

THE DIACONATE: HISTORY & THEOLOGY

“Ministry is exercised by people and within relationships that are always situated in a particular place and a particular time.” R.R. Gaillardetz

Ministry is not an abstraction and thus the clerical offices and lay ecclesial ministry¹ should not be overly spiritualized, nor should we attempt to write exhaustive job descriptions for priests, deacons or formal lay ecclesial ministers. Nevertheless, with the continuing revival of the Diaconate it is important that the Church as a whole develop an adequate understanding of the office in relation to its mission and in regard to the long standing clerical and lay roles familiar to all.

In a keynote address to The National Association of Diaconate Directors of the Roman Catholic Church in America, Richard Gaillardetz² laid out four relevant criteria that should be addressed to adequately understand and integrate the Diaconate within the church. Any understanding of the Diaconate must:

¹ For purposes of the article, lay ecclesial ministry is used to refer to ministerial roles filled by lay persons where specific formation is required, and the individual is publicly installed in that ministry.

² I am indebted to the work of Richard R. Gaillardetz, Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies University of Toledo for the basic framework and some of the material presented herein. See: R. R. Gaillardetz, On the Theological Integrity of the Diaconate in *Theology of the Diaconate*. Ed. L. Boadt, Paulist Press, New Jersey, pp 67-97.

- (1) do justice to the tradition of the church regarding the historical ministry of the diaconate,
- (2) explain why the diaconate is properly an ordained ministry,
- (3) distinguish the ordained ministry of the deacon from that of the presbyter and bishop, and
- (4) distinguish the ministry of the deacon from the ministry of lay ecclesial ministers without in any way denigrating the importance of lay ecclesial ministry.

The sessions covering History & Theology of the Diaconate are intended to address the issues highlighted by Gaillardetz.

Outline

I. History & Tradition

1. Early Church Polity & Ecclesiology

- Comparison of Synagogue and Christian Church Order
 - Parallels between 1st Century Synagogue & Early Church Assemblies
 - Synagogue offices
 - Organization and Church Governance c. 50 AD
 - Evolution of Clerical Offices

2. NT Greek Word Family *diakon-* and Usage of *diakonos* in Context

- Gospels & Paul's Epistles
 - Deaconesses - Exegesis of Rom 16.1 and 1 Tim 3.11
- Acts 6
 - Historical Context and Exegesis

3. References to Deacons and Their Ministry in Writings of the 1st – 4th Century

- Apostolic Fathers and Other Documents
 - Clement
 - Justin the martyr
 - Polycarp
 - Shepherd of Hermas
 - Ignatius
- Historical Church Documents on Discipline, Order & Worship
 - Didache
 - Didascalia Apostolorum
 - Apostolic Constitutions
 - Hippolytus - Apostolic Traditions
- Councils

- Evolution of Bishop & Presbyter Roles – Influence on Deacons
 - Cursus honorum
 - Council of Arles (318 AD)
 - Council of Sardica (c. 343 AD)
 - Council of Nicea (325 AD)
 - State of the office of Deacon (Deaconess) at the time of Nicene Council
4. Changes in the Order of Deacons from the 6th – 16th Century
 5. Changes in the Order of Deacons from the 17th -21st Century

II. Theology

1. On Ordination and the Diaconate pg 23

I. History & Tradition

1. *Early Church Polity & Ecclesiology*

“Whenever men combine together for a common object they must have rules; and every society or community must have a system of government. Whether the society be for secular or religious purposes, the members of the association must submit to laws and regulations; for without them they cannot act in concert.”³

For purposes of this review it seems fitting to begin with an understanding of the order and practice of the Jewish synagogue in the early part of the first century particularly since at its inception the church was essentially Jewish in composition. The thesis being that the order and practice common to the early synagogues was accepted, and was likely the basis for order and practice in emerging Christian communities. From this foundation then the evolution of what would be formal offices in the Christian church, e.g., bishop, priest and deacon emerged.

The synagogue was a relatively mature institution by the first century of the CE in terms of ordered worship and designated offices, including a president (first among equals), elders or presbyters, attendants (possible parallel with deacons) and readers⁴. In every important city with a substantial Jewish populace there was a council that sat in the chief or primary synagogue and exercised judicial, religious and political authority; one body, three spheres of authority. Each

³ Ref #1, page 211

⁴ Reader was not a distinct office in the first century synagogue. Individuals were called upon by the Chazzan on occasion of a reading. By Tertullian's time readers were an order in the church and in the 'Apostolic Constitutions' there is a form of ordination that includes laying on of hands.

council was composed of presbyters or elders, and each council had its president. The president recited prayers, or appointed others for this function, as well as the reading of the law and teaching.

First Century Synagogue Offices:

Information derived from literary texts, inscriptions and papyri dating to the first century indicate that the following offices were recognized in the synagogues of the time:

- *archon*: ruler⁵; also *archisynagogos*: See Mk 5:22 reference to Jarius, ruler or director of the synagogue and its services; also referred to as *prostater*: one who stands before, in front of; president, leader, patron⁶
 - Duties: select the readers or teachers in the synagogue, to examine the discourses of the public speakers, and to see that all things were done with decency and in accordance with ancestral usage
- *presbuteros*: counselor, elder; member of ruling council⁷
- *grammateus*: scribe⁸
- *huperetes*: a subordinate, e.g., attendant, sexton, constable; common usage: under oarsman; a servant; one who aides another in any work (see Lk 4:20); *archihuperetes*: *chief or head attendant*

The *huperetes* or *chazzan* in Hebrew, was an attendant/minister of the synagogue that appears to be analogous in some respects to the office of deacon in early Christian congregations; acting as assistants to the president and presbyters and regulating various details of the worship service. The *huperetes* was responsible for removing a copy of Law from the ark and handing it to the reader and then returning the scroll to the ark at the end of the reading. The

⁵ Josephus, Vita 278,294

⁶ CIJ: Frey, J.-P. (ed) *Corpus Inscriptioinum Iudaicarum Vol 2*, 1952

⁷ Judith 6:16; Lk 7:3-5

⁸ Mk 1:22; CPJ: Tcherikover, VA and A Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, 3 Vols. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1957-1964.

huperetes would also stand by the reader to observe that the reading was correct, as well as other oversight duties during the service. Similar liturgical responsibilities are noted for the deacon in ancient liturgies of the church among them being: maintaining order among the congregation, directing people to their seats, indicating when to stand or kneel, dismissing catechumens before the Eucharist, bringing the elements to the altar and other duties supporting orderly and proper worship (See comments on *Apostolic Constitution*).

The selection and installation of officers, e.g., presbyters, in the synagogue and church were similar. The appointment was subject to the approval of the congregation. The most ancient form known outside the NT accounts is found in the Apostolic Constitutions (book 8) where an essential part of the ordination rite (in both church and synagogue) was the laying on of hands.

CONCLUSIONS: Evidence indicates that first century church liturgy and ordered structure closely paralleled structure and function of the early Jewish synagogue.

Evolution of Roles within the Church

There is understandably confusion as to when bishops, priests and deacons, at least as we understand these contemporary roles, arose in the church. As noted earlier the leadership roles identified in the synagogue, and adopted by early Christian congregations are often translated into English using contemporary terminology, e.g., bishop for *episkopos*, priest for *presbyteros* and deacon for *diakonos*. It is highly unlikely that the official roles referenced in the NT are strictly analogous to contemporary ordained roles; note Paul appears to use *episkopos* synonymously with *presbyteros* in Tit 1:5,7.

The NT suggests a hierarchy, or at least functional differentiation existed in the Jerusalem church by 50 CE. James, referred to in later historical documents as the Bishop of Jerusalem, appears to act in the role of *archon* in the Jerusalem congregation relative to presbyters and other Apostles likely present when he

pronounces a decision resolving conflict over practice in churches outside Jerusalem. (Dispute over the ritual requirements for Gentile Christians, Acts 15:1-30⁹). Likewise, the sending of emissaries with the judgment to distant churches is also consistent with the exercise of authority similar in function to diocesan bishops that were in place by the second century. Nevertheless, the activities described do not make James a bishop in exactly the way the term will come to be understood by the end of the second century. Nevertheless, it is clear that roles and functions similar to those assumed by bishops later in the evolution of the church grew out of an evolving need already manifest during the time of the Apostles.

Also, Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus, who appear to have authority to ordain and oversee more than one church in the region; are noteworthy in their similarity to role and authority to be assumed by diocesan bishops. (1 Tim 5.19,22; 1 Tim 1.3; Titus 1:5; appoint/ordain elders in every town – multiple churches).

2. The Usage of Diakon- Words in the NT

In the Gospels: The word *diakonos* [1249, noun] occurs 29 times in the NT and is principally translated as servant in various contexts, e.g., servant of an eschatological king (Matt 22.12); servant to the master of ceremonies (Jn 2:5,9) or as helper (Eph 6.21; Col .7). Other citations occur in a similar context of service in relation to another: Matt 20.26 (servant or minister; service); Mk 10.43 (servant or minister) and Matt 23.11 (servant).

⁹ Council called to consider the dispute over what should be required of Gentile converts relative to circumcision and Jewish observance of the Law. The apostles and elders (*presbyteroi*) convene to hear the various perspectives and James pronounces a decision in 15:19 on behalf of the assembly. Paul and Timothy deliver the Council's decision; Acts 16:4.

In Paul's writings: *diakonos* is also used to denote a servant in relationship to the new covenant, a servant of righteousness and of Christ. From the context and common usage of the time *diakonos* refers to a servant, with special reference to the person to whom service is due, i.e., reference to the master's benefit, and in subservience to another's will. Thus, the meaning is typically, *one who executes the commands of another, esp. of a master; a servant, attendant, minister.*

The word *diakonia* (1247, verb; occurs 32 times in the NT), is often used to describe mission or commission: a commission from God to which Jesus responds in taking up his mission and the laying down of his life (Mk 10.45) and in another example the churches of Asia that send Paul on a mission of mercy to Jerusalem (Ro 15.25). Numerous other occurrences illustrate a similar usage.

There are only two instances where the word *diakonos* appears to be used in a technical sense and in both cases, it is used in relation to the role of *episkopos*; a servant in relationship:

- Phil 1:1 the word *episkopos* is associated with *diakonos* in the salutation
- 1 Tim 3.1 qualifications for office of deacon described following qualifications for the role of *episkopos*.

The inference of a technical usage in 1 Tim arises from several aspects of the context: first the association of these words with specific qualifications, second, the references in 1 Tim 3.10 and 3.13 refer to testing or evaluating a person in their role, i.e., assessing performance, presumably against specified criteria.

Paul's salutation in Phil 1:1 addresses *overseers*, [masculine, plural] and *servants/attendants* and is thus likely a reference to the elders or leaders of the church in Philippi and those who assist them in their duties; most often translated as deacon and bishop in English, respectively. However, these words do not take on their contemporary meaning until later in the history of the church. It is

important to note that the office of *deacon* does not stand alone in a NT context. The association of a servant or attendant in relation to the overseer role is consistent with the meaning discussed above, i.e., the *diakonos* is attendant to and in support of the role and needs of the *episkopos*.

With reference to deaconesses: 1 Tim 3.11 is ambiguous and is typically translated as referring to wives of deacons not women deacons. A paper published on the internet by C. Adjemian entitled *On Deaconesses*¹⁰ presents a thoughtful exegesis of 1 Tim 3:11 and Romans 16.1 and other relevant passages. Sections 1-5 of *On Deaconesses* are relevant to the topic under review. Adjemian closes section 5 with this statement: “I conclude that in 1 Tim 3.11 we are given qualifications required for a deaconess [*Greek: diakonos*], and in Romans 16.1-2 we are shown an example of a deaconess who is sent on a mission for her church. She comes with authority for her mission, and she has the privilege of being assisted by other churches in carrying out that mission.” It should be noted that he also concludes that deaconesses are a subgroup of deacons (section 4.1) based on Paul’s reference to “deacons likewise”. He states, “They [deaconesses] form a separate class of official church servants and the term deaconesses (which later came into use in the church) ...”

Regardless of whether there existed a formal office of deacon/deaconess at this time, Phoebe is honored for her ministry to Paul and others. Elsewhere Paul applies the term [*diakonia*] to his own work when he leads a delegation to Jerusalem with a gift from the church in Asia (Rom 15.31). It is not possible to say unequivocally that the use of *diakonos* in Rom 16.1 with regard to Phoebe is or is not a technical reference to an ordained office. (See comments on Deacons and Deaconesses in early church documents including the *Apostolic Constitutions* to follow.)

¹⁰ <http://www.reformedprescambridge.com/articles/Deaconess.03jul02.pdf>.

Review of Acts 6:1-6 - First Deacons?

Diakonia is used in three ways in the first four verses of chapter 6: distribution of food, service at table and proclamation of the Word of God; all three acts of service or ministry. There is no evidence that Luke uses the word in a technical sense, i.e., to identify the role/office of deacon in these passages.

In Acts 1:17 Luke makes reference to Judas' share in the ministry [*n, diakonia*] of the apostles and disciples, and elsewhere in Acts he uses the verb *diakonia* in reference to the apostolic work of taking the Word of God abroad.

Several aspects of the historical context are noteworthy:

- First century Jewish congregations would typically have had men who were responsible for caring for the widows, orphans and the poor among them, thus to assume that no one was providing for these women before the selection of the Seven is not necessarily warranted.
- The Jewish congregation in Jerusalem was composed of both Hellenist (Greek speaking) and Palestinian Jews (Aramaic speaking) who did not agree on all religious practices, e.g., the importance of Temple worship
- A dispute arose among the Hellenist and the Palestinian Jews over the daily provision/care of Hellenist widows – *diakonia ti kathemerin* = daily ministrations

One possible way to understand the selection and ordaining of the seven described in chapter 6 is that leaders from among the Hellenist were appointed to assume leadership roles among their specific community to avoid contention over issues like the daily ministrations to widows and others among the Hellenist.

This conclusion is bolstered by the fact that we are informed that several of the Seven engaged in apostolic ministry in the chapters immediately following (Stephen's witnessing and martyrdom; Philip's mission to Samaria and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch). Luke follows with an introduction of Paul and his

mission to spread the Word of God abroad as an act of *diakonia*. It would seem that the responsibility and authority of the Seven was significantly greater than oversight of the distribution of food to the widows and or needy members of the community.

Regardless of one's understanding of the events recorded in Act 6 it is difficult to definitively define these men as the first "official deacons", at least in the contemporary sense of the order, especially in light of Philip's activities.

3. Deacons and Ministry in Writings of the 1st-4th Century

The following writings from the Apostolic Father provide insight into how the three church offices related and functioned in the early church.

Clement of Rome (c. 30-100 CE) Letter to the Corinthians

The letter appears to address a long-standing dispute about the liturgical presidency in Corinth near the end of the first century. Clement draws analogies between Jewish temple liturgists and the Christian leadership in Corinth. Among the Christian leaders he names '*episkopoi*' and '*diakonous*' who he says, "they [the apostles] appointed as their first fruits, when they had tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons for the future believers." (42) Clement argues that the apostles received the Gospel from the Lord Jesus Christ and Jesus was sent forth from God. Thus, Jesus is from God and the apostles are from the Lord so then both came from the will of God in that order. One of their acts was to select and appoint men to continue that order for the sake of future believers. This is one of the first evidences of the development of the doctrine of apostolic succession and this logic also defines the relationship between *episkopoi* and *diakonous*, and in this particular reference we see at least one dimension each role: *episkopos* as president of the Eucharist and the *diakonos* as one who acts as an assistant in liturgy.

Justin the Martyr (c. 100-165 CE)

References 'those we call deacons' as assisting in the distribution of bread and wine in the context of the liturgy. There is no direct, corresponding reference to *episkopoi* in this letter. (Apologia 1.65.5)

Polycarp (c. 69-160 CE) Letter to the Philippians

The letter exhorts various members of the community including women, orphans, deacons, young men, young women and presbyters; presbyters are encouraged to care for widows, orphans and the destitute; deacons are exhorted to live a virtuous life. Deacons in this context are said to be 'deacons of God and of Christ, not men' (5.2): "Similarly, deacons must be blameless in the presence of his righteousness, as a deacon of God and Christ and not of men: not slanders, not insincere, not lovers of money, self-controlled in every respect, compassionate, diligent, acting in accordance with the truth of the Lord, who became "a servant of all". (Scriptural refs: 1 Tim 3:8-13; Mark 9:35)

Shepherd of Hermas (late 1st to early 2nd century)

No reference to the liturgical responsibilities of *diakonous*, but their service to the *episkopoi* in the handling of financial resources of the community is mentioned.

Ignatius (d. 117 CE)

The three-fold order and relationship between church offices named in the opening to the letter to the Magnesians (2): "So then I was permitted to see you in the persons of Damas, your godly bishop (*episkopoi*), your worthy presbyters (*presbyteron*) Brassus and Apollonius, and my fellow servant (*syndoulou*), the deacon (*diakonou*) Zotion; may I enjoy his company, because he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the presbytery as to the Law of Christ."

In this letter, the relationship between the three church orders is portrayed as analogous to the Divine hierarchy and authority: the bishop presiding in the

place of God, and the presbytery in the place of the council of the apostles and the deacons serves the Bishop as Jesus served the Father. The role of Messiah, or Priest, or Prophet or Servant of all is not in mind here as evidenced by the context of this statement and other content in this specific letter. Thus, the deacon is positioned to be commissioned and submitted to the bishop just as Jesus was to Father. The Trinitarian pattern of relationship, collaboration and council is evident in the *theological* framework posited by Ignatius. Support for this model is also found in his letters to the Trallians (3.1): “everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ”, i.e., as a representative or agent of the bishop; to the church at Smyrna (8.1): “respect the deacons as the commandment of God”, i.e., the deacon’s word and action are, when the deacon is submitted to the bishop, the bishop’s word and intent, “respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father” Trallians (3.1).

N.B. Ignatius uses the word *hyperetai* in the letter to the Trallians instead of *diakonou* used in the letter to the Magnesians inferring a role as administrators and executors of the wishes and decisions of the church’s chosen leaders (a role in civil society that was well understood, e.g., clerks of the court, civil administrators).

Other Documents on Church Order, Discipline & Worship

Didache (D), Didascalia apostolorum (DA), and Apostolic Constitutions (AC)

D	Late 1 st or Early 2 nd Century
DA	ca 250-280 CE
AC	Late 4 th Century

Didache

In light of the date of authorship assigned to D, this source is thought to reveal something about how early Jewish Christians saw themselves, and how traditional Judaism was adapted for Gentiles who converted to Christianity.

Chapter 15 - Speaks to the election of bishops and deacons: (15.1,2), “Therefore

appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men who are humble and not avaricious, and true and approved, for they too carry out for you the ministry of the prophets and teachers. You must not, therefore, despise them, for they are your honored men, along with the prophets and teachers.”

Didascalia Apostolorum (c. 3rd century)

An evolving understanding of church leadership results in concentration of gifts said to be given to the church [Ephesians 4:11-13] in a single office, the bishop, who is considered to be the chief teacher, apostle and prophet. The description in the *Didascalia apostolorum* (I.IV.XXV) referring to the Episcopal office is striking in that it invests considerable authority and all the ministries of Jesus Christ in one individual:

“You, O bishops, are today priests to your people, Levites, ministering to the tabernacle of God, the holy Catholic Church, and standing continually before the Lord our God. You are to your people priests and prophets and princes and leaders and kings and mediators before God and his faithful people, and hearers of the word and preachers and proclaimers of it and knowers of the Scriptures and of the promises of God and witnesses of his will, who bear the sins of all and render and account for all.” [Underlined words my emphasis]

Apostolic Constitutions

AC consists of eight books covering worship/liturgy, discipline and doctrine. The first six books of AC are taken from DA and the seventh book is thought to be from D. Book eight appears to be a mixture of sources and attributed to Hippolytus. The text are useful sources for understanding the roles of bishops, priests, deacons, deaconesses, sub-deacons, readers, etc. from the end of the first century and during the ante-Nicene period.

Excerpts from AC:

References are made to deacons in relation to the bishop; ethical injunctions regarding conduct beyond reproach and a warning to bishops on how they should conduct themselves, specifically in reference to care of deacons, widows and orphans. Also, comments on the ministry of deaconesses are included.

1. An admonition to the people: honor the Bishop; parallel reference to priests and Levites/presbyters and deacons. "This is your chief and your leader, and he is your mighty king. He [the bishop] rules in the place of the Almighty: but let him be honored by you as God, for the bishop sits for you in the place of God Almighty. But the **Deacon** stands in the place of Christ; and do love him. And the **deaconess** shall be honored by you in the place of the Holy Spirit; and the presbyters shall be to you in the likeness of the Apostles; and the orphans and widows shall be reckoned by you in the likeness of the altar."

2. Reference to deacons receiving the offering on behalf of the bishop. Also refers to deacons managing business matters for the bishop: "But let them have very free access to the deacons, and let them not be troubling the head [Bishop] at all times, but making known what they require through the ministers, that is through the deacons. For neither can any man approach the Lord God Almighty except through Christ. All things therefore that they desire to do, let them make known to the bishop through the deacons, and then do them."

3. An exhortation to bishops and deacons - "Let the bishops and the deacons, then, be of one mind; and shepherd the people diligently with one accord. For you ought both to be one body, father and son; for you are in the likeness of the Lordship. And let the deacon make known all things to the bishop, even as Christ to His Father. But what things he can, let the deacon order, and all the rest let the bishop judge. Yet let the deacon be the hearing of the bishop, and his mouth and

his heart and his soul; for when you are both of one mind, through your agreement there will be peace also in the Church."

4. On the Appointment of Deacons and Deaconesses - "Wherefore, O bishop, appoint thee workers of righteousness as helpers who may co-operate with thee unto salvation. Those that please thee out of all the people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacons: a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but a woman for the ministry of women." The passage goes on to address the deaconess's role in baptism of women.

Deaconesses¹¹ did not perform baptisms but assisted women who were being baptized. They assisted in post-baptismal instruction on Christian living to women but did not typically teach. Also ministered to women who were ill – entry into homes for such care demanded sensitivity to cultural issues of modesty and appearance: "And thou also hast need of the ministry of a deaconess for many things; for a deaconess is required to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that of which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to recover from sickness ... For this cause [aforementioned tasks] we say that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially needful and important."

Comments on ministry of all deacons:

"And be you (bishop and deacon) of one counsel and of one purpose, and one soul dwelling in two bodies. And know what the ministry is, according as our Lord and Savior said in the Gospel: *Whoso among you desireth to be chief, let him be your servant: even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many* [Mt 20.26-28]. ... For we are imitators of Him, and hold the place of Christ." Note the close relationship

¹¹ Office of deaconess abolished in France in 517 at Council at Epaon and again in 533 at Council of Orleans

between the bishop and deacon in this reference, two acting as one for the purpose of ministry to the body.

Summary: Principle duties of the deacon include liturgical and charitable responsibilities. Other functions included keeping order in the church, prayers, instruction of catechumens, proclaiming the Gospel, assisting with baptism, ministry to the sick, as well administration of church affairs and property.

Councils

By the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th century, the role of deacon was well established being characterized by a strong relationship with the role of bishop.

Transition to diocesan bishops and presbyter leadership within the local church results in a growing ambiguity for the deacon's role in local churches, i.e., lack of definition of duties and responsibilities relative to presbyters in light of the deacon's historical association with now largely absent bishops.

Council of Arles (318)

Already by 314 CE conflicts had arisen between deacons and presbyteral councils in local congregations; Canons 15 & 18 of adopted at Council of Arles addressed deacons who apparently assumed prerogatives and or authority considered to belong to presbyters:

“Concerning deacons who we have learned are conducting services in many places, it resolved that this ought to happen as little as possible.”
(15)

“Concerning the deacons of The City¹². That they not presume too much for themselves, but reserve honor for the presbyters, so that they do nothing of importance without the presbyter's knowledge.” (18)

¹² This statement is likely a reference to the deacons of Rome.

Council of Nicea (325) Canon 18

“Deacons must abide within their own bounds. They shall not administer the Eucharist to Presbyters, nor touch it before Presbyters do, nor sit among the Presbyters. For all this is contrary to the canons and decent order.”

***Cursus honorum* and the rise of the transitional diaconate:**

- Subordinate offices known as early as the 2nd century, e.g., sub-deacon, reader
- *Cursus honorum* becomes recognized in canon law as early as the mid-4th century at the *Council of Sardica*, (c. 343)

Authority and prerogatives necessary for local church worship and polity reserved to bishops are delegated to presbyters as the transition of bishops to diocesan role and scope combined with a growing adoption of the *Cursus honorum* leaves in question the necessity of the office of deacon.

Changes in the Order of Deacons between the 6th – 16th Century

With the rise of transitional orders, including the transitional diaconate, the diaconate, as a separate order, declines over the next 1000 years.

TRANSITIONAL DEACONS

The necessity of a series of offices (*Cursus honorum*¹³) through which one must ascend to ordained ministry in the church has a long history (beginnings as early as the third century and firmly established by the fifth century), but is without a

¹³ Latin for “course of honors” the [sequential](#) order of [public offices](#) held by aspiring [politicians](#) in both the [Roman Republic](#) and the early [Empire](#). Offices developed in the church, including major and minor were porter, lector, exorcist, acolyte (the minor orders) and sub-deacon, deacon, presbyter and bishop (major orders)

sound theological or biblical foundation. The evolution of the *ecclesia* into an institutional entity as it aligned with Roman and then Imperial governments is likely the predominant influence shaping ecclesiastical practice. Thus the adoption of *Cursus honorum*, with its emphasis on each “lesser” office being transitional, was one of the dominant factors contributing to the decline of the diaconate as a separate and distinct order. This understanding, transitional ordination, persists to this day and contributes to the confusion often associated with the reintroduction of a separate and distinct diaconal office.

A case in point is the Roman Catholic Church. Minor orders (e.g., Readers, sub-Deacons) were suppressed (Pope Paul VI, Vatican II, 1963-78) and the Diaconate restored as a permanent and stable order in 1965. Nevertheless, the transitional diaconate was maintained as an “internship” period for the priesthood varying in length from 6-18 months. In practice two different rites and defined obligations exist in the Roman Catholic Church for the permanent and transitional states of diaconal ordination, a fact that testifies to the continuation of the *Cursus honorum*, albeit in a slightly modified form, in the Catholic as well as other branches of the Church.

Within the Episcopal Church the transitional diaconate has been retained despite the reintroduction of the separate and distinct office of deacon. As in the Roman Catholic Church it is clear from the typical activities of transitional deacons that they are in fact not serving as deacons, but are priests “transitioning” to the presbyterate, e.g., participation in preaching and liturgical duties typically reserved for presbyters during their diaconate despite the fact that they are not yet ordained to the office of priest.

Suffice it to say that the confusion of orders caused by the continued ordination of transitional deacons blurs the distinction between deacons and presbyters resulting in a loss of integrity of diaconal office in the mind of the laity, as well as being inconsistent with early church practice. The transitional diaconate not only

undermines the ecclesiastical integrity of the diaconate, it is also contrary to at least two of the criteria mentioned earlier by Gaillardetz as rationale for ordination of deacons.

17th – 21st Century

Lutheranism (c.a. 1840) and Methodism develop a diaconal role, but do not place the role among the permanently ordained leadership of the church.

Early Baptist tradition advocated an ordained diaconate (c.a. 17th century). However, modern Baptist churches do not ordain their deacons for life. Deacons typically serve as council of elders in a local congregation.

The Eastern Orthodox Church retained diaconate throughout its history, but today the role is largely restricted to service in the Eucharistic liturgy. The Byzantine ordination rite does not recognize a transitional office, although the Armenian and Coptic rites do. Russian Orthodox deacons serve as liturgical ministers and are chosen for the ability to sing the liturgy. It is uncommon to find deacons serving in an official role as pastors or as leaders in charitable/social ministries.

In many Protestant denominations, the diaconate is a lay order that may include official public recognition. There are few liturgical responsibilities in light of the nature of Protestant worship services. In some cases, the diaconal ministry is exercised via committee or Board of Deacons, e.g., Presbyterian churches.

Church of Christ (1968) the office of deacon/deaconess is defined in the “provisional Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)”. Selection is via election and ordination that is repeated for each term according to church policy. Duties include pastoral, charitable, liturgical and administrative functions.

United Methodists, initial introduction of the office deaconess in 1888, followed by official recognition of “diaconal ministry” in General Conference of 1976. This denomination has retained a transitional diaconate as preparation for ordination as an elder. There is an office referred to as “diaconal minister” regarded as a “called out” ministry for charitable, pastoral and liturgical functions. Although not referred to as ordination the “authorization” is for all intents and purposes an ordination rite.

Roman Catholics called for a reinstatement of the diaconate as separate and distinct office at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) reconstituted the order of deacon as a separate and distinct office in the church. But no real action was taken until 1965 as one of the outcomes of Vatican II. It is noteworthy that the shortage of priests in the Roman Church has often, and still results in deacons acting in the role of presbyter resulting in a confusion Orders.

II. Theology

ON ORDINATION AND THE DIACONATE

Sacramental Theology as Prelude

Anglicanism understands the sacraments as a channel of grace, of sanctification and salvation. Sacraments have both form and matter. *Form* is the liturgical action while the *matter* refers to material objects, e.g., water and chrism in baptism; bread and wine in the Eucharist. Sacraments are one way that God adapts his work to our state, in that we are not physical only nor spiritual only but a mysterious combination of both. The sacraments are efficacious because God chooses to use them for his purposes. Their efficacy is not a consequence of the role (bishop, priest) or the individual who administers them, or because of the form or matter involved. Through the sacraments God sustains and sanctifies his people, fitting them for their mission in this world and preparing them for the next.

Anglican theology recognizes two primary sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist, although it speaks of the sacramental character of other important rites, e.g., marriage. Similarly, the Church itself can be thought of as sacrament, for this entity is in fact a means of grace, sanctification and salvation in that it is the chief means (form and matter) through which God's saving work is manifest to the world.

The ordination of individuals into specific offices is for the furtherance of the ministry of Jesus Christ through the agency of his Body the Church, as well as for ordering the of the Church. Authority and responsibility of ordained persons flow

from their sacramental role (representative) in the execution of the ministry of the whole church.

The historical apostolic ministry of bishops is characterized by preservation of the church's continuity in teaching and practice, pastoral oversight, and is ritualized by their presidency in the Eucharist, Baptism and ordination. Their responsibility and authority for this sacramental ministry is conferred by ordination to this office. The ministry of apostolic oversight is delegated to presbyters in the local parish but not to the office of deacon, although the diaconal office too shares in the apostolic mission. The deacon is historically and specifically ordained by rite to serve as an extension of the bishop in his or her oversight of the needs of the community. The ministry of ordained persons must be understood not in terms of authority conferred, nor by functions or particular ministries performed, but by the apostolic ministry of Jesus Christ manifest in and outside the Church. All Christian ministry is thus derivative and dependent on Christ Jesus.

This understanding is entirely consistent with the use of the word *diakonia* in classical and New Testament Greek; being commissioned or sent forth on behalf of another. Thus, it is accurate to define the primary ministry of all the baptized as diaconal in nature. More on this thought later.

Ordination – What is changed?

It is important to establish a common understanding of the purpose of ordination in order to address the question of why the Diaconate is properly an ordained ministry. It is said that ordination results in an ontological¹⁴ change. Whether the ontological change is a change in substance or a change in relationship within the community of the baptized or both is a subject of debate among various Christian traditions. However, to hold the position that the change is a change in substance results in an unfortunate distortion of the sacramental theology that

¹⁴ Ontology attempts to classify things and their relationship to one another.

underlies the rationale for ordination. To assume that ordination results in a change in substance and the conferring of powers on a particular individual is an abstraction that sets the individual apart from the community in which the ministry of the ordained is constituted, and thus undermines or at least distorts the relational change that should result from ordination.

Gaillardetz draws a helpful parallel between baptism and ordination: “The ontological change brought about by baptism, and the sacramental character thereby conferred, can only be appreciated adequately with respect to the ecclesial relationship constituted by baptism. Baptism, a Spirit-powered, ecclesial act, “orders” or configures the believer in Christ within the community of faith, the people of God. Baptism does not make one a different kind of individual, it draws the believer into a profound ecclesial relationship. All baptized have an ecclesial *ordo* within the life of the church.¹⁵ [The full meaning of baptism cannot be realized outside the context of the community of faith since baptism is the sacramental act that constitutes one as one in Christ and his Body the Church.]

In like manner, we can recognize a similar ontological change effected in ordination that is oriented, not toward the conferral of powers on the ordained, but toward the reconfiguration of the ordained into a specific ecclesial relation. The distinctive powers [authority] follow from demands of the new ecclesial relation.”¹⁶ Hannahford also supports this perspective.¹⁷

¹⁵ Hannahford: “While the mark of ordination rests upon the mark of baptism it modifies it in a certain way. Every member has a baptismal vocation to share in the ministry of Christ but baptism on its own does not carry either the authority or the character to be a representative *persona*.”

¹⁶ Gaillardetz, pg 78

¹⁷ “The view that ordination affects an ontological change in the sense of changing the identity of the *ministerial persona* as a consequence of a change in relationship between the individual and the Church differs from the understanding of a fundamental ontological change in substance that affects an individual’s powers. The idea that one’s powers are changed as a consequence of ordination is an abstraction divorced from the one’s relationship to Christ and to the Body, His

Thus, ordination is a Spirit-powered action that changes the relationship of the ordained person within the community of faith conferring on them an official representative ministerial persona.

From Relationship Flows Sacred Ministry

Understanding the ministry of the diaconate as a set of tasks or functions, such as service to the needy is an inadequate basis for understanding this or any other ordained ministry. Nor does perspective aid in developing a theological understanding of the diaconate. It is noteworthy that Jesus' **ministry flowed from** and was shaped by his **relationship** to the Father, and the mission given him by the Father, not from specific tasks that he performed. Everything he did flowed from his relationship to the Father. It follows that ministry for Jesus' disciples cannot simply be about specific tasks. Those who are followers of Jesus' find their identity and ministry in responding to his call. Diaconal ministry, all ministry for that matter, must, and will be shaped by our relationships within the Body of Christ; that is our day-to-day walk and work among his people in the ordered communion we know as the church, as well as in our expression of Christian mission in the world.

Sacred Ministry, Sacramental Ministry

Likewise, the ministry of the three-fold order of bishop, priest and deacon flows from their relationship to Christ and his work in the world that is affected through the Church. Hannahford comments: "Those churches which accept the historic three-fold order of bishop, priest and deacon, are generally committed to a sacramental interpretation of the sacred ministry (liturgical ministry). This means, among other things, that **the primary significance of these orders is to be found in what they represent and not in the functions that their members**

Church. In the latter the change affects an individual independently of the Body and its mission and ministry."

perform. Bishops, priests and deacons are a sign of the apostolic character of the Church and of Christ's continuing headship in the Christian community as prophet, priest and king. **The sacred ministry acts as a sacramental focus for the concrete reality of Christ's ministry in and through the Church.**"¹⁸

Sacred ministry then is a focal point, a way of seeing with clarity the meaning of what the symbols characterize, and in our context, it is Christ as prophet, priest and king, and his continuing ministry in and through the Church. Tasks and functions attach simply because sacred ministry is an authoritative focus of the ministry of Christ.

Sacred ministry is a focal point for the ministry of the whole Church, for it is the whole Church and not the sacred ministry itself that is a sign of Christ in the world. "The priesthood and its ministry follows as a corollary from the priesthood of the Church. What one is, the other is."¹⁹ Hannahford: "The significance of sacred ministry lies not in those functions traditionally associated with it, but rather in its identity as a clear and well-defined image of the continuing ministry of Christ in and through his Church. Functions, while not insignificant, do not define sacred ministry. **Functions should flow from the sacramental meaning of the sacred ministry because it is an authoritative focus of the ministry of Christ.** The office bishop is not defined by the power to ordain but the office ordains because he is the focus of the *episcopate* of Christ and of the apostolicity of the Church." These are important foundational statements regarding offices and function in the church.

It is the Church itself, and not the sacred ministry, which is the fundamental sign of the ministry of Christ in the world. The Church itself is in the nature of a sacrament because it is both a real manifestation of God's mission in the world in

¹⁸ *The Deacon's Ministry*, Christine Hall, ed., Gracewing, Hereford, England, 1991; Chapter III, pg25.

¹⁹ R. C. Moberley on the Catholic Anglican understanding of holy orders.

Jesus Christ, and an effective instrument of his redemptive work, Jesus himself being the primal sacrament. **Thus, it is only within the wider sacramental significance of the Church as a whole that the other sacramental signs take on their Christian significance.** [Refers back to the importance of relationship, authority, function, etc.]

Sacred ministry is a focus for the general sacramental representation of the ministry of Christ in the community of all the baptized. Nevertheless, **it belongs uniquely to the ministerial office to be an image of what is true for the whole church.** [General statement for ordained ministry.]

The Diaconate – Why is it a properly an ordained ministry?

What distinctive aspect of NT *diakonia* does the order of deacon exemplify or symbolize? The idea of *diakonia* lies at the heart of the NT understanding of ministry, a truth that calls this aspect of the Christian life into focus for all. While true this fact can be confounding in that it makes the understanding of a distinctive diaconal order difficult for the church because in a real sense the entire church must have a diaconal character if it is to be a faithful sign of Christ in the world.

To avoid this confusion, it is important to understand that a sacramental theology of sacred ministry does not require that what the office of the deacon signifies must be peculiar to it. *In fact, the sacred ministry lies precisely in its capacity to focus what is proper to the Church as a whole.* The distinctiveness of the diaconate lies precisely in its capacity to signify a central aspect of the Church's universal vocation. ***The tension felt by many in the diaconate is that while certain functions both pastoral and liturgical are traditionally associated with this office, none of these is the exclusive preserve of the deacon.*** Functions are the consequence of the underlying sacramental role in the sacred ministry of the ordained.

Indeed, the distinctiveness of the diaconate lies in its capacity to signify a central aspect of the Church's universal vocation. All baptized Christians share in diaconal ministry, but it belongs to those who are sacramentally ordained to be a unique focal point or image of this universal calling.

One perspective: the deacon is a sign to the Church of the call for a radical conversion of life (pg 35, *The Deacon's Ministry*); those who would enter God's kingdom must become like children and servants. Certain implications follow from this identification of the diaconate with the absolute nature of the gospel demand for a transformation of life. As a sign of the call for a true interiorization of Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom, the diaconate focuses in a particularly sharp way on the transcendent demand of the Kingdom addressed to the Church.

There is a tension in the sacramental image of the Deacon relative to what is intended, and what the Church in terms of its mission and ministry realizes. That tension is created by the radical call for transformation of the very identity of each person making up the Church. That transformation involves identifying with and ministering to the powerless, the poor and the victims of injustice. Where that kind of servanthood is lived out the Kingdom of God is manifest.

Thus the office of Deacon represents more than just charitable ministry. Charity, that is giving aid to someone, can be a subtle and unconscious form of control and certainly creates an unequal relationship or situation. The servant nature manifest in the life of Christ, and the call to servanthood in the Kingdom of God demands identification with the poor and the oppressed. The call to service is a call to give up pride of place, and become like those we would serve. In that way, we are transformed but also the situation is transformed. There is no longer an imbalance of power and the potential for coercion is neutralized. Thus, the Deacon represents not simply charitable ministry but the poor themselves and the radical call for a conversion of the heart to fulfill the work of Christ in the world. [In one sense the office of Deacon creates tension or judgment. The sign

of the office holds up before the Church the ministry and heart attitude that it is called to fulfill.] “The charity of God’s Kingdom is not the benevolence of the rich for the poor, but the sharing of the good things of the world amongst those who are seeking the community of the Kingdom.”

Distinguishing Diaconal and Lay Ecclesial Ministry

With regard to formal lay ecclesial, and lay ministry in general, what distinguishes these ministers from the office of Deacon, and why is the Deacon considered among the ordained ministers of the church? What makes formal lay ecclesial ministry distinct from lay ministry is the way each of these ecclesial responsibilities brings the individual into a new public, and formally accountable ecclesial relationship to fulfill a specific ministry for a limited duration. In distinction, the sacrament of ordination is an ecclesial action that repositions the one being ordained into a new, permanent, and lifelong ecclesial relationship set apart for apostolic ministry or in the case of the deacon, a sharing in the apostolic ministry under the leadership of the bishop.

Summation

With this background in place it is relatively easy to address the four criteria for a clear understanding of the ecclesial role of the deacon. Our first objective is to place the office in an appropriate historical and traditional context. We are on relatively safe ground in this regard, that is historical evidence is readily available to corroborate, that the deacons have participated in diverse ministries, including but not limited to: preaching, teaching, ministry to the sick, administration of temporal goods, pastoral oversight, catechesis, taught and written on theology, and served as liturgical ministers. And with respect to the ordering of the Deacon within the Church community, the earliest ordination rites confirm that a deacon was ordained into the “service of the bishop” (in *ministerium episcopi*). Historical records also point out that the office of Deacon is not defined by specific tasks, but their sharing and extending the apostolic ministry of the bishop. Linguistic

studies²⁰ of the word *diaknonia* and its cognates in late classical and early Christian writings finds the root and its related forms in three contexts, those of “messenger”, “agency” and “attendance upon a person or household”, and with regard to roles, as diplomatic messengers, servants of merchants, and maids sent to the market for household needs. The common thread is agency; a role that acts on behalf and with the authority of another.

Secondly, as stated earlier, the diaconate is properly an ordained ministry because deacons are involved in carrying out the work of the “apostolic office”. It is in fact the deacon’s explicit role in service to the bishop that justifies his/her share in the office. Ordination places the deacon, in this case, into a new ecclesial relationship to the bishop and the church.

The visible presence of the deacon at the side of the one who exercises *episkop* in the liturgy publicly expresses this relationship. In high-church expression the president of the Eucharist typically blesses the deacon before the reading of the Gospel as a sign of their relationship and roles.

Thirdly, we can readily distinguish the ordained ministry of the deacon from that of the presbyter and bishop in that the deacon’s part in the apostolic office does not include pastoral oversight of a congregation or the administration of the sacramental rites Baptism or Eucharist. The Bishop, and through delegation, a priest, exercises apostolic oversight of a specific, local congregation, Baptism and Eucharistic sacraments.

Lastly, to distinguish the ministry of the deacon from the ministry of lay ecclesial ministry, it is helpful to restate the definition of lay ecclesial ministry: a publicly ordered, non-ordained, ministry in the church requiring special formation in distinction to the normal, everyday exercise of charisms by Christians in their life

²⁰ J.N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

and work. Examples of lay ecclesial ministry include, Stephen ministers, Prayer team member, Lectors, Altar Guild, and Worship Leader. What distinguishes the diaconate from lay ecclesial ministers is not the substance of the ministerial activity, but the way in which the deacon explicitly conforms his/her service to the directives of the bishop, or by delegation, presbyters.²¹ By virtue of his promise of obedience, the deacon serves explicitly in response to the needs of the community as discerned by the Bishop or priest. Laypersons will, in general, have a greater degree of freedom in their choice of ministry or pastoral initiative in comparison to ordained persons.

²¹ Gaillardetz, pg 95

References:

1. *The First Century of Christianity*, Homersham Cox, published by Longmans, Green, 1886. (Google: Original from the New York Public Library Digitized Jun 19, 2006)
2. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Second Edition, Garland Publishing, New York, 1999 (ISBN 0-8153-3319-6)
3. *The New International Dictionary of Theology*, Vol 3, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1971. (ISBN 0-310-33220-6)
4. *Deacons and the Church*, JN Collins, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2002 (ISBN 0-8192-1933-9)
5. *For Such a Time as This. A Renewed Diaconate in the Church of England*. A report of the General Synod of the Church of England of a Working Party of the House of Bishops. Church House Publishing, London, 2001 (ISBN 0 7151 5764 7)
6. *Theology of the Diaconate. The State of the Question*. Three keynote lectures delivered at The National Association of Diaconate Directors in 2004. Paulist Press, New York, NY 2005 (ISBN 0-8091-4345-3) [RC]
7. *The Permanent Diaconate. Its history and place in the sacramental orders*. Kenan B. Osborne, Paulist Press, New York, NY, 2007 (ISBN 978-0-8091-4448-8) [RC]
8. *Deacons and the Church*. Owen Cummings, Paulist Press, New York, NY, 2004 (ISBN 0-8091-4242-2) [RC]
9. *The Deacon's Ministry*. Christine Hall, ed., Gracewing, Herefordshire, England, 1991.