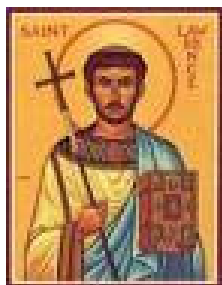


Deacons and the Servant Myth

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It is frequently argued that the distinctive character of deacons is that they are servants called to the charitable and social justice ministry of the Church. The belief that service is distinctive of deacons is the servant myth. It is based on a false reading of Acts 6 and it has consequences for the way in which the Church receives the ministry of deacons. Breaking down this myth is the first step in restoring an authentic diaconate in the life of the Church.

What happens in Acts 6.1-7? Is Acts 6 the starting point for the ministry of deacons and what is their ministry? Frequently readers assume that the Seven were called to meet the material needs of the Greek widows who were neglected at the daily distribution and that this form of charitable service establishes the authentic and distinctive character of deacons. This is the beginning of the deacon as “servant myth”. This myth is a belief that the distinctive and defining characteristic of a deacon and diaconal ministry is service, usually in the form of charity, especially to the poor and those on the margins of Church and society. It is a myth that continues to distort our understanding of the diaconate and hampers the full reception of the fruits of this restored ministry. Curiously it never seems to touch the transitional diaconate, which is accepted without question or in-



deed much reflection, at least in the Roman Catholic tradition. If service, is the distinctive quality of the diaconate what does this say about the service dimension of the other ordained ministries and the mission life of the Church? *Diakonia* is a word Roman Catholics use to describe the ministry of the bishop without any sense that the word is restricted to social justice or charity (*Lumen gentium* 24). Surely all ministers are called to imitate Christ the servant and a similar attitude should pervade the whole church. I do not argue that deacons cannot have or will not have a charitable or service role only that it is not the distinctive character of their ministry. The myth does not have its genesis in Acts but is shaped by revival of the diaconate in nineteenth century German Lutheran church, reinforced by translators choices which shape our understanding of Acts and reflections of diaconate in post war Germany in the 1940's and 50s. In this article I intend to explore the origins of the myth and suggest why it is not a sound basis for a theology and praxis of the diaconate. The most recent documents of the Roman Catholic tradition on diaconate contain layers of tradition but it is possible to perceive an outline of diaconate that is balanced and avoids the servant myth as a foundation.

Making sense of Acts

In making sense of Acts 6.1-7 translators in English take some liberties with the Greek text. The choices translators make have influenced the way we hear and make meaning of this text. In verse one the cause for the complaint of the Greek speaking Christians, is variously given as a neglect of the widows in the daily distribution of *food* (NRSV),

of *funds* (GNB) and of *food* (JB). The RSV is happy to leave the neglect simply at an unspecified distribution. The Greek does not add the preposition *of* or the terms *food* and



funds and in this the RSV reflects the original text. The text does not say what is being missed in the daily distribution and it has to be inferred from the whole context of Acts. It would hardly seem likely that either food or funds could be intended because Acts 5 deals with what happens to disciples who try to neglect others in the distribution of the material goods of the community. In verse 2 the apostles complain about not wanting to neglect the word and wait *on* tables (NRSV), neglect the preaching and *manage finances* (GNB) neglect the word *to give out food* (JB) and to give up preaching to serve tables (RSV). Again it is the RSV which resists the temptation to add anything to the text and it does not insert a preposition which is not found in the Greek between serve and tables or add references to finances or food. In verse 4 all translators are certain about prayer and with dealing with the word we are most interested in; *diakonia*, which is translated in the way it is most normally used in Acts and the letters of Paul. *Diakonia* is translated as ministry, and in the context of the whole sentence a ministry of the word (*diakonia tou logou*).

If we take the Greek text, as it is reproduced RSV, we are able to construct a better picture of what is really happening in Acts 6.1-7. The Greek speaking Christians are complaining that their widows are being neglected in the daily *diakonia*. In Acts *the dia-*

konion is the proclamation of the Gospel. They are neglected for two reasons, the Aramaic speaking Apostles predominantly 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 daily *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 the Greek has it, to minister tables. Both the Apostles and the Seven had been entrusted with the same *diakonia* which is to minister or proclaim the word. To underscore this interpretation we see that Stephen immediately commences to proclaim the Gospel to the point of giving witness with his life (Acts 6-7.50) and Philip commences his *diakonia* of the word in proclaiming the Gospel, catechising the Ethiopian and baptising (Acts 8). The laying on of hands becomes the concrete sign that the ministry entrusted to the apostles is to be entrusted to the Seven. The one thing we do not see the Seven do is charitable works or distributing food or funds to the widows, in fact we do not see anyone in the New Testament with the title of *diakonos* engaged in a specifically charitable service activity. This should give us some clues as we address the servant myth.

Whether or not the Seven were the first deacons, as Eusebius

calls them, is debateable. The one word that Luke does not use of them is *diakonos* the noun from which we get our word deacon. Proclaiming the word, leading communities, representing communities and taking messages between communities and other forms of ministry are associated with those who are called *diakonos* in the New Testament as well as the clear delegation and imposition of a mandate for such ministry by the leaders of the community through the laying on of hands. Therefore it is reasonable to infer that the Seven may have been referred to as deacons in the early Church and that Eusebius is reflecting that understanding.

How did *diakonia* become service?

We do not have space here to review the many references to deacons in the first nine centuries of the Church, and in particular the first four centuries when so much of the structure of ministries in the early Church was taking shape. A few brief references, taken from the Fathers and used again in the recent Roman Catholic documents are testament to an earlier tradition, before *diakonia* was defined as service and deacons as a kind of ordained social worker/charity worker. Three references will suffice to indicate the flavour of this early tradition. Ignatius to the Magnesians, "deacons entrusted with the ministry/*diakonia* of Christ" and to the Trallians, "deacons are not waiters (*diakonoi*) providing food and drink but executives (*hyperetai*)



of the Church of God" and finally to the Philadelphians, "take care to use only one Eucharist...there is one bishop in union with the presbyters and the deacon." The earliest witnesses of the tradition reflect the common Greek usage. Deacons were not thought of as having a distinctive servant orientation but as part of the broader understanding of the apostolic ministry and leadership of local churches.

Although it is a broad leap from the early tradition we need to look to Trent. By the time the Reformation was underway the diaconate had become a transitional ministry of limited liturgical functions. Luther and others argued that the ministry, as they experienced it, had limited value in the life of the community and saw it more as an appendage to the ministry. The response of the Council of Trent was to insist on the reality and validity of the threefold ministry of deacon, priest and bishop and to call for the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent ministry in the life of the Church. Trent's desire to restore the diaconate was not fulfilled until the Second Vatican Council was able to take up the issue again and Paul VI issued *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*.

(Basic Norms and Directory, Introduction §2) By 1998 the Congregations for Clergy and for Education issued jointly the *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* and the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*.

In these two documents we find an outline of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on diaconate. Although I will come to

these in more detail later, what we find in the documents is an interweaving of two traditions and early tradition which frames diaconate within the broader understanding of the apostolic ministry of the Gospel and a narrower tradition with a focus on *diakonia* as a synonym for service. Behind these two traditions stand two sources. The first source is the Scriptural foundation which understands *diakonia* a ministry as outlined in the study by Collins. The second source is the revival of the diaconate in the German Lutheran churches in the nineteenth century specifically as a work of charity and social work. It is to this second source that we now turn our attention.

A type of diaconate was revived in the nineteenth century in the Lutheran Church in Germany and gradually this pattern of diaconate was adopted in the Nordic Lutheran and some of the Reformed churches. The Lutheran Pastor Theodore Fliedner and his wife Frederike established a ministry to care for the homeless and poor who were increasing in number in the industrialised cities. This ministry was not an ordained ministry and was modelled somewhat on the lines of a Roman Catholic religious order. The Fliedner's took their inspiration from their understanding of Acts 6 as a ministry of charity to the widows who, in their reading of the text, were neglected in the daily distribution of charity and the goods of the community. They called the women in this ministry deaconesses and the men deacons.

Brodd argues that the identification of *diakonia* with charity (*caritas*) and social service developed into a functionalist un-

derstanding of diaconate, where the deacon is defined not from an ecclesiological foundation based on the Church as *koinonia* and situating ordination within this context but inductively from the sum of the functions performed. The result is that in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions the deacon came to be seen as a kind of ordained social worker. In his study Brodd concurs with the work of Collins and indicates that *caritas* and *diakonia* essentially belong to two different conceptual circles.

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It is the intersection of four elements that provide us with the final clues as to how *diakonia* became service. The first is the development of the functionalism in the eighteenth century as a way describing ministry. The second is the practice of *diakonia* as it was revived in this charitable, social work form in northern Europe. The third is the influence of the authoritative work of Bauer, The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature, which defined *diakonia* as service. He was perhaps influenced in this by his association with the Lutheran deacon movement. The fourth element is the development of role theory in psychology

and sociology and the attempt to account for ministries in the church in terms of roles. What emerged was an understanding of diaconate not based on Scripture and the early tradition of the Church but one developed from the practice of the charitable diaconate movement.

Restoring the diaconate

"The almost total disappearance of the permanent diaconate from the Church of the West for more than a millennium has certainly made it more difficult to understand the profound reality of this ministry. However, it cannot be said for that reason that the theology of the diaconate has no authoritative points of reference, completely at the mercy of theological opinion." (Basic Norms §3) The norms list some of these reference points as an ecclesiology of *koinonia*/communion, the sacrament of ordination, the gifts of the Spirit received at ordination, the rite of ordination, the theology of sacraments of character and the powers conferred. The Norms and the Directory simply equate *diakonia* with service, for the most part, and repeat the error and therefore continue the servant myth through this process. Why and how this premise must be challenged is considered below.

The one essential reference point must be the recovery of the meaning of *diakonia* and *diakonos* from the Scriptures and the early documents of the Church. In order to do this through the Scriptural path churches, deacons and others interested in ministry must go through the work of John N Collins. Collins has the only study of the





diakon group of words and his work represents a paradigm shift in our understanding of *diakonia*. Some churches have commenced this process, as is evident in the documents from the Anglican Church in England on diaconate. Once the task is undertaken *diakonia* can be fully appreciated and the gift of this ministry and its potential in the Church can be more easily fulfilled.

The International Theological Commission in its paper, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, suggests that the Second Vatican Council intended to implement the principle and not any particular historical form of the diaconate. That is Laurence of Rome or Francis of Assisi or a Nicholas Ferrar might give us some idea of how deacons have exercised their ministry in the past but we may not want to copy their ministry as the model diaconal ministry. What we are looking for is a diaconate for today. It should also be a ministry that includes women in all of the Churches since we know from the Scriptures and the early Church and its laws that women were deacons. In the Roman Catholic Church there has never been a statement about ordination to the diaconate being reserved to men alone, although canon law includes such a reservation. This is one of the questions that remain open for the church to consider in its restoration of the ministry.

Conclusion

The creative possibilities for di-

aconal ministry are opened for the Church when we move away from restrictive notions of the deacon as being primarily defined by service as the minister of charity or social justice. Deacons are primarily those who proclaim the Gospel, in the name of their bishop, to the assembled community and those dispersed. Like the bishop, whom they serve, they have a *diakonia* to build up the community of faith and reach out to dispersed Christians and to those who have yet to hear the gospel. Restricting our understanding of deacons as principally servants of charity and justice not only reveals a disregard for the Scriptural witness but leads to sterile debates about the identity of deacons and closes our eyes to new possibilities for the new evangelisation to which deacons



are called to contribute (Basic Norms and Directory, Joint Declaration). When we look to the Scriptures and the early tradition of the Church, we see those who are described as

diakonos/deacons engaged in a vast array of activities. Only some of their activities would include what we call charity or justice. We need to let go of the servant myth in order to receive fruitfully the gift of the Spirit which is the ministry of deacons.

References

1. John N Collins; *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New*. Gracewing, Leomister, 2002, p 47-58

2. NRSV is the *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition*. Thomas Nelson, 1990, GNB is the *Good News Bible*, American Bible Society 1976, JB is the *Jerusalem Bible*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966. RSV is *Revised Standard Version* 1946.

3. John N Collins; *Deacon's and the Church*, p52. I add the emphasis here to indicate that the unifying meaning of *diakonia* in Acts is the ministry of proclaiming the gospel and is used throughout of the work of the apostles, Paul and the other ministers of the Gospel.

4. John N Collins; *Diakonia: reinterpreting the ancient sources*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990. 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 of the word *diakonia* and that the phrase minister tables had a particular 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. This distinction is found in the texts of the early Greek Fathers e.g. Ignatius, Trallians, 2.3.

5. Collins, in the works cited, would conclude that the Seven were not deacons.

6. Sven-Erik Brodd, Caritas and Diakonia as perspectives on the Diaconate, in Borgegard, Fanuelson, Hall (eds) *The Ministry of the Deacon: Ecclesiological Reflections 2*, Nordic Ecumenical Council, 2000, p42-43

7. In the Nordic Lutheran Churches deacons have had to obtain nursing or social work qualifications before being installed or ordained as deacons because charity was the defining feature of the understanding of diaconate. The practice is changing across Northern Europe as more churches engage with the research of the Australian scholar John N Collins. A diaconate with a clearer scriptural and ecclesiological foundation is developing with a balance of a ministry of word, liturgy and pastoral aspects.

8. Brodd, *Caritas and Diakonia*, p27

9. Two documents that give witness to the shift that Biblically based reflection can have are *For A Time Such as This: A report of the General Synod of the House of Bishops, 2001* and *The Distinctive Diaconate*, Diocese of Salisbury, 2003. At one point the Church of England had wondered about phasing out the diaconate and now their engagement with Collins and ecumenical conversations, particularly the Hanover report have reversed this direction of thinking.

10. International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*. Catholic Truth Society, London, 2003.

11. Owen Cummings; *Deacons and the Church*, Paulist Press, New York, 2004. He devotes chapter 5 of his work to explore the life and ministry of this diverse group of deacons.

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