

On the Ministry of the Diaconate, Part Two

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

His Eminence presents a three-part series about revitalizing the diaconate in our Archdiocese.

The canons of the Council of Ancyra (314) imply that the duties of a deacon at that time, according to commentators, were limited to bringing bread and wine, making petitions and preaching.¹ This means their liturgical role was clear from the end of the third century. Canon 23 of the Council of Trullo (692) states that no one — whether bishop, priest, or deacon — may exact a fee for administering Holy Communion, because grace cannot be sold. This implies that deacons could administer Holy Communion to the faithful. The *Apostolic Constitutions* (380) also state that after the bishop or priest celebrates the Divine Liturgy, the deacon takes the sacraments to commune the laypeople, assisting the priest. This practice is still observed today when a deacon is present with a priest, where the priest gives the deacon the chalice to invite the faithful to partake, saying: “With the fear of God, faith, and love, draw near,” and then the deacon returns the chalice to the priest to administer Communion.

The *Apostolic Constitutions* further instruct: “Let the deacon carry the chalice and as he presents it, let him say: ‘The Blood of Christ, the cup of life.’”²

St. Justin the Martyr, in his *First Apology*, states that the deacons among them distribute the Eucharistic bread, wine, and water to each of those present and take the sacraments to the absent. Another role is the delivery of the divine sacraments to the sick.³ Currently, the priest performs this duty due to the lack of deacons to assist him. Thus, the liturgical and humanitarian roles of deacons were evident from the early centuries.

With the entry of deacons into the administrative domain, new problems arose, such as their elevation over priests due to their proximity to the bishop. This necessitated addressing these issues in church councils.

¹ Canon 2.

² *Apostolic Constitutions*, viii. 13. 15-17

³ *First Apology*, cc. 65, 67.

The First Ecumenical Council stated: “Deacons should not exceed their limits, knowing that they are servants of the bishops and inferiors to the presbyters”⁴ – meaning their work was limited to serving the bishop in the diocese and in liturgical services. The Apostolic Canons also state that “priests and deacons should do nothing without the bishop’s consent, for he is entrusted with the Lord’s people and is accountable for their souls.”⁵

Emphasis on the authority of the bishop is found in subsequent councils, such as the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 (Canons 12, 14), the Council of Laodicea in 363 (Canon 57), and the Council of Carthage in 418 (Canons 6, 7, 41, 50).

St. Ignatius of Antioch (+108) considered deacons as servants of Christ’s mysteries, assisting the bishop in worship. According to St. Hippolytus (+236), deacons were ordained by the laying on of hands. The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD), issued reminders and warnings against deacons’ arrogance and superiority over priests, emphasizing that they are merely servants of the bishop.⁶

The Council of Trullo condemned and excommunicated deacons who claimed superiority over priests due to the honor and distinction they received from their humanitarian service and proximity to the bishop.⁷

It is important to clearly and strictly distinguish between what is called a rank and what is called a function. The diaconate is one of the three clerical ranks, and it is assigned a specific function, or ministry, according to the Church’s system, local situation, and current needs. This function does not change the deacon’s clerical rank, meaning it does not prevent him from performing his liturgical duties assigned to his rank, nor does the exalted function allow him to perform liturgical duties not assigned to his rank.

The early ordination rites for deacons do not specify a particular gift required for the diaconate, unlike the specific gifts required for a bishop, for example. There is a common belief in the Orthodox Church today that a deacon should have a beautiful voice because his service has become largely confined to liturgical chanting. In the non-Chalcedonian churches, the cantor is often ordained a deacon,

⁴ Canon 18.

⁵ Canon 39; cf. Antioch (341) Canon 24.

⁶ Canon 18.

⁷ Canon 7.

yet does not perform a strictly sacerdotal role. There is no specific gift assigned to the diaconate, as there are particular talents for service to which any believer is called.

Even the current ordination rite for deacons does not specify a particular gift. When the bishop ordains a deacon, he lays his hand on his head and asks for the grace of the Holy Spirit to appoint him as a servant in the administration of the Sacraments.

With the evolution and changes in the ecclesiastical situation, the deacon's ministry began to be confined more to the liturgical realm. The prayer recited over the candidate for the diaconate in the ordination rite only refers to assisting the priest in worship, without naming the specific gifts which the bishop confers on him for the diaconate. Another indication of this is the timing of the ordination. A deacon is ordained after the transformation and consecration of the Eucharistic Gifts, while a priest is ordained before this, as he will participate in the sanctification of the bread and wine. The bishop gives the priest the lamb to carry in his hands, preserving this deposit until the Lord comes again, as a sign that he will be accountable for his ministrations of the Eucharist. This is not the case with the deacon, however, as he is ordained after the sanctification of the offerings.

One reason for the absence of deacons in many churches today is the insufficient number of priests. The shortage of priests has led to the ordination of deacons as a transitional phase, which may last for a single day or several years, according to the bishop's discretion. This is only if the deacon meets the requirements for priestly ordination. In our Archdiocese, the deacon's service remains confined to the liturgical role.

Over time, this reality led to the absence or reduction of deacons' roles in charitable and pastoral services, replaced by laypeople who have founded charitable and educational associations. Some of these lay brotherhoods played an important and fundamental role in preserving Orthodox faith during times of occupation or decline, such as in Ukraine, Serbia, and the East.

Today, with the development and complexities of life, the Church, in its pastoral care for the faithful, needs to enter the realm of specialized care. It is no longer sufficient for the priest to care for his parish in the traditional manner, despite its importance. Each age group now requires care tailored to its age and the challenges it faces. This would include people with special needs, marital problems, the spread

of religious indifference, family problems, psychological issues, the poor, widows, the sick, those with autism, those living in loneliness and isolation, etc.

Without being overly idealistic and overburdening the Church beyond its capacity, we can at least revitalize the service of the diaconate, if there are suitable and willing believers for this service, and if the local church has the resources for them.

Given the availability of many talents in our Archdiocese, entering the realm of specialized care has become urgent and feasible.

(To be continued.)