

# The Office of the Deacon in the Church from the Time of the Apostles

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## I. THE ORIGIN OF THE DIACONATE

Although Christian tradition from Irenaeus onwards has held that the Seven appointed in Acts 6 for the service of the tables were the first deacons (a view embedded in the Liturgies of many Churches, including the Anglican), this view has not been universally accepted, and many find in the Seven the first presbyters. But among ancient documents, only the records of the Council in Trullo (Constantinople, A.D. 692) deny the liturgical functions of the deacon to the Seven.

Of those who support the traditional view, some are impressed by the outward similarity of the deacons' ministrations in serving tables with their liturgical ministry, as assistants to the bishop. Some have suggested that *diakonos* really means 'waiter'; others have referred it specially to his assistance to the bishop in liturgical functions. Fr. Thurston, in the Catholic Encyclopaedia, suggests that in the early Church the Agape was the primary charge of the deacons, and that this must have involved considerable management; their liturgical function would then have derived from this, by analogy. Fr. Leclercq, in the Dictionary of Christian Archaeology edited by Fr. Cabrol and himself, supposes that there were originally seven Hebrew deacons, and that they were balanced by the seven Greeks of Acts 6, to see that the Greeks got their fair share of the relief that was distributed.\* He is very indignant at the suggestion that the Seven's duties were merely the looking after the distribution of relief: 'If', he says, 'you join those who accept the queer idea that the Seven were temporary hands, junior employees, and in a word, "chop-house-keepers", among whom one stays no longer than is necessary to climb up one rung of the administrative

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\*If this is so, it must have been early forgotten, as it is the number seven, based often expressly on Acts 6, that is mentioned as limiting the number of deacons in any local Church.

ladder, clearly they have nothing in common with the deacons honoured by St. Ignatius as practically the equals of the bishops and presbyters.' They must have had the duties of liturgical assistants to the apostles from early days: 'The distribution of food, the dispensing of alms, were the duties of the deacons, and, by a very natural recollection of their original purpose, the care of the distribution of the Eucharist in church, and of carrying it to the sick was also allotted to them.'

The other view is that the origin of the diaconate is not specified in Acts, or elsewhere in the New Testament, but in the later books (Philippians, I Timothy), we find it taken for granted. In an article in the *Church Quarterly Review* for July, 1959, Fr. Barnabas Lindars, S.S.F., suggests that the first development after Pentecost was the institution of the presbyterate, the second rank of the hierarchy, and that this is what is recorded in Acts 6. (Though he is by no means the first to make this suggestion). This would be the logical continuation of the fact that there was already the order of apostles. He believes that the Sacred Ministry had a strong eschatological element, and was meant to be something that would continue in the Age to Come, when Christ would have his Council of Twelve: the councils of presbyters were to administer the local affairs of each Church, and from them, by apostolic ordinance, the monarchical episcopate arose. The deacons were the special functionaries of the laity, as were also others with charismatic ministries, prophets, healers, exorcists. These were people whose gifts fitted them for particular works in the Body of Christ, but who did not form special ranks in the Church's structure. Later on, he suggests, the deacons were included in the pattern of Holy Orders because of their important liturgical functions: and the tendency to elaboration made for minor orders for some of the others. Fr. Barnabas suggests that in the course of the development, an original eschatological reference in the ministry was lost, and that it was originally designed to foreshadow the future polity of the Kingdom of God: 'In the Kingdom of Heaven at the End of the Age, there is to be a polity of mutual indwelling in the one Christ, of which the proper temporal expression is the hierarchical structure of the Church.' He goes on to suggest that the recovery of this eschatological element in Christian thinking is necessary if we are to understand properly the ministry, and much else besides.

The idea of the deacon as the special representative of the laity seems to me to accord with a good deal of his work: the whole Body was priestly: the bishop (and later the presbyters) performed the functions of High Priest in the midst of the priestly Body, and certain members of the laity were appointed to assist in particular ways. The deacon's ambivalent position is clearly shown in the Orthodox Liturgies, where he both represents the celebrant to the people, giving them the necessary instructions for taking their part in the service, and also, in the name of the people, instructing the priest to perform certain acts.

One important feature which distinguishes the deacon from the minor functionaries is that he is ordained by the laying-on of hands by the bishop: this link with apostolic days may be taken as one indication that the diaconate is of apostolic institution (as indeed we gather implicitly from Philippians and I Timothy). For the minor orders, the outward act of the ordination is the delivery of an appropriate instrument: these are offices of human institution, and there is nothing specifically apostolic about them.

But whatever may have been the origin of the office, by the days of Ignatius of Antioch at the latest the diaconate was regarded as essential to the Church: and when it was necessary to smuggle a presbyter into the gaol to celebrate the Eucharist for those awaiting martyrdom, a deacon was smuggled in with him.

So much for the origin of the diaconate: the functions of the deacon, from the end of the first century at any rate, have been fairly clearly defined, though they have varied from time to time and from place to place; and to these we now turn.

## II. •THE DEACON IN THE EARLY CHURCH

### (a) *During Divine Worship: (i) Liturgical*

1. It was the deacon's office to assist the bishop and presbyters in the service of the altar: the care of the Holy Table, and of the vessels, was in their hands. It was the deacon's work, e.g., to spread the linen cloth on the altar, a survival of which is found in the deacon's spreading of the corporal during the creed in a modern Roman High Mass.

2. It was the deacon's office to receive the offerings of the people, and to present them to the celebrant, and also to recite the names of those who had offered.

3. In some churches (principally in the West, where it became the deacon's privilege), the deacon sings the Holy Gospel at the Eucharist. The Gradual and other chants seem also to have been their proper sphere; though later other singers were appointed to perform these. In Russia up to the Revolution a good bass voice was the requirement of a deacon in a fashionable church. In the Latin Church, the deacon still sings the magnificent *Praeconium Paschale*, the blessing of the candle on Easter Eve. This may be a relic of his duties as lamp-lighter at the normal vigil service of Sunday, but in some places at any rate the bishop actually blessed the light. The *Praeconium Paschale* is a definite benediction.

4. They assisted the bishop or priest to administer the Sacred Elements, usually by administering the Chalice to the people, and also by taking the Sacrament to the sick (which was later done by acolytes).

As long as the bishop was the normal minister of the Eucharist the presbyters must have been liturgically less important than the deacons, who seem to have thought that because

they came directly under the bishop, they were superior to the presbyters, and they needed to be kept in their place: they had to be forbidden, for instance, to administer the Sacrament to a priest, or even to administer the Sacrament in the presence of a priest, without his leave (Council of Nicea, 325). Some deacons seem even to have taken upon themselves to consecrate the Eucharist, but this practice was strictly forbidden by the Council of Arles (South France, A.D. 314). The Fermentum was taken originally by the deacons (later by acolytes) to the other churches in the city from the bishop's Eucharist, and it may have been that it was the deacon himself who placed the fragment in the chalice at the daughter church.

5. In the case of Baptism, deacons were allowed to administer the Sacrament in country churches where they were in charge, as a matter of course, though the bishop's blessing of the candidate was needed for its consummation. In the case of solemn baptism, they had their proper functions, which included the instruction of catechumens, and they also went down into the water with the male candidates (deaconesses performing this office for the female).

6. It was the deacon's office to bid the prayers of the congregation,\* and to give the necessary directions for standing, kneeling, etc. They were also responsible for the dismissal of those under discipline, the catechumens, and the faithful at the appropriate stages of the service.

7. Deacons were only allowed to preach with the authority and licence of the bishop. In some Churches, e.g. in France, they were allowed to read a homily in the absence of the priest.

### (ii) *Non-Liturgical*

1. It was the deacons' job to regulate and direct men's conduct in service time. They had power to rebuke the irregular, and chastise them for indecent or unseemly behaviour, such as sitting in the wrong place, talking, sleeping, or laughing.

2. In the days of the persecution of the Church, it was the deacon's task to keep the door, and see that no one entered who should not do so.

3. Originally, the deacon did the work of all the inferior ministers, and only gradually were the sub-deacon, reader, etc., made into separate offices.

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\*It is to be noted that the deacons did not address God in the name of the people, which was reserved for the bishops and priests, but only the congregation, directing them what to pray about. It is a pity that in the Proposed Prayer Book of the C.I.P.B.C., the Litany in the Eucharist, which is presumably intended to be primarily diaconal, should have ignored this distinction, and be cast on the pattern of the Prayer Book Litany, which is of quite a different origin. In the C.S.I. Liturgy, the second form of the Litany conforms to the ancient diaconal pattern, while the first form is open to the same objection as the C.I.P.B.C.'s proposed form.

(b) *Outside Service Time : (i) Ordinary Routine*

1. The deacons were the bishop's sub-almoners, and the care of the aged and the sick, widows, etc., was particularly their province. But they must do everything with the bishop's knowledge, so that there could be no ground for an accusation that the bishop was neglecting the poor. Church finances were largely in their hands, and in churches which owned much property this was an important factor which often led to a bishop being succeeded by one of his deacons. They were also responsible for arranging burials, and some people have seen in the 'young men' who buried Ananias and Sapphira the forerunners of the later deacons.

2. They were to supervise the general character of the Church, and report misconduct to the bishop when they could not redress it themselves.

3. In some cases they acted as a bodyguard to the bishop.

(ii) *Exceptional Jurisdiction*

1. In the absence of the bishop and priest, a deacon was allowed to reconcile penitents *in articulo mortis*. But the experts are divided whether this reckoned as a sacramental absolution or not.

2. In some of the Greek churches, the deacons had authority to suspend the inferior clergy in case of need, in the absence of bishop and priest.

(iii) *At Councils*

1. Normally deacons attended their bishops at General Councils and acted as their scribes; sometimes at the bishop's behest, they acted as his mouthpiece. But they were inferior in status to the presbyters, standing, while these sat, and, while presbyters were at least occasionally allowed to vote, deacons never were, except as proxies for their bishops. The custom in East and West differed about the place of their votes being recorded: in the East, they voted in the place of the bishops whom they represented, in the West, after all the bishops had voted.

2. At provincial and consistorial synods, they were sometimes allowed to vote in their own names.

### III. LATER DEVELOPMENTS

It is the opinion of Dom Gregory Dix that the atrophy of the diaconate as a real order in the church in the West begins from the period of the Council of Nicea, after which the deacon's functions in the Eucharist came to be regarded as purely ceremonial, to be performed by a priest in deacon's vestments if no deacon was available. The diaconate itself degenerated into a mere period of preparation for the priesthood. In the Roman Catholic

Church, at some stage which I have not been able to discover, the importance of the diaconate was further depressed by being conferred on students at the seminary, who then left it as priests. This seems to be the normal thing nowadays, though in monasteries and cathedrals, perhaps, deacons are to be found.

During the mediaeval period, there seems to be little evidence to go on: it appears that as the provision for the sick and the poor became more widespread, through Monasteries and specific Charities in Europe, the deacon's work in this respect grew less, and he remained only a liturgical minister, and a candidate for the priesthood. But there was some development in their liturgical functions (even if they were usually performed by priests in the West), as in the emergence of the Offertory Procession at Sarum, and the Great Entrance in the Orthodox Church.

#### IV. ANGLICAN PRACTICE

The Book of Common Prayer clearly regards the diaconate as normally merely a preliminary stage on the way to the Priesthood. His duties are laid down in the following passage taken from the Ordinal: 'It appertaineth to the Office of a Deacon, in the Church where he shall be appointed to serve, to assist the Priest in Divine Service, and specially when he ministereth the Holy Communion, and to help him in the distribution thereof, and to read holy Scriptures and Homilies in the Church; and to instruct the youth in the Catechism; in the absence of the Priest to baptize infants, and to preach, if he be admitted thereto by the Bishop. And furthermore, it is his Office, where provision is so made, to search for the sick, poor, and impotent people of the Parish, to intimate their estates, names, and places where they dwell, unto the Curate,\* that by his exhortation they may be relieved with the alms of the Parishioners, or others.' They are remarkably close to the ancient duties mentioned in II (a) (i) 3, 4, 5, 7, and (ii) 1 above. Note that (unlike the Lay Reader!) he specially needs the bishop's licence if he is to preach.

Other functions (church finance, seating of the congregation and keeping order during services, and the care of the fabric) in England fell largely to churchwardens, who, like the deacons, are the bishop's officers.

#### V. OTHER REFORMED AND PROTESTANT CHURCHES

I quote from an article by Mr. J. M. Ross:

'Protestants who are not content that the diaconate should be simply a short step to the full ministry have appointed "deacons" for one or more of five functions:

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\*In the language of the Prayer Book, this word means the Rector or Vicar or Priest in Charge of the Parish, and not his assistant, as in modern use.

- (1) The care of the poor within the Christian community (this often has not given the deacons a worthwhile job) ;
- (2) The care of the poor and needy of all kinds in the community at large\* (this has often been left to secular authorities or to agencies outside the Church) ;
- (3) The administration of the financial and material concerns of the local congregation ;
- (4) The general oversight of the local congregation ;
- (5) Distribution of the elements at the Holy Communion.

These also have clear affinities with the duties of deacons in ancient times.

## VI. ARCHDEACONS

Archdeacons of the present day hardly fall within the purview of this article, but are included here for the sake of completeness. They were originally deacons, and up to the tenth century they were always in deacon's orders, as they still are in the Eastern Church. There was a good deal of tension at times between them and the presbyters, over whom they claimed some sort of jurisdiction: ordination to the priesthood was regarded as a demotion. But it was sometimes used as a means of getting rid of a troublesome archdeacon. In the Roman Church, the institution of a Vicar-General in each Diocese reduced the importance of the Archdeacon, who now seems to be merely a functionary of the Cathedral. In the Eastern Church he still has a specially close relation to the bishop, and the Anglican Church has in many places preserved the Archdeacon in his mediaeval functions, though deprived of a good deal of his powers. As far as I know he is now always at least a priest in the Anglican Church.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

It seems then that we may trace three steps in the development of the Diaconate as we know it today in the Anglican Church ; they all need to be taken into account in considering what should be the position of the deacon in the Church of God in the future :

- (1) The loss of the eschatological element in the Church's thought about the whole ministry ;
- (2) The common practice in the West at least of using a priest to perform the deacon's liturgy in the Eucharist ; and
- (3) The breaking of the deacon's musical monopoly which led to its being no longer regarded as a life-long office (Fr. Thurston).

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\*Earlier in the article he says: 'It came to be recognized that (certain Brethren) were supplying the kind of *diakonia* that the missing third order of the ministry ought to be doing—presenting the Gospel to the world, not by preaching and sacrament, but by acts of love, by education, and by service of all kinds to those in physical, moral, and spiritual need.'

Finally, let me quote from an article by Fr. John Bligh, S.J. :  
 ' It seems best, therefore, to draw a sharp distinction between the status of deacon and the powers of the diaconate, and to say that the diaconate is essentially " an eminent grade in the Church " which makes its holder a fit person to exercise functions of a certain category, if his bishop sees good to authorize him to do so. The powers actually entrusted to deacons in different dioceses and at different times will then naturally depend upon local circumstances : where the supply of suitably trained candidates for the priesthood is abundant, the functions allotted to deacons will be slight, whereas in missionary countries where suitable candidates for the diaconate are more easily found than suitable priests, there might well be a notable amplification of the powers and activities of the diaconate.'

Principal authorities consulted : —

Bingham: Christian Antiquities. Bk. 2, Ch. 20.

Articles in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne.

Catholic Encyclopaedia.

Dix: Shape of the Liturgy.

Wordsworth: Ministry of Grace.

Gore: The Church and the Ministry.

Lindars: Qumran and the Christian Ministry (C.Q.R., July 1959).

Five articles in *Theology* for November 1955 (from which the quotations from Mr. Ross and Fr. Bligh are taken).

(*This article has been prepared as a companion article to that by Rev. Canon L. L. Lancaster on ' the Theology of the Diaconate ', which appeared in the October 1959 number of the Indian Journal of Theology.*)

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' Not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up in life. These are words by which the slanderers of the nature of the body, the impeachers of our flesh, are completely overthrown. We do not wish to cast aside the body, but corruption : not the flesh, but death. The body is one thing, corruption another : the body is one thing, death another. What is foreign to us is not the body but corruptibility.'

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: On the Resurrection of the Dead