

On the Ministry of the Diaconate, Part One

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

His Eminence presents a three-part series about revitalizing the diaconate in our Archdiocese.

To adequately analyze the diaconal ministry, it is first necessary to look back at its history in the Church. How was it actually carried out in the early Church? How did it evolve? Did it expand or contract? Church history shows that there has never been a rigidly fixed or demarcated ministry assigned to the diaconate, from the first century to the twenty-first century. The diaconate has experienced periods of prosperity and periods of decline and was even completely absent in some eras.

Linguistically, the word “deacon” means “servant.” The first reference to the diaconate in the New Testament, according to Christian tradition, is found in the Acts of the Apostles. Understanding why this ministry arose is important because it reveals its role of service in the Church.

In the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1-6), we learn that the Church carried out a service (διακονία) to the underprivileged, which required time to be managed properly. Similar to charitable services organized by the Church today, there can arise an accusation of personal favoritism, of helping one group at the expense of another, even if unintentional. So were the Hebrew Christians accused of favoring the Jewish widows as compared to the Gentiles. Faced with this problem, the Apostles decided that “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables” (Acts 6:2). Such a ministry could not be neglected, but the time and effort it required could not come at the expense of the Apostles’ preaching and teaching. The Apostles therefore decided to appoint seven men of good repute and set them apart by laying hands on them for this service. Their service was that of charity, or “tables,” which included collections and distributions to the poor, the widows, and possibly the agape meals that accompanied the Divine Liturgy at that time.

Saint John Chrysostom (+407), in his commentary on this text,¹ mentions that the seven whom we call deacons were not ordained with a sacramental ordination as deacons and priests are today because, at that time, the ranks of priestly service

¹ Homily XIV on Acts, ET NPNF 1:11, pp. 90-1.

and ordinations were not yet organized as they later came to be. However, he accepts calling them deacons because they were appointed as **servants for a specific service**. Thus, in his interpretation of the text, he seeks to affirm the importance of the diaconate, considering it a service that began in the early days of the Apostles. He does not diminish their importance; on the contrary, he praises their service and encourages it.

Early Church testimonies after the time of the Acts of the Apostles confirm the existence of the three known ranks in the Church: deacon, priest, and bishop. The service of the diaconate was always present at the heart of the Church. St. Justin the Martyr (+165), for example, says that deacons distribute the Holy Eucharist to the faithful and bring the Holy Communion to those who could not attend the Divine Liturgy due to illness or imprisonment.² St. Basil the Great (+379) also mentions deacons performing this service, providing Holy Communion to those unable to attend church for valid or pious reasons.

The service of the diaconate becomes clearer in the councils convened by the Church after the fourth century, when many canons were established to regulate it. The issues they address often may seem insignificant to us today due to changing circumstances, but they indicate that the diaconate was a fundamental service in the Church.

For example, the Council of Neocaesarea (315 AD) addressed the issue of whether there could be more than seven deacons in a single city (referring to the seven original deacons mentioned earlier). Such a matter would not have been raised at a church council if the service of the diaconate had not been present in the churches whose leaders convened at this council. The Council of Neocaesarea emphasized that the number of deacons should not exceed seven,³ while the Council of Trullo (692 AD), about 300 years later, allowed for an unlimited number of deacons in a single city.⁴

One might rightly ask why the Council of Trullo amended the canon of Neocaesarea. The answer is simple: The service of the diaconate evolved as the need for it increased. With the stabilization of the Church and Christianity becoming the

² First Apology, cc. 65, 67.

³ Canon 15.

⁴ Canon 16.

official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church's missionary and social service expanded, and with it, the service of the diaconate.

What is this role? What are the services or functions assigned to this ministry? Are they still important today? We must return to history to obtain answers and judge the necessity of this service for today's Church. As Orthodox Christians, we must be guided by Holy Tradition if we are to pursue this path.

Holy Tradition considers the diaconate an essential and complementary part of apostolic service. Since the early days of Christianity, the diaconate has been considered the third rank of the three priestly ranks.⁵ This means that it was not a temporary or transitional service, a mere stage or step towards entering the priesthood, as it has become in many churches today due to the shortage of priests.

From the canons of various councils that discussed this matter, as well as the writings of some theologians and historians, it is clear that the diaconate was a service designated for a specific mission, and at the same time necessary for the era in which it existed, as evidenced by its relative cessation in other times.

As Byzantine canon law developed, we notice an administrative dimension for male deacons forming, especially after Christianity stabilized and the Church became institutionalized. The deacon was considered, for example, the bishop's hearing, tongue, and hand,⁶ as someone whose ministry is in "fulfilling the bishop's need." With the establishment of the liturgical form of worship, the deacon's role in facilitating the service was primarily defined, especially in the presence of the bishop. Even today, at least in the Byzantine rite, as in other rites, the bishop and deacon almost entirely serve the Divine Liturgy, and the service order (*Typikon*) allocates only a few proclamations to the priest.

(To be continued.)

⁵ As witnessed in Canon 18 of Nicaea (325).

⁶ E.g., *Didascalia Apostolorum* xi.128.

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The canons of the Council of Ancyra (314) imply that the duties of a deacon at that time, according to commentators, were limited to bringing bread and wine, making petitions and preaching.¹ This means their liturgical role was clear from the end of the third century. Canon 23 of the Council of Trullo (692) states that no one — whether bishop, priest, or deacon — may exact a fee for administering Holy Communion, because grace cannot be sold. This implies that deacons could administer Holy Communion to the faithful. The *Apostolic Constitutions* (380) also state that after the bishop or priest celebrates the Divine Liturgy, the deacon takes the sacraments to commune the laypeople, assisting the priest. This practice is still observed today when a deacon is present with a priest, where the priest gives the deacon the chalice to invite the faithful to partake, saying: “With the fear of God, faith, and love, draw near,” and then the deacon returns the chalice to the priest to administer Communion.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* further instruct: “Let the deacon carry the chalice and as he presents it, let him say: ‘The Blood of Christ, the cup of life.’”²

St. Justin the Martyr, in his *First Apology*, states that the deacons among them distribute the Eucharistic bread, wine, and water to each of those present and take the sacraments to the absent. Another role is the delivery of the divine sacraments to the sick.³ Currently, the priest performs this duty due to the lack of deacons to assist him. Thus, the liturgical and humanitarian roles of deacons were evident from the early centuries.

With the entry of deacons into the administrative domain, new problems arose, such as their elevation over priests due to their proximity to the bishop. This necessitated addressing these issues in church councils.

¹ Canon 2.

² *Apostolic Constitutions*, viii. 13. 15-17

³ *First Apology*, cc. 65, 67.

The First Ecumenical Council stated: “Deacons should not exceed their limits, knowing that they are servants of the bishops and inferiors to the presbyters”⁴ – meaning their work was limited to serving the bishop in the diocese and in liturgical services. The Apostolic Canons also state that “priests and deacons should do nothing without the bishop’s consent, for he is entrusted with the Lord’s people and is accountable for their souls.”⁵

Emphasis on the authority of the bishop is found in subsequent councils, such as the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 (Canons 12, 14), the Council of Laodicea in 363 (Canon 57), and the Council of Carthage in 418 (Canons 6, 7, 41, 50).

St. Ignatius of Antioch (+108) considered deacons as servants of Christ’s mysteries, assisting the bishop in worship. According to St. Hippolytus (+236), deacons were ordained by the laying on of hands. The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD), issued reminders and warnings against deacons’ arrogance and superiority over priests, emphasizing that they are merely servants of the bishop.⁶

The Council of Trullo condemned and excommunicated deacons who claimed superiority over priests due to the honor and distinction they received from their humanitarian service and proximity to the bishop.⁷

It is important to clearly and strictly distinguish between what is called a rank and what is called a function. The diaconate is one of the three clerical ranks, and it is assigned a specific function, or ministry, according to the Church’s system, local situation, and current needs. This function does not change the deacon’s clerical rank, meaning it does not prevent him from performing his liturgical duties assigned to his rank, nor does the exalted function allow him to perform liturgical duties not assigned to his rank.

The early ordination rites for deacons do not specify a particular gift required for the diaconate, unlike the specific gifts required for a bishop, for example. There is a common belief in the Orthodox Church today that a deacon should have a beautiful voice because his service has become largely confined to liturgical chanting. In the non-Chalcedonian churches, the cantor is often ordained a deacon,

⁴ Canon 18.

⁵ Canon 39; cf. Antioch (341) Canon 24.

⁶ Canon 18.

⁷ Canon 7.

yet does not perform a strictly sacerdotal role. There is no specific gift assigned to the diaconate, as there are particular talents for service to which any believer is called.

Even the current ordination rite for deacons does not specify a particular gift. When the bishop ordains a deacon, he lays his hand on his head and asks for the grace of the Holy Spirit to appoint him as a servant in the administration of the Sacraments.

With the evolution and changes in the ecclesiastical situation, the deacon's ministry began to be confined more to the liturgical realm. The prayer recited over the candidate for the diaconate in the ordination rite only refers to assisting the priest in worship, without naming the specific gifts which the bishop confers on him for the diaconate. Another indication of this is the timing of the ordination. A deacon is ordained after the transformation and consecration of the Eucharistic Gifts, while a priest is ordained before this, as he will participate in the sanctification of the bread and wine. The bishop gives the priest the lamb to carry in his hands, preserving this deposit until the Lord comes again, as a sign that he will be accountable for his ministrations of the Eucharist. This is not the case with the deacon, however, as he is ordained after the sanctification of the offerings.

One reason for the absence of deacons in many churches today is the insufficient number of priests. The shortage of priests has led to the ordination of deacons as a transitional phase, which may last for a single day or several years, according to the bishop's discretion. This is only if the deacon meets the requirements for priestly ordination. In our Archdiocese, the deacon's service remains confined to the liturgical role.

Over time, this reality led to the absence or reduction of deacons' roles in charitable and pastoral services, replaced by laypeople who have founded charitable and educational associations. Some of these lay brotherhoods played an important and fundamental role in preserving Orthodox faith during times of occupation or decline, such as in Ukraine, Serbia, and the East.

Today, with the development and complexities of life, the Church, in its pastoral care for the faithful, needs to enter the realm of specialized care. It is no longer sufficient for the priest to care for his parish in the traditional manner, despite its importance. Each age group now requires care tailored to its age and the challenges it faces. This would include people with special needs, marital problems, the spread

of religious indifference, family problems, psychological issues, the poor, widows, the sick, those with autism, those living in loneliness and isolation, etc.

Without being overly idealistic and overburdening the Church beyond its capacity, we can at least revitalize the service of the diaconate, if there are suitable and willing believers for this service, and if the local church has the resources for them.

Given the availability of many talents in our Archdiocese, entering the realm of specialized care has become urgent and feasible.

(To be continued.)

On the Ministry of the Diaconate, Part Three

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Specialized Diaconate Ministry Project for Better Pastoral Ministry

"The deacon assists the hierarch and the priest in conducting prayers and services, and completing pastoral, educational and social work" (Article 95, Chapter VII of the Internal Regulations of the See of Antioch issued by the Holy Synod on April 7, 1983).

Introduction

Whereas urban areas are expanding, and parishioners' residences continue to scatter over wide areas, making the direct presence of the priest in the local community more challenging;

And whereas, the current era is marked by specialization in all fields – scientific, educational, pastoral, and social work, making it more difficult for a single individual to master them all;

And whereas, there is a pressing need for the activation of knowledgeable ecclesiastical pastoral service, with competency in specialized fields;

Whereas traditional pastoral care that once characterized small agricultural communities, predominantly Orthodox in the past, no longer meets the diverse needs of the current society;

Whereas the complexity of contemporary life, on one hand, and the economic situation in general, on the other, no longer allows the Church to establish full-time ministers for all the required pastoral services;

Whereas diverse talents might additionally contribute to various ecclesiastical pastoral services, it is becoming imperative for the Archdiocese to expand the field of volunteer diaconal ministry, especially since many of our young people show willingness and desire to serve their Church in specific areas commensurate with the talent and potential of each of them.

Therefore, we encourage our children to engage in specialized volunteer diaconal service, in accordance with the laws of the Holy Orthodox Christian Church of Antioch and the requirements of our Archdiocese in North America.

Admission Requirements:

- The applicant must be over twenty-five years old.
- The applicant must be a faithful attendee of church services.
- Must have completed (the online) St. Stephen's Certificate Program from the Antiochian House of Studies, or The Word (Al-Kalima) Program in Balamand, or be willing to pursue studies in either program.
- Must have a good reputation, being known for moral and ethical purity.
- Must be married to one woman, not divorced or remarried.
- Must obtain a letter of recommendation from the parish priest attesting to his active ministry, apostolic zeal, and talent in diaconal service (pastoral, educational, and social fields).
- Must obtain a letter recommendation from the Antiochian bishop in his area.
- Must commit to volunteering for six hours of specific service weekly, excluding liturgical services.
- Will commit in writing to not seek ordination to the priesthood in the future.

Duties of the Deacon:

- Assisting the parish priest in conducting weekly services in the parish, the Divine Liturgy on Sundays, feasts and all other church services as needed.
- Performing a specific service or "diakonia," according to his talent and ability, in full coordination with the parish priest, working under his obedience and complying with his instructions.
- The deacon can serve in any of the following areas: educational, pastoral, and all acts of charity as highlighted below:
 - Teaching the parishioners by word and example, and guiding them to the fountains of salvation, in full coordination with the parish priest.
 - Caring for the poor, the orphan, the widow, the disabled, the bereaved, the sick, the imprisoned, and the distressed, in full

coordination with the parish priest and the Archdiocese's charitable societies.

- Caring for children and youth, organizing their meetings, helping to educate them in the faith, securing their readings, and their spiritual and sports activities, in full coordination with the parish priest.
- The deacon shall seek the blessing from his parish priest to be absent from the parish, and from the bishop of the area to be absent from the country.
- The deacon remains in the parish where he was ordained and is not transferred elsewhere except under extraordinary conditions.