

The Missing Link in Ministry:  
A Fresh Look at the Diaconate

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Presented 10/6/17 at Saint Phoebe Center for the Deaconess  
“Renewing the Male and Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church Conference” in  
Irvine, CA

(i) Introduction: reimagining the diaconate

Let me open with a personal anecdote and a personal confession. I recall a striking image of the role of deacons experienced recently in Constantinople. Following Lenten supper, the Ecumenical Patriarch entered the small chapel for compline with some other clergy. He was surprised to find seven deacons but no priest; the priests were on assignment elsewhere. Sensing his surprise, I said: “Your All-Holiness, it’s exactly what the church should look like. Many deacons, some priests, and very few bishops!” Justinian’s paradigm of sixty priests, one hundred deacons, forty deaconesses, and ninety subdeacons reflects cutbacks in sixth-century Constantinople, but it also provides a useful and helpful analogy!

As I looked around, it occurred to me that each of these deacons had a special and specific ministry: one served in the private patriarchal office, another as his archdeacon in liturgy and administration; yet another was deputy secretary of the holy synod, while another was the synodal scribe; and the remaining two worked in the ecumenical office and the English-language office. Moreover, these clergy had been deacons for many years; there is a long tradition of diaconal ministry at the Phanar. The point is: They did not have to be priests in order to be ordained; and they did not have to be priests in order to serve in their respective ministries. In fact, it was incredibly – even inspiringly – extraordinary to witness the patriarch himself vested solely with a priestly stole (ἐπιτραχήλιον), an unassuming yet compelling sign that he too had a very precise and distinct ministry at that moment, beyond his official title and institutional office.

Now here is my confession, which should really be construed as an expression of thanksgiving in the sense of the Psalms. I didn't mean to become a deacon. Like almost every ordained clergyman in the Orthodox Church, and possibly certain other mainstream Christian churches, I became a deacon by serendipity, not by selection – by coincidence, not by conscience. At the same time, however, while I normally cringe when people tell me they were “called to become priests,” I actually *believe* that I was called to become a deacon, by which I mean that my bishop in Australia literally asked if I would accept to become and remain a deacon in order to serve the church in a specific way through administration and education.

Several years ago now, in a meeting of Orthodox bishops in Chicago, one hierarch touched on the heart of the issue of ordination as vocation, when he asked: “Is someone ever *called to the diaconate*? Do we not normally say that people are *called to the priesthood*?” Well, I believe that we are called primarily to the royal priesthood, to the priesthood of all believers, than to the ordained priesthood. The truth is that one is not called to the diaconate any more than one is called to the episcopate. One is not actually called to the priesthood at all, at least as a distinct order, but to *the priestly ministry of the church*, within which there are three distinct and different orders.

(ii) The traditional concept of priesthood

There is a logical and theological purpose for which, over the centuries, the church settled on this unique or singular traditional concept of priesthood and the threefold ministry of deacons, priests and bishops. Regrettably, albeit realistically, customary practice has an uncanny way of obscuring and even abandoning tradition; but tradition, too, has an unmistakable way of reassessing conventional practice, although this sometimes takes far longer to determine. The apostolic community is unmistakable in its philosophy and practice with regard to assignment by the disciples of unambiguous roles and responsibilities to male and female deacons alike. This is particularly true of St. Paul as the missionary to the world.

Together, then, with the bishop and presbyters, deacons were regarded by Ignatius of Antioch toward the end of the first century as an essential part of the structure of the church, which realizes its unity – most completely and comprehensively – when the community is “with the bishop and the presbyters and the deacons who are with the bishop.” “Without these,” St. Ignatius adds, “[the community] cannot be called a church.” As the early church expanded and developed, deacons played important and varied roles, to the point one can say the second and third centuries were the golden age of deacons; and from the fourth century, the ecumenical councils made clear distinctions between deacons, priests and bishops.

The early church did not perceive the diaconate in the same way: deacons were neither neophytes nor novices; they were not necessarily immature or inexperienced. After all, as St. John Chrysostom reminds us, “even bishops are called deacons.” Indeed, in the time of the apostles, there is no implication or indication that deacons were a condition or requirement for elevation to priesthood. This is why it is my conviction that there can be no clear understanding of the priesthood or even of the episcopate unless we first properly apprehend and appreciate the diaconate in and of itself. So in the early seventh century, Isidore of Seville would boldly state:

Without the ministry of deacons, the priest has the name but not the office. The priest consecrates and sanctifies, but the deacon dispenses and shares.

### (iii) The contemporary concept of priesthood

Unfortunately, over time we have misconceived the concept of priesthood, thereby literally missing the mark on the role of deacons. We have in many ways misconceived – in the process misrepresenting and even distorting – the reason for which deacons originally emerged in the community. We have come to see deacons as assistants or apprentices. Deacons have become transitional and almost dispensable, invisible and virtually superfluous. It is no wonder, then, that – while this phenomenon is by no means restricted to any geographical region or historical

period – the Church of Russia sought on several occasions during the nineteenth century to eliminate the diaconate, while no less a formidable and formative theologian than Fr. Georges Florovsky saw little purpose or prospect for the restoration of the diaconate.

In recent centuries, the diaconate has only enjoyed a symbolical or transitional role in the church. Parish clergy are ordained to the priesthood after serving only briefly as deacons. It is as if they are *expected* to “move on!” or “move up!” The diaconate has been reduced to little more than a preparation or stepping-stone for the priesthood or episcopate. The latter two stages are often considered more significant for the ordained ministry, whereas the diaconate resembles a kind of sub-priesthood, rarely perceived as a lifelong or permanent office. This may be part of the problem surrounding the suspicion or trepidation of bishops – and, to a lesser degree, also priests and congregations – with regard to the ordination of women deacons, who are seen as seeking elevation or self-promotion to higher clerical orders.

In many Orthodox churches, the diaconate has been still further reduced, relegated in some to a purely aesthetic or exclusively liturgical office. Ironically, the purely liturgical obligations were traditionally delegated to sub-deacons, who were neither ordained nor consecrated but simply “named” or “appointed.” Deacons were always responsible for far more than simply liturgical order; deacons functioned as an essential aspect of the Christian community and its diverse manifestations and expressions.

(v) An alternative concept of priesthood

Therefore, given the essential role of deacons in the traditional concept of priesthood, I would strongly argue that there is something seriously missing from the ordained ministry if deacons are undervalued or omitted in the overall picture. A fuller vision of the ordained ministry should recognize the role of *the bishop* as the bond of unity and spokesman for doctrine; likewise, it should respect the role of *the presbyter* for celebrating the presence of Christ in the local community. Yet it should also realize the role of *the deacon* as servant in *completing and complementing this*

*circle of unity and community* in the local Church. And, in my opinion, this role may just as easily be fulfilled by men and women alike. In order to broaden our understanding of the diaconate, it may be helpful to consider an alternative vision of the priesthood conceived from three different perspectives.

a) The dinner table

First, the authentic image of the church that we should be seeking – in our minds and hearts as in our ministry – is that of *a dinner table*, and not that of a corporate ladder. The church is not a pyramid, where all attention and authority are turned toward and look to the summit. We are to imagine the church as comprising a sacrament, where the principal and essential focus is the celebration of the Eucharistic feast, in which “the least is greatest” (Matt. 23.12), “the last is first” (Matt. 20.16), and “the leader is servant.” (Matt. 20.26)

Accordingly, if the image of the table – the picture of *church-as-eucharist* – is our formative and normative icon of the church, then we might imagine deacons as waiting at festive tables or serving community needs, rather than as pawns at the bottom of some powerful or political organization; and certainly not as apprentices or interns awaiting promotion or self-fulfillment. Each of the orders is self-sufficient; it is not incomplete or contingent on further advancement. In this perspective, we can appreciate the invaluable and inviolable importance of deacons, male and female alike. After all, what greater gift could anyone ever ask for than – merely, only, simply – to serve: for some ministering pastorally at tables in the Mystical Body of Christ, just as for others ministering liturgically at the Mystical Supper? I certainly know of no other, no better, no more sublime gift.

b) The circular approach

Second, I would propose a circular approach to ordination and priesthood. Imagine for a moment the movements of deacons in the liturgy, where they are constantly moving inside and outside the altar, between the gospel book or communion cup and the congregation or communicants. Sacramentally, deacons consistently move between past, present and future, between history and

eschatology. Spiritually, deacons constantly mediate between clergy and laity, as well as between the church and the world.

The deacon is a sign of the cohesion of the ministry and the interdependence of the community. Almost in prophetic manner, the deacon points to the signs of the infusion and pervasion of the kingdom by sharing the Eucharist as a promise for the entire world. So by holding together the two inseparable aspects of the church (sacrament and world, ordained priesthood and royal priesthood, clergy and laity), by reconciling the two essential natures of the church (heavenly and earthly, uncreated and created), and by integrating the two vital dimensions of ordained ministry (spiritual and material, soul and body), deacons are the missing link that maintains unity within community and symmetry within priesthood.

This “go-between” dimension of the diaconate is even reflected in the architecture and liturgy of the church, where the deacon circulates between the invisible altar and the visible nave, connecting and combining the two worlds with a sense of frequency and familiarity. Indeed, constant motion is precisely the essence of *diakonia*, understood as never-ending *kinesis*. Think of deacons that move between the master and the guests at the feast in Cana of Galilee (John 2); or the angels ministering as deacons to Christ after his temptation in the desert (Matthew 4); or the deacons that serve as ambassadors of the church to the world in Ignatius of Antioch (*Philadelphians* 10). This “between-ness” also explains the ambiguity of the deacon, who is both clergy and laity, while at the same time neither clergy nor laity. It is, I believe, an ambiguity that reflects the very dynamism of a church “in the world” but “not of the world” (John 17.11-16).

Thus, ministerial dignity should be conferred on members of the laity, male and female, whose particular qualities would be formally incorporated and integrated within the community. Such persons would be commissioned or empowered in their ministry through the imposition of hands and grace of the Spirit, their various charismata – solemnly and sacramentally – recognized by the community and intimately bound with the altar. In this way, they would support rather than substitute the ordained ministry of the church.

c) The breadth of gifts

The third approach to which I would draw your attention is the horizontal dimension: that is, looking at the breadth of the gifts in the church. When we think of the linear concept of the church, we tend to speak only – or primarily – of the apostolic succession of bishops, which implies an unbroken line of continuity with the past and with the early church. However, there is a problem whenever we reduce the church to a linear institution. The church is not merely about historical existence or endurance, about sequence or survival.

We should not think of the church merely in terms of a *historical* or vertical line. Instead, we should embrace the entire *breadth* or horizontal dimension of the church, which includes all of its members and their concerns, all of its facets and dimensions. The church was at its best when it embraced the whole world – whether through the witness of martyrdom and the rise of monasticism, or else through its social institutions and the expansion of the arts. And the church was at its worst when it isolated itself from the world – whether by excluding lower clergy or members of its faithful, or else by choosing simply to preserve tradition and protect doctrine.

Now by breadth, I mean the fullness or plenitude of the church, which in turn implies the diversity of gifts expressed in the “royal priesthood of believers,” whose talents and skills should not be exploited but rather enlisted in a sacramental way by the church. That is what “calling” signifies; it isn’t the presumption – surely arrogant and even conceited – of some otherworldly inspiration or vocation, but the discernment of particular abilities and aptitudes for surrender to the church and for service to the community. In this regard, chrism (or the sacrament of ordination) and charism (or the vocation of the individual) are not mutually exclusive, but rather totally compatible in the ordination of a deacon. This is how I read St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, about the variety of gifts and services and activities in the one body of Christ with its many members, all of which are indispensable.

Unfortunately, this image of communion or conciliarity in the church is understood and practiced as a “closed caption” exercise, as if higher clergy somehow

have a monopoly in determining or deciding the direction of the church. Yet, a hardened hierarchal structure inevitably leads to mediocrity and abuse. Patriarchy gives rise to diverse problems, including narrow-mindedness and sexism. Moreover, it leads to a sense of fear or paranoia with regard to developments in other confessions, which are dismissed as degeneration and dissolution by those seeking refuge in Orthodox Christianity from other churches. Any criticism or reduction of the linear hierarchal structure invariably leads to a nervous college of bishops, just as it does to anxious clergy-converts, who must wonder what they would be introducing in the church if they were to accept the ordination of women deacons.

Of course, as the first and elementary order of priesthood, the sacramental office of the deacon, derived from the term *diakonia* (service), in and of itself implies an absence of institutional or hierarchal structure. If no one can become a priest or a bishop without first becoming a deacon, this underscores the fact that the diaconate can be neither overlooked nor undermined. Whenever and wherever the diaconate is either disregarded or diminished, it is always to the detriment of the priesthood and the church in general.

For example, matters of pastoral care, practical administration, financial concern, and even theological education could quite easily be delegated to deacons. Here is my vision: Someone whose administrative gifts are welcomed for the organization of a parish would be “ordained” to perform this task in the community. He (or she) could be a deacon that serves (part-time or full-time) in that capacity. The same would occur in cases where someone (again, male or female) has certain unique gifts in specific areas: for instance, as youth minister or even financial comptroller (just as monasteries have a novice master and a steward [*oikonomos*], as catechetical instructor or hospital chaplain, as pastoral assistant or social worker, and so on. Deacons may also be “called and commissioned” to preach or counsel, perform functions of parish or public service, as well as assist in liturgical and community affairs, such as administering the sacraments to members of the community who are in need.

Otherwise, we are passively surrendering to the deleterious temptation of *clericalism* – no matter how spiritual our justification or how logical our vindication

may be! I have come to appreciate that part of the cause – and the challenge – for this lies in the unrealistic expectations that we have of the priesthood, upholding the priest as some perfect icon, infallible model, and all-embracing minister.

Here is the fundamental and essential question for me: *Does someone have to be a priest in order to do what he is doing?* “Ordained” is one thing; “ordained a priest” is another! Rebalancing our hierarchy – reorienting our ordained ministries – by restoring and reinvigorating the diaconate (male and female) could invariably have profound theological significance, spiritual influence, and practical consequence for the development of our parishes and the growth of their ministries. Think about this for a moment:

- Organizing a conference like this . . . is a deacon’s work.
- The work of the executive director of OCMC is a *diakonia*; not the job of a priest; the CEO of IOCC should be a deacon, not a layman.
- Teaching at a theological faculty or Orthodox seminary, like Holy Cross and St. Vladimir’s, is a deacon’s role – neither a priest’s nor a layperson’s.
- Facilitating the youth office or camp programs of a diocese is a *diakonia*; why has it become the training – or waiting – ground for candidates to the priesthood?
- Guiding charitable programs of a Philoptochos chapter is a sacred assignment (for a male or a female) – it is neither a secular role nor a culinary task.
- Choir directors, parish outreach leaders, young adult ministers, adult educators, and stewardship officers – these are all specific services and defined ministries optimally suited for diaconal designation and ordination.
- Chaplains and counselors – in various capacities and with varying responsibilities – to students on campuses, military on bases, patients in hospitals, or prisoners in corrective services. These should be ordained deacons.
- Even – and there is no rhyme or reason for listing them after prison ministry – attendants or drivers to bishops.

These ministries are not subordinate or superfluous in the life of the church. It is important to remember that the living history of the church is written on the margins of the world, not behind the closed doors of an institutional synod.

(v) Conclusion: Revitalization of *diakonia*

I have argued and still maintain that our theology of the priesthood should be turned upside-down, beginning not from the top down, but springing from the elementary and essential notion of *diakonia*, reflecting the one who “came not to be served, but to serve and give his life” (Mark. 10.45), without whose service and sacrifice none of the priestly orders make any sense whatsoever. Any revolution in our appreciation and application of the priesthood, in all its breadth and diversity, will ultimately come from the bottom upward, from the grass roots. It is there that our faithful know what matters and what works in the church; it is also there that our faithful perceive the broader dimensions and implications of pastoral ministry. This is why it is crucial for a revitalization of the diaconate to occur, both for a reorientation of our ordained ministry as well as for a reinvigoration of our pastoral ministry.

Now, along with maintaining a sense of symmetry within the priesthood, the diaconate also maintains a balance of power in the church. And here, I believe, is where the heart of the problem lies. For the church fiercely resists any challenge to its current institutions authority. We must learn to pursue an attitude of humility and not of power, to practice ecclesial forms impregnated by simplicity and not ceremony; to retain a the vision of transforming the church as an organization of hierarchy into a community of service without nostalgia for the past but with openness toward the kingdom.

Without deacons, a parish becomes progressively insular rather than catholic, increasingly parochial rather than global. Deacons ensure the universal dimension of the church. In many ways, deacons are the missing link in preserving the fullness of church doctrine or, at the very least, in preventing a form of “monophysitism” in the institutional church. You see, the church preaches a God perceived as Trinity and a church conceived as conciliarity and community.

If we properly understand the diaconate, then we will also better understand the other orders of the priesthood. We will understand why and how women can quite naturally – by which I mean traditionally, rather than exceptionally – participate in the diaconate without triggering fears of ordination to the presbyterate or foregoing theological discussion about the male priesthood. Candid conversation about the priesthood can only enrich our appreciation of both the ordained ministry and the royal priesthood. And “if this idea or exercise is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, no one will be able to overthrow it.” (Acts 5.38-39)

In this way, the diaconate will be expanded and enhanced to reflect a modern ministerial expression, even while being rooted in the historical apostolic experience. You see: beyond administration and authority in the church, there is service and . . . serving. Beyond observing liturgy and sacraments, there is attending to people as the living altar on the body of Christ. Perhaps deacons will gradually awaken other, fresh ministries, not restricted to traditional roles and expectations. A creative revival of the diaconate in our age can become the source of resurrection for the ordained ministry as a whole, thereby playing a crucial role in the broader mission of the church. In this respect, the restoration of the diaconate – the missing link – may well prove both timely and vital.