

The Embattled 'deacon' Words

In his July 2006 article in *The Pastoral Review* under the evocative title 'The Deacon: An Icon of Christ the Servant' Bishop Michael Evans of East Anglia said what most deacons want to hear. This added up to a rich affirmation of the deacon's identity. As icons deacons both mirror Christ and are a window onto him. In their servanthood – their diaconal character – deacons recognise a unique connection between themselves and him who is among us 'as one who serves' (Lk. 22.27).

By November of 2006, however, deacons were being invited in these same pages to rethink all that. On the basis of what the ancient Greek terms for deacons and diaconate really meant – let us limit the terminology to the one word *diakonia* - Anthony Gooley, a deacon from Brisbane, put up a different model of diaconate, one that eliminated servanthood as the defining character of the deacon. Now, as all deacons know – and none better than Deacon Nick Donnelly who wrote on "The Deacon and the Truth of Servanthood" in the March-April issue of 2007 – a wide-reaching and all-consuming spirituality has grown around the servant character of the deacon. There is an understandable fear that if you disturb this you deeply disturb – perhaps even mortally wound – the deacon. Hence Nick Donnelly's insistence that 'retaining the understanding of *diakonia* as loving and humble service ... is essential to maintaining the humility necessary for the deacon to be an icon of the self-emptying of Christ'.

The service syndrome

Not all of this servant spirituality, however, is necessarily good spirituality. At least some of it has shown itself to be bad spirituality, if such an oxymoron is admissible. I have a Finnish friend whose doctoral thesis was to diagnose maladjustments experienced by Lutheran deaconesses of the earlier modern era in the course of their induction into and lifelong pursuit of a servant spirituality. Two summers ago, as I stood in the hallowed deaconess cemetery in Bethel, which is home to the largest *diakonic* undertaking in Germany, I wondered whether any of these selfless dedicated Christians had virtually self-destructed under the dead weight of the sense of their lowliness.

As the originator of one of the two 'revisionist' ideas that Nick Donnelly finds 'unduly' influencing Catholic reflection about the diaconate, I think it is important to be perfectly clear what my 'revisionist' idea is. But it is also important to be conscious that the idea singled out by Donnelly is only a marker defining what *diakonia* does not express. My comment to follow, while presenting some values that *diakonia* does express, will focus on the difficulty of setting this marker in place and on its import for developing a coherent theology of the diaconate.

Concluding my analysis of the *diakonia* words in 1990 I put the idea this way:

Care, concern, and love – those elements of meaning introduced into the interpretation of this word and its cognates by Wilhelm Brandt [*Dienst und Dienen im NT*, 1931] – are just not part of their field of meaning.¹

Nick Donnelly's antipathy to taking 'care, concern and love' out of *diakonia* is symptomatic of how deeply imbedded in diaconal consciousness this dimension has long been. Accordingly, I would like to assure him and his deacon peers, as well as the general reader, that when I realised in what direction research into the *diakonia* words

was taking me I was acutely aware of the discomfort (or worse) that my views could cause deacons.

Those awkward moments are now an unbelievably long time ago: 30 and more years when I was reading in the Classical Institute of Gordon Square and writing in our basement flat in Mecklenburgh Square. Some of my reading had introduced me to the work and diaconal enthusiasms of Hannes Kramer, the late founder - as he can only be called - of the permanent diaconate. A social worker in the immediate post-WWII years and a married man, he had gathered around him a circle of like-minded men and women dedicated to meeting the needs – spiritual, material and social – of the marginalised. Some of those men were to become the first Catholic deacons of the modern era. And their deepest aspiration was to deliver service after the manner of the Son of Man who ‘came to serve’ (Mk. 10.45).

Gertrude’s House

On our first meeting in Freiburg Hannes took me out of the city to a snowbound deacons’ retreat he had named *Haus Gertrud*. Speaking there about my research to a handful of German deacons I felt inadequate in the presence of their defining sense of having been ordained as a Christ extending lowly and loving service to the needy. I was floundering as I tried to get around the difficulty of not being able to flaunt a newly enriched *diakonia* of Christ-like love as the outcome of my research. So I turned to emphasising another and much neglected aspect of *diakonia* that my reading had uncovered. This was part of the real value expressed in ancient times by these words. And their currency in early Christian discourse made ancient audiences aware of a holiness close to the divine pertaining to the office of those called to be deacons among God’s holy people, the ‘saints’.

My small audience of deacons liked that, but at no time in the decades since have those involved in the German diaconate been persuaded that the *diakonia* words were anything other than ordinary everyday terms for servants and thus were designating deacons essentially as providers of services to those in need. Over the decades I have followed their thinking closely, possessing what is probably the only 32-year run of their journal *Diakonia Christi* in Australia.

Ironically, one other German Catholic did seize on the high religious tone of so much usage attaching to *diakonia*. This person was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in the address by which he opened the 1990 Roman Synod on priestly formation. Mounting an assault on Catholic theologies of priesthood that he called ‘purely functional’ and that defined priesthood as ‘principally the proclamation of the gospel’ and ‘the ministry of love’, Ratzinger attributed this diminution of traditional theology to Protestant inroads. Not the least damaging of these was the Protestant scholarly conviction that the *diakonia* terminology chosen by the early Greek-speaking Christians was not ‘sacral’ but ‘profane vocabulary’.

Against this low evaluation of *diakonia*, Ratzinger supported his championing of a wholly innovative and seemingly irregular high view of *diakonia* by reference to the linguistic research in my doctoral dissertation,² a public copy of which rested at that time - to my knowledge - only on a shelf in the tower of the Senate House of the University of London; that is: unless (and my memory is playing tricks here) on our journey to Israel for a fellowship at Tantur on our eventual way back to Melbourne my wife and I had

made a parting gift of one other copy to the library of the International Diaconate Centre (IDZ) in Freiburg. From there, at any rate, it is a little easier to envisage the unpublished dissertation being consulted from the Holy Office.

This truly remarkable appeal by Cardinal Ratzinger to one of the chief semantic values revealed by the new linguistic research remained – from what I can judge - wholly unnoticed in the scholarly world and remained unique within German theological scholarship until the year 2000. By contrast, English-language and Nordic theology were quickly alert to the significance of this and other semantic values within the first years following the publication of the research in 1990.

A poignant moment in the traditional German advocacy of *diakonia* as service to the needy occurred in 1994 when IDZ published an English-language edition of *Diakonia Christi* to mark the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the permanent diaconate in USA. The equivalent German-language edition named the theme as 'Der Diakon und Modelle der Diakonie', which became in translation for the English-language edition "The Deacon and models of social welfare work'. The final paper in this issue, among papers by such eminent figures as Bishop Karl Lehmann, Bishop Walter Kasper and Cardinal Bernadin, was an address I had delivered to the Inaugural National Conference of permanent deacons in Australia in which I strongly contested the continuing German insistence that *diakonia* meant welfare work. Interestingly, Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical *Deus caritas est* cannot be fully understood in its English version without an understanding that *diakonia* there (*Diakonie* in German, the original language of the encyclical) carries all its German connotations of loving service to those in need.

That this term *Diakonie* is the standard German term for Christian social welfare is not the outcome of the restoration of the Roman Catholic diaconate but of the 19th century Lutheran foundations of the deaconess and deacon houses. Today the 'Diakonic Work' of the German Lutheran churches has upwards of half a million people on its payroll under the banner of *Diakonie*. Is it possible to imagine how one might convince them that this highly revered *Diakonie* is a misnomer?

Of interest to a consideration of the Roman Catholic diaconate is that the ideals underpinning the longstanding Lutheran dedication to *Diakonie* provided Hannes Kramer with a ready-made theological framework for the diaconate he was working to establish. A tell-tale sign of his indebtedness to the Lutheran tradition is that his *Haus Gertrud* was named in honour of Gertrude Reichard, the very first commissioned deaconess in Pastor Fliedner's motherhouse in Kaiserswerth.

Hans-Jürgen Benedict and the German confrontation with a re-interpreted *diakonia*

In 1999 Hans-Jürgen Benedict, a professor at the *Rauhes Haus* in Hamburg – another of the foundational institutions of German *Diakonie* – attended a conference on deacons in Finland. There he was deeply impressed by a presentation by Kjell Nordstokke, then a director of a Norwegian deacon training institution, which drew out implications for the deacon movement of the linguistic research in my *Diakonia* book of 1990. The Nordic countries had in fact been testing the new research for some years, an initiative eventually finding expression in significant publications of the Anglo-Nordic Diaconal Research Project; influential in this project, alongside Nordstokke, have been Sven-Erik Brodd, dean of the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala, and Ninni Smedberg, then Diaconal

Strategist for the Church of Sweden. The Nordic developments took Benedict totally by surprise, and on his return to Germany he made a close study of the book *Diakonia*.

When I arrived in Heidelberg in 2003 to present a lecture at the Lutheran Theological Faculty's Academic Diakonic Institute, its director, Professor Heinz Schmidt, kindly drew my attention to the paper Benedict had published in *Pastoraltheologie* 2000. Its title was startling and was provided in an English abstract as follows:

The Protestant Claim for Diakonia – a Misinterpretation of the Ancient Sources? On John N. Collins' Book 'Diakonia'. Collins, in Germany yet to be noticed, shows: The New Testament passages do not present Diakonia as an exclusively Christian reevaluation of serving, but simply – close to the common ancient use of the word – understand Diakonia as carrying forth mission.

In the course of providing a superb précis of the research, Benedict went out of his way to point out that the German neglect of the research over the preceding decade had meant that scholarly writings on *Diakonie* had become 'nonsense'.

The reaction in German Lutheran diakonic circles was instantaneous. Heinz Schmidt was able to provide me with proofs of a collection of papers to appear later in 2003 as *Diakonische Konturen*. In the section given to the 'diakonic contours in the New Testament', no fewer than four of the six papers were entirely devoted to the critique of and reflection upon the methodology and outcomes of the linguistic research. Each of the papers supported the outcomes in principle, two very strongly (Benedict himself and Dierk Starnitzke, a professor in New Testament at Bethel).

Prior to this burst of interest in the new linguistic profile of *diakonia*, the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission had produced the Hanover Report of 1996 on *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*. This document identified the research as one of its main sources – naming it a 'historical-philological corrective to earlier understandings of the *diakon*- words' (n. 60) - but avoided following through on the real implications of this assessment for the theology of diaconate. Nonetheless, the Study Commission which evaluated the Report for the German Lutheran authorities in 2000, came much closer to what the research means for German *Diakonie*. It stated:

In the New Testament there is no significant link between the diaconate and the commandment to love one's neighbour, nor is it possible, on evidence provided in the New Testament, to assign to a particular group of functionaries the caring love of the neighbour that Jesus imposed as a responsibility on all his followers. In addition one cannot assume that New Testament occurrences of *diakonia* words carry a meaning of a helping and caring service of the neighbour, especially in the sense of practical love of the neighbour...³

These issues are yet to be worked through in Germany, and the complexities are great. But at least in some quarters – not Roman Catholic, however – the problem has been identified. As the brochure for the three-day Rummelsberg conference on diaconate announced in 2005, 'What is a deacon?... In former years a few could give clear answers... Now the Australian theologian John N. Collins has put into question the traditional understanding of the biblical term *diakonia*...' This would be to imply, of course, that if loving service is not the theological platform on which to construct the diaconate the church must look elsewhere.

Dictionaries and theology

As Nick Donnelly has reminded us, the theology of *diakonia* as loving service drew its mainstay support from the article on these words by H. W. Beyer in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (German 1935; English translation 1964). That all remains in place. However, another classic dictionary of New Testament Greek has been that of Walter Bauer which appeared in its first English-language edition in 1957. Although Bauer's original treatment of the words contributes nothing of particular interest to the discussion, things changed dramatically with the third English-language edition that appeared in 2000 under the direction of Frederick William Danker, a lexicographer of note.

Bauer's original one page on the words became two pages by Danker, and the format Danker adopted owes its shape to the delineation of usage presented in my research volume. Thus Danker abandons any idea that 'waiting at table' is the so-called 'basic' meaning of the *diakonia* words and works instead through the semantic categories established in the research volume. Thus we move through ideas like functioning as intermediary, performing obligations, carrying out official duties. Notable is the one instance Danker provides of the *diakon-* verb in the sense 'help' (the parable in Mt. 25.44: 'when did we not help you?') but then pointedly refers to the alternative reading presented in my exegesis as an instance of *diakonia* expressing the idea of 'carrying out official duties', much like contemporary 'ministers' of the Crown in the Westminster system.

This is not the place to enter into the exegesis of individual passages, not even the leading passage about the service of the Son of Man (Mk. 10.45) that Nick Donnelly rightfully discusses at some length. For all exegetical comment on the 100 instances of *diakonia* words in the New Testament I can only refer to my original book of 1990 and to subsequent publications, which are numerous in journals. Most easily available – accessible too – of my three books on the subject of early Christian ministry is likely to be *Deacons and the Church*⁴ (not to be confused with a later book with the same title by Owen Cummings). The rationale of this book is to identify for deacons which passages are specific to them and which are relevant to disciples as a whole. All of this being within the semantic parameters set by the research of the 1970s. The book then moves to outline theological and pastoral implications for deacons of today.

Meanwhile, Catholic commentary in the German language declines to dialogue with the new research. Christian Wessely's 25-page bibliography for his book on the diaconate makes no mention of it.⁵ Things could shortly change. In March 2007 Anni Hentschel published a 500 page volume examining '*diakonia* in the New Testament'.⁶ According to the pre-publication blurbs on the internet, Hentschel is confronting a situation in which 'J. N. Collins ... rejected an interpretation of the words in the sense of Christian mercy.' The rest of the blurb reads like the list of contents in my original research volume. At the time of writing, my copy of Hentschel's book is yet to arrive in Melbourne.

¹ *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York/Oxford: OUP, 1990) p. 254.

² 'On the Essence of the Priesthood' in *Called to Communion*, Eng. trans. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996) p. 106.

³ ÖSTA Nr. 21d, *Stellungnahme des ÖSTA zu der Studie 'Der Diakonats als ökumenische Chance'...* (October 2000), n. 63.

⁴ *Deacons and the Church: Making connections between old and new* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002).

⁵ *Gekommen, um zu dienen* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2004)

⁶ *Diakonia im neuen Testament* (Heidelberg/Erlangen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). [Hentschel was born a year after I began my research in Gordon Square. I have no idea of her denominational connection, if any; currently at a Catholic faculty, she has studied broadly across the Lutheran/Catholic span in German universities.]