

# The Role of the Deacon

*By Richard Fabian*

Having spent 23 years teaching at the country's largest School for Deacons, and as many years promoting (or defending) the diaconate at international conferences and meetings, I have plenty of opinion on this one. Mine is not now the majority opinion; but I think it is the only opinion that stands a chance of working today, when most Anglican provinces OPPOSE reviving the active diaconate, seeing there a superfluous clericalist block to lay liturgical ministry. Alas, most apparent promoters of the diaconate only give their enemies ammunition by arguing for deacons' exclusive privileges. Your informant's hope that people will miss an absent deacon when the liturgy goes badly without one exemplifies such self-defeating talk. (One used to hear a similarly hollow argument about ecumenism: we should make people miss the unity of Christians by refusing communion to each other.) Nobody will support an exclusive diaconate today, because nothing else works that way today. And nothing in the gospels says it should. Tradition won't really support it either.

The deacon's job began in synagogues with handling logistics during services: it was a way of making the services work; and it still is. The deacon marshals all the other ministries, reminding and enabling folks to do them on cue. It does take spiritual practice as well as training, and the deacon counts on the congregation's support and authorization, like any minister. But what matters is that the liturgy go well, for all participating. For that reason churches have historically shared out some deacon's work to others, often under the deacon's guidance: choir directors are the most widespread classic example. For the past century Episcopalians have shared out further diaconal work to folks labeled "Lay Readers" or "Lay Eucharistic Ministers." There is nothing wrong with sharing the work out that way. And it is just telling the truth to call their ministry deacon's ministry; so we do at St Gregory's. A growing number of English parishes call such folks "Lay Deacons"--which is at least clearer than "Lay Reader (doing deacon's work)." As you know the Lay Reader was invented for a completely different purpose, to read Morning and Evening Prayer in remote churches that had no ordained clergy most Sundays.

The traditional way to understand and evaluate a church's ministries is not by appeal to some ideal model (history undermines all of those) but by examining the prayers used at ordination, on the reasoning that God will graciously do what a church asks God to do. So when a church asks God to give someone grace to do deacon's work, and maybe spells that work out a little, we believe God supplies the candidate what's needed spiritually for that work. All our ordination prayers are written that way. None of them say anything about exclusive privileges--unlike medieval degree ceremonies, which normally do. Medieval society, Greek or Latin, was a ladder of exclusive rights and privileges--something inherited from Roman society, but having nothing to do with the gospel. Byzantine law and custom was particularly rigid: from slave to emperor, in civil or military or church service you moved up the ladder only, never downward--until exile, maiming or execution ended your progress. Today eastern churches still rank ministers so, allowing no-one to do a job "lower" than their latest ordained position. Some Episcopalians think deacons should be a protected rank like that, and follow the Byzantine rule that a deacon later ordained to the presbyterate must never again wear the diaconal orarion, or

perform the deacon's job in the liturgy as he formerly did. (A Greek or Russian presbyter celebrating without a deacon may say some of the deacon's part, but not all of it.) By contrast, western churches have treated all ordinations as permanent until martyrdom, reckoning that God gives candidates a lifetime of spiritual gifts necessary for the work, and never takes them away; hence a Roman bishop today may officiate as deacon at a papal mass, because that bishop was ordained deacon for life, and his Episcopal ordination was added on when the church prayed for him to receive further grace.

This is possibly the one matter where I think it is pointless to abandon western custom now for eastern use. Our society is not structured like Roman or Byzantine society, but is flexible. The average American can expect to work in three to five different jobs during one lifetime, each job requiring training and authorization independently, and many people work in two at once. Today a woman with a law degree and a medical degree can work in both the law courts and the hospitals--and in each place she dresses for the job she's doing. She never tells the judge she wore a white coat because her medical research degrees are higher than her law degree; she never operates in a wig and bands because her law firm pays more than the hospital. Only one modern career I can think of continues the Roman/Byzantine one-way ladder: professional football players move upward only, until maiming catastrophes or surgeries force their retirement, whereupon they are exiled. Just like Roman gladiators! But in my view they make a poor model for modern Christian ministers.

At St Gregory's we call a spade a spade and a deacon a deacon, according to the liturgical work being done. Normally an ordained deacon supervises laypeople doing it. And anybody doing the job vests for it. At present, our presiding presbyter alone wears the stole, "pallium"-style over the chasuble like a Roman chief general among his officers, while the rest wear chasubles alone (no other presbyter wears a stole). And an ordained deacon wears the orarion over the chasuble, hanging down from the shoulder, while laypeople doing the deacon's job in their chasubles wear it on the wrist--the earliest form--and both sorts of deacons wave this cloth strip about to get attention when speaking, just like Roman and Byzantine consuls wielding it at public meetings. In this way we keep all historic vestments visually present, tied as closely as possible to DOING A JOB, instead of making them marks of clerical rank. By the way, however, I hear that Ormonde Plater, a prominent American deacon, thinks laypeople doing deacon's work might better vest with the orarion over the shoulder like any other deacon.

Finally, let me note that the deacon's job is essentially assisting and marshaling others. There is nothing the deacon can do that someone else cannot do. Certainly not Reading The Gospel! That was the preacher's job until Gregory the Great's time; and if we have layfolk read the other readings there is no reason they should not read this one--under the Deacon's helpful guidance, of course. Here is the rub. Too many of my students at the Deacons' School looked forward to some exclusive privilege--one said "well, nobody else is going to read the gospel where I'M deacon!" And that attitude will doom the revival of this order. Opponents of the active diaconate are right, if deacons push laypeople aside instead of marshaling and training and expanding their ministry. That's why most Anglican provinces today do not plan to restore and boost the active diaconate.

Furthermore, I believe the best way to build respect for the deacon's role, in our more active province is to encourage the presbyters to revel in the job when they are doing it: vest for it, relish it as a leadership role, and experience the special joy--even the special power!!!--of assisting people to do what they really can do but often don't know they can. (Ask any schoolteacher whether they feel powerful when that happens.) Truthfully, it's my own favorite job in the liturgy. Thank God I was ordained to it for life. The presbyterate is an organizational necessity (and God has given me the gifts I need for that too). The diaconate is maybe even unnecessary, but a complete joy to me.

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