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THE QUEST FOR A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE DEACON

Anyone seeking to write on spirituality for the deacon is immediately faced with a variety of problems. These problems are associated with as yet unresolved issues in the study of the diaconate itself. Issues involved here are nothing less than fundamental to the true advancement of any final discussion. They include the history of the order of deacon; the theology underlying the deacon's ministry; the ecclesial significance of deacons, (that is, the deacon's place in the Church and specific role in relation to other members of the Christian body); the development of the deacon's ministry at various periods and in different regions. Each of these issues continues to be the subject of research, of questioning, and frequently also of debate. Strangely, however, in the midst of these often far-reaching reflections on so many diverse fronts, it is not yet possible to identify a spirituality which could be termed specific to the deacon of today. To locate in the Scriptures and in the rich spectrum of the Christian tradition a spirituality which will be widely acknowledged, among deacons and in the Church at large, as specific to deacons will depend in large measure on agreed out-

comes from enquiries into many areas where accord does not yet exist.

In approaching the question of spirituality for the deacon here, I have drawn on some recent reflections on spirituality in general, but have mainly reflected on the experiences of deacons themselves. In my work as a strategist of diaconal work in the Church of Sweden, I frequently meet large numbers of deacons and groups of deacons. Talking with them in their Swedish context, I take away an impression that they feel alone in their service, alone in the sense that they do not always experience an affinity between where they stand as workers in the Church – mostly in parish congregations – and who they are as deacons. They seem to experience a sense of a failed connection, hence the tiredness, the frustration, the sadness, and even the anger that I sometimes meet. My question is whether this frustration and feeling of loneliness arises because the Church has not yet succeeded in establishing the spiritual connection between itself and these ordained members of its body. If there is a failed connection here, if the specific spirituality is missing, deacons can hardly be expected to feel switched on, no matter how many tasks they may attend to.

An approach to the nature of this problem may be opened by considering briefly the commission delivered to the deacon of the Church of Sweden at ordination. The ordination liturgy instructs deacons in these words: 'Meet people tenderly and with respect. Together with them, seek the way God wills, and let it be your endeavour to let faith, doctrine and life become one.'

One of the questions to the deacon in the ordination rite asks: 'Will you so live among people that you bear witness to the love of God and to the mystery of reconciliation?'¹

In this paper I will maintain that it is very difficult for deacons to fulfil a commission, which, as the ordination rite shows, is intimately connected with the life of the Church, when deacons themselves so often have a deep sense of being outsiders in the Church. On the one hand, the task of combining doctrine, faith and life is itself connected with what we understand the spirituality proper to deacons to be. On the other hand, is it realistic to expect deacons to bear witness to the mystery of reconciliation within congregations when it is difficult to recognise congregations as a whole as being places of reconciliation? In the quest for a spirituality for deacons, perhaps it is not the diac-nate itself which is the problem, but rather the fact that we are confronted with questions about fellowship and about whether the parish congregation, as such, is able to be an environment which witnesses to the mystery of reconciliation and in which the love of God flourishes. The forming of such an environment and the bearing of such a witness cannot be a task fulfilled through only one part of the ordained ministry or even only through the ordained ministry as a whole.

In addressing the quest for a spirituality for the deacon, then, it seems that there is a need to bear in mind the experience of deacons themselves. In their concrete service, they try to com-

¹ Sven-Erik Brodd, *The Deacon in the Church of Sweden*, in Borgegård G., and Hall, C. (eds.), *The Ministry of the Deacon*, vol. 1, *Anglican – Lutheran Perspectives*, Uppsala 1999, pp.127 and 136, hereafter referred to as MOD1.

bine action and reflection, intuition and reason, radicalism and contemplation. In these processes they become aware of a new receptiveness to spirituality in people among whom they work, and they sense that, as deacons, they are indeed responding to this openness, but they have difficulties in making their response with any sense that they are acting as members of a congregation rather than on their own. It is difficult to bear witness to the mystery of reconciliation in a church with a split image.

I do not want to give the impression that I am entering into the quest from an exclusively Swedish perspective. That could not lead to an authentic exploration, nor in fact has it been my experience of diaconate, for the diaconate in the modern world has never been a stranger to ecumenism. All over the world deacons have been gathering in many different networks and organisations.² Through these encounters, a clear understanding has developed among deacons that they actually have common questions about their identity and function even though they live and work within their different churches. Whether deacons meet in an Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican or Reformed environment, they share a clear sense of community and of common concerns.³ If this has been a unique ecumenical development, it is one that deacons have come to take for granted. On the ground of this experience it has been natural in the preparation of this paper to draw on material from several traditions.

² Sven-Erik Brodd, *An Escalating Phenomenon: The Diaconate from an Ecumenical Perspective*, in MODI, pp. 11-48.

³ Ecumenical consultations are explored, especially from the viewpoint of women deacons, by Dorothea Reininger, in *Diakonat der Frau in der einen Kirche* (*Women in the deacon's ministry in the early Church*), Ostfildern 1999, pp. 575-603.

In what follows, consistent with the experiential dimension to which I have drawn attention, this paper will offer reflections on how the realities of the deacon's life and work have a bearing on the deacon's spirituality and on how this situation might affect the way we need to define that spirituality. The discussion will raise the question of the connection between the identity of the deacon and the deacon's spirituality, as well as that of the deacon's connection with liturgy. In most of these matters we are touching on questions that are in need of deeper study and understanding.

The starting point

Because deacons are engaged in a very practical service, they seem to expect that a spirituality is somehow 'just there' as a foundation for everything that they do. Part of the explanation for silence about diaconal spirituality is perhaps the fact that deacons are so immersed in their practical work that they do not find time or inclination to talk about spirituality. In talking about it here, it may be useful to consider the situation in which a deacon in an urban area may be placed in the course of diaconal ministry.

In the western world today society can be briefly characterised as neo-liberal. Individualism is central, economic values seem to be the measure of most things (at times even of life itself), and day-to-day business – in Nordic welfare societies at least – is moving towards a total privatisation. A growing gap between rich and poor is a global problem, affecting also 'old' welfare

societies like the Swedish. There is today a concentration of wealth, which also means a concentration of power, in an increasingly small elite, often called 'the market'. These developments expose not only individuals but also whole nations to extremely vulnerable situations. We suffer under the impact upon our lives and values of a society which is extremely consumer orientated.

In the wake of such developments, we can also clearly discern the emergence of suspicions directed against institutions of various kinds, and of course the Church is not exempt from this. Religious life becomes more and more individualistic. People want to form their own beliefs, and to encounter their own God without a clear commitment to a particular church. A possible contributory factor to these attitudes is a perceived lack of spiritual leadership of a kind which has meaning for people in today's societies. More and more people are experiencing a feeling of being hunted. This seems to be true not only of people in Scandinavia but also in Europe as a whole. Today's illnesses are often related to stress and too much work. It is a luxury for many to take a break, relax and do nothing. This is the reality also for people working inside the Church. There is no time to meet the unexpected.. We have now developed a sense that we can control everything, that there are technical solutions and answers that provide a holistic view, though in fact this is only part of the fragmentation in which we live today.

There are connections between the needs and longing inside people and the Church's own need for a new openness towards

society. In their work, deacons meet all kinds of stressed, depressed and tired people. Often the contact starts in a situation of crisis. Something has happened that leaves a person with a feeling that life is in pieces and that there is no possible way of getting life back together again. As one person said to me, 'I am not looking for theological answers but for someone who can be present in my life for a moment, someone who can also feel compassion.' Maybe this kind of experience is part of the frustration of today. When people see theology as just another theoretical construct divorced from life, the provision of theoretical solutions can no longer meet their needs and longings. The role for the deacon in these situations is rather to be characterised as that of a bridge-builder or even of someone who goes between different cultures or different systems.

Anonymity and vulnerability are characteristic features of life in the big city. One-person households are increasingly common, and single mothers ever more frequent among those seeking help, a picture confirmed in a recent Swedish Government report, 'Welfare at the crossroads, development during 1990' (SOU 2000:4). Quite often a conversation that began around financial issues may lead on to other matters, such as the meaning of life, the search for personal identity, the building of self-confidence. Long-term work among people suffering in these ways can be very frustrating, mainly because, in this work, one is only touching the surface. Those involved in this kind of ministry often feel that they are treating the symptoms without being able to reach underlying causes. The underlying causes have also become more difficult to reach, because increasing numbers of people are

entering acute situations, while the deacon faces decreasing possibilities of going more deeply into any particular one of them.

Typical of the life of deacons who work in an urban social setting is the need to find a balance between having time for people in urgent need and having time to reflect on their own work as a long-term commitment. Ways need to be found to guide deacons to establish a balance between supporting people in specific situations and developing their own existential reflections without expectation of gratifying rewards in return. The deacon's ministry for our churches is about seeing and being closely involved in every-day situations. Perhaps it is also about guiding people to a sense of belonging somewhere spiritually.

These few reflections about the realities of the deacon's ministry, arising as they do from what deacons find themselves called to do and to be among people, are basic to any reflection about a spirituality that will support deacons immersed in this kind of world.

The nature of spirituality

It is not easy to give a specific definition to the term 'spirituality', although writing on the subject tends to be moving in a particular direction. Observations about spirituality often move through inter-related areas, describing spirituality as an 'interaction between doctrine, discipline, liturgy and life',⁴ these being seen as 'woven together' and providing 'the basic pattern

⁴ Ferguson, Sinclair B. and Wright, David F. (eds.), *New Dictionary of Theology*, Leicester and Downer Grove, Illinois, 1988, p.657.

for understanding the fabric of any given spirituality'.⁵ Similarly, Geoffrey Wainwright defines spirituality as the 'combination of praying and living'.⁶ Christian spirituality involves the relationship between the whole person and a holy God, who reveals himself through both testaments and supremely in the person of his unique Son, Jesus Christ.⁷

The same direction can be found in Bradley Hanson's recent study of Lutheran spirituality, for this too is presented as 'a lived faith plus a path'.⁸ Hanson strongly emphasises that 'a lived faith' is not merely a theory:

Faith here does not indicate merely a set of doctrines or beliefs, nor just membership in a certain institution or school of thought. Rather, spirituality refers to actual experience of faith that has a particular configuration of commitment, trust, and belief.⁹

Bradley means here that spirituality also involves one's own everyday life and experience. Similarly Philip Sheldrake opens his comments about spirituality and the connection with theology by saying that theology must always be grounded in spiritual experience: 'If it is to be complete, theology needs to be lived just as much as it needs to be studied and explained.'¹⁰

⁵ Ferguson and Wright, p.657.

⁶ Jones, C., et al (eds.), *The Study of Spirituality*, London, 1992 (repr.), p.9.

⁷ Ferguson and Wright, p.657.

⁸ Hanson, Bradley, *A Graceful life, Lutheran Spirituality for today*, Augsburg Fortress Press 2000, p.11.

⁹ Hanson, p.12.

¹⁰ Sheldrake, P., *Spirituality and Theology, Christian Living and the Doctrine of God*, Norwich 1998, p.3.

Entries for the word 'spirituality' in a Swedish dictionary¹¹ indicate that the word can denote either the philosophical idea that reality itself is spiritual or the theological idea of a component inside people which renders the merely material or even the merely ritual insignificant. In today's society, talk about spirituality may involve such subjects as so-called dream drums, healing crystals, liberating breathing and other similar phenomena now identified as 'new age' spiritualities. These are signs of a new readiness in today's society to talk and reflect about spirituality in general. There is, it would appear, a seeking and a longing. The Church of Norway has been reflecting on this new interest in conjunction with the longing for spirituality among ordinary people. An ongoing dialogue in the Church Synod is considering how the Church could interact with modern longings for a deeper understanding of the human person. The question is how the Church can be a more open Church for people and thereby bring all closer to each other, to creation and to God.¹²

In a different context, that of Liberation perspectives, Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, in his reflection on the spirituality of Latin America, that the starting point for discipleship and for the imitation of Christ is the original meeting with the Lord.¹³ He draws on St Paul's phrase 'to live according to the spirit' (Ro-

¹¹ Bra böckers lexikon.

¹² *Kirken i motet med den åndlige lengsel i vår tid. Betenkning til Kirkemotet 1999*, (The Church meets the spiritual longing of today. Report to the Church of Norway Synod, 1999), p.17.

¹³ Gutiérrez, Gustavo, *Vi dricker ur vår egen brunn* (We drink from our own wells), Stockholm, 1991, pp.109 and 77.

mans 8:4) to describe the sphere of faith or spirituality. He points out, however, that the term 'spirituality' first began to be used in the early 17th century in religious circles in France. Anything related to the issue of Christian perfection was called 'spiritual life', and reflection on this resulted in spiritual theology. This new terminology, and the ideas that it articulates, did of course give rise to discussions and controversies, and also to misunderstandings. One of the major reasons behind the lack of clarity was, according to Gutiérrez, the use of a terminology imputing a separation of body and soul. This is a dichotomy underlying Western culture, and it has had repercussions on much biblical interpretation in relation to 'body' and 'soul'. This topic will be revisited below but, before that, other related perspectives on modern spirituality need to be introduced.

Anders Arborelius, Roman Catholic Bishop in Sweden, opens his reflections in his book *Spiritualitet, Andlig Teologi*, with a list of topics, which need to be considered in addressing the question of spirituality. These are: dialogue, tradition, time and eternity, the mystery of Christ, reason, theology, bridges, gardens.¹⁴ Commenting on the theological component, Arborelius indicates that theology must close the gap, which emerged in the Christian West, towards the end of the Middle Ages, between theology as an academic discipline and spirituality as focused more on personal devotion. For him, spirituality today is the expression of how God's Holy Spirit makes present for us the reality of God the Holy Trinity as revealed to us in the

¹⁴ Arborelius, Anders, *Spiritualitet, Andlig teologi* (Spirituality, Spiritual Theology), Karmeliterklostret, Gumlöv, 1994, pp.7-10.

Word, Jesus Christ. This is something that takes place here and now, in the midst of our life, in its every aspect. Our spirituality is our manner of participating in this dialogue, of letting the Spirit of God move over us, and of allowing it to live in us and to lead us to our true home. Here he refers to Romans 8:9, and the reader is reminded of Gutiérrez's similar reference to Romans 8:4, above.¹⁵

Arborelius then introduces a distinction between the term 'theological', as designating something conceptual within the scheme of Christian revelation, and his term 'theological',¹⁶ this designating something that originates in God, is supernaturally infused into us, and orientates us towards God. Spirituality swings like a pendulum between being more theological and more theological. Within this perspective, Arborelius looks at three aspects of spirituality. They are not completely distinct, but overlap with each other. They are:

1. **Concurrence:** From the perspective of our human reason we have a desire to approach God's richness and explore it (theological).
2. **Correlation:** Encountering God's supernatural and unfathomable mystery that surpasses our reason, we can only adore in silence and seek to listen to his small voice (theological).
3. **Collaboration:** Here, both God and we ourselves may speak, meet and collaborate in the power of the Spirit (theological and theological).

¹⁵ Arborelius, p.14.

¹⁶ Arborelius, p.15.

Arborelius and Gutiérrez both describe, along similar lines in spite of their different traditions within the Roman Catholic Church, how spirituality integrates practice and theory, experience and reflection, intuition and reason. So long as we confine our living to one or other of the modes designated here, we shall never form a church which not only displays but also integrates the distinguishing characteristics of the early Church, these being according to Arborelius¹⁷ *koinonia* (fellowship), *leitourgia* (worship), *diakonia* (service of fellow human beings), and *utopia* (vision).

Some of these perspectives are reflected in a recent book about spirituality connected to the ministry of priests. Ingemar Birgersson has the following to say:

Reflection on the spirituality of the priest aims to find lines of integration that keep life and service together, as well as ministry and person, struggle and contemplation. Spirituality holds things together instead of splitting them up.¹⁸

Birgersson continues:

The basic element in the spirituality of the priest is not the carrying out of a command to do something special but is rather to recall and renew contact with the point where everything started: the call from God¹⁹

¹⁷ Arborelius, p. 23.

¹⁸ Birgersson Ingemar, *Älskar du mig mer? Om prästers identitet och spiritualitet*, (Do you love me more? On priestly identity and spirituality), p.14.

¹⁹ *Ibid* page 117.

This accords very well with what Bradley Hanson writes about the heart of Lutheran spirituality, namely, that it 'seeks to foster a relationship of trust that God's merciful grace under-girds all of life.'²⁰

In some of the cited literature, we are offered a vision of a spirituality that is trying to reveal how spirituality can bring together dimensions from different church traditions. We have also seen writers projecting a holistic perspective of spirituality. The vision is inclusive of body and soul, and seeks to combine experiences from ordinary life with what conventionally might be described as more spiritual experiences. On this basis we are able to move closer to considering a spirituality for deacons. Deacons whose formative influence – at least in the Nordic countries – can be traced to the French Sisters of Mercy still live the tension between praxis and theory that Arborelius and Gutiérrez have identified.

Towards a spirituality for deacons

Writing from an Anglican perspective, the Church of England deacon, Rebecca Swyer, asks: What can we say specifically about spirituality for the deacon? Indeed can we pinpoint aspects of spirituality that are specifically diaconal?²¹ She proceeds to describe the identity of the deacon from three points of view (which there is no space here to expand):

²⁰ Hanson, p.38.

²¹ Swyer, p.2.

1. The deacon as a go-between or a bridge.
2. The deacon as an agent of change.
3. The deacon as a servant.

On the basis of this identity it is possible for a spirituality to emerge because it is the deacon's identity that is forming the spirituality and not the deacon's personal spirituality that is determining the diaconal identity. In Rebecca Swyer's words, 'we are not just a string of images; we are people with an identity. A fundamental part of that identity is being a deacon and we have to reflect this in our spiritual life.'²²

In the Vatican's review of the formation and ministry of deacons published in 1998, the spirituality of the deacon is considered both in the *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* and in the *Directory for the Ministry and life of Permanent Deacons*. With regard to formation, the following applies:

When a candidate begins the path of formation for the diaconate, generally he has already had a certain experience of the spiritual life, such as, recognition of the action of the Spirit, listening to and meditating upon the Word of God, the thirst for prayer, commitment to service of the brothers and sisters, willingness to make sacrifices, the sense of the Church, apostolic zeal. Also, according to his state of life, he will already have matured a certain defined spirituality: of the family, of consecration in the world or of consecration in the religious life. The spiritual formation of the future deacon,

²² Swyer, p.6.

therefore, cannot ignore this experience, which he has already had, but must seek to affirm and strengthen it, so as to impress upon it the specific traits of diaconal spirituality.²³

Subsequently, and building on this, in the section concerning ministry and life, we read:

He (the deacon) is called to be a living sign of Christ the servant, and to assume the Church's responsibility of 'reading the signs of the time' and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, so that, in language intelligible to every generation, she may be able to answer the ever-recurring questions which men ask about this present life and of the life to come, and how one is to be related to the other.²⁴

These paragraphs express a desire to safeguard the spiritual experience that the future deacon already has and to make use of it for the purpose of integrating it into a specific 'diaconal spirituality'. The document is an attempt to articulate ways in which the deacon, in both ministry and life, is part of the mission to make the Church visible as the Body of Christ, both mystical and ecclesial.

This Roman Catholic document and Rebecca Swyer's analysis from the Anglican perspective are both pointing to important tools for developing the spiritual maturity of the deacon. Spiritual maturity is a pre-condition of achieving credibility when

²³ *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998, p.61-62.

²⁴ *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998, p.110.

ministering to others, of bringing to brothers and sisters what the deacon has found to be essential to life. These documents both stress the importance of guidance and support not only from a spiritual director but also from fellowship with other deacons. Both these traditions assume that personal guidance in spiritual development is a given.

From within the Orthodox tradition, similarly, Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald stresses the importance of deacons (male and female) being provided with appropriate nurture and guidance.

The diaconate, perhaps more than any other order, is essentially called directly to minister to spiritually hungry people. The candidate for ordination to the diaconate, therefore, must be discerned, screened and educated conscientiously. It could be argued that the formative discipline and instruction required for a candidate for the diaconate would perhaps require more spiritual preparation, theological and pastoral training than what is now typically expected for clergy.²⁵

By contrast, corresponding documentation from within the Swedish Lutheran tradition, presents no such preoccupation.²⁶ Requirements for admission to become a deacon include very little concerning spiritual maturity or spiritual guidance, apart from an attitude test and an interview with the diocesan bishop and the recruiting officer. During the period of study and training there is time for spiritual guidance conducted by someone

²⁵ FitzGerald, K.K., *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church, Called to Holiness and Ministry*, Brookline, Mass., 1999, p.195.

²⁶ See PM *avseende normalmodell för antagning till diakon i Svenska kyrkan* (Paper on the standard model for admission to the diaconate in the Church of Sweden).

inside the institution or in a congregation nearby. But every institution of education handles this in its own way. Following training and ordination, however, deacons themselves would seem to have to bear the responsibility in far too large a degree for their own spiritual development. No follow-up is apparent, nor is there even an expectation that this should be provided. Sometimes opportunity arises for supervision of a professional kind (which, of course, is extremely important for the professional quality of the ministry of the deacon), but the opportunity to receive or rather to seek spiritual guidance in the interests of spiritual maturity is not self-evident.

Identity shapes spirituality

By and large, the diaconal ministry that emerged towards the end of the 19th century in Northern Europe took the French Sisters of Mercy as its model. Diaconal institutions and mother-houses, in Germany as well as in England and in Scandinavia, were founded and flourished for variable periods of time. Most of these operated outside the established organisation of the Church. They were built on the foundation of the personal devotion and spirituality of individual people, rather than on the foundation of a theological profile already developed within the Church. They were built as protest against contemporary ways of dealing with vulnerability, but maybe also as protest against the ecclesiastical inclination to separate body and soul.²⁷

²⁷ This picture is confirmed also in Tuulikki Koivunen Bylund's dissertation, '*Frukta icke, allenast tro*', *Ebba Boström och Samariterhemmet 1882-1902* ('Fear not, only believe' Ebba Boström and Samariterhemmet 1882-1902), especially in the chapter on the spirituality of Ebba Boström, pp. 258-268.

In Sweden, as Anders Bäckström has shown, the diaconal movement of the 19th century can be seen as part of the revivalist movement and the general populist movement. He describes also the connections between the diaconal movement and the spirituality of societies and associations, which slowly drew closer to the Church of Sweden. In his empirical investigation, Bäckström describes how the emergence of the Christian idea of works of mercy gradually became a bridge between the revivalist movements and the Church. The revivalist movements have always included a passion for social justice, and this has contributed to selfless service and works of mercy (lay ministry). Bäckström has also mapped out the way towards diaconal ministry for the individual deacon, including training, ministerial identity and areas of work. What follows below owes much to the material in his report.

In Sweden, diaconal ministry is very largely a women's movement, engaging as deacons a large majority of women (86% of the total number of deacons in 1994).²⁸ Initially, these women were primarily recruited from the social background of farmers, workers in industry and the lower ranks of office staff, and this shows similarities with the recruitment to other caring professions in Sweden. For the diaconate, this means that a large number of deacons brought with them a spirituality coloured by the revivalist movements in the rural areas where they had grown up, and with a vocation directed towards serving the 'little ones and the least' in society. The church professionals most literally faithful to the Bible are also probably found within the

²⁸ Bäckström p.213.

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diaconate,²⁹ In general, it could be said that, until 1990, the deacon was usually a woman from the country, brought up as a practising Christian from her youth, and devoted to spending her life in works of mercy for the benefit of 'the little ones'. She was usually a professional nurse or social worker, and was introduced into the context of the Church during her one year of diaconal training.

This background and recruitment was in all probability very suitable within Sweden so long as the tradition of the mother-house remained. When that was dissolved, towards the end of the 1960s, a spiritual community, a form of nurturing, and a sense of belonging were not replaced, and individuals were left to their own devices to meet needs no longer being met through institutional means. For some, the 'Sisterhood' was perhaps replaced by marriage and a family, a situation in which the space for individual spiritual development was limited or at least fundamentally changed (often expressed through morning and evening prayer with the children, the books of Narnia, caring for family graves, playing a hymn on the recorder, and offering a tired sigh of prayer while washing up at the kitchen sink).

Connection with the Liturgy

As soon as we turn from some reflections on the practical life of the deacon to consider the deacon's connection with the liturgy, a new set of problems quickly arise. On the one hand, there are expectations on the deacon to be a liturgical sign in conjunction

²⁹ Bäckström, pp.72 and 213.

with the rest of the ordained ministry while, on the other hand, we are aware of a trepidation on the part of deacons of treading on someone else's liturgical territory. For example in the Church Ordinance we read of the Sunday service in the following terms:

The priest, church musician, churchwarden and the members of the Sunday congregation put together each particular Sunday service. Those who celebrate the Sunday service are sent out to everyday life to witness to the Gospel and to perform the service of love: to mission and diaconal ministry.³⁰

In this there is no mention of the role of a deacon at all. This silence can probably also diminish the possibility of making *diakonia* as such more visible in the Sunday service.

In contrast to such a problematic situation for the deacon in relation to liturgy, it is important to establish some kind of space for deacons in which to give public expression to their spirituality. For this to happen, it is not sufficient for deacons to have a presence among people in their daily social setting, but they and the people need to experience it also within the congregation and with a clear connection to the Sunday service. Philip Sheldrake points out:

In Christian terms, 'spirituality' concerns how people subjectively appropriate traditional beliefs about God, the human person, creation, and their interrelationship, and then express these in worship, basic values and lifestyles.³¹

³⁰ KO, *Femte avdelningen: Gudstjänst* (Church Ordinance, Part 5: Worship), p. 75.

³¹ Sheldrake, pp.34-35.

The following may serve as a short outline for a further reflection around this theme.

The Lenten time of fasting moves through pain and death towards the Resurrection and can become an icon of the deacon as a companion to people. What deacons often share with people is the road of fasting, the time before liberation, solutions or homecoming. For example, in the counselling situation, the role of the deacon is always to go along with the person up to the moment of confession and absolution, which is the task of the priest. It is not uncommon for a deacon to follow a person some parts of the road towards death. But when it comes to the end the priest gives the last communion and anointing and finally also the funeral. A deacon can follow a young couple's way through difficulties in marriage, in reflections about problems of having children, and so on. But when the decisions have been made and the conflicts resolved the priest conducts the marriage or baptism. In such ways some parts of the deacon's road lead to a sacramental, liturgical action and can be understood as a part of the liturgy as a whole.

Bishop Jonas Jonsson has described how the Eucharist is not an action performed in isolation at the altar but is rather an action that includes the whole of society.³² In the Eucharist we include our whole visible world with its victims and destructive forces but also the world with its righteousness and unstable peace.³³

³² Jonsson, Jonas, Att resa tecken, in *Spiritualitet, teologiske studier og brugstekster*, (To raise a sign, in *Spirituality, theological studies and texts*) *Festschrift for Anna Marie Aagard*, 14 January 1985, Aarhus, 1985.

³³ Jonsson, p.195.

The same is true of the common prayers that are often formulated in concrete situations and become also political. It is in the formulations of the common prayers of the Eucharist that the Church often enters into dialogue with society and reveals at what point it stands within the political spectrum.³⁴ Perhaps it is not a coincidence that on the evening of Maundy Thursday, the commemoration of the Lord's last supper, we read the text where Jesus washes the feet of the disciples (John 13:1-15). Jesus says, 'I have set you an example so that you might do just as I did to you'. Sometimes a voice suggests that this ritual should be part of the deacon's liturgical role. The washing of feet is a ritual that is connected to everyday life and is an intimate service to the body.

Clearly, traditional links between deacons and liturgy are one way to explore the integration of deacon, Church and community. Thus both Rebecca Swyer and *Basic Norms for the Permanent Diaconate*, stress the importance of participation in worship, in the liturgical role. She writes:

The liturgical role must reflect the role we have in life because we are one person. We must function as servant, go-between and agent of change not just pastorally but also liturgically, or it is as if we have a split personality.³⁵

³⁴ Jonsson, p.191.

³⁵ Swyer, p.5.

Basic Norms further states:

In fact, service of the poor is the logical consequence of service of the altar. Therefore the candidate will be invited to participate every day, or at least frequently, within the limits of his family and professional commitments, in the celebration of the Eucharist and will be helped to penetrate ever deeper into the mystery. Within the context of this Eucharistic spirituality, care will be taken to give adequate appreciation to the sacrament of Penance.³⁶

In his address to the participants at the Jubilee for permanent deacons in February 2000 Pope John Paul II said:

In addition, you rightly strive to live without separating your liturgical service from that of charity in its concrete forms. This shows that the sign of Gospel love cannot be reduced to categories of mere solidarity but follows as a logical consequence of the Eucharistic mystery.³⁷

There is a similar voice from the Orthodox tradition in Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald:

The deacon also ceaselessly witnesses through prayer, presence, and action to an eschatological reality beyond himself or herself. This humble and dynamic transparency is given expression through the diaconal cycle of 'bearing and returning' those gifts of God to and from his creation, established within the context of the Christian community, on behalf of the bishop.³⁸

³⁶ *Basic norms for the formation of Permanent Deacons*, p.62.

³⁷ From the Vatican homepage. www.vatican.org

³⁸ Fitzgerald, p.188.

In the light of this, the paragraph on the deacon in the new Church Ordinance of the Church of Sweden seems rather strange. The document does emphasise that the diaconate has now been integrated into the ordained ministry of the Church, but the role that it affirms is not the liturgical role but the caring or caritative role.³⁹ In spite of this, some of the texts in the new Church Ordinance indicate the joint responsibility of the ordained ministry. For example, we read that the democratic organisation and the ordained ministry of the Church have a common responsibility to conduct an activity in coordination with the faith, confession and doctrine of the Church of Sweden.⁴⁰ Again, in the chapter dealing with the commission and offices,⁴¹ we read that the ordained ministry is a sign in the congregation as well as in society, drawing attention to the common call of the Church and the responsibility of every baptized person. It speaks of the call of the whole Church and the ordination of specific persons for a lifelong service directed at the spiritual development of the congregation and its specific mission in the world.

³⁹ A comment from the second church law committee (*andra kyrkolags utskottet*), in its work preparing the decision in the 1999 Synod reads: 'Yes' to a caring/caritative diaconate but 'No' to a liturgical diaconate. The text of the new Church Ordinance does not indicate anything about a diaconate with a specific liturgical role. Everybody in the Church shall of course collect their spiritual nourishment and be sent out for service from the Sunday liturgy, but there is no specific liturgical function that a deacon has to perform. On the contrary, the committee emphasised that the rationale for a deacon's admission into the church was along social caring/caritative lines and as a sign of the common social call and service of the Church as a whole.

⁴⁰ KO, *Andra avdelningen: Församlingen* (Church Ordinance, Part 2: The Congregation), p.15.

⁴¹ KO, *Sjunde avdelningen: Kyrkliga uppdrag och befattningar* (Church Ordinance, Part 7: Commission and Office of the Church, p.101.

So, to some extent, Swedish deacons must continue to live with a kind of 'split personality'. The most painful experience for deacons in their parishes is not so much the lack of visible participation in the liturgy as the lack of being part of a spiritual community. The deacon is now expected to fulfil a caring ministry, provided through the local church, but on the basis of a spirituality that is founded on his/her own personal, private and subjective experiences. Often the deacon then encounters a lack of understanding with regard to the reflection and the integration of that spirituality, which is the fruit of practical work in a theological context.

Incorporation into the Church

Ordinary people are those who today, with the idea of the secure 'folkhem' (the popular home-for-everyone) left behind, increasingly expect some clear involvement by the Church. 'Why doesn't the Church speak out?' a member of the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) asks me. Well, why not indeed? The important question is whether the motive for our diaconal involvement springs from the outside, from the evidence of social injustices, or from the inside, from the mission to liberate the people of God for everything that is good. This may sometimes be a matter of a very fine line between being perceived as a populist church, or as a credible one. Gutiérrez writes:

To be effectively involved is a must, because of the grace of the Lord, but, at the same time – let us not forget this – the opposite movement to contemplation

is a condition and a life-giving element of historic action.⁴²

Through works of mercy deacons try to mediate the divine grace they themselves have experienced, as well as the hope they have perceived which could also change the lives of others. In this there is a progression from grace to service. Deacons are those who accept this vocation and who through ordination are commissioned to a lifelong service. What does that require in terms of imitation of Christ? Gutiérrez quotes Bishop Oscar Romero, 'A truly Christian conversion must today lead to the discovery of the social mechanisms that turn labourers and farmers into marginalized people.'⁴³

Gutiérrez himself says, as cited earlier, that the starting point for all faith is a meeting with the Lord. This experience determines the way that will be followed from then on, and the divine initiative and the historical circumstances in which the experience took place will always mark that way. St Paul says that the imitation of Christ means 'to walk according to the Spirit' – the Spirit who is Life and who calls us to live in freedom of the Spirit. This walk concerns an entire people. The Bible itself presents it as a corporate enterprise. It is a people who, on the liberating initiative of God, break away from exploitation and death and who, walking through the desert, arrive in the promised land. This is a story of an entire people. It is a story of a collective enterprise rather than an individual's personal jour-

⁴² Gutiérrez, p.127.

⁴³ Gutiérrez, pp.126–127.

ney. It is about an imitation that also has an effect in shaping spirituality, and not the spirituality of deacons only but of all God's people. Even so, the deacons may be said to have a special responsibility to make visible in the Church and in society the vulnerable and the little ones, and to display loyalty towards them.⁴⁴

Deacons who manage to develop a corporate, collective vision of the Church (for example, the tradition of the 'folk church') are sustained by the hope of community as liberation also for vulnerable people. These deacons must at the same time rely on their own personal spirituality when it comes to the imitation of Christ. I continue to refer to Gutiérrez, who describes how spiritual experience emerges in people involved with those with no possessions, the marginalized, and with those who show loyalty towards them in their fight for liberation. This experience, in turn, gives rise to a popular, corporate striving in the search for the Lord, a search that cannot be united with elitist models.⁴⁵

In real life, however, the story tells more than this. It tells also of weakness not only among others but also in oneself. Not only is one to see the vulnerability, one has also to identify it in oneself. Not only is one to show loyalty towards the little ones, one has also to identify oneself among them. It is about not distancing oneself from oneself but meeting one's own worries, emptiness and feelings of loneliness.

⁴⁴ Freely quoted from the Rite of Ordination of Deacons in the Church of Sweden.

⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, page 29.

The identification of the deacon is established through a presence in everyday life. People who may not be active members of a local church community nonetheless look upon the church building as an important part of their local community. The fact that it stands there is a reminder of a presence that most people find important. It is good if there is something going on inside; that is a satisfaction in itself so long – they might think – as I do not have to take part. Its liturgy becomes a liturgy by deputation. The Church becomes present in everyday life by the same process. People are pleased to have it there even though – they might say – I do not think I need it, at least not for the moment. For many people perhaps it is enough to know that the deacon is present in the local community taking part in everyday life.

Most deacons choose to become a deacon in the course of their adult lives. Most of them have already had many years in another profession. This fact lessens the gap between the deacon and the people living in the community. Deacons are also close to people in their community through their prayers. Often perhaps these people are only vaguely aware of being included in someone's prayer. In fact, however, whether they are aware or not is unimportant because diaconal work is not being used as evangelism. There is a need for the deacon to share with God all these people's problems of everyday life. *Ora et labora.*

In the end I think again of deacons involved with those on the margins and striving not to become invisible themselves, not to become marginalized within their own structures in the Church.

I think of the difficulty of integrating the spiritual experience that deacons bring to the Church from their meetings with the marginalized in society, and once more I see loneliness in spite of the vision of community.

Questions to develop

Once such reflection begins on the nature of a specifically diaconal spirituality, a number of other problems emerge which require attention. Three are listed below:

1. The balance between a private, personal engagement and an official commission from the Church;
2. The integration of work, private life and spirituality;
3. An unclear spirituality of the Church.

1. BALANCE BETWEEN PRIVATE, PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT AND AN OFFICIAL COMMISSION FROM THE CHURCH

Today (at least in Sweden) selection interviews as well as programmes of ministerial training place an emphasis on deacons' personal spiritual experiences. Questions are put concerning personal vocation and personal spiritual experience. However, difficulties arise because there is hardly any guidance on how to understand these personal qualities or on how to fit them into a wider context, for example into that dialogue which

Arborelius identified in his third point of 'collaboration' at the levels he named 'theological' and 'theological'.⁴⁶

Personal qualities are stressed at the cost of the corporate context, and the deacon is ordained and sent to the congregation and the society to minister.⁴⁷ Ordination implies for the deacon an acceptance of being part of that particular ministry which belongs to the nature of the Church. However, questions might be asked as to how the Church understands its own responsibility as a consequence of this ordination. In the long term, this commission, this ministry in the congregation and society, is quite a lonely one, and deacons frequently face difficult situations.

In a recent report on how the education programme for priests meets the future, Sven-Erik Brodd writes:

Crucial for the fact that someone is a priest is the ordination, not the skill or competence of one individual. The basic idea is that it is Christ who conducts the ordination together with his Church and that the ordination gives the gift of the Holy Spirit for a communion inside the Church. At the same time the ordained becomes a gift to the Church.⁴⁸

In regard to the diaconate this has not, so far, been stressed clearly enough. As I have shown so far, the focus for the ordain-

⁴⁶ Arborelius, p.15.

⁴⁷ KO *Sjunde avdelningen: Kyrkliga uppdrag och befattningar* (Church Ordinance, Part 7: Commission and Office of the Church), p.102.

⁴⁸ Hansson, Per (ed.), *Prästutbildningen möter framtiden, rapport från en konferens om utbildning till präst samt prästens identitet och spiritualitet* (The education to priesthood meets the future, a report from a conference on education for priesthood, the identity and the spirituality of the priest), p.19.

ed deacon points towards a caring service in society. It is said that the sending is also into the congregation, but at the very same time we hear that this sending is not related to the liturgy.

Bäckström provides the following reflection as part of his research:

It is evident that younger deacons, to a higher degree than their older colleagues, wish to leave this ministry, particularly those who have some longer theoretical professional training. Those who have been considering leaving also indicate that they receive little support from the diaconal institutions.⁴⁹

The research does not raise any corresponding question about the level of support that parishes might be providing. In the light of all this, it may be asked what the consequences might be when those who were trained during the 1950s and 60s approach retirement, as they will in the next few years. Those who are retiring soon are the last of the active generations who have had the experience of the traditions of the motherhouses, and who have thus received their spiritual formation within those sisterhoods. Without taking a romantic stance towards that period and that tradition, it may seriously be asked what will follow hereafter. Investigations give evidence of a younger body of deacons who feel rootless and experience a lack of support. It is also clear that a middle-aged body of deacons are experiencing increasing frustration with feelings of alienation and spiritual restlessness.

⁴⁹ Bäckström p.70.

Arborelius can help us identify to what degree we succeed in cultivating a diaconal spirituality which binds deacon and Church together in mission. According to him, three steps, or levels, may be discerned in a spirituality that is the 'atmosphere of the Spirit'.⁵⁰ The first includes personal spirituality as well as the entire spiritual life and experience of the Church, that is, the 'reaction' and the 'echo' that the revelation of God and of divine grace evokes in each human heart by virtue of the work of the Spirit within us. The second includes our use of this gift of the Spirit as well as the attitude we adopt towards bringing the gift to fruition – all for the purpose of our growth in holiness towards perfection. The third step, or level, is the systematic, theological one, at which the Church wants to test and integrate the subjective into the objective reality without belittling the personal experience but rather making it fruitful for everyone and everything. This has to be so because even the most personal and unique aspects of our lives are part of the Church. Within the body of Christ, everything is corporate.

If we leave the level of metaphysics and look at the question on the functional level, we see that there are various ways of dealing with the first two steps described by Arborelius, but we find that the third step is completely missing. So far, at least in the Nordic experience, attempts to integrate the personal levels have been unsuccessful. The personal devotion and spirituality that deacons carry remain private and individualistic without becoming explicitly integrated into the collective body, the

⁵⁰ Arborelius, pp.15-35.

Church. This is so, simply because deacons lack the instruments for effecting this integration. They have little possibility of integrating the personal call within their official commission so that their service does not remain private.

Differences between diaconal traditions occur here as a result of the different points of entry into education programmes for deacons. Within the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church there is an expressed desire that candidates be identified in a parish or other places where they worship and be recommended to the diocese.⁵¹ The Nordic tradition, by contrast, does not have such a requirement. As a result some candidates of today do not necessarily have a familiarity with life in a parish.

2. THE INTEGRATION OF WORK, PRIVATE LIFE AND SPIRITUALITY.

Gustavo Gutiérrez writes that the consequences of recognising what reality looks like are obvious, because it becomes necessary for us to investigate how we ourselves might be co-responsible for the existence of unjust social mechanisms.⁵² Such an analysis will demand in many cases, and in addition to the demand for personal conversion, a break with the social environment one has so far belonged to. To enter another world, the world of the poor, is a radical break.

⁵¹ Hall, C., *The Deacon in the Church of England*, in MOD1, p.216.

⁵² Gutiérrez, p.127.

What is required of people active in the churches' diaconal ministry, of deacons who have fought many times in vain for recognition within the context of their own church? This is not a quest for recognition of their own person, but for recognition of that service and involvement with the vulnerable and marginalized who are to be found not only in Latin America but much closer to hand. The issue is taken up, for example, in *The Study of Spirituality*:

In recent years the necessity of a link between spirituality and social justice has been increasingly asserted. On the one hand, the revival of gnostic and 'privatised' styles of spirituality has led to the need for discernment and discrimination between true and false, healthy and pathological spiritual trends. Since the 1960s there has been a growing concern to provide spiritual resources and nourishment for the work of social and political struggle.⁵³

In the search for integration, we have much to learn from Latin American theologians who, 'are deeply concerned with "liberation spirituality", the incarnational nature of the Christian spiritual tradition, and the prophetic dimension in prayer'.⁵⁴

Meeting vulnerable people, in the course of professional tasks of diaconal ministry, the deacon is the bearer of the Church's serving ministry in the world, in order to bring hope and to awaken faith. For a vulnerable person, the deacon represents the Church, and, in the moment of the meeting, Christ is also present. This is nothing complicated, but something quite na-

⁵³ Jones, C., et al (eds), *The Study of Spirituality*, London, 1992 (repr.), p.583

⁵⁴ Jones, p.583.

tural. It is at the next stage that difficulties arise. How does a deacon integrate into the Church, not only the practical work (in itself quite a difficult integration) but also the spiritual experiences that are exchanged in these encounters? Maybe this question is pointing to the gap so often felt today between the professional ministry of priests and that of deacons.

Programmes of formation for priests often stress theological analysis at the expense of spiritual development. As a result, the priest enters upon his or her career with a mind much more closely orientated towards ecclesiastical affairs. It thus becomes easier for priests to find a way into the Church on the basis of their academic attainments than any such connection is for deacons, whose personal spirituality has often not developed beyond a narrowly personal and private devotion.

Even so, it may be that the spiritual devotion of deacons more easily finds points of contact with the devotion and spirituality of ordinary people. Since at least part of the spirituality of *diakonia* is probably also that of the people, the important question arises as to how this also may be seen to be part of the Church. Perhaps the reflection on the spiritual context within which deacons operate as professional ministers is more or less lacking. The space for dialogue, through which deacons can fit their lives into the context of God's mystery, is too small, as long as the proclamation of the word (in the Lutheran traditions) is presented as the most important ministry. Such dialogue also requires insight built on silence and listening, and a spiritual awareness that is neither merely intellectual nor exclusively in the form of works of mercy. Such a balance and conception of who-

leness is important for the future development of the Church. This claim must not be perceived primarily as a threat, or as a way merely to protect a well-defined ministerial 'territory'.

Full integration is not altogether easy, for the person who, in the Nordic context usually, possesses the theological competence, namely, the priest, is also usually the manager supervising the deacons, and is quite often presumed to have some kind of monopoly on theological reflection. The deacons, on the other hand, are hardly ever encouraged to engage in theological reflection, either during their training or in their ministry. Maybe this is a gender-related issue formed by its historical background, but maybe not. Maybe the deacon's narrow attitude towards theological reflection is due to the tradition of the devout woman, lovingly (but silently) taking care of the little and the vulnerable person. Maybe the priest's hesitation to leave some theological space to someone else has its source in a male tradition of power and hierarchy. The fact is, nevertheless, that both these professions are currently carried out by people of both genders, and, by implication, that ought to lead to such tendencies becoming more and more rare. Anders Bäckström's research picks up some such gender-related reflections, but the basis for his analysis is fairly small, and it is preferable not to build anything further on this discussion at the moment.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Studies are currently in progress on this topic and may have a bearing on the question of leadership among deacons, e.g. 'Gender and religious leadership: Some critical remarks from a West-European Viewpoint', a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Research Association (SSSR-RA), Houston 22/10/00 by Prof. Veerle Draulans (Leuven and Tilburg); a study of the dynamics between diaconal work and worship, covered in two ongoing Swedish studies by Ninna Edgardh Beckman and Pernilla Parenmalm at the Uppsala Institute for Diaconal and Social Studies; a Finnish study by Ulla Maier Kauppinen-Perthula on 'Embodied spirituality – the deaconess at the leper hospital', a paper delivered at Lovisenberg, 27–28 October 2000.

3. AN UNCLEAR SPIRITUALITY OF THE CHURCH: A PERSONAL VIEW

Reflecting on the question of what kind of spirituality the Church of Sweden carries within itself, it is difficult to see what this inheritance might consist of. Training for the diaconal ministry has always had a pietistic character. For example, the hymn-book is full of pietistic sentiment and attitudes. Perhaps, for a Lutheran Church, the inherited spirituality consists in a certain openness, in the idea of the 'open Folk Church', in which everyone should be able to find room and living space? Maybe it is the doctrine of unmerited grace, freely handed out to everyone? Maybe it is the call to personal responsibility within this open church that contains the mystery?

Making the connection between the theological and the theological/mystic form is of the greatest importance for the individual as well as for the Church as a whole. Otherwise one would be required to carry the whole responsibility for one's own spirituality. That becomes an even greater problem when one realises that not even employed church people are able to find space for spiritual development. In other words, the spirituality of the diaconate would be emerging from within deacons as individual persons rather than from deacons as members of an ordained public ministry in the Church. In my view, the frustration arising for deacons from the loneliness that so many of them experience is at least partly caused by the lack of dialogue within the clerical context and tradition.

As things stand, vocation as a deacon is personal and the spirituality private. The identity of a deacon in the Church of Sweden is often determined by work among various vulnerable sectors of society. The Rite of Ordination of Deacons confirms this when it states that deacons are called to defend people's rights, to stand on the side of the oppressed, and to encourage and liberate the people of God for everything good, in order that the love of God may become visible in the world.⁵⁶

Currently, the training of deacons in Sweden is in the process of being adapted to the requirements of higher education. This is of course something very positive with regard to the many new challenges that deacons are facing, and also with regard to the opportunities to reflect theoretically at that level on the practical ministry that the candidates will then be expected to carry out. However, there is also a risk that studies based on this reflection will take place at the cost of spirituality and that theoretical studies focused on dialogue (with other types of caring professionals and with other organisations) will replace spiritual nurturing. There is a risk that the training may focus too much on the various areas of activity rather than on the common task of the Church. Maybe the fact that many deacons turn to other traditions rather than to their own in order to develop and nourish their spirituality is also significant. Maybe it is the same signal when I myself, when asked to write on matters of spirituality, find inspiration from Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox literature. The collaboration that

⁵⁶ From the Church of Sweden Ordinal, The Rite of Ordination of deacons.

Arborelius writes about, in which the theological and the theological forces meet, seems to be difficult to achieve within one and the same tradition.

Afterword

The deacon's ministry must spring from, and be firmly anchored within both the personal spirituality of the deacon and that of the Church itself. Neither in prayer nor in theological reflection may the deacon distance herself or himself from the everyday life of people. The theology that the deacons represent can take the form of answers to questions, which no one asks, or reflections, which do not touch the reality of people's lives.

The Orthodox tradition has expressed this very well when it says that the spiritual life can never be locked into a kind of formula. Christian faith is life, not a teaching.

It has been said that it is impossible to get to know the life of faith of the Eastern Orthodox Churches only through study. That can only be achieved by living within it. It is not found within theological scholarship, but in worship, in the monk's cell, in a woman's simple prayer, in the martyr's preparedness to die, and generally in that which is alive. It cannot be approached from without, but only from within.⁵⁷

I am looking out of an office window in Stockholm, and I see something but I am not quite sure what it is. Probably I ought

⁵⁷ Colliander, T., quoted by Ucko, H., in *Orthodox Spirituality*, Report no. 6 from the International Research Department of the Church of Sweden, Uppsala 1989, p.5.

to recognise it, but the eye cannot make it out. In the midst of this undiscerning gaze, suddenly I spot an empty space. The space makes it possible for me to interpret immediately what I had been gazing at, a very ordinary underground train. I quite simply could not discern the whole, the train itself, until I saw the 'in-between' space between the carriages.

This is a concluding parable. The deacon's ministry is the 'in-between' space that links the whole together: spirit and faith to action and contemplation in the midst of everyday life, a space, an acknowledged place, where it also is natural for deacons to be. Monika Bexell writes:

To bind together spirituality and action into a unity is sometimes experienced as difficult. But to retire into aloneness with God is the foundation from which both the work and the ministry grow. It is to some extent like breathing, like breathing out and laying down all the stress and the pressures and the musts before God, and to be with God in silence and to be open to his strength, to breathe in this power and strength that sends us out among the people and the needs.⁵⁸

Finally, every time the caring aspects of the deacon's ministry are emphasised, the contemplative side must also be strengthened. Every time people's social safety reaches a minimum level and the practical challenges to the diaconate are increased, space must also be safeguarded for spiritual deepening and reflection. This is a matter of deacons' spiritual survival and of the credi-

⁵⁸ Bexell, M., *Diakonins perspektiv, Diakonins perspektiv i liturgi och spiritualitet*, (Diaconal Perspectives, Diaconal Perspectives in liturgy and spirituality), p. 132

bility of the Church. To serve the Church as a deacon is a challenge, in which the demands and the conditions imposed from outside must always be combined with personal, inward devotion and fellowship within the community in Christ. In the long term, it is untenable to approach the deacon's ministry only on the basis of a caring motivation.

Though it has been difficult so far in our history to combine theology and spirituality, there is now some important work being done. Philip Sheldrake observes that a number of theologians or theological traditions in recent decades have had a particularly important impact on the reintegration of spirituality with theology.⁵⁹ He is exploring ideas associated with this situation. Perhaps an even greater challenge could be to see what kind of influence a diaconal reflection might bring into this development. And thus, finally, some challenges might emerge for a continuing dialogue.

Do the diaconal experiences deriving from the spirituality of deacons constitute a challenge to the Church today? Can the Church afford not to integrate diaconal spirituality into its structures? What impact might such integration have upon the Church?

⁵⁹ Sheldrake, p. 65.

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