

Review of Diaconal Publications: 3

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The reviews sent in the summer of 2016 to my international diaconal network were all of Roman Catholic publications in the United States: Frederick Bauerschmidt, *The Deacon's Ministry of the Liturgy* (Liturgical Press, 2015); William Ditewig, *To Be and to Serve: The Ministerial Identity of the Deacon* (Abbey Press Publications, 2015) and *The Deacon's Ministry of Charity and Justice* (Liturgical Press, 2015); Silas Henderson, ed., *Serving with Joy: Lessons from Pope Francis for Catholic Deacons Today* (Abbey Press Publications, 2015); and Phyllis Zagano, ed., *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers* (Liturgical Press, 2016).

My readers may be wondering why I didn't review Anglican or Episcopal books. The answer is simply the lack of such books! The action on diaconal publications in recent years has been very much in the USA with our Roman Catholic confrères, thanks to the fine work of Liturgical Press, Paulist Press and Abbey Press. Anglican/Episcopal books date back a decade or more: in the UK to Christine Hall, ed., *The Deacon's Ministry* (Gracewing, 1992) and Rosalind Brown, *Being a Deacon Today* (Morehouse, 2005); in Canada to Maylanne Maybee, *All Who Minister* (ABC Publishing, 2001); and in the USA to James Barnett's revised edition of his 1981 work *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (Trinity Press International, 1995) and Ormonde Plater's second edition of his 1992 book *Deacons in the Liturgy* (Church Publishing, 2009).

It is therefore a pleasure now to review *Inferior Office?* by Francis Young in the UK and *Unexpected Consequences* by Susanne Watson Epting in the USA, both published in 2015 – the first substantial Anglican books on the diaconate since Rosalind Brown's work ten years earlier.

I am grateful to Canon Brown for drawing *Inferior Office?* to my attention. She has passed on to me a witty comment on the differing perspectives on the diaconate in the Church of England and the Episcopal Church in the USA:

... you can tell the difference between the Americans and the British just by looking at the book titles: the Americans say 'A full and equal order' while the British say the same thing but in the reverse way by asking the typically understated and ironical question 'An Inferior Office?' with the '?' being vital in understanding what is being said.

So let's look at these two perspectives – in this issue, the British book by Francis Young; in the next issue, the US book by Susanne Watson Epting. After that, we'll review some more American Roman Catholic publications, starting with Jay Cormier, *The Deacon's Ministry of the Word* (Liturgical Press, 2016), and James Keating (ed.), *The Character of the Deacon* (Paulist Press, 2017).

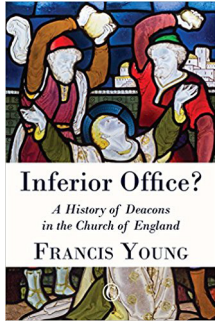
**Francis Young. *Inferior Office? A History of Deacons in the Church of England.*
Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 2015**

This intriguing book by historian Francis Young reveals much about the ambivalent attitude to the vocational, distinctive or permanent diaconate in the Church of England. The Mother Church of the Anglican Communion has been reluctant to join in the modern revival of the order of deacons evident in its North American offspring, or in the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II. As a Canadian Anglican, I once again realize the differences between the C of E and its two North American counterparts. Being the State church weighs heavily on everything in the Church of England, an example being the legal status of the deacon as a “clerk in holy orders.” The Catholic-Evangelical divide is much more pronounced than in Canada and seems to colour almost every issue – in this case, dioceses which have implemented the vocational diaconate tend to be the more “catholic” ones, such as Chichester and London, whereas the “evangelical” ones are reticent. The powerful institution of lay readers has clearly put a damper on the development of the distinctive diaconate, as has the assertion that all ordained ministers are deacons and that the transitional diaconate should be strengthened.

However, Dr. Young’s book is first and foremost, as its secondary title indicates, a scholarly *history* of deacons in the Church of England. His research turns up some fascinating and little-known stories. “The ‘third order’ of ministry,” he asserts, “was hidden rather than invisible” before the twentieth century.

During the Reformation period, the prevailing notion of the diaconate as a brief, probationary period for the priesthood continued to hold sway, even to the point of some individuals being ordained deacon one day and priest the next! Yet there were some attempts by the reformers, including Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, evident in the ordinals of 1550 and 1552, to give more substance to the diaconate through its role of service to the poor and preaching, and there was a requirement that future priests remain in the diaconate for a year. With the Elizabethan settlement and into the seventeenth century, under the influence of theologian Richard Hooker, the teaching and preaching roles of deacons were emphasized. Some clergy remained in deacon’s orders for a long time or indefinitely – individuals who could not meet the university educational standards for priests, others who were “deacon-schoolmasters” and “deacon-administrators,” still others who could not find full-time clerical employment. The best-known of the seventeenth century deacons was Nicholas Ferrar, ordained in 1626, who founded the Little Gidding religious community.

In the seventeenth century, especially after the restoration of 1660 ended the eleven-year Puritan interregnum, the diaconate was defended against Protestant criticism on theological grounds, as an integral part of the three-fold catholic ministry inherited by the Church of England. Although deacons were few in number in the eighteenth century, there were some “deacon-curates” in remote parishes in northern England, university lecturers, canon lawyers, and, again, deacon-schoolmasters. In the Victorian era, there was much discussion about using the diaconate to expand the ministry of the class-bound Church of England to a wider social spectrum, as well as reviving the deacon-schoolmaster tradition; but the rigid structure of the established church meant that little came of it in practical terms. Interestingly, the institutions of lay readers and deaconesses emerged at the same time.



The final chapters of *Inferior Office?* are the most pertinent for those concerned about the contemporary diaconate – and the most disconcerting. Francis Young tells the story of deacons in the Church of England in the twentieth century, examines their situation today, and sums up the arguments for and against the distinctive diaconate. He contrasts the C of E’s lacklustre response to the diaconate with the revival of the order in other provinces of the Anglican Communion, in the Roman Catholic Church, and to some extent in Lutheranism.

By the early part of the twenty-first century, there were fewer than a hundred distinctive deacons in the entire Church of England in sharp contrast with the Anglican Church of Canada (400 deacons in 2017) and the Episcopal Church in the USA (3,000 deacons in 2017). There had been attempts to promote the diaconate – several studies in the 1980s and 90s and an experiment with deacons in the Diocese of Portsmouth – but the effect was minimal.

Then two major reports advocating the vocational diaconate were presented to the General Synod: *For Such a Time as This* in 2001, which was sidelined by the synod; and *The Ministry and Mission of the Whole Church* in 2007. In 2003, impatient with the delay over *For Such a Time As This*, the Diocese of Salisbury issued its own report, *The Distinctive Diaconate*, authored by Rosalind Brown, and the Diocese of Chichester did a report the same year. Yet there has still not been a major increase in the number of deacons. Why this anomaly? Let me attempt to summarize Dr. Young’s complex and detailed analysis.

- The diaconate primarily provided a form of ordained ministry for women from 1987 (replacing the order of deaconesses) until they were admitted to the priesthood in 1994, “leaving behind a small ‘rump’ of male and female deacons.” Few men opted for the diaconate. This was unlike Canada, where the women were ordained deacons from 1969 and priests from 1977 (Dr. Young says incorrectly 1985).
- As noted above, the powerful institution of lay readers has been a major factor in discouraging the diaconate in England, on the grounds that (a) it goes counter to the empowerment of the laity, notably in worship, and (b) deacons are redundant because lay readers can fulfil the same functions. Vigorous opposition from lay readers stymied the reception of *At Such a Time as This* at the General Synod in 2001.
- Prevailing opinion in the Church of England firmly adheres to the doctrine of cumulative ordination. Presbyters and bishops are “another group of deacons” and you don’t need “distinctive deacons to represent the diaconate.” Even those favourable to the distinctive diaconate, like Rosalind Brown, advocate a longer and more meaningful transitional diaconate. Francis Young rejects the terms “permanent” and even “distinctive” deacon in favour of “lifelong” deacon because, he avers, “every ordained minister in the Church of England is a ‘permanent deacon’.” The notion of direct or *per saltum* ordination to the priesthood and abolition of the transitional diaconate, discussed in North America among Anglicans and even Roman Catholics, gains absolutely no traction in the Church of England.

Summarizing the pros and cons of the distinctive diaconate, Francis Young appears to give much more weight to the latter. “The case against distinctive deacons is really the case *for* transitional

deacons,” he says. “The very existence of a distinctive diaconate undermines the status of transitional deacons,” who are the vast majority of those in deacon’s orders. Priests already act as ‘liturgical deacons’ and some might conceivably revert to diaconal ministry. Put bluntly, “distinctive deacons represent a failed experiment in ministry.”

The case *for* deacons is a cautious one indeed. “The Church of England has adapted itself to a deaconless existence” and it is hard to justify this “ecclesiological luxury.” On the other hand, although the diaconate may be seen as a “vestigial remnant” which could be discarded, there is a clear historical case for it, if “revived in a form more appropriate for the present time.” Deacons must be realistic: they are ministers subordinate to priests rather than a “full and equal order” reporting to the bishop. Ordained deacons may well have an ecumenical vocation, in common with Roman Catholic and Methodist deacons. They should be non-stipendiary and in secular employment as “a bridge or link between the church and the world.”

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, observes Dr. Young, many churches are shifting their emphasis from ministering to the faithful on Sundays to serving the wider community and here “deacons are more keenly needed than they ever have been.” In his concluding words, he commends “the church’s ancient practice of ordaining fully authorized agents of the church in the world: deacons.” Francis Young finally comes down on the side of the distinctive diaconate – but only just.