

NOTE

CONCLUSIONS REGARDING THE FEMALE DIACONATE

The problem whether or not at this time to introduce the female diaconate into the Church involves a series of separate questions: (1) Dogmatically speaking, is it possible to confer this order on women? The response to this question will take Scripture and tradition as its point of departure. (2) Can the factors which led to the blossoming and demise of the female diaconate be brought into relief? From this there might ensue points which are important for a fruitful revival of this female office in the Church. (3) Assuming its feasibility in light of dogma, should the reasons for such a reanimation be examined? (4) Should—with an eye to the second question—something be said about what should determine the functions of this diaconate and what relationship the holder of this office would have today to other ministers? These two points are vital to the healthy development of such an office.

I

The Gospels and other books of the New Testament bear witness to the immense and irreplaceable role women played in the growth of the early Church. In the context of a still relatively fluid structure, one where the distribution of offices and services was not yet fixed, they functioned: as prophetesses,¹ their charisma being as much one of service and just as prominent and vigorous as the apostleship and the office of teachers and evangelists; as proselytes who in the various cities ranked with the “notables” of the young community² and thus took part in its direction; and as those who undertook missionary and charitable activities.³ It may well be said that without this committed female collaboration and its full recognition by the Church, the spread of Christianity would have been unthinkable.

It is in the context of such activity on the part of women in the early Church that Rom 16:1 mentions Phoebe, whose missionary and charitable work is indicated by the title “deaconess of the church at Cenchreae.” Because there was still no specific use of the words *diakonein* and *diakonos* in reference to ministry and the office of service in the Church,

¹ Cf. 1 Cor 11:2 (regarding the apparently contradictory text 1 Cor 14:33b-36, cf. H. Conzelmann, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (Göttingen, 1969) pp. 289 f.); Acts 21:9; Ap 2:20. It was not until the pastoral epistles were written that women were expressly forbidden to teach; cf. 1 Tim 2:11-14. (The gloss 1 Cor 14:33b-36 also belongs in this context.) With the struggle against Montanism and Gnosticism the arrangement became permanent.

² Cf. Acts 14:16; 1 Cor 16:19.

³ Cf. Rom 16:1 f.; 16:3-5; 16:11.

it would be false to call this a testimony to the existence of the female diaconate as a specific office. The formation of official structures was a whole process still in embryo.

The situation reflected in the pastoral epistles is of considerable interest. Modern exegetes unanimously hold that these writings are post-Pauline in character and have the double purpose of showing that apostolicity was inherent in the structure of the early catholic Church and of making the retention of this structure a matter of obligation. On the one hand, the letters speak of an ingrained institution, the order of widows, with its conditions of admission and formulary of duties, etc. On the other, they give a directive for women at 1 Tim 3:11, right in the middle of a description of the office of diaconate. Is it a question here of the deacons' wives or of deaconesses? The reasons for supposing the former are judged by present-day exegetes to be of questionable validity. More attractive, they say, is the latter view.⁴ The suspicion that the directive is a later interpolation cannot be adequately supported. Ultimately stemming from a certain embarrassment in the face of the text, it is nowadays disregarded by almost all exegetes.

Merely on the basis of the evidence from the New Testament, it is impossible unambiguously to say whether or not dogma leaves room for the office of deaconess. A text from Origen, however, seems to me to be important for an elucidation of all sides of the question. In his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans he writes of 16:1 f.:

This passage shows with apostolic authority that women too were designated for the Church's ministry. Paul is commending and greatly praising Phoebe, who had been installed in this office in the Church at Cencreae.... So this passage shows two things: first, as we have said, that there were female ministers, and secondly, that it was expected that those who had been of so much help and by their good services had gone so far as to merit apostolic praise would be taken into the ministry.⁵

Here "ministry" and "female ministers" translate respectively the Latin text's *ministerium* and *feminas ministras*. Essential to understanding this text is the observation that in Origen's time there were no deaconesses in his ecclesiastical province. Also, Origen seems to understand Rom 16:1 in terms of the by then quite institutionalized diaconate familiar to him. The least that follows, then, is that he was not opposed on principle to admitting women to the diaconate; and quite likely he knew from tradition that women had been deaconesses.

⁴Cf. A. Vögtle, *Die Tugend- und Lasterkataloge im NT* (Münster, 1936) p. 53; and N. Brox, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (Regensburg, 1969) p. 154; further references in the latter.

⁵PG 14, 1278.

In referring to "one of" the two epistles to Timothy—which one is not clear—Clement of Alexandria had already written:

The women whom . . . the apostles . . . took around with them were not wives but, as befitted the apostles' dedication to an undistracted preaching ministry, sisters, fellow ministers to the women who kept house. So the Lord's teaching made its way into the women's quarters too, and in a manner above reproach; for we know what the honorable Paul in one of his letters to Timothy prescribed regarding female deacons.⁶

One may well conclude from both texts that for these two eminent and discerning theologians, pertinent passages from the New Testament, viewed in conjunction with its over-all theology of the Church and church offices, clearly granted the possibility of admitting women to the office of deaconess.

The witness of Pliny the Younger, from a letter (111–113) dispatched to Trajan from northwest Asia Minor, is a neat chip in this entire mosaic of evidence. The writer had "...judged it...necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled *deaconesses*...."⁷

As for tradition, the earliest text that gives formal and unequivocal evidence of the existence of the office of deaconess is the *Didascalia*, the Syrian document dating from the first decades of the third century.⁸ Pertinent passages show what place the office of deaconess had amid the other ministerial offices and outline its duties in detail. So this ecclesiastical code presupposed an established communal practice, the appointing of deaconesses, which, though perhaps not yet established among all those addressed by the document, the bishops were being exhorted to continue.

Exactly as the deacons, the deaconesses were chosen and ordained by the bishop. Their ministry was of both a liturgical and a nonliturgical nature. In the first area, they were mainly expected to assist at baptisms of women and perform the accompanying anointings. In the other, calling on women, sick ones in particular, for whom they performed nursing duties, and giving religious instructions and guidance to newly baptized women made up their responsibilities.

The rapid expansion of the female diaconate in the Eastern churches brought a number of other responsibilities to the office and gave it further definition. In the area of liturgy, deaconesses in certain churches were granted the right to distribute Communion from the rail to women and children. As to the rest, they occasionally administered the

⁶ *Stromata* 3, 6, 53 (PG 8, 1158).

⁷ Pliny, *Letters* 2 (tr. William Melmoth; Cambridge, Mass., 1957) 405.

⁸ Fr. Funk, ed., *Didascalia et constitutiones apostolorum* (Paderborn, 1905).

Anointing of the Sick to women, were responsible for the order and cleanliness of the sanctuary, and functioned, in church and outside of it, as portresses, the community's guardians as it were of women and children. They were supposed to take an interest in all women and children, healthy or ill.⁹

The exact meaning of the Council of Nicaea's nonadmission (canon 19) of the ordination of deaconesses through the laying on of hands is disputed. Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon, however, does speak of such an ordination through the laying on of hands. The ordination formulas, the ceremonies (the laying on of hands), the handing over of the stole, etc., all of which had been retained, show that here it is a matter of ordination regarded as on a par with the ordination of a deacon, i.e., an ordination in the strictest sense, not something like a blessing.¹⁰ The formally sacramental character of this ordination cannot be questioned.

In fixing an apportionment of clerics into various types, the *Novellae Justiniani* give grounds more or less to infer that deaconesses were part of the clergy as such.

... We decree that no more than sixty priests, one hundred male and forty female deacons, ninety subdeacons, one hundred ten lectors, and twenty-five cantors be appointed to the most hallowed high church, so that the total number of its most reverend clerics be four hundred twenty-five, plus one hundred of those called porters.¹¹

Although, like the deacons, the deaconesses were ordained and fully integrated into the liturgical and pastoral ministry and the performance of charitable works, two principles always applied in the various Eastern churches: the deaconesses were not allowed to function at the altar, especially during the consecration of the Eucharist;¹² and they were given no assignments ranking them above men. This applied both to the deaconesses' co-operation with other clerics, i.e., to specifically clerical functions, and to their association with the laity.¹³

⁹ Along with the *Constitutiones apostolorum*, cf. especially Fr. Funk, ed., *Didascalia Arabica*; I. E. Rahmani, ed., *Testamentum Domini nostri Jesu Christi* (Moguntiae, 1899); and the documents of the Monophysite Church in J. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca orientalis* (Rome, 1721 and 1778) Vols. 2 and 3. Selections from these texts may be found in Josephine Mayer, ed., *Monumenta de viduis diaconissis virginibusque tractantia* (Bonn, 1938); and H. Krimm, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Diakonie 1* (Stuttgart, 1960).

¹⁰ For ordination formulas cf. Funk (*Constitutiones apostolorum*), Rahmani, and Assemani.

¹¹ Justinianus, *Novellae*, in *Corpus juris civilis*, ed. Rudolfus Schoell and Guilelmus Kroll, 3 (Berlin, 1954) 21.

¹² Cf. Epiphanius, *Adv. haer.* (PG 42, 743 f.).

¹³ Funk, *Constitutiones apostolorum*, p. 530.

That the theological justification for the first point was not easy can be seen in an Egyptian ecclesiastical code from the third century. Through an imaginary conversation between Peter, John, Mary, and Martha it is explained that women had not been allowed to take part in Jesus' celebration of the Last Supper with the apostles because Mary had laughed and because "what is weak will be saved by what is strong."¹⁴

Theologically unsatisfying as such a response may be, the practice of the Eastern Church allows at least this to be derived as a general principle: the one mission of Jesus Christ which is represented structurally in the many church offices is so many-sided that it prohibits the conclusion that all ministers who take part in this mission of Christ are *ipso facto* partakers of the office of priesthood. This, it seems to me, is important not only for considering the question of the female diaconate but also for maintaining the element of independence in the definition of the male diaconate. In matters regarding the female diaconate, the Western Church did not follow the same line of development as the Eastern Church. Nevertheless, a number of women were ordained to the diaconate in Lower Italy and Gaul. Here the strong influence of the Eastern churches can be clearly seen.¹⁵ In the context of a study such as this, it is not necessary to enumerate the individual cases. Rather it seems more important to point to two decisive reasons why in the West the formation of the female diaconate as an institution never occurred. First, the women in the West were more firmly integrated; so the mission to them, instructing them, etc., did not require the appointment of women in any official capacity. Cornelius Nepos had remarked:

... What Roman would blush to take his wife to a dinner-party? What matron does not frequent the front rooms of her dwelling and show herself in public? But it is very different in Greece; for there a woman is not admitted to a dinner-party, unless relatives only are present, and she keeps to the more retired part of the house called 'the women's apartment,' to which no man has access who is not near of kin.¹⁶

Secondly, in the Roman Church the order of widows did not have diaconal duties the way it did in the Eastern churches; so it could not, as in the East, simply be lifted from its original setting and then incorporated into the office of deaconess as the latter initially took shape.

¹⁴Erik Tidner, ed., *Canones ecclesiastici sive canones apostolorum* (Berlin, 1963) pp. 112-13.

¹⁵Cf. the detailed presentation in A. Kalsbach, "Die altkirchliche Einrichtung der Diakonissen bis zu ihrem Erlöschen," *Römische Quartalschrift* 22, Suppl. (1926).

¹⁶Cornelius Nepos, *The Book on the Great Generals of Foreign Nations*, tr. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Mass., 1947) p. 371.

II

The female diaconate in the Eastern churches gained the greatest ground during those long periods of peace when the Christian communities imparted momentum to an intensive, ever-growing missionary action and took in multitudes. It was the time before the official recognition of the Church, the time of a quite energetic expansion. A greater number of adult baptisms was in evidence; catechumens had to be instructed and after their baptism receive a still further and deeper introduction to the faith. The need to meet the various problems led not only to the creation of the lower clergy but also to the simultaneous entrustment of women with an important office in the Church.

The moment the churches proceeded to lose their missionary character, this office began to die out. So the female diaconate continued to flourish in the large mission churches of the Far East, while in Byzantium it was already showing signs of torpidity and deterioration. Functional weakening brought about the weakening of the office itself. Since there were fewer adult baptisms, the deaconesses' commission to teach became more and more restricted; they were increasingly relieved of the duties of the deacon; and so the stagnation and demise of the office in the "established" churches came relatively quick.

If anywhere, then precisely in connection with this process of deterioration it becomes apparent that hand in glove with an office in the Church go a clear-cut professional image and well-defined, sufficiently variegated portrait of the capacities of the office.

III

The discussion of the New Testament evidence and of the data of tradition makes clear that dogma provides no grounds for misgivings about ordaining women to the office of deacon. In the Latin Church the reasons for opposing the ordination of deaconesses were not of any fundamental nature but derived from conventions of the times. From this starting point we now pursue the question whether the reasons justifying a present reanimation of the female diaconate are sufficient. The following enumeration of them, however, will not go beyond the brevity of an outline. They are all part of much greater complexities, each of which has been often enough expounded upon in the recent discussion of the female office in the Church.¹⁷

The first thing that must be pointed to is the fundamental transformation of the position of woman in modern society, a society which is so closely connected with an economy characterized by the division of labor. Society's doffing of that form and cultural guise where the guild and the

¹⁷ Cf., for example, H. van der Meer, *Priestertum der Frau* (Freiburg, 1969).

peasantry were the dominant features made woman a partner with equal rights in social and economic life; it opened the doors to equal chances of advancement to positions of leadership in public life. In a large measure, working women are involved in two fields intimately associated with the Church's pastoral activity, those of education and welfare, and hold numerous positions of leadership in these areas. In such a situation the complete exclusion of women from offices in the Church can only be taken as adherence to a bygone conventionality and as discrimination.

Secondly, to a large degree paralleling the development of the women's professions in society, the collaboration of women within the sphere of the Catholic Church has grown into something bountiful and specialized. The main thrusts of the effort are differentiated along the lines of catechetical, pastoral, social, charitable, and administrative work. A great many of these women are persons who, in the service of the Church, direct their lives wholly and entirely to the service of Jesus Christ, often remain unmarried, and regard their profession as a lifework. The educational background as well as the personal inner dispositions of many of them constitute the prerequisites for espousing an official ministry that makes a claim on one's entire life. Here the Church has obviously been endowed through the providence of God with a mine of potential authentic vocations, one which no one with a church responsibility can blindly bypass.

Thirdly, like the Church in the third century, the Church today finds itself in a missionary situation which demands an all-out effort. In the so-called Christian countries the Church has turned out to be in a minority position. The Church needs to take new root in society. What Christian faith bespeaks today, what it can and in fact does mean to people of this age, can only be made visible through the maximum expenditure of energy. The requisite impulses for this have come from the Second Vatican Council. In conformity with the prompting of John XXIII, it was the Council's intention to freshen the face of the Church. And part of such a process, indeed an essential part, is a renewal of that impression of the faith which the Church's ministerial offices give. The Church can no more forgo the official collaboration of women today than it could during its great missionary drive or during the missionary effort of the third century; their assistance was simply indispensable. The third-century redistribution of the numerous ecclesiastical functions entailed the creation of the entire lower clergy, one marked by the inclusion of an office for women. Likewise today, the reanimation of such an office in the Church is imperative for the reorganization and differentiation of the ministry.

The above reasons do not from beginning to end and unambiguously betoken the office of deaconess. However, considering that in accord with

unbroken tradition in the East and West the episcopal and priestly offices are reserved for men, considering that ecumenical advances toward Orthodox Christianity are under way, the only female office thinkable in the present situation of the Church is the office of deaconess. For it, there is clearly a precedent in the Church's history; about it theology has not the least misgivings.

IV

A single fundamental point, one important for an over-all evaluation of the matter of the female diaconate, is all that the following reflections are designed to bring out.

The question regarding the meaning of ordination perhaps arises with greater trenchancy in connection with the female than with the male diaconate. Would it not be better to continue with what has been the practice until now, namely, of entrusting women with the performance of an abundance of services in the Church? Why ordain them? What is it supposed to empower them specially to do? Indeed, this question feeds on something articulated in lay circles, the fear of an augmented clericalism within the Church. But it is also posed by priests, motivated by the fear of losing that self-identity perceived in the exclusive right to administer the sacraments. Both the male and female diaconate make requisite a thorough consideration of the essence of official ministry in the Church. Such ministry cannot be defined primarily in terms of the sacramental powers. It is much better to understand official ministry with a view to the community and the world, as official *repraesentatio* of the mission of Jesus Christ. An office in the Church is a God-given commission, the power to build up communities and equip them for lives sustained by the one, universally binding mission of Christ.

New Testament exegesis has shown us anew the mission of Jesus Christ in all its breadth and comprehensiveness and thus made clear how necessary it is to take the entire scope of this mission into consideration insofar as it is represented by the official ministry, in the community, for the community and for the people of the world. The cultic and sacerdotal aspect should not be depreciated, but to concentrate on it to such an extent that the diaconal element is slighted would be an anachronism running directly counter to our present knowledge of the New Testament. Seeking its way toward the total person and into all dimensions of society, the mission of Jesus Christ has a scope which can only be represented by way of office to the extent that a plurality of relatively independent offices is envisaged. Naturally, such offices have need of the constitutional and functional integration guaranteed by the office of the episcopate. They should, however, be respected for their independence and not simply be regarded as participating in the "priesthood." There

are aspects of the mission of Jesus Christ which cannot be brought into historical effectiveness by the function of the community leader, the presbyter, but which have been reserved for this purpose to the diaconate.

This basic viewpoint on the matter of Church office provides an important standard for the entrustment of deacons and deaconesses with liturgical or sacramental tasks and powers. The liturgy, especially the Eucharist, is the most concentrated of the expressions of faith and at the same time a presentation of what the community in the Lord is. The deacon's or deaconess's function there should be defined, then, in terms of their specific tasks in the life of the community. Bringing the sacrificial gifts to the altar and distributing Holy Communion, for example, make visual what day by day, nonsacramentally takes place in the community through the diaconal ministry. Also, the preaching done by deaconesses and deacons during services should be the expression of such tasks.

These few hints are meant to be no more than illustrative. They are enough to show how the desirable introduction of the female diaconate can be combined with the development and enrichment of the community's life in the area of the liturgy and the sacraments.

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