

Who Is Being Served At Tables? The Permanent Diaconate Today

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Abstract

Since Vatican II the restored Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church has played an increasingly important role in the life of the Catholic Church, particularly in Western Europe and North America. Is there a theology of the diaconate, and if so what are the contentious issues? How far is the diaconate really distinct from the priesthood and the ministry of laypeople? A way forward is to revive the subversive character of *διακονία*, both in practical pastoral ministry and in serious engagement with Catholic Social Teaching; this necessitates major changes to diaconate formation programmes. A clearly defined diaconate would be able to help the Church renew and reform its understanding of ministry.

Keywords

Diaconate, Ministry, Catholic Social Teaching

Introduction

Since the Second Vatican Council in its decree on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, called for the permanent diaconate to be restored in the Roman rite,¹ and in the subsequent implementation of this call by St Paul VI, this form of ministry has assumed a growing importance in many parts of the world, particularly North America and Western Europe. I want to look at whether a ‘theology of the diaconate’ has developed during this time and, if so, to examine what it is; and also to look at possibilities for the future. My principal claim is that this new form of ministry, correctly understood, offers great opportunities to the Western Church.

¹ ‘... it will be possible in the future to restore the diaconate as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy.’ There had been a full debate about this proposal.

In 1993, at about the time I was deciding to become a Catholic, on my first visit to Rome I heard St John Paul II giving catechesis about the diaconate as part of one of his weekly audiences.² I didn't really know much about it then and didn't think that about five years later I would be asked by the Archbishop of Southwark to take over the academic part of his diaconate formation programme, which I have been doing now for nearly twenty years. It's the largest such programme in the country (and probably the British Isles) numbering over fifty students (including those in the propaedeutic period and ordained deacons completing their studies with many deacons' wives also coming to the formation days), from eight or so dioceses. Indeed it is one of the largest clerical formation programmes in the country. Since 2008 the programme has been formally linked to St Mary's University, Twickenham, thanks to the late Father Michael Hayes, Professor Anthony Towey and Professor Peter Tyler. For nine years I was Chair of the National Conference of Diaconate Directors and Deacon Delegates, the official representative body of deacons and those responsible for their formation. I also founded and co-edited the first academic journal in English dedicated to the diaconate, the *New Diaconal Review*.³ I also advised those who have set up the permanent diaconate in Ireland and am External Examiner for the main formation programme based at Maynooth, Ireland. I mention all this simply because it does give me a vested interest in this form of ministry; but I hope I can look at the topic with some objectivity.

Is there any theology for the diaconate, and what is it?

I ask this question simply because it is so often claimed that *there is no theology of the permanent diaconate*, so the whole enterprise might be seen as somehow theologically illegitimate. I won't at this point ask about other aspects of the life of the Catholic Church, about which the same statement could be made. I am not aware of a developed theology of the diaconate in the Eastern churches, where of course the diaconate did not fall into abeyance. Perhaps this gap, if there is one, is because, as I understand it, the role has been largely rather limited. In the Roman rite, if there is a gap, it is being rapidly filled,⁴ and the problem has surely been because the prospect

² Extracts from this appear in the *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*; also *Insegnamenti* XVI, 2 (1993), pp. 954ff.

³ The original journal, which failed to attract enough subscribers in northern Europe, is now incorporated within the American journal *Josephinum Diaconal Review*. This is now the only Anglophone academic journal devoted to the diaconate.

⁴ There is now a considerable body of theological literature on the permanent diaconate, mostly from the United States and Germany. In addition to the study by Collins cited below

of reviving a distinctive ministry of deacons only began to arise in Germany in the 1950s, made concrete in a specific call in *Lumen Gentium* subsequently acted upon by St Paul VI. For the centuries when the diaconate was simply the last stepping stone to priesthood, it is hardly surprising that it did not attract much theological reflection, particularly as the Tridentine understanding of the priest was so dominant. This history is probably reflected in the character of many diaconate formation programmes, which were, in the early years after the permanent order was restored, simply scaled down seminary courses that had been adapted for students who were mostly part-time. It also means that people tend to look more exclusively at a deacon's liturgical role than other areas, because for many centuries that was all people ever saw of a deacon if they went to High Mass (and he was usually a priest dressed as a deacon). This in turn has led to two contrasting accusations often made against permanent deacons: first, that a deacon is simply a 'glorified altar server' who likes being on public display in the sanctuary, or second, that the deacon nowadays is ill at ease and incompetent in the sanctuary (curiously some people make both criticisms simultaneously).

The two most authoritative documents that include a theology of the restored ministry are the *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* and the *Directory on the Life and Ministry of Permanent Deacons*,⁵ as well as the document from the International Theological Commission: *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*.⁶ The initial English translation of this reflection was inadequate and Deacon Tony Schmitz, Director of Formation for Permanent Deacons in Scotland, has been publishing gradually an improved translation in most issues of the *New Diaconal Review* and the *Josephinum Diaconal Review*.

(which is, of course, broader in scope), together with other writings by him, and the Vatican documents also cited below, one should add: James Keating (ed.) *The Deacon Reader* (Leominster: Gracewing 2006), Owen F. Cummings, *Deacons and the Church* (New York: Paulist Press 2004), Owen F. Cummings, W Ditewig and R. Gaillardetz, *The Theology of the Diaconate* (New York: Paulist Press 2005), W. Ditewig *The Emerging Diaconate* New York: Paulist Press 2007 and his many other works, and P. Zagano *Called to Serve - A Spirituality for Deacons* Ligouri: Ligouri publications 2004. The best study published in Britain is Bridie Stringer, *Baptising Babies and Clearing Gutters* (Matthew James 2013) and in Ireland: Gearóid Dullea (ed.) *Deacons Ministers of Christ and of God's Mysteries* (Dublin: Veritas 2010). See also the Proceedings of the National Assembly of Deacons in England and Wales and North European Diaconate Conference 2011, *New Diaconal Review* issue 7 (November 2011), in particular the keynote addresses by Michael Hayes, William Cavanaugh and Jozef Wissink. The International Diaconate publishes the journal *Diakonia Christi* (mainly in German) - for details go to www.diaconia-idc.org.

⁵ London: CTS 1998, in one volume, although the documents were issued by two Vatican congregations (Clergy and Catholic Education) and from www.vatican.va.

⁶ London: CTS 2003.

Other points often made about the permanent diaconate as it has evolved include: Is it needed? Is it not simply another level of clericalism? And what should permanent deacons wear? I will answer some in the course of this paper, although the last does not really merit time and attention – I have always taken the view that basically the issue is no more or less important than the similar question applied to priests. The most important point made is, Why can't women be deacons? Over the years there has been vigorous debate about this, particularly in the United States.⁷ I will not cover this issue here, since it requires a paper of its own and it is also being examined by a special committee of the ITC set up by Pope Francis. The findings of that group will need to be looked at theologically when they are published.⁸

An issue of conflict

A sure sign that there is a theology about something is when there is debate and disagreement about it, and fortunately this is the case. This focusses on what we are told in the Acts of the Apostles:

About this time, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenists made a complaint against the Hebrews: in the daily distribution their own widows were being overlooked. So the Twelve called a full meeting of the disciples and addressed them, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the word of God so as to give out food; you, brothers, must select from among yourselves seven men of good reputation, filled with the Spirit and with wisdom, to whom we can hand over this duty. We ourselves will continue to devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the word.' The whole assembly approved of this proposal and elected Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these to the

⁷ See the spirited debate between Phyllis Zagano and Sara Butler in various issues of the *New Diaconal Review*. Professor Zagano is a member of commission of the ITC set up by Pope Francis to examine the issue of women and the diaconate. On this issue see Gary Macy, William Ditewig and Phyllis Zagano *Women Deacons Past, Present and Future* (New York: Paulist Press 2011).

⁸ The Pope's action in setting up the enquiry follows the important change made by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 which made a change in the text of Canon Law. In the Apostolic Letter *Omnium in Mente* the Pope revised the text of canon 1008, adding a new canon (1009) to read 'Those who are constituted in the order of the episcopate or the presbyterate receive the mission and faculty to act in the person of Christ the head, while deacons are enabled to serve the people of God in the diaconate of the liturgy, the word and charity'. While at first sight this might look like an effort to demote the diaconate in terms of importance, at the time it was interpreted as possibly preparing the way for women to be ordained to the diaconate.

apostles, and after prayer they laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-5, New Jerusalem Bible)

The conventional interpretation of this passage sees it as the theological basis for 'service', particularly of the poor and vulnerable, a fundamental characteristic of the deacon's ministry. This is expressed most powerfully in the 'Prayer of Consecration' said by the bishop as a new deacon is ordained in the modern Roman Rite:

In the first days of your Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostles of your Son appointed seven men of good repute to assist them in their daily ministry, so that they themselves might be more free for prayer and preaching. By prayer and the laying on of hands the apostles entrusted to these chosen men the ministry of serving at tables May he [*the man about to be ordained deacon*] excel in every virtue: in love that is sincere, in concern for the sick and the poor, in unassuming authority May he in this life imitate you Son, who came not to be served but to serve⁹

For some time now this understanding¹⁰ has been challenged by the Australian theologians John N. Collins¹¹ and Andrew Gooley.¹² They argue that contemporary Catholic attitudes, particularly in Germany where moves to revive the diaconate began in the 1950s, have been excessively influenced by the Nordic Lutheran concept of the deacon's ministry. In these churches it was not possible to become a deacon without a social work or nursing qualification. For Gooley in particular, what he calls the 'Servant Myth' has accounted for a lopsided and unbalanced diaconate, at least in some places. The problem centres on the phrase in Acts 6:2 *διακονεῖν τραπέζαις*, conventionally rendered 'to serve at tables'. They argue that we are not told what the distribution (*καθημεριμνη*) to widows actually involves; we are talking not about charitable service but proclamation of the Word. Collins argues that 'ministry at tables' in the ancient world would simply have meant a sacred duty, a ministry of significance, citing also St Ignatius of Antioch: 'They do not serve mere food and drink, but minister to God's Church'.¹³

⁹ *The Rites of the Roman Catholic Church*, (New York: Pueblo 1980) volume II, pp. 56-57.

¹⁰ Perhaps also reflected in the only reference to the permanent diaconate in a papal encyclical, Benedict XVI's first letter *Deus Caritas Est* 21: '...the social service which they were meant to provide was absolutely concrete, yet at the same time it was also a spiritual service; theirs was a truly spiritual service which carried out an essential responsibility of the Church, namely a well-ordered love of neighbour.'

¹¹ Principally in his seminal study *Diakonia: Interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990).

¹² 'Deacons and the Servant Myth', *The Pastoral Review* vol. 2 issue 6 (November/December 2006).

¹³ *To the Trallians* 2.3.

Scepticism about the traditional interpretation of Acts 6 is justified. A contrast between ministries of charitable service and preaching the Word, which is what is often presented, makes little sense in relation to the account of the martyrdom of Stephen a little later in the narrative (and this problem is acknowledged in the ITC study), who was not stoned for distributing food to widows. Nor does it fit in with the ministry of one of the other deacons, Philip, in his catechetical exercise with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

I would also accept that for the deacon's ministry to be narrowly focused on social worker / nurse /charitable worker is a distortion. If in some places this excludes deacons from exercising a ministry of preaching, let alone prayer, we have a serious imbalance. However, in many places any distinctive charitable role for the deacon is not in any way dominant, but by contrast is invisible. Often, because there are fewer priests than in the past, the deacon is simply the part time curate who cannot say Mass or hear confessions or anoint the sick. I would not wish to deny that this ministry in charitable work is valuable or important - but it does seem to me to be more of a problem than the one which Collins and Gooley identify.

In any case, being aware of errors in interpretation does not necessarily lead us in the direction of abandoning a 'myth' that is based on it. My analogy for this claim is the examination by Professor David Brown in his study *Discipleship and Imagination*¹⁴ of the figure of St Mary Magdalen. Brown accepts the conclusions of historical criticism that the conventional identification of Mary Magdalen as a prostitute is not justified from the text of the New Testament, but he sees the subsequent development of the tradition, which in the Middle Ages was very rich, as a positive and legitimate development. Catholic teaching about development is in line with this approach, which means that the 'Servant Myth', identified by Gooley is actually not a problem. The tradition develops as part of the Church in the way that we accept that doctrine and teaching develop.

Incidentally, the uncertainty and marginality of the diaconate, which seems to underlie claims that there is no theology of the diaconate, itself has a theological meaning. Collins in his study explores the possible etymology of the Greek word *διακονος*,¹⁵ which, of course, in ancient Greek means either slave (sometimes *δοῦλος*) or servant. He refers to suggestions that the word is related to the verb *διώκω* ('to run'), so the deacon is the slave who is 'on the run', the moving messenger. At times *διακονός* is a word with a slightly shifty side to it, used of the god Hermes (the Roman Mercury), the servant and messenger of the gods. Hermes was, among other things,

¹⁴ Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, pp. 31ff.

¹⁵ Particularly pp. 93ff.

the tutelary god of thieves¹⁶ and of fertility; the slave or servant in the ancient world was always viewed with suspicion. He was on the run.

There is also speculation that the word might be related to the word *κονίς*, ‘dust’ or ‘ashes’.¹⁷ Often the servant or slave slept, not for very long, near the hearth, literally in the ashes and dust from the fire. Deacons sometimes complain that they are marginalised and sidelined in their ministry, trodden on perhaps like dust and ashes, and this is often true: the best example is the sustained refusal of those involved in planning Vocations Sunday each year in most parts of the world to include the diaconate alongside the priesthood and the Religious Life in prayer for vocations or vocations promotion. But the background to the word means that being on the edge, the margins, is part of the territory; and I encourage students to reflect on this rather than feel sorry for themselves. It also gives the deacon a particular role in the call often made by Pope Francis for the Church to minister to those ‘on the margins’ – *the deacon is there already, or should be*.

In an important paper, the late Bishop Michael Evans of East Anglia argued that, like priesthood, the diaconate should in part be seen as ‘ontological’ rather than ‘functional’¹⁸ – there is no suggestion here that this gives the deacon special privileges or means that normal rules of conduct do not apply. To claim that anyone in ministry is configured to Christ, and experiences a spiritual change through this, need not put that person on a pedestal. Bishop Evans wants to ‘peel away the trappings and the gilt’ and see the deacon’s ministry as a gift to the Church. While all three *munera* of Eucharist, Word and Charity are important, he feels that the last has been neglected and that the imbalance should be redressed. It has perhaps been pushed aside because pastoral needs in parishes, with fewer priests and a dwindling number of curates, have become more pressing; it is also perhaps much more demanding. The deacon should be an *icon*,

¹⁶ ‘It is not particularly remarkable that he is the god of merchants and others who use roads, including thieves, though the latter characteristic illustrates his non-moral nature... in Crete we find him associated with a piece of ritual tropytydom...’ (‘Hermes’, in N. G. L. Hammond and H.H. Scullard (eds.) *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed., [Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970]), citing Aristophanes, *Ploutos* 1155. In his dialogue with Carion in the play Hermes is portrayed as a thief who helps other thieves.

¹⁷ This point was made in a lecture (not published as far as I am aware) by Fr Jim O’Keefe (then President of Ushaw) at the annual Diaconate Directors and Delegates conference in Leeds in November 2000. When this paper was read at the conference, scepticism about this suggestion was expressed by Fr Nicholas King SJ.

¹⁸ ‘The Deacon: an Icon of Christ the Servant’, *The Pastoral Review* vol. 2 issue 4 (July/August 2006). The bishop was a strong supporter of the ministry of deacons, but he disapproved of them preaching at Sunday Mass because he saw this as the function of the principal celebrant of the Mass.

but of Christ the Servant. Drawing on *Deus Caritas Est*, he writes that this will enable the deacon to ‘draw others into what it signifies and portrays. The specific role of the deacon is to draw the whole church into humble service, into Christ’s washing of feet, into his humble ministry of love’. This is how the deacon’s ministry can be distinctive – he is not calling for deacons to be social workers. This is an important insight: at his ordination the deacon, like others in Orders, is given *authority*. This ought to mean, surely, that the deacon should normally be able to exercise this (with sensitivity and in a collaborative manner) in relation to a parish’s charitable activity. So often lots of different groups in a parish devoted to charitable work carry out their work independently of each other, with little direction or co-ordination. None of this, of course, should devalue charitable work done by laypeople or Religious.

*The way forward - deacons and Catholic Social Teaching:
the deacon as Lurcio*

Indeed this function can offer a way forward in terms of theology, and I think it can also enable deacons to further refute the suspicion of clericalism, to which I alluded earlier. It involves the ancient model of the servant or slave. Perhaps we need to try and see the deacon as more Lurcio from *Up! Pompeii!* than Mr Carson from *Down-ton Abbey*. This element of awkwardness or subversiveness is surely something deacons could pursue. In relation to a parish’s charitable activity and its general outreach, the deacon should surely emulate Philip in Acts 8, referred to above as one of the original ‘Seven’. Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch shows the church’s outreach to two marginalized groups (Ethiopians and eunuchs) – contemporary deacons should surely be the vanguards of the Church’s commitment to outcasts and those on the margins, as Pope Francis has requested. So if people in a parish do not want to support a centre for asylum seekers, or a place like the *London Catholic Worker* house, then it is the deacon who should be challenging this. The Church’s ministry of charity is not meant to be popular. Perhaps one reason why deacons have not been very subversive in this country is that they have often been drawn from parishes in ‘suburbia’, where, in some ways, the epicentre of strong Catholic life is to be found, rather than in inner city parishes of a few generations ago. This inevitably means that Catholics in general may reflect conservative political attitudes in their local community, although this is beginning to change because, at least in cities, more deacons are being ordained from ethnic minority communities.

Part of the answer to the problem is surely to embed properly the diaconate within the life of the Catholic Church in this

country – there should be more deacons, and every parish should have at least one deacon. While in theory every diocese in England and Wales and in Scotland has deacons, it is not acceptable when a bishop arbitrarily suspends this form of ministry, as has happened.¹⁹

Another part of the answer is surely to give the diaconate, in line with the legitimate development of tradition, a specific focus in terms of deacons' proclamation of the gospel. This does not mean deacons being social workers (qualified or not), but it does mean a specific teaching ministry in relation to Catholic Social Teaching, as envisaged in the key documents: the *Basic Norms* make it clear that that should be a specialism.²⁰ Now again, there are dangers. Anyone who has done anything about Catholic Social Teaching, or the Church's teaching about justice and peace, knows how easy it is become a patronised specialist. You get a lot of invitations, and this lets everyone else off the hook. I am not suggesting for a moment that commitment to Catholic Social Teaching should not be a key part of the ministry of bishops, priests and Religious. It is also the case that deacons, particularly for those from the early years who have now largely retired or gone to their eternal reward, might not have studied much social teaching in their formation.

But it is clear to me that a willingness to focus deacons more clearly on proclamation of the gospel in relation to social teaching should be part of the way forward. This means that diaconate formation programmes should be distinctive and tailor-made, not simply scaled-down versions of what is taught to seminarians. Social teaching should have greater weight, so from autumn 2018 we have restructured the programme for the southern dioceses in England and Wales, for which I am responsible, to enable third year students to devote the whole of their final year to social teaching by enrolling for our new MA degree in Catholic Social Teaching at St Mary's University. The first year of the degree, which all students study, is made up of an introductory module explaining the principles and history of social teaching, and a second module looking at some of the ways in which the Church applies these principles. After ordination, deacons will be able, if they wish, to continue the degree, working on further modules covering the theologies of liberation, political theology, the relationship of charities to social

¹⁹ Currently this is the case in the Archdiocese of Cardiff. The diocese of Salford for many years did not accept candidates, but this policy has recently changed.

²⁰ Listing the subjects that should form part of the curriculum of formation, the document says: 'Christian morality, in its personal and social dimensions and, in particular, the social doctrine of the Church.' [81 (e)]. The *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, citing *Gaudium et Spes* 40-45, makes it clear that the deacon's ministry should involve 'promoting life in all its phases and transforming the world according to the Christian order' (38).

teaching, the ecumenical implications of social teaching, the market, the environment and globalisation.

This deals with some of the problems that have been raised. A specific focus on this part of moral theology gets written into this form of ministry from an early stage. I would hope it will mean, in due course, that selection for the diaconate by bishops will take more account of this (and that unsuitable applicants do not go forward). It should also strengthen the ways in which deacons already show a different way of 'doing ministry', being more collaborative and less authoritarian. In the challenges over ministry and authority which the Church faces in the light of the child abuse crisis, deacons should have an important role to play.

I stress again that this renewed and enlarged focus on Catholic Social Teaching for deacons should not in any way devalue what others do, particularly in the Religious orders and congregations, and in organisations like CAFOD. But among ordained clergy not nearly enough is being done.

Since the publication of *The Common Good* in late 1996, Catholics in this country have, slowly but surely, learnt more about Catholic Social Teaching, but there is still a long way to go. This was clear during the 2016 EU Referendum campaign, when we saw in the Church exactly how deep indifference and ignorance about social teaching is in our community. This level of theological illiteracy effectively neutralised any effort to counteract what was really an attack on the Catholic community (as many of us saw when anxious Polish parishioners asked for our advice after the referendum vote) and on Christian teachings. It was claimed, erroneously, that social teaching only offers us basic principles and that the Church gives us no real guidance about specific issues such as whether or not the United Kingdom should stay in the European Union. Again, this could have been avoided if more deacons – not to mention priests and bishops – had really been conversant with Catholic Social Teaching. But they did not; nor do many of them now. A proper renewal of our theory and practice about the diaconate can play a part in redressing this.

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