

Deacon: Herald of the Gospel

Anthony Gooley

In a previous article I have argued that an understanding of the deacon as being primarily or essentially a minister of charity and justice is part of the servant myth which limits the full reception of the ministry of deacon in our churches.¹ Indeed the work of such scholars as John N Collins, Sven Brodd and now a work soon to be published by Anni Hentschel continue to build a strong academic case for the reassessment of the deacon as servant in this sense.² What is called for now, is to engage with this new scholarship and begin to articulate a theology and practice of diaconal ministry which takes its cue from the evidence and engages with the tradition of the Church. I want to explore three lines of reflection in developing an understanding of the ministry of deacon. The first is to look at what deacons do in the New Testament. The second area is to consider the iconography and symbolism surrounding deacons and diaconate. The third line of enquiry is that of the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons.

Ministry of the word

Taking Acts 6 as our starting point and assuming that the Seven are in fact deacons we can see that the *diakonia* which they undertake is a *diakonia* of the word. It was first a daily *diakonia* of the Greek speaking Seven among the Greek speaking widows in Jerusalem but the scope of their mission continued to expand. Stephen begins to preach, Philip begins to evangelise, catechise and baptise (Acts 7-8). The preaching or proclamation of the Gospel is the chief activity of the two whose career is documented for us. *Diakonia* in the New Testament is the word used to describe the commission received by the apostles, prophets and teachers to proclaim and explain the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is associated with the work of Paul and Barnabas in their mission to the gentiles, with the work of the apostles in building up communities (Acts 1:17, 25) and with the work of Jesus, who is described as the *diakonos* (deacon) of the Father (Mark 10:45).

There is no instance in the New Testament of any deacon doing charitable or social justice work at all, let alone as his or her primary activity.³ What is primary is that the deacon acted with a commission and was sent with this commission to act in that person's behalf and normally to deliver a word or message. Our reading of the text in English, where the *diakon* words are usually rendered as service does not help us

understand how significant these words were for the communities that gave us these texts and obscures their primary meaning. The word, *diakonia*, is best translated as ministry. The commission for the *diakonia* of Christ came from the Father and for the deacon in the Church it emerged as a commission from God mediated by the Church. That the word *diakonos* emerged so early in the New Testament tradition as a title for an office or ministry within the Church is a clue to its significance for those first communities and suggests that the commission which was received, by the laying on of hands, was a permanent one. We need to bear in mind that the apostles also had a *diakonia* of the word and we would not regard that as being a temporary commission.

In a similar way the episkopos (bishop) also emerged early in the tradition as a term of office and ministry. Very soon in the subapostolic era it became clear that the commission of the deacon was mediated through that of the Bishop, who is the first *diakonos* of the local Church. The Second Vatican Council uses *diakonia* just as we have suggested above in describing the mission of the bishop in his diocese and provides a number of passages of Scripture to indicate that this is what *diakonia* means, a ministry (Acts 1:17, 25; 21:19; Rom 11:13, 1 Tim 1:12)⁴. Lumen Gentium does not restrict the understanding of *diakonia* as only charitable and social justice work as the primary understanding of the bishop's commission. His commission is to proclaim the Gospel and to be the sign of Christ's presence as head and shepherd of his Church and as his vicar or icon.

We must remember that the threefold ministry did not emerge immediately in the life of the Church but took some time to develop. On this point Vatican II offers a subtle correction of Trent. Trent taught that the ministry of bishop, priest and deacon had existed from the beginning (*ab initio*) whereas Vatican II is satisfied to teach that these three had been called from ancient times (*ab antiquo*), bishop, priest and deacon. The presbyters (elders) took some time to be distinguished from episcopoi and both terms were occasionally used as synonyms for the one ministry. In a later development the presbyters would be called priests. This term is not found in the New Testament to designate a minister but only the ministry of Christ as high priest and the priesthood of all the baptised.

Ministry of the word must be taken in its fullest sense. To minister the Living Word requires not only the act of the proclamation of the word contained in scripture, but its enactment in liturgical celebration and sacramental signs and through acts of

concrete charity and social justice. For it is through each of the means that the Living Word is made truly present. To restrict the sense of a ministry of word only to the reading of the Gospel in public proclamation or to works of charity is reductionism and not in keeping with an understanding of the relational nature of the revelation of God's word. Agape, caritas, love are related in this way to *diakonia* in that only through agape the Living Word is encountered just as through preaching the Living Word is encountered. Revelation, in the Christian sense, is always an encounter with the Living Word. Benedict XVI draws our attention to the intimate relationship between agape, Eucharist and encounter with the Living Word in his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* and the post-Synodal exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*.⁵

Symbolism

Much is made of the charity role of deacons in a certain period of the Church including the famous examples of Lawrence of Rome and Francis of Assisi. Lawrence is often remembered for his comment about the poor being the riches of the church and for the griddle on which he died. Yet what is often overlooked in the iconography of Lawrence is that of the motif of the four Gospels. The mosaic in the Cathedral of Ravenna, illustrating the martyrdom of Lawrence, depicts him with Gospel in hand and with the cabinet containing the four books of gospels to his right. Lawrence like all of the other deacons continues the essential ministry of the deacon which is to be a minister of the Gospel. In a similar way the Francis of Assisi is quoted as saying, "preach the Gospel and if you must use words" and variations on that theme. This is used to justify a kind of diaconate that is essentially concerned with practical matters and charity, a kind of diaconate with boots on. Those who try to appropriate such instances as a justification for a diaconate which is primarily about charity miss the point that proclaiming the gospel is not an either or choice between word and deed. In both the case of Lawrence and Francis we see men who are primarily heralds of the Gospel, announcing the Good News to a widely dispersed audience and carrying that message around the diocese of Rome or Italy respectively.

In restoring the diaconate the Second Vatican Council did not wish to implement any particular historical form of the diaconate but the principle of *diakonia* and diaconal ministry in the life of the Church.⁶ It would be a mistake to privilege one historical manifestation of the diaconate as the model. If we were to look at models from past deacons do we choose Pope Adrian V, who like many bishops of Rome was a

deacon elected bishop? (Although in his case never ordained a bishop.) Or do we choose Ephrem of Nisibis who was a theologian and Doctor of the Church or Stephen and Philip who were preachers of the word? We need to be able to draw on the inspiration of many of the saintly deacons but we must be careful lest we selectively hold up as the image of deacons only those who seem to fit a popular model of deacon as primarily a servant of charity.

At his ordination a deacon is presented with the Book of Gospels and the bishop says; "Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe and practice what you teach." This powerful symbolism links the deacon to the original meaning of *diakonia*, a ministry of the word and a commission to proclaim that word. Presentation of the Book of Gospels is a symbol of the primary or essential meaning of the ministry of deacon. Herald is a powerful word. The herald in the ancient world might go throughout the land proclaiming a message of some significance with a commission to do so from the one who sent the message. The word herald incorporates a sense of mission, outreach and travel across the territory where the proclamation is to be heard. The herald is one who goes out into the world with the proclamation. The herald does not have a message of his own making but carries faithfully the message of another. The deacon as herald conjures the image found in Acts 7-8 following the commissioning of the Seven, who immediately make haste to continue their commission of the ministry of the word. Deacon as herald of the gospel immediately suggests a primary orientation or focus of the deacon toward the dispersed community, including those who are not baptised. In current church structure since the mission of the deacon comes from and is a sharing in that of the Bishop's mandate to proclaim the Gospel to all within his local Church (diocese) his area of ministry coincides with the boundaries of the diocese. This will be explored below.

Priests at ordination are presented with the chalice and paten. These symbolise his ministry at the altar and the primary orientation of the priest toward the gathered community. The shift in language from elder to priest reinforces the Eucharistic focus of their ministry. In fact the role of the priest as elder mostly survives only in references to his being ordained into the order of elders and then perhaps the Council of Priest may represent something of the Council of Elders which was prominent in synagogue structures and some churches in the first centuries of the Christian era. In English speaking countries Catholic priests are frequently addressed as Father "Smith" and are never addressed as Elder "Smith" or Priest

“Smith”, whereas deacons and bishops are referred to by the Biblical titles; Deacon “Smith” and Bishop “Smith”.

A second element of diaconal symbolism is the close relationship between the bishop and deacon expressed in his being at the right side of the bishop during liturgies. The deacon sits with the bishop and walks beside him in processions if the deacon is not carrying the Book of Gospels. In part this tradition reflects the theology of Ignatius who saw the Bishop as standing in the place of the Father as the foundation and principle of unity for the diocese (local church) and the deacon as representing the Son, who came as *diakonos* of the Father. Ignatius then placed the priests/presbyters as the senate or council supporting the bishop.⁷ While the Church today would not adopt the same kind of theological world view of Ignatius, in its current documents on diaconate the Church sees in this teaching of Ignatius a primary orientation of the deacon toward the work of the diocese and deacons as close collaborators with the bishop in this work.⁸ It is because of the wider orientation of the deacon toward the diocese and the narrower orientation of the priest toward the parish community in the early church that probably accounts for the regular election of deacons as bishops. They were men who had a bigger picture of the needs of the whole diocese.

Dispersed and gathered

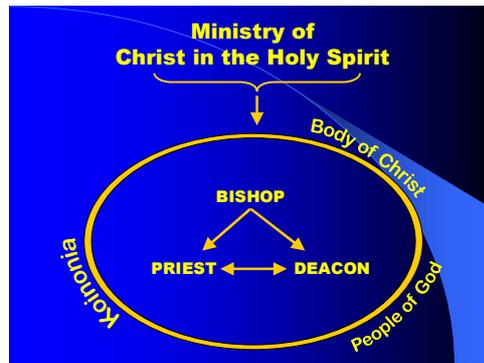


Figure 1 Sharing one diakonia

Both the deacon and the priest share in the one *diakonia* that comes from the Bishop and they are his collaborators in the mission of the local church.⁹ The local church is made one in the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁰ Deacons and priests represent two arms of the bishop’s ministry.¹¹ Deacons are primarily agents of the proclamation of the Gospel, in the full sense of this proclamation. Liturgically we point to this mission of the deacon through his being the ordinary minister to proclaim the Gospel in the liturgy.

The priest is primarily oriented toward the Eucharist and building up the community through its celebration each Sunday. In a sense the deacon has a primary orientation toward the believing community which is dispersed and toward those who are not yet part of the believing community. The priest has a primary orientation toward the gathered community, the parish and Eucharistic assembly in particular. Primary orientation is not the equivalent of exclusive orientation. We know from the ministry of the church that there is frequently overlap between the ministries of lay people, deacons and priests and this should be expected. Ministry is not so neatly defined and delineated that lines of demarcation can be drawn in all situations even when preserving the principle of each minister operating in his or her particular sphere of competence or authority.



Figure 2 Dispersed and gathered

When we examine the list of possible ministry placements for a deacon suggested in the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons there is already a clear orientation toward the ministry of deacon as herald of the Gospel to the dispersed community of believers and toward all who live within the boundaries of the diocese. I have collected the suggested placements into a table but we must remember that this is a suggested list and it is not a complete list.

Dispersed and diocese

Could include some of these:

Dispersed-parish/deanery

- RCIA
- Marriage preparation
- Sacraments programs
- Youth
- Adult faith education
- Catholics Returning Home
- Lay ministry formation

Disperesed-Diocese

- Chaplain in hospital or university
- Campus minister in school
- Diocesan administration
- Diocesan agencies
- Tribunal
- Chancellor
- Migrant chaplain
- Deanery coordinator
- Social justice or charitable agency
- Theologian/university

Table 2 Possible ministry placement Directory #26-42

The deacon gathers with the gathered community and links his mission with that of the Eucharistic assembly. He proclaims the Gospel, preaches, announces the prayers of general intercession, invites the community to greet one another in peace and sends the assembly on mission at the dismissal. He is not a concelebrant of the liturgy but participates in it and gives witness to the *diakonia* of Christ. When a church has deacons then the local church expresses the fullness of the priestly ministry of Christ as laity, deacons, priest in communion with their bishop visibly expresses the fullness of the ministry of Christ.

Diakonia and the ministry of deacon is the essential element of the Churches ministry. The church has never been without this sign of Christ's presence as head and shepherd of his church from the time of the New Testament until now. Diaconate is the primary sacrament of orders. Priest and bishops do not cease to participate in the original *diakonia* which was received when they were ordained deacons. There is one *diakonia* which has taken different expression over time. In restoring the diaconate as a permanent ministry in the life of the Church, Vatican II was fulfilling what Trent had sought to do which was to restore the fullness of the sign of the sacrament of order. Attempts to ground the essential nature of the permanent deacon as a minister of charity and social justice only are simply not consistent with what the Scriptures say a deacon does and this must be our starting point for any reflection on the ministry and life of deacons.

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¹ Deacons and the Servant Myth, *The Pastoral Review* November 2006. A deacon may make charity and social justice a primary element of his ministry, as could a lay person or priest, but that is different to saying that the essence of a theology of diaconate is that of a minister of charity and justice.

² See John N Collins *Diakonia: reinterpreting the ancient sources*, Oxford University Press, 1990, also his *Deacons and the Church*, Gracewing, 2002 and Sven Brodd, Caritas and Diakonia, in Borgegard, Fanuelsen and Hall, *The Ministry of The Deacon*, Nordic Ecumenical Council 2000. Hentschel's work *Diakonia in the New Testament* is to be published in Germany soon.

³ There is simply not the scope in an article this size to list every instance here. Collins provides a detailed list in Appendix 2 of Diakonia.

⁴ Lumen Gentium 24

⁵ *Deus Caritas Est* n14, 15 and 18 and *Sacramentum Caritatis* 88-91

⁶ International Theological Commission; *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, Catholic Truth Society, London, p53

⁷ Ignatius of Antioch Ad Trallians 3;1

⁸ Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons; n8, 23

⁹ Lumen Gentium n24-29 in Austin Flannery, *Vatican II: Conciliar and post Conciliar documents*, Veritas Dublin 1981,

¹⁰ Christus Dominus 11 also in Flannery

¹¹ Walter Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, Herder and Herder, New York, 2003, p18