

“For deacons who want to fulfill their liturgical role with more faith and understanding, for those who wonder what deacons may and may not do, for those curious about the history of the diaconate, for priests who share responsibilities with deacons, for men considering a call to the diaconate, for anyone seeking a better view of what deacons do and who they are, Deacon Frederick Bauerschmidt offers sure-footed information, pastoral guidance, and inspirational confidence.”

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Pastor, St. Anthony Catholic Church, Kansas City, MO
Author, *Let Us Pray: A Guide to the Rubrics of Sunday Mass*

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— Deacon Owen F. Cummings
Academic Dean and Regents’ Professor of Theology
Mount Angel Seminary

The Deacon's Ministry of the Liturgy

Frederick C. Bauerschmidt



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*For
Deacon Frank Hodges
and
Dr. Cyndi Tiff,
devoted servants of the church's liturgy.*

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CHAPTER 1

The Deacon and the Liturgy in Scripture and Tradition

For Catholics, our theological reflection ought to be rooted in Scripture as read in light of the tradition with the guidance of the church's teaching office. It is therefore fitting that, as we begin to explore the deacon's ministry of liturgy, we look to Scripture and tradition for insight both into the nature of liturgy and the role of the deacon within it. From this starting point we can begin to understand not simply *what* the deacon does in the liturgy, but *why* he does what he does, for it is only if the deacon is firmly grounded in the history and theology of the liturgy that he will be able to carry out his ministry of liturgy well.

Liturgy and Deacons in Scripture

The most ordinary meaning of the term "liturgy" is the more-or-less set ritual forms of public worship employed by practitioners of the different religions of the world. In the ancient Greek-speaking world, however, *leitourgia* was a public work or act of service to the city or *polis*, typically undertaken by a person of means at his own expense (often as an alternative to paying taxes). This might include providing a chorus for a festival, financing athletic competitions, or providing a military vessel in time of war.¹ Though not excluding religious service, since festivals and plays often had a religious element, the meaning of the term was broad enough to include a number of "public works" projects that we would consider secular.

This term was already taken over by the scholars who translated the Hebrew Scriptures in the third century BC, who used it to refer to the ritual service rendered by the Levites in the temple.² It is worth noting that the Levites were not priests, but those who assisted the priests at the sacrifice, and thus were seen in the Christian tradition as precursors of the diaconate. Here, the meaning of *leitourgia* seems to indicate a religious work, but one that is undertaken for the good of the community as a whole. The “public work” of the Levites was their ritual service in the temple.

This religious sense of *leitourgia* is carried over into Luke’s gospel, where it is used to refer to Zechariah’s ritual priestly service in the temple (Luke 1:23). Other New Testament texts also use the term, or closely related terms, to refer to priestly or other religious service. The letter to the Hebrews says that Christ’s *leitourgia* is more excellent than that exercised by the priests in the temple, referring to their role of performing the sacrificial ritual (Heb 8:6). It also speaks of the angels as *leitourgika pneumata*—sometimes translated “ministering spirits”—which refers to the assistance they offer people on earth, but may also be a reference to their role in the heavenly worship of God (Heb 1:14). In the letter to the Romans, Paul says that he has been given grace to be the *leitourgon* to the Gentiles by “ministering-in-a-priestly-way” (*hierourgounta*) to the gospel, though it is not clear that he is referring to any sort of ritual ministry (Rom 15:16). Other uses in Paul seem clearly non-ritual, such as his *leitourgia* of providing a collection for the poor in Jerusalem, though we ought not to forget that this collection might well have been collected as part of the Christians’ gathering for worship (2 Cor 9:12). In all of these uses we can hear echoes of the secular Greek sense of “liturgy” as something that one does as a “public work” for the good of one’s community.

Apart from explicit uses of the term “liturgy,” the Scriptures also presume the ritualized worship of God. The Old Testament bears ample witness of the “liturgical” nature of Israelite worship, both in the meticulous descriptions of what took place in the temple and in the psalms, which give us many of the texts used in Israelite worship. Sometimes people think that the Christian rejection of the Jewish ceremonial law as a vehicle for salvation meant that Christians rejected all sense of ceremony and ritual, but both Jesus and the churches of the New Testament presume much of the liturgical life of Israel as a backdrop. Early Christian worship, while not approaching the temple

in splendor, was characterized neither by freewheeling unstructured enthusiasm nor by puritanical sobriety. We can safely presume that at the Last Supper Jesus followed the traditional pattern of Jewish sacred meals and that these ritual meals carried over as the fundamental framework within which the early Christian Eucharist developed. Baptism, associated with dying and rising in the Pauline tradition (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:12) and with birth in the Johannine tradition (John 3:5), was clearly an action carried out with a sense of ritual awe. Moreover, St. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, expresses his desire that, when Christians gather for worship, all things “be done properly and in order,” meaning that exuberant expressions of the Spirit’s presence not overwhelm the set pattern of worship (1 Cor 14:40).

Does Scripture give us any insight into the role of deacons in these early Christian assemblies? The short answer is no, not directly. Some, interpreting the seven chosen in Acts 6 as the first deacons, have wanted to see some sort of liturgical ministry in their being set apart “to serve at table” (Acts 6:2), but this is not clear. It is possible that this “serving” took place at the Christian communal meal, which was not yet clearly distinct from the Eucharist, but the term could also mean simply keeping the community’s accounts. One of the seven, Philip, baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch, which could certainly be considered a liturgical action (Acts 8:36-38). But even if we do see the seven as the first deacons, which some scholars dispute, we cannot know whether or not Philip’s action tells us something about what was normal for deacons. The First Letter to Timothy tells us something about the qualifications for the office of deacon, but nothing significant about its role, liturgical or otherwise.

We might also look at the word *diakonia* for hints concerning the role of those who took their name from this term. It is usually translated as “service” or “ministry.” Modern scholars have tended to treat this as a term that implies a kind of lowliness or humility, but more recently it has been suggested that in secular Greek a *diakonos* was not just any sort of servant, but one who acted on behalf of his or her master—an agent or go-between. John Collins notes that though the various forms of the word *diakonia* found in the New Testament cannot be reduced to a single meaning, wherever it is found it “will always connote a mandate from a commissioning person or institution.”³ Rather than simply being a humble servant, one who engaged in *diakonia* might well have exercised a certain kind of leadership: a leadership carried

out on behalf of another, an authority that arises from being authorized. This in itself does not tell us how those called deacons functioned liturgically in the first century, but it might help us understand why deacons functioned the way that they did as the church developed in subsequent centuries.

In short, there is much that we do not know about Christian worship in the first century, and even more of which we are ignorant concerning deacons and their roles. We can presume that Christian gatherings had at least in part a ritual character and that the emerging office of deacon has some role in those assemblies, but the exact nature of that role is, as far as we know, lost to history.

Deacons in the Liturgy of the Early Church

The amount of our information on deacons and the liturgy increases as we move through the first few centuries of the church. One of the earliest Christian documents outside of the New Testament, the *Didache*, which may date from the late first century, gives us a little more information on Christian worship, including instructions on how to baptize and prayers for use at the Eucharist. After instructing Christians to gather on the Lord's Day (i.e., Sunday) "to break bread and to give thanks,"⁴ the *Didache* immediately goes on to say, "appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons," but does not specify any particular liturgical duties for them, describing them only as "prophets and teachers."⁵ Writing at the first decade of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch (died ca. 110) speaks of deacons as "servants of the mysteries of Jesus Christ," and notes, "they are not servants of food and drink but servants of the Church of God."⁶ Perhaps we have here an allusion to the Eucharist and the deacon's role within it, but what that role is we cannot say. Writing in Rome in the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr (100–165) gives us our earliest account of what at least one Christian community did when it assembled on the Lord's Day: reading the Scriptures, listening to preaching, making intercession for the world, taking bread and wine, giving thanks over them, and receiving them as the Body and Blood of Christ. In the course of this description Justin makes explicit mention of the role of the deacon in distributing the Eucharist to the assembly, as well as carrying it to those who are absent.⁷

More evidence accumulates in the third and fourth centuries. In North Africa, Tertullian (ca. 155/160–after 220) mentions that deacons

and presbyters can baptize if they have the permission of the bishop.⁸ Writing slightly later, Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200–258) says that presbyters celebrating the Eucharist should do so with the assistance of a deacon⁹ and mentions explicitly the deacon's role of administering the cup.¹⁰

Even more detail can be found in the document that modern scholars have called the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, but which recent research indicates may be a composite document dating from a number of different places, including perhaps Rome and Egypt, and times, ranging from the mid-second to the mid-fourth centuries.¹¹ The text provides a prayer for use at the ordination of deacons that describes them as chosen “to present in your sanctuary the offering of him who was established as your high priest, to the glory of your name.”¹² This fits with descriptions elsewhere in the text of deacons presenting the bread and wine to the bishop at the altar prior to the eucharistic prayer.¹³ Deacons, along with presbyters, helped in the breaking of the bread for Communion,¹⁴ but, in a practice different from what we saw in Cyprian, only helped distribute Communion by ministering the cup if insufficient presbyters were present.¹⁵ Apart from the Eucharist, deacons also had an assisting role at baptism: they held the oil of exorcism for the pre-baptismal anointing and the chrism (called the oil of thanksgiving) for the post-baptismal anointing; they also went down into the font with the candidate, and may have performed the actual baptismal immersions.¹⁶ In the absence of the bishop, deacons could also preside at the evening agape meal, which involved distributing a blessed cup and blessed bread (in that order) to those who were assembled.¹⁷

From the Christian East, the third-century Syrian document known as the *Didascalia* fills out some other liturgical roles of deacons. In particular, it points to the role of the deacon in keeping order in the liturgical assembly. One deacon stood at the door as a porter, controlling who came in and making sure that they went to sit in their proper places, which was strictly defined by age and sex. Another stood inside, “next to the gifts for the Eucharist” (presumably the bread and wine that were to be consecrated), and made sure that everyone remained in his or her proper place, admonishing them if they were mislocated. He was to make sure as well “that no one whispers, falls asleep, laughs, or nods.”¹⁸ The deacon also had the role of initiating the kiss of peace before the eucharistic prayer by saying in a loud voice, “Does anyone have something against another?”¹⁹ Perhaps he asked this because he was the one who had been scrutinizing everyone during the Liturgy

of the Word. This role of the deacon as liturgical “enforcer” is also reflected in a slightly later document originating from Egypt, probably in the fourth century, known as *The Canons of Father Athanasius*, which notes, “if any of the people should talk loudly, the presbyter is to blame the deacons for this since the latter have not trained the people.”²⁰ In this document, deacons were not only charged with restraining an unruly assembly; they also had to restrain themselves: “As to the deacons who strike one another at the altar [. . .], they must stand outside [the church] for a month and fast for a week.”²¹

Another document from the East, the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions*, shows deacons doing a variety of tasks during the celebration of the Eucharist, many of which are familiar to this day: reading the gospel (a task shared with presbyters);²² leading the litany of intercession “for the whole Church, for the whole world and for its various parts, for the products of the earth, for priests and rulers, for the bishop, for the sovereign, and for peace everywhere”;²³ preparing the offering;²⁴ ministering the cup at Communion;²⁵ and dismissing the people.²⁶ Some duties might seem less familiar, such as expelling penitents²⁷ or fanning the offerings to keep bugs away.²⁸ At the same time, certain things are explicitly forbidden to deacons: “The deacon is not allowed to offer sacrifice, to baptize, to give a blessing whether it be small or large.”²⁹

This concern over clearly distinguishing diaconal roles from presbyteral and episcopal ones and asserting the superiority of presbyters over deacons began to emerge at least as early as the Council of Nicaea (325), which had forbidden deacons from giving Communion to presbyters—“neither the canon nor custom permits Christ’s Body to be distributed to those who offer the sacrifice by those who cannot offer it”—and enjoining deacons to “remain within the limits of their functions and remember that they are servants of the bishops and are subordinate to the presbyters.”³⁰ In the East, the so-called *Canons of Hippolytus*, dating from the fourth or fifth century, noted that the deacon should distribute Communion only if the bishop or presbyter explicitly tells him to do so.³¹ Even when the deacon brings Communion to a presbyter who is sick, the presbyter is to receive it at his own hands and not from the deacon.³² In the West, the Second Synod of Arles, held in the second half of the fifth century, forbade deacons from sitting with the priests and from distributing the Eucharist when a priest was present.³³ Pope Gelasius (died 496) warned that “deacons

are to observe their proper limits” and that “their service is to include nothing that antiquity has properly assigned to the higher orders.”³⁴

Some writers attempted to distinguish diaconal and presbyteral roles by presenting them as complementary rather than competitive. An anonymous fifth-century treatise titled *De Septem Ordinibus Ecclesiae* noted:

The priest is commanded to pray, the deacon to sing psalms. The priest is to sanctify the offerings, the deacon to distribute what has been sanctified. Priests should not presumptuously take the cup from the Lord’s table unless it has been handed to them by a deacon. [. . .] Deacons place the offerings on the altar. They arrange the Lord’s table. Deacons assist the priest while the sacraments are blessed. Deacons pray before the priest prays. [. . .] The Lord granted us the diaconal order so that all might see that the priest is not the only minister who acts and performs in church. The priest needs the diaconal office just as the deacon needs the priestly office, much the same as there can be no rich person without a poor person, nor someone poor without someone rich. [. . .] The presbyter needs a chair, the deacon an altar, the subdeacon the sacristy, the reader a lectern, the doorkeeper a church, and the grave digger a cemetery. [. . .].³⁵

Here the diversity and mutual dependence of liturgical ministers—not simply presbyters and deacons but also subdeacons, lectors, and so forth—served as a reminder of human interdependence more generally. The liturgy, in the coordinated harmony of its ministries, was an image of the coordinated harmony of God’s kingdom.

One area where friction over the liturgical role of deacons showed itself most clearly was in baptism. Despite the example of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 6, there was disagreement as to the circumstances under which a deacon could baptize. The *Testamentum Domini*, a church manual written in the fourth or fifth century in what is today Turkey, stated that deacons could only baptize in cases of necessity when a presbyter is not present.³⁶ An Armenian synod held in 527 likewise restricted deacons from baptizing except in cases of necessity.³⁷ In the West, Pope Gelasius, in a letter written in the late fifth century, took a position, similar to what we see in the East, that deacons should baptize only in extreme emergencies and “may do what lay Christians commonly do”—that is, administer emergency baptism.³⁸ Other Western writers, however, saw diaconal administration

of baptism as more normal. Writing a century before Gelasius, Jerome (ca. 345–420) seemed not to put any restriction on deacons baptizing.³⁹ A few decades after Gelasius the Second Synod of Orleans (533) treated baptism as an ordinary part of diaconal ministry, directing that no one be ordained as a priest or deacon who does not know how to baptize.⁴⁰ Particularly striking is the strong statement in *De Septem Ordinibus Ecclesiae* that “no one can believe that a person baptized by a bishop is more holy than a person baptized by a deacon.”⁴¹ As we move into the Middle Ages, the differences in Eastern and Western approaches solidify, with deacons in the West tending to be seen as ministers of the sacrament of baptism in nonemergency situations and those in the East baptizing only in emergency situations. A similar difference develops with regard to deacons administering Communion, with some of the churches of the East restricting this to bishops and presbyters, which was not the case in the West.⁴²

One general development of the patristic period, especially after Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in AD 312 and began to function as a patron of the church, was the increasing splendor of the setting of the liturgy. Elements of civic ritual were carried over into the liturgy, especially the practice of the bishop being preceded in procession by candles and incense, just as Roman civic officials were. Processions both within and outside churches became very prominent and popular. Music grew more elaborate and deacons were often highly prized for their singing ability, so much so that Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century decreed:

It has long been customary in the Roman church to ordain cantors as deacons, and, furthermore, to use them for singing rather than for preaching and caring for the poor. As a result at divine services a good voice is more appreciated than a good life. Consequently no deacon may henceforth sing in the church except for the gospel at Mass. The remaining lessons and psalms shall be sung by subdeacons or, if necessary, by those in minor orders.⁴³

Clergy also adopted formal attire for the liturgy that was originally the same as secular formalwear but, as fashions changed, came to be seen as distinctively sacred garments, reserved for liturgical purposes and bearing symbolic value.⁴⁴ Writing in the fifth century, Theodore of Mopsuestia remarked on the deacon's vestments, which “make them seem more impressive than they are.” At the same time he noted that

the deacon's way of wearing the stole—on the left shoulder and hanging down in front and back—was both a sign of service and “the sign of the freedom to which all of us believers in Christ have been called.”⁴⁵

By the end of the sixth century, the liturgy had taken a form that in many ways would be recognizable to us today. Similarly, the ministry of the deacon within the liturgy was fairly well defined, including his role as reader of the gospel, leader of the intercessions, and exhorter of the assembly—all roles that still today form part of the liturgical ministry of deacons.

Deacons in the Liturgy of the Middle Ages

The line between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages is a fuzzy one. Indeed, it is a division that was only drawn in retrospect, by later historians, and many elements from the first centuries of Christianity carried over into the period that followed the demise of the Roman Empire. Yet often historians of the liturgy see this thousand-year period as an undifferentiated era of decline, in which the liturgy came to be seen less as something in which all of the faithful played a part and more as a sacred drama staged by the clergy for the benefit of an essentially passive assembly.⁴⁶ While there is an element of truth in this picture, the reality is, as is so often the case, more complicated. In this section, I will look first at some broad trends in the liturgical developments of this period and then look specifically at what happened to the liturgical role of the deacon.

Perhaps the most significant changes in how Christians experienced the liturgy during the Middle Ages is related to language. In the West, Latin was the language of literacy, and so the liturgy, because it was increasingly fixed in texts, remained in Latin. The people of northern Europe, however, spoke a variety of Germanic languages, and in southern Europe spoken Latin was rapidly evolving into early versions of the Romance languages we know today. In some sense, then, the language of the liturgy became a barrier to the participation of many of the faithful. But the issue is more complex than it might first appear. Particularly in southern Europe, where people spoke vernaculars derived from Latin, many of the laity apparently had some *passive* ability to understand Latin; where their difficulty arose was in their *active* ability to speak Latin (not unlike how an English-speaker today might be able to understand Shakespeare but would be hard put to write grammatically correct

sixteenth-century prose). In terms of participation in the liturgy, this meant that the faithful might be able to identify what the gospel reading was or to make some of the shorter, fixed responses (e.g., *Et cum spiritu tuo*), but were not capable in joining in longer hymns or prayers of the liturgy, which were increasingly taken over by clerical choirs.⁴⁷ In the late thirteenth century, a local church council in Italy decreed that deacons should not use overly elaborate chants for the gospel since this would impede the people's understanding of what was being sung, which indicates that even at this late date there was some expectation, at least in Italy, that the laity could understand at least some of the words of the liturgy.⁴⁸ So while the level of vocal participation by the laity undoubtedly decreased over the course of the Middle Ages, this should not be taken to mean that they suffered a total alienation from the action of the liturgy.

To the degree that the spoken language of the liturgy formed a barrier to lay participation, this was partially overcome by the rich ceremony of the liturgy itself, which engaged the senses and the imagination. We should not underestimate the sheer sensual appeal of the liturgy—with its brilliantly colored vestments and windows and statuary, its fragrant incense, its sonorous chanting—particularly in a world that was not saturated with bright imagery and recorded music in the way that ours is. In addition, allegorical interpretations of the various rites, such as those offered by Amalar of Metz in the mid-ninth century, correlated the action of the liturgy to events in the life of Jesus, serving both the didactic purpose of teaching the life of Christ through the liturgy and the spiritual purpose of helping worshipers affectively engage the liturgical action.

Some have noted that even if people were engaged, it was primarily as individuals: robbed of their common voice in the liturgy, the assembly disintegrated into a mere collection of people using the liturgy as a backdrop for their private devotions. Most significantly, beginning already in the fourth century in the East and spreading to the West in the early Middle Ages, the frequency with which laypeople received Communion at Mass declined drastically, until the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) had to mandate that the laity receive Communion once a year at Eastertide in order to retain their good standing in the church. Not only the vocal participation of the laity, but also the ultimate sign of the collective unity of the church, the assembly's communion, largely disappeared from the liturgy.

Yet more recent scholarship has pointed out the ways in which the liturgy was understood in profoundly communal terms in the Middle Ages; rather than being a pageant enacted by the clergy for a passive lay audience, it was a sacred drama in which all were involved and that enacted what the historian John Bossy calls “the social miracle” that created a space of “public holiness where the parish could assemble together to combine sociability with the worship of God.”⁴⁹ Above all, the celebration of the Mass, even with the infrequent communion of the laity, was a powerful experience of being bound together through the blood of Christ shed on the cross. Controversy over the teachings of the theologian Berengar of Tours in the eleventh century had sharpened the church’s appreciation of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the power of the sacrifice of the Mass to unite Christians in charity. Even uneducated Christians had a profound sense that the Eucharist, in which Christ was present, body and blood, soul and divinity, was a powerful source of social cohesion.

This is not to say that the liturgy as celebrated in the Middle Ages was beyond criticism. In particular, with a strong sense of the distinct value of each offering of the eucharistic sacrifice, there was in the later Middle Ages a proliferation of “low Masses” celebrated by the priest with a single server and without any music, in which the diverse ministries of celebrant and deacon and subdeacon and cantor were all taken by the priest, turning what had been a manifestation of the church in her diversity of ministries into something of a one-man show. Clearly this made the liturgical ministry of the deacon increasingly seem an optional add-on to the liturgy, as the sacrament of holy orders became more focused on the priest and his power to consecrate the Eucharist.

At the same time, the diaconate appears to have remained through much of the Middle Ages as a distinct ministry with a clearly defined liturgical role, at least in some places. It is often said that during the Middle Ages the diaconate ceased being a genuine ministry and became simply a transitional step in the clerical *cursus honorum*, the final stop before reaching the pinnacle of the priesthood, and one that candidates moved through as quickly as possible. “Deacons,” it is claimed, were typically priests who vested as deacons and fulfilled their liturgical function, and not men who were deacons as a permanent state. While this did eventually become the case and remained the case until the Second Vatican Council, we should be cautious about

accepting this picture too quickly as a general truth concerning the diaconate in the Middle Ages. Even apart from well-known cases such as Alcuin of York in the eighth century and Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth, who were ordained to the diaconate and remained deacons their entire lives, papal records of taxes on clergy from thirteenth-century Italy indicate that almost all churches in that region had at least one deacon and one subdeacon.⁵⁰ It is unlikely that that many clergy were simply “transitioning” through these orders on their way to the priesthood. At least in some places at some times, therefore, the “deacons” of the liturgy were actual deacons.

With regard to the actual liturgical duties of the deacon, many Western medieval descriptions simply repeat what was found in a late seventh-century work called the *Epistola ad Leudefredum*, falsely ascribed to Isidore of Seville.⁵¹ It identifies the deacon as one who assists the priest in everything associated with the sacraments, including the chrism at baptism, placing the offerings of bread and wine on the altar and also “vesting” the altar (perhaps spreading the corporal?), carrying the cross (perhaps a reference to the Good Friday liturgy?), proclaiming the Gospel and epistle, leading the prayers and the “recitation of names” (i.e., the prayer of the faithful), exhorting the attention of the assembly, and “calling out and announcing peace.”⁵² Even though some aspects of the liturgy had changed—notably the disappearance of the prayer of the faithful—this description was still deemed suitable some six centuries later. Similarly, other later medieval writers note the role of the deacon in ministering the chalice to the people,⁵³ even though by the thirteenth century the practice of the laity receiving in one kind only was nearly universal.

With regard to liturgical roles outside of Mass, we have evidence that deacons continued to perform baptisms in nonemergency situations. A thirteenth-century fresco from the baptistery in Parma shows a deacon in alb and stole baptizing an infant in the same font in which a bishop is baptizing a king, a visual representation of the statement from *De Septem Ordinibus Ecclesiae*, which I quoted above, that a person baptized by a bishop is no more holy than a person baptized by a deacon.⁵⁴ With regard to marriages, the church in the West developed a theology of matrimony that focused on the mutual consent of the couple as the essence of the sacrament, meaning that the ordained cleric present served as witness rather than the minister of the sacrament. It is not clear how often deacons served in that role of witness,

though the canon lawyer Gratian mentions a case where a deacon, along with a priest, is identified as having been witness to a couple's vows.⁵⁵ At the same time, the increasing insistence that couples receive a priestly blessing as part of their wedding, and that the wedding be followed by a nuptial Mass, probably led to weddings most often being officiated by priests.

The Middle Ages continued the liturgical functions of deacons inherited from the early church. Despite the persistence of the diaconate as a distinct order into the thirteenth century, there does seem to have been gradual erosion of the order of deacons as more and more emphasis was placed on priesthood as the paradigm of ordained ministry. By the beginning of the sixteenth century there does appear to be a complete reduction of the diaconate to a brief stop on the way through the *cursus honorum* to priesthood and to a liturgical role fulfilled more often than not by priests dressed as deacons.

Deacons in the Liturgy from the Reformation to Vatican II and Beyond

The Protestant reformers tended to reject the medieval structure of orders and along with it the diaconate as an ordained ministry, substituting instead a single ordained ministry of word and sacrament.⁵⁶ In part as a reaction to this, the Council of Trent (1545–63) reaffirmed the role of the diaconate, and even decreed that diaconal ministry, as well as the ministries of the “minor orders” (doorkeeper, lector, exorcist, acolyte, subdeacon), were “only to be exercised by those holding the appropriate orders,” and that these functions should be restored in churches, “as far as can be reasonably done.”⁵⁷ Yet this did not happen, and it failed to happen in part because of the teachings of the Council of Trent itself.

As in the late Middle Ages, the council focused on the priesthood in its teachings on ordination and saw other ministries as instituted “to give official assistance to priests.” It also reaffirmed the notion that men should “ascend through the minor to the major orders.”⁵⁸ Moreover, Trent's concern to reform the education of clerics through the founding of seminaries,⁵⁹ while in many ways improving the quality of the clergy, also tended to keep those ordained to the diaconate behind the walls of the seminary as they moved with all deliberate speed toward the priesthood.⁶⁰

Even the “liturgical deacon”—that is, the priest who, by virtue of his earlier ordination to the diaconate, vested as a deacon (or subdeacon) and fulfilled his role at a Solemn Mass—became increasingly rare. Many of the new religious orders that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were strongly apostolic in their focus and not much interested in elaborate liturgies, preferring the simple Low Mass celebrated by a priest and a single server.⁶¹ Even on those occasions when a more solemn form of Mass was celebrated, this was often a *Missa Cantata* (Sung Mass), which was a sung form of Low Mass, with the tasks of the deacon and subdeacon divided between the celebrating priest and the servers. Thus even the echo of the deacon’s liturgical ministry preserved in the Solemn Mass was not experienced by most people except on rare occasions. This was the state of affairs for several centuries.

When in the mid-twentieth century theologians and others began discussing the possibility of reviving the diaconate as a permanent ordained ministry, the liturgical functions of deacons—specifically their ability to solemnly baptize and to distribute Holy Communion, as well as their being bound to the recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours—were often seen as one of the things that distinguished them from laypeople who might engage in charitable, catechetical, and administrative tasks on behalf of the church. At the same time, these same theologians emphasized that the diaconate was not *simply* a liturgical ministry, but rather that the liturgical ministry was an expression of a deeper diaconal identity.⁶² If the diaconate was merely a liturgical role, why should priests not fulfill it? If it was simply charitable and catechetical activities, why should the laity not fulfill it? What was needed was a recovery of a sense of diaconal ministry that encompasses the liturgical, the catechetical, and the charitable, a ministry to which one could devote oneself as a permanent vocation.

This interest in restoring the diaconate often went along with an interest in restoring and renewing the liturgy itself, often referred to as “the liturgical movement.” Beginning in the early twentieth century, there was a desire to return to the ideal of Christian worship as found in the early church, in which the liturgy was a “public work” in which all of God’s people took their part. The point of this, as the liturgical scholar Josef Jungmann noted, was not simply to return to the past, but so that “in the celebration of the Christian mysteries the inner wealth of the Church comes to light as of old and the children of the

Church constantly renew their joy and gladness because of their possessions and their blessings.”⁶³ This end was sought through restoring to the laity their voice in worship through singing and speaking the responses and encouraging them to follow the action of the liturgy itself rather than engaging in their own devotions, for which the liturgy merely formed a backdrop. It was also sought through a return to the ideal of the Solemn Mass, in which the church in its diversity was manifested through a diversity of liturgical ministries.

At the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), the hopes of both those who sought a revival of the diaconate and those who sought reform of the liturgy were fulfilled. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church stated, “it will be possible in the future to restore the diaconate as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy” and “to confer this diaconal order even upon married men, provided they be of more mature age.” Though the diaconate was defined as a “ministry of the liturgy, the word, and of charity,” the Constitution’s enumeration of the deacon’s duties was almost entirely liturgical:

to administer Baptism solemnly, to reserve and distribute the Eucharist, to assist at and to bless marriages in the name of the church, to take Viaticum to the dying, to read the sacred scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and the prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, and to officiate at funeral and burial services. (*Lumen Gentium* 29)⁶⁴

The Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, in contrast, when discussing the restored diaconate, scarcely mentioned liturgy at all, focusing instead on the ministries of preaching, administration, and charity. The only allusion to liturgy was the statement that laypeople already engaged in these ministries would, by ordination, be “more closely bound to the altar” (*Ad Gentes* 16).

At least in North America and Europe the revival of the diaconate has been a great success, with some dioceses having almost as many permanent deacons as they do priests. Yet the tension between *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes* represents in some ways a continuing tension in the postconciliar period regarding the nature of the diaconate, and in particular the liturgical ministry of deacons. Certainly the most visible ministry of most deacons is liturgical. If you asked most Catholics what deacons do, they would probably mention reading the gospel at Mass or, perhaps, performing baptisms or officiating at weddings.

Because of this, many have criticized the restored permanent diaconate as simply being a cadre of glorified altar servers. This charge is, of course, unfair in light of the many hours spent by deacons on non-liturgical ministry. But even more importantly, the basic assumption of such a charge, that liturgical ministry is not “real” *diakonia*, should also not go unchallenged. Our survey of the history of the liturgical ministry of deacons has shown that the liturgy is the place in which the nature of the church achieves ritual expression, and that the diversity of ministries in the liturgy says something about what the church is. The prominence of the deacon’s servant ministry in the public work of the liturgy points to the importance of the *diakonia* of the church as a whole as it stands before God in the act of worship.