

# Should Deacons Represent Christ the Servant?

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## Abstract

Vatican II envisioned a revived permanent diaconate modeled on Christ the servant. That view, well grounded in subsequent church documents and widely appealed to in theological reflection, is criticized increasingly as lacking theological integrity or practical guidance for ministry. This article examines the metaphor itself and its application to the diaconate, concluding that the office in its functional, relational, and sacramental dimensions is indeed structured to represent Christ the servant. This metaphor also illuminates the distinctive calling of deacons in the ecclesial, secular, and post-Christian contexts where they practice their ministry.

## Keywords

church office, diaconate, Holy Orders, ministry, servant, Vatican II

In the just over fifty years since the Second Vatican Council framed a revived permanent diaconate for the western church, a steady stream of official pronouncements of various kinds, building on the council documents themselves, has envisioned deacons as representing Christ the servant. In the ordination rite itself, immediately after invoking the Holy Spirit, the bishop prays that the ordinands may show “love that is sincere, in concern for the sick and poor, in unassuming authority,” continuing several lines later, “May they in this life imitate your Son, who came not to

1. International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *The Rites of the Catholic Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 2:35.

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be served, but to serve.”<sup>1</sup> This way of framing the diaconate has been a bedrock of theological and homiletic reflection on diaconal identity as well. Even when the metaphor of Christ the servant is not specifically appealed to, the assumption is widespread that a deacon’s ministry should be characterized by humble service, with an emphasis on charitable outreach to the poor, the sick, and the vulnerable—characteristics that express in practical ways the image of Christ the servant.

The ubiquity of this general approach suggests that both deacons themselves and those who form or direct them have found it to be enriching and useful.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, over the past twenty-five years the weight of theological argument has turned increasingly cautious and critical about Christ the servant as a key to diaconal identity. John N. Collins offered the first influential negative assessment in 1990, arguing that the focus on humble and caritative service had arisen from a misunderstanding of the *daikon-* words used in early Christian literature, so that a lexical and (in Collins’s view) even a scriptural foundation for the reigning view of diaconal ministry was lacking.<sup>3</sup> In 2003, the International Theological Commission, while admitting that the theme of Christ the servant was well grounded in church documents, found it “problematic” as a distinctive vision for the diaconate, mainly because “service must be considered as a characteristic common to every ordained ministry.”<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, various writers have found the idea inconsistent with a sacramental character conferred by ordination, as overly individualistic and insufficiently ecclesial, as promoting a narrowly functional view of diaconal ministry, or as providing wrong or inadequate guidance in the broad range of ministerial contexts in which deacons find themselves today.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, there

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2. A web search of diaconate vocation offices, formation programs, and associations in English, French, German, and Italian reveals (in URLs far too numerous to cite here) that when ministerial identity is directly addressed, apart from canonical, logistical, and functional questions, the servant framework and usually the image of Christ the servant make up by far the most common theme. In the USA, the National Association of Diaconate Directors’ three-day 2018 conference is titled “Christ the Servant: Yesterday, Today, Forever.” A recent treatment of diaconal vocation, formation, and ministry by one of the most widely-read writers on the diaconate in English uses Christ the servant as its unquestioned framework: see James Keating, *The Heart of the Diaconate: Communion with the Servant Mysteries of Christ* (New York: Paulist, 2015). Examples could be multiplied greatly.
  3. John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford, 1990); more recently, “The Problem with Values Carried by Diakonia/Diakonie in Recent Church Documents,” in *Diakonia Studies* (New York: Oxford, 2014), 37–56.
  4. International Theological Commission (ITC), *Le diaconat: evolution et perspectives* (2003), 47(b), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_pro\\_05072004\\_diaconate\\_fr.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_fr.html). Despite these cautions, the ITC states in its conclusion (after 7d), together with other rather tentative considerations, that the deacon is a “living icon of Christ the servant,” quoting a document of the Congregation for Catholic Education which will be discussed below. The translation here, and all translations from non-English sources in the text and notes below, are my own.
  5. Citations will be provided along with a discussion of the critiques below.

is a reluctance in some quarters to affirm for deacons any manner of representing Christ, on the grounds that this could be used in an argument against ordaining women to the diaconate.<sup>6</sup> Even in Germany, where diaconal self-understanding has been grounded in an ideal of humble and caritative service since the preconiliar movement for a permanent diaconate, theological reflection has increasingly turned to other themes, such as the deacon's "borderland" location in society or capacity to identify with the outcast and the "other."<sup>7</sup> These lines of thought do not so much deny the significance of Christ the servant as attempt to move outside and perhaps beyond it.

## The Goal and Argument of This Study

The current theological discussion about the ministerial identity of deacons has come to an impasse about Christ the servant. On one side, there is a weight of church documents, along with pastoral and homiletic reflection, that treat this metaphor as the most important key to diaconal identity. In addition, many theological studies of the diaconate incorporate such a view within their broader arguments, and there is no lack of theologically cogent, pastorally informed, and well-argued treatments of diaconal ministry in which representation of Christ the servant provides the key.<sup>8</sup> However, the supporters of this approach have not addressed in any systematic way the objections of the critics, and therefore the central theme of their argument lacks what by now has become a necessary defense. If the criticisms are engaged seriously, two conclusions

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6. Noted by Christian Delarbre, "Diaconat et épiscopat. Pour éviter une approche sacerdotale du diaconat," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 133 (2011): 228–44 at 238, <https://doi.org/10.3917/nrt.332.0228>, and to be discussed below.

7. On the centrality of humble and caritative service in the German development of the diaconate, see Margaret Morche, *Zur Erneuerung des ständigen Diakonats* (Freiburg: Lambertus, 1996). On deacons occupying a "borderland" between secularity and holiness, Christian Wesseley, *Gekommen, um zu dienen. Der Diakonats aus fundamentaltheologisch-ekkesiologischer Sicht* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2004), esp. 223–25. Hans-Joachim Sander also finds a starting point in social location, placing deacons in a "heterotopic" space within the larger society; see "Diakonats: die heterotope Dimension des kirchlichen Amtes," in Richard Hartmann, Franz Reger, and Stephan Sander, eds., *Ortsbestimmungen: Der Diakonats als kirchlicher Dienst* (Frankfurt am Main: Josef Knecht, 2009), 38–58. On a diaconal identification with the "other," see Stefan Sander, *Gott begegnet im Anderen. Der Diakon und die Einheit des sacramentalen Amtes* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 261–304, and *Das Amt des Diakons*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 2013), 165–76.

8. Examples: Walter Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroads, 2003), 13–44; Michael Evans, "The Deacon: Icon of Christ the Servant," *Pastoral Review* (July-August 2006): 28–32; Robert Zollitich, "Der Diakonats – ein modernes Amt," in Klemens Armbruster and Matthias Mühl, eds., *Bereit wozu? Geweiht für was? Zur Diskussion um den ständigen Diakonats*, *Quaestiones Disputates* 232 (Freiburg: Herder, 2009), 372–80; Johannes Kreidler, "Systematisch-theologische Grundfragen im Zusammenhang mit der kirchen-amtlichen Lehre," in Hartmann, Reger, and Sanders, *Ortsbestimmung*, 59–69.

are possible: jettison the whole framework of Christ the servant as a key to diaconal identity, or provide it with a theological grounding that can withstand the criticisms.

The present study comes to the second conclusion: that Christ the servant remains a theologically cogent and pastorally appropriate vision of diaconal identity and ministry. Moreover, I will argue that this framework is foundational: theological and pastoral reflection on the diaconate can and should range outside it, but we cannot jettison the idea of deacons as representatives of Christ the servant without losing something integral to diaconal identity itself. The critics have challenged us to provide a more precise and cogent account of Christ the servant, of the diaconal office and ministry to which it is applied, and of the kind of representation that can be claimed in this case. Accordingly, this study will focus primarily on constructing the building blocks that support the intellectual framework in which deacons rightly represent Christ the servant; once this is done, the criticisms can be addressed succinctly.

We will begin by defining the ecclesial and social context in which diaconal ministry is practiced, making use of over forty-five years of experience on the ground. With the exception of empirical studies, the theological literature on the diaconate nearly always takes context for granted, referring only anecdotally to practical issues that have arisen in the writer's own realm of experience.<sup>9</sup> But the theology of ministry necessarily has a contextual dimension.<sup>10</sup> Besides giving concreteness to our understanding of the diaconate itself, a clearly articulated context will provide one standard of evaluation for our key concept: we will be able to ask whether the image of Christ the servant provides useful guidance in the actual conditions where deacons practice their ministry. Next, I will offer an analysis of Christ the servant Himself, an image with multiple interlocking aspects that in the diaconate literature is treated as something already understood, although both proponents and critics of its application to diaconal ministry often turn out to be appealing only to particular aspects. Turning to the initial sketch of deacons as representing Christ the servant in the Vatican II documents and the fuller development of this theme in their reception, we will find that this vision of the diaconate became a defining influence on the formation and self-understanding of deacons over more than forty-five years.

We can then turn to examine whether there is a defensible theological rationale why deacons should represent Christ the servant. I begin by attempting to offer an adequate account of diaconal office and ministry in themselves, as integrating functional, relational, and sacramental dimensions. This is necessary because both critics and contexts in which diaconal ministry is practiced around the world, supporters of a diaconate modeled on Christ the servant tend to apply this image only to particular aspects of diaconal office, a procedure that leads inevitably to distorted conclusions. After

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9. The ITC, in *Diaconat: évolution et perspectives* 6, provides a good survey of the contexts in which diaconal ministry is practiced around the world, but does not integrate this contextual dimension into its theological treatment of the diaconate (7).

10. See, e.g., Thomas O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist, 1999), esp. 5–138; and Kenan Osborne, *Orders and Ministry: Leadership in the World Church* (New York: Orbis, 2006).

pausing to define the kind of representation with which diaconal ministry can (and cannot) be tasked, I will show how the diaconate is indeed structured to represent Christ the servant, and how this image provides practical guidance in the contexts where deacons practice their ministry. Finally, building on this positive argument, I will examine a range of criticisms, concluding that none undermines the coherence or usefulness of envisioning deacons as representatives of Christ the servant.

## The Ecclesial and Historical Context of This Study

We consider here the Roman Catholic diaconate as it was revived at the Second Vatican Council<sup>11</sup> and given institutional sanction by Paul VI in 1967.<sup>12</sup> Our reflections will not wander out of this fairly well-defined context into the Eastern Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, or Anglican diaconate, all of which have different histories and characteristics. What an ecumenical study including those other traditions gains in breadth and perspective it must lose in specificity and concreteness.<sup>13</sup> Nor will we consider the transitional diaconate as a step to priesthood; this office has the same ordination rite as the permanent diaconate, but a completely different history, ecclesial context, and ministerial self-understanding. As a point of clarification, we will study the Catholic diaconate in its current canonical discipline as restricted to men (and accordingly will use masculine pronouns for convenience), but nothing in the reflections that follow suggests that diaconal identity is gendered; everything said here would apply equally to women deacons, should the Church choose to ordain them. I will address below the concern that viewing diaconal ministry as in any way representing Christ provides an “iconic argument” against ordaining women to the diaconate. Overall, by focusing on the Roman Catholic permanent diaconate we will be able to use the data of specifically Catholic teaching and reflection on a ministry that has grown up in particular conditions over the past generation and a half.

Moreover, we can be precise about what those conditions are. We necessarily focus our study on North America and certain countries of Western Europe, where bishops have ordained a very large majority of the permanent deacons in the Western church. In doing this we will be studying what has turned out to be the typical case for the diaconate; after all, the council’s expectation that the bishops of Latin America, Africa,

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11. The diaconate proposed by Vatican II is often termed a “restoration,” as though an early church office had been dusted off and, substantially unchanged, put to use in the contemporary church. This article uses the term “revival,” which recognizes some continuity with the ancient office, but also allows for the differences in context and purpose we find in the contemporary diaconate.
  12. Paul VI, *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* (June 18, 1967), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_motu-proprio\\_19670618\\_sacrum-diaconatus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19670618_sacrum-diaconatus.html).
  13. This focus differs from that of John Collins, who studies the diaconate in all the Christian denominations as a single phenomenon with a variety of subthemes. See, e.g., his *Deacons and the Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Gracewing, 2002), “written for deacons of any denomination” (vii).

and Asia would ordain deacons in great numbers to address those quite different pastoral situations has not been fulfilled so far.<sup>14</sup>

Three conditions on the ground shape any understanding of diaconal identity in the context we have defined. First, within the church itself, the diaconate has grown alongside a rapid drop in the number of priests, together with a significant increase in ministerial activities by people who are not ordained, and who exercise those activities on an occasional or full-time basis. Thus, the diaconate has been challenged to define itself as distinct from priesthood, even while taking on certain liturgical and pastoral functions that until recent times were normally performed by priests. And deacons have needed to stake out an ecclesial identity distinct from non-ordained ministers, particularly those with professional training holding responsible positions in the church.<sup>15</sup>

Second, the vast majority of deacons exercising their ministry are married and employed in non-church jobs, or if retired were so employed previously. These characteristics defining a deacon's social location are so prevalent that they can be treated as typical, as conditions of his ministerial life and action.

Finally, the larger world in which the church and its ministers find themselves, in Western Europe and North America, can be described as increasingly post-Christian in culture and outlook. This situation is an issue for all ministers, but presents particular challenges and opportunities for deacons, as compared with bishops and priests, because deacons live mainly in non-church surroundings.

These three contextual characteristics (ecclesial, social, and cultural) are strongly marked and show no sign of changing any time soon. As a result, our reflections on the permanent diaconate both can and should address this entire context as we inquire whether, or in what sense, deacons should represent Christ the servant.

## Dimensions of Christ the Servant and Their Application to Christian Discipleship

In examining a possible analogy between a scriptural image of Christ and a particular kind of contemporary Christian minister, we must begin by gaining an adequate understanding of the image itself. The view of Christ as servant is one of several windows

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14. As of December 31, 2014, 75 percent of the 43,954 diocesan permanent deacons worldwide were from North America and Western Europe, 40.8 percent in the USA alone. *Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2014* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis, 2016), 92–101. The heavy numerical preponderance of the diaconate in these countries, together with the concentration of theological study centers in them, has resulted in a near-total concentration in the theological literature (whether tacit or openly stated) on this social and ecclesial context. Moreover, as deacons are scattered broadly and unevenly over the rest of the world, there is no other numerically significant typical context to address.

15. This first condition on the ground, addressing the ecclesial context for diaconal development, was proposed by William Ditewig, "The Once and Future Diaconate: Notes from the Past, Possibilities for the Future," *Church* 20 (2004): 51–54.

into the single person of Christ and offers a perspective both into his nature as God's Son and into his saving action in the world. Of course, "servant" is applied to Christ in a metaphorical sense, so using the image requires shuttling back and forth between the divine mystery and human social relations. Other metaphors found in Scripture, such as "shepherd," "bridegroom," "priest," and "head," offer additional perspectives on the person of Christ.

The Old Testament offers a range of servant roles that are developed in the New Testament understanding of Jesus. The key idea is that a servant performs tasks for a superior; the context may be chattel slavery or not; and the social position of the servant may be humble or highly respected, depending on the status of the master and the kind of tasks performed.<sup>16</sup> Two particular Old Testament strands of servanthood provide the background for an understanding of Christ as a servant. First, kings, prophets, priests, and other persons who carry out tasks on God's behalf are called servants of God. Second, the servant in Isaiah 40–55 is specially chosen by God and gives himself for the people of Israel.<sup>17</sup> These concepts of servanthood are richly developed in the self-offering of Jesus for the spread of God's kingdom, and those developments in their fullness are what constitute the metaphor of Christ the servant. We cannot here undertake a detailed exegetical and theological investigation of the metaphor and its implications. Rather, I will offer an analysis adapted from the procedure Avery Dulles uses in his treatment of the servant model of the church.<sup>18</sup> Such an analytical outline allows us to see Christ as servant from multiple viewpoints, and highlights relational, functional, and symbolic dimensions of the image in a manner that will help us to achieve some rigor in testing its possible application to discipleship and ministry. The servant/service complex of ideas applied to Christ combines four interconnected aspects.

First, there is the question: "whose servant?" Considered as a servant serving a master, Christ does not his own will, but the will of the one who sent him. He is obedient to the Father, coming into the world to bring light into the darkness and to establish God's kingdom (Mark 14:36 and parallels; John 5:30, 6:38, 12:49–50).

Second, we have the question: "serving whom?" Christ gives himself to serve the needs of the world, by offering salvation, forgiveness, healing, and divinization. Particularly in John's Gospel (17:6–26; 13:1–17), he ministers in an intimate way to his own community of disciples. In the larger world, Christ serves with special care the neediest and the victims of injustice—the poor, the outcast, the sick, and the disabled.

The third question is "serving how?" Christ serves the Father's will, and serves the needs of the world, in a manner that is not dominating, but self-giving. He came not to be served, but to serve (Matt 20:25–28 and parallels). It is a mode of humble service, as dramatically enacted in the foot-washing scene in John's Gospel (13:1–17), and as

16. John Byron, "Servant," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2009), 5:192, with references.

17. *Ibid.*, and article following by Raymond Collins, "Servant of the Lord," 192–95.

18. In formulating the first three aspects of my analysis, I have used Dulles's specific questions about the "servant church" in *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 91–92.

exemplified in Jesus' mingling with sinners and outcasts. Moreover, he came into the world as one of the powerless, without status or legitimate authority even among a subject people, the Jews, who were themselves dominated by the Roman imperial system. In a further extension of this humble service, he gave himself for the salvation of the world by "taking the form of a slave," and by undergoing a humiliating death understood by his followers through the lens of Isaiah's servant songs.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, we ask "what service" it is that Christ the servant offers. Christ's gift of self in humble service manifests itself especially in two areas of his salvific activity. One is to effect our redemption as the suffering servant. The other, seen in Jesus' ministry, is to offer healing and salvation, particularly to the poor and suffering (Luke 4:18–19; Matt 11:4–5). To those he encounters, Jesus addresses both their physical needs, such as healing and nourishment, and their existential needs—for hope, truth, solace in suffering, participation in community life, and salvation from sin and death. Jesus' works of charity are important in a this-worldly sense, intended to alleviate real physical and emotional suffering (Matt 25:34–40). But his service to the world is fundamentally a witness to the kingdom and a sign of God's presence; the works of charity flow from the proclamation of the kingdom and point to its consummation.<sup>20</sup>

The four aspects of Christ as servant we have just sketched have a coherence that is theological rather than lexical, i.e. the image is not captured by any particular word, specifically not by the word "servant." This point is important because John Collins's influential criticism of "servant" as a model for diaconal identity is based on the quite correct argument that the content of this metaphor (particularly the elements of charity and humble service) does not fit within the lexical domain of the *daikon-* words. I will consider that criticism in more detail later, but here we should note that the texts from the Septuagint and the New Testament that contribute to this single metaphor do not fit in the domain of the *daikon-* words either, but use three different Greek words (*diakōn*, *doulos*, and *pais*) with overlapping semantic domains. All denote servanthood of some kind; their precise meaning depends on the context.<sup>21</sup> The theological coherence of the metaphor is initially suggested by the semantic range of the "serve-service-servant" words with roots in the Latin "serv-" group, but the real coherence of the metaphor is shown by the way the various aspects interconnect and build upon each other. The following two series of interconnections illustrate the coherence. In serving the Father's will (#1, "whose servant"), Christ expresses that will by serving the needs of a sinful and suffering world (#2, "serving whom"), in the self-giving mode of a humble servant

19. Phil 2:5–8; Matt 12:18–21 (= Isa 42:1–4) and Isa 52:13–53:13 as a frame for the synoptic passion narratives. Stanley Porter, *Sacred Tradition in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 79–104.

20. Matt 4:23, 12:28; Luke 9:1–2, 10:8–9. Analogously, the healings in John's Gospel are signs that point to God's full self-revelation (e.g., 4:54, 6:2, 12:18).

21. Byron, "Servant," 192. Frederick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), s.vv. *diakoneo/diakonia/diakōn*; *douleia/douleuō/doulē/doulos*; *pais* 3 (hereafter cited as BDAG 3rd ed.).



(#3, “serving how”), and in this manner expressing God’s particular solidarity in service to the poor and suffering (#4, “what service”). Or, starting from a different direction, Christ’s humble situation, his absence of status and power (#3, “serving how”), reflect in worldly terms his complete submission to the will of the Father (#1, “whose servant”); and represent the means by which the Father serves the needs of the world, especially the poor and suffering (#2, “serving whom”), particularly through Christ’s offer of healing and salvation (#4, “what service”).

Thus, although we are aided in formulating the metaphor by the umbrella of the “serv-” words, this lexical domain is not what provides the coherence. After all, there are areas of meaning within the “serv-” words that do not apply to Christ, especially the sense of “servile” as the inner characteristic of being cringing, weak, or unfree. Moreover, for aspects of this image there are other words that express its meaning as well or better than the “serv-” words, such as the “minister–ministry” group to describe “whose servant” and “serving whom.” Considered theologically, however, “Christ the servant” does provide a valid, scripturally grounded, and sufficiently coherent perspective—although by no means an exhaustive or definitive one—on Christ’s person and salvific activity.

In addition, it is clear that, proceeding with appropriate qualifiers, this model is one that all Christians are called to apply to their own lives.<sup>22</sup> We can follow the analogy through each of the four aspects of the servant image we analyzed above. Thus, Christian disciples are to serve God’s will in all things (“whose servant”); to be humble, charitable, and self-giving with one another (“serving how”); to proclaim the Good News, and be ministers of healing and reconciliation (“what service”); and to bring that Good News to a sinful world, and especially to the poor and suffering (“serving whom”). Thus, after moving upward by analogy from human social relations to gain insight into the servant dimension of Christ, we can return downward by analogy from the theme of Christ as servant to flesh out the servant aspect of Christian discipleship.

If all Christians are called to model Christ the servant, how then does this metaphor come to be applied specifically to diaconal ministry? That precise application cannot be found explicitly in the New Testament and the early church, but developed within an understanding of ministry inspired by the twentieth century ideal of a servant church.

## Vatican II: A Servant Church with Servant Ministers

Although they understood the church to be the vehicle for Christ’s continuing service to the world through the Holy Spirit, the New Testament and early Christian writers did not see the church itself as exemplifying Christ the servant.<sup>23</sup> They preferred metaphors like the body of Christ, the household of God, the assembly of the saints, and

22. A process that began in the New Testament period. See Holly Beers, *The Followers of Jesus as the ‘Servant’: Luke’s Model from Isaiah for the Disciples in Luke-Acts*, Library of New Testament Studies 535 (London: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2015).

23. A point noted by Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 92.

similar images that stressed the solidarity of a mission group that was already weak and “servile” enough in its social context—small, vulnerable, and struggling to survive and grow.<sup>24</sup> In such conditions, a community call to servanthood would hardly suggest itself.

The contemporary Roman Catholic diaconate, as it developed before and during Vatican II, arose in a very different ecclesial situation. In the mid-twentieth century, the church was a worldwide institution with considerable power in the public realm, and it still functioned as the legally established church in many countries. The clergy were largely defined by their exercise of governance and of the “sacred power” to administer the sacraments. In many quarters, the church was practically identified with its clergy and religious orders, and was understood as a holy bulwark against a hostile world. The reform impulse that animated the council sought to shift the focus away from what Bishop de Smedt, in a famous intervention early in the first session, called “clericalism, juridicism, and triumphalism”<sup>25</sup>—attributes against which the early church hardly needed to be warned. This reforming movement at the council was tempered in the debates and documents by a commitment to continuity in the Church’s doctrine and practice.

It was in this tension between reform and continuity that the council framed a revived permanent diaconate.<sup>26</sup> The most characteristic influence on the definition of this revived office was a developing understanding of the church as servant; this was one of several visions of the church incorporated into the council documents.<sup>27</sup> We will see that the council’s identification of deacons with Christ the servant was largely an attempt to exemplify this vision of a servant church. That view of the church was one response to the contemporary situation that appealed strongly to many of the council participants and their theological advisors.

The animating idea behind the vision of a servant church is that, if the church is to represent Christ and carry on Christ’s ongoing mission in the world, then the church itself must exemplify and act in accordance with Christ’s character as servant, embodying the kind of attributes we have sketched above for that metaphor. *Gaudiam et Spes* offers the most powerful and distinctive expressions of this servant vision of the

24. 1 Cor 12:12–26; 1 Pet 2:9–10; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Tim 3:15; the use of *ekklesia*, “assembly,” obviously is widespread in early Christian literature.

25. *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Vaticani* 2, 1/4 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis 1970), 142–44.

26. My hermeneutic of Vatican II recognizes the fierce debate over the interpretation of the council between emphases on continuity with the church’s tradition and on epochal change, as well described by Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist, 2012). The question about reviving the permanent diaconate participated in the council’s larger dynamic; we will note the tension and compromise between reform and continuity. In addition, the hermeneutical method used here combines the authorial, textual, intertextual, and reception approaches identified by Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist, 2004).

27. See Tim O’Donnell, “How the Ecclesiological Visions of Vatican II Framed the Ministry of Permanent Deacons,” *Worship* 85, no. 5 (2011): 425–446, with references.

church. Thus, in a development beyond strictly scriptural, medieval, or modern views, the church is seen as not only serving Christ and the Spirit (“whose servant”), but also the broader world (“serving whom”); and not just by witnessing to the truth and acting as a vehicle of grace, but by seeking peace, justice, the common good, and the brotherhood of all peoples (“what service”). Moreover, the church is to carry out this mission in a self-giving way, as a humble servant; not triumphalist or authoritarian, but in respectful dialogue with the world, always ready to offer help and solace (“serving how”).<sup>28</sup>

The council’s appeal to an idea of the church itself as exemplifying Christ the servant parallels a theme that pervades the council’s treatment of the church’s internal ordering, and especially its treatment of the clergy. This is a shift in emphasis, compared with pre-conciliar treatments of the clergy, from power to service.<sup>29</sup> The shift does not mean that the Catholic clergy have ceased to be defined to an important extent by their powers and faculties in the sacramental realm or in pastoral oversight. The council, however, clearly ties those powers to the ideal of service: the clergy are first and foremost servants of the whole church, the people of God. Only servant ministers could direct and exemplify a servant church.

Despite framing the clergy as servants in a broad and important sense, the council did not, and really could not, present the whole clergy as exemplifying Christ the servant. The council’s emphases on leadership as humble service and on the clergy’s mission to serve the people of God do reflect the image of Christ the servant, just as they parallel the ideal of a servant church. But the service the clergy is called to provide, specifically the three tasks assigned to them—to teach, sanctify and govern—take us into different metaphorical spaces.<sup>30</sup> These tasks distill into the specific realm of ministry three other metaphors of Christ imprinted on every Christian disciple at baptism: prophet, priest, and king.

What happened to the image of Christ the servant in the treatment of the clergy at Vatican II? The image remained integral to the hierarchy by coming to rest on the revived office of permanent deacon. This is clearly expressed in the council documents themselves and more fully interpreted in their reception.

28. *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), esp. 1–3 (hereafter cited as *GS*), in Norman B. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1990), 2:1069–70. See also *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), 8 (hereafter cited as *LG*), esp. at Tanner, 2:854 line 31 to 855 line 15; and Paul VI, in his closing homily *Hodie Concilium* (December 7, 1965) *AAS* 58 (1965): 57–64, at 63: “... the rich abundance of this teaching looks in one direction, that it might serve the human person ... The church has, so to speak, declared herself the servant [*ancillam*] of humankind.” For a full English translation of this speech, see [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_spe\\_19651207\\_epilogo-concilio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651207_epilogo-concilio.html).

29. *LG* 18, in Tanner, 2:862, lines 34–39. Nathan Mitchell described the importance of this shift, and the contribution of the revived diaconate in effecting it, in *Mission and Ministry: History and Theology in the Sacrament of Order* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982), 299–306.

30. Citations for the three tasks are provided below.

## Council and Its Reception

The council's foundational document for a revived permanent diaconate is *Lumen Gentium* 29. *Ad Gentes*, the Decree on Missionary Activity, extends and complements the council's vision by placing deacons in a mission context, but retains the servant framing from the earlier document.<sup>31</sup> Neither the active preconconciliar discussion about a permanent diaconate, nor the council speeches, nor the debates in the Doctrinal Commission, were particularly concerned with sketching an overall vision of this re-conceived church office, so it is not here that we find the emphasis on servanthood.<sup>32</sup> Instead, that debate was focused primarily on practical issues: whether this ministry could extend the pastoral reach of the church where there was a shortage of priests; whether ordination would strengthen the already active apostolates of laymen; whether the ordination of married men would reduce vocations to the priesthood and erode support for priestly celibacy; how these ministers could be formed and supervised; and whether such a ministry would be accepted in particular churches around the world.<sup>33</sup> Once the vote of October 30, 1963 directed the Doctrinal Commission to place a revived diaconate in the text of *Lumen Gentium*, the practical issues were worked out in the Doctrinal Commission and presented to the full council for votes in October, 1964. The result was a compromise on celibacy to allow married deacons "of mature age," and a provision for optional implementation through bishops' conferences. The task of sketching an overall framework for the diaconate, consistent with the structure, rhetoric, and outlook of *Lumen Gentium*, fell to the drafter, the Belgian Jesuit Gérard Philips. Thus, it is an interpretation of the council text itself, using the keys provided by the *Relatio* of the drafting committee and Philips's own commentary of 1967, that reveals the vision of the deacon as representing Christ the servant.

31. *Ad Gentes* (December 7, 1965) 16 (hereafter cited as *AG*); Tanner, 2:1025–26.

32. O'Donnell, "Ecclesiologies," 427–32 notes the different lay apostolates (social workers, catechists, and liturgical assistants) that contributed to the debate on pastoral needs; behind this, and largely implicit, were competing visions of the church. The lack of theological attention to the servant theme before the drafting of *LG* 29 is illustrated in two influential works of the period: Paul Winninger's full contemporary "dossier" of the preconconciliar discussion in *Vers un renouveau du diaconat* (Strasbourg: Declée de Brouwer, 1957); and Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, eds., *Diakonia in Christo. Über die Erneuerung des Diakonates*. *Quaestiones Disputatae* 15/16 (Freiburg: Herder, 1962), a 600-page collection of articles where the servant theme appears as a theological idea only briefly, as one key to diaconal identity, in Augustinus Kerkwoorde, "Die Theologie des Diakonates," 220–84 at 271. The initial focus on historical, institutional, and pastoral issues is not surprising given there was no existing diaconal office on which to reflect theologically.

33. Council debates October 4–16, 1963: contemporary summaries in Giovanni Caprile, ed., *Cronache del Concilio Vaticano II edite da "La Civiltà Cattolica,"* 4 vols. (Rome: Edizione Civiltà Cattolica, 1966–68), 3:70–95 and 4:100–9. Doctrinal Commission report of July 1964 in Giuseppe Alberigo and Franca Magistretti, eds., *Constitutionis Dogmaticae Lumen Gentium Synopsis Historica* (Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, 1975), 464–66.

*Lumen Gentium* 29 is the last section of the Constitution's third chapter, which treats the hierarchy and includes a relatively long section on bishops followed by a much shorter treatment of priests before turning to deacons in section 29. The key to diaconal identity emerges if we recognize the textual emphases in the section's first paragraph: specifically, the opening, the closing, and the language that makes deacons distinctive within chapter 3's presentation of the hierarchy as a whole.

This chapter assigns three tasks to the clergy: to teach, sanctify, and govern the people of God.<sup>34</sup> The way in which section 29 handles the third task shows how diaconal identity is envisioned. As we move through the chapter from bishops to priests, the three tasks are exercised with increasing limitations.<sup>35</sup> For deacons, the scope of the first two tasks is further limited, as sanctifying and teaching become "the ministry of the liturgy, [and] of the Word . . ." But for the third task we find a complete substitution: governing is replaced by "charity."<sup>36</sup> Read within chapter 3 as a whole, the point is clear. Deacons do not govern; instead, they perform works of charity. The substitution serves to stress the importance of this task for deacons, and the fact that its exercise is in some way distinctive of diaconal office.

A few lines later, the text returns to the three tasks, and this time, picking up the thread that the third task has to do with governance, the document qualifies and expands its earlier statement by admitting a form of diaconal leadership next to the works of charity. Before this, the text has listed nine functions that deacons may perform, all of which are within the ministries of the Word and of liturgy. But in summing up, the text returns to the third task, describing the deacon as "dedicated to the works of charity and administration . . ."<sup>37</sup> The conclusion: deacons clearly have all three tasks to perform, yet what is distinctive about them compared with bishops and priests is a focus, already stressed, on caritative service, placed together now with a qualitatively different, subordinate form of leadership in the church—not governing (*regere*) but administration (*administratio*). This word denotes an organizational role more concerned with implementation than with policy, and where any exercise of leadership over others is limited and performed under supervision.<sup>38</sup> In the tasks of teaching and sanctifying, then, deacons are simply more limited than bishops and priests. But in the focus on works of charity and on the limited and supervised exercise of leadership, deacons are distinctive—indeed unique—within the clergy. The *Relatio* offered to the council to explain *Lumen Gentium* 29 supports this reading, noting that the list of liturgical and catechetical tasks, though given relatively long treatment, is intended to

34. *LG* 21, Tanner, 2:864–65, esp. 865 lines 15–19; see also, for bishops, *Christus Dominus* (October 28, 1965), 2, Tanner, 2:921, and for priests, *Presbyterium Ordinis* (December 7, 1965), 13, Tanner, 2:1058–60.

35. On bishops, *LG* 21 as cited above; on priests, *LG* 28, Tanner, 2:872–74.

36. At Tanner, 2:874, line 12.

37. *Ibid.*, line 21.

38. *LG* here presents the objective norms and conditions of diaconal activity within the church, not the inner attitude of service to the people of God, which is characteristic of bishops and priests as much as of deacons.

be illustrative but not definitive for diaconal ministry. The most distinctive aspect of the diaconate, the *Relatio* affirms, is the dedication to charity and administration.<sup>39</sup>

The opening and closing of the key paragraph in *Lumen Gentium* 29 further stress the deacon's identity as servant. The paragraph opens by highlighting the diaconate's "lower level" within the hierarchy and its character as ministry or service (*ministerium*) rather than priesthood. This opening already emphasizes the humble status and limited power in the sacramental and pastoral spheres that are to characterize deacons.<sup>40</sup> Their place in the clergy is to be servants of others, particularly the bishop, and to minister to others' needs. This vision is distilled and given greater weight in the paragraph's conclusion, which uses a quote from Polycarp exhorting deacons to "... walk in the truth of the Lord, who became the servant (*minister*) of all." The footnote explains that Polycarp's own word here is *diakonos*, thus equating "deacon" with "servant."<sup>41</sup>

While *Ad Gentes* adds to the council's presentation of deacons by addressing the missionary situation, *Lumen Gentium*'s framework of the deacon as servant is carried into this later document. *Ad Gentes* does present deacons as "leading (*moderantes*) far-flung Christian communities," which suggests a somewhat broader scope for leadership than is implied in the *administratio* of *Lumen Gentium* 29. But deacons do this only "in the name of a parish priest or bishop," so the limitations and the stress on supervision are retained. *Ad Gentes* also places somewhat more emphasis on the catechetical role of deacons, but as in *Lumen Gentium* 29 works of charity substitute for governing as their third task, highlighting the distinctive diaconal calling to caritative service.<sup>42</sup>

Why did the council document frame the diaconate by highlighting works of charity, limitations on power, and a servant identity? The latter two emphases clearly had

39. *Acta Synodalia*, 3/1, 260. Discussion in Hervé Legrand, "Le diaconat dans sa relation avec L'Eglise et ses ministères," in *Diaconat XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. André Hacquin and Philippe Weber (Brussels: Lumen Vitae, 1997), 23–24. Herbert Vorgrimler, a *peritus* at the council and major supporter of the diaconate, asserts that *Lumen Gentium* 29 was designed to stress the tasks of social work ("Sozialarbeit") and public witness in the world rather than sacramental and pastoral responsibilities; the list of liturgical and catechetical roles was inserted to help gain the support of Latin American bishops. See "Liturgie, Diakonie, and Diakone," in *Die Diakonale Dimension der Liturgie*, ed. Benedikt Kranemann, Thomas Sternberg, and Walter Zahner, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 218 (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 236–45 at 240–44.

40. Gérard Philips comments that *diakonos* and *minister* are both generic terms for servant ("serviteur"), and notes that deacons are servants not only of the church but of priests and bishops. Philips, *L'Église et son mystère au II<sup>e</sup> Concile du Vatican. Histoire, texte, et commentaire de la Constitution Lumen Gentium*, 2 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1967), 1:376.

41. *Epistle to the Philippians* 5:2. Polycarp's culminating "servant of all" made his virtue list for deacons more compelling within the framework of a servant church than the virtue lists for deacons in *Didache* 15:1–2 and 1 Tim 3:8–13, which conclude by stressing the honor of the office. Philips notes that the paragraph ends with a return to "charity and administration" and culminates with "Christ, servant of all" in order to provide complete clarity about their paramount significance ("par souci d'exactitude ..."). Philips, *L'Église*, 1:381.

42. *AG* 16, at Tanner, 2:1026, lines 6–13.

some practical underpinnings: the council had no intention of defining diaconal office in a way that could set up any possible rivalry with priests or bishops.<sup>43</sup> But beyond that, these themes present the deacon as a clear representative, within the clergy, of the evolving idea of a servant church, itself understood as the representative of Christ the servant.

In the church's reception of the council, the understanding of deacons as representing Christ the servant became normative for the first generation of church teaching, theological reflection, and ministerial practice, as the diaconate grew rapidly, primarily in North America and Western Europe. In the immediate aftermath of the council, theologians picked up the servant theme primarily as significant for a deacon's "spirituality,"<sup>44</sup> but official documents and papal addresses increasingly treated the office itself as representing Christ the servant. Paul VI, setting out norms for the new permanent diaconate in 1972, describes the office as a "sign or sacrament of the Lord Christ himself, who came not to be served, but to serve."<sup>45</sup> John Paul II, in a 1985 address to the Italian Diaconate Convention, states that "the deacon, participating in the triple function of the sacrament of Orders, personifies in his degree Christ as servant of the Father."<sup>46</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) roots diaconal identity in sacramental character, asserting that "the sacrament of Holy Orders marks [deacons] with an imprint ('character') which cannot be removed and which configures them to Christ, who made himself the 'deacon' or servant of all."<sup>47</sup> In 1998, the Congregation for Catholic Education issued its *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*, noting that *Lumen Gentium* 29 and its quotation of Polycarp had "outline[d] the specific theological identity of the deacon: as a participant in the one ecclesiastical ministry, he is a specific sacramental sign, in the Church, of Christ the servant," and therefore, in his "specific spirituality . . . a living icon ('*iconem* 'viventum) of Christ the servant within the Church."<sup>48</sup> These and similar treatments of diaconal identity show an increasing attempt to harmonize a representation of Christ the servant with ideas about sacramental character and a theology of Holy Orders rather than any move to deepen Vatican II's vision of the deacon as exemplifying of the servant dimension of

43. The fact of such rivalries during the early centuries was a concern in the preconiliar and conciliar discussions, and is noted with historical references by Philips, *L'Eglise*, 1:378.

44. For example, Paul Winninger, *Les diacres. Histoire et avenir du diaconat* (Paris: Centurion, 1967), 131–37.

45. Paul VI, *Ad Pascendum* (August 15, 1972), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/motu-proprio/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_motu-proprio\\_19720815\\_ad-pascendum.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/motu-proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19720815_ad-pascendum.html).

46. John Paul II, Speech to the Italian Diaconate Convention (March 16, 1985), 2, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1985/march/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19850316\\_diaconi-permanenti.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1985/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850316_diaconi-permanenti.html).

47. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1570, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P4U.HTML](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4U.HTML).

48. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Ratio Fundamentalibus Institutionum Diaconorum Permanentium* (1998), 5 and 11, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_31031998\\_directorium-diaconi\\_lt.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_31031998_directorium-diaconi_lt.html).

the church.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, the servant identity of deacons, whether or not explicitly appealed to as representing the servant dimension of Christ or the church, has remained the default position in much theological and homiletic reflection on the diaconate.<sup>50</sup> We will examine in a moment the question of sacramentality and representation in the diaconate, and distinguish our approach from certain of the postconciliar developments. However, first we must turn to a theological and contextual analysis of diaconal ministry itself. This will help us to see clearly what is to be represented by the image of Christ the servant, and how some of the critiques turn out to be based on an incomplete or distorted understanding of the office itself, or of the conditions in which it is exercised.

## The Theological Coherence of the Diaconate: Three Dimensions

Theologically, the diaconate combines the entire bundle of ecclesial functions and relationships into which a deacon enters as a result of ordination.<sup>51</sup> The office integrates three dimensions—functional, relational, and sacramental—which we will consider in turn. The first has engendered the most confusion and will be examined in some detail.

That the church tasks deacons with fulfilling particular functions should be clear from the “three task” framework of *Lumen Gentium*. Deacons exercise the ministries of the Word, liturgy, charity, and (if we follow *LG* 29) “administration.” We have seen how these last two ministries emerged in the Vatican II documents, somewhat uneasily, from the third clerical task, governance, and how they highlight the servant role of deacons. Many treatments of diaconal ministry stick to the “three task” schema,

49. The idea of deacons representing Christ the servant by being a vanguard for a servant church is still found in some theological treatments, e.g., William Ditewig, *The Emerging Diaconate: Servant Leaders in a Servant Church* (New York: Paulist, 2007), esp. 126–8, 137–8; Zollitch, “Ein modernes Amt,” 374. But in recent decades, reflection on diaconal ministry normally is not rooted, explicitly at least, in a particular vision of the church.

50. See, for example, the strong servant focus in Pope Francis Homily at the diaconate jubilee (Rome, May 29, 2016), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160529\\_omelia-giubileo-diaconi.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160529_omelia-giubileo-diaconi.html). Other homiletic and theological literature has been cited already. Particularly after the ITC raised its questions in 2003, however, church documents have been more cautious in appealing specifically to Christ the servant, a development noted by Delabre, “Diaconat et épiscopat,” 238–40.

51. This way of defining the theology of ministry as applied to deacons combines Richard Gaillardetz’s view of ministry as “ecclesial re-positioning,” focusing on a minister’s pattern of relationships in the church, with an appreciation of the way in which actual ministerial tasks or services come to define who the minister is. See Richard Gaillardetz, “The Ecclesiological Foundations of Ministry within an Ordered Communion,” in *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood: Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry*, ed. Susan Wood (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2003), 26–51, esp. 36–41; and Kathleen Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2010), 48–67.



making “ministry of charity” the third task; any definite leadership function is then omitted or left implicit.<sup>52</sup>

Although understanding deacons as leaders has engendered some ambivalence among both theologians and other ministers,<sup>53</sup> in practice the exercise of the other tasks by someone holding an office in the church must involve some form of leadership. Nor does the focus on humble service in the metaphor of Christ the servant preclude deacons from functioning as leaders. In the New Testament itself, it is precisely the leaders of the church who are urged to be servants of all (Mark 9:33–35 and parallels). This is a way of envisioning leadership, not a denial of its exercise. The substitution of “administration” for “governing” in *Lumen Gentium* 29 simply underlines that all leadership by deacons is exercised within limits, and stops short of full pastoral oversight; likewise, the opening of this passage in *Lumen Gentium* with the formula “not for priesthood but for ministry” makes clear that the office in no way involves presiding over the eucharistic assembly.<sup>54</sup> Yet even when implicit or combined with the ministry of charity, leadership within limits remains a diaconal task.

Furthermore, the ministry of charity as a central function of deacons must be understood in its fullness, and not narrowly defined as referring only to hospital and prison ministry, working in soup kitchens, visiting the sick, and similar “charitable work” as commonly understood. Diaconal ministry frames all such activities as present signs of the kingdom that incorporate, at least implicitly by their integration into one office, aspects of sacrament and witness. Moreover, in light of the church’s social doctrine, this focus on caritative service must include activities aimed at promoting social justice.

The diaconal tasks are very broad categories of ministry and will mean different concrete roles in different contexts. Moreover, the actual ministries performed by individual deacons will be weighted more in some areas than others, depending on need and talent.<sup>55</sup> As a church office, however, the diaconate only has coherence if it is ordered

52. For example, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), 18–21. The deacon is called a “guide” in the title to the section on the task of charity, but the activity of guiding is not mentioned in the text itself.

53. The amendment of canon 1009 of the Code of Canon Law to exclude deacons from acting in the person of Christ the Head involves in part a move to set clearer limits on diaconal leadership: Benedict XVI, *Omnium in Mentem* (October 26, 2009), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_apl\\_20091026\\_codex-iuris-canonici.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20091026_codex-iuris-canonici.html).

54. The framework of *LG* 29 is developed in Congregation for Catholic Education, *Ratio Fundamentalis* 9, which defines the third task as follows: “Finally, the task of governing is performed through a commitment to the works of charity and assistance and for the benefit of communities or areas of ecclesial life, especially as regards charitable activities. This is the ministry most characteristic of the deacon.” William Ditewig has written extensively about “servant-leadership” by deacons. See “The Kenotic Leadership of Deacons,” in *The Deacon Reader*, ed. James Keating (New York: Paulist, 2006), 248–77.

55. The shifting emphases over time between liturgical, charitable, and catechetical roles for deacons in Germany is well summarized by Stephan Sander, “Anlass and Zielsetzung des Symposions,” in Hartmann, Reger, and Sander, *Ortsbestimmungen*, 3–10 at 6.

to the exercise of the totality of its functions. Indeed, the sole rationale for combining them in a single office is that the sum is greater than the parts. Thus, the diaconal roles in liturgy tie a deacon's activities in catechesis and caritative service to the church's worship, even if there is no immediate sacramental role in a particular instance of performing these other ministries. Likewise, the responsibility for catechesis is always at least implicit in a deacon's other ministries, and even in his life in a larger society, if only because he is witnessing to the faith by being publicly identified with diaconal office. The stress on caritative service framed by *Lumen Gentium* 29 and developed in subsequent church documents is a distinctive diaconal task only if it issues from and is marked by the diaconal roles in worship and in the proclamation of the Word.

Like other persons who exercise offices in the church, deacons are not wholly defined by their functions. But who they are cannot be wholly separated from what they are tasked to do. If we define diaconal identity without reference to any set of functions, we miss both the distinctive quality and the concrete content of the office. The result is to make diaconal office merely a participation in the bishop's office of pastoral oversight, where the deacon takes on whatever functions are required to further the episcopal ministry, or where a deacon's task is to carry that ministry mainly into non-church settings.<sup>56</sup> It is true that there is a quality of flexibility in diaconal ministry, which a bishop (in practice, often a parish priest in consultation with the deacon himself) fits to particular needs in a wide variety of ways. Nevertheless, as we have shown, diaconal office does come with a particular set of tasks (however broadly defined) and so is not merely a participation in episcopal ministry.<sup>57</sup> Nor can we define diaconal office solely in terms of its functions: doing so results in the admittedly widespread but incorrect perception of deacons as mini-priests or social workers with special roles at Mass. Rather, diaconal office becomes distinctive and intelligible only when ordered to the totality of its tasks, and further defined through its relational and sacramental dimensions.

These dimensions are clear enough in their general outlines to require only a brief treatment here. A deacon is related to the bishop by the promise of obedience;

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56. Thus, Richard Gaillardetz defines diaconal ministry as "service to the ministry of *episkopē*," in "On the Theological Integrity of the Diaconate," in *Theology of the Diaconate: The State of the Question*, ed. Owen F. Cummings, William T. Ditewig, and Richard R. Gaillardetz (New York: Paulist, 2005), 67–97. Christian Delarbre comes to a similar conclusion in "Diaconat et épiscopat," 229–36. Rupert M. Scheule argues that as all of the functions of deacons could in principle be performed by a non-ordained person, the key to diaconal identity must be sought elsewhere than in functions, specifically in the deacon's character as an ordained minister living mainly in a non-church setting: "Ja zum vagen Amt. Apologie eines offenen theologischen Selbstverständnisses Ständiger Diakone," in Hartmann, Reger, and Sander, *Ortsbestimmungen*, 70–77. I argue here that this social location is a contextual factor rather than a defining key to diaconal identity.

57. Didier Gonneaud argues correctly that defining diaconal ministry as participation in the bishop's office undermines the diaconate's sacramentality as well as its distinctiveness: "La sacramentalité du ministère diaconale," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 36 (2005): 3–20 at 5–7, <https://doi.org/10.2143/rtl.36.1.2017437>.

to a particular place, by incardination in a diocese; and to the church, whose life and mission he makes a permanent and public commitment to serve. The sacramental dimension includes the conferral of sacramental grace at ordination, and the deacon's resulting entrance into one of three orders of the hierarchy. The rite and the order define the functional and relational dimensions of the office we have discussed already. Participation in the order is also permanent. That permanence gives solidity to another aspect of the diaconate's sacramentality: the capacity of this office to represent some aspect of the divine mystery, specifically of Christ and Christ's salvific mission in the world. I am arguing that deacons are called to represent Christ the servant. But here we must pause briefly to define what sort of representation this is.

### Sacramentality and Representation

The bewildering variety of words currently used for such a representation by deacons suggests that it will not be possible to adopt a term already understood, and also that we will need to define "representation" with some care for the purpose of this study. In the literature, a deacon with respect to Christ the servant is said to be a "representative," a "sign," a "sacramental sign," an "image" or an "icon"; he is portrayed as "representing," "exemplifying," "symbolizing," being "configured to," "conforming himself to," or "personifying"; and in another way of expressing this last idea, of acting "in the person of."<sup>58</sup> These terms have a variety of connotations, and some bring with them particular theological implications. In this study, I use the broad term "representation," which I propose to render sufficiently precise for our purposes by delimiting it clearly.<sup>59</sup> In general, I use "represent" in the sense of "make present in human experience;" for diaconal office, this representation will have a sacramental dimension. Such a formulation captures most of what the various words used in the literature convey. To avoid claiming more than is useful or necessary, however, I exclude from the definition used here two specific kinds of representation that have been claimed for the diaconate.

The first is the idea that a deacon acts "in the person of Christ the servant." This formula is adapted from an understanding of the priest as acting in the person of Christ, particularly in celebrating the Eucharist.<sup>60</sup> However apt this expression may be in the case of priesthood, the adaptation is problematic for deacons because it is hard to see how personification can be applied only to a particular aspect (servanthood) of the

58. This list is not exhaustive but covers the major terms used. All have been employed in works quoted or cited here.

59. For the broad applicability of the term in communication, see Frank J. Warkne and T. V. F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993), s.v. "Representation."

60. Anthony Barrett, "What is Ordination? A Roman Catholic Perspective," *Ecclesiology* 3 (2006): 57–79; medieval background at 67–68; issues in the case of priesthood at 75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744136606067682>.

person of Christ.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the suggested relation to Christ is distinctly personal and tends to obscure an ecclesial mediation intrinsic to a deacon's service, which is carried out by serving a bishop or priest, whether in liturgy or in pastoral and charitable tasks.

Second, the representation I argue for here does not include the related idea that deacons receive "Christ the servant" as a sacramental character at ordination. This idea is problematic in several ways we cannot try to solve here. It is difficult enough to establish a specific content to "character," beyond the view that sacramental grace (in baptism, confirmation, and ordination) effects something permanent in the recipient, so that the sacrament is not repeatable.<sup>62</sup> In the case of ordination, the difficulty is magnified in various ways, not least because there is one sacrament conferred in separate rites for three distinct offices.<sup>63</sup> Thus, must there be a single character or can there be a particular one for each office? Even if each office in the hierarchy could be shown to have a distinct character, we would still need a coherent definition of that character for the diaconate.<sup>64</sup>

We noted earlier the appeals to personification and sacramental character in church documents, theological literature, and homiletic writings about diaconal representation of Christ the servant. These approaches affirm that the representation is in some way sacramental. The understanding of representation followed here also incorporates sacramentality, but in two ways which should not be similarly problematic. The first I have mentioned already: a sacrament in the narrow sense (holy orders) gives the diaconate permanence and definition (both functional and relational), so that the office has a solidity that allows it to represent a reality beyond itself. Second, the representation that this office does effect is sacramental in the broad sense that human words and actions (in this case, those of a deacon in the right exercise of his office) become vehicles for making an aspect of the divine mystery present in human experience. Thus deacons, like bishops, priests, and married couples in other ways, are enabled to represent dimensions of Christ's presence in the world. Ignatius of Antioch appeals to this broadly sacramental representation when he writes that bishops should be representatives (*typoi*) of God the Father, presbyters of the apostles, and deacons of Christ.<sup>65</sup> In

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61. The exclusion of deacons by *Omnium in Mentem* (2009) from acting in the person of Christ the Head moves deacons farther away from the possibility of acting "in the person of Christ" at all.
  62. Summary by Dorothea Sattler, "Charakter, Sakramentaler," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994): 2:1009–13, with references; Barrett, "Ordination," 66–67, 73–76, and 78–79 on the evolving definition of character in Holy Orders.
  63. Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, trans. Linda Moloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 263–65, 274–76.
  64. Alphonse Borras criticizes a diaconal "configuration" to Christ generally, and a christological understanding of sacramental character specifically, on several grounds, and I have made use of his insights here. He also affirms a symbolic representation for diaconal office which includes a briefly sketched image of Christ the servant as part of a broader definition of what deacons may represent (146–7). Borras, *Le diaconat au risque de sa nouveauté* (Brussels: Lessius, 2007), 111–49.
  65. *To the Trallians* 3.1. Summary of patristic understandings of sacramental representation and later developments, with references, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), s.v. "Sacrament."

the last case, Ignatius is pointing to some but not all of servant dimensions of Christ; the deacon serves both the bishop and the church/the faithful.<sup>66</sup> This *typos* language is not complicated by later ideas about personification or permanent character, and without having the same content as Christ the servant has for the revived diaconate, the term *typos* illustrates well the kind of representation we have defined here.

To sum up: I argue here that deacons should represent Christ the servant in a way that is rooted in the sacrament of ordination and is broadly sacramental, but that does not include or rely on ideas about personification or sacramental character. This definition helps to clarify why an argument for such representation does not prejudice the debate about ordaining women to the diaconate; we noted earlier that this concern has encouraged some scholars to move away from claiming any representation by deacons that is based in Christ. However, there is nothing gendered about the servant metaphor itself as applied to Christ: a bridegroom is a man, but “servant” cuts across gender lines completely. If diaconal office is called to make Christ the servant present in human experience, an “iconic argument” might attempt to show that the representative should have the same gender as Christ, but this would be credible only if the representation amounted to full personification—an identification which we have seen to be both unnecessary and problematic.<sup>67</sup> The primary focus in the debate, whether the church may or should receive women into the diaconate as a grade of holy orders at all (“the argument from authority”), is not affected either way by an understanding of diaconal office as representing Christ the servant, if we understand sacramental representation by the diaconate as defined here.<sup>68</sup> Thus, we neither contribute to any “iconic argument” against ordaining women to the diaconate, nor prejudice the broader debate. Rather, we ask if the diaconal office itself, whether as at present open only to males or at some time open to both genders, is structured to represent Christ the servant, and whether this metaphor provides guidance for diaconal ministry in the contexts where it is practiced.

## Christ the Servant in the Structure of Diaconal Office

We noted earlier that the image of Christ the servant incorporates four aspects of service that together provide a window on Christ’s person and salvific activity, and also

66. Service to the *ekklēsia*, *To the Trallians* 2.3. Service to the bishop is repeatedly stressed for everyone but especially for deacons, e.g., *To the Magnesians* 3.1.

67. For the scope and limitations of the “iconic argument,” see Sara Butler, “Women Deacons and Sacramental Symbolism,” *New Diaconal Review* 6 (2011): 38–49; and Gary Macy, William Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano, “Women Deacons and Sacramental Symbolism: A Response to Sara Butler,” *New Diaconal Review* 8 (2012): 12–22.

68. Gerhard Müller relies solely on the primary argument (“from authority”) and does not appeal to the “iconic argument” in reaching the conclusion that the church may not ordain women to the sacramental diaconate. Müller, *Priesthood and Diaconate: The Recipient of the Sacrament of Holy Orders from the Perspective of Creation Theology and Eschatology*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002), 35–62, 183–226.

that this image provides a model for all Christian discipleship. We now consider how diaconal office is structured to represent this image with a particular intensity. After highlighting how each of the four aspects of Christ's servanthood is expressed by analogy to characteristics of diaconal office, we will turn to the office itself and examine how its functional, relational, and sacramental dimensions each contribute to the representation of Christ the servant.

Like Christ, the deacon serves the will of another ("whose servant"), always acting as the agent, the assistant, the one who is sent—particularly serving the bishop, but also priests in their role of standing in for the bishop. And the deacon does this with a completeness of subordination, of servanthood, that is unique in the tripartite clergy. Like Christ, the deacon is the servant of all ("serving whom")—both of the disciples (for the deacon, as for other clergy, the people of God) and of the world (for the deacon, especially through the focus on caritative service and ecclesial witness in non-church settings). Like Christ, the deacon is called to be a humble servant, distanced from power or status ("serving how")—particularly within the clergy, where he occupies the "lower level" with the most limited powers in the both sacramental and pastoral realms. Like Christ the servant, the deacon is particularly tasked with a ministry of charity, in solidarity with the poor, the suffering and the outcast ("what service").

The distilled representation of Christ the servant I have just summarized grows out of the ecclesial relationships and responsibilities into which a deacon enters, permanently and publicly, as a result of ordination: circumscribed and supervised leadership, limited powers with respect to the clergy's three tasks, and a non-exclusive emphasis on humble and caritative service. The image of Christ the servant thus offers a distinctive key to the deacon's ecclesial identity, one that is qualitatively different from that of bishops and priests on the one hand, and of all the baptized on the other.

The image is also rooted in each of the three aspects of diaconal office sketched earlier. In the functional dimension, we see this in the focus on caritative service within an integrated exercise of all the diaconal tasks. In analyzing the image of Christ the servant above, I noted that Jesus's works of charity were intended to alleviate real physical and emotional suffering; but his activity in this sphere flows from the proclamation of the kingdom, points toward its consummation, and symbolizes its fullness. Jesus' integration of works of this-worldly charity within a broader ministry of *kerygma* and symbolic action offers a particularly apt analogy for the stress on caritative service within combined tasks of Word, liturgy, and charity that together make up diaconal ministry.

The image of Christ the servant is very clear in the relational dimension of diaconal office, where the deacon always acts as the agent or assistant of the bishop or priest, and is in a serving relation both to the people of God and to the needs of a broader world. Finally, the sacramental dimension of diaconal office—the entrance into an order with permanent and public characteristics—is what provides the solidity that enables a deacon to do the representing of Christ the servant in the first place, however imperfectly real holders of this office actually do so.

## Christ the Servant as a Guide to Diaconal Ministry in Practice

Besides having theological integrity as a key to diaconal identity, the image of Christ the servant has provided, and continues to provide, a fruitful model for diaconal ministry in practice.<sup>69</sup> I noted earlier that the diaconate has developed in the context of three conditions on the ground: in the church, a sharp drop in the number of priests, together with an increase in both volunteer and professional ministry by people who are not ordained; a typical social location for deacons in family life and non-church jobs; and a ministry situation challenged by an increasingly post-Christian culture. Within these contexts, envisioning diaconal ministry on the model of Christ the servant brings out its distinctive identity, highlights its particular role in the church's ministry, and offers useful guidance to deacons in their ministerial practice.

This theme has helped to guard both diaconal and priestly distinctiveness in a church faced with a plummeting number of priests. Deacons, who commit themselves to serve the church where the need is greatest, now exercise a variety of sacramental and pastoral roles once normally performed by priests, with the attendant danger that the distinctiveness of the priesthood may be obscured, or that deacons come to function merely as "mini-priests." But the limited and serving role that deacons have in liturgy or in parish ministry, contrasted with the priestly role of presiding, both liturgically and pastorally, keeps the distinction in view.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the emphasis on caritative service as a central element in the ordinary ministry of deacons, even if practical needs do not allow this task to come first in every individual case, calls on deacons to participate in and represent Christ's love in a distinctive way that goes outward from the church's threshold. All of this highlights the quality of humble service rooted in the image of Christ the servant that is distilled in the ministry of deacons in a way that makes them recognizably different from bishops and priests.

The diaconate also has developed in a church blessed by a significant increase in ministerial activities by people who are not ordained, many of whom exercise those ministries

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69. In addressing this situation, I have developed an argument that is consistent with the helpful "Ten Points of Reference" in William Ditewig, "Charting a Theology of the Diaconate," in Cummings, Ditewig, and Gaillardetz, *The Theology of the Diaconate: The State of the Question* (New York: Paulist, 2005), 31–65.

70. Sherri L. Vallee argues that the widespread practice of taking on too many "presbyteral roles" weakens the ability of deacons to be "icons of Christ the humble servant in our midst." Such an outcome is a serious danger in practice; the antidote is a proper balance between the three diaconal tasks. Still, it is worth noting that there is nothing inherently "presbyteral" in the liturgical and pastoral roles performed by deacons: the roles are limited, and done in an explicitly subordinate or assisting manner which is consistent with the image of Christ the servant. Specifically, there is nothing "presbyteral" about performing baptisms and witnessing weddings and funerals; these are ordinary roles for deacons (extraordinary for all the baptized), and quite distinct from presiding at the Eucharist or celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation. Vallee, "The Restoration of the Permanent Diaconate: A Blending of Roles," *Worship* 77, no. 6 (2003): 530–52.

in a highly committed and even full-time manner. Of these, some have greater training and/or may be said to give greater service to the church than deacons typically do. But the non-ordained ministries are aimed at specific functions, exercised for a given time. The service of deacons, even when more limited, is qualitatively different because it grows out of a permanent, public commitment and is inaugurated through a sacramental ordination by which the deacon is called to exercise not just one or more functions, but all of the diaconal tasks, with a unifying focus on caritative service. In a practical sense, the mode of humble service inspired by Christ the servant is a useful reminder to deacons to avoid “pulling rank” on non-ordained ministers, particularly as they struggle to gain recognition in a church where in the past ministry has been so identified with clerical power.

The typical social location of deacons is the same as the faithful who are not ordained, but deacons as an order are tasked to reach precisely into such secular settings in a manner that is not typical for priests and bishops. Moreover, the emphasis on humble and caritative service derived from the metaphor of Christ the servant is particularly suited to ministry in the non-church settings in which deacons ordinarily work and live. Of course, all of the baptized are called to practice charity in everyday social interactions. The setting for these interactions is the same for deacons as for the laity, but a deacon’s service within them is qualitatively different because of its permanent, public, sacramentally rooted dimensions; and also because the full range of his ministry, including Word and sacrament, are always present, even if only potentially and/or implicitly. Finally, in the increasingly post-Christian world of Western Europe and North America, the unifying emphasis within diaconal ministry on humble and caritative service turns out to provide a particularly effective way of bringing a recognizable ecclesial presence into everyday life, as in these cultures Word and sacrament are becoming harder for many people to comprehend.

We have shown that the metaphor of Christ the servant provides a theologically cogent and practically fruitful model for the diaconate as it has developed in the concrete social and ecclesial conditions of the past forty-five years. We now consider the two general lines of criticism that have questioned the entire approach. The critical forays have been invaluable in bringing clarity and rigor to the debate, but we will see that the model of Christ the servant remains valid for the diaconate, if both the image and office are correctly understood.

## The Critics

The first line of criticism questions the theological coherence of applying the image of Christ the servant to diaconal office and/or finds the image wanting as a guide to ministerial practice. As I have already presented a detailed argument that comes to the opposite conclusion and incorporates many responses to these criticisms, I will survey the most significant critiques briefly here, referring back to my own argument.

Some have argued that servanthood should be characteristic of all ministers, and indeed of all Christian disciples, and so cannot be distinctive for the diaconate.<sup>71</sup> I have

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71. E.g., ITC, *Le diaconat: evolution et perspectives* 7(b); Gaillardetz, “Theological Integrity,” 73.



shown how diaconal office actually has been structured to represent a particularly distilled image of Christ the servant. While this metaphor is problematic as a definition of sacramental character for the diaconate, the representation claimed here is operative in a way that need not be identical with or even include sacramental character. It has been argued that the image of Christ the servant points to a narrowly functional view of diaconal identity, envisioning the deacon as a sort of ordained social worker.<sup>72</sup> I have acknowledged the center of gravity in caritative service within the diaconal functions, but insisted on the integration of this ministry into the full range of tasks; placed all the functions within the relational structure and sacramental framework of diaconal office; and grounded the image of Christ the servant in all the dimensions of that office. Alphonse Borras has cautioned that this image can push deacons to a personal self-identification with Christ, resulting in a distorted and burdensome spirituality that loses the ecclesial focus required for effective ministry.<sup>73</sup> Granted that these are potential dangers, it remains true that the structure of this ecclesial office and not the personality of an individual deacon is the vehicle for representing Christ the servant. Finally, there is an undercurrent of unease among some critics with the “humble servant” aspect of this metaphor, because it may undercut the appropriate exercise of leadership by deacons.<sup>74</sup> This is a real risk in practical contexts, but we have shown that a correct understanding of the image of Christ the servant shows it actually to be a model of servant leadership.

The second line of criticism, championed by John N. Collins, argues that key components of Christ the servant as a model for the diaconate lack scriptural support and, mainly for this reason, provide the wrong guidance for contemporary practice. My argument has not addressed this criticism directly, so I will respond to it here in some detail.

Collins argues that this model for the diaconate is based on a simple misunderstanding of words. The mistake came about, he says, through a wrong translation of the Greek term *diakonia* and related *diakon-* words, widely used in early Christian writings, as denoting care and loving service. This misunderstanding arose in the Reformed tradition and directly influenced the modern development of a distinctly “diaconal” ministry focused on caritative service to the poor and suffering, particularly among German Protestants.<sup>75</sup> The mistake was given academic respectability by the New Testament scholar Wilhelm Brandt, himself a chaplain to German deaconesses, and then incorporated into the influential *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* through entries on the *diakon-* words, authored by H. W. Beyer.<sup>76</sup>

72. E.g., Gaillardetz, “Theological Integrity,” 72–73.

73. Borras, *Le Diaconat au risque*, 122–25.

74. E.g., Sander, *Das Amt des Diakons*, 137–38.

75. It is hard to tell whether the German Protestant understanding of “Diakonie” had any influence, direct or indirect, on the Second Vatican Council’s framing of the revived diaconate. The general ideas about a servant church with servant ministers are the influences we find in the council documents themselves, as discussed above.

76. German edition 1935; trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley as Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964); Beyer entries are at 2:81–93. Discussion by Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, 1–14.

In 1990, Collins published an exhaustive word-study of the Greek *diakon-* words (including the noun *diakōn*, used for the office of deacon) in which he was able to show that “care, concern and love – those elements of meaning introduced into the interpretation of this word by Wilhelm Brandt – are just not part of their field of meaning.”<sup>77</sup> Rather, the *diakon-* words point to situations in which one person acts as an agent or messenger for another, or performs in an assisting role. Further, there is nothing in the *diakon-* words themselves that suggests such actions should be seen as humble service. In a subsequent stream of books and articles, Collins has argued for an understanding of all ministry, including diaconal ministry, as being rooted not in any particular kind of service, but in the fact of being publicly commissioned and sent out on behalf of the church.<sup>78</sup>

Collins’s studies have demolished the basis of that (still) widely used word association between diaconal ministry (*diakonia*) and humble, caritative service. Moreover, he has highlighted that the New Testament and early church understanding of ministry, including its understanding of the office of deacon, provides no justification for envisioning the modern diaconate as especially devoted to humble service and works of charity.

However, these lexical and exegetical considerations do not actually address the validity of a conciliar and post-conciliar Catholic understanding of a revived diaconate.<sup>79</sup> In the first place, there is no reason why the character of diaconal office should be circumscribed by the original semantic range of the *diakon-* words. This is true even of the ancient office, and much more so of the modern revival. Looking at the ancient diaconate, it is very probable that *diakonoi* received their titles because they acted as assistants or agents of *episkopoi* (“overseers” or “bishops”). Alistair Stewart has argued in a recent study that food distribution in connection with community meals was a function of *diakonoi* in the earliest churches—an adaptation of the role of *diakonoi* on temple staffs.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the original understanding of *diakonos* may have had more of an inherent charitable dimension than Collins allows. Still, that office did not originate with the focus on caritative service, and certainly not within the threefold

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77. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, 254. Collins’s conclusions were incorporated into revised entries in *BDAG* 3rd ed., 229–31, esp. 231 col. 1, where Collins is quoted.

78. E.g., Collins, *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry* (New York: Oxford, 2014), 165–264, incorporating writings from the previous decade, and his *Deacons and the Church*. Zollitch (“Der Diakonat”) accepts Collins’s argument that the *diakon-* words define a deacon as one who is sent or commissioned, and then moves effortlessly to say that they are sent out to be a sign of Christ the servant and of the servant church.

79. It may be enough to say, with Stephan Sander, that the church has broad freedom to change the content of ministerial offices, but reviving the diaconate within the framework of Christ the servant actually followed a scriptural model of development—see below. Sander, “Anlass und Zielsetzung,” 6.

80. Alistair C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 100–19.

ministry of Word, liturgy, and charity that characterize the revived diaconate of Vatican II. An official title may stay the same, while its content shifts and develops. Already in the ancient church, the title of *presbyteroi* or “elders” remained unchanged even while their ministry was increasingly understood through the lens of eucharistic presiding rather than age or mature judgment, as the original title suggests.

Indeed, the evidence of the early Christian sources provides a particularly apt model for the way in which Vatican II moved to revive diaconal ministry. What the New Testament itself shows is, first, that Christ himself commissioned an apostolic leadership for the church and, second, that this leadership quickly extended itself in a remarkable diversity of forms reflecting pastoral and missionary needs. Thus, we see the commissioning of the seventy and the seven, the incorporation of Paul and others into the leadership as apostles and apostolic delegates, the wide diversity of ministries in the Pauline churches, and the development of ministerial office by *episkopoi*, *presbyteroi*, and *diakonoï*.<sup>81</sup>

The participants at Vatican II followed precisely this scriptural model in their adaptation of the structure of ministry to meet pastoral and missionary challenges. In the case of the office of deacon, the move was a development from the ancient office, and from the original sense of *diakōn*, aimed at extending the church’s pastoral reach and framed by the metaphor of Christ the servant. We noted earlier that this metaphor has a theological coherence that is not captured by any one word-system. The Greek *diakon-* words actually refer to our first two senses of “whose servant” and “serving whom”: deacons serve the bishop, the faithful, and the church’s mission to the world. The focus on humble service is better captured by the Greek *doulos-douleuō* words that express the condition and activity of servitude/servanthood which the New Testament applied both to Christ and to ministers of the Gospel.<sup>82</sup> The council moved into the sphere of the *doulos-douleuō* words in applying the image of Christ the servant to the revived diaconate, a development amply justified on both scriptural and ecclesiological grounds, and moreover validated by subsequent pastoral results. In summary, although Collins’s philological critique has been valuable in helping us to use our words more carefully, it lacks normative force for defining the ecclesial identity of the revived diaconate or for evaluating the incorporation of Christ the servant into the understanding of this ministry.

In subsequent work on the present-day diaconate appealing to early Christian models and considered from an ecumenical viewpoint, Collins is particularly concerned to

81. The following passages, although hardly exhaustive, are illustrative: Jesus commissions the Twelve (Mark 6:7–13; Matt 10:1–15; Luke 9:1–6); the eleven (Matt 28:16–20; Mark 16:15–18); and the seventy (Luke 10:1–12). Appointment of the seven (Acts 6:1–6); diversity of ministries in the Pauline churches (1 Cor 12:4–11; Eph 4:11–13); *episkopoi* and *diakonoï* (1 Tim 3:1–13); apostles, James, and elders (Acts 14:23; Acts 15; 1 Pet 5:1–2; Jas 5:14); Timothy as an apostolic delegate commissioned by Paul and elders (1 Tim 4:11–16); and Titus as an apostolic delegate appointing elders, Titus 1:5.

82. Christ as *doulos*: Phil 2:7. Ministers of the gospel as *douloi*: Rom 1:1; 2 Cor 4:5; Gal 1:10; Titus 1:1; Jas 1:1; 3 Pet 1:1. This list is illustrative, but far from exhaustive.

avoid identifying the diaconate with “selfless loving service” as a specialized activity not fully rooted in the Christian community and its mission. This, he notes, was a common pattern for Protestant deaconesses dedicated to charitable work and living in motherhouses.<sup>83</sup> Collins does not deny that caritative service may be a special focus of diaconal ministry, but he insists on a fully ecclesial context for it. Thus, he argues that “an understanding of *diakonia* must be cultivated which embraces social welfare without simply being identified with it. One way to attempt this is through a sacred commission.”<sup>84</sup> This would provide a recognizable role for diaconal ministry within the community, root that ministry in liturgy, and make clear that the deacon’s service inside and beyond the community aims to “extend the benefits of the commemorative meal so far as they will reach.”<sup>85</sup> In fact, the Roman Catholic permanent diaconate has been structured on precisely this model: permanent commissioning through ordination; a recognizable office combining three tasks; rooted in Word and liturgy, moving outward from them in the focus on caritative service. Moreover, the scriptural image most foundational to this vision of the diaconate is Christ the servant.

## Conclusion

The wide-ranging inquiry into the theological, historical, contextual, and practical aspects of the permanent diaconate, particularly in the past generation, has enabled us to view this rapidly growing ministry with increasing clarity and concreteness. Vatican II framed the diaconate through the image of Christ the servant, but offered only a brief sketch of the office itself. Subsequent church documents, along with a stream of monographs and articles, have repeatedly appealed to Christ the servant as the key to diaconal ministry, usually without giving either the image or the office much definitional elaboration, critical analysis, or historical context. Critics have argued that the image fails to ground diaconal identity in Scripture, or in a coherent theology of ministry or orders; or that it provides flawed guidance for deacons in the practical conditions in which they exercise their ministry.

I have argued here that, on the contrary, Christ the servant is a theologically cogent, contextually supported, and practically useful vision of diaconal identity. We began by considering the scriptural image of Christ the servant in four aspects to capture its import and coherence. Moving to the historical context of the revived diaconate, we noted how this image framed the idea of a servant church—an important ecclesiological vision at Vatican II. The council distilled this image in its foundational sketch of diaconal identity (*LG 29*), specifically envisioning the deacon as “servant of all,” with a distinctive center of gravity in the ministry of charity. We turned next to the diaconal office itself in its functional, relational, and sacramental dimensions, and then clarified that the capacity for representation by this office is rooted in sacramental ordination and is broadly sacramental, but does not include or rely on ideas about personification

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83. Collins, *Deacons and the Church*, 119–20.

84. *Ibid.*, 134.

85. *Ibid.*, 131.

or sacramental character. I then showed how the office (particularly through its disengagement from ecclesial power and its focus on humble and caritative service) is structured to represent Christ the servant; and how the diaconate represents this image through its functions (especially the focus on this-worldly charity within a broader ministry of Word and sacrament) and relationships (particularly the stress on service in its various aspects: to the bishop, for the people, and for the church's mission in the world). The sacramental dimension, the deacon's entrance into an order with permanent and public characteristics, provides the stable foundation for the office's particular sacramental representation as Christ the servant. Turning to the context of ministry, we saw how the distilled focus on Christ the servant gives deacons a coherent ecclesial identity that is clearly distinct from bishops and priests on the one hand, and from non-ordained ministers on the other. Finally, we noted that a deacon's particular grounding in a ministry of charity integrated with the ministries of Word and sacrament is an apt vehicle for bringing a recognizably ecclesial presence into the unchurched and culturally post-Christian settings of North America and Western Europe where the vast majority of deacons live.

The vision of deacons as representing Christ the servant combines theological coherence, contextual grounding, and practical guidance in a way that qualifies it as foundational for understanding and living diaconal ministry. Inquiry and debate continue to shed new light on the diaconate in ways that enrich both understanding and practice. But deacons cannot jettison the call to represent Christ the servant without losing something integral to their ecclesial identity and to the gift they offer the church.

### **Author Biography**

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