

## On Diaconal Ministry of Service

Stephen Sharman

Deacons are one of the three orders of sacred ministers of the Church, the other two being Bishops and Priests. Their ministry is one of service to God, to the Bishops and Priests and to the people of God. As servants they embody Christ's ministry of service. The strongest example of Christ as servant is His washing of His disciples' feet at the Last Supper (John 13.1-20). Christ in His incarnation enters this world as a servant and says of Himself, "even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20.28). St Paul expresses this point eloquently: "who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2. 6 & 7).<sup>1</sup> Deacons have clearly defined liturgical functions. With the blessing of the priest, they chant the Litanies and by so doing, they lead the people in their prayers. With the blessing of the priest, they read the Holy Gospel, they can administer the Holy Communion, and they assist in other liturgical matters.

Justin Martyr writes about the deacons' ministry of administering the Holy Communion in his *First Apology*:

And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry way a portion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All Scriptural quotations are from the RSV.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology, chap LXV, The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1996) Vol. 1 p.185.

He repeats the same thought a little later, “and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.”<sup>3</sup> The service for the Ordination of Deacons speaks of the life and work of a deacon. When the Bishop lays his hand upon the deacon to be, he prays: “The grace divine, which always healeth that which is infirm, and completeth that which is wanting, elevateth, through the laying on of hands, *N.*, the most devout Sub-Deacon, to be a Deacon: Wherefore, let us pray for him, that the grace of the all-holy Spirit may come upon him.”<sup>4</sup> We notice here the laying on of the Bishop’s hand and the prayer for the grace of the Holy Spirit, and we also remember that the Bishop is the successor of the apostles. The following prayer emphasises the diaconal ministry of service in these words: “those who are ordained by thine inscrutable power to be thy servitors,” and “thy servant”<sup>5</sup> The prayer identifies these qualities for the life and service of a deacon – “soberness of life, holding the mystery of faith in a pure conscience.”<sup>6</sup> Here we find St. Stephen presented to us as the model of diaconal ministry in the Church.<sup>7</sup> The next prayer in the service continues the theme of the ministry of a deacon as servant with these words, “Whosoever desireth to be first among you, let him be your servant,” and then describes the desired qualities of life – “all faith, and love, and power, and holiness, through the inspiration of thy holy and life-giving Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> Canon 18 of the Council of Nicea defines the status of deacons in relation to that of bishops and priests and stresses the role of deacons as servants:

It has come to the knowledge of the great and Holy Synod that, in some districts and cities, the deacons administer the Eucharist to the presbyters, whereas neither canon nor custom permits that they who have no right to offer should give the Body of Christ to them that do offer. And this also has been made known, that certain deacons now touch the Eucharist even before the bishops. Let all such practices be utterly done away, and let the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>4</sup> Isabel Florence Hapgood, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Church*, Englewood NJ 1983, p. 312.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 313 & 314

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 313.

deacons remain within their bounds, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishops and the inferiors of the presbyters. Let them receive the Eucharist according to their order, after the presbyters, and let either the bishop or the presbyter administer to them. Furthermore, let not the deacons sit among the presbyters, for that is contrary to canon and order. And if, after this decree, any one shall refuse to obey, let him be deposed from the diaconate.<sup>9</sup>

Traditionally, the order of deacons is considered to be of apostolic foundation. According to the Acts of the Apostles, their ministry is “to serve tables” while the Apostles’ ministry is to “devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6. 2-4). The passage continues: “And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the Apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them” (Acts 6.5-6). Their ordination as deacons was accomplished by the laying on of the Apostles’ hands with prayer setting the pattern for ordinations which the Church has followed since.

Bishops ordain deacons by the laying on of their hands with prayer. In addition to the ministry of serving tables, Stephen “did great wonders and signs among the people” and preached so eloquently and convincingly that “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke” (Acts 6.8 & 10). As we have seen, the service of ordination of deacons sets St. Stephen before us as the model pattern of diaconal ministry. The Venerable Bede composed a commentary on the Acts of the Apostles in which he described the seven deacons as columns: “For this reason, the apostles or the successors of the apostles throughout all of the churches now decided upon seven deacons who would be of higher rank than the others, and who would stand closer around the altar, like the columns of the altar.”<sup>10</sup> The word “columns” suggests Bede’s opinion of the importance and strength of their ministry of service.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, (Grand Rapids, MI Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1997), Vol xv, p.38

<sup>10</sup> The Venerable Bede, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Lawrence T. Martin, trans. Kalamazoo, MI1989, p.65

There are references to deacons in the Pauline Epistles. In Philippians 1.1 deacons are listed with bishops as ministers of the church and addressees of the Epistle. In 1 Timothy 3.8-10 and 13, St. Paul describes the qualities of life which he desires in deacons. He stresses their moral qualities. They are to be 'serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain'. As a result they can 'hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience'. St. Paul is also saying that they must know and believe the faith which they hold. They are to be tested for their office of service and ordained if they be found worthy. Deacons must be members of families, 'the husband of one wife' and fathers of children. As we have seen, St Paul's teaching is embodied in the service of ordination.

The order of deacons was held in great respect in the early Church. To illustrate this, I have selected two passages from the Epistles of Ignatius. The first comes from his Epistle to the Magnesians: "...my fellow-servant the deacon Zotion, of whom I would fain have joy, for that he is subject to the bishop, as unto the grace of God, and to the presbyter, as unto the law of Jesus Christ."<sup>11</sup> The second passage is from his Epistle to the Trallians: "and those likewise who are deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ must please men in all ways. For they are not deacons of meat and drink but servants of the Church of God. It is right therefore that they should beware of blame as of fire."<sup>12</sup> Both letters speak of the deacons' ministry of service. Their status as servant is an important part of their lives and ministries.

*About the author:* Dr. Stephen Sharman is an independent scholar who lives in Selkirk, Manitoba. He received his PhD from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2013. The title of his dissertation was *Visions of Light in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*.

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<sup>11</sup> St Ignatius, *To the Magnesians 2*, J.B. Lightfoot, (ed & trans), *The Apostolic Fathers*, (Grand Rapids, MI Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1981) Part Two, Vol Two, p. 551.

<sup>12</sup> St Ignatius, *To the Trallians 2*. J. B. Lightfoot, ed & trans, *The Apostolic Fathers*, (Grand Rapids, MI Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1981), Part Two, Vol Two, p. 555.