

What is a Deacon? A Liturgical Perspective¹

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In the renewal of the order of Deacons, the liturgy must be our starting point; for until we understand the liturgical nature of the Deacon, we cannot understand the way in which Deacons relate to the world. The argument of what follows is therefore that the work of Deacons in the world is to be seen in the light of their role in the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy, which is ‘for the life of the world’ (John 6. 51).²

The Order of Deacons

The role of the Deacon in the Scottish Liturgy has its roots in the Mass of the Roman Rite and the Eucharistic Liturgies of the Eastern Orthodox churches, which give a special place to the Deacon in the liturgical action. Drawing on both traditions, the reading of the Gospel, the introduction to the prayer for the Church, and the delivery of the cup, was explicitly allowed to the Deacon in the First Prayer Book of Edward VI, of 1549, which is the ancestor of the various forms of the Scottish Liturgy. All rubrical mention of the Deacon, however, disappeared in 1552, and did not reappear in any of the English books that had parliamentary sanction.

We should nevertheless note that the reading of the Gospel was explicitly mentioned in the English Ordinal of 1550, which remained the

¹ This article was written originally for publication in this journal, but it was also incorporated in a very similar form as part of the SEC Doctrine Committee’s *Theology of Authority in the Ministry of the Church*, Grosvenor Essay No. 13 (Edinburgh: General Synod Office, 2020), pp. 51–60.

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² See also *Scottish Liturgy 1982*, section 19 (Breaking of the Bread): ‘The living bread is broken for the life of the world’. Alexander Schmemmann’s classic, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s, 1973), suggested that the world can be understood from the perspective of the unbroken experience of the Church, as revealed and communicated in worship, above all in the Eucharist, which he interpreted as ‘the sacrament of the world, the sacrament of the Kingdom’ (p. 8).

normative rite until 1662: 'Take thou authoritie to reade the Gospell in the Church of God', says the bishop, 'and to preache the same, yf thou bee thereunto ordinarily commaunded.' The Ordinal of 1550 continues:

It pertaineth to the office of a Deacon [in the Church where he shall be appointed,] to assist the Priest in divine service, and specially when he ministereth the holy Communion, and [to] help him in distribution thereof, and to read holy scriptures and Homilies in the congregation, and [to] instruct the youth in the Catechism, to Baptise and [to] preach if he be [commanded] by the Bishop. And further more, it is his office [where provision is so made] to search for the sick, poor, and impotent people of the parish, and to intimate their estates, names, and places where they dwell to the Curate, that by his exhortation they may be relieved by the parish or other convenient alms: will you do this gladly and willingly?

The Scottish Ordinal did not depart from this wording in any significant way before 1984.

The Scottish Liturgy, from 1637 onwards, began to introduce explicit roles for the Deacon in the rubrics. Following the Clementine Liturgy, it was sanctioned that the Deacon may deliver the cup. In 1764, the role of the Deacon was expanded, allowing him to say, 'Let us present our offerings to the Lord, with reverence and godly fear' — a text influenced by the so-called Clementine Liturgy of the Apostolic Constitutions, published by Bishop Rattray.³ The role of the Deacon was greatly expanded from 1912 onwards, with explicit sanction to read the Epistle and Gospel, to introduce the confession, the prayer for the Church, and to read the exhortation after Communion. All explicit mention of the role of the Deacon in the rubrics of the Scottish Liturgy was lost, however, from 1970 onwards, and *Scottish Liturgy 1982* notably has no rubrics at all. The *Scottish Ordinal 1984* gives us the following diminished and somewhat vague picture of the diaconate:

Deacons share with the bishop and presbyters in the ministry of word and sacrament and in works of love.

In a distinctive way deacons are a sign of that humility which marks all service offered in the name of Christ. They bear witness

³ Thomas Rattray (1684–1743), bishop of Brechin 1727–1731, bishop of Dunkeld 1731–1743, Primus 1738–1743. See *The Ancient Liturgy of the Church of Jerusalem* (London: James Bettenham, 1744), p. 113.

to the Lord who laid aside all claims of dignity, assumed the nature of a slave and accepted death on a cross.

In the name of the Church, deacons care for those in need, serving God and the world after the pattern of Christ.⁴

This represents a significant shift away from the ancient understanding of the role of the Deacon. The SEC Diaconate Working Group's second report, *Truly Called ... Two*, published in 2013, has nevertheless outlined what it understands to be the liturgical role of the Deacon, as follows:

The Deacon's traditional ministry in the liturgy represents the ministry of service and mission of the whole Church. This includes: calling the community to confession of their sins; proclaiming the gospel; preaching; leading prayers of intercession; receiving the gifts and preparing the altar for Holy Communion; assisting the president with the distribution of Communion; and sending the community out in the service of the Lord.⁵

Diakonía and diákonos

In 1990, John N. Collins, a Roman Catholic scholar, produced *Diakonía: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*.⁶ Nearly three decades later his philological conclusions about the meaning of *diakon-* words remain not only undisturbed, but were adopted in the third edition of *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, and have been reinforced by the work of Anni Hentschel.⁷ Collins began by identifying a particular understanding of *diakonía* taken up among theologians of the Lutheran churches in the nineteenth century and which had become entrenched (especially in German theology) by the 1940s, and then also by many in the Roman Catholic Church from the 1960s. Based on a certain reading of Acts 6 in conjunction with other key texts — especially Mark 10. 45 — this understanding has seen *diakonía* as meaning self-giving service to the poor

⁴ *Scottish Ordinal 1984 (amended 2006)*, Ordination of Deacons, section 2, 'Response of the Bishop'.

⁵ *Truly Called ... Two* (Edinburgh: Scottish Episcopal Church, 2013), p. 7.

⁶ John N. Collins, *Diakonía: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: OUP).

⁷ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. by Frederick Danker (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001); Anni Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2007).

and needy. The *Scottish Ordinal 1984* reflects this also: 'In the name of the Church, deacons care for those in need'.

Collins has demonstrated, however, from examination of secular and sacred Greek usage, that the word *diakonía*, and its cognates, have a quite different root sense: that of one person's commissioned service to another person.

So, the essence of the diaconate, according the argument of Collins, is first of all something other than to follow Christ who came 'to serve rather than to be served', or to bear witness in a special way 'to the Lord who laid aside all claims of dignity, assumed the nature of a slave and accepted death on a cross'. The Deacon's ministry and function does not begin with washing the feet of the poor, caring for widows and orphans, and feeding the hungry. Such works of philanthropic love and charity are indeed the essence of Christian discipleship, and certainly good and worthy in themselves. *Diakonía*, however, is not fundamentally about such works of 'humble service'.

In its essence, Collins has argued, *diakonía* is about being commissioned to serve the bishop, the Eucharistic president; about serving the Eucharistic president in the administration of the Lord's Body and Blood; serving the Eucharistic president in the proclamation of the Holy Gospel. This is not primarily a philanthropic, but a cultic, liturgical, service. In as far as their duties may extend in the direction of philanthropy or administration, it is instructive to observe the role of the Deacon in the *Apostolic Tradition*: to attend the Bishop (8:2) and 'report to him who are sick so that he, if it seem good to him, may visit them' (34). Their ministry is primarily to the bishop (8:2), not to the needy. This role survives almost verbatim in the classical English and Scottish Ordinal already mentioned: the Deacons are 'to search for the sick, poor, and impotent [...] to intimate their estates, names [...] to the Curate'; the 'Curate' here being the rector, the priest instituted by the bishop to the cure of souls in the congregation, and who stands in the place of the bishop in overseeing the work of the Deacon in that context.

In fact, Collins seeks to rehabilitate 'ministry' as a more accurate translation of *diakonía* and 'minister' as a translation of *diákonos* (a translation found, as it happens, in the King James Version of the Bible). So, when in Matthew 25. 44 the servants of the king say to him, 'Lord, when was it [...] that we did not take care of (*diakon-*) you?', we should understand them as asking, 'Your majesty, when was it that we did not carry out your commands?'. The task was diaconal, not because it was aiming to relieve hardship, but because it was being carried out according to instructions from

a mandating authority.⁸ The orientation of *diakonía* and its cognates is not towards the person in need but derives its 'potency from the person who mandates the activity'.⁹

As a more general summary of Collins's position, a number of points can be set out. The most important are as follows. *Diakon-* words, which have deep roots in Greek religious language and culture, and which also occur in the Septuagint (a Greek transmission of the Old Testament), can apply at the highest levels of civic and religious functions, always expressing the notion of a mandated authority. In religious contexts, a connotation of the noble and even of the divine characterizes the usage. In most contexts in the Hellenistic world, the person or activity designated by *diakon-* would be held in the highest respect, and even in awe. There is no imputation of inferiority, and *diaknonía* was in certain circumstances unthinkable for slaves. *Diakon-* words implied no personal service in relation to the recipient of the *diakonía* and never expressed or connoted love of any kind, and the values expressed by these words in Christian writings were no different from those expressed in Hellenistic and classical Greek. There is, indeed, no nuance or shift between New Testament and non-Christian usage.

The ordination of deacons

Bearing all this in mind, it comes as no surprise to find that the early ordination rites of the Western churches do not make reference to the notion of humble service. Instead, there is an emphasis on the Deacon's function in Christian worship. The prayer for the ordination of Deacons, which is found in all the earliest sacramentaries (whose origins lie before the seventh century), reads:

electis ab initio Leui filiis qui mysticis operationibus domus tuae
fidelibus excubiis permanentes haereditatem benedictionis
aeternae sorte perpetua possiderent. Super hos quoque famulos
tuos quaesumus Domine placatus intende quos tuis sacrariis
seruituros in officium diaconii suppliciter dedicamus.¹⁰

⁸ John N. Collins, 'From presbyter to priest to ... minister?', *Gateway to Renewal: Reclaiming Ministries for Women and Men* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), p. 137.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Sacramentarium Leonianum*, ed. by Charles Lett Feltoe (Cambridge: CUP, 1896), p. 121; see also *The Gregorian Sacramentary under Charles the Great*, ed. by H. A. Wilson (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1915), p. 8; *The Gelasian Sacramentary: Liber sacramentorum Romanae Ecclesiae*, ed. by H. A. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1894), p. 27.

From the beginning the sons of Levi were chosen as faithful guardians, devoting themselves to the mystical offerings of thy house, who would possess as an everlasting portion the inheritance of an eternal blessing. We beseech thee, O Lord, to look with favour also on these thy servants, whom we humbly set apart for the office of deacon to serve in thy sanctuaries.

Here the Deacon is seen as the successor of the sons of Levi. Just as the Levitical ministers of the Jewish temple served the sacrificial priesthood, so Christian Deacons are set apart to do service at the holy altars presided over by the bishop as 'high priest'.

The evidence strongly suggests that this language of the earliest Roman sacramentaries, in use until the late twentieth century, has firm roots in the earliest traditions of the Roman Church, as expressed in the *First Epistle of Clement*, written towards the end of the first century:

(40.4) Those, therefore, who make their offerings at the appointed times are acceptable and blessed, for those who follow the instructions of the Master cannot go wrong. (40.5) For to the high priest (ἀρχιερεῖ) the proper services (λειτουργία) have been given, and to the priests (ιερεῦσιν) the proper office has been assigned, and upon the Levites the proper ministries (διακονία) have been imposed.¹¹

Collins has argued that this passage shows that the term 'service' (λειτουργία, *leitourgía*) and its cognates refer exclusively to worship ('those who make their offerings at the appointed times'), so that 'the office of bishop' (ἐπισκοπή, *episkopē*) 'is referring to the central function within Christian cult'. The term 'priesthood' of the Levitical cult therefore changes to one 'meaning something like "presidency" in Christian assemblies'.¹²

Clement of Rome and the ordination prayers of the early sacramentaries therefore see the Christian ministry in terms of the Old Testament Hebrew priesthood. In short, the bishop equates to the high priest, and the Deacons to the Levites. The earliest sources give no indication that that *diakonía* is to be service to the poor. Christian ministry was cultic in essence and grew out of the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

¹¹ Lightfoot's text is reproduced in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. by Michael W. Holmes, 3rd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), pp. 98, 99.

¹² Collins, *Diakonía*, p. 238.

With the evidence of Clement of Rome, we can see that this idea goes back to a point in the first century before the New Testament scriptures had become universal or normative. Not until Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Eusebius (who were writing between one and two and a half centuries later than Clement) do we find speculation on a link between the Seven of Acts 6 and the diaconate.

The Roman ordination rites, before the reforms of Paul VI, maintained the understanding of the diaconate as a Levitical and cultic office, containing nothing of the ‘service-to-the-poor’ concept of *diakonía*. Later medieval additions to the earliest texts added a mention of Saint Stephen, commending him for his example of chastity rather than his philanthropy. A final prayer, of Gallican origin, which also alludes to Stephen and the Seven, continues to focus on the Deacon as one who ministers in the sanctuary.

We might also note that beyond the debated passage in chapter 6, Acts does not provide a view of Stephen or Philip as men with a special ministry to the poor and needy. Indeed, the noun *diákonos* is not used, and the only members of the Seven who appear again are engaged in proclaiming the Gospel, not table service.

The Prayer Book Ordinal, then, remains in the tradition, via Sarum, of the Roman Rite: it expands the Sarum formula as follows:

It pertaineth 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.

Conclusions and questions

Responses to Collins have been accepting of his philological conclusions but their implications have been ignored in practice. Most notable is the continued insistence that the diaconate is to be understood in the context of Mark 10. 45, rendered as, ‘the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (*diakonēσαι*) and to give his life as a ransom for many’, an expression of Jesus’s humiliation and giving up of himself for others, a value reflected in Luke 22. 26–27 as the voluntary self-humiliation of the disciple, ideas pointing to a radical change in the previously held values, and hence ‘loving action for brother and neighbour’.¹³ Agreeing with Anni Hentschel’s interpretation, Collins has rendered Mark 10. 45, ‘The Son of man did not come to have people attending upon him but to carry out his mission and

¹³ Collins, ‘A monocultural usage: *διακον*- words in Classical, Hellenistic, and Patristic sources’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 66 (2012), 287–309 (p. 292), citing *The New International Dictionary of New Theology*, ed. by L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, H. Bietenhard (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), p. 546.

give his life as a ransom for many.’¹⁴ Collins has gone on to support this interpretation on the basis of Origen’s Commentary of the Gospel of Matthew:

in order to carry out his mission and to go to such an extent in this mission for our salvation as to give up his own life.¹⁵

The argument I am making is not that Deacons should never have anything to do with any charitable and philanthropic activities, but that ‘diaconate as service to the needy’ is at odds with the evidence, and with the essentially cultic job-description given for the Deacon — a role rooted in the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy — and by the repeated references to the performance of diaconal functions ‘in conjunction with the bishop and presbyterate’.

The question of the nature of the diaconate, it has to be admitted, is far more complicated than this. Not least among the other components of *diakonía* is the ministry of upholding the presence of the word of the gospel within the community (that is, the local Christian assembly, or *ekklēsia*); in this, the relationship of the Deacon with that local church and its worshipping life is crucial. Before we go further, therefore, I am seeking to ask questions about how the ministry of the Deacon and the Deacon’s calling relates to the worshipping community, the Eucharistic community, out of which the candidate has been called; how Deacons in general minister within the Eucharistic liturgy, and the worshipping life of a particular local Christian community where they are placed; and how any Deacon will relate liturgically to bishop or presbyter (presiding pastor). For if a Deacon is to be a specially commissioned minister of the Bishop, then the primary liturgical relationship must surely be with the Bishop and the wider diocese. Likewise, if a Deacon is commissioned to minister within a local congregation, then the primary liturgical relationship must surely be that which mediates between pastor and congregation.

¹⁴ Collins, ‘A monocultural usage’, p. 307.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 308.