

The Diaconate in Today's Church

Introduction

The title of this modest essay reveals its purpose. The author brings before our fathers in God, the hierarchy of the bishops in Great Britain and Ireland, what he believes to be a timely question: *“how might the ordained diaconate be expressed in the contemporary Church, mindful of its historical development and legacy?”* This question is timely for a number of reasons:

1. The question itself reflects the mind of the Church. In a recent study on the diaconate¹, the deacon Dr John Chryssavgis cites 16 sources of Orthodox theological reflection concerning the subject over the last 50 years.
2. There is a growing awareness of the need to reassess the diaconate in order to improve its fitness for service in the Church today.

However, problems remain. Theological reflection and even consensus on possible ways forward has not been matched by practical change. Indeed, there are some parts of the Church where deacons are almost invisible. Sometimes this happens in the diaspora where churches experience difficulties in funding full-time ministries. Financial expediency has often made the addition of a deacon to a parish ministry team an unaffordable luxury. Yet more intractable issues are obscured by these practical problems and may in the long run prove more difficult to overcome. The most serious of these concerns a deformation in the diaconate, common in the west in heterodox traditions, whereby a deacon is thought to be merely a stepping stone to the priesthood. The fact that some Orthodox churches today share the same view is a tragedy. This distorted view of the diaconate undermines the whole notion of a complementary threefold ordained ministry which has proved its effectiveness over centuries. It is in turn based on a more radical misunderstanding of each of those three expressions of priesthood, that is, of the bishop, the priest and the deacon. Deacon John Chryssavgis puts it well in his seminal work on the diaconate:

*“... It is incorrect - or at least incomplete - to refer to a priest as merely a delegate of the bishop or to a deacon as purely an assistant of the priest (or bishop).”*²

This essay will make clear why this deformation has become so destructive of the synthesis of ministry that we see in the threefold order. For now, it is enough to observe that if the deacon is merely an assistant, when there is a shortage of priests, then his role and identity seems to be, practically speaking, merely a transitional stage (and often a brief one that) on the way to priesthood. This has several unintended consequences which we shall explore, not least the nervousness many bishops feel in renewing the female diaconate if that will be seen merely as a preliminary to a female priesthood. This author believes that practical changes in accordance with the mind of the Church in Tradition are urgently needed in order to restore the threefold ministry to something approximating its apostolic form and more in keeping with current needs and opportunities for service in the Church and in the world.

There have been many studies in recent times tracing the development of the diaconate from the appointment of the seven Hellenists in Acts, through the apostolic period, beyond Nicaea into the Middle Ages and up to the present day. I shall now summarise this historical trajectory but not in any great depth

¹ John Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2009).

² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

as this lies outside the scope of this work; and in any event it would merely repeat the work of others. I am indebted to the work of Deacon John Chryssavgis (*ante*) for much of what follows.

The Diaconate Through Time – the New Testament

Some interpreters, both ancient and modern, have tried to discover a template for the diaconate in Jewish practice contemporaneous with Christ. A possible solution is offered by Origen³ and St Athanasius⁴ who refer to the deacon's liturgical role in post-exilic Levitical terms. The Levites served as doorkeepers, administrators, chanters and custodians of the sacred vessels. Theirs was not a sacrificial priesthood but rather a service binding the people to that priesthood in the offering of prayer and the life of the community. Such service could take many different forms, including attending at tables, but it was by no means restricted to the Levites. Likewise, diaconal ministries in the New Testament were sometimes performed by deacons and at other times by others, but it was the ordained diaconate that manifested service as the hallmark of Christ's own saving work. Christ emphasised this service in His instruction to the Twelve (Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27) and offered Himself as a slave as an example when he washed the disciples' feet at the Last Supper (John 13:1-17).

The Levitical model probably informed the general shape of the diaconate when it emerged as an order of ministry by the laying on of hands of the Apostles in Acts 6:1-6, albeit "deacons" as such are not explicitly mentioned in that text. The social and the liturgical aspects of diakonia were carried forward into the life of the Church pre-eminently by this ministry. St. Stephen and St. Philip are perhaps the most prominent of the early deacons; and it is interesting that St. Luke emphasises their witness and preaching in Acts rather than their service to widows, orphans and in the communal meal. In so far as St. Philip baptised the Ethiopian eunuch it is clear that the diaconate had a central missionary, liturgical and ministerial status in the early Church in partnership with that of the Apostles. Nowhere is this partnership more strongly represented than in St. Paul's autobiographical account of his own ministry.

Most of St Paul's more general references to the ministry of deacons are to be found in his letters to the church at Corinth. Aside from their practical responsibilities, the deacons who served St Paul seemed to function as mediators and spokespersons for the community. This role continues to be represented today liturgically in the Church insofar as it is the deacon who leads the people in prayer and encourages their response. St Paul also employed deacons as fellow teachers bringing many to faith; and he regarded them as fellow ministers of God who were essential to the fulfilment of his own mission (1 Corinthians 3:5, 2 Corinthians 3:6; 6:4). They appear to have had a special responsibility for financial stewardship and the support of the poor (2 Corinthians 8:4, 2 Corinthians 9:1). This is corroborated by the example of the deacon martyr St Lawrence of Rome and many others who exercised this philanthropy.

Using English translations of the New Testament alone it is sometimes difficult to notice and remember that the Greek word St Paul uses in these contexts is *διακονοι* which perhaps too often is simply rendered as "ministers", "servants" or "(co-)workers" rather than "deacons", but it seems to this author the office of the deacon is his more general reference. Of course, it could be the case that *διακονια* is more usually understood by St Paul in the general sense of the service of those called to a

³ "When you see priests and Levites no longer handling the blood of rams and bulls, but ministering the word of God by the grace of the Holy Spirit then you can say that Jesus has taken the place of Moses." Origen of Alexandria, *Homily II on Joshua* 6.

⁴ "you will see the Levites (namely, the deacons) bearing the breads and chalice of wine, placing them on the table." St Athanasius the Great, *on Easter 8* (PG 86:2400).

supportive but non-ordained ministry. Historically, this argument has been used by those seeking to limit the female diaconate or others who see no warrant in Scripture or Tradition for constraining such service within an ordained ministry. Chryssavgis⁵ on the whole seems to favour an actual diaconal reference in St Paul's letters; and he may well be correct to (re)interpret in this fashion if only because a rather ill-defined ministry certainly evolved with more specific characteristics into the second and third centuries. St Ignatius⁶ certainly saw a deacon's role in this way, that is, commissioned to a particular representational ministry.

St Paul also understood the deacon to share an intimate collaborative relationship with the bishop in ministry and this is clearly set out in Philippians 1:1. This collaboration has endured throughout time both liturgically and pastorally but has sometimes become the source of a conflict of interest between the presbyter and the deacon. It may well indeed have been such tensions that eventually led to the diaconal ministries being increasingly taken over by the presbyterate. In part this accounts for the contemporary need to reassess diaconal roles within the Church especially since *διακονία* is increasing in importance for the Church's mission within increasingly secular societies. More about this will be said later.

Finally in the Pastoral epistles⁷ we note that St Paul lists separately the qualifications for those exercising a diaconal and an episcopal ministry. The emphasis on the deacon's trustworthiness and honesty probably reflects his key role in mediating between the bishop and the people. Good household management and financial probity remain vital to a deacon's standing and effectiveness in the Church. The service orientated domestic life and witness of both the bishop and the deacon constitute essential prerequisites of both their ministries. Clearly as we move into the second century the partnership between the bishop and the deacon, itself an evolution of the original commissioning in Acts 6, is a secure and established cornerstone of the Church's ministerial priesthood.

Excursus – a Female Diaconate?

St Paul commended the service of those deacons who supported him and his ministry; and amongst these were counted a number of women. Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 is referred to not as a deaconess but as a "deacon of the Church." The assessment of a female diaconate is another study in itself, but it is sufficient here to note the New Testament origins of a ministry that included women from the apostolic period until the Middle Ages. The ground breaking research into this subject by Professor Evangelos Theodorou in 1954 seems to have been received and endorsed by the Rhodes Consultation of 1988⁸ such that few doubt today that women were sacramentally ordained as deacons in the early Church. Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald⁹ has comprehensively assembled the evidence. Although uncertainties still remain as to women's liturgical diaconal participation in the early centuries, there seems to be no obstacle standing in the way of a contemporary reassessment of these questions.

⁵ Ibid 1, p. 42f.

⁶ *To the Philadelphian's 10:1*

⁷ *1 Timothy 3:8-13 (deacon)*

1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9 (bishop)

⁸ Ref: *"The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women,"* Gennadios Limouris, ed., (Katerini, Greece: "Tertios" Publications, 1992).

⁹ Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, *"Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church – Called to Holiness and Ministry"* (Brookline, Massachusetts, Holy Orthodox Press, 1998).

The Diaconate Through Time – Before and After Nicaea

In the period of Church history leading up to the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. the diaconate entered what Deacon John Chryssavgis calls its “golden age.”¹⁰ Although 1 Clement, the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas all refer to the diaconate as a third order in the ministry of the Church it is St Ignatius of Antioch who warmly refers to the deacons as his “fellow servants” and “special friends.”

*“The bishop presides in the place of God; the presbyters reside in the place of the apostolic college; while the service of Christ is reserved for my special friends, the deacons.”*¹¹

Across his writings St Ignatius refers to the deacons as fellow ministers with the bishop and the presbyters in the Liturgy, the Word, charity, administration and authority. There are corroborating references to the deacon’s ministry in the second century in the writings of St Justin Martyr and St Polycarp. So influential did these deacons become in the Church that some bishops, notably St Hippolytus, saw fit to remind them that they should be subordinate in accountability and authority to both the presbyters and the bishop.¹² In a later period the tables would be turned on the deacons!

As the Church grew numerically and in extent in this early period, the deacons’ influence strengthened along with their growing administrative responsibilities. Liturgically, the deacons led the people in prayer and often preached. With the bishop present their supportive roles eclipsed that of the priests. Pastorally they represented the people’s concerns to the bishop and assisted him in most of the practical aspects of his ministry. In times of persecution the deacon could also stand in for the bishop or the priest in performing baptisms and might even hear confessions *in extremis*. We know this from the letters of St Cyprian of Carthage, but the practice was not limited to North Africa. The philanthropic work of the diaconate, however, remained that essential characteristic which connected it to the servanthood of Christ in the Church. Most notable in this regard was the example of St Lawrence at Rome (258). This popular deacon and martyr presented the poor to the persecuting prefect as “the treasure of the Church.” In the period before the great Councils it was inconceivable that a Christian community and its bishop should be without a deacon and in many larger communities there were a number of these.

In the conciliar period from the fourth century onwards the Church saw fit to restrain the development of the diaconate because it started in some places to encroach on the presbyterate, particularly in the offering and administration of the Eucharist.¹³ Nearly one third of the 85 canons in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (4th Century) concern the ministry of deacons but mostly these concern the correction of abuses. Once again the “offering” of the Eucharist is forbidden (8.46). The 17th Catechetical Lectures of St. Cyril of Jerusalem refers to the role of the deacon in the administration of baptism and seemingly continues in the tradition of the deacon baptising in the absence of a priest or bishop. This pastoral provision, however, was never extended to the Divine Liturgy. Many Councils in the fourth and fifth centuries both affirm and reinforce the limitation on diaconal ministries. Deacons remained nonetheless a highly prized aspect of the Church’s ordained ministry. The distinctiveness of the diaconate sometimes even prompted a (Roman) Pope to complain that ordination to the presbyterate of a particular

¹⁰ Ibid 1, p. 47

¹¹ *Epistle to the Magnesians*, 6. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/srawley/magnesians.html>

¹² *Apostolic Tradition* 9.

¹³ Councils of Arles and Ancyra (314), Nicaea (325) Canon 18, Laodicea (345), Antioch (341), Carthage (390).

diaconal candidate would degrade his contribution to the Church!¹⁴ Deacons still routinely preached in the middle of the 5th Century but their primary role liturgically was to be found in the Eucharist itself. This remained the case even in the west where, subsequently, the diaconate suffered a more rapid decline than in the east. This from St. Isidore of Seville (c. 560 – 636) for example:

*“Without the ministry of deacons the priest has the name but not the office. The priest consecrates but the deacon dispenses the sacrament. The priest prays while the deacon recites the Psalms. The priest sanctifies the offering but the deacon distributes what has been sanctified. It is not permitted for priests through their presumption to take the chalice from the table of the Lord, unless it is handed to them by a deacon.”*¹⁵

After the 6th Century, more rapidly perhaps in the Christian west than the east, the diaconate entered a period of prolonged decline. The reasons are diverse and complex, but Barnett¹⁶ has persuasively argued that the reasons lie in profound changes taking place in the relationship between the three orders of ministry in the Church. These changes concern the gradual conformity of hierarchy in ministry to the *‘cursus honorum’* or sequential order of public office in the Roman Empire. Charism and function gradually gave way to an over-emphasised vertical organisational principle. With the suppression of the *choriepiscope* (rural assistant bishops) and their subordination to the emergent class of Metropolitan bishops in the major urban centres after Nicaea I, the popular acclaim by which St. Ambrose could be elected bishop as an unbaptized layman gave way to an orderly progression through the ministerial ranks, starting with the so called ‘minor orders.’ This ‘progression principle’ did not however become embedded in Church practice until the 9th Century - even if desirable candidates could still be accelerated through ‘the ranks.’ Nonetheless, there was a more immediate consequence of the *cursus honorum* model of ministerial hierarchy and this undermined the diaconate long before the 9th Century.

Although the implementation of a more sequential vertical hierarchy could be seen as a providential development in serving the organisational needs of a rapidly expanding Church, there were a number of perhaps unintended consequences. Perhaps the most damaging of these was the erosion of the ancient horizontal, charismatic and functional aspects of a relationally ordered ordained ministry. This in turn tended to fuel clericalism and careerism. The diaconate suffered from this transformation more than the presbyterate since it had been long understood that the presbyterate and the episcopate shared the *same* priesthood, but with the bishop alone sharing in its fullness. In this vertical hierarchical economy the diaconate became successively weakened, and indeed, rendered irrelevant. In the west this led to the curious practice in the Middle Ages of Archdeacons being in priest’s orders ... an anomaly retained today only by the Anglican Church. More generally, as the pastoral and administrative functions of the diaconate atrophied, the deacons were left with an almost exclusively liturgical ministry, which in turn was further eroded by the presbyterate. In the ensuing sometimes ungodly power struggle between the ascendant presbytery and the declining diaconate, it was the latter that was bound to emerge, qualitatively speaking, worse off. In effect, senior presbyters supplanted the deacons as the bishops’ assistants; and the deacons became the priests’ assistants. Soon enough and under the inexorable pressure of the *‘cursus honorum’* the diaconate came to be seen as a temporary transitional stage in “promotion” towards the priesthood; and in many places so it has remained until today.

¹⁴ Pope Leo the Great to Archbishop Anatolius of Constantinople.

¹⁵ *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis* (PL 83;788-789)

¹⁶ James M. Barnett, *The Diaconate, a Full and Equal Order* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Trinity Press International, 1995).

This author believes that this decline in the diaconate, born out of an over-emphasised vertical hierarchical economy, has had a disastrous impact on the mission and the life of the Church both in the east and in the west. In a period where the servanthood of the Church in the world and the relational aspect of her ministry is paramount, it is a grievous loss that churches should still tolerate the impoverishment of a ministry that represents this servanthood most fully, that is, the diaconate. The remainder of this paper considers how that diaconal jewel might be restored to the crown of the Church, a jewel that is in fact a thorn rather than a lifeless gemstone. True beauty lies in the outpouring of sacrificial love not in the competition for precedence and influence as our Lord Himself remarked, (Mark 10:42-45).

Is There a Problem?

Some might object to any change in the diaconate on the grounds that ministries are not static and if the diaconate has evolved into different expressions, even less significant, over time by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so be it. There is some truth in this. Restorationism is alien to mind of the Orthodox Church. She does not continually refer back to the past as if restoring historical patterns of faith and life would by itself keep herself true to the gospel. Change often happens for good reason and by the guidance of God. However, the Church is called upon by God to exercise discernment, to examine prayerfully whether or not changes in the past truly have reflected His mind and then to consider how the present context and its challenges are informed by that. This is a delicate task as there is a tendency in every age to assume that it knows best. In discerning the will of God for today's Church, antiquarianism and novelty can only be resisted by applying irreducible, irreformable insights from the gospel itself. First, of course, there must be an agreement on what those applicable insights might be with reference to the contemporary situation of the Church. In addressing these issues the Church will respect diversity of place and culture. What might be judged possible universally will not always prove to be prudent locally. So, to return to the question. "Is there a problem?" This author believes that there is.

A Deacon-shaped Hole

The irreducible, irreformable insight from the gospel applicable here is the servanthood of Christ. We have already established the New Testament legacy for this from Christ Himself (p. 2). The problem which this insight addresses arises primarily within post-Christian cultures where huge swathes of the populace find themselves, for whatever reason, alienated from the Church. This is intolerable. However, religious propaganda will only make this alienation worse and for the following reasons. Post-Christian cultures are word-deaf but action-sensitive, doctrine-jaded but personally-sensitised. Never has there been a time in such places (within living memory at least) where the need for the Church to make a *practical* difference in the lives of persons and communities has been more important. Now I am *not* saying that only deacons can perform that serving role. All believers, ordained and not ordained are called to the same priestly service. However, it is the deacon above all that most personally - and with the full authority of God and His Church - incarnates that principle. He or she makes it visible and accessible to all in a prophetic and practical manner. This is the "deacon-shaped hole" created by the mission deficit in post-Christian cultures. Happily, that hole can be filled from the treasury of the Church's ministerial practice in Tradition. Absolutely nothing new is being called for here, just the re-imagining of the diaconate, both male and female, for the modern context, *and* the boldness to implement that!

Possible Ways Forward

If the Orthodox Church were to act to renew the diaconate then no one can predict how that ministry might evolve in today's conditions. New challenges will doubtless arise with new opportunities.

This should not deter us from action for Gamaliel's famous test still applies: - *"if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it"* (Acts 5:38b-39a). Because I believe that we have now come to the point of action rather than merely a yet more extended repetitive debate, I humbly submit these proposals as possible ways forward for a renewed diaconate.

1. Commission readers, acolytes and subdeacons in numerous parishes.

There are a significant number of competent, theologically informed and godly believers in many parishes who might well have a vocation to become deacons but who are not aware of that vocation. In one sense, this is good, because future deacons should be selected on account of the need to accomplish a specific ministry, rather than because an individual has a desire within themselves to be ordained. However, in another sense, this lack of awareness of a possible vocation is due in part to the existing absence of long-term deacons within parishes and the resulting lack of models for potential future deacons. An important and readily achievable first step in promoting the diaconate in today's Church would be to appoint suitably qualified readers, acolytes and subdeacons in *every* possible parish. This would provide an opportunity for potential deacons to become better acquainted with the liturgical service. In tonsuring these people, both young and old, to become readers, acolytes and subdeacons, it should be stressed that these roles are of value in and of themselves. The possibility of a specific reader, acolyte or subdeacon becoming a deacon should then be considered prayerfully by the candidate, the parish priest, the community and the bishop.

2. Welcome the diaconate as a possible lifelong vocation.

Many laymen (at times influenced appropriately by their wives) are understandably hesitant about whether they will be able to meet their existing family-based and work-based commitments should they become deacons. Stressing that there is no obligation for a deacon to become a priest will encourage many laypeople to consider the opportunities for service that the diaconate offers. The Roman Catholic experience of ordaining permanent deacons has been successful in many dioceses, providing relevant evidence that the practice of the early Church is still applicable to the contemporary Church.

The ministry of deacons today would evolve to serve the mission of the Church and the needs of the World, but always within the critique of Tradition and the oversight and authority of the bishop. A reconfiguration of ministerial roles between the deacon and the priest would of course prove necessary and a large degree of pastoral discretion and humility would be required from all concerned. As we have seen from our historical analysis of the decline of the diaconate in this paper, the mistakes of the past arose from the passions and the occasional lack of clarity in the definition and development of these ministries. We can learn from these mistakes; they should not be repeated. The active leadership of the episcopate in facilitating the harmonious realignment of both presbyteral and diaconal ministries remains vital. Perhaps some of the historical roles assigned to deacons in the Divine Liturgy, now lapsed, could be restored to them but the diaconate will not be rejuvenated by such minor albeit important adjustments alone. A more thorough-going reassessment of all the serving ministries of the Church is called for. The relationship between the deacon and the people of God should also be borne in mind, for diaconal ministries in the body of Christ are not and never have been restricted to those who are ordained. The deacon could become a very effective and inspirational leader and trainer of the people of God in their diaconal ministries as well and this is the greatest hope we might have for the work of the Church in mission, especially in alienated secular cultures.

3. Seek appropriate funding of parish-based deacons.

Each newly appointed deacon, with his or her financial needs, is a unique person. The responsibility for meeting financial needs rests largely with the individual himself and with his parish. If the parish wishes the

individual to spend a significant number of hours each week in serving the parish, then the parish will need to accept the responsibility for supplementing the new deacon's income, if necessary. While diocesan endowments (if available) and charitable foundations might be helpful, especially in the early years of a new deacon's service, the parish itself will need to structure its finances in such a manner that those who are willing to serve as deacons can be confident that their changing financial needs will be discussed confidentially within the parish setting, with suitable plans being developed. One way forward might be for bishops to agree a pilot scheme to match funds raised by two or three parishes for the first three years of a new deacon's service, perhaps to an annual sum of £2,000 from the bishop and £2,000 from the parish. While this would not be a living wage, the possibility of such an arrangement would make it clear to a layman (and his wife) that significant financial support would be available in return for significant service to the parish.

4. In implementing the above steps, explore the possibility of women deacons.

Each of the above three steps will need to be implemented within a specific jurisdiction before serious consideration can be given to the appointment of women deacons. The appointment of a woman as subdeacon should not be undertaken until there is a consensus within a particular jurisdiction that it might be possible for a female subdeacon to become a deacon, if this was discerned by the candidate, the community, the parish priest and the bishop as a suitable course of action. Before female deacons could be appointed, it would be essential that a permanent diaconate be already established within a diocese (and preferably within the specific parish) so that there was a clear understanding among all parties that women deacons would not become priests. In the early Church, female deacons were involved in the preparation of women for baptism and in the exercise of pastoral care within the congregation. Although there is little or no historical precedent for the liturgical service of female deacons there is no reason to suppose that such service would be inappropriate today. Many women within the Church who do not necessarily believe they themselves are called to become deacons would be greatly supported by the Church's vision for the role of women in the contemporary Church.

Each of the four changes proposed above is a realistic possibility for a specific parish and a specific diocese provided that the bishops themselves achieve a common mind and intention. Ideally, as many Orthodox dioceses as possible could now move forward to consider and reflect upon these possible changes. It would be immensely encouraging to both laity and clergy if all the Orthodox dioceses in the British Isles and Ireland were to agree together on the precise changes needed now to renew the diaconate for today's Church and to act upon them. It is this author's belief that the Church's Mission would be immeasurably enhanced and blessed.

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