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On Renewing the Diaconate

Fresh winds began to blow through ecumenical discussions of the ministry of the church when the doctrine of the apostolate of the laity won something like universal acceptance, and the church's thinking about mission in the world thereby began to take new, creative forms. Now we could be on the verge of another breakthrough into fresh thinking about ministry – this time by way of the question concerning the nature of the diaconate. Present thought about the servant character of all ministry makes the time seem ripe for raising the question of the nature of that special kind of ministry which bears the servant name. Moreover, our answers to questions about the diaconate might well serve to bring some order out of the chaos of much of the current discussion about lay and ordained ministries in and of the church.

We would suggest that the distinction between 'ordained' and 'lay' kinds of ministry is to be determined, in part at least, by the instruments through which these ministries are to be carried out. For the ordained minister the instrument is primarily an institution of the church, for the layman an institution of secular society. Of course, the ordained man will also participate in forms of social life outside the church, and the layman will exercise his Christian calling in part within forms of the church's life. Nonetheless, the distinction seems valid as far as the primary instrument of the vocation of each is concerned.

As the church seeks to rethink the question of the structures which will best serve her mission in the world, she will be led to devise certain institutions through which ministries of helpfulness to the poor will be exercised by those called and ordained to them. Both biblical and historical reflection on ministry in relation to present-day suffering and want will lead her to do so. Exactly what instruments of her own will be needed to supplement those provided by society or state cannot easily be determined. One criterion for settling the question will be the principle that none must suffer want on account of their religion, class, or race, or because their needs have not sufficiently touched the conscience of society at large. Whatever criteria are adopted, no doubt the church will always find it necessary to provide forms of service for the alleviation of human suffering and the enhancement of human good through institutions of her own devising – institutions which will supplement those of secular society devoted to similar ends. In the latter, of course, as well as in the former, the church will be present in serving love, through Christian laymen who find in them a proper place to offer their service to Christ. But in so far as the church, as a corporate body, devises institutions to meet the needs of the poor, these should be manned by ordained

ministers who are called, tested, and empowered to serve through them in the church's name.

In our view, many of the specialized forms of the ordained ministry to which men and women believe themselves called today belong under this rubric: the diaconate. These are forms of ministry for alleviating poverty of many kinds – ignorance, sickness of body and mind, deprivation of the things that in various ways make life human and good – through institutions of the church. Ordination is properly sought for the exercise of such ministries.

If our reasoning is correct, two consequences follow. The present practice of regarding deacons as apprentice priests will have to be ended. Forms of ordination, other than those which imply that all ministers are ordained to a ministry of word and sacrament, will have to be devised.

W. O. F.

On not Justifying the Church by Works

These are hard times for historic institutions. Late twentieth-century western man shows little interest in traditions, however august. The dizzying acceleration of technological and social change has made his present so baffling and his future so problematical that he has – or at any rate thinks he has – no time for the past. What he wants to know is where he can hope to go from here, not where he came from.

In such a climate of opinion, the more historic an institution is, the more suspect it must appear. But in our western society the Christian church is the institution with by far the longest continuous history and the most massive historical heritage. Thus it is peculiarly vulnerable to attack by the 'Now' generation – for its sheer antiquity, its 'prescientific' dogmas, its pretechnological styles and structures.

Not surprisingly, many Christians today reject the traditional strategies of reform – rethinking theology, restyling worship, reshaping structures – as inadequate. They propose nothing less than a drastic redefinition of the church's role in the world. In the past the church has stressed the proclamation and celebration of God's saving acts in Christ; today it must focus its vision and energies on God's saving action in the social revolutions of our time.

We may well hear this proposal as a badly needed warning against the narrow pietism that so easily infects the church. Christians – confessing, as they do, God's steadfast love for man – should be more, not less, deeply concerned than other men for the secular welfare of humanity. In an age when that welfare clearly requires political action, they should move energetically towards such action, guided by an informed conscience. If they were to settle

for piety without politics they would be neglecting an essential lesson of the gospel.

But can we rightly go to the other extreme? May we settle for politics without piety? If we answer 'Yes,' surely we fail to account for the existence of the church *as church*. The church is sent, first and foremost, to bear witness among men to the divine source, goal, and meaning of human life – uniquely embodied and disclosed in Jesus Christ. If it were to forsake that mission, it would lose both the whole gospel and its own essential *raison d'être*.

E. R. F.

Forthcoming Issues

The July issue will be largely devoted to studies of Christian worship with special attention to contemporary problems. The October issue will contain a memorial to Karl Barth.