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Meins G.S. Coetsier

The Drama of *Diakonía*

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It was the German Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber (1878-1965) who said that “God dwells wherever we let him in.”¹ As a permanent deacon and prison chaplain in two security prisons in Germany, to me, this is sound theology and a deep spiritual truth. To let the Divine Presence in, even behind barbed wire ...² Is this not the ultimate purpose of God and the goal of *diakonia* today, “to let God in”? But can we let him in? And if so, where can this happen? At the margins of society: in a prison, in a homeless shelter or in a Podcast on YouTube? Possibly only there, as Buber claims, where we “really stand,” and “where we live,” where we serve and “live a true life.”³

The apostle Paul refers to the practitioners of *diakonia* as “co-workers in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ.”⁴ It is all about strengthening and empowerment,⁵ and about encouraging *You* “in your faith so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.”⁶ Beautiful encouraging words of St. Paul! – A statement that not only affirms the self-understanding of many deacons today but could arguably define the wider term *diakonia* as a theological key word in the pastoral theology of diaconal spirituality as well

1 Martin Buber, *The Way of Man: According to the Teachings of Hasidism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 33.

2 See Meins G.S. Coetsier, *Theology, Empowerment, and Prison Ministry: Karl Rahner and the Contemporary Exploration for Meaning* (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2022) [Expected Publication Date: 17 Nov. 2022]; “Towards a Theology of Prison Ministry,” in: *The Furrow: A Journal for The Contemporary Church* 72, no. 12 (December 2021): 679-685; “Theologie der Stärkung, Zeitgemässe Theologie der Gefängnisseelsorge,” in: *Seelsorge & Strafvollzug: Zur Praxis heutiger Gefängnisseelsorge*, Volume 8 (Zürich: Verlag für Gefängnisseelsorge, 2022), 40-54.

3 Buber, *The Way of Man*, 33.

4 1 Thess. 3: 2-3

5 Cf. Mery Kolimon, “Empowerment: A New Generative Theme of Christian Mission in a Globalized World,” in: *Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christianities in Context*, Volume 40, Issue 1 (Brill, 2011), 35-56.

6 Ibid.

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as in understanding the Church and its relationship to society and people.

“TO SERVE WELL” – THE DIACONAL HUMAN STORY?

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) opened the ordination of married men to the permanent diaconate.⁷ In Germany, in the Catholic Diocese of Fulda we celebrate this year its 50th anniversary. Worldwide the diaconate exists today in most Christian churches. The areas of ministry and responsibility may differ but essentially deacons are sent out to *serve*—to serve God and the Church, to organize and support others, to preach, teach, and listen. As a married deacon working with prisoners, however, I ask myself on a personal level: where am I in all this? What happens in this diaconal human story? Do the words of 1 Timothy 3: 8-13 still have an impact today? Can deacons still “hold the deep truths of the faith”?

[D]eacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, *let them serve as deacons*. In the same way, the women [Possibly deacons’ wives or women who are deacons⁸] are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who *have served well* gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.⁹

7 The ‘founding fathers’ of the reemerged diaconate in the Catholic Church, the Catholic theologians Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler promoted the diaconate in the 1960s, especially in Germany. Another advocate of restoring the diaconate as an independent ministry was the Dutch missionary and bishop, Willem van Bekkum (1910-1998; bishop of Ruteng, Indonesia). Cf. William T. Ditewig, “The Dachau Experience and Postwar developments,” in *The Deacon Reader* (ed. James Keating; Mahwah: Paulist, 2006), 31–55, esp. 32–33. Cf. Bart J. Koet, Edwina Murphy, Esko Ryokas, eds, *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The First Two Centuries*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2. Reihe (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2018), 8 [n. 28].

8 Romans 16: 1-2: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.” For issues relating to deaconesses see John St. H. Gibaut, *The Cursus Honorum: A Study of Origins and Evolution of Sequential Ordination* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000); Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek (eds.), *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

9 1 Timothy 3: 8-13

I am convinced that in order “to serve well,” we need, especially in Europe, a *new* understanding of diaconal spirituality. A spirituality that includes lay men and women, in order to establish, in the secular places where we work and live, “a dwelling for the divine presence.” That is, a *flowing Presence* that reaches one’s heart in order to reach out to the hearts of others (*cor ad cor loquitur*); a Presence that becomes a creative and diaconal way beyond the mere understanding of “service.”¹⁰

The problem I detected in the Church in Germany, however, is that the term *diakonía* and its related office is often used and categorized one-sidedly in the sense of “humble service” or as a “social service” to others, with an active role of “social work” within the churches but remaining *way-less* and/or *Presence-less* at the same time. The problem is that the word “service” has arguably become an empty slogan and/or clerical concept used by church authorities to exercise hierarchical power, disconnected from any human experience of empathy, of compassion and love. This leaves people depressed and alienated. What is more, does diaconal spirituality not go much deeper? Since the New Testament word “deacon,” for instance, and its related word *diakonía* have multiple meanings—as in being “commissioned for a task,” as “proclaimers of the Word” or as “messengers” etc. How can we re-evaluate in today’s context the Christian themes of “care,” “concern,” and “love” (*agápē, ahava*) for the poor and the needy, and find a way?

Due to new philological discoveries,¹¹ there has presented itself a need to reinterpret *diakonía* and its spirituality in the dramatic and powerful cultural and socio-economic contexts of our time. From a pastoral theological angle, questions could be raised if it is true that “service,” utter “humility” or “duty” come first in diaconal spirituality and in pastoral ministry? What about the free spiritual person and his/her search for meaning?¹² Should we not carefully observe, as Buber puts it, what our heart draws us to, and then choose that diaconal way with all our strength. In what way

10 Cf. Meins G.S. Coetsier, *Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis*. Eric Voegelin Institute Series in Political Philosophy. Studies in Religion and Politics (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008), XIV + 228 pp.

11 Koet et al., *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The First Two Centuries*, 10 [“3. The Need for Further Research Due to New Philological Ideas”].

12 It’s this question of meaning concerning the sovereignty of the person, for instance, that gave the Canadian clinical psychologist and professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, Jordan Bernt Peterson, in recent years widespread attention, especially, in relation to his (arguably conservative) views on cultural, religious and political issues. See Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Random House, 2018); *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999); *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* (New York, NY: Penguin/Portfolio, 2021)

has social work something to do with *diakonía* and what role does humility play in it?

I like to speak of “the drama of *diakonía*” which unites these existential questions and refers to the individual, spiritual and social dramas of our lives, where we seek for meaning and order, within the supervening divine drama of truth becoming luminous in our human consciousness.¹³ In other words, we seek the way to find our diaconal way. This drama is not an end in itself, but a way to God. Therefore, the word *drama* plays a central role in the diaconate and stands for the lived, dramatic quality of *diakonía*. Life and the diaconal “event”-dimension of our human story, in the words of Eric Voegelin, is a spiritual drama, with its “divine-human movements and countermovement”: its elements of living faith, action, tension, struggle, and setbacks. It finds its irreplaceable expression in our Christian narrative, as we set out to convey insights into the reality of diaconal spirituality in our day. Subsequently, we try to get some clarity about our own presence in the ongoing drama of *theophany* – manifestations of the divine – in which we as humans participate.¹⁴

In seeking to hear God’s voice in all this complexity, we arguably must act resolutely and keep moving forward in this human struggle. Concretely, from a pastoral perspective in prison ministry, for example, this means to be creative and to be brave enough to bite the dust: to be edgy and to speak the truth from the heart—i.e. ‘service’ through authenticity and truthfulness. From an academic point of view, we have to look carefully at the problem of terminology as well as at the diaconal spirituality of the human person in the overall drama of *diakonía*.¹⁵ At the same time, we’ve to bring this human drama and its spirituality into dialogue with the fields of pastoral aesthetics and practical theology. I believe it is important to wisely reinterpret from ancient sources the earliest Christian sources on *diakonía*.¹⁶ My research in the field of pastoral theology and aesthetics seeks to advance theological thinking

13 See Eric Voegelin, *The Drama of Humanity*, three speeches: “Man in the Cosmos”; “The Revolt of Man”; “The Epiphany of Man.” Atlanta, Georgia: Walter Turner Candler Lectures, Emory University (April 1967), 7-20. See also *The Drama of Humanity and other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985*, edited with an introduction by William Petropoulos and Gilbert Weiss, Vol. 33 of The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004). See also Brendan Purcell, *The Drama of Humanity: Towards a Philosophy of Humanity in History* (Frankfurt am-Main: Peter Lang, 1996).

14 Ibid.

15 For analysis of “the Person” see David John Walsh, *Politics of the Person as the Politics of Being* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016); *The Priority of the Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

16 See John N. Collins, *Diakonía: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York, NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 [1990]).

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about diaconal spirituality and its relationship to the human quest for meaning.

OPAQUE SYMBOLS AND WIDESPREAD DOGMATISM

The diaconal drama starts with the problem in terminology, with the difficulty of opaque symbols and the widespread dogmatism of our time: Scholars have noted technical complications with the word *diakonia* and related expressions in classical Greek and New Testament Greek, such as in Luke-Acts and Paul's letters (Dieter Georgi; John N. Collins).¹⁷ Consequently, the original experiences and the truths underlying these expressions have eroded; got lost in translation, and have so become inexistent to human consciousness over time.

Greek *diakonia* symbols are strongly related with "serving" words, taken up by the teachings of the Church in terms of "the humble servant of all," expressed by Pope Francis). One could not only refer to symbols such as *diakoneo*, *diakonia*, *diakonein* and *diakonos* but also to the expressions *douleuo* (to serve as a servant), *therapeuo* (someone who volunteers to serve), *latreuo* (to serve for wages), *leitourgeo* (someone who holds public office), and *hypereteo* (governor); or words such as *cheirotomia*, *cheirotesia*, and ordination.¹⁸ The research asks: does 'service' or 'being humble' mean anything specific in terms of diaconal spirituality? Can we recapture today some of the original experiences that engendered the Greek but also the Hebrew symbols?¹⁹ Or do we need to search for alternatives to resolve some of the great uncertainties regarding the meaning of the *diakonia* terms? In view of these problems in terminology, I deal with the symbol *diakonia*, its experience and spirituality, in the broader context. I argue the thesis that,

Understanding the spiritual experiences of *diakonia* as referring only to "lowly service" is neither compatible with the Greek of Hellenistic, and Christian sources nor with the ancient Hebrew accounts. To limit the spiritual experiences of *diakonia*, in terms of "bishop's assistant,"²⁰ "servant" or "helper," may be understandable in light of Catholic teaching or tradition but is pastorally and spiritually *not* sufficient in an ever-growing complex, hostile and digital world. In order to address the complexity of the drama

17 Ibid. Koet et al., *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The First Two Centuries*, 10. Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians: A Study on Religious Propaganda in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

18 See vatican.va

19 Cf. Beate Ego & Helmut Merkel, *Religiöses Lernen in der biblischen frühjüdischen und frühchristlichen Überlieferung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

20 Bart J. Koet, "Diakon: Adjutant des Bischofs oder Sprungbrett zur Priesterschaft. Randbemerkungen zur jüngsten Studie über Cursus Honorum," *Diaconia Christi* 41 (2006): 41-46.

of *diakonia* today, a fundamental shift of consciousness should take place, moving beyond opaque terminology and traditionally accepted concepts towards a diaconal spirituality that is grounded in a theological and pastoral aesthetics.

The drama of *diakonia* and the challenges of the church and society in the twenty-first century, have presented us with new problems that demand critical rethinking. I suggest that one possible solution, as illustrated by my recent Ph.D. on the *Theology of Prison Ministry* (Trinity College Dublin),²¹ could come from pastoral theology and aesthetics: with a diaconal spirituality that focuses on the person as directed *meaning-wards*²² and *go-between*.²³

Drawing on the scholarship of John N. Collins and some of the leading thinkers in the field,²⁴ I would like to challenge the consensus by exploring whether the Greek experience of *diakonia* originally had something to do with charitable social work. I propose the argument that *diakonia* instead refers to spiritual experiences of “a go-between,” echoing Plato’s “in-between” of the *metaxy*.²⁵ This type of spirituality of divine-human activity, of seeking and searching (*zetesis*),²⁶ can arguably be best described as a mediation of meaning. It is carried out by order or on behalf of another (human) person and/or (divine) Person(s). For Collins, a deacon (or more universal) the person is debatably

- 21 Meins G.S. Coetsier, *Towards a Theology of Prison Ministry*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Trinity College Dublin, School of Religion, Loyola Institute, 2021 [http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/96469]
- 22 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York, NY: Beacon Press, [1959] 1985); *Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager* (München: Kösel-Verlag, [1977] 2016). Brendan M. Purcell, *The Drama of Humanity: Towards a Philosophy of Humanity in History* (Frankfurt a/M: Peter Lang, 1996); *Where is God in suffering?* (Dublin: Veritas, 2016).
- 23 Bart J. Koet, *The Go-Between: Augustine on Deacons* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). Koet et al., *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The First Two Centuries*, 10.
- 24 Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*. Koet et al., *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The First Two Centuries*. Sven-Erik Brodd, “The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity: Historical Ecclesiological Layers in Understanding the Diaconate,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 13/4 (2014): 270-285. Annette Noller, *Diakonat und Kirchenreform: Empirische, historische und ekklesiologische Dimensionen einer diakonischen Kirche*, *Diakonat – Theoriekonzepte Und Praxisentwicklung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016). Mikko Malkavaara, *Diakonia ja diakonivirka* (Helsinki: Kirkkohallitus, 2015). Herbert Vorgrimler, “Liturgie, Diakonie und Diakone,” in Benedikt Kranemann et al., *Die diakonale Dimension der Liturgie* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 236–45
- 25 Cf. Eric Voegelin, *Glossary of Terms Used in Eric Voegelin’s Writings in Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, Vol. 34, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 168.
- 26 *Ibid*, 185.

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not a ‘humble servant’ or ‘assistant’ but rather something like a “messenger,” “a-go-between,” or “prophetic intermediary” in the existential and divine-human quest for meaning.²⁷ Taking up Collins argument, I would like to advance this type of agency in terms of the *go-between*: that is, with a spirituality of meaning, of leadership and teaching, of communication between people, and interaction between communities, churches, and the world.

DIACONAL SPIRITUALITY

We have to figure out what diaconal spirituality is. How can spiritual experiences of *diakonia* be given a reliable reading? Which themes can be distinguished in the field of spirituality and what would be a meaningful way to address them? In the resulting societal tensions, social conflicts and emotions, human beings seek meaning and understanding: What is our commonality with those who have gone before us? Is there a frame of *diakonia* and a conversation of humankind?

We have to take into account that even today there is an ongoing historical and spiritual drama, where despite worldwide pandemics, wars and hunger, persons can reach an understanding of one another and of the Transcendent. It is our observation that human beings, historically, have always been charged with the responsibility of gaining and maintaining a sense of meaning and peace in their existence from ever-threatening meaninglessness, chaos and destruction. In a modest attempt, I would like to get an insight into *diakonia* for the twentieth-first century. That is, to move *meaning-wards* and *go-between* towards the Transcendent – God – the Source of everything. Our time, in this respect, is spiritually no different as in the mythic, philosophic, revelational, and post-ideological experiences of the human person.²⁸

My aim is to move beyond the problems concerning terminology, towards a theological inquiry into diaconal spirituality that is part of the inquiry into the drama of humanity itself and its search for the ground of existence. In a person-centered hermeneutic of *diakonia*, one must include the deacons and their pastoral ministry but not aim at them exclusively. We must reflect upon the unfolding process of the person’s quest for the Transcendent, which is shown, for example, in prayer, song or meditation, in poetry, literature and art, as well as in Creation, and in the encounters with fellow humans in need. These spiritual and pastoral accounts are explored as illuminating moments in the meditative *anamnesis* of the quest

27 Koet et al., *Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity: The First Two Centuries*, 10. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*.

28 See the works of Eric Voegelin, Brendan M. Purcell, and David J. Walsh.

of human consciousness, and as the intrinsic diaconal service to God, humankind, society and the world.²⁹

In a person-centered hermeneutic of *diakonía* we ask: Who is a person? How should a person live? How can humans go *meaning-wards*? How should we ‘serve’ or ‘treat’ other persons? Can *diakonía* become a *go-between* – with humility and of service – to humanity and to the planet as a whole? That is, with humans not as ‘the crown of creation’ but ‘responsible for creation.’ These are the anthropological questions and the theological hermeneutic that could move us towards a diaconal spirituality with pastoral aesthetics.

TOWARDS A CONTEMPORARY PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Theological research of diaconal spirituality, in terms of exploring personhood, is at the center of our shared human search for meaning, for authentic religiosity and renewed, contemporary faith within the church and outside. This field of study can be significantly enriched by a theology of beauty and the dialogue between theology and the arts, such as dance, drama, film, literature, music, poetry, and the visual arts. By integrating the arts in our spirituality, we truly acknowledge and affirm that personal existence and *diakonía* means first and foremost a co-creative *go-between* of the free participation in transcendent reality, truth and goodness.

Art in today’s modern cultures has become a vehicle of human and spiritual expression. There is a growing body of scholars and practitioners in the fields of theological aesthetics and the theology of spirituality. The “theology-arts conversation” has contributed so much over the last decade; nonetheless, in relation to *diakonía*, the growing presence of the aesthetic within practical theology discourse could be positively enhanced and critically reviewed. Art can function as a source of diaconal spirituality and of pastoral theology (Tillich, Rahner). Art often speaks louder than words, which is also true for the beauty of God (von Balthasar, Barth). The arts create concrete islands of meaning in today’s culture. Music and visual art, especially, play an essential role of imagination in the theology of diaconal spirituality.

The human person as *go-between*, has not only feeling, intuition, and intellect, but also moves courageously *meaning-wards* towards the Transcendent and by doing so becomes *transcendence* itself. This act of co-creation and participation in the divine presence goes beyond mere human aspiration into the very reality and idea

29 Voegelin, *Glossary of Terms Used in Eric Voegelin’s Writings in Autobiographical Reflections*, 150, 154.

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of beauty itself, and of the vision of God (Aquinas, Bonaventure). Persons who integrate a diaconal spirituality may well become “Go(d)-between-seekers”: They find meaning in all things (Ignatius of Loyola), and seek Christ among the poor, the outcast, the sick and the marginalized, those most in need.

But can the human search for the divine and the person’s *go-between* for meaning – that is, through beauty, and the arts – become a diaconal spirituality? Or as Dostoevsky puts it, can the beauty we find, acknowledge and create, truly “save the world”? Meditating on the signs of the times, one discovers that there is a greater need, especially now the Church in Europe is in crisis, for clarity and spiritual guidance. I hope to contribute scholarly to the theological debate as well as shining a little light on the dark sensations, the feelings of hurt, the lack of imagination, and the ongoing struggle towards a renewed spiritual understanding of our faith, and of *diakonia* in our times. With a lived diaconal spirituality I hope to explore further the unfolding of the human person as *go-between* with the sustenance, authenticity and creative power of the arts.

Finally, in my own personal efforts as a permanent deacon, prison chaplain, singer-songwriter and academic, I have spent most of my time trying to understand this existential and spiritual drama of *diakonia* and the transcendent meaning of our personal existence. I realise that it is hard to find a way, to “taste the fulfilment of existence.”³⁰ *True existence* often seems to pass us by; you and I, we do not always participate in “true, fulfilled existence,” as Buber puts it. Yet, I strive to find – somewhere – what we’re all seeking: *You*—God. Somewhere, in some part of the world, or in my own consciousness: But do I seek where I stand right now or where I have been sent out (for me in prison)? Is it not here and nowhere else that the treasure of *diakonia* can be found? That is, in the imprisonment and freedom of our personal existence, in the reality of the *go-between*. Or in the words of Buber, wouldn’t it be a greater thing, “if the streets of our hometown are as bright to us as the paths of heaven. For it is here, where we stand, that we should try to make shine the light of hidden divine life”³¹

30 Buber, *The Way of Man*, 30.

31 *Ibid*, 31.