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Glenn Morrison

Disturbing  
Deacons:  
Upstanders  
Through Moral  
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# Disturbing Deacons: Upstanders Through Moral Resistance. *Towards a New Golden Age of Ministry*

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Glenn Morrison

In this article, I wish to explore the history and vocation of the deacon to highlight the hope for a new Golden Age of possessing a “thinking heart”<sup>1</sup> of a martyr to inspire trust, truth and the evidence of love for the Church. Accordingly, deacons are called to be upstanders in Christ even to the point of demonstrating the disturbing resistance and counterforce of disobedience that will in time be seen and understood as the ethical action and ministry of speaking frankly in the name of those who are most vulnerable within the Church.

Let us begin by asking some questions on the nature and identity of the deacon, the better to open up a lens of the charisms and gifts of deacons to the Church. What is a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church? Is he an image of “Christ the Servant”,<sup>2</sup> “a social intermediary among the people of God,”<sup>3</sup> or a missionary who resides on the “borderlands”<sup>4</sup> or margins of society to be with the poor? Can we envisage the identity of deacons as “serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money

- 1 The metaphor of a “thinking heart” comes from the writings of Etty Hillesum. During her incarceration at Westerbork Transit Camp before being transported to Auschwitz, she expresses, “The thinking heart of the barracks,” to summarise her search for “the great redeeming formula” that “sums up everything within” her of the “overflowing and rich sense of life”. In sum, to possess a thinking heart is to come near to the heart of poet reflecting on the mystery of life and the presence of God. See Etty Hillesum *An Interrupted Life. The Diaries, 1941-1943 and Letters From Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 199.
- 2 See Tim O’Donnell, “Should Deacons Represent Christ the Servant?” *Theological Studies* 78 (4) (2017): 850–78.
- 3 Shawn W. McKnight, and David W. Fagerberg, “Chapter 5, Precedents for the Deacon as Social Intermediary,” in *Understanding the Diaconate: Historical, Theological, and Sociological Foundations* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 109.
- 4 O’Donnell, “Should Deacons Represent Christ the Servant?”, 852.

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[who] hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim 3:8-9)? We learn from the Acts of the Apostles, that deacons were like busy table servers (6:2) who fulfil the ancient Israelite call to look after the welfare of widows (Deut 10:18; cf. Jas 1:27).

DEACONS IN THE TRADITION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

In the Golden Age of Deacons from 100 CE to 325 CE, that is to say from the Age of the Apologists to the time of the Council of Nicea, the deacons worked as “church officials” in close relation and connection to the bishop (Phil 1:1).<sup>5</sup> At this time, deacons, being both servants of the Church and of the bishop,<sup>6</sup> developed important administrative tasks that brought together a good balance between the secular and sacred. They administered the finances, looked after the memorials after martyrs at cemeteries, took liturgical roles at the Eucharist, and engaged in the pastoral care of their fellow Christians. Accordingly, as the “primary intermediary between the bishop and the people,” the deacon became, as it were, the “‘hearing’, ‘mouth’, ‘heart,’ and ‘soul’ of the bishop”.<sup>7</sup> In effect, as servants of Christ, they were called to know the Gospel as much as the suffering of others.<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising then in the Early Church (and even in the Middle Ages) that, “Frequently, deacons [such as St. Athanasius of Alexandria] were elected bishops because of their administrative capabilities and expertise”.<sup>9</sup>

The Second Vatican Council “revived” the hope for the permanent diaconate (proposed in *Lumen Gentium* no. 29) whereby Pope Paul VI gave “institutional sanction” on June 8, 1967 with his Apostolic Letter 1967, *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* [General Norms For Restoring the Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church].<sup>10</sup> Previously, over 1600 years before Vatican Council II, the first Ecumenical Council of the Church, the Council

5 McKnight, and Fagerberg, “Chapter 5, Precedents for the Deacon as Social Intermediary,” 122 and Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. II Δ-H* (Grand Rapids: Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964), 89.

6 Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. II Δ-H*, 89.

7 McKnight, and Fagerberg, “Chapter 5, Precedents for the Deacon as Social Intermediary,” 132-138.

8 Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them* (Homebush NSW: St. Pauls, 1985), 42.

9 Shawn W. McKnight, and David W. Fagerberg, “Chapter 6, The Transformation and Decline of the Diaconate,” in *Understanding the Diaconate: Historical, Theological, and Sociological Foundations* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 146-147.

10 O’Donnell prefers to use the word, “revive” instead of “restore”. He points out: “restoration” implies that “an early church office had been dusted off and, substantially unchanged, put to use in the contemporary church. In contrast, the term, “revival,” “recognizes some continuity with the ancient office, but also allows for the differences in context and purpose we find in the contemporary diaconate.” See O’Donnell, “Should Deacons Represent Christ the Servant?”, 854 (especially footnote 11).

of Nicea in 325 CE, taking up the “Roman Apostolic Tradition” initiated the “erosion of the deacon’s influence in the governance of the Church” by articulating an overarching “distinction between and deacons and presbyters”.<sup>11</sup> In other words, deacons now became subordinate to presbyters. Hence, within a few decades after the Council of Nicea, the presbyters, primarily a college of “primary counsellors of bishops” [elders<sup>12</sup>], became “priests” assuming “offices of leadership in rural communities, presiding over the assemblies and fulfilling liturgical functions that had been associated with the bishops”.<sup>13</sup> The decline of the deacons was also due to the frustration of Bishops upset about deacons abusing their authority.<sup>14</sup>

#### ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH: LOOKING FOR EMBERS OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF DEACONS

In response to the decline of the deacon’s role and identity in the Church, there is a need today to develop hope for a new Golden Age of deacons. To begin to search for traces or embers of such hope for a new Golden Age, let us look then, for example, at St. Ignatius’ Letter to the Trallians (Ch.2:3-3:1), who relates 1 Timothy 3’s concern that “deacons be upright and respectable men”<sup>15</sup>:

And those likewise who are deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ must please all men in all ways. For they are not deacons of meats and drinks, but servants of the Church of God. It is right that they should beware of blame as of fire. In like manner let all men respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, even as they should respect the bishop as being a type of the Father and the presbyters as the council of God and as the college of Apostles. Apart from these there is not even the name of a church.<sup>16</sup>

St. Ignatius writes to the Trallians with “warm friendship and exhortation”<sup>17</sup> knowing also that his sacrifice of death could be

11 McKnight, and Fagerberg, “Chapter 6, The Transformation and Decline of the Diaconate,” 147.

12 Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1953), 583

13 McKnight, and Fagerberg, “Chapter 6, The Transformation and Decline of the Diaconate,” 147-148.

14 *Ibid*, 149.

15 McKnight, and Fagerberg, “Chapter 5, Precedents for the Deacon as Social Intermediary,” 120.

16 J. B. Lightfoot (text) and J. R. Harmer (ed.), *Apostolic Fathers*, (Macmillan and Co., 1891 translation), <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-trallians-lightfoot.html>.

17 Alexander N. Kirk, “Ignatius’ Statements of Self-Sacrifice: Intimations of an Atoning Death or Expressions of Exemplary Suffering” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 64, no. 1 (2013): 66-88.

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soon where he writes at the end of his letter, “My spirit is offered up for you, not only now, but also when I shall attain unto God. For I am still in peril; but the Father is faithful in Jesus Christ to fulfil my petition and yours. May we be found unblameable in Him” (Trall. 13:3).<sup>18</sup> Taking on the lens of faith, let us imagine that St. Ignatius of Antioch’s paschal words as the warm embers of martyr to give direction and hope to point towards a revival of the role of deacons in the Roman Catholic Church.

We can learn from St. Ignatius that deacons, to be servants of God (and not mere “table servers”, cf. Acts 6:2), must model themselves on the paschal mystery and seek a life of goodness, truth and righteousness even to the point of taking up a spirituality of martyrdom as Pope St. John Paul II explains in *Fides et Ratio*:

“The martyrs know that they have found the truth about life in the encounter with Jesus Christ, and nothing and no-one could ever take this certainty from them. Neither suffering nor violent death could ever lead them to abandon the truth which they have discovered in the encounter with Christ. This is why to this day the witness of the martyrs continues to arouse such interest, to draw agreement, to win such a hearing and to invite emulation. This is why their word inspires such confidence: from the moment they speak to us of what we perceive deep down as the truth we have sought for so long, the martyrs provide evidence of a love that has no need of lengthy arguments in order to convince. The martyrs stir in us a profound trust because they give voice to what we already feel and they declare what we would like to have the strength to express.”<sup>19</sup>

Following in the tradition of St. Ignatius of Antioch’s devotion of living in the mystery of Christ, Pope St. John Paul II expresses the heart of the spirituality of the martyr as: (i) the self-discovery of truth through the personal encounter with Jesus the Christ; (ii) of love enabling the grace to take on the paschal road of faith; and (iii) of living out a stirring witness of “profound trust” in Jesus’ preaching of the newness and nearness of Kingdom of God. Hence, altogether, martyrs possess a spirituality and charism of becoming “thinking heart” archetypes of faith.

### THINKING HEART DEACONS: WITNESSING TO A NEW GOLDEN AGE

Taking on the “thinking heart” and spirituality of a martyr, together deacons may witness to a new Golden Age of courage and

18 See also, Kirk, “Ignatius’ Statements of Self-Sacrifice,” 81.

19 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (14 September, 1998), no. 32.

confidence. For their presence contains the possibility and, indeed, ability to “stir” “a profound trust” in people’s hearts. Accordingly, the deacons of the Church, I suggest, must look to what stirred Jesus’ ministry from the very start, namely “the Temple incident that provoked the Jewish authorities ... the first step to the trial of Jesus”.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, the Temple incident in John’s Gospel (Jn 2: 13-22) occurs “at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry”<sup>21</sup> just before the time of Passover. Jesus has found a specific and dramatic time to begin to reveal himself through an act of disturbance as the messiah and “messenger of the covenant” (Mal 3:1). He is consumed with “zeal” for God’s Temple (Jn 2:17). In other words, he is willing to take a stance of disobedience against “insults” (Ps. 69:9) so that, “All is Holy to the Lord” (Zech 14:20).

Here, deacons may learn from Jesus’ covenantal “*faithful human action to rage and protest*”<sup>22</sup> to incarnate a ministry of disturbance.<sup>23</sup> Such ministry can be seen as a liturgy of responsibility evoking a “difficult freedom” and “difficult adoration”<sup>24</sup> to make God’s temple (Church) a sacred place of worship and service. The idea of a difficult freedom speaks of being responsible for-the-other to the point of seeking a new Golden Age where deacons inspire peace, justice and mercy. Such seeking for the Kingdom of God portrays a difficult adoration or devotion towards the other’s pain, vulnerabilities and needs for healing and compassion. Here, the counterforce of disturbance and disobedience become the breakthrough of God’s grace to develop a “thinking of heart” of knowing the Gospel and the suffering of others.

Let us look further at the ethical and prophetic value of disobedience as a form of taking up a ministry (and theology) of disturbance and resistance. We can call this equally the resilience of possessing a “thinking heart” and spirituality of the martyr. What then is the context for the deacon to develop his mission and identity? Today, permanent deacons are primarily married men who work and live in a secular culture and serve within the Roman Catholic Church that has encountered a diminishing number of priests.<sup>25</sup> In a sense, deacons are close to the reality of living between a secular and sacred world. Such metaxic or Pauline existence (cf. 2 Cor 6: 1-10) produces a “profound turbulence”

20 Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (Mahwah NJ, Paulist Press, 1976), 117.

21 Anthony J. Kelly and Francis J. Moloney, *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 71.

22 Walter Brueggemann, “Covenanting as Human Vocation: A Discussion of the Relation of Bible and Pastoral Care,” *Interpretation* 33: 2 (April 1979): 123.

23 Anthony Gooley (Deacon, Archdiocese of Brisbane, QLD, Australia), *The Permanent Diaconate: A Ministry of Disturbance* (Unpublished Paper, 2019), 1-3.

24 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 145, 272.

25 O’Donnell, “Should Deacons Represent Christ the Servant?”, 855.

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of faith; a defining theological reality of living between Christ's resurrection and Parousia.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, of being close to the risen Jesus, deacons learn to share in the mystery of friendship where those on the margins of the society, "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14:21) are the first to feast in the Kingdom of God. And in hoping for Parousia, the eternal moment of salvation, deacons are called to scrutinise the "signs of the times" and interpret "them in the light of the Gospel".<sup>27</sup> Deacons therefore are called to develop a sense of the poverty of riches and the riches of poverty: to develop a taste for the Gospel, to be poor in spirit, and to learn the bodiliness of compassion; to suffer through the sufferings of others and be wounded through the wounds of others.

Utilising a more sociological language, one could perhaps see the role of deacons as a function of resistance and rescue, of being an "upstander" rather than a "bystander" against processes and systems that dehumanise people to the point of taking away their dignity and rights. Pointing out the distinction between an "upstander" and a "bystander", Paul Bartrop writes:

"An upstander, it might be said, is the opposite of a bystander. For whatever reason, bystanders generally do not get involved in situations in which moral choices need to be made in relation to right and wrong. As a result, it is uncommon for them to take action when confronted with the persecution of abuse of another. Upstanders, on the other hand, will intervene in some way, choosing to take positive action in the face of injustice or in situations where others need assistance."<sup>28</sup>

Keeping this distinction in mind, one could imagine that deacons are called to be spontaneous and vigilant upstanders with a "thinking heart" of the Gospel against the forces of evil that poison the human soul. An important caveat here for deacons working towards the newness of the Kingdom of God, is that they are called first to be servants of "Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 3:13) and peacemakers (Mt 5:9) rather than "ethical fanatics"<sup>29</sup> who seek rebellion and protest for the sake of rebellion and protest. Ultimately the aim is to show that, "disobedience is necessary in order to show that ethical action is no longer disobedient".<sup>30</sup>

26 Anthony J. Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 95.

27 Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), no. 4.

28 Paul R. Bartrop, *Resisting the Holocaust: Upstanders, Partisans and Survivors* (Santa Barbara CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016), xxiii.

29 Linus Vanlaere, Roger Burggraave and Laetus O.K. Lategan, *Vulnerable Responsibility: Small Vices For Caregivers* (Bloemfontein: Sun Press, 2019), 99.

30 *Ibid.*, 99.

In terms of taking up “a ministry of disturbance” as the “thinking heart” of a martyr, let us look at the example then of the prophetic stance of disobedience, one that led Jesus himself on his collision course with the authorities of Israel and Rome. We have no doubt heard of “civil disobedience” in politics and society or even perhaps, “professional disobedience” in for example healthcare.<sup>31</sup> What about then, “*ministerial disobedience*”? One could immediately posit such disturbance as reckless or foolish. However, let us think of it as like the motivation of a vaccine to trigger an immune response. And therefore with the witness or “vaccine” of “ministerial disobedience”, the deacon may learn the value and “counterforce” of “moral indignation” as a means to “speak frankly in the name of the most vulnerable”, and hence “to create room for the little goodness”.<sup>32</sup>

The act of ministerial disobedience will begin for the deacon when he becomes aware of his own feelings. The deacons will experience feelings resonating inside such as hurt and frustration, anger and heartbreak in relation to the drama of situations, people, rules and systems. Facing “social pressure”<sup>33</sup> to do as others do can inhibit the gifts of spontaneity, endurance and vigilance to respond. Remembering that during the Golden Age (100 CE -325 CE), deacons were “a source of knowledge for the Bishop,”<sup>34</sup> their authority meant a freedom to know the concerns of the laity and of the local Church intimately. Accordingly today, deacons need to recover their authority by for example possessing the grace of moral indignation so that they may develop the sense of “moral resistance” to institutional and organisational wrongs.<sup>35</sup> In this way, deacons show that they take on a “difficult freedom” to live out a “thinking heart” of justice and mercy, and be vigilant upstanders to respond to issues arising in the Church and society. Hence, for example, in terms of considering the welfare of the poor, deacons can be the first to highlight the need to give them spiritual care, and hence to share the friendship of Jesus<sup>36</sup> with those living on the margins such as the poor and oppressed, the lonely and disabled, and strangers desolated by loss. The witness of faith and holiness of the deacon can then even become a vehicle to inspire “obedience to the faith” (Acts 6:7) for the whole Church, from laity to priests (Acts 6:7) and bishops.

31 Ibid, 94.

32 Ibid, 31-32, 68, 82, 93-107.

33 Ibid, 107.

34 McKnight, and Fagerberg, “Chapter 5, Precedents for the Deacon as Social Intermediary,” 125.

35 Vanlaere, Burggraeve and Letegan, *Vulnerable Responsibility*, 95.

36 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24th November, 2013), no. 200.



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If ministerial disobedience begins with feelings like frustration and develops through an intellectual understanding of the situation, there eventuates another key feeling: anger even to the point of rage. Now the situation touches one more spiritually and physically (like the incarnation of the soul into the body) to cause the stomach churn. Such affectivity animates the deacon to arrive at a decision not to remain silent or “indifferent” about what he sees.<sup>37</sup> Strength is then created for the deacon “to actually and actively bring about change”.<sup>38</sup> The mess and rot of a bent world must stop. The vulnerable ones must be first in a Church of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The deacon goes through a conversion of heart to realise that the situation of abuse or injustice for example is unacceptable. As such the deacon will make a stance to disturb, signifying, “I won’t be a part of it” any longer.<sup>39</sup> And so let us imagine that deacons, upstanders through moral resistance, embodying the “thinking heart” and spirituality of a martyr, begin to witness to a new Golden Age of being servants of Christ.

Ministerial disobedience now transforms into the testimony of “ethical action”,<sup>40</sup> a character that ensures that the behaviour of the deacon is no longer disobedient, but only disturbing. But the counterforce continues in the hope towards building a new world to correct structures, situations or even people that fall into patterns of bullying, exploitation and injustice. Taking on the “thinking heart” and spirituality of a martyr, the deacon further begins to speak frankly and tell the truth “without pretense”, masks or disguises.<sup>41</sup> And we must not forget that permanent deacons are mostly married men; they have much to learn from their wives about the grace of ministry, and in particular of the maternity of God such as the gift of tears, the first words of compassion. For did not the Mothers of Israel like Rachel (Mt 2:18) or Mary, the sister of Lazarus (Jn 11:33) weep bitterly in the hope for the resurrection of new life? Let then the tears of “disturbing” and “thinking heart” deacons be not only a sign of a healthy ministry and hope for a new Golden Age, but also the grace to enter the mysteries of Jesus, to behold, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

37 Vanlaere, Burggraeve and Letegan, *Vulnerable Responsibility*, 97.

38 Ibid, 98.

39 Ibid, 98.

40 Ibid, 99.

41 Ibid, 101.