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The Renewal of the Diaconate  
and  
the Ministry of the Laos



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## THE RENEWAL OF THE DIACONATE AND THE MINISTRY OF THE LAOS

by Richard F. Grein

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The title of this essay intentionally links the reemergence of the diaconate with the ministry of the baptized, because it would make little sense to resurrect the diaconate unless it were directly connected to baptism and the ministries associated with the baptismal covenant.

Every deacon is a living reminder of the servanthood of Jesus. Thus deacons signify *diakonia*, the ministry of service in which all the faithful share. Note: Servant ministry is part of the baptismal covenant—we are servants by virtue of baptism. Yet as a sign of Christian service, the deacon enables the church's mission by leading its people into the world for servant ministry. This works best when we understand the office of deacon as given to "order" the church's servant mission, "to interpret to the church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world." It is not inconsequential that this revival of deacons comes at a time when the image of the church as servant is strong and when the ministry of the baptized is emerging in a new way. The revival of the diaconate would not be viewed as further clericalizing of the church, but as a providential gift by which God's people can be lead into service in the world. For the priests of the church cannot effectively both nurture the flock of Christ and lead them into ministries of service in the world.

But all of this needs to be set into a larger framework. So I want to begin by developing a kind of ecclesiological picture as the appropriate vehicle for discussing the relationship of particular roles of the church's ministries. Let us for a moment go back in time to the first instance of the church, to that initial calling out which created *ecclesia* and begins the sacred history of God's people. "Abram, go from your country, your kindred, your father's house. Abram, let go of your land, your clan, and family to go to a place I will show you." For the church to begin, the one called must radically abandon all natural roots. To say yes to a new history he must say no to past history. He must undergo a baptism of death to become something new. Abram's "no" to land, clan and family is the baptismal renunciation which must precede his "yes" to God. And by this "yes" God intends to bring salvation into history. Abram is to be the mediator, the sacramental means by which God will Act. "Abram, I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing, and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God's call to Abram will bring him blessings, will cause him to prosper and grow, he will be sanctified but the ultimate purpose of the call and covenant is to make him an

instrument of grace on behalf of all the nations of the earth. The call has a utilitarian quality. As Archbishop Temple said, "The church is the only institution that exists primarily for those who do not belong to it." But also notice that Abraham (let's call him that now) leaves behind all those things that would separate him from others, like nation, race and family, to become a universal figure, a figure who can, in some way, unite himself to all other people. Here it symbolizes the breaking down of partitionism, as Paul will say, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." He is a universal pilgrim on a universal mission—to be a blessing for all the families of the earth. In this he signifies for us the basis of the church's catholicity.

Abraham's "yes" to God's call signals the beginning of salvation history, and the nature of that call characterizes the church's role in history through the ages. This character is catholicity of identity, catholicity of purpose, and utilitarianism which means the church exists as a sacramental means of divine grace for the world.

At this point I want to offer a characterization of this church we have been describing as blessing in terms of gift. By such a characterization I mean to point to the fact that the church is not an end in itself. Like all gifts, it serves the intentions of the giver. A gift is given as a sign of relationship, and as a source of the relationship; that is, God gives the church to signify his relationship to all people and to bring that relationship into being. On a more personal note, we could say that God has gifted each of us in a particular way that we might offer those gifts on God's behalf through our ministries.

Now, we go deeper into this mystery. Abraham is called to take the promise and offer it. He is commanded to take Isaac his son, his only son, the one he loves, and sacrifice him to God.

Here is an image of the church taking the fruits of having been faithful, having been blessed, and being asked to sacrifice them. "Take now the promise of fulfillment and give it to me." The people of God are not sanctified to be protected and saved for something or other, they are sanctified to be offered. The offering of Isaac can be seen as an image of the church being given for the life of the world and is, of course, an image of the cross. To be a church which claims it is an extension of the Incarnation, to be a church which claims to be sacramental, is at the same time to claim to be a church ready to be offered.

Now picking up on the themes of blessing, gift and offering, I want to take us forward in our story to the Last Supper as John presents it. After washing the feet of the disciples, Jesus speaks his heart to the gathering. He speaks to them about their relationship to him in glory, of the pattern of believers' lives and of their relation to the world. Then in Chapter 17, lifting his eyes to heaven, he offers what is called the High Priestly Prayer. It is a combination of great intercession and eucharistic prayer. Remembering that in John there is no institution of the Eucharist, we can see that what is consecrated here is not bread and wine, but the church.

In the first part of the prayer, Jesus presents his own life to God in offering: "I have glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work thou gavest me to do; and now Father glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before

the world was made.” Here Jesus claims to be living out in his earthly life the pattern of the relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity that existed in eternity. Michael Ramsey in his book, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, put it this way:

It is thus in the revelation of the Son and in the gift of the Spirit that the Father’s glory is fully disclosed. And it is disclosed in an inseparable union with the glory of the one God, Father, Son, Spirit. The obedience of Jesus to the Father in his life and death and the vindication of Jesus by the Father in The Resurrection are the disclosure within time of a glory of self-giving love which belongs to God from all eternity. ‘The doctrine of the Trinity is the projection into eternity of this essential relationship, the assertion that eternally the divine life is a life of mutual self-giving to one another of Father and Son through the Spirit who is the *vinculum* or bond of love between them’ ‘He lives in a human way the replica of a previous mystery, without which the history mystery would not exist.’

Returning now to the high priestly prayer, in the second section Jesus holds out to God the disciples as his second offering: “I have manifested thy name to those whom thou gavest me out of the world; then they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy work. . . sanctify them in thy truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they might also be consecrated in truth.”

Finally he lifts to God the future church: “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word. . .the glory which thou has given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one. . .I have made known to them thy name. . .that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Here then Jesus includes in the offering of himself to God the church before him, represented by the disciples, and the church of the future—both becoming part of the gifts offered to God. In this the church is called to be a sign to the world of the self-giving love within the Godhead, a love manifested in the life and death of Jesus. To be this sign of God’s love means that the church is called to live out the reconciliation given to us in Jesus at every level of our life together. Thus we are to be a sign of promise to the world of What God intends for all humanity. The Apostle Paul says it most clearly: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of this cross. And you, who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.” (Col. 1:19-22) This is not an option for mission: it is rather the final goal of all our efforts in mission. And it must be manifested in all that we do together as a community of faith.

In this brief ecclesiological picture I have tried to stress the language of liturgy—bless, gift, and offer. Abraham as an image of the church was to be blessed to be a blessing—a gift for all nations. Jesus in offering himself consecrates the church as an offering.

Now before I extend this ecclesial picture into our own experience of the church, I want to add one other piece from history. Let's go back to about the year 210, the place is Rome. The description of events comes mostly from Hippolytus.

At that time those who wanted to become Christians were carefully examined as to their manner of life before becoming "hearers of the Word"—examined regarding their reasons for "embracing the faith," about their trades and professions, whether or not they were engaged in magic, and about such things as their marriage status. If admitted to the catechumenate, they spent three years undergoing instruction. Every Sunday they were dismissed from the liturgical assembly before the prayers of the people to go say prayers by themselves.

After three years of instruction they were examined again to see if they were ready to become candidates for baptism. Their selection process possibly took place around the season we call Lent. From that time to the time of their baptism they underwent daily exorcisms with fasting and prayer as the day drew near. The night before the dawn of their baptism they spent in vigil, hearing readings and instructions about salvation history; the bishop might preach after each reading. Presbyters were also invited to speak.

Then just before the sun was to rise, they were taken out to the local pond or stream. Here the bishop spoke to them for the first time that night: "Take off your clothes." They were faced toward the darkness of the west and asked to renounce Satan and all evil. In some places they would spit to the west. Then professing their faith in Jesus they were turned toward the rising sun. Deacons took them into the water and, responding to the bishop's threefold credal questions, were baptized. After that they were anointed with oil as newborn babies are, clothed in white and brought back to the assembly where the vigil continued. There they were taken to the bishop where they were sealed on their foreheads, the oil still fresh on their heads.

Then for the first time they joined in the prayers of the people, for now they were part of the royal priesthood. Following the prayers the kiss of peace was exchanged. The Eucharist was then celebrated and after receiving the sacrament, they were given milk and honey, for now they were in the promised land.

Compared to this, ordination was simple affair, perhaps five or ten minutes at the Sunday liturgy. Listen to Hippolytus:

Let the bishop be ordained after he has been chosen by all the people. When he has been named and shall please all, let him, with the presbytery and such bishops as may be present, assemble with the people on a Sunday. While all give their consent, the bishops shall lay hands upon him, and the presbytery shall stand by in silence. All indeed shall keep silent, praying in their heart for the decent of the Spirit. Then one of the bishops who are present shall, at the request of all, lay his hand upon him who is ordained bishop.

In contrast to third century Rome most of us can remember the days when baptism were often private affairs—just the family and a few friends. The one baptized was usually an infant; the service lasted no more than fifteen minutes. At the same time, ordinations were, and are quite different. Someone, after careful screening and selection, is sent away for three years of intensive training and formation. After training, this person is again scrutinized and tested for this knowledge and worthiness, then ordained in a glorious liturgy lasting well over an hour. In this service the one ordained is dressed in special clothing and, in some places, anointed. It is not hard to understand the confusion many people have about which has primacy. In the recent past, from outward appearance at least, it would seem that ordination was of more importance than baptism. Small wonder, then, that many thought of the ordained as a superior caste of Christian and that the baptized were mere neophytes, novices in the faith.

However, the current reemphasis on the importance of baptism in the church is causing a total re-examination of the relationship between those in holy orders and the Laos. Ordination does not create a caste of superior Christians; rather, in terms of the language we have been using, it consecrates a personal gift to the church of the ordering of its life. It is a gift offered for the benefit, for the blessing of the people of God. One could say it is a gift of service given to the church that the church might be a gift for the world.

The call to ministry is given in baptism, that is, each Christian promises to share in the life of the community and in its liturgy, to proclaim the Good News as an evangelist, to engage in the works of servanthood, and to strive for social justice. Baptism empowers each Christian to carry out these ministries as his or her personal offering to the total mission of the church. This means that those who are ordained do not so much bring ministry to the church as they bring a gift that enables a ministry already possessed by the community. In sacramental ways those in holy orders image back to the community a ministry that is theirs, as, for example, the diaconate acts as a living icon of servanthood, calling forth from the people of God the servanthood they professed in baptism. But here I am getting a little bit ahead of myself. We need to back up to liturgical assembly.

The natural rhythm of our lives as Christians is in gathering and sending—we could say to be blessed, to be a blessing. In our gathering into community we are nurtured in faith, blessed. In our sending on mission we are to be a blessing.

When a community of Christians gathers, they do so around what we call the Sacred Tradition—a tradition expressed in word and sacrament. One prominent liturgist of the Episcopal Church expressed it this way: “All liturgy is ultimately an act of anamnesis—remembrance.” He means that in our liturgical assemblies we seek to recall, to represent the mighty acts of God in such a way as to give life, to bless God’s people. The Apostle Paul put it this way: “My priestly service is the preaching of the God, and it falls to me to offer the nations to him as an acceptable sacrifice, consecrated by the Holy Spirit....” Note: proclamation of God consecrates, blesses.

This, of course, is the pastoral role that belongs to priests and bishops. In careful reading of the Ordinal one cannot help but note the intended relationship between the

ordination rites and baptism. In the address to the ordinands for priesthood this is made very clear:

“...the Church is the family of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of Holy Spirit. All baptized people are called to make Christ known as Savior and Lord, and to share in the renewing of his world.”

The ordinand promises

“...to minister the Word of God and the sacraments of the New Covenant, that the reconciling love of Christ may be known and received;” and,

“...to be a faithful pastor to all whom you are called to serve, laboring together with them and with your fellow ministers to build up the family of God.”

Ordinands to the episcopate promise to:

“...proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of your people;”

and to

“encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries, nourish them from the riches of God’s grace, pray for them without ceasing, and celebrate with them the sacraments of our redemption.”

Those involved in pastoral ministry, the nurture of God’s people, are called to a particular life of prayer and study that they might so appropriate the Good News of God that the urgency for its delivery never ceases. In this they are to be a gift to the church so that the church might be God’s gift to the world. Thus pastoral care is related to mission, as gathering is to sending, and as blessedness is to blessing.

But now let us add deacons to this equation by using the Eucharist as the paradigm for interpretation of ministries.

I like to think of deacons as people on the boundary, that is, on the boundary where the church and the world interface. On this boundary they sometimes face the world to speak the message of the Gospel. Other times they face the church to speak on behalf of the world. In this their task is to keep the boundary open to exchanges between church and world.

They are often compared to angels, who move between the sacred and the profane bearing messages. In the Orthodox liturgy this comparative relationship is seen during the singing of the intercessions, as the deacon holds his stole in such a way as to represent the fluttering of angel wings bearing prayers to God.

But let us apply this notion of boundary to the liturgical work of the deacon in the Eucharist. In the liturgy the deacon's first function is the reading of the Gospel. The Book is taken from the altar and brought into the midst of the people—an act representing the movement from the sacred to the world. Here on the boundary the deacon faces the world bearing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Next the deacon bids the prayers of the people. Here the deacon, representing the concerns of the world, faces the church from the boundary. Because the deacon has been involved with the sick, the hungry, the homeless, and with all sorts and conditions of human life, he or she is the proper representative of these concerns. The writing of the intercessions ought to be a weekly project of the deacon and the outreach committee of the parish—it ought to be alive with what are current issues in the world and surrounding community; thus, the liturgical action and the works of mission are brought together in the diaconal symbol.

At the offertory the deacon collects the gifts of the people, gifts representative of their lives, to be presented for consecration. These are things taken from the world, and the deacon is the bearer of the gifts to and from the altar. In this the deacon, following Ignatian images, represents Jesus. He or she offers to God the church for consecration. At the conclusion of the liturgy this same deacon sends the assembly into the world as a gift in the same way Jesus sent the church into the world. Here the dynamic is much the same as that expressed in the High Priestly Prayer.

It might be appropriate here to say a word about the training of deacons. Often we find the candidates for deacons' orders are given a cut down version of the theological training given to priests. I think that is a mistake. Because deacons are not called to do ministry in place of lay people, but in their service, they need to know how to organize people to carry out needed ministries. Just as they organize the gifts of people to be offered at the altar, they also need to know how to organize people and their gifts for ministry to be taken into the world. They also need to be trained to recognize the needs of society—to be the eyes and ears of the church where the world is concerned. Training in social ethics and clinical pastoral education are appropriate. Of course some theological education is important—especially in the areas of liturgy and the gospels. (They do carry the Gospel Book!) Their preaching, although not a regular part of their ministry, ought to focus on servant ministry. In their formation they need to learn to live in the tension between their call to be prophetically confrontive to the church and obedient to its decisions. As servants to the institution, they are to be obedient truth tellers. All this is to say that their training needs to be determined by the shape of their service to the church.

In passing we ought to note clearly that what is consecrated in the Eucharist is the people of God. Bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Christ signify that which is occurring within the assembly as the church “re-members” itself as the Body of Christ. Also note that the eucharistic prayers are usually a rehearsal of salvation history beginning with creation, going on to redemption through Christ, the giving of the Spirit, and ending with the gathering in the *eschaton*—the great eighth day. In other words, a eucharistic prayer is a rehearsal of the meaning of Sunday itself—Creation, Resurrection, Pentecost, and the Eighth or Eternal Day. Thus the church is reconsecrated each Sunday by thankfully recalling God's mighty acts.

Here once again we find the liturgy setting forth the nature of ordained ministry. The pastors of the church, priests and bishops who speak the words of the eucharistic prayer, are acting out liturgically their calling of service to the community. Their vocation is to bear to the people of God the Tradition, through preaching, teaching, celebration of sacraments, and counseling. For it is by this tradition that life is given to the church, and it is consecrated to be a gift offered to the world.

In this little essay I have tried in a shorthand way to set forth the various roles of the church's ministries. I have used ecclesial images which emphasized the church as gift, using the language of offering, blessing, and consecration. I did this for several reasons: First, because such images are consistent with a church seeking to understand itself in terms of the doctrine of God and as eucharistic community. Second, because I believe we are in transition in which God's people are being lead to see them selves more and more clearly as something which God is giving to the world as an extension of Christs' incarnation. And third, because I believe deacons are a gift which will help us in this process of rediscovery and renewal. +++

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