

The Rebirth of the Diaconate

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I. *Full- and part-time deacons*

There are two ways of reinstating the diaconate: having full-time deacons without any other occupation and having part-time ones whose main job is something else. Gradations between the two are also possible. The full-time deacon may, if necessary, do a certain amount of other work, whereas the part-time one may fulfil his duties say just in the mornings, or only in his spare time (evenings or weekends). Neither type, however, would be satisfactory by itself. There is a danger that the part-time deacon would lack the necessary firmness of purpose without the example of a full-time one, and that his attitude to the work could degenerate into a take-it-or-leave-it casualness. On the other hand, the church would be unable to manage with full-time deacons only, for economic reasons. It would be impossible to supply them to small mission stations, to the many churches in Latin America which lack a priest, or to the small diaspora areas on the continent. In these cases the only feasible thing is to have a local man as part-time deacon. A full-time one has to be guaranteed an income, while someone working part-time in an honorary capacity would compensate for this outlay, as in his case there would simply be the cost of his training. As part-time deacons men would be considered whose occupations were readily compatible with this work: teachers, social workers, lay preachers who give religious instruction at schools, etc. But the choice of part-time deacons should not be limited to men of these professions. There are men in every walk of life who are suitable for this work. Now that the worker-priests have been suppressed, could not the church make use of the *worker-deacon*, as a representative of the hierarchy in the world of labour?

Karl Rahner¹ makes this reservation about part-time deacons: only men should be chosen for whom service in the diaconate fulfils a basic need of their nature. For example, a scientist who puts everything into his research work would, he maintains, be quite unsuitable. Only in exceptional cases can a secondary occupation become a real vocation.

¹*Diaconia in Christo: Über die Erneuerung des Diakonates*, edited by Karl Rahner, s.j., and Herbert Vorgrimler (Friburg 1962), pp. 285-324.

But this means that we should have to exclude all men of intellectual professions. It might, indeed, be easier for a simple person to make his diaconal activities, even if only part-time, the most important thing in his life; but who is to say whether a doctor or a judge might not find profound satisfaction in this work, so long as his other profession is not neglected? If Rahner's criterion is applied, would we find enough people to undertake this service?

II. *Minor orders as preliminaries to diaconate and priesthood?*

Candidates could come from every age-group, but of course a young man could not become a deacon overnight. He would need to pass through certain preliminary stages first, e.g. acolyte or reader. After say three years he could be ordained as sub-deacon, and after a further trial period be received into the diaconate.

Ideas on the minor orders vary a good deal. It is stated that the functions of these orders have long been performed by the laity (as was pointed out by Pope Pius XII) and that they should continue to be so. According to August Kerkvoorde² they are, and always were, fundamentally lay functions. This was certainly true in the early church. Gradually, however, the desire grew in those who performed them for recognition as a properly constituted independent body. This led to the establishment of the minor order, which made the candidate legally, though not essentially (in a theological sense) a cleric. These functions reverted later to the laity, but the ordination ceremony was retained. The Tridentine reforms produced no change in this field. Thus today minor orders are 'fictions' (Balthasar Fischer). They are 'anachronisms which no longer fulfil the functions for which they were initially instituted'. That is why Kerkvoorde recommends abolition of the minor orders and even of the subdiaconate, which is reckoned a major order. The sacrament of ordination with its three *ordines sacri* would then, he maintains, be placed in its proper perspective, while the laity would have its appropriate sphere of activity assigned to it. This argument is not without force, all the more as the customary manner of conferring these orders (all together or in quick succession) has tended to obscure their importance. Nevertheless, the complete abolition of all minor orders and the subdiaconate does not seem to me desirable. I have always taken the view that the problem of minor orders is linked with that of the revival of the diaconate. In the interests of the latter the retention of some

²*Diaconia: Erneuerung der Niederen Weihen?*, pp. 575-620.

preliminary stages, as indicated above, would seem desirable and even necessary.

Would the following be practicable? Minor orders and that of the subdiaconate would no longer be conferred on a future priest. He would then, before his ordination as priest, and earlier than at present, receive only the order of deacon, which as the first stage of his full ordination would be sacramental. It has often been suggested that a candidate for the priesthood should have a longer testing period as deacon, and in various places this is already put into practice. Rouquette, in his *Etudes* (May 1959), even suggests that the future priest should remain a deacon until he is thirty. Such a provision would be welcome, particularly as the young man would then have longer to make his final decision. The obligation to celibacy, in this case, would only come with his final ordination. These proposals, however, are quite independent of the question of a separate diaconate.

Just as the priest would receive the order of deacon as a preliminary stage towards becoming a priest, so also would the orders of reader, acolyte, and subdeacon be preliminary steps towards becoming a deacon. This arrangement would remove the ambiguous nature of the subdiaconate (not a sacrament, yet a major order) and assign it once more to the minor orders, as the requirement of celibacy would no longer apply to it. Once the independent diaconate were re-established these things would be seen in proper relation to one another and there would no longer be any danger that the subdiaconate would detract from the function of the diaconate. As the minor orders would be conferred only as preliminaries to the independent diaconate, and consequently only a relatively small number of people would be involved, the functions of the minor orders and all the other new services which the church requires would be reserved for the laity, who could only benefit from this proposal. Whether these lay functions, and perhaps also those of Catholic Action, ought to be assigned within a liturgical framework need not be decided here.

III. *Marriage or Celibacy*

The celibacy of the priest is not something commanded by God, it is a requirement of canon law. It was originally a characteristic of the monastic life, and there is no necessary connection between celibacy and the office of a priest. It is not, however, simply a matter of discipline, but has much deeper roots than that.

However important the reasons for the celibacy of a priest, theologians will have to review them in relation to the revival of the diaconate. Alfons Auer³ has led the way in this field.

We must give thanks to God that he has given the church a new view of the body, of sex, and of marriage. Today the church is especially emphasising the sacramental character of marriage, with all its consequences. The grace effect of the sacrament pervades even the deepest expression of married love and fellowship in the physical union of the partners. Each is given the task to bring the other to God. Now the idea has grown up, less perhaps in the writings of theologians than in the minds of the faithful, that the priest must be celibate because there is something impure about marriage, and particularly sexual intercourse in marriage, which would unfit him for the performance of the Christian rites. This argument would, if valid, apply to a deacon also. The view of the Council of Carthage (390) concerning the celibacy of bishops, priests and deacons, that all who 'deal with the holy mysteries' and 'serve the altar' must observe chastity,⁴ is echoed by the words of an African missionary, 'The native converts would sooner forgive their priests a lapse (if they duly repented of it) than receive the eucharist from the hands of married deacons.' We have overcome in theory these vestiges of gnosticism and Manichaeism, and we are labouring to overcome them in practice. The church is at pains to bring the faithful to see that previous sexual intercourse does not disqualify married couples from approaching the Lord's table. These are the best grounds for contesting the above erroneous views concerning the celibacy of the priesthood.

The *character indelebilis* of ordination makes him who is ordained Christ-like. Accordingly, many justify celibacy by demanding that the priest who follows the unmarried Christ should also renounce marriage; but this is to ignore the infinite gulf between the God-man and the man whom God has called to be a priest. It is entirely inconceivable to think of Christ as married or as a human father. This line of reasoning, then, does not take us very far. In two recent articles⁵ the notion of a bridal relationship between the celibate priest and Christ is described as 'scarcely realisable'. This relationship could only exist for a woman. If, then, one wished to speak of such a relationship in connection with a priest, it would be in relation to the church, as shall be seen.

³*Diaconia: Diakonat und Zölibat*, pp. 325-339.

⁴*Diaconia*, p. 109.

⁵Alfons Auer in *Diaconia*, p. 331 and I. F. Görres in *Laiengedanken zum Zölibat*, p. 37.

Auer gives as his most cogent reason for celibacy the difficulty of combining physical and spiritual paternity. Here, as Auer anticipates, the laity will object. Is a married man charged solely with *generatio carnalis*? What of the responsibilities of *generatio spiritualis* towards his children which sacramental marriage lays upon him? What of the 'general priesthood' of the laity, which is a reflection and an imitation of the priesthood of Christ? What of the priesthood of the father within the family? And what of the missionary work of the laity, both within Catholic Action and outside it? Is that not also a form of *generatio spiritualis*? Is not the difference here between priest and laity only one of degree? Is there not a real connection, in the case of the married laity, between spiritual and physical fatherhood? (The essential difference consists in the *generatio carnalis*, which is denied the priest by his celibacy.)

It is the eschatological argument which has always carried most weight with me: a priest should not belong to one, but to all (Semmelroth). A bishop is wedded to his bishopric (hence his ring), a priest is wedded to his parish. A bishop is answerable for his bishopric to God, a priest for his flock. Their life and love is the church. It is a matter of *vacare Deo*—not simply being more readily available, but being able to devote oneself entirely to the service of the faithful. Hence the need to remain free from earthly ties, for the sake of heaven.

Here, as Auer points out, the question arises whether the reasons for the celibacy of a priest hold equally for a deacon. He emphasises that a deacon is also ordained and that he too has to represent Christ as teacher, priest and pastor, he too is a 'dispenser of the divine mysteries', and he asks whether the distinction between a priest and a deacon is of so essential a nature that the reasons for the celibacy of one should not hold good for the other.

Although I agree with Auer in acknowledging that they both have a priestly character, the difference between them is obvious and quite clear to the laity. The priest celebrates the Holy Eucharist, and the deacon assists him at the altar, but it can be celebrated without a deacon. The priest, as *dispensator ordinarius*, administers the sacraments.

In the sacrament of penance, the faithful of the Roman church will always be anxious that the priest to whom they confess their sins and reveal the most intimate secrets of their life remain unmarried. A deacon is not a confessor. If anyone cares to confide in him, that is his own affair. To be a deacon means to be a servant, serving is of his nature. He serves, in his fashion, at the Eucharist, he serves the bishop, he serves the priest, he serves the poor. By this differentiation between the two offices the high

calling of the deacon is, I suggest, in no way diminished.

The difference does, however, justify a different attitude to the question of celibacy. The functions of a priest are objectively more important than a deacon's, therefore is his dignity the greater. Thus it seems legitimate to ask of the priest an objectively higher form of perfection—celibacy—but not to ask it of the deacon. That the latter can remain unmarried and subsequently become a priest if he wants to goes without saying.

Both marriage and celibacy possess the character of a sign. Both are signs of the love of Christ for his people, of his devotion to the church, of his marriage with the church. On the subject of celibacy and marriage the gospel says, 'He that is able to receive it, let him receive it' (Mt. 19, 12)—let him receive the immensity of this mystery! Could one not say that the priest, in his celibacy, represents the devotion of Christ to his church through his own devotion to the flock entrusted to him, whereas the deacon could represent the marriage of Christ with the church through the sign of marriage. If it is true that physical and spiritual paternity are realised among the laity in the one man, then there would be nothing to prevent the deacon from performing the functions of physical and spiritual fatherhood, and the latter more fully than the layman because he performs them professionally, on the basis of his ordination, i.e. on a higher plane. Whereas the priest consecrates his life to spiritual paternity alone.

It would be foolish to deny that in general the celibate is, at least objectively, freer for God and the church than the married man. Yet we must always remember how well the married priests of the Eastern churches bore up under persecution. I shall never forget the words of a Ukrainian priest who told me that often it was the priest's wife who strengthened her husband's will to martyrdom! Let us also remember the gallant stand many married Protestant clergymen took under Hitler, who went to the concentration camps for it. How many married deacons laid down their lives for Christ in the persecutions of the first three centuries? Total devotion, to the point of laying down one's life is a grace which God can give just as well to a deacon as to a priest. Let us also remember that for the married layman—for a doctor, say, or a naval officer—his profession often comes before his wife and family. The choice of the right wife is of course very important. To educate a deacon so that he will make the right choice and to include his wife in his spiritual training—as has been done with success in the case of Protestant deacons—will be an important task of the deacons' seminary.

It would be a mistake not to point out the positive advantages of deacons marrying. A wife and family do not only make claims on a man, they educate him, sustain him and help him to develop, in his professional work as well. Often the wife of a deacon would be able to assist her husband in his work. Who could deny the urgency today of having the example of Christian deacons' families? The Protestants here have led the way.

If the above has shown that there are no serious basic objections to the idea of married deacons, perhaps a few sober practical considerations may decide the issue:

If the church demands celibacy of deacons, then the proposed revival of the diaconate will not achieve its ends. What we are aiming at is getting new recruits for the pastoral work of the church, finding men who do not want to or cannot become priests, but who have been endowed by God with priestly and pastoral inclinations. That there are such men, that there is such a thing as a deacon's vocation, cannot be doubted (Aeur makes this point also). At a time when the shortage of priests has become acute and there seems no way of increasing their number within the foreseeable future, can the church afford to do without them?

If the church were to allow the celibate deacon only, then this would react unfavourably on the calibre of these. If both priest and deacon are committed to celibacy, in what personal qualities, apart from their different vocations, would they differ? Are only those to become deacons who are incapable of doing a theology course? Then there would be a risk of getting people who were not able to cope with living, as Schamoni fears. (To avoid this I have always advocated that candidates for the full-time diaconate should at least have passed their school-leaving examination.) If, however, there were no drawback of this kind, but the candidate simply had inhibitions of one kind or another about entering the priesthood, then in view of the shortage of vocations the regent of studies or the bishop would certainly help him overcome them. But this means that if only the celibate deacon is to be allowed, then there is no need to revive the diaconate. All the more, as then the idea of a part-time deacon would also become impossible. (I am speaking here of the diaconate in the world, not of deacons in an order or a secular institute, whose celibacy is perfectly justified).

There is a further point to be made. Hitherto a deacon had to be celibate because he wanted to become a priest and as such was bound to celibacy. If, however, the independent diaconate is instituted, then that is a completely new situation (Rahner), and the church can make her

decision in greater freedom. (As the Roman church has insisted on celibacy in priests uniformly throughout the world, the ruling on deacons would of course be equally universal).

At the Austrian theological congress of autumn 1961 it was stated, 'The married deacon will save the celibacy of the priest.' It was no mere rhetorical question when someone asked whether we should retain the celibacy of the priesthood and with the worldwide shortage of priests jeopardise the religious life of whole continents. Can we continue to justify the celibacy of priests and not utilise the great aid to pastoral work that the married deacon offers?

If the church does not insist on celibacy with a deacon, then it has all the more right to insist on it with a priest. Then a young man would be no longer forced to decide between 'all or nothing'—priest or layman—but he would have a real choice between two basically priestly ways of life: a celibate priest or a married deacon.

However much we may emphasise the high value of celibacy, it would be wrong to make its sacrificial character into an absolute. Does the challenge of celibacy alone rouse a young man's idealism?⁶ Are married deacons men who are half-hearted, not prepared to make any sacrifice?⁷ The more a priest recognises the sacrificial elements in marriage and in family life, the less he will be likely to represent celibacy as the only form of Christian sacrificial living. A husband too makes sacrifices, and they are often greater than those demanded by celibacy (*vide* Auer). It will be necessary to explain to the deacon right from the beginning of his training, should he not already be aware of it, that his life, both private and professional, consists of sacrifice and service.

In reply to the view that the institution of married deacons might result in fewer priests, I should like to make the following points:

(1) Some of the young men who do not become priests because of the rule of celibacy (or for other reasons) will at least become deacons, so their services will not be lost to the church.

(2) Some of those who go into the diaconate would not have made good priests, but they could make excellent deacons (Rodhain). 'The diaconate will preserve us from unhappy priests' (Archbishop D'Souza).

(3) Young men will become deacons who never would have thought of becoming priests, and there will be many such.

(4) A large number of priests will come from deacons' families (Protestant vicarages provide 23 per cent of all Protestant vocations).

⁶Holstein in *Etudes*, September 1960.

⁷M. Gomm in *Der Rheinische Merkur*, 38/62.

(5) Many (e.g. Winninger, Rodhain) hold the view that if the priest is freed from some of his burdens by a deacon he can become fully a priest again (rather than being forced to be a business administrator) and the priesthood will regain its proper dignity and become more attractive than it is at present.

IV *Training*

The office of a deacon is essentially a priestly office of a unique stamp. Consequently a deacon should not be trained together with priests at a priests' seminary. He does not require a full theological training, but that training suitable to his work. He would need to have the school-leaving certificate as a preliminary. He would have to be given thorough instruction in the bible and the liturgy and also in the field of social work. He should have a basic knowledge of youth psychology and educational theory. Above all he would require from the beginning training in personal discipline and instruction on the spirituality of marriage. Practical exercises and a fairly long probationary period at the end of his training would ease the transition to his future profession.

At the beginning one would have to be fairly elastic. As far as possible one would make use of the existing training centres for social workers, but it is important that this side of the work should be properly balanced by the catechetical instruction. There are already hundreds of lay-preachers who give religious instruction, and some have already expressed interest in the diaconate.⁸ It would indeed be fortunate if by their ordination as deacons they could be brought into closer connection with the church.

Karl Rahner suggests ordaining those men as deacons who have proved themselves through the discharge of diaconal functions (liturgical, educational, charitable and administrative) and through their Christian life. At the outset this will be necessary; but to continue this practice, whereby future deacons would be trained first in a specific field (as social workers, catechists, church administrative officials) and then after a short but thorough training in the liturgy be ordained, does not seem advisable. This would be to neglect the basic general training. Apart from the difficulty of ensuring the necessary religious and disciplinary instruction during the special training, it is desirable to bring the two things together right from the start in order to engender a sense of community and create a distinct group of men. Thus it would be necessary eventually to found a special deacons' seminary, which should not be too difficult if

⁸*Religionsunterricht an Höheren Schulen*, 1961, p. 202.

several diocese pool their resources (cf. the essay on the formation of a deacons' circle in Cologne⁹).

Part-time deacons would undergo the practical training of assisting deacons and also have evening or weekend classes, with possibly longer courses at the seminary for full-time deacons during the holidays when the latter were away. After ordination their training and spiritual direction should continue, just as in the case of full-time deacons. It would be particularly necessary for the part-time deacon, with his secular profession and his family, to maintain high spiritual standards. This follow-up would be the responsibility of the chief deacon of the area and of the deacons' seminary.

V. *The History of the Diaconate and its Revival*

A brief note on this: recently a professor of theology wrote to me from Rome that there were fears that deacons could cause a lot of trouble.

God has entrusted his church to the direction of men. Of course some of the deacons will turn out failures; so do some priests. If, for example, in Italy the married deacon is often barred,¹⁰ then let us also remember what happened in the years after the war, when so many priests left the church, chiefly because of the rule of celibacy. There are similar, though lesser, difficulties in France, and great problems in Latin America. This should prevent us from pre-judging the possible human frailty of a married deacon. Some fearful souls will interpret Walter Croce's words¹¹ as meaning that deacons had always been troublesome, all through history; that latterly they neglected the charitable side of their work because they considered it beneath them; they were ambitious to exercise priestly functions; they themselves were responsible for the decline of the diaconate! But let us not forget Croce's main point: 'We shall probably never know exactly why the diaconate declined'—and his concluding sentence: 'The church needs a *ministerium*, if the *sacerdotium* is to be free to discharge its own task properly.'

One could pursue many other lines of historical research, e.g. the influence on the diaconate of the liberation of the church under Constantine, or those times when there was a superfluity of priests and the role that the proliferation of private masses played in this. Perhaps the truth is that the deacon did not fail in his work so much as that he was pushed

⁹*Diaconia: Das Diakonenseminar*, p. 548ff.

¹⁰*Diaconia*, p. 450.

¹¹*Diaconia: Aus der Geschichte des Diakonats*, pp. 92-128.

out of it. His office was never abolished officially, it seems to have just withered away.

But are these historical perspectives of much value to us? The question of the revival of the diaconate is one of present pastoral needs, not of history. We cannot argue for it simply by pointing to the flourishing state of the diaconate in the early church. Still less can we argue against it by pointing to its subsequent decline. No age exactly resembles another. Therefore we do not need to fear that the same difficulties will repeat themselves. Yet let us learn from history.

If I have dealt in detail with essentially practical questions in this essay, it only shows how far things have already developed, not least through the agency of *Diaconia in Christo*. Surely by now a start could be made, if only on an experimental basis, perhaps differently in different parts of the world, as their requirements demand, rather than uniformly throughout the Church. We must all hope that in the forthcoming session of the Council the necessary authority will be given for this important work to begin.

(Translated by William Glen-Doepel)

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