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The Liturgical Role of the Deacon in the Past and Today

David R. Holeton

1. The Evolution of the Deacon's Role in the Liturgy

The role of the deacon in the liturgy (and in the life of the church in general) has never been static. In order to address the question of the deacon's role in the liturgy today, it is important to understand how that role has evolved as well as the general attitude the church has taken towards the diaconate at different times and places. For while those churches which have placed great value on the historic (apostolic) succession of ministry have retained the diaconate as part of the *cursus honorum* as a "rank" through which a candidate must pass on the way to their "goal" – the presbyterate – these churches have not, until the last few decades, placed much value on the office and ministry of the deacon often seeing in it little more than a liturgical office required at "high mass" or as an inconvenience to be endured.¹ The diaconate, in effect, has been an ecclesiastical fiction.

The First Centuries

In a survey of some of the earliest Christian documents that mention the liturgical ministries of deacons, the roles vary from one community to another. Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology* (c.155), speaks of the liturgical role of deacons twice, both in conjunction with the Eucharist: deacons "permit each one present to partake of the eucharistic bread and wine and water"² (c.65) and "they carry it also to the absentees" (cc.65; 67).

¹ Symptomatic of this was an experience reported in a variety of traditions. When the movement to restore the vocational (permanent) diaconate began, many bishops were initially resistant claiming that they "needed more priests, not deacons." Any understanding of the historic ministry of deacons in the church had generally disappeared, even in circles where one might have expected it to have been known.

² This passage is somewhat unclear. While it is usually read to mean that the deacon actually assists in the distribution of the eucharistic elements, another possible reading of the text would be to see the deacons as the ones who monitor those present-

When the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (c.230) begins to discuss the appointment of deacons (male and female) (c.16) great emphasis is placed on the importance of those ministries that should be carried out by women and not by men. Foremost among these is at baptism where a female deacon should both accompany female candidates into the font and, then, anoint them.³ Deacons should also minister to the sick and “for everyone provide ... the appropriate ministry” (including bringing communion?). Deacons should also be sufficiently numerous in each community that they can know all the faithful and keep the bishop informed of every need.

In the *Apostolic Tradition* (once attributed to Hippolytus) of which the basic stratum dates from the early third century, the liturgical ministries of deacons are mentioned on several occasions. During the baptismal liturgy, after the bishop has blessed the oils that will be needed, two deacons stand on his either side, the one holding the oil of exorcism on his left, the other the oil of thanksgiving on his right (21,8).⁴ During the actual baptism, it is the ministry of the deacon to lead the candidate down into the baptismal pool, where each candidate assents to the baptismal interrogation and is plunged into the font (21,11–18). At the Eucharist, deacons present the eucharistic oblations to the bishop (4,2; 21,27), assist the presbyters in the distribution of the cup(s) (of water, milk and wine at baptisms) and share in the breaking of the bread before distribution of communion. Other duties belonging to deacons are to “serve the bishop” and “to inform him of who is sick” (c.34). At the communal meal (*agapē*) which had a clear ritual character, the deacon brought in the lamp (25,1), sang one or more of the hallel psalms after the sharing of the mixed cup (25,12) and, in the absence of the bishop, either a presbyter or a deacon could give thanks over the common cup and sing the blessing over the bread which was then shared (28,5–6).

ing themselves for communion. In both, the deacon is clearly fulfilling the ministry of acting as assistant to the bishop which becomes the classic function of the deacon.

³ Women were also able to enter “pagan” houses where Christian women dwelt in a way that would have been socially inappropriate for men. In general, the author of the *Didascalia* saw men ministering to men and women to women (c.16).

⁴ The detail and placement of this text suggest that it may come from a later redaction of the text; see: PAUL F. BRADSHAW/MAXWELL E. JOHNSON/L. EDWARD PHILLIPS (edd.), *The Apostolic Tradition. A Commentary* (Hermeneia), Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2002, 124.

In sum, in these documents from the second and third centuries, it was the primary ministry of the deacon to assist the bishop in exercising his *episkopē*, both in the immediate sense during the liturgy and in the larger sense, by acting as the bishop's "eyes and ears". Thus, at baptisms deacons were to perform such duties as holding the oils for the bishop, taking the candidates into the font, and immersing them after the baptismal interrogation. At the eucharist they were to receive the oblations and, later, share in breaking the bread from communion and were to assist in the distribution of the cup. They were also to serve the *episkopē* of the bishop by either bringing the eucharist to those who were absent from its celebration on the Lord's Day or by reporting the names of the sick to the bishop so that he could minister to them himself.

It is important to note that none of these ministries present the deacon as a liturgical representation of the seven who, in Acts 6:1–6, were chosen to spare the twelve from the distraction of waiting table. Nor is there any suggestion that the deacon's role was to be seen as a particular "icon" of the servant ministry of Christ. Both of these ideas of diaconate come from much later ages and, in the end, are false. The early church did not draw on the pericope from Acts as a biblical basis for the diaconate that existed in its midst. The responsibilities that fell to deacons were much too elevated to make the image of deacon as a waiter of tables appropriate. The "deacon as icon of service" is a modern fiction which does serious damage to the ministry of humble service which is incumbent on all the baptised. In the liturgy of foot-washing on Maundy Thursday, it is the bishop (or in his stead a presbyter) and not the deacon who washes feet as a model of service to be emulated by the community as a whole.

Deacons in an Established Church

From these seminal references to the ministry of deacons, the roles played by deacons were to expand rapidly. The ministry of deacons as the "eyes and ears" of the bishop soon developed to one in which deacons were often the managers of the local church, holding considerable authority. Deacons often became members of the bishop's household. They also oversaw the charitable and social work of the church. The practical and the liturgical dimensions developed hand in hand and reflected each other.

With the Peace of the Church after Constantine, and the rapid move of the church into a more established mode of operation in which the liturgy was celebrated in large spaces where a more detailed and elaborate ceremonial was appropriate, the liturgical ministry of the deacon was rapidly expanded. While this varied widely within the various regions of the church, it initially was a liturgical reflection of the extensive responsibilities that became those of the deacon – these fell largely in the areas of church management and the liaison between church and world. Reading the gospel became an almost universal liturgical function of the deacon (and, in some places, singing the psalm that preceded it) leading the biddings in the prayers of the faithful and dismissing the people at the end of the liturgy for service in the world, were all liturgical embodiments of the deacon's role in relating church and world.

With the more elaborate ceremonial that evolved after the church began using large buildings for the liturgy (either secular basilicas given over for church use or buildings constructed specifically for that purpose) the preparation of the gifts became a much more ritually complex affair and deacons (for more than one was required for the job) found themselves engaged in an elaborate preparation of the table greatly evolved from the relatively simple presentation of the gifts taking place in a "house church" mentioned in Justin Martyr. In large buildings, ritual movement by the whole assembly was possible and the preparation of the gifts became one of the most important moments of the liturgy as the entire community engaged in formal, liturgical movement. During the singing of a psalm, all of the baptized, bearing gifts of bread and wine to be used at the eucharist as well as other gifts in kind to be used for the charitable work of the church, moved in procession towards the altar where they presented their offerings. Deacons, who were responsible for the oversight of the church's charitable work, played a major role at this point in the liturgy where ritual action and social outreach came face to face. Beginning by laying a cloth over a large altar in preparation for the eucharistic banquet, deacons then performed an evolved form of the ministry we find them doing in Justin. As the baptized brought their gifts to be presented at the altar, the deacons received the flagons of wine and poured each into a great vessel from which wine needed for the purposes of communion would later be drawn. Enough breads for communion were also selected and arranged by the deacon on the altar. (The bread and wine not needed for communion, as well as the other

gifts in kind, were later taken to the diaconal churches – which served as social service centres – where they would be distributed to the poor and needy.) Here there was a close relationship between the deacon’s role within and beyond the liturgy.

As the liturgy progressed, deacons would fulfil their ministry as assistants to the bishop by sharing in the long process of breaking the bread so that it could be given in communion and then by communicating the laity with the chalice. Finally, the interplay between liturgy and world was enacted again as a deacon sang the dismissal at the end of the liturgy sending the faithful out into the world where each would perform his/her respective *diakonia* as one of the baptised.

Deacons in a Mighty Church

Over the coming centuries, the deacon’s role in the liturgy was modified by several factors. When the capital of the empire was moved from Rome to Constantinople, the bishop of Rome, as the highest ranking figure of that city, began to fill the power vacuum left in the emperor’s absence. Liturgically, this saw the papal liturgy increasingly imitating the highly regulated ceremonial of the Byzantine court so that what one experienced at the liturgy of the bishop of Rome was not unlike what one experienced in the emperor’s court in Byzantium where each person had a particular ceremonial role dependent upon their status. Deacons came to fulfil liturgical functions which bore a greater relationship to the duties of a courtier than they did to their historic ministry of being both the enabler of the bishop’s liturgical *episkopē* as presider at the sacraments and the bishop’s “eyes and ears” in relating the needs of the faithful to his pastoral *episkopē*.

The ceremonial of the Byzantine church was also very much influenced by the ceremonial of the court at this time and many of the effects on the deacon’s role in the liturgy were similar to those in the West. In the Byzantine and Eastern churches, the deacon’s role in the liturgy became both more audible and visible than in the west. Fulfilling the role of serving the bishop’s *episkopē* in the liturgy by assuring its smooth execution, the deacon came to be a “living rubric”, directing the action of the liturgy with various “sung rubrics” such as “Let us be attentive!” before the readings; “Let no catechumens remain!” at the time adult catechumens were dismissed so that they would not witness the

Eucharistic mysteries before their baptism; and “Let us salute one another with a holy kiss” at the Peace.

In addition to this, a significant difference also appeared in the development of the liturgical texts themselves, particularly in the litanies and eucharistic prayers. In the West, the “solemn prayers”, one of the classical forms of intercession took the form of a series of biddings by the deacon with each set of biddings being followed by a silence for prayer, after which the presider would draw the set of intentions together with a collect.⁵ This style of prayer did not find a place in the liturgies of the Byzantine and Eastern churches where, instead, a series of litanies, sung by the deacon and concluded by the presider, became the norm. In both forms, it is possible to see the deacons fulfilling their role of being the “eyes and ears” of the bishop by bringing the needs of the church and the world before the local church. In addition to this, eucharistic prayers in Byzantium and the East gave a much more active role to the deacon who repeatedly sings exhortations to presider, ministers, people, and God alike: “Bless”; “Those who are seated, stand!”; “Spread the fans!”; “Bless, Lord!” etc., not unlike the *ceremonarius* at the imperial court.

During the same period, deacons, because of their supervisory functions became individuals of tremendous power. Their responsibility grew to include the administration of the church as a whole as well as the care for the poor. As such, deacons came to have control of the church’s purse. Bishops were elected directly from the diaconate proportionately more often than they were from the numerically larger colleges of presbyters. The archdeacon, as chief among the local deacons, came to have the authority to discipline the lower clergy as well as to examine them and determine their preparedness for ordination. This was reflected in the liturgy as it was the archdeacon who presented candidates for ordination and attesting to their fitness for the job. Between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, the power of archdeacons increased to such an extent that they came to exercise quasi-episcopal responsibility for the administration of the church within their region (archdeaconry). This change of status and function in the church was reflected liturgically when it became the usual responsibility of the archdeacon to insti-

⁵ This form of prayer has been restored for possible use at the Sunday Eucharist in a variety of Anglican and Old Catholic churches. Until recently, it was, probably, best known from its use in the liturgy of Good Friday.

tute the clergy into their cures rather than the bishop whose pastoral responsibility it (at least in theory) remained. Thus, in effect, deacons came to exercise a pastoral *episkopē* that, historically, had never pertained to the office of deacon.

The middle ages saw a massive shift in the basic character of the eucharistic life of the Christian community. Once clearly the activity of the whole People of God, in which every baptised Christian had their particular *leitourgia*, liturgical activity (including the regular reception of communion) became increasingly the domain of the clergy and the laity were slowly reduced to passivity. The causes for this are too many to enumerate here, but included factors such as the development of the vernacular languages while the western liturgy remained in Latin, the emergence of an understanding of the clergy as a “caste” set apart from the *laos* as a whole, the imposition of the Roman rite for political reasons in contexts where its ceremonial was neither known nor understood, and an overly materialist understanding of eucharistic presence.

The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, at which all the baptised had played their particular role and at which all had communicated, became the work of the clergy. Because neither the language nor the ceremonial were understood by the faithful, meaning had to be given to the rite through the invention of a new genre of text – the commentary on the mass (*expositiones missae*) which relied heavily on artificially imposed allegories of the liturgical ministers, vessels, actions and texts. The consequences for the deacon’s role in the liturgy were significant. As there was less and less lay participation in the liturgy, many of the traditional tasks of the deacon in the liturgy either fell into desuetude or became vestigial. Even these disappeared as the “low mass” with a presider and server (ministrant) alone became the general norm replacing, as it did, the “solemn mass” which required a wide variety of liturgical ministries and orders. As the weekly reception of communion by the laity gradually disappeared, so did the procession of the gifts as did the need to take communion to those who were absent from the assembly. For when the laity had ceased to expect to receive communion as a normal part of their participation in the Sunday Eucharist at which they were present, there was no need to bring it to them when they were, for some reason, absent, unless they were in danger of death – in which case they needed the ministry of a presbyter to administer extreme unction as well as the *viaticum*. The elaborate preparation of the table which we

found in the patristic church retained much of its ritual intricacy but usually came to involve the preparation of a single host and a cup with only enough wine for the “celebrant” alone to drink. These actions, now devoid of their original significance, came to be highly allegorised – usually in terms of the Passion in which the host was Christ the victim, the chalice the grave and the paten the stone which sealed the tomb – as did the ministry of the deacon himself.⁶

Deacons in the Age of Reform

The reforms of the sixteenth century did not augur well for deacons. Those churches which retained the historic three-fold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon, on the whole reduced the diaconate to a generally invisible step in the *cursus honorum*, the process of sequential ordination on the way to the presbyterate. The *interstices* or time to be observed between ordination to one order and another, originally intended to be a time of testing of both preparedness and worthiness for the “next” order, were observed more in the breach than in reality. It was not uncommon to ordain candidates to the diaconate and the presbyterate within a matter of days, if not on the same day itself. Most parishes never experienced the ministry of someone in deacon’s orders. In the Roman Catholic church, presbyters and bishops continued to dress as deacons in order to perform that prescribed liturgical ministries of deacons in the liturgy (particularly at high mass) – a custom aped by Anglicans after the ritual revival of the nineteenth century and carried on by Old Catholics.

More Recent, “Questionable” Uses of the Diaconate

The exceptions to this, in Anglicanism at least, were either anomalous or less-than-honourable. Until the nineteenth century, all those teaching in the historic schools in England (including the ancient Universities of

⁶ One fifteenth century commentary on the mass begins with this series of allegories: “The choir signifies the virgins, the church (nave) the widows, the cemetery the married people. The altar is the cross, the chalice the tomb, the paten the grave stone. The deacon is Mary, the sub-deacon John and the priest, Christ.” (MS Brno, Moravian National Library Mk 110 f. 281b.) The deacon is never mentioned again in the ensuing text. For the reader of this commentary it would have been very difficult, indeed, to have any sense of the place of the deacon in the church, let alone the liturgy!

Oxford and Cambridge) were required to be in Holy Order. Thus, many were ordained deacon in order to fulfil this legal requirement without having any personal interest in or sense of vocation to the diaconate, let alone any interest in fulfilling any of the particular ministries of deacons – either liturgically or administratively.

From the second quarter of the nineteenth century until before the Second World War many men were ordained deacon so that they could be missionaries among ethnic groups and isolated communities. Not infrequently, these were men who were themselves from those communities they were being ordained to serve but who did not meet the educational or social (and, unfortunately, sometimes racial) standards thought necessary in order to be ordained to the presbyterate. Thus the diaconate became an order for “failed presbyters”.

From the late nineteenth century until the 1970s many women were ordained as deaconesses (often using the same rite used for the ordination of deacons but substituting “deaconess” for “deacon”) because Anglicanism did not admit women to Holy Order. After their ordination many, at least in some Anglican provinces, were given responsibility for ongoing pastoral and (at least partial) liturgical oversight (*episkopē*) in rural communities over widespread areas such as rural and northern Canada and Alaska. The celebration of the Eucharist was reserved to the archdeacon (anomalously, always a presbyter) or the bishop who would preside during their occasional visits. When Anglican provinces began to ordain women to the diaconate, many of these “deaconesses” because of the rite by which they were ordained, came to be regarded as deacons. Their ministries remained the same – deacons with the *episkopē* of a presbyter in all things with the exception of eucharistic presidency. So the diaconate became an evasion of a difficult theological nettle as can be seen in the very small percentage of these women who remained deacons after it became possible to be ordained to the presbyterate.

2. Deacons in the Liturgy Today

The question of the liturgical role of the deacon is a much more complicated one today than it was even a quarter of a century ago. Then, for much of Western church at least, the vocational diaconate was largely unheard of. The deacons one encountered were normally “transitional”

and serving their six months to a year before they were “advanced” to the presbyterate. As financial crises complicated the employment situation in many dioceses, fewer and fewer parishes even saw “transitional” deacons as curates. Occasionally one encountered deacons who were “failed priests” – older men (and they were men) who had hoped to be priests but for one reason or had not met some requirement of the local bishop and were fated to remain deacons throughout their ministry – a ministry to which many of them did not feel called and in which many were often very frustrated.

During the same period, a shift took place in eucharistic piety. The general expectation among the faithful that each Sunday would be marked by a celebration of the Eucharist saw an increasing number of theological students ordained to the diaconate during the final year of their studies so that they could be ordained priests before being sent to their first parish. As a result, the former phenomenon of the “deacon in charge” in small parishes disappeared.

Together, all these factors produced the curious result that, if a parish ever saw a “deacon” in the liturgy, that “deacon” was much more likely a presbyter or, perhaps, a bishop dressed as a deacon for “liturgical purposes”.⁷

⁷ Since Vatican II, the custom of a bishop or presbyter dressing as a “liturgical deacon” has disappeared in the Roman Catholic and Old Catholic Churches – and has never taken place in the Byzantine and Oriental Churches. Alas, the same cannot be said of some parts of Anglicanism where, for some, the “maple sugar” (deacons are the sap, presbyters the syrup and bishops the sugar) or “stamp collecting” (deacons and bishops are respectively the “low and high values” in the series) theories of the *cursus honorum* are still in vogue. With its corollary “once a deacon, always a deacon”, as the rationale for vesting as a deacon in the liturgy. Of this practice, Louis Weil remarks: “This strikes me as an example of an appalling trivialization of an outward symbol (a vestment) which does not correspond to the interior reality. It would be wise to remember that both the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches canonically inhibit a minister of one order from wearing the vesture of another order. Since we claim to share with those two traditions a concern for the maintenance of the three-fold pattern of ministry, even a slight degree of humility would suggest that these traditions understand vesture not merely as a surface decoration, but rather as corresponding to the reality of the person’s place in the community. This is not a liturgical charade.” Cf. LOUIS WEIL, *Should the Episcopal Church Permit Direct Ordination?* in: Edwin F. Hallenbeck (ed.), *The Orders of Ministry: Reflections on Direct Ordination*, 1996, Providence RI: North American Association for Diaconate, 1996, 62.

A consequence of the widespread reform and renewal of the churches' liturgical life over the past few decades, when the sense that the liturgy is the work of the whole People of God (rather than something done for the laity by the clergy) became a fundamental premise of the liturgical celebration, a variety of liturgical ministries began increasingly to be exercised by lay people. Among these were many which had been historically the liturgical ministries of deacons which, in their absence, had been fulfilled by presbyters. Such ministries included, among others, leading the Prayers of the People (*oratio fidelium*), helping with the preparation of the gifts at the "offertory", and, in some places, the proclamation of the Gospel and the dismissal. In some Anglican communities, at least, it became the custom to vest a lay person in a dalmatic-like garment and to refer to him or her as the "deacon" because she or he was fulfilling the historic liturgical duties of the deacon.

The restoration of the vocational diaconate, and the consequent reappearance of deacons in many parishes, thus was not without its tensions. Newly ordained deacons knew well the liturgical ministries that had been theirs historically and they expected to exercise those ministries in the parishes to which they were appointed. This often resulted in a conflict with those lay members of the parishes who had been fulfilling some of those traditionally "diaconal" liturgies. Given the relatively short time it takes for a practice to become liturgical "tradition", many liturgical ministries that have historically been those of the deacon had come to be seen as ministries "traditionally" exercised by lay persons who, in turn, saw deacons encroaching on what had become "their" ministry in the parish. In many places, it would have been pastorally unwise, if not counterproductive, to allow deacons to perform all the liturgical roles that have been historically exercised by deacons.

It is certainly not part of the ministry of deacons to supplant the ministry of the laity.⁸ To speak of the liturgical role of the deacon today

⁸ In a larger sense, it is not appropriate for any person to usurp the ministry of another. This is a matter which still requires serious reflection in our churches. There are still ordinations to the episcopate where bishops are given *all* the liturgical ministries displacing presbyters, deacons and lay persons from ministries that are normally theirs. The same is often true of regular ordinations where the ordinands are all given jobs so that one of them is always liturgically occupied – again displacing others from the liturgical ministries which they normally exercise. Bishops and presbyters who feel that they must play guitars and lead the community in song need

requires that these new factors be taken into account rather than simply assuming that everything the deacon came to do in the liturgy over the centuries is appropriate for the deacon to do today.

A Confusion of Ministries?

The liturgical ministry of the deacon today must be grounded in a well-formed theology of the diaconate. In a recent, and very helpful, article, Richard Gaillardetz⁹ points out some current theologies of the diaconate which he sees as “dead ends”. These theological dead ends are those which see the diaconate as 1) an internship for the presbyterate (the *cursus honorum*); 2) a manifestation of the iconic model of holy order in which the deacon is the icon of Christ the servant; and 3) the beginning of a distinctive “clerical state”. Each of these theologies of the diaconate, in one way or another, does serious damage to a theology of ministry which is rooted in baptism. As such, each does harm to a restored diaconate which must find a distinct place within a church in which all, because of their baptism, are “ordained”.

In Gaillardetz’s search for a contemporary theology of the diaconate, he suggests a number of factors which should characterise that theology. Among them, two that are particularly pertinent to the question at hand are: 1) a theology of the diaconate must distinguish diaconal ministry from that of the presbyter and bishop; and 2) a theology of the diaconate must distinguish the diaconate from lay ecclesial ministry without diminishing lay ecclesial ministry.¹⁰

In the Roman Catholic Church, there has been an interest in the restored diaconate expressed by some bishops as a means of dealing with the shortage of presbyters. The liturgical/sacramental need for presiders at baptisms, weddings, funerals and for the sacramental anointing of the sick and dying has led to bishops permitting deacons to fulfil these ministries (diaconal sacramental anointing of the sick, however, has been censured by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, but continues in “non-sacramental” form). The result is a curious inverse blurring

to reflect on the possible confusion of ego needs with their principal ministry of liturgical *episkopē*.

⁹ RICHARD R. GAILLARDETZ, *Towards a Contemporary Theology of the Diaconate*, in: *Worship* 79 (2005) 419–438.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 434–438.

of the roles of bishops/presbyters and deacons. Just as presbyters and bishops were (and in some places still are) accustomed to dressing as deacons during the liturgy so that they could appear to fulfil the deacon's liturgical "role" in the absence of a real deacon, now deacons are being delegated liturgical ministries which are traditionally those of bishops and presbyters appearing to have regular liturgical *episkopē* over the life of the community. While one might appreciate the pastoral need for presiders for these liturgical celebrations, the licensing of deacons to preside at these events avoids the necessity of addressing more fundamental questions that lie behind the shortage of candidates for the presbyterate in the Roman Catholic Church. Such a vocations crisis does not present itself in most other churches today and is certainly not a problem in Anglican and Old Catholic Churches. Thus, it would be most unwise for Anglicans and Old Catholics to begin delegating liturgical ministries traditionally exercised by bishops and priests to deacons on the basis that they are now permitted to exercise such ministries in the Roman Catholic Church. Should there be a deacon (or lay person for that matter) exercising normal pastoral and liturgical *episkopē* over a community, neither marriage nor gender provides a canonical obstacle to that person's ordination as a presbyter in most of either Anglicanism or Old Catholicism.

The exhortation or address to those who are to be ordained makes clear that bishops and presbyters are ordained to a ministry that is quite different from that of a deacon. The ministry of oversight (*episkopē*) historically found its focus in the office of the bishop as the chief pastor and presider at the liturgy in the local (diocesan) church – particularly at the dominical sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. Bishops also exercise this *episkopē* in delegating responsibility for pastoral oversight and liturgical presidency to presbyters who preside in the bishop's absence in particular parishes/congregations. Deacons are not ordained to this ministry of *episkopē*.¹¹ It has not been a normal part of the ministry of

¹¹ There are many examples, however, of when deacons have exercised both pastoral care and some sort of liturgical presidency. In many rural parishes it was common for a transitional deacon to be given pastoral responsibility as deacon-in-charge for a community and to officiate at its Sunday worship. Until the relatively recent past when communities have come to expect to be able to *receive* the Eucharist each week, Sunday worship often consisted of the Office (Matins or Evensong) and the archdeacon would come every month or two to preside over a celebration of the Eucharist. More recently, however, in many places this has developed into a

the deacon to exercise pastoral ministry or to preside liturgically in local communities. Instead, the deacon is ordained to “assisting or serving the needs of pastoral oversight (*episkopē*) as determined by the one who exercises that oversight”.¹² The liturgical ministry of the deacon must then be a clear manifestation of both the *difference* between the ministry of deacons and those of bishops and presbyters and also of the *particularity* of the deacon’s ministry of service to the needs of the ministry of *episkopē*.

How can these two realities best be reflected in the liturgy? In a number of new ordinals, the bishop-elect is asked in these or similar words: “As chief priest and pastor, will you encourage and support all the baptized in their gifts and ministries, nourish them out of the riches of God’s grace, pray for them and celebrate with them the sacraments of our redemption?” Bishops who have promised “to encourage and support all the baptized in their gifts and ministries” need to be particularly conscious of how they do this in the context of the many liturgical assemblies in which they find themselves present – be it a great occasion at which the whole diocese is assembled or in a small and, perhaps, moribund parish. The presence of deacons exercising liturgical ministries that clearly appertain to their order – and only their order – is particularly important. The liturgical model we present at episcopal liturgies should be that of the church at her best – one that clearly says “the celebration of the Eucharist is the work of the whole People of God”, and not one that elevates one order over another or eliminates one ministry altogether.

The other consequence of any attempt to reflect the distinctiveness and particularity of the deacon’s ministry is to re-assess some of the liturgical practices that have developed in our churches over the recent past where we have extended ministries to deacons on the basis that “Rome has done it” without serious reflection on either the historical or theological consequences. Are deacons in positions where they have

liturgy modelled on the pro-anaphora (Service of the Word) followed by the distribution of the communion. When this happens on a weekly basis, this becomes the community’s normative experience of eucharistic worship and it *appears* to many of the faithful as if the deacon has become the normative presider at the Eucharist acting as the bishop’s delegate in the same manner as is a presbyter. This seriously blurs the distinction between the ministries of bishops and presbyters and that of the deacon.

¹² Cf. GAILLARDETZ (see note 9), 432.

effectively been given pastoral and liturgical *episkopē* on an on-going basis? If so, should they not be ordained to the presbyterate – for it is that order whose ministry they are largely exercising. Is licensing deacons to baptise, to distribute the Eucharist on a regular basis at a Service of the Word on Sundays, and to preside at weddings not doing damage to an important aspect of the theology of the diaconate?

The anointing of the sick is, perhaps, quite a different matter. This did not become a practice restricted to presbyters and bishops until the ninth century – when the idea of clergy as a separate class was being invented – and the evidence suggests that, until then, it was more frequently administered by the laity than the clergy.¹³ Rather than seeing the anointing of the sick as a ministry of bishops and presbyters that ought to be delegated to deacons because of a shortage of priests (as some think in the Roman Catholic Church), perhaps the churches need to re-evaluate the consequences of the historical development of the sacrament and, then, acknowledge that this is a ministry that could quite appropriately be exercised not only by deacons but also by the laity at large or, at the very least, by lay members of a parish’s “pastoral care team”.

A Distinctive Liturgical Ministry in Concert with Others

One of the goals of the movement to restore the vocational diaconate is to assure that there is a vocational deacon in each parish just as there is normally a presbyter in each parish. Consequently, the bishop should normatively assure that there is a deacon functioning liturgically at every episcopal liturgy. This should be just as much a matter of course as it now is for the bishop to assure that she or he is accompanied by members of the college of presbyters around the altar and that other “non-ordained” members of the assembly will read, lead prayers, chant the psalm after the first reading, serve as acolytes, and all the other liturgical ministries that they are accustomed to performing. In presenting a well-modelled liturgy, the bishop will fulfil the teaching ministry that is fundamentally that of a bishop as a good model will do much more im-

¹³ See BERNHARD POSCHMANN, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick* (Herder History of Dogma), Freiburg: Herder/Montreal: Palm, 1964, 234ff.; cf. the German original: *Busse und letzte Ölung* (HDG 4/3), Freiburg: Herder, 1951, 125ff.

mediate (and lasting) good than many lectures and pastoral letters from synod office.

What liturgical ministries should the deacon be seen to be performing on these occasions? Those which make clear that deacons are those who serve the needs of the *episkopē* of the church, those who act as persons “sent forth” on behalf of the bishop (or the one with immediate pastoral responsibility for a particular community) in service of that *episkopē*, and those who have often been given the responsibility for the charitable and social work of the church. Looking at the classical texts and discerning the deacon’s ministry in them is not an exercise in historical restorationism – trying to reconstruct the “golden age” of the deacon – but to see the deacon’s liturgical ministry in a context in which there was a clearer relationship between the deacon’s role in the church which was, in turn, mirrored by the deacon’s role in the liturgy.

Thus, the liturgical ministry of the deacon should be to attend the bishop, to be seen to serve those who exercise *episkopē*, and to perform those ministries which make clear the deacon’s role in interpreting church to world and world to church. “Attending the bishop” is, in part, the relatively simple ministry of presence and accompaniment – not as a master of ceremonies but as the one on whom the bishop “relies”. This would be made clear if the deacon were to remain close to the bishop at all times that are reasonable (we probably don’t need deacons waiting at the foot of the pulpit for the bishop to descend!). As episcopal visitations have increasingly become times at which baptism takes place – frequently that of adults – it would be appropriate if the deacon were to be delegated to perform the actual baptism which would highlight the bishop’s role as the one who anoints with chrism. At the preparation of the gifts, the deacon’s role should be clear – not so much as a “waiter on tables” but as the one who assures that all is in order for the bishop’s presidency at the table. This might be made clear if it were not the deacon alone who prepared the gifts but that task be performed in conjunction with others (including lay persons) but that it be visible that the deacon is assuring that all is being well ordered for the presider’s arrival at the table. The deacon should stand by the presider throughout the eucharistic prayer, and share in the breaking of bread and distribution of communion. All of these are ministries of attendance on and service to the ministry of *episkopē*.

The deacon’s ministry as one who is “sent” and who has a particular role in relating church and world can be best seen in the proclamation of

the Gospel, preaching on some regular basis (this would be appropriate when the deacon is serving in the parish to which she or he has been assigned rather than when accompanying the bishop), and singing the dismissal at the end of the liturgy.

There are some traditional ministries of the deacon that have not been mentioned – these are those that include charisms not given at ordination. While Aidan Kavanaugh is probably right in his oft made observation “if you can’t sing, you shouldn’t be ordained”, this is rarely one of the criteria applied when selection committees discuss candidates’ appropriateness for ordained ministry. Failing to do so, however, does have implications for some of the traditional ministries of the deacon. Singing the *Lumen Christi* (the Light of Christ) while carrying the paschal candle¹⁴ and the *Exsultet (praeconium paschale)* at the Great Vigil of Easter or the portion from the Roman Martyrology announcing the birth of Christ at the beginning of the midnight Eucharist of Christmas are texts which have been classically those of deacons and encapsulate the deacon’s ministry of relating church and world as these are proclamations to the world at large rather than to the gathered community alone. As liturgical texts, however, they are highly dependent on being sung, rather than read. No one is served well when they are badly sung. As such, they should be delegated to those who sing well rather than asking a deacon who has difficulty singing to struggle through the text because it is historically the deacon’s role. In these matters charism rather than order should be the guiding principle in the exercise of these particular ministries.

Conclusion

From what has been said, those who were looking for clear-cut rules about the liturgical role of the deacon will probably come away disappointed. Defining the deacon’s role in the liturgy today requires not only some sense of the historical development of the ministry of deacons, it also requires a clear theological understanding of what we want a restored diaconate to be in our age. If we believe that a restored diaconate

¹⁴ The parallel roles with their acclamations when used at the *lucernarium* are also, appropriately, those of the deacon but who should exercise the ministry also needs to be put in the context of the ability to sing.

has something valuable and distinctive to offer the church in its ongoing process of renewal, then the liturgical ministry of deacons must reflect that. Deacons do not have a ministry of service because they first have a liturgical ministry; deacons' liturgical ministry is the mirror of the ministry of service which they should have at the heart of their sense of vocation to the vocational diaconate.

Over the past thirty years a renewed sense of ministry with a baptismal ecclesiology at its heart has won a place in many communities. Out of that has flowed a sense that all those who are baptised are gifted with charisms which are to be used in the ministry of the church. Appropriately, this finds itself manifested in the Sunday Eucharist where a wide variety of people fulfil diverse liturgical ministries. To use our historical knowledge of the liturgical roles of deacons in the past as a "check-list" for everything deacons should be doing in the liturgy today would be, in many parishes, pastoral folly. If a deacon is fulfilling her or his ministry as "one who is sent" in the service of *episkopē* and as one who interprets world to church and church to world, then the liturgical ministries that emerge from that will be clearly understood and valued by the community; if not, they will ring false and be little more than a liturgical charade. That is a matter of much wider proportions than simply trying to discern and apply a set of liturgical duties culled from the varied roles deacons have played in the liturgy in the past. In many of the parishes which over recent years have come to know the ministry of permanent deacons, the interplay between the extra-liturgical and liturgical ministries of vocational deacons has come to play an important role in the ongoing renewal of their common life as a Christian community.

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die ältesten erhaltenen Zeugnisse aus dem 2. und 3. Jh. lassen erkennen, dass Diakone dem Bischof so zugeordnet sind, dass dieser seine Verantwortung (*episkopē*) in der und für die Ortskirche wahrnehmen kann, und zwar sowohl im Vollzug des Gottesdienstes (Austeilen der eucharistischen Gaben an Anwesende und abwesende Kranke) als auch an den Schnittstellen von Liturgie und Alltagsleben, d.h. im sozial-karitativen Bereich. Wo von Diakoninnen die Rede ist, so sind sie (z.B. beim Taufbad) für Frauen zuständig. Nirgends wird beim Diakonat auf Apg 6 (Tischdienst) oder auf das Verständnis Jesu als Diener für andere im Sinn eines Vorbildes rekurriert.

Die Bedeutung des Diakonates wächst mit der grösseren Zeremonialität des in Basiliken usw. gefeierten Gottesdienstes und der zunehmenden Zahl der Glieder der lokalen Kirche von der konstantinischen Wende an; das wird sichtbar im Blick auf die Verkündigung des Evangelientextes und auf Aufgaben bei der Aussonderung und Bereitung der von den Gläubigen in die Kirche mitgebrachten Gaben für die Eucharistie und die Armenfürsorge.

Im Osten bekommen die Diakone eine sichtbarere und hörbarere Rolle als im Westen, insofern sie sozusagen das liturgische Verhalten der Gläubigen dirigieren und für den geordneten Verlauf des Gottesdienstes Verantwortung tragen. Die Funktion der Diakone, «Augen und Ohren des Bischofs» zu sein, zeigt sich in Ost und West etwa in der Leitung der Fürbitten, wo eben die Nöte von Menschen und der Welt vor den Bischof und die Gemeinde gebracht werden. Diakonen wurden in der Regel vom Bischof auch die effiziente Verwaltung der finanziellen Ressourcen einer Ortskirche oder die Ausbildung junger Kleriker anvertraut, wobei sich hier wieder der Konnex zwischen geistlichen und materiellen Aspekten der grundsätzlich bischöflichen *episkopē* zeigt. Die Bedeutung der Diakone zeigt sich darin, dass Bischöfe mehr aus ihren Reihen als aus dem Kollegium der Presbyter gewählt wurden.

Der allmähliche Niedergang der praktischen Bedeutung des Diakonates im Mittelalter hängt mit der Klerikalisierung des Gottesdienstes zusammen: Wo die Laien nur noch passive Zuschauer sind und der Empfang der Kommunion auf den Presbyter/Priester beschränkt ist, da werden wesentliche liturgische Aufgaben des Diakons überflüssig und vom allein «zelebrierenden»

Priester übernommen. Der Diakonat wird zur blossen temporären Durchgangsstufe zur Priesterweihe. Wo Bischöfe und Priester sich, etwa in einem Hochamt, als Diakon und Subdiakon verkleiden, liegt keine Weiterführung des altkirchlichen Diakonats vor, sondern dessen Karikierung.

Im Horizont des wachsenden Bewusstseins, dass es die ganze Gemeinde ist, der die Feier von Gottesdiensten aufgetragen ist, nicht nur dem Priester, sind – manchmal auch als Folge von Priestermangel – in den letzten Jahrzehnten viele Aufgaben in der Liturgie von nicht ordinierten Laien (bisweilen in Tuniken gekleidet) übernommen worden, etwa bei den Fürbitten oder bei der Gabenbereitung in der Eucharistiefeier oder bei deren Austeilung während der Kommunion. Das sind Aufgaben, die früher dem Diakonat zugekommen sind. Dessen liturgietheologisch geklärte Erneuerung kann aber nicht einfach das Frühere unbesehen repristinieren, sondern muss auch den angemessenen liturgischen Dienst der Laien aufgrund ihrer Taufe voll berücksichtigen.

Andere Probleme ergäben sich, wenn anglikanische und altkatholische Kirchen einfach einer neueren römisch-katholischen Praxis folgten: Angesichts des Priestermangels haben Bischöfe Diakonen erlaubt, einerseits Tauf-, Trauungs- und Beerdigungsgottesdienste zu leiten, und es gibt Stimmen, welche Entsprechendes auch für die Spendung des Sakraments der Krankensalbung vorschlagen. Im ersten Fall bedeutet das eine Vermengung von diakonalen und episkopalen Aufgaben (welch letztere konkret vom Bischof oder in seinem Auftrag von Presbytern oder Presbyterinnen wahrgenommen werden). Wenn Diakone und Diakoninnen derart in die pastorale Arbeit hineingewachsen sind, dass solche Leitungsfunktionen nahe liegen, müssten sie eigentlich für presbyterale Aufgaben ordiniert werden. Im Fall der Krankensalbung mag die Sache anders liegen, da diese bis ins 9. Jh. anscheinend mehr von Laien als von Ordinierten vorgenommen wurde.

Das Ziel der Erneuerung des permanenten (*vocational*) Diakonats in seiner Beziehung zum Bischof (und Presbyterat) und zur ganzen Gemeinde sollte es sein, dass die Präsenz eines Diakons oder einer Diakonin für jede Gemeinde eine Selbstverständlichkeit ist wie die eines Priesters oder einer Priesterin. Ebenso selbstverständlich sollte immer ein Diakon oder eine Diakonin dem Bischof am Altar assistieren, zumal bei der Gabenbereitung, oder ihn bei einer Visitation begleiten. Leitend für die weitere Ausgestaltung des erneuerten Diakonates sollte sein, wie dieser an der Schnittstelle von Gemeinde und Welt nach aussen, von Welt und Gemeinde nach innen am besten dem Auftrag der Kirche dienen kann. Fehlt aber ein Charisma wie das, gut zu singen, dann ist es wohl besser, klassische liturgisch-diakonale Aufgaben wie den Vortrag des österlichen *Exsultet* zu delegieren. Als Ganzes kann eine Erneuerung des Diakonats nur gelingen, wenn die historischen Kenntnisse über die Aufgaben des Diakonats sich mit einer wachen theologischen und pastoralen Besinnung auf die Sendung der Gemeinde verbinden.