else besides charitable tasks. The iconography of Lawrence in Ravenna reveals hints of this. So too with the deacon doors in an iconostasis which bear the images of Angels Gabriel and Michael, the bearers of messages or agents of God. This iconography is consistent with Collins' findings. There is no novelty in my interpretation, as Donnelly claims; since these are just two extant iconographic interpretations of the ancient world which I describe.

Limitations and challenges of Biblical studies

There are limitations to all scientific investigation of Scripture, and the work of Collins (1990) is susceptible to these no less than any other. The challenge for those

who want to reject Collins' work is to revisit the sources, repeat the study and argue that different conclusions can be drawn from the evidence. Hentschel (2007) has revisited the sources reworked the linguistic analysis and found agreement with Collins. I don't think Collins' work can be dismissed because we disagree with his conclusions or because studies written before his work repeat an entrenched, popular but untested definition of the *diakon-* words.

I do not believe the work of Collins requires an either/or solution to the definition of diaconate. I do not believe that we have to choose between Collins and what is in the documents on diaconate and other studies. Rather I believe that the significance of his work lies in its potential to extend and renew the meaning of diaconal ministry. Recovery of the semantic field of the *diakon-* words could unleash the potential for deacons as part of the new evangelisation.

If the bishops had access to the research on *diakonia* at the Second Vatican Council their teaching about deacons may have been substantially different. An analogy may be drawn with documents, such as *De Ecclesia* on the Church, drafted by the preparatory commission leading up to the Second Vatican Council and the final version of the document which is *Lumen Gentium*. The draft document seems untouched by the patristic, biblical and liturgical studies which were contemporary with its formation. Compare these with the final documents in which the new studies are included and we have a very different picture. Neo-scholasticism gave way to a more dynamic theology drawing on deeper appreciation of the ancient sources. Rather than being diminished by the results of the new studies the documents of the Council were infused with new life by drawing on the reinterpreted ancient sources. There is potential for Collins work to do something similar with diaconate.

Renewal not restoration of a particular historical period

The International Theological Commission (ITC) in its work *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* suggests that Vatican II intended that the diaconate is to be renewed in the Church; it is not a restoration of a diaconate from any particular era.ⁱⁱ The form of it is open to a new situation and it will develop to meet the demands of the Gospel and people living today.

The main value of the work of Collins and others is to provide us with a very useful tool for interpreting and receiving the documents of the magisterium as well as to evaluate the contributions from theologians on the theology of diaconate. My concern about maintaining equivalence between diaconate and charitable service is that it is not evidence based. Equivalence may so restrict the field of meaning of diaconate that the renewal and flourishing of diaconate as a ministry, to support the new evangelisation, may also be restricted. For these reasons I would reject the idea of deacons as primarily servants of *caritas*.

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ⁱ John N Collins, *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 1990.

John N Collins; *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New*. Harrisburg Gracewing, 2002

Sven-Erik Brodd, Caritas and Diakonia as Perspectives on the Diaconate. In Borgegard, Fanuelsen and Hall (eds) *Ecclesiological Explorations 2: The Ministry of Deacons*. Nordic Ecumenical Council, Uppsala, 2002

Anni Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2007

ⁱⁱ International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*. London, Catholic Truth Society, 2003. pp61-62