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### THE PROBLEM OF DIACONATE IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

**The misconception of the diaconal office is rooted to a great extent in the general overemphasis on the aesthetical aspect of the divine rite which has been growing in modern times.**

The diaconate has obviously changed its shape and function more than once in the course of history; hence, the Orthodox theologian is guided in his inquiry by tradition, especially in controversial matters.

From early times the diaconate was acknowledged as an integral part of the threefold structure of apostolic ministry, if only in the third place. Strangely enough, the actual origin of the diaconate as an institution is still an open, and rather obscure, issue.

It is generally assumed that the diaconate can be traced back to the appointment of the Seven by the apostles, described in the sixth chapter of the Book of Acts, although the name "deacons" does not appear in the text. This was the usual interpretation in the West, as early as the time of St. Irenaeus.

In modern times, however, this interpretation has been challenged. The Orthodox theologian is bound at this point to take into account that venerable exegetical tradition of which St. John Chrysostom was an authoritative exponent and witness.

Speaking of the election of the Seven, in his homilies on the Book of Acts, Chrysostom emphatically and formally denies that Seven were "ordained" as deacons, for the simple reason that at that time no distinct ecclesiastical orders existed: no bishops, no presbyters, and no deacons. According to Chrysostom, the Seven were appointed for an occasional and specific task, that is, for the "service of tables" (Acta Apostolorum, hom. XIV, MG LX, c. 116).

It may be argued that this interpretation simply reflected the situation in Chrysostom's own time, when the diaconate had become, especially in the East, a liturgical institution. Yet, Chrysostom in no way was inclined to minimize the importance of charitable diakonia in the Church; indeed, the social responsibility of the Church was one of his crucial concerns. He simply insisted that the diaconate was instituted in the Church for a different task and purpose.

Whatever may be said of Chrysostom's exegesis, it was authoritatively endorsed by the Council of Trullo (692), with direct reference to Chrysostom's witness. The question was raised whether it was permissible to have more than seven deacons in a given local Church.

### Philanthropy and charitable care

The local Council of Neocaesarea (c. 315) ruled that the pattern of the Seven had to be adhered to, with the reference to Acts (canon 15). The Council of Trullo, after having pondered the whole matter and, with direct reference to Chrysostom's witness, reversed the ruling, since there was no valid reason for limitation in number.

Indeed, there was no identity or connection between the "liturgical diaconate," *ton tois mysteriois diakonoumenon andron*, and the diakonia of the Seven, which was restricted solely to the "service of tables." This "service," special and occasional, must remain, however, a "pattern of philanthropy and charitable care," *typos philanthropias kai spoudes* (canon 16).

This sharp distinction between the hierourgias diakonia and the oikonomia ton trofon became a commonplace of Byzantine canonical thinking. It has been maintained by many competent scholars in the Russian Church in modern times, both by exegetes and by canonists. The order of deacons has always been regarded in Catholic tradition as a subordinate and subsidiary office in the total structure of ecclesiastical ministry.

In the documents of the early Church, deacons are usually described as "servants" or "attendants" of the bishop: *ton men episkopou hyperetai eisin*, in the phrase of the first Ecumenical Council (Nicaea I, A.D. 325, canon 18). They constituted at that time the working retinue, as it were, of the bishop, and in this capacity were assigned various tasks, primarily in the field of pastoral administration and service to the needy.

The very term diakonia seems to have denoted at that time precisely this special kind of service. Deacons had a wide area of duties in the early Church, but a limited and subordinate competence. They acted by the bishop's authority and under his orders, and had to report all matters to him for decision. They were not supposed to do anything without his knowledge and approval, "in a clandestine way."

## Bishop's apostles and prophets

As the bishop's agents and representatives, acting on his behalf and in his stead, they held an influential and distinguished position in the life of Christian communities. Accordingly, they were described sometimes not only as the bishop's "servants," but also as his "apostles and prophets," as his "ear and eye, mouth, heart, and soul" (Apostolic Constitutions, bk. II, ch. 30, 31, 32, 43).

In conjunction with that hyperesia, deacons had from early times their own distinctive role in the liturgical worship of the Church and were described also as "servants of Christ's mysteries" (St. Ignatius, Trallians 2).

According to the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, deacons were ordained by the imposition of hands by the bishop, not in sacerdotio, sed in ministerio episcopi, and for that reason presbyters, or priests, were not supposed to participate in the rite of ordination, since deacons were not their symbouloi and had no share of that spirit of counsel which was the common possession of "the clergy": non est enim [diaconus] particeps consilii in clero (id. 9). This sharp distinction between sacerdotium (common to bishops and priests) and ministerium, or hyperesia, is highly significant.

Strictly speaking, according to the Apostolic Tradition, deacons did not belong to "clergy," kleros, at all.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, their actual prominence in the practical field could but breed and encourage ambition and pride. As early as the Council of Nicaea, they had to be recalled to "their proper limits," tois idiois metrois, and to be reminded that their order was lower than that of the presbyters, ton presbyteron elattous, since they were no more than "bishop's servants" (canon 18, quoted above).

The tension continued, however, and the Council of Trullo was compelled to wrestle with the same problem once more. Deacons were still, even at that time, appointed occasionally to certain administrative positions (offikia ekklesiastika exontes), and granted thereby "dignity" or "honor" (axioma). They tended therefore to assume precedence over presbyters. The Council dismissed all such claims as license and presumption (canon 7).

## Follower of the sufferings of Christ

What is crucial and essential in this ruling is obviously the strict distinction between "order" and "office." The ruling implies that administrative appointments or commissions do not change the hierarchical status of the appointees, in spite of the axioma which such appointments may confer.

Now, the question immediately arises: was the "service to the bishop," the hyperesia, just an "office"; that is, a "commission," and "assigned task" And what exactly was the relation of such "commission" or task to the "order."

The early rites of ordination are rather vague at this point. They do not specify the charisma conferred by ordination to the diaconate, nor do they define those functions to which deacons are ordained. Yet, the subordinate and auxiliary character of the diaconate is clearly stated.

The only clue here is, perhaps, the reference to St. Stephen, which occurs in the rite described in the eighth book of the Apostolic Constitutions: "And replenish him with thy Holy Spirit, and with power, as thou didst replenish Stephen, thy martyr and the follower of the sufferings of thy Christ" (ch. 18).

This clause is retained in the later Byzantine rite that is still in use. It is significant, however, that St. Stephen alone is mentioned here, and is mentioned as martyr and sufferer and not as "deacon." It is rather an analogy, with an emphasis on the charismatic character of service. In the course of time most of the tasks that originally constituted the hyperesia of deacons were transferred or reassigned to other agents.

Indeed, the pastoral care, in general, and especially the care of the poor and needy, could be exercised by bishops in manifold ways and through diverse channels. Moreover, charity and mutual service was the obvious duty of all believers and of the whole community.

## Becoming liturgical assistants

Of the various duties which characterized the service of deacons in the early Church, only their liturgical function, with special reference to the celebration of the holy Eucharist, has been retained as their distinctive and proper task.

In a sense, it was a conspicuous change, but it would be inaccurate to describe it as an atrophy or decline of the diaconate. Indeed, it meant a reorganization of the Church's diakonia at large.

It implied also a new interpretation of the nature of the diaconate, still in line with the old tradition, but with sharper distinction between "order" and various "offices" or commissioned tasks. In fact, the liturgical role of

deacons was becoming increasingly conspicuous precisely in the fourth century, in the period of stabilization and unification of rites.

It was for the role and function of "liturgical assistants" (of bishops and priests) that deacons were ordained. This was their basic and primary function, and it constituted their ecclesiastical and ministerial status.

In the contemporary rite of ordination to the diaconate its auxiliary character is clearly indicated. The ordination takes place at the liturgy after the anaphora, that is, after the consecration of the elements; and this is meant to signify that deacons do not take any acting part in the consecration, except insofar as the whole worshipping congregation also is supposed and invited to join in prayer and to share in this way in the celebration.

On the contrary, ordination to priesthood takes place before the consecration, at the very beginning of the sacramental service, so that a newly ordained priest is able immediately to join the bishop and his fellow-presbyters in the priestly action of consecration.

## Crisis of diaconate

This twofold ordination is a new way to express the traditional distinction: deacons are ordained in ministerio, whereas priests are ordained in sacerdotio. After the rite of ordination has been completed, the new deacon receives from the bishop a ripidion, or flabellum, a kind of fan, with which he is supposed "to guard" the Sacrament (originally from flies and insects).

Now it is no more than a symbolic gesture, but it expresses clearly the serving role of deacons in the liturgy of the Church. In modern times the ripidia are made in the shape of cherubs (and are accordingly called hexapteryga), in order to suggest an analogy between angels and deacons, since angels also are but "serving spirits."

According to the contemporary rule, ordination to the diaconate may also be performed at the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, which is not a sacramental service in the strict sense, but simply a special variant of Vespers with the additional rite of administering holy Communion from the presanctified, or reserved, Sacrament.

In brief, deacons are not supposed or permitted to function as such, except as assistants of the officiating priest or bishop. They are no more than assistants.

The liturgical function of the deacon is conspicuous and impressive in the Eastern rite. Western liturgiologists usually regard it as a distinctive and most characteristic feature of this rite. On the whole, this observation is correct; however, if the assistance or participation of deacons in the divine service is normal, regular, and desirable, it is not indispensable or obligatory, since it is an auxiliary and subsidiary function.

This assistance belongs, as it were, to the plene esse of the liturgical rite, to its ceremonial completeness and perfection, rather than to its very esse. As a matter of fact, there are no deacons at all in the majority of Orthodox communities today. This may be a sign of crisis or decline, but it must be considered seriously and understood properly. It is significant that as early as the fourteenth century, the great Byzantine interpreter of the liturgical rites, Nicholas Cabasilas, was rather reticent about the function of deacons.

## The keeper of the liturgical order

Let us turn now to the analysis of the rite itself. First of all, the deacon is a keryx, a kind of liturgical herald or crier. The term itself has been used by St. John Chrysostom and by Theodore of Mopsuestia. The deacon announces the beginning of the service and invites the officiating priest to give the initial blessing or invocation (kairos tou poiesai to kyrio), while he himself receives the permission to start.

The deacon exhorts the congregation to join in prayer, and at certain particular points he stirs its attention: "orfoi-proschomen" "stand aright," "let us attend." It is his duty and privilege to call the congregation, before the anaphora, to recognize each other, "to love one another," and to introduce the recitation of the Creed. It is his privilege also to invite the celebrant to proceed to the consecration of gifts.

It is his task to invite communicants to approach and to receive holy Communion from the hands of the officiating priest or bishop. It seems that in the ancient church deacons were permitted, or even commissioned, to administer communion themselves, if only to the lay people, and this is still occasionally done, mainly in the Greek Church, although it is now commonly regarded rather as an abuse. In all these instances the deacon appears to be the keeper of the liturgical order.

The role of a herald is, by its very nature and purpose, conspicuous, but obviously it is auxiliary and subordinate. Lessons at the liturgy are normally read by deacons, although the epistle is usually read by an anagnostes, or even by a layman, and probably, in older times, it was the privilege of the anagnostes to read all lessons. Before the reading of the Gospel, the deacon asks for the blessing of the officiating priest in a rather solemn form.

The most significant function of the deacon in the divine rite is, no doubt, the recitation of the litanies, of which, in a sense, he is the regular minister. The litanies, however, may be said only in the context of the regular public service presided over by a priest (or bishop); outside of this context they cannot be said at all.

The ministry of the deacon is in this case a subordinate ministry. It is hardly accurate to describe the litany as a dialogue for there are no replies, or answers.

### Ambassador and mediator

Nor is it accurate to describe the deacon as a leader of the congregation, or as a mediator between the priest and the congregation, as it is often done, especially by Western scholars.

As a matter of fact, the deacon does not recite prayers, that is, the litanies, on the behalf of the congregation; he only invites it to pray. "Let us pray" is simply an invitation, not yet the prayer itself. In the phrase of such a competent student of the Eastern rite as Jean Michel Hanssens, "Both the celebrant and the people pray together in litanies, though in many different forms," and the clauses of the litany pronounced by the deacon "are exhortations directed to the people rather than prayers addressed to God." Indeed, "to invite" is not the same as "to lead."

Each litany must be concluded with a doxology by the priest, who is actually the true and only leader of the congregation. It is proper at this point to quote the comments of Cabasilas: "At the beginning the priest exhorts the people to prayer, for he is appointed to this office and is for that reason placed in front of the people. He is also their ambassador and mediator (os presbeutes auton kai mesites). . . . After he has prayed for all his intentions, the priest calls upon the faithful to commend themselves to God."

Now, the litanies are recited by the deacon, and the priest has his own prayers to be said at the same time, *submissa voce*, within the sanctuary.

There is an apparent duplication, or parallelism, of prayers; yet, the litany is incomplete without the doxology which can be given only by the priest. It is much more than just an audible exclamation (*ekfonesis*). In the phrase of Cabasilas, it is an explanatory verse (*akroteleutios*), which gives the reason for which prayers may be offered at all (*prostithesi ten aitian*). The reason is the glory of God. "The priest wants to bring all the faithful to share in his hymn of praise . . . and the congregation do indeed unite themselves to his prayer, for when he has recited the doxology, all the faithful say 'Amen,' and by this acclamation they take to themselves as their own the prayers of the priest."

It is hardly correct, therefore, to describe the deacon as an intermediary between the congregation and the officiating priest. Indeed, the priest, who has direct contact with the congregation, is himself their mediator. The prayers of the priest and of the congregation are not only coordinated, they are truly integrated into one action of praise and intercession.

The role of the deacon is conspicuous, especially in the first part of the divine liturgy, the *enarxis*, but it would be a gross exaggeration to consider him as a minister in his own right.

### No distinctive role of his own

There is no reason to assume, as it has been sometimes suggested, that the duplication of prayers in the *enarxis* was motivated by the Semitic conception of the Holy as totally inaccessible to ordinary people.

Nor is it probable that this duplication had been introduced deliberately to secure the closer participation of the people in the worship, when language difficulties arose. In any case, this does not apply to the Byzantine liturgy, in which the language of the people has been always used.

It is important to underline that this duplication of prayers in the *enarxis* has nothing to do with the habit of reciting the anaphora in secret (*mystikos*). In this case, there is actually no duplication at all: the part of the prayer which is recited now by the priest "in secret," the parts of it audibly intoned by the priest, and the responses of the people, constitute in fact one single and continuous prayer, which is offered by the celebrating priest in the name and on behalf of the whole Church as gathered at that time for celebration, and in which both the celebrant and the congregation participate jointly, *if diversis modis*.

The anaphora is indeed the common prayer of the Church, *publica et communis oratio*. Characteristically, at this point the deacon has no distinctive role of his own (*precantur celebrans et populus*).

It would be out of place to engage now in further discussion of this matter, important as it undoubtedly is. The secret recitation of the anaphora was an unfortunate device to emphasize the august mystery of the Eucharist,

but, in fact, it only obscures the common and corporate nature of the eucharistic celebration, especially in the situation when the people are not aware of the content of the prayer offered by the celebrant on their behalf.

Strangely enough, it is often contended today that the congregation should not know the text of the anaphora, and special editions of the Euchologion are sometimes produced for the use of the worshippers, in which all secret prayers, including the anaphora, are simply omitted, under the pretext that they do not concern the congregation, being, as it were, a kind of private prayer of the officiating clergy.

That, of course, is poor and confused theology, in flat contradiction of the open purpose and intention of the eucharistic rite itself.

## Under authority of the priest

At present, however, we are concerned only with the liturgical function of the deacon, and are interested in the rite only insofar as it helps to clarify the nature of the diaconal assistance.

There is nothing in the divine liturgy that might authorize us to regard the deacon as being more than a subordinate liturgical assistant of the officiating or celebrating priest. Certain parts of the rite are normally performed by deacons, always under the authority of the priest and in conjunction with his function, and they can be properly denoted as *ta diakonika*; but only the priest is the acting minister of all public rites in the Church.

We have noted, in the earlier part of this chapter, that, while the assistance of the deacon in the celebration of the divine liturgy was regular, traditional, and normal, it could not, and should not, be regarded as mandatory or necessary. In other words, it does not belong to the essential structure of the eucharistic rite.

Nothing essential is missing in the rite when the priest celebrates alone, and this situation is formally anticipated in the rubrics of the Euchologion. Indeed, in our time Divine Liturgy is more often celebrated without the participation of the deacon than with it.

Of course, in this case, the priest himself has to perform certain functions of the deacon, as, for instance, the recitation of the litanies. This may create some practical inconveniences: the priest will have to say both the litanies and his own secret prayers, which are supposed to be said simultaneously.

These inconveniences, however, can be easily obviated, and moreover, the rite itself will be enriched if the priest reads aloud his own prayers before the concluding doxology.

It seems that the whole rite may assume more unity and cohesion if celebrated without the deacon's assistance, so that its basic purpose and ultimate aim are better focused and enhanced. On the whole, the participation of the deacon is a matter of convenience, not of substance.

## Ceremonial or artistic office

A further question now arises: does the participation of the deacon, in its contemporary form and shape, really serve that ultimate purpose for which the eucharistic rite is intended and instituted, or may it, in certain cases, obscure and even impede that purpose? It is a grave and crucial question, and a delicate one, so that often it is cautiously avoided.

It is significant, however, that in the Russian Church, in the early years of this century, the usefulness of the diaconate, in its contemporary form, and even its necessity, were vigorously challenged by certain prominent bishops, of the conservative wing of the Russian episcopate of that time.

It has been contended that it was simply useless and to no purpose to have deacons in the parish churches; that it was, rather, a meaningless custom, or just a fashion; and the hope has been expressed that the parish diaconate might go out of fashion altogether and rather soon. The reasons for such radical intervention were mixed and obviously "situation conditioned." The problem was neither deeply probed, nor traced to its basic theological presuppositions.

Nevertheless, this challenge, coming from competent and authoritative quarters, cannot be easily dismissed or ignored.

As a matter of fact, in the Russian Church, for various and manifold historical reasons, the diaconate has lost, in modern times, its spiritual significance and has degenerated into a kind of ceremonial or artistic office. The deacon has become practically a musical officer in the Church. His participation in the rite was sought mainly because it was expected to add to the external impressiveness of the rite, to its emotional and esthetic appeal.

## Misconception of the diaconal office

The main requirement of a deacon, accordingly, was to have a good and powerful voice and artistic skill; his function was divorced from the true purpose of the rite.

Here it seems proper to mention one characteristic abuse which, unfortunately, has become almost a custom in many communities: deacons are often permitted to serve without preparation, that is, without the required fasting and without the intention to receive communion at the celebration in which they are taking part. It is true that, in this case, they are not supposed or allowed to function at all in the sacramental part of the divine liturgy, and their role is limited to the enarxis, that is, to the recitation of litanies and the reading of lessons, although the discipline on this point is often rather lax. In fact, this restriction itself only underlined the abnormality and ambiguity of the usage.

The deacon came to be regarded as an accidental participant in the rite, in which he was invited to perform certain functions of artistic and decorative character, without being spiritually engaged in the celebration of the mystery. Indeed, this is not only an abuse, but a characteristic abuse, reflecting the current misconception of the diaconal office.

The deacon has lost his proper position in the liturgical office.

This misconception of the diaconal office is rooted to a great extent in the general overemphasis on the esthetical aspect of the divine rite which has been growing in modern times, especially in the Russian Church. The choir has assumed a disproportionate role in the rite, and the rite itself has become a sort of artistic performance.

The aesthetic aspect is indeed essential to the sacred rite, in which there is ample room for art. Art and aesthetics, however, must be subordinate to the spiritual purpose of the rite, but they tend to run an independent and autonomous course. The modern history of music in the Russian Church is a conspicuous example of such distortion, but it would be out of place to discuss this complex subject at length at this point.

Only against this general background is it possible to understand properly the current shift in the character of the diaconate.

## Congregation in the role of spectator

The other important factor in the process was the growing custom of infrequent communion. Whatever may be said, and is being said, in the defense of the habit of non-communicating attendance which still prevails and is often even enforced in Orthodox communities; in spite of the vigorous challenge and appeal of such a great and saintly master as Father John of Kronstadt and many others before and after him, one cannot underestimate the obvious spiritual danger inherent and implicit in this habit.

It encourages the faithful to regard the Eucharist as a kind of sacred spectacle which may be attended without any deeper engagement in the very purpose of the divine rite. By its very structure, and also by the purpose of its divine institution, the eucharistic rite is inwardly ordained toward Communion, and culminates precisely in the solemn call "to draw near," addressed to the congregation. Only in this perspective can the participants in the service find their proper place.

According to the authoritative interpretation of the Fathers, and of the later Byzantine commentators, the liturgy certainly is, in a sense, a "sacred panorama," a comprehensive symbolic image of the whole oikonomia of salvation: it requires and implies vision and contemplation. But obviously this contemplation finds its fullness only in communion. In other words, attendance finds its justification precisely in participation, which is the only real focus of attendance.

The current over-emphasis on the artistic side distorts the perspective and actually impedes contemplation. In contemporary practice, the congregation, "the Holy People," in the phrase of Cabasilas, is reduced to silence, to the role of spectator; it loses its true part in the service which is, in principle and essence, precisely the corporate action of the whole Church, as gathered for celebration, in which it is at once the privilege and the bounden duty of all believers to participate.

All functions in the divine rite are coordinated precisely at this point; if they are not, the inner unity of the rite may be completely lost. This is what has actually happened with diaconal function in the contemporary situation.

It is for this reason that the question arises whether the diaconal assistance, in its contemporary form, is really desirable, even for the plene esse of the rite. At this point we are facing a dilemma. On the one hand, one may dispense altogether with the assistance of the deacon in the eucharistic rite, since this assistance in its contemporary form does not seem to serve the true and ultimate purpose of the rite.

## Liturgical assistance must be clarified

This has been done already on a large scale, if only for accidental reasons, and the venture seems to have been justified by its results. The priest is able to exercise more effectively his role as a minister of unity in his local congregation, and the congregation recovers its own and proper part in the divine service.

It has been not infrequently suggested that common and congregational singing be restored in order to make the participation of the people real and effective. It has been done in many communities in the Russian Church and the purpose has been achieved.

On the other hand, the existing diaconate may be reorganized and restored to its proper role of liturgical assistants of the priests in the eucharistic service. A closer liturgical relationship must be restored between the priest and his deacon on the basis of their joint participation in the eucharistic celebration, as it is actually anticipated in the traditional rite, although the mode of their participation will be different.

The concept of liturgical assistance must be clarified and properly defined; then the participation of the deacon in the service may become an organic part of the divine rite. This prospective restoration of the true liturgical diaconate can be achieved, however, only in the context of a comprehensive liturgical renewal. Valid arguments may be adduced in favor of either alternative; they must be carefully scrutinized and pondered. This would require a theological reassessment of the whole problem of ministry.

The nature of Christian ministry is always defined in the Orthodox tradition in close relation to the sacraments, especially to the holy Eucharist. The theological key to the problem of the diaconate lies in the doctrine of the Eucharist, and actually the whole problem of ministry is a eucharistic problem: the Eucharistic is the heart and the center, and indeed the foundation, of the Church, which is herself the Body of Christ.

## Priesthood as hereditary social group

The diaconate, as a distinct ministerial order, can be understood adequately only in this eucharistic setting.

As a matter of fact, the permanent diaconate has survived in the Eastern Church, if in a very peculiar form. At all times there has been, in the Church a large body of deacons, both in the cathedrals and in the parishes. The composition of this group was mixed.

In the Russian church one can discern two main categories. First, there was a distinct group of those who were selected for this position on the basis of their musical ability, mainly in the cathedrals or in large city churches. They had to remain permanently in their office simply because they were selected for special reasons, as qualified precisely for the diaconal function.

Many in this group had an adequate theological training and could therefore be assigned to additional duties, including preaching and catechetical instruction, if required. Second, there was a much larger group of those who had to remain deacons because they were not qualified for promotion.

This peculiar situation can be understood only in historic perspective. The instance of the Russian Church is especially significant in this respect. For various historic reasons, which cannot be discussed at length in this paper, the clergy in the Russian Church gradually became a closed and hereditary social group, a kind of a special class, or even a caste.

This situation was decreed by state law and was rigorously maintained; it could not fail to foster the development of a peculiar class-consciousness, for even the families of the clergy belonged by law to 'the clergy.' The unity of the clergy was a social phenomenon in the total structure of a neatly stratified society. 'Clergy' was a legal status, not an ecclesiastical institution.

The school system, established in the 18th century, was the chief factor in securing the unity of the class. It was the duty of bishops to establish schools in their dioceses, and it was the legal obligation of all the clergy to send all their boys to these schools, under severe sanctions and threats of prosecution for desertion in the case they failed to do so.

## Diaconate as professional, not a vocational group

These were general schools, not specifically theological, and theology was taught only in two upper forms. The course was long, the curriculum dry and heavy, and discipline oppressive. Only a tiny minority of those who were compulsorily enrolled at an early age was able to graduate.

Those who left the school before graduation were in constant danger of being conscripted as soldiers, or compelled to join the ranks of peasantry, unless they were given some position in the Church. This explains the disproportionate inflation of the lower ranks of the clergy in the Russian Church, and it affected the social status of the diaconate.

Most deacons, especially in the rural parishes, had a very inadequate education, and could not be promoted to any higher or responsible position. Moreover, their economic situation was often alarmingly poor.

This created a sharp social split within the ranks of the clergy. It is true that this system was legally abrogated about a century ago, in the era of Great Reforms in the 1860s; but its consequences were still felt quite strongly, even in the early years of this century, and inveterate habits continued.

The diaconate was, in fact, a professional group in the Church rather than a vocational one. The abnormality of this situation has been sharply exposed by many bishops of the Russian Church, especially in the period of Pre-Conciliar discussions in 1904-07, and then at the Great Council of 1917-18.<sup>19</sup> These social conditions complicated the problem of the nature and function of the diaconate in the Russian Church.

The existing permanent diaconate could not fulfill the purpose that would vindicate its existence. In other Orthodox Churches the situation was different, according to the historic and local conditions, but the basic problem was always the same.

## Restoration of the office of the deaconesses

Many problems of the past are now obsolete and antiquated, especially in the Churches behind the Iron Curtain, but the memories of the past still weigh heavily on today's canonical and theological thinking.

The contemporary problem of the diaconate, as it is conceived and discussed rather intensively in the West, is more the problem of diakonia in a wider sense than that of the diaconate as a distinct hierarchical order. In the Eastern Churches the situation is different. In spite of the crisis and confusion outlined above, the Eastern Church is primarily concerned with the liturgical diaconate.

This does not mean that the Orthodox Church is indifferent to the great and grave problem of diakonia, of the social responsibility and service of the Church; but it may be contended, from the Orthodox point of view, and in the light of the historic tradition of the Eastern Church, that diakonia in this sense cannot serve as a basis for the diaconate as an order.

Diakonia is but a function or a task, and it is the task of the whole Church. It may be further contended that this task can be accomplished rather by the laity in the Church, under special commission from the hierarchy and under its supervision. In certain cases an ordination to minor orders may be desirable.

As a matter of fact, many of the diaconal tasks, in this large sense of the word, have been for a long time successfully exercised in the Orthodox Churches by lay people: in the field of missions, of education, and religious education in particular, of charity and social service.

For these tasks, from the Orthodox point of view, there is no need to restore a permanent diaconate. These tasks and duties belong to the common competence and responsibility of the whole Church. In this connection one should think rather of the restoration of the old and traditional office of the deaconesses (of which there has been constant talk in the Russian Church during the last hundred years), of the expansion of sisterhoods and especially of medical sisterhoods, and of many other similar institutions. These are indeed urgent and impending problems; but they are outside the scope of this paper.

Many of these tasks may be assigned to deacons, but rather on the basis of individual competence or vocation, and not as an intrinsic component of the diaconal ministry, in the proper sense.

[www.philosophy-religion.org/diaconate/chapter\\_4.htm](http://www.philosophy-religion.org/diaconate/chapter_4.htm)