

## What Do Deacons Do? Viewpoint

*by Deacon Nicholas Denysenko*

Today, I will talk about what deacons do, and what the diaconal ministry could become, if the Churches are truly interested in developing and sustaining a healthy and holy permanent diaconate. Most of my reflections are based on experience – I have been blessed to live in multiple locations and serve in many parishes, serving with many deacons and presbyters along the way. I begin the series of reflections with three observations. First, there is no uniform standard that defines the details of diaconal ministry. Second, many parish presbyters do not understand the diaconal ministry and either conflate it with presbyteral ministry or view deacons as subordinate to presbyters. Last, the Church seems to have lost its sense of the diaconate as a holy order, appointed and established by God to perform Christ's ministry.

### **The Eucharist as the Foundation of Diaconal Ministry**

Diaconal ministries should stem from traditional liturgical practices and the theological principles underpinning them. In the Byzantine Rite, the most visible and prominent function of the deacon is to lead the assembly in prayer and proclaim the Gospel. The deacon also assists with the preparation and consumption of Holy Communion. Liturgically, then, here is what deacons do (drawing from the Byzantine rite):

- Assist the presider in completing the preparation of the gifts to be offered;
- Perform (most of) the ritual incensation of the temple;
- [predominantly] Direct the prayers of the assembly.

Consultation of diaconal ministry in the history of the Byzantine rite suggests that deacons once handled the preparation of the bread and wine for Communion themselves – the presider would recite the main prayer at the covering of the gifts. A vestige of the process of preparing and consuming the gifts remains in the Byzantine Rite, as the rubrics appoint the deacon to place the consecrated pieces of bread on the diskos (paten), and place them into the chalice(s) in preparation for consumption. Deacons perform the consumption of Holy Communion that remains after distribution has been completed.

Churches of the Byzantine Rite that implemented liturgical reform relied upon the history of diaconal Eucharistic ministry, especially when the numbers of communicants increased significantly. Such parishes appoint deacons to assist the presbyters (and bishops, when they are present) with the distribution of Holy Communion. This practice is not universal in the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic traditions; many bishops and dioceses strictly reserve the duty of distributing Communion to presbyters and bishops.

A proposal for what deacons could do on the basis of Eucharistic practice and theological principles would begin with restoring the practice of deacons distributing Holy Communion, including bringing Communion to those who are invalid and ill.

I propose that deacons should also resume the ancient practice of preparing the gifts for Communion. For Byzantines, this would mean that deacons would preside at the rite of the prothesis, with the presider retaining the recitation of the concluding prayer of preparation. Restoring diaconal management of the office of preparation service would enable presiders to polish their sermons, or, as is often the case, meet with parish leaders, greet guests, or hear confessions before the beginning of the Liturgy.

The diaconal task of preparing Communion connects organically with the commemorations added to the diskos. This aspect of the deacon's part in the Eucharistic ministry would require deacons to be among the laity, and manage the process of identifying the sick, afflicted, departed, and those who need prayer, and praying for them at the prothesis, and again (as is often the case) in the Litany of Fervent Supplication, and at the conclusion of the anaphora. (The Greek practice invites deacons to intone their own commemorations during the intercessions at the end of the anaphora). Appointing deacons to minister to the sick is a natural application of the Eucharistic ministry of to the diaconate.

This section, then, essentially fills in the blanks with what deacons could do. History indicates that deacons played a leading role in preparing, distributing, and consuming Holy Communion. The proposed revisions of the current practice simply restore the fullness of the diaconal Eucharistic ministry; it is incomplete in its current form.

### **Presidency of Liturgical Offices?**

The prominent role exercised by deacons at the Liturgy in leading the assembly's prayer raises the question on whether or not deacons can preside at some liturgical offices. Byzantine practice is wildly inconsistent on this matter. In general, the bishop or presbyter is to preside at all offices. But if they are absent, does this mean the community cannot gather to pray?

Only a bishop or priest can preside at a Holy Mystery (Sacrament) – the deacon's role is to assist, not preside. Therefore, there is no theological principle that allows deacons to preside at Baptism, Chrismation, Marriage, and Unction, not to mention the Divine Liturgy and ordination.

That said, the Byzantine Liturgy adjusts to circumstances in which a bishop or presbyter cannot preside, especially for the Liturgy of the Hours. The problem is more acute for dioceses with a limited number of "supply" presbyters who could substitute for the pastor when needed. In these instances, parish communities gather to celebrate a typica service of psalmody and song. This service is based upon a Palestinian antecedent in the book of the Liturgy of the hours when the monks gathered to pray. Many Byzantine bishops designate deacons to lead Typica services with Communion from Presanctified Gifts. It is crucial to note that the deacon does not lead the people in offering and petitioning for God's consecration of the gifts, as this does not belong to the ministry of the diaconate. But leading prayer, proclaiming the Gospel, and distributing Communion are diaconal ministries, and the celebration of Typica services with Communion is a pastoral application of the deacon's Eucharistic ministry.

The Liturgy of the Hours offers a similar paradigm- the community can celebrate "Reader's" Hours without a presider. The diaconal ministry of leading assembly prayer should permit deacons to preside at the Liturgy of the Hours, performing their usual duties of incensation and intonation of the litanies.

I also propose adding the possibility of diaconal presidency at four additional offices and one ministry: burial (funeral), the short memorial (panikhida), a molieben or paraklesis, and the blessing of homes with holy water. With the proper training, a deacon could also hear the confession of a penitent, with the understanding that the final act of reconciliation is a presbyteral ministry.

Technically, the office of burial is not a Holy Mystery, but is a modified Matins service containing specific poetry and readings for the dead. Pastorally, it would be ideal for bishops or presbyters to preside at funerals, so diaconal presidency would be limited on the basis of need. The short memorial service is celebrated so frequently in the Byzantine Rite, and demands much of the presbyter's time, that it is sensible for deacons to preside, in churches, cemeteries, and homes.

The custom of the pastor blessing the homes of parishioners has existed for centuries. Blessing homes comes from the annual Theophany feast in the Byzantine Rite, on January 6. When the waters are

blessed on Theophany, the people drink from the water, anoint themselves with it, and take it home. The pastor's visit to the home of the faithful is a blessing, ideally with some of the water taken home by the laity – and it is also an opportunity to visit.

Many pastors schedule the blessing of waters for several weeks following the Theophany feast, and in larger communities, the schedule can go up until the beginning of Lent. It is a precious opportunity for the pastor to meet with people in their homes, "off campus" as it were. Inviting the deacon to perform this ministry is not a means of displacing the pastor, but of extending the larger ministry of the parish community to include the deacons. If deacons are to engage the community, pray for the sick, and manage the community's local and global list of commemorations, consultation with the people of the community in their homes provides a good opportunity to learn about the people and their lives.

While one will not find the rite of the blessing of waters included in lists of the Mysteries, it is sacramental. The prayer for the blessing of waters includes an epiclesis and asks God to remit the sins and heal the souls and bodies of those who partake. To this day, the waters blessed on Theophany can be used as a penultimate step for reconciling penitents to the Church. Presbyters and bishops should preside at the rite of blessing, but the blessing of homes is essentially an extension of distributing the holy water. There is good reason to share that ministry with deacons.

It is also possible for a deacon to hear the confessions of a penitent. This ministry can be exercised by non-ordained monastics, and this indicates that the ministry of hearing another's confession is not exclusively presbyteral or episcopal. The ministry of reconciling an excommunicated penitent to the Church is presbyteral and episcopal. Confession is a multifaceted ministry, and with the right training, a deacon can exercise the part of meeting with the penitent and hearing the confession. This is particularly useful in an era of broken trust because of abuse of authority. Theologians have lamented the decline of confession in the Church. Perhaps more people – especially women – would be willing to present their confession if it is made in the presence and hearing of someone they trust. The potential for the renewal of confession and repentance is closely tied to authorizing deacons and deaconesses to hear confessions, while preserving the rite of reconciling penitents to presbyters and bishops.

### **What Deacons Can Do**

The theological foundations of the diaconal ministry suggest that deacons can preside over the preparation of the gifts in its entirety (except for the prayer of the prothesis), lead the ministry of visitation with communion and anointing, preside at Sundays services of Communion of presanctified Gifts, preside at the Liturgy of the Hours and memorial services, and in cases of great need, funerals, and participate in the ministry of the home by blessing homes.

As for deaconesses, we are several hundred years removed from our ancestral model of the deaconess, with some exceptions. The Church has to decide what ministries deaconesses will exercise in the renewal of the order- will deaconesses resume catechetical ministry? Will they perform woman-to-woman ministries, like confession? Will they do everything deacons do? If we allow the principles of ministry to govern us, then deaconesses could assist in leading prayer, proclaiming God's word, and extending the Church's sacramental ministries into the community. This is my view – but let the Church speak. The big point here is to avoid conflating diaconal ministries with presbyteral ones.

Enriching the diaconal ministry by restoring and revising certain liturgical and extraliturgical ministries is motivated by the desire to permit the diaconate to be what it was originally intended to be: a ministry of a major and holy order, distinct from, yet not inferior to the presbytery.

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