

The Diaconate in the Church Today

by Metropolitan SABA Esper, August 27, 2001

The diaconate, from its inception, has had a clear and definite ministry.

With the increase in the number of the faithful, the apostles, after Pentecost, found themselves involved in the application of faith within the domain of the new gathering, especially in the field of evangelization and proclamation of the gospel, i.e., in teaching and preaching. Because of the rapid growth of Church membership, the apostles created a new ministry in order to alleviate the pressure of the growing Church; this new ministry provided some needed practical services.

In this regard we read in the Acts of the Apostles as follows:

“Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:1-7).

The religion of love was the content of the preaching of the apostles. It expressed itself in the everyday economy of care to the new members and their common bond for one another. The apostles distributed the contributions of the faithful over the needy widows and established the agape tables during their religious gatherings. Since those who embraced the new faith were from Jewish and Greek origins, a dispute took place, in which the apostles were accused of neglecting the Greek widows in favor of the Jewish. This necessitated the need to create a new ministry that could efficiently take care of this dispute. Thus, the office of the diaconate came into existence.

Deacon is a Syriac word; it literally means “the Servant.” This ministry has been in the life of the Church from its inception until today, though it has undergone an up and down scale of development. The office of the diaconate reflects the growth and development of the Church in the world; the establishment of the Holy Orders: bishop, priest and deacon, is known since the apostolic age, especially in the area of the diaconate, where we read in the epistles of St. Paul that there were both male deacons and female deaconesses, which again means that the diaconate was a fundamental ministry in the Church.

With the establishment of churches everywhere, there was an increase in diverse services of teaching and praxis. We find deacons helping in liturgical services, in the acts of charity, in the distribution of Eucharist to the faithful and to the sick at home, in the area of preaching and teaching, in helping the women, and in the care of temples and in accompanying the episcopos. Historians reveal that the ministry of deaconesses remained a vital ministry until the 11th century.

Even though it suffered a setback because of the change of circumstances which required the guarding of women in the temples, deaconesses helped in the anointing of the entire body during baptism, in teaching women, and accompanying them when they had an audience with the hierarch. The only service that characterizes what we call an “evangelical deacon,” the deacon as is known today, is his role in assisting the priest or the bishop in liturgical services and prayers, to such an extent, especially in our Antiochian Patriarchate, that it has become a preparatory step into the office of the priesthood.

During the years of captivity of the Church in the areas of spiritual and social services, church life was minimized in the area of worship as well, consequently causing the disappearance of many phases of ministry. The role of the deacons suffered to such an extent that the sacraments and church rituals were celebrated by the priest with a chanter responding.

Today, with the sharp decrease in the number of priests who are spiritually qualified to serve parishes, and with the problem that parishes and dioceses are unable to provide the basic cost of living, there is a pastoral need for one priest to every hundred or two hundred families; with the emergence of working priests and the increase in various fields of specialization in the modern world, the faithful are turning to their Church to help them meet the varieties of challenges. Regardless of how intelligent the pastor is, there is definitely a dire need today to revive the role of the diaconate.

We have begun to realize this ministry, yet, in a sporadic way, without details. We begin to see deacons assigned by their bishops to certain limited works, attached to the pastors so they can help distribute the gifts during Communion. Or we may even see other lesser degrees, such as subdeacons, who read some petitions during the Divine Liturgy; all such services have become ceremonial, not spiritual, which means it is about time we consider moving the diaconate from the context of the church ritual into meeting Christ in His “brethren” who are in the streets and on the roadways.

This need invites us to become aware of many absent pastoral vocations and to seriously study the solutions that are available, not rushing into doing what we find convenient, but responding with piety and purity according to the dictate of the Holy Spirit today and now. The fact that the Holy Spirit once inspired the early Church in responding to the challenges and called for the creation of the diaconate, means that we can be prepared for the contemporary challenges. The Holy Spirit, indeed, can work, not in a vacuum, but in human beings. Consequently, we must seriously reflect together, so we may respond to the ministries that are needed in today’s Church.

On the other hand, we must hear what the Holy Spirit dictates to us in this regard and work together to fulfill that task. There are many individuals in every parish who are ready to join the diaconate in a certain designated field of ministry without incurring financial burden, and in many areas and diverse fields in which faithful are in dire need; this can become a reality with the revival of the office of the diaconate.

- We can designate deacons for specific ministries and invite them to dedicate their time to be prepared for the challenge.
- We can invite many of our single women to use their creative energy in order to serve the faith.
- The diaconate can lend an important ministry in the field of teaching and Christian education, spiritual evening gatherings and training our youth and children, our families and senior citizens.

- We have indeed ignored tremendous potentials that are wasted because of disorganization and lack of economy.
- We can energize the faith and make them proactive in the lives of the faithful of various age groups, by inviting volunteers to safeguard this ecclesiastical role.
- We can begin to see the role of the diaconate in the light of the Contemporary Catholic Monastic Orders or the married evangelical missionaries.
- Last but not least, we lock Christ in the temple when we focus on providing deacons to simply shorten the time which is spent during the Communion lines, or to add formal prestige to the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.
- If we seek a live and active Church, we must attempt to energize it with vitality and good action, which are poured on us by the Holy Spirit.

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