

Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Challenging Long-Held Beliefs

Often times, when an assertion is repeated long enough, it can attain, by the mere fact of its repetition, the status of a truth. As a young boy growing up in the 1960s, my mother use to forbid me from going swimming an hour after I ate for fear that I would drown. This repeated assertion was grounded in the theory that, after we eat, some of our blood is diverted to our gut leaving less blood in our arms and legs. This lack of blood in our limbs, in turn, led to cramping which, in the mind of nearly every responsible American mother, meant the premature death of their child.

Was this true? Well, it was true to my Mother and she was not one to cross when the lives of her children were at stake. I mean, the theory was sound, but would it stand up to medical scrutiny? According to doctors at the Mayo Clinic, there is no scientific evidence that swimming after eating leads to drowning. Though I never lost confidence in my mother's care for me, she was functioning on the best theory of that time. New evidence, not available earlier, suggests that what was considered truth, was only partially true. Yes, cramping can occur, but not to the intensity and frequency that would result in drowning.

In a similar way, there are certain long-held assertions about the diaconate that should be subjected to scrutiny, such as the meaning of the term *diakonos* (service) as understood by the early Church.

Some years ago, the Australian linguist, John N. Collins, conducted an extensive study on the *diakon-* word group in the Scriptures, the writings of the early Church Fathers, and the corresponding Greek-speaking world. In his 2009 book, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Sources*, Collins concludes that, in all of these sources, the term means an envoy, emissary, or messenger and, at least early on, had little to do with care for the poor and needy – though this would later develop. Instead, he maintains that Jesus' *diakonia* is done out of compassion and love for others as an envoy of the Father.

This understanding stands in stark contrast to the common notion of the deacon as a kind of spiritual handyman occupied by corporal works of mercy. While there is a certain truth to this, it masks the deeper reality. Collins traces this diminished understanding to the 19th Century Lutheran Deaconess Movement which interpreted the diaconate exclusively in terms of ministry, and only certain kinds of ministry. This was picked up in Protestant theological circles and influenced some of the post-Vatican II authors. Unfortunately, this limited understanding remains the predominant perception, even among the clergy today but, like eating before swimming, it contains only elements of the truth while hiding something more profound.

Collins brilliantly puts the emphasis of Christian service back where it belongs, shifting the object of *diakonia* away from the thing being done, to a concrete expression of divine love. This is what it really means to be a minister of service, not simply a doer of good things, but an envoy of God's love in the service of which, good things are done. The deacon's service isn't first and foremost to the people, but to God, and only in God, and with His grace, can he truly serve the people. Understood this way, the implication of Collins' contribution moves Christian service away from a purely functional work to a deeply relational encounter. Here, the deacon is called to stand in-between God and the people as a divine ambassador and proclaim the Gospel, which is precisely what he does in the liturgy and in pastoral ministry. This in-between, like Christ Himself, like the saint who intercede for us, do not impede the people to God, but instead, facilitate it.

Perhaps its not fair to compare assertions about swimming and eating with assertion about the meaning of sacred ecclesial service. They are, in fact, worlds apart. One thing is for sure, they both represent partial truths that mask deeper truths. By understanding the whole truth, I can now go swimming after I eat and exercise my diaconate in a more effective way.

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