

Many Gifts: One Form of Service

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The many recent discussions in the churches on the “ministry of women” have only served to reveal the sterility of the topic when considered as an end in itself, apart from the wider context in which it belongs, a context which itself needs to be re-examined: the responsibility of every member of God’s church to minister.¹

The arguments on women and the priesthood face a particular danger in the Roman church, where there is an unhealthy focus on priesthood, to the exclusion of every other aspect of Christian ministry. This has produced a church in which rigid conformity to the three estates—the priesthood, the “religious life”, the lay state—has blinded its members to Christ’s exhortation to every soul to seek out freedom and wholeness. The result has been a misuse of the concept of vocation. Any member of the church who gives exceptional evidence of a spiritual dimension to his life, or exhibits an interest in the workings of the institutional church is expected and channelled to go on to something higher, and this means to take a step up the hierarchical ladder which has been devised. In this way his universal Christian vocation is subsumed into a specialist vocation which the church regards as superior. Such a system fails to profit by and encourage the growth of those of its members who are permanently committed to the lay state. Most especially is this anachronistic in the modern world where education and the tools of civilisation are no longer the special charge of the church but within the grasp and gift of everybody. Such a development in the Christian world should be joyfully accepted as heralding the replacement of institutionalised and elitist knowledge by equality of opportunity and, therefore, of contribution. Now, more than at any time, the laity is able to pull its weight in the church and fulfil its ministerial functions. For too many centuries the benighted role of the faithful has fostered a misinterpretation of the meaning and function of ministry, and an aggrandisement and isolation of the minister in his sacerdotal capacity.

One of the reasons for the wide division between laity and priest in the Roman Catholic church is that all the forms of minor

¹Studies which are useful on this issue are R. Ruston, ‘Theology and Equality’, *New Blackfriars*, February, 1974; M. Martinell, ‘Women and Ministries in the Church’, *The Clergy Review*, LIX (Sept., 1974); G. Thils, ‘Annee internationale de la femme: les theologiens sont interpelles’, *Revue Theologique de Louvain* 6 (1975) pp. 41-50.

orders which existed in the early church have effectively disappeared, in particular the diaconate. Once a ministry valuable in itself, in so far as it exists now it forms part of the apprenticeship to the priesthood.

The office of deacon is instituted almost at the origins of the church itself. Acts 6:1-6 describes a situation which must have quickly developed, where the ministry of the twelve Galilean apostles fails to take sufficient account of the needs of the Greek-speaking Jews. To remedy this the body of believers choose from among themselves seven men “full of the spirit and of wisdom”, These are presented to the apostles, who pray and lay their hands on them, delivering to them with ceremony and due importance their own task of waiting at table. The Greek phrase is *diakonein trapedsais*, from which we arrive at our word deacon. It is clear that the responsibility which the twelve hand over formed part of their own original apostolic duties and that the transfer is to be seen as an expansion of ministerial roles within the church, leaving the twelve free to devote themselves to prayer and to that other aspect of ministry—preaching the word. The institution of the deacon was clearly a significant step, since we are given the names of each of the seven, and character sketches of two of them. Most of chapter 6, and chapters 7 and 8, emphasise the importance of the diaconate by following in turn the careers of Stephen and Philip. Several facts emerge which suggest that, far from being an officer confined to domestic activities, the deacon from the beginning was chosen for his many gifts and was expected to adapt to many forms of ministry, where he might exercise initiative as well as service. Stephen the first deacon, is also the first Christian martyr. Chapter 6: 9-11 shows him in the role of prophet if not preacher; and chapter 7 is filled with certainly the longest sermon in Acts, which comes from him. In this he shows himself a teacher. To Stephen is given the first vision of Christ in glory after his ascension. Philip, in his turn, is shown preaching the word in Samaria (8: 5). He is described as miracle-worker (8: 6) and evangelist (8: 40; 21: 8), and is empowered to baptise (8: 39). All this points to the plurality of the functions of the earliest deacons and the power they exercised in the primitive church as domestic *and* liturgical administrators. It is important in the light of present-day controversy to notice that this office was also open to women, and the major testimony to this fact comes from St Paul. The Letter to the Romans (chapter 16) mentions Phoebe as *diakonon* of the church in Cenchreae. She is also, perhaps, the bearer of Paul’s letter. The first Letter to Timothy (13: 11 ff.), with its description of the deacon’s ideal virtues, shows how quickly church offices were becoming institutionalised.

The church of the Fathers continued to emphasise the importance of the role of the deacon. This is well documented. Echlin tells us that in the early second century:

“Deacons did by reason of their office what prophets and

teachers did by reason of *their* charism which was itself becoming institutionalised. The task of prophets and teachers, and therefore of *episcopoi* and deacons, was to preach (I Cor 12:x), to serve the community (I Cor 14: xiv), to teach, encourage, reprove, correct and console (I Cor 14: iii). By preaching the mystery of Christ (I Cor 13: ii) they brought men to the faith (Rm 16: xxvi).²

The deacon's main duties were threefold—pastoral, liturgical and administrative. He was expected to visit the sick and the poor as well as the faithful in general, and to inform the bishop of their needs. At the liturgy he was responsible for orderliness of procedure, in that he was in charge of admitting catechumens, pagans and heretics and ensuring their departure at the correct point in the service. He also might read the gospel. It was to the deacon that the people brought their offertory gifts, and to the deacon belonged the sole right of administering the eucharistic cup. At the *agape*, in the absence of priest or bishop, the deacon could give the blessing. Appointed directly by the bishop, and responsible solely to him, the deacon was his chief financial administrator in the diocese, a task that grew from his original function in Acts, where he was in charge of the communal meals. After the second century there developed from this the deacon's duty to propose the name of the poor who were to participate in the common meal.³

From the beginning deaconesses were indispensable. The declining importance of the order of widows led to an expansion of the order of deaconesses from the mid-third century onwards. Their duties arose from the needs of the female congregation, and centred on baptism, the instruction of women and children, and works of charity, as well as all the offices of the deacon as far as they related to the female congregation. According to the third century (?) Syrian document *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Chapter 9):

“The bishop sits in the place of God Almighty. But the deacon stands in the place of Christ; and do you love him. And the deaconess shall be honoured by you in the place of the Holy Spirit, and the presbyter shall be to you in the likeness of the apostles.”

Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) uses the word *cheirotoneo*, “ordain”, in specifying the age at which a woman could be ordained to the diaconate. This is the technical word used for ordination into the male diaconate and the presbyterate.

The early church soon realised, however, that its multitudinous and diverse needs, catered for in major part by deacons and deaconesses, demanded the establishment of auxiliary minor orders.

²E.P. Echin, *The Deacon in the Church. Past and Future*, New York (1971), 17.

³See W. Croce, ‘Histoire du Diaconat’ in *Le Diacre dans L'Eglise et le Monde d'Aujourd'hui*, Paris (1966) (= *Unam Sanctam* 59), pp. 39-40.

Accordingly, the offices of sub-deacon, acolyte and door-keeper, which derived from the diaconate, were instituted. The pastoral and liturgical needs of the faithful also necessitated the offices of exorcist and lector, and in some cases sextons and singers.⁴ But this healthy plurality was reduced in time when the offices of deacon and sub-deacon became concentrated on the liturgy, with the result that lectors and acolytes were superseded. For historical and other reasons the other minor orders eventually disappeared, and the deacon and sub-deacon were left isolated in their liturgical functions, which they had embraced to the exclusion of administrative and pastoral duties. The fossilisation of the deacon's liturgical role, which developed largely from his loss of pastoral contact with the Christian community, meant that he came to be looked on as an apprentice-priest.

The Fathers of the Council of Trent realised that this state in the minor orders was insupportable, and legislated to rectify it.⁵ Unfortunately, their legislation remained a dead letter for four hundred years. It was not until after World War II when Wilhelm Schamoni and Paul Winninger published works advocating the re-establishment of the diaconate that the question of minor orders was again seriously examined.⁶ It must be stated, however, that the arguments of Schamoni and Winninger in favour of the reintroduction of the diaconate do not stem from any conception of the integrity of the office, but rather from a preoccupation with the world-wide shortage of priests which they considered the restoration of the married diaconate would alleviate. The question of the restoration of the diaconate was put to the vote at Vatican II, and only after great opposition and several ballots was the decision reached to restore the office as a permanent one in its own right. For this purpose a congress on the the diaconate was held in 1965. Although this activity suggests a renewed and abiding interest in the role of the deacon, discussions and pronouncements have not

⁴Acolyte: a messenger, he distributed alms and ministered to those in prison. Exorcist: although this office seems to have had an origin independent from the diaconate, the exorcist, in a specialised capacity, helped the bishop and deacon in their ministry to the sick. Lector: the office of lector grew with the extensive readings in the liturgy from scripture and patristic texts. In the sixth century this large number of readings was reduced to two – what we now know as epistle and gospel – and could easily be read by the deacon and sub-deacon. Door-keeper: an early Christian bouncer. His office derived directly from the diaconate, but was naturally abandoned when Christian assemblies were no longer secret and illicit.

See B. Fisher, 'Esquisse historique sur les ordres mineurs', *La Maison-Dieu*, 61 (1960) pp. 58-69; J.G. Davies, 'Deacons, Deaconesses and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 14 (1963) pp. 1-15.

⁵See Echlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-6.

⁶W. Schamoni, *Married Men as Ordained Deacons*, London (1955); P. Winninger, *Vers un Renouveau du Diaconat*, Paris (1958).

derived from a wide enough basis. The position of the deacon in the early church and the broader needs of the modern church have not been sufficiently considered, either singly or in combination. Decisions have continued to be made not with regard to the intrinsic worth of the office, but in response to what the church authorities regard as an immediate need—the supplementation of the clergy.

This unwillingness to consider the true place of the deacon in the community has been given papal sanction by the *Motu Proprio* of 18 June, 1967 (*Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*), and by the *Ad Pascendum* of 15 August, 1972. These tacitly restrict the diaconate to the male sex and explicitly enjoin permanent celibacy on those unmarried persons who undertake the office. This suggests that despite the progressive superstructure, the diaconate in many respects is still seen by church authorities as a pale imitation of the celibate priesthood. Since the deacon was originally an autonomous minister within his allegiance to the bishop, the partial resurrection of the office as directly subordinate, and inferior, to the priesthood is an arbitrary and dangerous appropriation of tradition. The Pope has further stipulated that deacons, with priests, are to be regarded as *clerici*, to be newly distinguished from the other minor orders which he has seen fit to reconstitute. In his own words, “in this way the distinction between clerics and laity will be better apparent”. In accordance with the papal philosophy the minor orders have been reduced to two: the acolyte and the lector, from both of which ministries women are expressly forbidden.⁷ There is nothing laudable in such an attitude which, apart from undermining the spirit of the incarnation, denies the very establishment and tradition of the minor orders as the mirror of the equality and diversity of ministry of all Christians.⁸

The recent attempts to restore the diaconate, then, are doomed to fail, since they begin from false premises. In re-establishing the office, church authorities have partly followed tradition, and partly ignored or embroidered on those aspects of the early diaconate which they do not find sympathetic. It cannot be denied that tradition is of itself a selective process, but, let it be said, what is noticeably absent from the recent ordinances on the diaconate, and on the offices of acolyte and lector, is that spirit of the early church which led to the formation of these offices. If the Fathers and Mothers of the early church could recognise how the social conditions of their time made it imperative to have women ministers, the modern church cannot ignore the imperative presented to it now by the radical reappraisal of the relative status of men and women.

⁷ *Motu Proprio. Ministeria Quaedam*, 15 August, 1972 (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* LXIV, August 1972, 533).

⁸ Cf. I Cor. 12, 4-11.

It is the right time to open up not only the priesthood, but also the diaconate and other minor orders to women—which is to say that these ministries should be open to all Christians sincerely seeking to serve their fellow disciples by these means, whether the prospective candidate be male or female. The Pauline prohibition of I Cor 14: 34-35 and that of I Tim 2: 9-15 are quoted wrongly and incessantly to justify the church's refusal to entrust any form of authorised ministry to women. But of all the many prohibitions and injunctions in the New Testament how many, apart from these, are still adhered to? Who now feels morally bound to avoid conducting legal business with an atheistic judge? (I Cor 6: 1-8) Who could now be found to agree that Christianity demands from slaves diligent and unquestioning service to their masters? (I Tim 6: 1 cf Tit 2: 9)⁹ Why is it simply the New Testament prohibitions and exhortations concerning women which are held to with such tenacity? Of a piece with this arbitrary interpretation of scripture is the address of Paul VI given 18 April, 1975, to a committee studying the church's response to International Women's Year. In part it reads: "If women did not receive the call to the apostolate of the Twelve and therefore to the ordained ministry, they are however invited to follow Christ as disciples and collaborators".¹⁰ With equal illogic it could be pressed that nor did the Gentiles, nor did non-Galileans receive the call to the apostolate of the Twelve. Gentiles and non-Galileans, however, have long been able to exercise their right to serve as ordained ministers, and the very phrase which freed Gentiles for Christ's service is the same that frees men and women from the bondage of their sex (Gal 3: 28).

But the refusal to accord women their rights is only one aspect of Rome's denial of an innovatory and actively supportive role to all who are not priests. Together with the movement for the ordination of women to the priesthood must proceed a conscientious attempt to "de-emotionalise" the word "ministry", which has wrongly become a term loaded to mean "priesthood", and to restore worth to all forms of service.

⁹See further the important work of H. van der Meer, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?*, trans. A. and L. Swidler, Philadelphia (1973). pp. 23-5.

¹⁰*The Tablet*, 26 April, 1975.