

NORTH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE DIACONATE

Centre for the Diaconate *Monograph Series*

A View from the  
Omnivorous Presbyterate

by

Jeffrey D. Lee



Monograph Series No. 6  
PDF Edition

©1991

North American Association for the Diaconate  
271 North Main Street  
Providence, RI 02903

## A View from the Omnivorous Presbyterate

by Jeffrey D. Lee

*The Rt Rev. Jeffrey D. Lee is Bishop of The Diocese of Chicago. Bp. Lee was previously Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Northern Indiana where he actively participated in the team effort to improve and strengthen the process toward ordination for deacons. This monograph was delivered as part of a keynote team presentation to the June 1991 conference of NAAD in Spokane, Washington.*

I'd like to begin by sharing with you an incident that happened to me a couple of month ago, an incident that I'm sure will be familiar to other presbyters.

I was visiting a congregation in the diocese on a Sunday morning. I was there to meet with the search committee after the morning's principal Eucharist, so I took advantage of the opportunity to participate in the liturgy from a pew. It was a lively celebration, well planned for the most part, with a lot of participation from everyone. The preaching was thoughtful and well prepared, the sermon was, in fact, about the need for all the members of the congregation to discover and use their own gifts for ministry, a sermon about the importance of the ministry of all the baptized. When it came time for communion, I went with the other folks in my pew and presented myself to receive the sacrament. As this priest came down the line—*The Body of Christ...the Body of Christ...*—when he came to me, he paused. And for the next moment or so, he rummaged around in the ciborium until he found a piece of the *priest's host* to give me.

The interim priest was, and is, a good and faithful pastor. He was providing effective leadership in this parish as they searched for a new rector. As noted above, his preaching was thoughtful and informed by solid baptismal theology. And yet, when it came time to administer Holy Communion to one of the baptized who happens also to be ordained, he unintentionally turned the Eucharist into a betrayal of itself. The Eucharist is a sign of our common baptismal identity and solidarity. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism—one bread and cup. There is not one food for the merely baptized and another, special food for the somewhat more than baptized.

This little vignette illustrates, for me in a small way, the profound obstacles to the recovery of a vigorous diaconate, and the even greater task of recovering a full realization of the awesome dignity of baptismal vocation and ministry, of which the diaconate is a principal sign.

In short, the problem as I see it, is this pervasive and deeply rooted phenomenon known as clericalism; or, as it is known by its quintessentially late twentieth century name, consumerism. It is the idea that Christian faith is somehow the specific reserve of certain professionals who dispense religious goods and services to the more or less passive consumers of same—otherwise known as the laity. A model of church I like to call the **Holy 7-Eleven**. You know, the religious shop keeps the shelves, and if they are not stocking them with the particular religious goodies I want, I'll take my money and go elsewhere.

In the process of preparing this paper it was tempting to say that the principal obstacle standing in the way of the recovery of the diaconate was presbyteral piety. *Omnivorous Priesthood* piety, to borrow Boone Porter's wonderful phrase. Father knows best and all that. The kind of piety that refuses to entertain the arguments in favor of abolishing the transitional diaconate, because, after all, *I was ordained a deacon and, well, Once a deacon always a deacon*. The kind of piety that persists in viewing Christian ministry in hierarchical terms only, and so one that cannot help but regard deacons as junior clergy shop assistants.

Yes, I was tempted to say that the main problem with the recovery of the diaconate was the priests and their persistent tendency to regard ministry as their possession.

But—

My friends in Northern Indiana with whom I have worked and shared have persuaded me that this whole mess is by no means limited to those of us who have been ordained to the presbyterate. The problem is not with the priests. The problem is with all of us. The problem is a systemic one. I know too many deacons who have fallen victim to the malaise, dressing and acting like the junior clergy they are not. Deacons who consider and act as though their ordinations were some kind of promotion out of the laity. I know too many committed lay persons who have been clericalized out of most of the effective ministry they had in the first place, taken out of their workplaces more and more, and turned into thoroughgoing

churchaholics. No, the problem goes deeper than filling pastoral vacancies with hip priests who know all the right *total ministry* lingo.

I think I am one of them, and I must tell you how deeply challenged my own view of things is by the work I have been called to do developing a new church in suburban Indianapolis. To do it effectively means letting go of most of the control of the organization. And, it is not just my problem. In subtle and not so subtle ways, most of the people I am working with still look to me to provide instant church. Despite the fact of our consumer orientation and as an antidote, the new church which I serve is organized into small lay-led groups; I do not and cannot know what is going on in those groups all the time. Ministry is growing and flourishing without my doing it. It makes me feel useless and futile at times because I've been formed by a thoroughly clericalized model. But, it holds the promise of setting me and the rest of the church free in ways we can not imagine.

The congregations I have observed in which the diaconate seems to be working, and working well, are congregations that have begun to understand themselves as ministering communities, congregations that do not have to wait for marching orders from the priest before something happens. More often than not, that self-understanding has begun in response to a presbyter who models a new kind of authority, a de-clericalized one. A presbyter who understands himself or herself to be first and foremost one of the baptized who also happens to be ordained, not the other way around. In the case of the Diocese of Northern Indiana, the growth of a vigorous diaconate has been in response to the leadership of a de-clericalized bishop. Healthy leaders make for healthy organizations. We have worked hard to help congregations into recovery from the disease of clericalism. Presbyters who are willing to take responsibility for their own spiritual, emotional and physical health are the ones who seem able to model legitimate authority that is well self-defined, unthreatened and generous. The church is freed and ministry flourishes.

In his remarkable book, *Strong, Loving and Wise*, Robert Hovda writes:

The trouble with the kind of genuine church renewal that we have gotten ourselves into is that problems and questions *begin* (deceptively) at a fairly superficial and manageable level (Should deacons wear clerical collars? or, What to call women priests?!) At first it looks easy. And then, almost imperceptibly, each of the problems and questions invites us deeper and deeper into the heart of ecclesial faith, where all the roots are intertwined... (We must be) concerned, first of all, with a spirit, a

consciousness, an awareness. With that spirit, techniques are indispensable and highly useful. Without that spirit, techniques are dangerous.<sup>1</sup>

Without being challenged by the deepest implications of the paschal mystery, the reality of our own participation by baptism and Eucharist in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, without coming face to face with the One who relativizes all our structures and ideas, the recovery of the diaconate at any level threatens to be simply another dangerous technique. One more mutation of the gene, clericalism.

But—

The opportunity is before us, and I believe it is a specific call to the deacons in the church, to lead us deeper than we have dared into the paschal mystery of Christ. The deacons carry the candle and sing the song. A strong, loving, and wise diaconate that can reveal to us the real nature of Christian ministry: not power, but service; not prestige, but humility; not control, but love. The genuine authority that has little if anything to do with canons and a very great deal to do with the cross.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Hovda, *Strong, Loving & Wise: Presiding in Liturgy*: Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1983.

**North American Association for the Diaconate**  
**Monograph Series**

Edwin F. Hallenbeck, Editor

- No. 1. Grein, Richard F. *Baptism and the Ministry of Deacons*, 1987.
- No. 2. Lassen-Willems, James *Are Deacons the Enemy?* 1989.
- No. 3. Grein, Richard F. *The Renewal of the Diaconate and the Ministry of the Laos*, 1991.
- No. 4. The 1986 Sindicators Meeting, *Laos and the Diaconate*, 1991.
- No. 5. Plater, Ormonde, *Calendar of Deacon Saints*, 1991.
- No. 6. Lee, Jeffrey D. *A View from the Omnivorous Presbyterate*, 1991.
- No. 7. Plater, Ormonde, *Historic Documents on the Diaconate*, 1991.
- No. 8. Plater, Ormonde, *Music and Deacons*, 1995.
- No. 9. W. Keith McCoy, *The Deacon as Para-Cleric*, 1998.
- No. 10. Louise Williams, *Growing in Ministry: Formation for Diaconal Service*, 1999.
- No. 11. Susanne K. Watson, *Formation of Ministering Christians*, 1999.
- No. 12. Thomas Ferguson, *Lifting Up the Servants of God: The Deacon, Servant Ministry, and the Future of the Church*, 2001.
- No. 13. Richard L. Jeske, *The Role of the Diaconate and the Unity of the Church*, 2002.
- No. 14. Osvaldo D. Vena, *Gospel Images of Jesus as Deacon: Upsetting the Hierarchies of His Culture*, 2003.
- No. 15. Charles Hefling, *What Do We Bless and Why?*, 2003.
- No. 16. Benjamin L. Hartley, *An Empirical Look at the Diaconate in the United States*, 2003.
- No. 17. John W. Willets, *Deacon as Learner and Mentor for Today's Church*, 2005.
- No. 18. Susan Wilds McArver, *What Was Happening in Nineteenth Century Germany That Ignited Diaconia?* 2007.