

# International Theological Commission

## The Diaconate: Development and Perspectives

### Chapter 6: The Reality of the Diaconate Today

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Deacon Tony Schmitz and Fr Ashley Beck were the founding editors of the *New Diaconal Review*. Under their direction, the journal began to publish a fresh translation of the International Theological Commission's document, *The Diaconate: Development and Perspectives*.  
This instalment concludes Chapter Six.

*The second typical situation: Churches where Deacons are more numerous*

The second typical situation is that of the Churches where the diaconate has undergone its greatest growth. These are the Churches confronted with a considerable drop in the number of priests: the United States, Canada, Germany, Italy, France, etc. The need to rearrange pastoral duties in response to the requirements of Christian communities which had been used to a wide range of services, and also the obligation to find new collaborators, all stimulated the emergence of new ministries and increased the number of lay folk engaged full-time in parish or diocesan pastoral work.<sup>1</sup> This also favoured the expansion of the diaconate. But at the same time this strongly influenced the kind of tasks entrusted to deacons. Tasks which had long and unproblematically been carried out by priests because they had been so numerous, now had to be entrusted to other collaborators,

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<sup>1</sup> Dependent on the country, these collaborators are given different names: "pastoral officers", "pastoral workers or animators", "pastoral auxiliaries", "lay pastoral agents", "pastoral auxiliaries", "parish assistants", "pastoral assistants", and in German: "Pastoralassistenten" and "Pastoralassistentinnen", etc. See A Borrás, *Des laïcs en responsabilité pastorale*, Paris, 1998.

some of these ordained (the deacons), others not ordained (lay pastoral workers). On account of this background the diaconate often came to be viewed as a *ministry of substitute priests*.

This dynamic is reflected in the results of a broad study undertaken in the United States,<sup>2</sup> which is clearly representative of the situation existing in many countries. The study shows that deacons were principally doing what priests were accustomed to doing unaided before the restoration of the diaconate. They carried out their ministry in the parish where they resided and there fulfilled mainly liturgical and sacramental functions. Their parish priests found them particularly suitable for sacramental and liturgical activities such as baptisms, weddings. The same was true in respect of the care of the sick and homilies. Ministry to prisoners and the championing of civil and human rights was where they were least involved. Lay leaders, for their part, considered that deacons succeeded best in the more familiar and traditional roles such as the liturgy and the administration of the sacraments. And the prediction was that their numbers would increase because of the diminishing numbers of priests. As they performed tasks traditionally exercised by priests, deacons risked being seen as "incomplete priests" or else as "more advanced laymen". This danger was all the greater given that the first generations of deacons had received a much shallower theological formation than that of priests or that of pastoral assistants.

A similar development could also be seen in other regions which likewise experienced a marked diminution of the number of priests.<sup>3</sup> It is a case of attempting to respond to the real needs of the People of God. It enables these Churches to assure a broader presence of the ordained ministry at the heart of Christian communities but this could risk losing sight of the proper meaning of this ministry. Together with the bishop and the priest, the deacon will remind them that it is Christ who is the foundation of the Church in every place and that through the Spirit he is still active in the Church today.

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<sup>2</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Study of the Diaconate: Summary Report*, Origins, 25 (18 January 1996).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Maskens, *Un enquête sur les diacres francophones de Belgique*, in A Haquin, and Weber (eds) *Diaconat XXIe siècle*, pp 217-232.

In this context, however, the identity of the deacon tends to be seen in reference to the figure of the priest: the deacon is perceived as the person who helps or replaces the priest in activities which were previously exercised by the priest himself. Many consider this development to be problematical, for it makes more difficult for an identity proper to diaconal ministry to emerge.<sup>4</sup> That is why, here and there efforts are being made to give this development a different direction by identifying charisms which might be more proper to the diaconate and tasks which might be priorities more suitably restored to the diaconate.

### *Lines of Development*

The most recent texts from the Roman Congregations enumerate the tasks that can be entrusted to deacons, and group these tasks under the threefold recognised *diakonia*, namely the *diakonia* of the liturgy, the *diakonia* of the word and the *diakonia* of charity.<sup>5</sup> Even if it is considered that one or other of these *diakonias* could absorb the greater part of a deacon's activity, it is insisted that the three *diakonias* taken together "constitute a unity at the service of the divine plan of Redemption: the ministry of the word leads to ministry at the altar, which in turn prompts the transformation of life by the liturgy, resulting in charity".<sup>6</sup> But it is recognised that of these tasks taken all together, it is "the service of charity"<sup>7</sup> that appears as particularly characteristic of the ministry of the deacon.

In many regions, then, efforts have been made to identify a certain number of tasks for deacons which can be related in one way or another to the "service of charity". The fact that most of these deacons are married men, earning their own living, immersed in the world of work, contributing,

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<sup>4</sup> For this sense, see B Sesboüé, "Quelle est l'identité ministerielle du diacre"?, in *L'Église à venir: Mélanges offerts à J Hoffman*, J Doré (ed), Paris, 1999, pp 255-257.

<sup>5</sup> See for example the document from the Congregation of for the Clergy: *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Permanent Deacons*, 1998, London, p.88..

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 39, 103: The text adds in the following paragraph: "It is important that deacons fully exercise their ministry, in peaching, in the liturgy, and in charity, to the extent that circumstances permit. They should not be relegated to marginal duties, be made merely to merely to act as substitutes, nor discharge duties normally entrusted to non-ordained members of the faithful."

<sup>7</sup> See the Congregation for Catholic Education, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*: 9: "Finally the *munus regendi* is exercised in devotion to works of charity and assistance and in motivating communities or sectors of the ecclesial life, especially in what has to do with charity. *This is the ministry which is most characteristic of the deacon.*" (Emphasis added.) *Ibid.*, p. 27.

along with their spouses, their own life experience is particularly promising.<sup>8</sup>

For example, a text by the bishops of France published in 1970 marked their preference "for deacons who, in daily contact with others through their family and professional situation, can witness with their whole lives to the service that the People of God should render to humankind, following Christ's example .... . Permanent deacons will thus share, in a way that is properly theirs, to the efforts of the hierarchical Church to go out to meet unbelief and misery, and to be more fully present in the world. They will keep all previous commitments which are compatible with the diaconal ministry."<sup>9</sup> Thus the mission they receive may often be situated "in the milieu of professional life and associations or trade unions related to the world of work (or even political life, particularly at the level of local government). Their mission is directed towards the care of the poor and the marginalised in such places, but also in their own parish areas, starting with home and family life."<sup>10</sup>

That is why in various places particular efforts have been made to make the diaconate a "threshold ministry", which aims to concern itself with "the Church at the margins": work in environments where priests are not present, with one-parent families, with couples, with prisoners, with young people, with the addicted, with AIDS sufferers, the elderly, disadvantaged groups, etc. In this way diaconal tasks are oriented towards activity in the social, charitable or administrative spheres, without however neglecting the necessary link with liturgical and teaching tasks. In Latin America, they speak of families who evangelise in the midst of areas of conflict; of a presence in extreme situations such as drugs, prostitution and urban vio-

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<sup>8</sup> "It is not the spouse who is ordained. However, the mission entrusted to the deacon obliges the couple to redefine themselves in some way in view of this ministry." M Cacouet and B Viole, *Les Diacres*, quoted in a study document on the role of the deacon's wife, Quebec, 1993. That is why in many countries the wife joins her husband for the initial formation period and takes part with him in continuing formation activity.

<sup>9</sup> Note of the Episcopal Commission for the Clergy, quoted by F Deniau, *Mille diacres en France*, in *Études*, 383, 5, (1995), 526.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pp p.527. This direction by the [French] bishops was confirmed in 1996 during their meeting at Lourdes where they indicated their desire that "the image projected by deacons ought not to be one of supplying for priests, but rather one of communion with them in the exercise of the sacrament of Holy Orders." *Documentation Catholique* 93 (1996), p. 1012.

lence; an active presence in the educational sector, the world of workers and the professional sphere; of a greater presence in densely populated zones as well as in the countryside; and finally, of animating small communities.<sup>11</sup> Very often, deacons are required to receive a progressively more solid theological and spiritual formation.

The outcome of all this very diverse experience makes it apparent that one could not hope to characterise the totality of diaconal ministry by identifying tasks which belong exclusively to deacons either depending on ecclesial tradition—which is far from clear—or through resorting to a strict division of tasks between the different ministers.<sup>12</sup> One of the texts of the Second Vatican Council seems to have intuited this, since one of the reasons cited in favour of re-establishing the diaconate "as a permanent state of life" was "to strengthen by the imposition of hands which has come down from the Apostles" and to unite more closely to the altar "men who *carry out a truly diaconal ministry* - preaching the word of God as catechists, or by presiding over scattered Christian communities in the name of the parish priest and the bishop, or by exercising charity in the performance of social or charitable works" (AG 16f.).<sup>13</sup> This has led certain people to propose that in order to define the character of the diaconate we need rather to look at the *being* of the deacon. "It is in the category of *being* that the specificity of the permanent diaconate is to be sought, and not in the category of *doing*. It is what they *are* that reveals the originality of what they do."<sup>14</sup>

It is this perspective of configuration to Christ the Servant that provides current theological reflection and pastoral studies with the lines of development of the permanent diaconate. This theological datum is seen as giving us the opportunity for an in-depth spiritual reflection appropriate for our present age. It can also guide pastors in their choice of the tasks to be

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<sup>11</sup> J G Mesa Angula OP: "Aportes para visualizar un horizont pastoral para el diaconado permanente en América Latina, hacia el tercer milenio, in: CELAM, I Congreso de diaconado permanente, Lima, August 1998. Working document.

<sup>12</sup> A certain number of tasks are of course reserved to deacons by Canon Law, but they do not account for the whole of a deacon's activity.

<sup>13</sup> Emphasis added. My [AFS] translation.

<sup>14</sup> R Pagé, *Diaconat permanent et diversité des ministères: Perspectives du Droit Canonique*, Montréal, 1988, p. 61.

entrusted to deacons. So the preferred tasks selected for them will be those that best express this characteristic of the diaconate: service of the poor and oppressed, a service which is not limited to mere assistance but which, following Christ, will be a sharing of life with the poor in order to journey with them towards their total liberation;<sup>15</sup> service of those who are on the threshold of the Church and who need to be led to the Eucharist. In many countries this perspective is very prominent in the thinking of those responsible for diaconal formation, and a spirituality and a pastoral practice of the "service of charity" can be seen to develop amongst deacons themselves. The profile proper to the deacon should thus emerge little by little through the performance of various ministries, and be manifested through a definite manner of doing, *in the spirit of service*, the things all are called to do, but also through concentrating on certain tasks or particular functions that render ever more visible Christ the Servant. It is clear the development of diaconal ministry always needs to be thought through in relation to the concrete needs of the Christian community. Certain Churches will not feel the need to develop it very widely. Other Churches would, on occasion, require the deacons to perform tasks other than those enumerated above; here one could think of those tasks which contribute to the pastoral animation of parishes and small Christian communities. The essential objective for pastors will always remain, in the spirit of Saint Paul, that of seeing that the faithful are "equipped for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:12-13). At the service of the bishop and his *presbyterium*, the deacon should, in the manner which is proper to him, go wherever pastoral solicitude needs him to be.

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<sup>15</sup> V Gerardi, *El diaconado en la Iglesia*, in CELAM, *Primer Congreso de diaconado permanente*, p. 8, referring to the First International Congress held in Turin in 1977.