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The Deacon offers an ecclesiological view of the present day challenges in the Church and Society

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I would like to express my thanks to the International Diaconate Centre for inviting me to speak about the ecclesiological place of the Permanent Deacon in the face of the present day challenges in the parish. The large number of those present - bishops, priest, deacons and their wives - clearly demonstrates the need for clarification of those issues, which I propose to address. At the same time this interest also illustrates the readiness to develop greater understanding of the Permanent Diaconate.

Yesterday this question was looked at from various points of view and you tried to find solutions - solutions, not based only on German or Western European points of view, but also incorporating those of Latin America and Eastern Europe. That is why the remarks of the Secretary of the Congregation of the Clergy, Archbishop Sepe, were of special significance.

In what follows I would like to take up these threads and try to develop them within the framework of a systematic, as well as a practical viewpoint, properly

focused on the future. I would like to show that the ministry of the deacon is a fundamental ministry in our Church, with its own identity, and that it should become more so.

1. The Ministry of the Deacon

Merely to claim that the Diaconate continues to be a fundamental and necessary ministry in our Church can lead to some heated debates. For a long time now the Diaconate has not necessarily been firmly established in all local churches. This is demonstrated by a lack of precise terminology. Where a priest is concerned we naturally speak of "ordination"; but with a deacon we simply speak of his entering into service. On the other hand ceremonies appointing lay people to church duties often take on the character of an ordination. Finally, even though more than thirty years have passed since the Council, Vatican II, the theological understanding of the Ministry of the Deacon remains unclear and contested. Various theological concepts continue to exist in opposition to each

other, yet it is from these concepts that the tasks of the deacon emerge.

When the Council Fathers considered the renewal of the Permanent Diaconate, they were, as we know, driven by very different interests.

- Some foresaw the imminent shortage of priests and, faced with their increasing dispersion in the old local churches and the "missionary" situation in the newer ones, hoped to obtain some relief through the Permanent Diaconate.
- Others adopted the ideas of the "diaconate circles", which came into existence before the Council, and strove for the strengthening of the diaconate in the Church as a whole.
- For others still the question of celibacy for the Permanent Deacon and of celibacy itself was the overriding factor in the introduction of the Permanent Diaconate.

The question of celibacy had particular significance for the opponents of the introduction of the Permanent Diaconate.

They feared the emergence of a celibacy debate in relation to priests. I will pass

over the question in this context, as well as the question of the diaconate for women. These are problems which are better dealt with in isolation. In what follows, I shall begin with the assumption that the diaconate, which was conceived by the Council as a level of ordination on its own right, should not, by virtue of the lack of priests, come to be understood as a replacement for those missing priests. Therefore, I would like to pursue the second theme mentioned earlier. I am of the opinion that from the point of view of the diaconate, suitable approaches for the future can be proposed.

In many dioceses of the world-wide Church the introduction of the Permanent Diaconate was prepared for by pastoral concerns and experiences; it arose as a result of a movement 'from below', especially in the so-called diaconate circles. These ideas 'from below' had already been encouraged by Pope Pius XII and then incorporated by many of the world's bishops in Vatican II. Accordingly, the debate at the Second Vatican Council was marked more by concerns of spirituality and pragmatism, than by purely theological issues. Fundamental reflections of a theological nature, particularly by Karl Rahner, Yves Congar etc., were soon added, however, and quickly led to the clarification, that the diaconate is not a development of the lay apostolate, but is

a special form of ordained office within the Church. This view was confirmed by Vatican II and has since become established.

In the diaconate Vatican II sees a "vital Ministry of the utmost importance to the Church". It has - as is expressly stated - made possible the introduction of the Permanent Diaconate, because the tasks pertaining to the theological aspect of the diaconate can be fulfilled in many areas only with great difficulty.

The fundamentals of the theology of ordained ministry in the Church are bindingly set out in the Constitution on the Church "Lumen Gentium". It contains the basic statement that the diaconate, as well as the priesthood, belongs to the same sacramental ministry, which is bestowed through the laying on of hands and prayer and which reaches its fulfilment in the episcopacy. Anyone who knows the history of theology even a little will know how this assertion was far from self-evident at the time of the Council. This declaration goes back to a time preceding developments in the Middle Ages, back to the liturgy and the theology of the first centuries after Christ. It breaks open the narrow understanding of medieval times, which limited the ministry of the Church solely to the priesthood, when the latter was seen as exclusively based on the power of consecration of the priest. Neither

the ordination of a bishop, nor that of a deacon could be included in this narrow medieval view of the power of consecration.

The renewal was made possible by going back to the ordination liturgy of the old Church and to the theology of the Church Fathers. In the light of this old tradition the Council was able to clarify in teaching terms the relationship of the diaconate, the priesthood and the episcopacy to the one sacramental ministry of the Church. The renewal of the diaconate as a sacramental ministry in the Church arose therefore as much from a pastoral sense of the needs of the present day, as from a theological consciousness of the authoritative sources of the belief of the Church. Only by undergoing this two-fold process could the renewal of the diaconate take on a form, worthy of the commitment of the Church.

Similarly, through the Council a new and important way of thinking was arrived at regarding the relationship of the episcopacy, the priesthood and the diaconate. Up until the second Vatican Council the different levels of ordination were thought of as an ascending career path. In contrast to this, the Council brought about a reversal of previous thinking habits. In line with old church thinking the Council proceeded

from the point that the bishop is granted the fullest extent of the sacrament of ordination. Deacons and priests have a specifically graduated share of the one sacramental ministry, which is granted to the bishop. Both the priest and the deacon are working colleagues of the bishop and are looked at in the light of both their independence from the bishop and in their assignment to him. Deacons and priests carry out their duties as representatives of the bishop, who, because of the overall burden of his duties, cannot perform them without colleagues and helpers. Of course, although they are assigned to the bishop, it does not mean that deacons are no more than his underlings. The actual dispenser of the sacramental ordination is of course Jesus Christ himself; through ordination, those ordained receive a lasting sign (indelible character) of the sacrament, through which, in a special way, they become one with Christ, the one High Priest, Shepherd and Bishop. As a result of ordination, those ordained are detached from the absolute authority of the bishop; by virtue of their direct link to Christ created by the sacrament of ordination, those ordained gain a certain independence and self-responsibility, which the bishop has to respect. The bishop, the priest and the deacon therefore, each in their own way, have a part to play in the one mission of Jesus Christ and are thus

dependent upon brotherly and comradely co-operation. Priests and deacons are not simply subordinates of the bishop, but should be addressed and treated by him as brothers and friends.

The different overall responsibilities to the ministry of Jesus Christ eventually have an impact on a more precise definition of the duties of the priest and of the deacon. So long as the diaconate was only an interim step to the priesthood, the deacon appeared to be hierarchically subordinate to the priest. This hierarchical subordination and super-ordination could also be divined by a brief reference to *Lumen Gentium* 29. There it states: "Hierarchically deacons are one level lower..." However, on closer examination, it appears, that what is meant here is not to subordination of the deacon under the priest, but the lesser participation of the deacon in the ministry of the bishop. In *Lumen Gentium* 28 this is completely evident, as it states: "Christ, whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world (John 10:36), has, through his apostles, made their successors, the bishops, partakers of His own ordination and mission. The latter, in their turn, have passed on the tasks of His ministry to responsible churchmen at various levels. Thus the Ministry established by God is performed in different orders by those, who from time immemorial

have been known to us as bishops, priests and deacons". Therefore, the different orders correspond to the different gradations in the share of the ministry of the bishop. To support him, the bishop has, so to say, two arms, which at times have different tasks, but which must work in co-operation with each other.

"The traditional theology of the ascending ladders of ordination and the concept of the ordination of the bishop as a non-homogeneous addition to the ordination of priests are thus abandoned". One has now to speak of an ordination theology involving differing parts of the bishop's ministry and, therefore, of the assignment of the deacon directly to the bishop, all of which, of course, includes brotherly co-operation with the priests, who likewise have a share in the bishops ministry.

This concept of the last Council corresponds to the way of thinking of the first centuries. Even Paul mentions the deacons as directly connected with the bishops (Phil 1:1). Ignatius of Antioch describes the deacons as his (i.e. not the priests') colleagues (syndouloi) (Phil 4; Smyrn 4:1; Eph 2:1; Magn 2:1). According to the Apostolic tradition of Hippolytus the deacons are "not appointed to the priesthood, but rather to the service of the bishop, to carry out the latter's tasks" (Trad. apost. 8). The Dida-

scalia Apostolorum warns: "Be therefore of one mind, you bishops and deacons, for you form one body". The deacon is indeed depicted as "the ears, mouth, heart and soul of the bishop" (Didasc. II, 44). At times the deacons seem to have occupied such a powerful position at the side of the bishop, that - as Jerome and Ambrosiaster report - the priests strongly protested against it.

Now that it is clear that the diaconate has a share in the sacramental ordination of the Church and also represents a specific expression of this one ministry, we must now inquire more precisely as to what the real substance of diaconal ministry is.

Lumen Gentium 29 has something to say on this matter, in an abbreviated quotation from the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus. The Council emphasises that the deacon "is not ordained into the priesthood, but to perform his service (ministry)". The ministry of the priest and that of the deacon are therefore quite different. The deacon is no "mini-priest", no substitute for missing priests. In the same way the ministry of the deacon is no mere stepping stone on the road to the priesthood, but an independent ministry in its own right. It represents an expression of the ministry of the Church, as instigated by Christ.

Ordination for the 'performance of service' means, that the Christian diaconia is entrusted to the deacon in a special way. Even in the story of the Apostles it is related that the Apostles could not 'serve at tables' alone, without neglecting the word of God, and thus they too needed helpers (Acts 6:2). Ignatius of Antioch says that deacons are charged with the service of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:1) and that the Church Order of Hippolytus speaks of the deacons caring for the sick and that they should answer to the bishop (Trad. apost. 8; see also Didasc. II, 44). Thus the deacons in the ancient Church were charged by the bishop with, above all, caring for the poor. The Council expressly notes that the deacons should be mindful of the warning of Polycarp to be 'merciful, zealous, living according to the truth of the Lord, who has become the servant of all' (Phil. 5:2; quote. LG29).

Of course through baptism and confirmation every Christian is charged with the love of one's neighbour and service to one's brother in the imitation of Christ. Just as self-evident - as the second Vatican Council never grows tired of stating - is the service character of the Church as a whole, and this applies equally to the ministries of priests and bishops. Lumen Gentium 24 states particularly clearly that the ministry

of the bishop is "a true service, and that is why in the Holy Scripture it is described using the word 'Diaconia', i.e. service" (see also Acts 1:17 and 25; 21:10; Rom 11:13; 1 Tim 1:12). Bishops, priests and deacons are together charged with bringing the diaconia of Jesus Christ in his name to the poor and needy and further developing it within the Church. This is expressly imprinted on the soul of a bishop at his ordination. The deacon shares in this diaconal task of the bishop in a special way. He should represent the 'diaconal dimension of the Church as a whole, i.e. the concept of service to the Church, embodied by Christ'.

In considering the diaconal service of the deacon it is not simply a matter of social and charity work. The deacon is no mere ordained social worker. Ignatius of Antioch, in a reference to 1 Cor 4:1 calls the deacons the 'deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ'. "For they are not deacons for food and drink, but servants of the Church of God" (Trall. 3:3; quote. LG41). They are "more closely tied to the altar" (AG16) and have, moreover, a share in the service of preaching (Sacramentum Concilium Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy 35,4; DV 25). The diaconia of the deacon practised in the name of Jesus Christ is

therefore to be understood in a single overall theological and ecclesiological context, that the service of the deacon includes preaching and service at the altar, as well as certain tasks of leadership (AG 16; see also CIC can. 1008 f).

Of course there are not just people, who are poor in material terms, but there are also those who are spiritually and intellectually poor, others who are reduced to poverty, or starvation, or who are searching for something and, often enough, those who are simply lonely. That is why preaching is also a service to the people. Teaching the ignorant has always been a task of spiritual charity, which has even greater significance in today's world, which is lacking in direction. In a similar way, bringing the Eucharist from the altar to the sick and the dying, which has always been a basic task of the deacon, is also as a work of Christian diaconia. In the final analysis it is a work of love and charity, to seek out people in their loneliness, to bring them together and thus build Christian communities. Accordingly, from the point of view of diaconia, all three basic aspects of service in the Church - suffering, liturgy, as well as diaconia in the narrower sense - should be attributed to the deacon.

Professor H Hoping, a deacon himself, sums it up in the following way: "The priests represent the bishop in situ, that is to say in the parishes, and thereby, they have the final responsibility for leadership in the communities, to which they are assigned, and that is why they also preside at the Eucharist. In that sense they have a large share of the apostolic mission of the bishop. The deacons also have a share in the apostolic mission of the bishop. But the deacons represent the bishop in situ in the diaconia, which - as has become clear - is at the direct disposal of the bishop. As a part of the leadership of the Church, the diaconia should be distinct from the sense of charity, borne from belief, of every Christian, and it is different from the work of established diaconal charity organisations.

As the priests represent the bishop in situ, it follows that they are also charged with an element of leadership. That is why in *Lumen Gentium* 29 it says of the deacons, that they should conduct their ministry 'in unity with the bishop and the presbyterate'. If it is part of the basic function of a Church ministry to represent the service of Christ as leader and Lord of the Church, then this also applies to the diaconate, as part of the Church order. According to Catholic un-

derstanding, that is why deacons have a share in the leadership in the Church".

Briefly, it says: in a special way the deacon represents Jesus Christ, who came to serve (Mk 10:45) and who humbled himself and allowed himself to be enslaved (Phil 2:7 f). Representing the bishop in situ and in accord with the priests, he leads, that is to say, he inspires and motivates the diaconia in the parish. Thus, based on their participation in the ordained ministry with regard to diaconia, deacons also have a share in the leadership of the Church. The diaconate as an ordained ministry illustrates that diaconia is an essential dimension of Church leadership.

Following this clarification of the special ministry of the deacon, we now need to ask how this ministry fits in to the overall scheme of conciliar ecclesiology, what, in particular, is its relationship to communio-ecclesiology. This reopens one of the most pressing questions of our time, namely the longing for community, and it has brought about growing awareness in many believers, that we are all Church. Why therefore do we need the deacon in our Church?

2. Communio-Ecclesiology as a foundation for the Diaconate

2.1 Communio-Ecclesiology and Diaconia

From Jesus Christ we have the gift of the most beautiful prayer, the Lord's Prayer. In this prayer we say and confess, that we all have the same Father and we are all the Children of God. A deeply moving idea. Before God and due to him I belong together with all other people to the one family of the common Father in Heaven.

On the other hand loneliness, isolation and alienation and, above all, enmity between people are signs of sin. That is why God did not want to save and sanctify men individually, independent of all obligation to each other, but rather wanted to make them into one people. Correspondingly, the Council understands the Church as "the messianic people", which "although it does not actually embrace all people and quite often appears as a small 'flock', is for the whole human race the indestructible nucleus of unity, hope and salvation" (LG9).

The communio-ecclesiology of the second Vatican Council adopts this 'Passion and Salvation' view of the Church. Its significance reaches far beyond questioning from within the Church: it shows the Church its place in the overall history of the world and

salvation. Lastly, *communio-ecclesiology* is the most concrete form of the basic statement of the Council, that the Church is in Jesus Christ the same sacrament, that is to say a sign and a tool of unity (LG1 etc.). For that reason it is one of the most important impulses of the Council: "For the Church there is only one way to the future: the way pointed by the Council. This way means: full realisation of the Council and its *communio-ecclesiology*". It says that the Church is not there for itself; it is a Church for others, a Church for people and for the world and its unity, its reconciliation and its peace. It is a serving Church. *Diaconia*, in the widest sense of the word, is not one, but the essential dimension of the Church.

In concrete terms, what *communio-ecclesiology* means is expressed in the Acts of the Apostles as follows: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Accordingly, the Church is the community of those, who through the witness of the Apostles have accepted the message of Jesus, the human expression of the love of God, who share this message, are one with it and who hold true to it. It is the community of those, who partake of the one bread in the Eucharist and thus form one body (see also 1 Cor

10:17); for the Eucharist is the sacrament of unity, as Augustine declares (John 26,6,13; quote from SC 47 etc.). The Church is ultimately the community of those, who put into action the community based on the deeds of Jesus, revealed in his Word and celebrated in the Eucharist in all areas of their life, and who share their daily bread and their possessions. *Martyria*, *liturgy* and *diaconia* are thus become the three basic dimensions of the Church and it is equally clear that the realisation of love, the *diaconia*, is the natural result and thereby the criterion for the authenticity of faith and Eucharist of each community and individual.

This is based in Jesus' own message, as well as in his actions. Jesus' pastoral ministry was a ministry of healing and salvation. This is evident in the miracles of Jesus in the face of the most singular needs: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, raising the dead, and exorcising demons. Accordingly, Jesus sends out his disciples, not only to preach and teach, but - and this is often forgotten - also to heal (Mt 10:8). The teaching and pastoral ministry of the Church must for this reason be realised and must prove itself to be credible both in healing actions and in diaconal-charity works.

That is why each parish as the Church in situ has to make sure that diaconia is realised. This means that faith and preaching, as well as the Eucharist and liturgy must be oriented to diaconia. Faith without diaconia is not a Christian faith. Preaching without diaconia is not Christian preaching. A non-diaconal parish celebrating the Eucharist may express its faith, but its faith remains dead; in the final analysis it cannot find God, as they miss the point that God reveals himself in the people, especially in the poor (see also Mt 25). "We cannot share the Eucharist bread, without sharing our daily bread".

The Church lives, wherever the corporal works of mercy are practised: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving shelter to strangers, liberating [sic] prisoners, visiting the sick and burying the dead. The Church also lives, wherever the spiritual works of mercy are practised; correcting sinners, teaching the ignorant, giving counsel to the doubters, comforting the distressed, enduring the troublesome, forgiving those who offend us, praying for the living and the dead.

If we takes this diaconal dimension seriously, then there cannot be any purely "private" needs, rather for the communal Church there should only exist a need

common to all. If one member is glad, all people are glad, if one member suffers, then all suffer (1 Cor 12:26). This is the logical consequence of being one with Christ, of the fulfilment of the pastoral ministry of Jesus Christ, who, as the good shepherd, lays down his life for his flock (John 10,11,15). Thus diaconia is not a sideline of a parish or the hobby of some fewer number; in the image of Christ and in obedience to his message it is a central task of the Christian community, especially of the Church.

2.2 Communio-ecclesiology and the Diaconate

We have seen that without diaconia there cannot be a Church, because Christ himself is one who serves ('diakon') (Lk 22:27). Therefore, at the Last Supper, on the evening before his suffering and his death, he not only established the idea of priesthood, but, in principle, also laid the foundation of the diaconal ministry. By the washing of feet he gave us an example, so that we also do, as he did to us (John 13:15). In these words one can see the foundation of the diaconate.

In the diaconate the Church has a ministry, which gives sacramental substance to the close link between martyria, liturgia and diaconia. In this way, lay people, as well as

bishops and priests are released from their diaconal tasks. But the question arises as to how the diaconate of the Church's ministry, which the deacon represents in a unique way, can be reconciled with *diaconia*, which is there for all God's people and for all those, who wish to follow in the path of Jesus.

In LG10 the Council speaks of the common priesthood of all those baptised. In SC14 it speaks of the active sharing (*actuosa participatio*) of all God's people, referring not only to liturgy, but also to the whole life of the Church. This says that the part of God's people being shared by all those baptised precedes all differences between ministries, charisms [sic] and services. But the essential difference between the clergy and lay people is not removed (LG10). "The Church as '*communio*' should be viewed as a differentiated whole, as a body or an organism, in which the different organs work together, but in different ways, to the benefit of the whole.

In this way *communio-ecclesiology* puts an end to the welfare or "provision" pastoral model. From *communio-ecclesiology* it follows that all members of the Church and all people in general, each in their own way, carry responsibility in the Church and for the Church - "*Corruptio optimi pessima!*" The spoiling of the best is the worst. There

was and is no aspect of council teaching, which has been and continues to be so much misunderstood as this. In the first place one has misunderstood the theological Great People of God (*laos tou theou*) by ascribing a sense of political union (*demos*) and, accordingly, demanded the democratisation of the Church. In so far as this can also mean more participation, this is basically justified. But very often with this justified demand also goes the ideological demand for the levelling off of the immutable difference between the various charisms, ministries and services". "The people of God, as meant by the Council, does not however mean lay people, that is to say elements which are different or in opposition to the 'official Church'. The people of God is the organised and structured whole of the Church, the people gathered round the bishop, as disciples of the shepherd, as Cyprian of Carthage said".

What now is the specific task of the ministry within this whole? The answer is given most clearly in the fourth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians. There it tells us how, from heaven, the risen Lord has established the various ministries: apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors. Then it tells us why he has done so "to arm the saints (i.e. the believers) to fulfil their duty, to build up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). The Church is therefore a ministry to other

ministries; it should equip the other ministries for their duties, that is to say it should not somehow suppress them and keep them small, but, on the contrary, it should inspire, motivate and qualify them for their own tasks and thus serve to develop the body of Christ by many members and many charisms and services.

This is also true of the deacon. He should not and cannot conduct the whole diaconia of the Church; but he can and should inspire, motivate and qualify others for diaconal service, and he does this best, if he himself leads by example in his own diaconal works, by his preaching invites others to follow his example and by sacramental service strengthens them for the way ahead.

Here we must re-assert that the diaconia is an essential basic dimension of the Church and it has a central place in the mission of the bishop. The deacon safeguards the diaconia in the bishop's name, in assuming his part of the latter's ministry; he thereby represents in his own way the good shepherd and the deacon Jesus. His diaconal service should enthuse and thrill them, give them courage and strengthen them, so that they in their turn may serve their brothers and sisters in the imitation of Christ, may share with them and through the realisation of the spiritual, as well as the corporeal acts

of mercy, may offer succour and thus build up and give life to the community of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, it is from just this communio-ecclesiology that the need arises for the services of the permanent deacon. He represents Jesus Christ as the good shepherd, who searches after the lost sheep, takes it upon his shoulder and brings it back to the flock, without regard for his own life.

3. The topicality of Communio-Diaconia

The Church and its parishes live and work in their respective times and they must heed the "signs of their times". Today the Church, like society itself, is in a state of great external and internal upheaval. The deacon is called and challenged in a special way, to acknowledge the "signs of the times", to be alert to the joys and hopes, the sorrows and fears of mankind (see also GS 1); he should share them and, in so far as his powers allow; heal them; he should explain, put into words, thereby offering direction and guidance based on belief, in particular the Christian faith, and should convey courage and strength, patience, hope, joy and peace amidst the everyday life of mankind. Finally, if we consider the issue of communio-diaconia in the present day situation, we thereby also question the

contemporary importance and future competence of the diaconal service. At this point a short analysis of today's situation - necessarily abbreviated - is required.

One of the greatest words, perhaps the great, central and fundamental word of modern times, is the word "freedom". The Church has for a long time not only failed to recognise this word and its intrinsic value, but indeed has often condemned it. The Church has for a long time overlooked the fact that the modern day fervour for freedom has its roots in Christianity. It was only Vatican II which grasped the helm and it must be counted as one of the great acts of the present day Pontiff and his persistent "human rights policy", that this inheritance from the Council was not only accepted, but was even further developed, intensified and enriched, thereby making an essential contribution to the breakthrough of freedom in Eastern Europe.

Of course, the Pope does not tire of showing the other side of the modern western struggle for freedom. This has led to the post-modern trend towards individualism, which consumes any idea of solidarity, of the sort encapsulated in the third slogan - 'fraternity' - of the French Revolution and which has led to an extensive decline in solidarity. Most notably, as a result of this,

there has been an increase in loneliness, in the sense of isolation, in social reserve and the erosion of common values. The one-sided emancipated understanding of freedom has emancipated itself still further from basic values, something which the modern history of freedom has made possible. This emancipated "freedom from" without a "freedom for" has led to a basic post-modern pluralism, to a do-as-you-please attitude, which can neither be roused to anything nor to exercise resolution, which is indifferent and sceptical to all absolute values, which leads to an absence of sin, to a spiritual vacuum and to an inner emptiness, which ends in futility and ultimately in nihilism. A few examples may help to illuminate this situation, in which society finds itself.

In marriage and within the family irritation, loneliness and boredom are on the increase. The number of divorces is constantly rising, as is the number of single parents. In the wider social context, in addition to material poverty and unemployment, there are the needs of those on the move and without shelter, the homeless, the victims of addiction, the lonely, the desperate, people without prospects, people incapable of forming relationships, women and children in distress, people on the fringes of society, who may be drawn to crime. Altogether, a

collective inability to relate and to live life seems to be overtaking society; it is associated with growing loneliness, isolation, with the desire to destroy and to deny, and with diminished powers of conversation and fear of real contact. For many, life has become darker. Others still are trapped in depressed resignation in the face of threats to their future opportunities in society or even to their very existence. Further signs of the times are a drop-out mentality or a conformist attitude, as well as the contradictory nature of life's realities. Other people, as a result of the manipulation of advertising and of the media, produce permanent icons of life, from which repeatedly result excessive burdens, which in turn lead to disappointments to oneself and others. On the other side of the coin, many people experience unrestrained affluence and luxury, a life of gratification without regard for others, an aggressive assertion of the Self etc. These too are signs of the times.

It is understandable, putting it perhaps in rather simplistic terms, that, in this situation, it is particularly amongst young people that the yearning for *communio* gains most ground. Above all *communio* means 'community'. They want to overcome their sense of loneliness and isolation, their lack of opportunity to relate to their fellow man, and they have a yearning for peace and

reconciliation. But *communio* also means participation. People want to 'belong'. That happens superficially, but actually not only superficially through fashion. For to be fashionably dressed in the same way, to speak and behave in the same way, is a signal, that one wants to belong and that one shares the same outlook on life. Ultimately, of course, unlike the customs and traditions of an earlier age, fashion is an unreliable foundation. By definition, what is fashionable today is out of fashion tomorrow. Many feel this. This engenders a search for a deeper meaning, new feelings of religion. Even when these feelings are vague, ill-defined and rather general and when they do not easily fit into traditions of the Church, they are nevertheless there, as ideas they can be grasped, and very often they cry out to be grasped in this way.

It is in this situation that *communio-diaconia* faces its challenge: here it finds its place and its pressing task. And who should be more suitable for this calling, if not the deacon, the outpost and the listening post, the outrider and the vanguard of the Church in overcoming this challenge? Because he lives a normal life as a married man and as a family man the deacon often gains access more easily to ordinary people, than would a priest, living a life of celibacy. That is also why deacons should

not make it their aim to attract as large as possible a slice of the specific duties of the priest. Their task is quite different from that of the priest and is important and pressing enough in its own right. Before parishes can be led and before the Eucharist can be celebrated in and with the parishes, they must first be built into a collective community. It is in these fringe and fragmented areas of society that the deacon has his place. He should not only think of them and be there for those, who "still" feel they belong, but also invite those, who could perhaps belong tomorrow. He should "drive" *communio-diaconia* in such a way that he helps to build up the Church of the future. That is an essential and indispensable contribution to new evangelising emerging at the present time.

In addition to the social needs of people, which are also reflected in parish life, there is also a specific need in the Church itself. This also constitutes a challenge for the deacon. This need concerns the form of the Church and of its parishes, as well as some forms of spiritual care. The Church suffers greatly from the burden of history and continues to engender mistrust in many people. It has difficulties with the new feelings of freedom and also with the new religiosity prevalent amongst many people. A great number of Catholics have withdrawn from

being practising members of the Church and from being active in parish affairs, among them an increasing number of women.

We often have occasion to complain about a comprehensive absence of the diaconal dimension and to note that the link between preaching and liturgy and diaconia is deficient. Parishes themselves seldom complain of deficient diaconal activity; but the complaints become enormous, as soon as a service is cancelled or the parish catechesis is neglected. Also, although one often hears talk about a shortage of priests, as far as I know, there is no such talk of a shortage of deacons. In the diaconal arena much, indeed nearly everything, of what may be regarded as parish activity is in fact delegated to institutions (e.g. charities, social welfare organisations etc.). Even the introduction of the Permanent Diaconate has very often happened without regard to the diaconia. "In any case, as far as Germany is concerned, given the high theological, spiritual and financial cost of the re-introduction of the diaconate, it is highly questionable, whether this could be achieved without the serious commitment of the diaconia AND the charity organisations. The link between the charitable and the pastoral in this new ministry has not, howe-

ver, been realised" (R. Zerfaß: Caritas 1/87).

This analysis of the situation could be viewed as depressing. However, the presence of needs always means opportunities and challenges as well. The challenge is how to 'reform' the Church and its parishes - into a Church of the *communio*, into a Church, which is not fixated with itself and its own needs and for which the main concern is the kingdom of God, a Church, "whose way is Man" (Pope John Paul II). It has been demonstrated that the public image of the Church is derived above all from the *diaconia* in the parishes and that the *diaconia* or the charitable works of the Church have the highest social impact. That is why the diaconal pastoral work is missionary in nature. Actions are more convincing than anything else.

The traditional form of the church ministries and services does not match today's demands, because it can no longer adequately guarantee the continuity of the Christ's *diaconia*. That is why, as we noted at the outset, the renewal of the diaconate was made possible by the Council. The needs of individuals, just like the needs of the parishes were sufficiently urgent to bring about the renewal, had it not already been in progress, and thus to renew the con-

sciousness that *diaconia* is a characteristic of the Church as a whole and of each of its ministries.

4. Some facts about the form of the diaconate today

In this final part I would like to fill in some details of the form of the diaconate, in so far as they relate to the background to basic theological reflections, as well as to their manifestation in the present day context. I will begin with a few remarks about the spiritual attitude of the deacon. In the Gospel of John we read: "The Spirit is that, which gives life; the flesh is useless" (John 6:63). Even institutional and structural reforms can - biblically speaking - be useless "flesh", if they do not come from the life-giving spirit. That is why the renewal of the diaconate is above all a spiritual task.

In the spiritual attitude of the deacon it must be clear, that the Christian way is not a way of ascendancy, nor a way to splendour and glory, but does involve the "looking down", yes - in the image of Christ, who himself descended - a "downward career". So we are told in the hymn of Christ in the letter to the Phillipians (Phil 2:6-11). Here it is first established what, in the spiritual tradition, is declared to be the cardi-

nal virtue of the Christian and what must also constitute the basic attitude of the deacon: the attitude of humility and readiness to serve.

The primary factor in the basic attitude of the deacon is that he must safeguard people, who are in need, those who are sick and those who are afraid. It is about healing, which offers deliverance and enables people to create trust and allows themselves to serve and to love. This is very beautifully depicted in the meeting between Jesus and the mother-in-law of Peter in Mt 8:14 f. Peter's mother-in-law lies ill in bed. She can no longer live her own life, let alone care for others. Jesus comes and sees this woman. He looks after her. Seeing and looking after are essential elements of his action. Jesus bends down to the sick woman, without saying anything, takes her by the hand and sets up upright. She gets up and stands once more on her own. Then, according to the ancient Greek text, she practises diaconia, turning to others and serving them. As someone, who can stand on her own, she helps others to get to their feet.

So we can say that "the aim of diaconal action is. . . not simply help, but the opening up of new possibilities in life, so that those who are stricken may indeed stand on their own again. Of course, due

regard has to be given beyond the individual to the social circumstances, in which he lives his life". In particular situations the deacon can and must become the advocate of the small and the weak, as well as of all those, who would otherwise have no voice and no power of lobby.

From these spiritual attitudes and outlooks must emerge concrete actions. In concrete terms it is the deacon, to whom the different needs described above are addressed. Any person may turn to him and be sure that trust will be present. Through his ministry in liturgy, preaching and diaconia he has the chance make people aware of the link between faith and life. In his service at the altar he sets the needs of man on the table of the Eucharist; and of course he includes them in his preaching. He has to make the parishes sensitive to all situations, where need exists and to motivate them to work with each other and for each other.

One of his essential tasks is to seek out volunteer helpers, to train them and work with them. As time goes by he must leave more and more of his tasks to the volunteer workers and concentrate his own efforts on giving technical, personal and spiritual support to the volunteers. For it is true to say that the volunteers in the charitable institutions (kindergartens, welfare services, ho-

mes for the elderly) also need pastoral care and support. It would be ideal, if the deacon could initiate and subsequently support as necessary the self-help groups, for example groups for single parents or drug addicts. It can be seen from the earlier description of the needs of the present time, that these activities are not limited to individual parishes. The drug problem does not simply come to an end at the parish boundaries. The "open youth work", which is needed today, is seldom dictated by the where the parish dividing line is.

From the point of view just noted, the suggestion arises, that a deacon should be assigned to an area beyond that of the parish - to the town, to the deanery, or a region embracing a number of parishes. Indeed, he should be based in and tied to a defined parish, but using that parish as a point of reference, he may still perform diaconal tasks in other parishes and, in so doing, draw them together. The emphasis in all this must be on the recruiting, training, support and development of volunteers in individual parishes and on creating associations of parishes within towns or within specific regions. Just such a project has already been started with some success in our diocese. Here there are big opportunities for the Permanent Diaconate.

Through sharing the responsibility for Church ministry, the deacon also has a share of the responsibility for leading the parish. In this respect, he must, above all, bring diaconia into play and ensure that it occupies its appropriate place in the administering of pastoral care. As an official representative of the parish he is the natural point of contact with the regional charity associations and with the welfare services. He should be represented in the ecumenical diaconal associations. Through him, moreover, the parishes should make contact with all those who are responsible for social services in the municipalities and in other bodies concerned with welfare. "The situation in our society has become so confused, need has so many faces, that it can only be addressed by resolute, trusting co-operation between professional charity specialists, local initiatives, the charity committees in the parishes and also the parish deacons" (R. Zerfaß, Caritas Freiburg 1992).

Many of the tasks described can only be addressed by professional full-time personnel, while others can also be carried out by a part-time deacon, who also has another profession. As far as the part-time deacon is concerned, the emphasis and the opportunities are more likely to arise within his particular professional field. Just like a

working priest, he can and should represent the Church in his professional field and be present on behalf of the Church, where otherwise there would not be anybody from the Church. He should then bring his wider experiences into the parishes and be the trustee of diaconia. In this way he would satisfy the demands of his own office as a deacon and would not simply be an emergency replacement, when priests are in short supply.

Of course, for the deacon it is not only parish work, but also the activities of specifically spiritual care, which together represent an ideal work situation. I am thinking here of hospitals, homes for the elderly, spiritual care in places of work, in prisons, in refugee shelters etc. I also include co-operation in the leadership of a diocese in those regions, where the main question is that of diaconal leadership. In this context, I would like to point out that for the bishop the community of deacons of a diocese can be a welcome panel of advisors. The deacons can act as the eyes and ears of the bishop in identifying areas of need and can help him in his task of being father to the poor.

Naturally, the deacon must become qualified for his tasks through appropriate training.

However, I cannot go into more detail on this subject at the present time.

To finish with - one more thought, which at first glance perhaps seems to be utopian. As without diaconia there can be no Church, and as the Church has a specific ministry for the conduct of diaconia, it would not be misguided, if there were to be a deacon in each parish. This does not represent a financial problem, as it could be resolved by the use of part-time deacons. I think, that in each parish there is a potential for this option, which is far from exhausted. The ideal case would be, if a parish were to say, that they could imagine that this or that person could divide his time between his normal profession and the office of Permanent Deacon. Ministers and parishes could then propose this individual to the bishop or to whomsoever in the diocese was responsible for the deacons.

I have learned from the diocese of Besancon, that there they have taken this idea a stage further. In that region, the persons responsible for the diaconate in the diocese visit individual deanery conferences. The deaneries should already have investigated in advance what the main social needs in their area are, and at the same time they should have a picture of the type of person whom, they believe, may be suited to act as

Permanent Deacon, while continuing his normal occupation. These men are then approached and the idea of a diaconal role is put to them. They are given one year to consider their response. If they decide to say yes, the training can begin. It seems to me, that this is a model worth examining.

So, in conclusion, we can say that spiritually motivated, well-trained and sensibly assigned deacons are important to the Church, and particularly so today. They are neither replacement priests, nor social

workers. They are in a sacramental fashion representatives of Jesus Christ, the Deacon. They make manifest in the world the love of God, which is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). They are pioneers of a new "civilisation of love". They are a blessing for the Church and for the people entrusted to us. Therefore, it is high time, that we move forward with the renewal of the diaconia and of the diaconate and that we give far more room in the Church for the 'impulse' of the Holy Spirit through the second Vatican Council.