

Overview of Archdeacon William Ditewig's Article (2004):

The Deacon as a Voice of Lament and link to Thanksgiving and Justice. 1

Ditewig was ordained for the Archdiocese of Washington, DC, in 1990, and holds a PhD from the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America. He serve(s/d?) as the executive director of the Secretariat for the Diaconate at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington.

“Lamentation and thanksgiving are the symbolic acts by which the community appropriates the name that God has assumed and the promises that have been made.”

“Relating the suffering of humanity to the remembrance of Christ is a matter of critical importance for Eucharistic celebration.”

“Suffering patiently borne and senseless suffering are not at all on the same level of understanding and reality. It is the possibility of Christ’s presence to senseless suffering that is the issue for today’s Eucharistic celebrations.”

Ditewig presents “some thoughts on a theology of diaconate that might suggest a new context for the liturgical role of the deacon, one that reflects the vision of the thousands of women and men who first dared to dream of a revived diaconate.”

History of the Revived Diaconate: began in 19th c. Germany. Gained urgency and focus in the Dachau concentration camp, due to the lament of the victims of “senseless suffering.” The author’s perception: **lament leads to doxology; doxology leads to the pursuit of justice.** He sees a potential for **deacons to serve as ministers of connectedness: as a (prophetic) voice of the community’s lament, leading and assisting in the resulting thanksgiving and praise, and leading and challenging the community to live out the implications of their lament and worship in the daily circumstances of life.**

Ditewig’s reflection on the renewed diaconate is in three parts:

1. **Highlights from the modern history** of the proposal to renew the diaconate within the RC church.
2. **Observations on the Second Vatican Council.**
3. Proposal for a **new way to think about the diaconate**, a way that finds its Eucharistic expression in the connection between lament and thanksgiving.

I. Modern historical roots.

Josef Hornef: traced the written record suggesting a renewal of the diaconate to an 1840 letter from a Frankfurt physician, J. K. Passavant, to a friend who became Cardinal Bishop of Breslau. Passavant wrote that *deacons, unlike the priests of his day, would be closer to the*

people and able to serve in the name of the bishop, especially in areas of preaching and teaching. Although the letter failed to spark a renewal of interest in the diaconate, it does hint at the potential of a renewed diaconate as a sacramental sign of expanded ordained ministry.

A. German Caritas Movement.

1897: German bishops directed the church in their dioceses to carry a ministry of charitable outreach to those in need.

1934: director of Caritas, G. Von Mann, published an article examining “*the very nature of charity as a vital element of church life to which all are called.*”

Recommended that:

- seminarians be assigned to charitable works during vacations;
- some sort of liturgical “commissioning” take place for lay persons involved in ministries of charity, which would also include a particular effort in catechesis.

Link between worship and charity: the notion of charity as a constitutive element of the Church (creates) the need for some sort of liturgical and official designation of those who act in the Church’s name in charitable ministries.

Hans Schutz: compared traditional functions of deacons with those of lay workers involved in Social Action. While “the functions of the two groups were very similar, the advantage of an ordained permanent deacon lay in the deacon’s *mission* received from the bishop. ... With the coming of the Third Reich, only the restoration of a permanent diaconate as an official arm of the Church could ensure the survival of ongoing efforts of charitable work. These *deacons would form an ascetical community dedicated to charitable work, would be professionally competent in a threefold ministry of liturgy, charity, and catechesis*, and would be *linked to the Church through ordination by the bishop.*”

Four critical points:

1. **Charitable service** (*diakonia*), sacramentally linked to the ministries of word and sacrament, is a constitutive element in the life of the Church.
2. *Diakonia* should be a part of the **sacramental life** of the Church.
3. The deacon’s sacramental identity is derived through **ordination**, linking him in a unique way to the apostolic ministry of the bishop.
4. This ordination should **not** be understood as purely functional: it **flows from sacramental initiation, not ordination.**

“The deacon’s *ordination is not simply to permit him to exercise certain functions he could not do previously; rather, the significance of diaconal ordination is to integrate, permanently and publicly, diakonia, leitourgia, and martyria.* The deacon is to help the Church see how these constitutive elements of Church fit together.”

B. The Dachau Experience and Post-War Developments.

*The journey toward a renewed diaconate took on added urgency during and after WWII. Dachau, opened by Hitler in 1933. Many clergy and religious were incarcerated here, in Cell Block 26, known as *der Priesterblock*. They discussed how the Church might be renewed to prevent the horrific tragedies of the first half of the 20th century from recurring. **One suggestion was to restore the diaconate as a permanent state**; during incarceration, *these men had rediscovered the necessity for a sacramental sign of the Church's own nature as servant*. After the war, two former prisoners (*Frs. Pies and Schamoni*) wrote about their experiences in Dachau and in particular about a renewed diaconal order.*

Pies: “the Holy Spirit was calling new ministries into existence, including the diaconate.” “...the Church had to be a more effective witness of Christ to the world. What the Church needed was not more ecclesial ministers *per se*, but **a ministry that would re-present the Christ who came to serve...**”.

Schamoni: drew parallels between ancient *diakonia* and the post-WWII world, noting that the devastation of WWII caused “massive relocations of peoples, increased missionary activity, and the need for the traditional duties of deacons in administration, liturgy, and sacrament. ...teaching, and Catholic Action.” The diaconate was not merely to “supply more ministers to ‘fill in’ for priests; rather, *the diaconate would extend the church's ministry even further, including ministry to priests themselves.*”

1951: Hannes Kramer and six colleagues formed the first “*diakonatskreis*” (diaconate circle) in Freiburg, Germany. Provided charitable service; explored the possibility of a renewed, ordained diaconate. The idea of the ordained diaconate spread outside Germany through:

- the work of the growing number of diaconate circles, and
- the contributions of theologians, especially Karl Rahner.

C. Eve of Vatican Council II.

1956: discussion of a permanent diaconate appears in missionary and catechetical circles.

October 5, 1957: Pope Pius XII states: “...there is thought these days to introduce the order of the diaconate conceived as an ecclesiastical function independent from the priesthood. The idea ...is not yet ripe. If one day it becomes such, ...this diaconate would take its place with the priesthood in the distinctions which we have indicated.” Theological and pastoral activity concerning the diaconate rose dramatically after the Pope's remarks.

January 25, 1959: Pope John XXIII. Announced intent to convoke the Second Vatican Council. Diaconate circles had formed a loose association and become so well versed in the experience and research on the question of the renewed diaconate that they opened an office in Rome to serve as a resource for Council fathers interested in researching the diaconate.

Karl Rahner and *Herbert Vorgrimler* edited a text containing articles on:

- the history of the proposal;
- the general lines of theological inquiry that had already been pursued; and
- how the diaconate might be developed in a different countries and cultures.

October 11, 1962: Vatican II begins.

II. Vatican II and the Diaconate.

The most known conciliar text on the diaconate is **paragraph 29 of *Lumen gentium***.

Eastern Churches were strongly encouraged to renew “the order” which had “fallen into disuse”.

The Diaconate is referred to in the:

- Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church;
- Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation;
- Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

A. The Antepreparatory Stage. 90 proposals in favor of a renewed diaconate represented 492 bishops from the global theater. 11 proposals against represented only 21 bishops.

B. The Conciliar Debate: October 4-16, 1963. Climaxed on October 8 with *Cardinal Suenens*' intervention. His articulation of a theology of the diaconate helped the Fathers focus on the essential elements of the issue, and not just on the functional dimension. Initial comments at the gathering had been negative, including this: “it was not possible to find ‘men of good repute, filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom; ...there are no people like this, not even among Catholics’”.

First speaker in favor: *Cardinal Doepfner of Munich* stated that there were *many persons around the world, many of them married, who were already serving the Church in diaconal roles. “Why should these people be denied the grace of the sacrament? The law of celibacy is sacred, but it should not become an obstacle for the evolution of beneficial ways to serve that may be necessary in our times.”*

Cardinal Landazuri Ricketts: the restoration of the diaconate was “*not to lessen the role of the laity, but to increase it, and that the lay apostolate, while most important, is not an end in itself.*”

Cardinal Suenens:

- outlined the *theological principles* upon which the diaconate is based.
- Cited the *authority of Scripture, the apostolic Fathers, constant tradition, and the liturgical books of East and West.*
- spoke of the *charisms* evident throughout the Church, *distinct from the priesthood, which provide direct assistance to the bishop in the care of the poor and the nurturing of the community.*

To say that these tasks can be given to lay persons does not mean that the diaconate is not needed. These tasks should only be given to persons (whether ordained or not) who have the necessary graces. The Church has the right to the benefit of all the graces given to it by God, including the graces of the diaconate.

“Probably the single most significant insight to be gained from the Council’s decisions with regard to *diakonia* is that the Council emphasized the inherent diaconal character of the entire Church.”

December 7, 1965: *Pope Paul VI*, before the Council’s solemn closing. “We stress that the

teaching of the Council is channeled in one direction, the service of humankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need.” Later, he wrote: the diaconate is a “driving force for the Church’s *diakonia* and a sacrament of the Lord Christ himself, who ‘came not to be served but to serve.’”

1987 Pope John Paul II, in address to U.S. diaconate community: **“The service of the deacon is the Church’s service sacramentalized.** Yours is not just one ministry among others, but it is truly meant to be, as Pope Paul VI described it, a ‘driving force’ for the Church’s *diakonia*. **You are meant to be living signs of the servanthood of Christ’s Church.”**

III. The Radical Nature of the Diaconate.

What might be said about the nature of the diaconate?

How might that influence the way we experience the deacon’s role within the Eucharist?

Three points for reflection:

- the radical nature of the diaconate itself
- the potential of a radical diaconate to complement – but never supplant or substitute for – the ministries of laity and priests
- the deacon as a voice of lament and a link to Eucharistic thanksgiving

A. Ordained to a Radical *Diakonia*.

Deacons have always been distinguished from other forms of ministry:

- St. Paul: refers to “bishops and deacons”
- the Apostolic Tradition: deacons are ordained “not unto priesthood, but into the ministry of the bishop.”
- 5th century: deacons are ordained “not unto priesthood, but into ministry.”
- *Lumen gentium 29: cites the same source as above.*

The diaconate must be identified and judged for what it is: a unique strand in the tapestry of ministry, rather than in terms of “what it cannot do that priests can”, or “what it can do that the laity cannot”.

The *ministerium* to which deacons are called.

LG 29: Deacons are “strengthened by sacramental grace, are dedicated to the People of God, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate, in **a *diakonia* of liturgy, of the word, and of charity.**”

The three *munera* (gifts): others in the Church share in the three *munera*, but deacons are ordained to a **unique sacramental expression of them:** “The sacramental significance of the *ministerium* of the deacon lies in the *balanced exercise of all three areas* of ministry.”

- deacons are not *simply* liturgical assistants during the liturgy: the church does not ordain to that;
- deacons are not *simply* lectors or teachers: the church does not ordain to that;

- Deacons are not *simply* social workers or advocates for peace and justice: the church does not ordain to that;
- deacons are not *simply* one or another of these things: through ordination, deacons are to be *all* of them.

The Council taught that these *munera* of the deacon were “supremely necessary for the life of the contemporary Church.”

“The major impetus behind the renewal of the diaconate was born at Dachau: the Church and the world need constant reminders of the diaconal nature of the Church; ***deacons are signs of the presence of a broken-yet-risen Christ present in a broken but redeemed world.***”

David Power: “Deacons give voice to the world’s lament while at the same time they proclaim the saving Gospel of Christ to a world most in need of it.”

Ditewig: A uniquely diaconal vision that complements both the sacerdotal orders and the “order” of the baptized, and is true to its ancient and contemporary heritage, is: ***“the diaconate is a sacramental sign of the kenotic Christ.*** The order of deacons should present to the Church the image of the Christ who ‘emptied himself and took the form of a slave.’”

In washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus acts out beforehand his humiliation in death. Foot washing serves others, symbolizes the service he will give in laying down his life for others. “Jesus can claim that foot washing is necessary if the disciples are to share in his heritage; it renders the disciples clean.” Those who would lead the community of disciples are to be identified by their own self-sacrificing love in imitation of the *kenosis* of Christ.

“Entrance into the Johannine community of disciples meant taking the risk of accepting the *hypodeigma* (exemplary death) of Jesus, a commitment to love even it led to death.” *Diakonia*, as an apostolic ministry, is fully expressed sacramentally by an emptying of self for others. *Diakonia* is Eucharistic, “a breaking and sharing of one’s life for the building up of the body in memory of Christ. **The ordination of the deacon into a share of the apostolic ministry is a reminder to all of the concrete ways in which the Christ himself poured himself out for all. Such is the radical nature of the diaconate.**”

B. Deacons must not be co-opted into the ministries of others. (Ditewig)

“A poorly defined diaconate will soon devolve into a form of ministry that is neither diaconal nor permanent.” The Congregation for Clergy states: “In every case it is *important that deacons fully exercise their ministry, in preaching, in the liturgy and in charity to the extent that circumstances permit.* They should not be relegated to marginal duties, be made merely to act as substitutes, nor discharge duties normally entrusted to non-ordained members of the faithful.”

Prophetic nature: Deacons must “put themselves ‘out there’, take risks with being unpopular when they must be prophetic about the institutional and societal causes contributing to social injustice. Theirs is a truly *kenotic* ministry. Deacons are ordained precisely to serve at the margins, where people are most at risk.. ... Being themselves inspired by the Word of God and fed at the Eucharistic

table, deacons should be leading us all to the margins, and then leading back to the assembly so that the lament will be heard and responded to by all.”

C. Deacons should be the voice of the community’s lament: as “eyes, ears, heart and soul” of the bishop, they should know the effects of sin and the needs of people.

This is how the liturgical role of the deacon might be understood. When the deacon:

- exercises his role during the penitential rite, he should speak the lament of all over sin and its effects;
- offers the General Intercessions, he should name the very concrete and messy daily needs of the people;
- proclaims the Gospel, it is not because another minister could not do it, but because the deacon in his very person is to help the assembly see the unbreakable link between the Gospel and the responsibility of the entire Church to respond in service to that Gospel: the link between Eucharist and justice;
- preaches, his preaching should be particularly prophetic, calling the people to be true to the diaconal responsibility of initiation, to take the Gospel out of the assembly and into the world at large;
- prepares the wine, it is his responsibility to add water to the wine with the words, “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity;”
- exhorts the people to prayer, or directs various elements of the liturgy, he models service and demonstrates the link that should obtain between the love and worship of God and the promotion of justice, care, and peace for those most in need;
- dismisses the assembly, he sends the people forth, back into the world in need of Christ’s kenotic, transformative, and salvific love.

Conclusion: How Will We Know When We Have Enough Deacons?

The Rev. Irma Wyman, Archdeacon for the Diaconate for the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota, on 6-17-01 said in her sermon titled “Holy Rescuers”: we will know we have enough deacons when:

- all the needs of the marginalized and vulnerable are met;
- to gather the gifts of the church and take them to the world, and to gather needs of the world and bring them to the church, has become a habit;
- “...Deacons, going back and forth, have worn down the boundary lines that we use to keep church and world separated...”;
- deacons, leading the baptized in and out, have beaten a path between the altar and the gutter so that everyone will see the link between the Blood in our chalices and the blood in our streets;
- all people respond to the challenge to live, not in the love of power but in the power of love.

1. Based on David Power’s language of lament and thanksgiving.

By The Rev. Dcn. Pauline Morrison