

“Towards a Contemporary Theology of the Diaconate”

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Ministry is not an abstraction. Ministry is exercised by people and within relationships that are always situated in a particular place and a particular time. Terms like “priest,” “deacon,” “bishop” and “lay minister” should not be treated as if they were Platonic ideals, as if there were an essential definition of each ministry. It is true that the Catholic Church’s teaching office offers a set of doctrinal teachings that say something about ministry in general and ordained ministry in particular, but these are surprisingly sparse and serve more as survey lines that map out the boundaries of the faith, leaving considerable theological and pastoral territory within which to roam. One area in which there is still considerable room for exploration concerns a theology of the diaconate.

The status of the diaconate today is remarkably like that of lay ecclesial ministry: both are largely post-conciliar realities with ancient church roots. Both, in their contemporary forms, have grown at a rate that has outpaced theological reflection. I am not sure that we can adequately understand one without the other. In a recent review of literature on the diaconate, William Ditewig described the current pastoral theological context for the diaconate in terms of a “confluence of three realities”: 1) the growth of lay ecclesial ministry in the decades since the council, 2) the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent and stable ministry and 3) the decline in the numbers of presbyters.¹ We stand today at the pastoral and theological “delta” of this

¹ William Ditewig, “The Once and Future Diaconate: Notes from the Past, Possibilities for the Future,” *Church* 20 (Summer 2004): 51-4.

confluence, seeking to develop a theology of the diaconate that is faithful to our tradition and responsive to the needs of the moment.

An adequate theology of the diaconate today must meet four essential criteria: 1) it must do justice to the tradition of the Church regarding the historical ministry of the diaconate, 2) it must explain why the diaconate is properly an ordained ministry, 3) it must distinguish the ordained ministry of the deacon from that of the presbyter and bishop, and 4) it must distinguish the ministry of the deacon from the ministry of the lay ecclesial minister without in anyway denigrating the importance of lay ecclesial ministry. In this essay I wish to briefly consider three approaches to a theology of the diaconate often articulated in our present church setting. I will then sketch the outlines of a constructive theology of the diaconate that attempts to meet the four criteria I just mentioned.

Part One: Inadequate Approaches to a Theology of the Diaconate

Contemporary pastoral practice, current diaconal formation programs and recent ecclesiastical documents² all give evidence of a startling diversity of theological understandings of the diaconate. In this section I will evaluate three such theological approaches which I believe are defective in some way.

A. The *Cursus Honorum* and the Diaconate as Pastoral Internship for the Presbyterate

By the end of the second century the ministries of bishop, presbyter and deacon had developed as stable, distinctive “orders” in the Church subject to sacramental ordination. In the

² See the documents published by the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Congregation for the Clergy: *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* and *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998).

middle ages, as the basic distinction between the clergy and the laity became more pronounced, these sacramental “orders” were hierarchically configured, along with a number of other “minor orders” into what came to be known as the *cursus honorum*. Not all ordained ministers ascended this hierarchical ladder; we know of deacons like Francis of Assisi who remained deacons throughout their life. Nevertheless, the dominant ministerial path, particularly for diocesan clergy, was one in which the minister was expected to ascend the ministerial ranks, culminating in ordination to the priesthood. In the Church of Rome this *cursus honorum* took the following form: porter, lector, exorcist, acolyte (the minor orders), followed by sub-deacon, deacon, presbyter and bishop (the major orders).³ Over time the diaconate gradually lost its status as a stable, integral ministry of the Church and was gradually reduced to a stepping stone on the way to presbyteral ordination. Even after Pope Paul VI suppressed the minor orders, established the installed ministries of lector and acolyte and restored the diaconate as a permanent and stable ministry, the diaconate has continued to function as a pastoral internship to be undertaken by a seminarian for between 6 and 18 months as a preparation for presbyteral ministry.

This situation has required, at least from a canonical perspective, two different diaconates, one permanent and one transitional, with two different sets of canonical rights and obligations.⁴ It is a situation that has served only to perpetuate a confused theology of the diaconate. Consequently, I am in sympathy with the proposal of Susan Wood that the Church

³ David Power, “Church Order,” in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 216. For further studies into the history and contemporary significance of the “minor orders” see Winfried Haunerland, “The Heirs of the Clergy? The New Pastoral Ministries and the Reform of the Minor Orders,” *Worship* 75 (July, 2001): 305-20.

⁴ John Huels, “Special Questions on the Diaconate,” *Liturgical Ministry* 13 (Winter, 2004): 1-9 at 7-8.

consider abandoning a transitional diaconate as a sacramental prerequisite to presbyteral ordination.⁵ The reasons for this are many.

First, the ancient tradition in no way presupposed that one must advance from one ordained ministry to the next. In the earliest centuries, bishops were chosen both from the ranks of the baptized and from the diaconate without having to be first ordained presbyter. The most recent scholarship now suggests that a fixed sequence of ordination—deacon, presbyter, bishop—was not firmly in place before the middle ages.⁶ Second, the existence of a “transitional diaconate” risks denigrating diaconal ministry by reducing it to a kind of pastoral internship or field education assignment. Third, although seminarians clearly benefit from a pastoral internship that includes preaching and limited sacramental/liturgical ministry, there is no reason that these ministries could not be delegated to seminarians by their bishop without diaconal ordination.⁷

B. The Deacon as Icon of Christ the Servant

A second theological “dead-end” attempts to develop a theology of the diaconate on the basis of the distinctive ministries and/or functions proper to the deacon. Building on common New Testament understandings of *diakonia*, many today try to ground the diaconate in the

⁵ Susan K. Wood, *Sacramental Orders* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 166-71. Huels believes that such a move could be justified as a means of removing canonical discrepancies. See Huels, 8.

⁶ See Wood’s discussion in *Sacramental Orders*, 167. For recent research on the topic see, John St. H. Gibaut, *The Cursus Honorum: A Study of the Origins and Evolution of Sequential Ordination* (New York: P. Lang, 2000); Louis Weil, “Aspects of the Issue of *Per Saltem* Ordination: An Anglican Perspective,” in *Rule of Prayer, Rule of Faith: Essays in Honor of Aidan Kavanagh, O.S.B.*, eds. Nathan Mitchell and John F. Baldovin (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 200-17; Balthasar Fischer, “Hat Ambrosius von Mailand in der Woche zwischen seiner Taufe und seiner Bischofskonsekration andere Weihe empfangen?” in *Kyriakon* [Festschrift for Johannes Quasten], vol. 2, eds. Patrick Granfield and Josef A. Jungmann (Münster/Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1970), 527-31; Ormonde Plater, “Direct Ordination: The Historical Evidence,” *Open* 37 (1992): 1-3.

⁷ However, it should be noted that *Redemptionis sacramentum*, recently published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, has prohibited even seminarians from preaching in the context of the Eucharist. *Origins* 33 (May 6, 2004): 801-22, see # 66.

ministry of humble service.⁸ This approach seems to have been foremost on the mind of the important leaders in the 1940's and 50's who advocated the restoration of the diaconate. It continues to be influential in contemporary theologies of the diaconate. So, for example, Susan Wood describes the deacon as a sacramental icon of "the Servant Jesus who washed the feet of the apostles."⁹ In this theological trajectory, diaconal ministry is often oriented toward ministry to the poor, the sick, the imprisoned and all those who are marginalized. At present, variations on this particular theological trajectory seem to predominate in deacon formation programs. Yet, on closer examination this approach falters in important ways.

First, it is a weak theology that tries to ground any ministry in a purely functional description of what a minister does. Ministry is not just about what one does, but the character of one's relationship within the body of Christ. A theology of ministry must be grounded in ecclesial relationship, a claim that will be substantiated below. Second, the view of the deacon as icon of Christ the Servant can obscure the ways in which both the presbyter and bishop are no less called to lives of humble service than is the deacon.¹⁰ Third, this approach founders historically because what we know of the ancient diaconate leads to the conclusion that diaconal ministry went far beyond ministries characterized as humble service to include preaching, catechesis and management of the temporal goods of the Church. Indeed recent studies in the

⁸ Hervé Legrand, "Le diaconat dans sa relation à la théologie de l'Église et des ministères," in *Diaconat, XXIe siècle. Actes du Colloque de Louvain-la-Neuve 13-15 septembre 1994*, edited by André Haquin and Philippe Weber (Brussels: Lumen Vitae, 1997), 13-41; Sherri L. Vallee, "The Restoration of the Permanent Diaconate: A Blending of Roles," *Worship* 77 (November, 2003): 530-42.

⁹ Wood, 173.

¹⁰ The International Theological Commission seems to concur in this assessment: "the ministries of the bishop and the priest, precisely in their function of presiding and or representing Christ the Head, Shepherd and Spouse of his Church, also render Christ the Servant visible, and require to be exercised as services. This is why it would seem problematic to aim to distinguish the diaconate through its exclusive representation of Christ as Servant, given that service should be considered a characteristic common to every ordained minister..." *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2003), 80.

ancient diaconate suggests that there were precious few ministries of the Church that deacons did *not* undertake as proper to their vocation.

Finally, a more serious difficulty is presented by the recent scholarship regarding the biblical meaning of *diakonia*. In three important works,¹¹ John N. Collins has persuasively demonstrated that in the New Testament, *diakonia* never referred to humble service, to what we might call acts of Christian charity. According to Collins, the tendency to think of *diakonia* as a kind of Christian “social work” crept into Christianity by way of early 20th century German biblical scholarship. His careful philological analyses suggest that the root meaning of *diakonia* lies, not in humble service, but rather in one’s having been sent or commissioned to fulfill the work or mandate of another. In this sense *diakonia* must be distinguished from ordinary Christian service to which all are called as followers of Christ.

Collins insists that in the New Testament, and particularly in the writings of St. Paul, *diakonia* describes a formal public ministry characterized by one’s having been “sent” or “commissioned” on behalf of another. Thus, Collins’ answer to the question that serves as the title of his second book, *Are All Christians Ministers?*, is, quite provocatively, “no.” All Christians are certainly called to “service,” that is, acts of Christian charity, but not all are called to formal ministry or *diakonia*, in the Church. Consequently, I think it is no longer acceptable to try to define the ministry of the deacon in terms of such service, as many have done in the past (including myself) by suggesting that the most appropriate ministry for the deacon is to be with the poor, the infirmed and the imprisoned. At the same time, I believe that some of Collins’ conclusions may be overdrawn, and I agree with Prof. Owen Cummings when he writes:

¹¹ John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); *Are All Christians Ministers?* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992); *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), 21.

If service in terms of the diaconate is construed too narrowly, then Collin's strictures are well taken. But service in terms of building up the Church which, in turn, is building up the world toward greater and more aware communion with God is what not only the diaconate but the Church itself is all about.¹²

Perhaps Ditewig provides a way to re-conceive the ministry of *diakonia* by configuring it not to menial service but rather to Christ's radical self-disposal or self-emptying, what the biblical tradition refers to as *kenosis*.¹³ Here I think Ditewig has in mind a broad and theologically rich conception of service understood, not in terms of functions or tasks, but rather in the unique way in which the deacon "empties himself" in a very concrete solidarity with the lives of ordinary believers, sharing with them many of their daily concerns for marriage, family and profession. As theologically rich as this approach is, it does not seem to get at any attribute of diaconal ministry that is truly distinctive of the ministry and life of the deacon over against the universal demands of Christian discipleship.

C. Identifying the Distinctiveness of the Deacon in the "Clerical State"

Yet a third approach to the theology of the diaconate emphasizes the introduction of the deacon into the "clerical state." It should be remembered that diaconal ordination did not always mark the entry into the clerical state. For much of the second millennium, one became a cleric at tonsure not at diaconal ordination. It was only with the directive of Pope Paul VI that minor

¹² Owen Cummings, "Theology of the Diaconate: State of the Question," *Proceedings 2004: Annual Convention and Business Meeting of the NADD* (2004): 21.

¹³ See William T. Ditewig, "Charting a Theology of Diaconate: An Exercise in Ecclesial Cartography," *Proceedings 2004: Annual Convention and Business Meeting of the NADD* (2004): 8-9. See also William T. Ditewig, "The Exercise of Governance by Deacons: A Theological and Canonical Study" (Ph.D. Diss., Catholic University of America, 2002), 156-63.

orders were suppressed and two installed ministries, lector and acolyte, were created, that diaconal ordination came to effect introduction into the clerical state.¹⁴

The irony of this tendency to stress the deacon's participation in the clerical state is that, in many ways, it has been the restoration of the diaconate that has called into question the continued usefulness of the lay-clergy distinction.¹⁵ The notion of the clerical state has for some time gone beyond a simple identification with holy orders to suggest a distinctive ontological identity reflected in a distinctive lifestyle. I am certainly not questioning the fact that diaconal ordination is a participation in the sacrament of holy orders, nor would I wish to deny that the deacon is, by ordination, newly configured within the life of the Church and receives the sacramental character proper to ordination. I will say that, even granting the unique sacramental character that the deacon receives at ordination, there is a difference between one's being a "cleric" by virtue of ordination and one's belonging to a "clerical way of life" which the language of "clerical state" suggests. For a long time this distinction was moot because the clerical state was practically identified with celibacy in the Western Church. However, the restoration of the diaconate has made it possible for one to be a cleric while being married, and this not by way of canonical indult or dispensation but as an ordinary feature of diaconal ministry. Once we can speak of ordinary clerics as being married, having children and pursuing a secular profession, it becomes difficult to see the continued helpfulness of speaking of a "clerical state" or a "clerical way of life" as distinct from a "lay state" or a "lay way of life."

Underlying this emphasis on the clerical state of the deacon are theological assumptions about the unity of the sacrament of holy orders and a Western theology of the ontological change

¹⁴ *Ministeria quaedam*, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 2 (New York: Pueblo, 1980).

¹⁵ See Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Shifting Meanings in the Lay-Clergy Distinction," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64 (1999): 115-39.

effected by ordination that only emerged in the second millennium. This shift in the understanding of ordination and ordained ministry in the second millennium was metaphysically underwritten by a substance ontology that attended primarily to those changes effected in a particular individual. This made it possible to identify ordained ministry in terms of the unique powers that were conferred through ordination. Many Western treatments of sacramental character have succumbed to the limitations of such a substance ontology, namely that it makes ontological claims regarding the individual abstracted from his or her relational existence within the life of the Church. As I will suggest below, the language of ontological change can only be retained if it is transposed in a relational key in which attention is drawn, not to the isolated individual, but to the person-in-relation. Within such a relational ontology, 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. In like manner, we can recognize a kind of ontological change effected in ordination that is oriented, not toward the conferral of powers on the *ordinand*, but toward the reconfiguration of the *ordinand* into a new ecclesial relation. The distinctive powers follow from the demands of this new ecclesial relation.

One possible consequence of grounding a theology of the diaconate in the deacon's identity as a cleric is that such an approach might suggest that the deacon participates, albeit in a subordinate degree, in the ministerial priesthood. This sacerdotal view of the diaconate, the deacon as "junior priest," has been used both to argue against the ordination of women to the diaconate and to justify the deacon's exercise of ministries that might seem more proper to the priest-presbyter. Because of growing shortages of priests in North America, many deacons are seeing their ministry filled with baptisms, weddings and funerals, ministries that were once the

province of the presbyter. The predominance of these exercises of diaconal ministry suggests a troubling shift in the ministerial shape of the diaconate today.¹⁶ It may be canonically permissible and, in our present circumstances, even pastorally appropriate for deacons to preside over baptisms, weddings and funerals, but sound ecclesiology and sacramental theology raises some questions. First, the preferred context for the celebration of baptism and the exchange of wedding vows is in the celebration of the Eucharist. This is because these sacraments, as sacraments of the Church, ought to be celebrated before the larger Christian community and under the presidency of their pastor. The performance of baptism outside of the Sunday Eucharist, or the exchange of wedding vows outside the context of a nuptial mass, ought to be seen as departures, however pastorally permissible, from the ecclesial and liturgical norm. Were pastoral practice of the Church to enact more consistently the ideal of baptisms performed at the Sunday Eucharist and the celebration of the nuptial mass as the proper context for the exchange of marriage vows, the participation of deacons in both ritual actions would diminish. In many instances, deacons are exercising these ministries solely because of a shortage of presbyters. Such pastoral accommodations do not provide a solid foundation for a theology of the diaconate. Far better to develop a theology of the diaconate in that which is truly distinctive of the deacon's ministerial relationship within the Church.

Finally, I believe this emphasis on the clerical status of the deacon has been used to justify deacons preaching in the context of the Eucharist while rejecting the possibility of lay preaching.¹⁷ The theological rationale for both allowing diaconal preaching and excluding lay preaching is the status of the deacon as a "sacred minister." *Redemptionis sacramentum*

¹⁶ See Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Are Deacons the Answer?" *Commonweal* 130 (August 15, 2003): 22-4.

¹⁷ For the purposes of my argument, I am referring to preaching in the context of the Eucharist. I am aware that liturgical law does in fact allow for lay preaching in many other contexts.

acknowledges this when it states that “the homily on account of its importance and its nature is reserved to the Priest or Deacon during Mass.”¹⁸ I will argue below that the theological rationale for this situation is problematic.

Having concluded to the inadequacy of each of these three approaches, let me turn now to develop a more constructive theology of the diaconate that fulfills the four criteria cited above. However, an adequate theology of the diaconate cannot begin with the diaconate itself but must begin with a theology of ministry. And a theology of ministry, in turn, must begin with baptism.

Part Two: Toward a Constructive Theology of the Diaconate

The documents of the council coined the term, “hierarchical communion.”¹⁹ The term was developed, presumably, to forestall an understanding of ecclesial communion within the political framework of liberal democracy. However, the danger of continuing to use the language of “hierarchy” is that by describing the Church as a *hierarchical* communion, you risk returning to the hierocratic, pyramidal view of the Church that developed in the thirteenth century. That view, quite foreign to the first thousand years of Christianity, presented the Church as a pyramidal structure in which the fullness of power (*plenitudo potestatis*) and truth was given to the pope and shared in diminishing degrees with the lower levels of church life.²⁰ Vestiges of this descending “trickle-down” view of hierarchy has remained, in spite of the council’s reforms. Yet it is difficult to reconcile this view of hierarchy with the council’s teaching about the fundamental equality of all the baptized, the universal call to holiness and the

¹⁸ *Redemptionis sacramentum*, # 161.

¹⁹ The term appears five times in council documents (LG # 21, 22; CD # 4, 5; PO # 7). It appears a sixth time in #2 of the *Nota Praevia Explicativa*. Walter Kasper offers a helpful discussion of the ambiguities surrounding this phrase in *Theology and Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 156-61.

²⁰ See Jean Leclercq, “Influence and Noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 31; Yves Congar *L’Église de Saint Augustin à l’époque moderne* (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 229-30.

nature of the Church as the new people of God. If the language of “hierarchy” is to be redeemed, it must be purged of these pyramidal conceptions.²¹ The Church can be said to be hierarchical, not in the sense of a chain-of-command or a pyramidal structure, but in the sense that the Church possesses a “sacred order” (*hier-archē*). The Church then can be called “hierarchical” in the sense that it is an *ordered* communion constituted by a great diversity of ministries and Christian activities that together build up the life of the Church.²² This ordered communion is grounded in the sacrament of baptism.

A. Baptism and the Fundamental Ordering of the Church

Gerard Austin has referred to the early Church’s theology of baptism as the first Christian ecclesiology.²³ The early Christians understood themselves to be forged, through faith and baptism, as a new people of God. For the author of 1 Peter, baptism was not a private action but rather an ecclesial act that inserted one into a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God’s own (1 Pet. 2:10)” where the priestly life of the community lay, not in any ritual action, but in the everyday holy living of the entire Christian community.

Paul certainly did not understand baptism to be a private religious event either; for Paul, baptism initiated the believer into the “one body” (1 Cor. 12:13), the Church. By baptism into the Christian community one participated in a new reality; one was a “new creation (2 Cor. 5:17;

²¹ For an attempt to retrieve the notion of “hierarchy” by distinguishing between “command hierarchy” and “participatory hierarchy” see Terence L. Nichols, *That All May Be One: Hierarchy and Participation in the Church* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997).

²² This view of the church as an ordered communion parallels in some ways Ghislain Lafont’s presentation of the post-conciliar church as a “structured communion.” See his *Imagining the Catholic Church: Structured Communion in the Spirit* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

²³ Gerard Austin, “Restoring Equilibrium after the Struggle with Heresy,” in *Source and Summit: Commemorating Josef A. Jungmann, S.J.*, edited by Joanne M. Pierce and Michael Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999): 35-47 at 37.

Gal. 6:15).” This new form of Christian living was given shape by the cross and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3-11), the “paschal mystery.”

From a biblical perspective, we might say that Christian initiation “orders,” or “configures” the believer to Christ *within* the community of faith, Christ’s body. Baptism does not just make one a different kind of individual, it draws the believer into a profound ecclesial relationship, one’s ecclesial *ordo* within the life of the Church. One’s personal identity is fully disclosed in the life of the Church. Moreover, when we consider the sacraments of initiation as a unity we recognize that initiation possesses its own anointing, “laying on of hands,” and entrance into Eucharistic communion. To be initiated into the Church is to take one’s place, one’s *ordo* within the community of the baptized. As the influential Greek Orthodox theologian and metropolitan, John Zizioulas, puts it, “there is no such thing as non-ordained persons in the church.”²⁴ To be baptized is to be “ordained” into our most basic ecclesial relationship as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The distinctive character of this baptismally ordered relationship unfolds in three dimensions. Vertically, if you will, we are baptized into communion with God, in Christ, by the power of the Spirit. Yet this relation is inseparable from our horizontal relationship with all our brothers and sisters in baptism who constitute together a communion of believers. These two dimensions of the baptismal ordering must, in turn, be conjoined to a third dimension, the movement outward in mission toward the world. This three-dimensional ecclesial relation established by Christian initiation offers us our primal identity as Christian believers and it can never be abandoned.

²⁴ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 215-6.

The theological status of the Church as an ordered communion is exhibited in a most profound way in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is the whole community of the baptized, Christ's body, that is the subject of the Eucharistic celebration, always under the necessary presidency of a priest or bishop and customarily assisted by the deacon. Yet in the Eucharist the entire assembly is drawn simultaneously into communion with God and with one another and it is the whole community that is sent forth from the Eucharist in mission into the world.

B. Ministry within an Ordered Communion

It is this view of the Church as an ordered communion of relationships grounded in baptism that provides the basis for our understanding of ministry. Ministry within the Church is ordered in any number of ways. Some among the baptized are commissioned to engage in formal but more occasional ministries, like those of the catechist or the liturgical ministries of the lector or cantor. Others among the baptized function as what the American bishops have begun to refer to as lay ecclesial ministers, engaging in ministries that require significant formation and commitment. One thinks of the many professional lay ministers who work in Christian formation or youth ministry. What makes all of these actions ministries, properly speaking, is the way in which each of these ecclesial activities brings the Christian into a new, public and formally accountable ecclesial relationship.

Finally, at least since the second century, the Church has called some from among the baptized to sacramental ordination as bishops, presbyters or deacons. We hold that sacramental ordination ecclesially re-positions the one being ordained into a new, permanent, and lifelong ecclesial relationship. James Puglisi's careful study of the ancient ordination rituals of the

Western Church confirms this analysis.²⁵ What Puglisi's study suggests is that the early Church's developing theology of ministry focused not on powers conferred, but on the new ecclesial relationship into which the *ordinand* was configured. But how do we characterize each of these new ecclesial relationships constituted by ordination?

In the early Church the privileged role of the bishop lay in his unique ministry of *episkopē*, the pastoral oversight of a Eucharistic community in which the bishop functioned as the chief judge and witness to the apostolic faith, the servant of the unity of that community and the agent for bringing that community into communion with other communities. By the third century the presbyter gradually was given a share in this ministry of apostolic oversight, though limited to oversight of a particular community under the leadership of the bishop. Whether in the case of the bishop or later the presbyter, Eucharistic presidency followed from their *de facto* pastoral leadership over a community.²⁶ Their ecclesial relationship to the local Church was decisive. The empowerment for sacramental ministry was offered in view of their ecclesial relationship as leader of the community.

The diaconate presented a somewhat different situation because the deacon's sacramental relationship within the life of the Church was not constituted by the ministry of apostolic oversight (*episkopē*), as with the bishop or local presbyter. However, and I take this to be decisive for understanding the diaconate, the deacon was ordained *to serve* the ministry of *episkopē*. In other words, the ministry of the deacon must be understood not in terms of powers conferred, nor by the functions or particular ministries he performs, nor as icon of Christ the

²⁵ James Puglisi, *The Process of Admission to Ordained Ministry: A Comparative Study* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), I: 205.

²⁶ Hervé-Marie Legrand, "The Presidency of the Eucharist According to the Ancient Tradition," *Worship* 53 (1979): 407.

Servant, nor by his introduction into the clerical state, but by his public service to the apostolic ministry of *episkopē* exercised by the bishop or presbyter.

C. The Diaconate: In Service of the Ministry of *Episkopē*

For both the presbyter and bishop, ordination introduces them into a new relationship within the Church characterized by pastoral oversight (*episkopē*) and ritualized, as it were, in their presidency at the celebration of the Eucharist.²⁷ This ministry of pastoral oversight is also called “apostolic” insofar as it is explicitly concerned with preserving the Church’s continuity in teaching and practice, with its apostolic origins. The deacon is also ordained into apostolic office, but his share in this office is not by way of *exercising* pastoral oversight (the ministerial province of the bishop and presbyter) properly speaking, but of *assisting or serving the needs of pastoral oversight* as determined by the one who exercises that oversight. Let me develop this more.

The research of John Collins suggests that *diakonia* had as its foundational biblical meaning, the sense of being publicly commissioned or sent forth on behalf of another. Thus, the deacon is the one who is “sent forth” by the bishop (and at times, indirectly by the local pastor) in service of the needs of the Church as seen by the one charged with oversight of the local Church. It is true that all ministries, lay and ordained, are subject to the ordering of the bishop or pastor, but the ministry of the deacon is not only *ordered by* the one responsible for apostolic oversight, his ministry is explicitly *placed at the service of* that ministry of oversight. To test the adequacy of this theological approach to the diaconate, let us see whether it fulfills the four criteria for a theology of the diaconate.

²⁷ I cannot address here the difficult question of how this theology relates to professed religious priests who may not exercise pastoral oversight of a particular community.

1. A Theology of the Diaconate Must Do Justice to the Tradition

As I noted earlier, the deacon of the early Church exercised a broad range of ministries. We have early documentary testimony of the liturgical ministry of the deacon, of the ministry of preaching, the ministry to the sick, the administration of the temporal goods of the local Church, and the ministry of catechesis. We have the historical witness of deacons who were accomplished theologians like Ephrem of Nisibis or later in the middle ages, of Alcuin of York.²⁸ In the midst of this great diversity in pastoral ministry, the most consistent feature of diaconal ministry seems to have been the deacon's distinctive relationship to the bishop. This is reflected in the ordination ritual for deacons found in Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* in which the deacon is ordained not into the priesthood but into "service of the bishop" (*in ministerio episcopi*).²⁹ The testimony of our tradition does appear to affirm that what distinguished the ancient diaconate was not what the deacon did or did not do, it was his commitment to be sent in service of the needs of the Church as discerned by the one charged with apostolic oversight (the bishop).

2. A Theology of the Diaconate Must Explain Why Deacons Should be Ordained

One can recognize many different ministries in the Church today, but not all of them are participations in an "apostolic office." It is the deacon's explicit service to the pastoral oversight of the bishop and presbyter that justifies his share in that apostolic office. Ordination does place the *ordinand* into a new ecclesial relationship. For deacons this new relationship is characterized by the unique bond between the deacon and bishop which is expressed in the

²⁸Cummings, "Theology of the Diaconate," 34-5.

²⁹Bernard Botte, ed., *La Tradition Apostolique* [*Sources Chretiennes*, 11], (Paris: Cerf, 1984), chapter 8. It is certainly noteworthy that while *Lumen gentium* 29 draws on this formula, *non ad sacerdotium, sed ad ministerium*, it does not make any explicit reference to the clause found in the *Apostolic Tradition*, regarding service to the bishop. This point was made by the ITC in their document as well, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, 85.

formal promise of obedience which a deacon makes to his bishop. It is further expressed in the ancient Christian conviction that once having been sacramentally ordained within the Church, one is never re-ordained. In other words, the early Christians soon recognized that such ministries placed one in a permanent, new relationship within the Church. Finally this close relationship to the one responsible for pastoral oversight is reflected in the way in which the deacon's liturgical ministry is visibly aligned with the one who presides over the Church's worship. Within the worshipping assembly the vested deacon stands at the side of the liturgical presider who exercises liturgical *episkopē*. He is blessed by the presider prior to his proclamation of the gospel, and he explicitly serves the ministry of the presider in the petition for God's mercy during the penitential rite, in the preparation and distribution of the Eucharistic gifts and in the call for the gathered assembly to share the peace of Christ.

3. A Theology of the Diaconate Must Distinguish Diaconal Ministry from that of the Presbyter and Bishop

In the midst of the diverse ministerial activity that has characterized the work of deacons, it must be said that deacons did not ever, as an ordinary dimension of their ministry, exercise pastoral oversight of a local Eucharistic community. That is not to say that deacons have never engaged in this ministry, merely that when they did so it was recognized as an exceptional accommodation to a shortage of presbyters. This then is the crucial distinction between the ministry of the deacon and that of the bishop and presbyter. According to church teaching the presbyter and bishop are ordained to minister *in persona Christi capitis* ("in the person of Christ as head"), but not the deacon.³⁰ This phrasing does not, as the scholastic tradition sometimes suggested, refer exclusively or even primarily to the priest's cultic role in "confecting" the

³⁰ For a history of the origin and usage of the *in persona Christi—in persona ecclesiae* schema see Bernard D. Marliangeas, *Clés pour une théologie du ministère: in persona Christi, in persona Ecclesiae* (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1978).

Eucharist, but rather to his acting in the person of Christ as head of the Church, that is as the minister charged with apostolic oversight of the local community.³¹

Deacons do not, as an ordinary dimension of their ministry, exercise this “headship” or apostolic oversight of a community. Note that I am intentionally using the term “oversight” (*episkopē*) rather than the broader term, “leadership.” It goes without saying that deacons are called, by virtue of their public ministry, to be leaders in the Church. So too, in fact, are lay ecclesial ministers and others who have taken public roles in the Church. Leadership can and does take many forms. I am arguing that it is only one very particular kind of pastoral leadership, *episkopē* or apostolic oversight, that in the Catholic tradition, has been reserved to the bishop and presbyter.

It is for this reason that I have some concern regarding the growing practice of making training to serve as pastoral administrators an integral feature of diaconal formation programs. This training risks giving the impression that serving as a pastoral administrator is an “ordinary” ministry of the deacon. Although canon 517.2 stipulates that the deacon is to have precedence over the non-ordained faithful in the delegation of pastoral responsibility over a parish without a priest-pastor, this does not change the fact that a responsibility for the exercise of *episkopē* is being delegated to the deacon that does not properly pertain to diaconal or, for that matter, lay ministry. The ministry of the deacon is no more oriented toward the actual exercise of apostolic oversight than is the ministry of the lay person. Both the deacon and the lay person, when serving as pastoral administrators, are engaged in what, from an ecclesiological point of view, must be considered extraordinary ministries proper to the presbyter. In the ancient Church, the sacramental ministry of the presbyter developed precisely because, when a bishop could not

³¹ For a discussion of whether and to what extent the deacon might act *in persona Christi capitis*, see the ITC document, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, 77-9; Ditewig, “The Exercise of Governance by Deacons,” 164-6.

personally exercise pastoral oversight of a Eucharistic community he sent a presbyter, not a deacon to serve as an extension of the liturgical ministry of *episcopus*.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is our present canonical discipline, and not sound theology, that prevents us from pursuing what is clearly the most appropriate ecclesiological response to a situation in which a community is to be deprived of a presbyter for an extended period of time. That response would be to ordain the *de facto* pastoral leader of that community, whether they be deacon or lay person, to the order of presbyter, that is, to that ordained ministry the principal responsibility of which is to provide such apostolic oversight in communion with the bishop.

4. A Theology of the Diaconate Must Distinguish the Diaconate from Lay Ecclesial Ministry without Diminishing Lay Ecclesial Ministry

Finally, I want to test this theology of the diaconate by considering it in relation to lay ecclesial ministry. I do so not just for reasons of theological consistency, but because, in some pastoral settings the relationship between the deacon and the lay ecclesial minister has been tainted by resentment and misunderstanding. I have argued in other contexts that lay ecclesial ministry must be recognized as a public, ordered (not ordained), ministry in the Church.³² Every Christian possesses charisms to be exercised in their daily life. These charisms may appear quite ordinary (making them no less vital) such as the charism of parenting³³ or imbuing the atmosphere of one's workplace with the values of the gospel. At other times these charisms may take on a more dramatic and even public character as in the evangelical witness of Dorothy Day. The exercise of these charisms, however dramatic, does not call for undertaking any new ecclesial relationship for the sake of the Church and its mission beyond that constituted by

³² See Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Ecclesial Foundations of Ministry within an Ordered Communion," in *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood*, ed. Susan K. Wood (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 26-51.

³³ See Wendy Wright, "The Charism of Parenting," in *Retrieving Charisms for the Twenty-First Century*, 85-101.

baptismal initiation. However, there are other charisms, the manifestation of which does suggest the suitability of entering into a new, public, ecclesial relationship within the Church. So a local community might recognize in a particular candidate the charism of teaching, and call them into a new ministerial relationship within the Church as a director of Christian formation. This new ministry, ought properly to be ritualized by a corresponding rite of installation.

It will often be the case that the particular ministries engaged by deacons and those of lay ecclesial ministers (such as the director of Christian formation) will overlap considerably.

Indeed a case can be made that they ought to overlap even more than they do now. I have in mind the preaching ministry which, by church law, a deacon but not a lay person may exercise in the context of a homily offered within the celebration of the Eucharist. Since the deacon does not himself exercise the ministry of liturgical *episkopē*, his preaching ministry is by necessity engaged under the presidency of the bishop or presbyter presiding at that Eucharist. It is the bishop and/or the presbyter who *presides over* the ministry of the Word. This is reflected in the deacon's reception of a blessing from the presider prior to the proclamation of the gospel and the offering of the homily. The deacon exercises the charism of preaching (and he should not be allowed to preach if he does not possess this charism)³⁴ under the presidency of the one who oversees the liturgical ministry of the Word. Consequently, it is difficult for me to understand why a lay person might not also exercise the charism for preaching in the context of the Eucharist since they too would only be doing so under the presidency of the bishop or presbyter.

In any event, the overlap in the actual ministries performed by deacons and lay ecclesial ministers need not threaten the theological integrity of the diaconate. Deacons will often work side by side with lay ecclesial ministers in catechesis, youth ministry, peace and justice

³⁴ The same should hold for the bishop and presbyter, of course, but that is an argument for another day.

advocacy, or the administration of the business concerns of a parish or other Catholic institution. Their performance of these ministries will generally be, in substance, no different from that of lay ecclesial ministers. Moving in the other direction, it should be pointed out that many of the ministries often presented as distinctive to the deacon (e.g., preaching, presiding at baptisms, weddings and funerals) can, in extraordinary circumstances, be engaged by lay persons. What distinguishes the diaconate from lay ministry is not the substance of their ministerial activity, but the way in which what the deacon does is much more explicitly a function of his service to the directives of the bishop and/or the pastor. The deacon is “sent” by the bishop into a particular pastoral field. This does not mean that the deacon is unable to engage in genuine pastoral initiative, but it does mean that his ministry is much more explicitly a function of his having been sent by the one with pastoral oversight. By virtue of his promise of obedience to the bishop and his lifelong commitment to diaconal ministry, a commitment the Church does not require of lay ministers, the deacon serves explicitly in response to the needs of the community as discerned by the bishop or his pastor. This sense of the deacon being bound closely to the discerned needs of the bishop is reflected in the growing practice in many dioceses of deacons being assigned by the bishop to diaconal ministry in a parish other than the one in which their formation was first begun or in some extra-parochial ministry.

Lay ministry too may emerge from the pastoral initiative of the bishop/pastor, but it more often emerges from the recognized charisms of the laity and the grassroots discernment of the ministerial needs of the local community. There is a freedom for pastoral initiative, always subject to the ultimate ordering of the bishop or pastor, that I believe is more characteristic of lay ministry than it is of diaconal ministry.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to make a case for a new theology of the diaconate that is faithful to our tradition yet is responding to the unique circumstances of the Church today. It is a ministry that possesses its own intelligibility without in any way threatening or calling into question the many other manifestations of the Spirit evident in the ministerial activity of the Church. The restoration of the diaconate reminds the Church that the essence of ministry does not lie in pursuing one's own pet projects and programs ("this is my ministry"). The diaconate teaches us that ministry does not lie in doing any particular thing at all, but rather in allowing oneself to be sent forth—by Christ, by the bishop, by the Church—to embody in one's whole way of life that kenotic pattern of dying and rising, what we call the paschal mystery, which is the inner grammar of all Christian living.