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Women deacons in The Apostolic Constitutions

Koet, Bart

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WOMEN DEACONS IN
THE APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS:
A FOREWORD

On 19 January 2003, the French magazine *La documentation catholique* published a document by the International Theological Commission (ITC) on the diaconate entitled *Le diaconat, évolution et perspectives*.¹ It was the fruit of many years of study of the sources of the diaconate, and it was also an attempt to take stock of the place of the diaconate in the life of the Roman Catholic Church. In its objective of updating the Catholic tradition, the Second Vatican Council had not hesitated to review one of the more original ministries in the church. Although the independent exercise of the ministry of deacon seemed to have died out with the death of Cardinal Deacon Teodolfo Mertel (Allumiere [Italy, not far from Rome], 1806 – Allumiere, 1899) this was only seemingly so. The diaconal ministry was still present in the Roman Catholic Church even after the death of the last cardinal deacon, for example during an obligatory period of preparation for the ordination of priests, but also when priests functioned as deacons in the eucharistic liturgy. Such a custom was also common for example in the church of Sweden for a long time.

The ITC document gives a historical sketch of the diaconate in the early church and also outlines how the permanent diaconate largely disappeared. In a theological reflection, the sacramentality of the diaconate is discussed. The last chapters focus on the following question:

¹ It was first published in French and in Italian. I use an (unofficial) English translation: *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2003). The title of the English translation is actually the title of the first chapter in the French, original text.

‘More than 35 years after Vatican II, what is the reality of the permanent diaconate?’²

In a fair and open assessment of the global situation, ITC discusses a number of elements. It is interesting, for example, that the diaconate had already been promoted in 1955 by the Dutch missionary bishop of Ruteng (Indonesia), Wilhelm van Bekkum, as a solution to pastoral needs in missionary areas. Accordingly, during the Vatican Council, the expectation was that it would be especially the young churches in Africa and Asia with their many lay catechists who would embrace the diaconate.³ However, it appears to be mainly countries such as the United States, Italy and Germany where the diaconate has taken root.

ITC points out that the Vatican Council identified the tasks of the deacon within the field of liturgy, of the Word and of charity (cf. *Lumen gentium* 29: *in diaconia (sic!) liturgiae, verbi et caritatis*). Although many theological studies have given priority to works of charity, ITC stresses that the witness of ecclesiastical tradition suggests that the three functions ought to be integrated into a whole.⁴

The document is a balanced summary of the historical, theological and ecclesiological status of deacons in the Roman Catholic Church. It expresses a certain openness towards the future and allows for the fact that the shape the diaconate takes on will depend on situations within the different local churches.⁵ In a certain sense it is also true that the diaconate of the future will be inspired by that of the past. This is exactly what this document tries to present.

The research into the past by ITC is well-founded and draws on much relevant literature. What is striking is that German-language literature and literature from the Romanesque language region are used in particular. There is no dialogue with the philological research carried out by Australian John N. Collins on the Greek term *diakonos*.⁶ This is one of the points in the discussion that remains open. One of the issues that the paper does discuss is the possible ordination of women as deacons/deaconesses. The document displays a certain reluctance to answer this question. Admittedly, ITC acknowledges that deaconesses

² *From the Diakonia of Christ*, 63.

³ *From the Diakonia of Christ*, 63.

⁴ *From the Diakonia of Christ*, 95–96.

⁵ *From the Diakonia of Christ*, 96.

⁶ John N. Collins, *Diakonia. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

of the early church were not necessarily equivalent to deacons, but their formulation of this issue indicates the need for further study.

And further study is exactly what happened. One aspect is that Collins' theses have been studied from different angles in scientific literature. An important confirmation of his theories is for example the book of the German Protestant exegete Anni Hentschel.⁷

In addition, an extensive study of the data on female deacons revealed that very little systematic research has been done into the sources of male deacons.⁸ Several initiatives have been taken to fill this gap. For example, together with the Patristic Institute Augustinianum, my colleague prof. dr Paul van Geest and I (both of the Faculty of Catholic Theology) had the opportunity of organizing the first congress in Rome on the sources of the diaconate.⁹

Whilst quite a few studies in respect of the sources for deaconesses have been published in the last century, this conference was a first attempt to give attention also to the material in respect of male deacons and to the positions held by deacons in the setting of the early church. In early Christian literature no explicit and thorough descriptions are given of their tasks. Therefore, only through scrupulous research into the relevant texts, written in the first centuries in different regions of early Christianity, we will be able to discern the characteristics of the early diaconate. Only then will the different views of the office of deacon and deaconess which existed in different particular churches, in the East and the West, be firmly established.¹⁰

The search for the identity of the deacon and the meaning of the term *diakonia* associated with this ministry is not only a Catholic quest. One of the centres of research on deacons, past and present, is Joensuu,

⁷ See Anni Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament. Studien zur Semantik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle von Frauen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) and *Gemeinde, Ämter, Dienste. Perspektiven zur neutestamentlichen Ekklesiologie*. Biblisch-theologische Studien 136 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2013).

⁸ Cf. K. Madigan & C. Osiek (eds. & trans.), *Ordained Women in the Early Church. A Documentary History*, (Baltimore/London, The John Hopkins University Press, 2005). See my review of this book in *Bijdragen* 67 (2006), 473–75, here 475.

⁹ The congress was organized in the Augustinianum, Rome (Vatican) in 2009 to discuss the early patristic documents on deacons. Most of these lectures have been published in *Diakonia, Diaconie, Diaconato. Semantica e Storia nei Padri Della Chiesa*. Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 117 (Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2010).

¹⁰ See Bart J. Koet, 'International conference on the sources of the diaconate: how it came about and how it turned out: a first report,' *Diaconia Christi* 44 (2009) 124–28.

a university city in the Eastern Finland close to the Russian border. Its theological department works within two traditions: a Lutheran and an Orthodox. For decades Docent Esko Ryökäs has stimulated research into the diaconate, organizing several conferences. With Dr Edwina Murphy (Australia) and myself he was an editor of *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity*, a collection of studies of the terms *diakonos* and *diakonia* in a representative cross-section of literary sources in the first two centuries CE.¹¹

Young researchers also participate in examining the origins of the diaconate and identifying the functions of deacons in the early church. Anyone involved in discussion about deacons in the early church will have to address questions concerning female deacons and their functions.

One of the younger Finnish scholars contributing to the research about female deacons is Pauliina Pylvänäinen, whose interest has been *The Apostolic Constitutions*. As noted above, in addition to the balanced assessment of the diaconate by ITC, two important elements remain for further investigation. To what extent is John N. Collins' re-interpretation relevant to determining the role of deacons in later writings, and what now is the relationship between the functions of male and female deacons? Pauliina Pylvänäinen's book is a contribution to the further mapping of these two issues. Her study is quite clearly stimulated by Collins' research. For this reason, she examines the tasks of deaconesses in *the Apostolic Constitutions* from the viewpoint of the reinterpreted *diakonos*.

According to Pauliina Pylvänäinen, the tasks of deaconesses in *the Apostolic Constitutions* can be divided into three categories: firstly, the compiler assigns to deaconesses duties that are linked to the liturgy. They guard the doors of the church building, find places for women who need them, and are present when the women approach the bishop and deacons during the Eucharist. When a woman is being baptized, a deaconess assists the bishop during the rite. Secondly, the deaconesses have tasks that traditionally have been defined as charitable service. Since the notion carried by the Greek term *diakonos* has been reinterpreted, Pylvänäinen analyzes whether the tasks include charitable connotations or not. The analysis shows that the deaconesses are sent to visit the houses of women. The visits include, for instance, almsgiving, and hence belong to the field of charity by nature. The tasks of healing and travelling seem also in some cases to have charitable connotations. Finally, and this is

¹¹ See also Bart J. Koet, *The Go-Between: Augustine on Deacons* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

the third point, along with these tasks, the deaconesses have a task that is neither mainly liturgical nor charitable. As messengers, namely, they play a role in the communications of the congregation.

The book appears at a time when more than ever there is a need to clarify the sources of the Christian tradition in the field of (assistant-) leadership in the early church, especially that of women. Not only in the Roman Catholic Church, but also in several Orthodox churches the possibility of female deacons for today's churches is being investigated. In some instances, the order of deaconesses has been restored. This book will be a solid contribution to these discussions in several ways. Additionally, the wisdom within the document under study in this volume is such that a reader seeking inspiration for reflections upon leadership and assistant leaders – even in a secular context – will find surprising inspiration.

A final remark: As noted above, studies on deaconesses are only half done if there are no studies on deacons. It is therefore gratifying to realize that this author from Finland hopes to make a study of deacons in *the Apostolic Constitutions* in the near future.

Bart J. Koet, professor of New Testament and
Early Christianity and Dean of Research
of the Faculty of Catholic Theology
Tilburg University

Within hours of this book going to press, it was announced that Pope Francis has set up a new commission to study the diaconate for women. The commission has ten members. Its president will be Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi and its secretary will be the Rev. Denis Dupont-Fauville. We hope that this study could contribute to the work of the commission and help them to reach a sustainable and responsible consensus.

P.P.