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ECCLESIOLOGY AND THE DIACONATE

The diaconate has re-emerged, in recent decades, as a topical subject of discussion within all the major Churches. This has involved extensive investigation of the historical development and present problems of the diaconal ministry. From a superficial point of view, this discussion might be thought of as a passing vogue, but that is not in fact how it should be interpreted. The debate on the diaconate has arisen out of real, concrete problems, which have forced the Churches to reassess the nature of the deacon's ministry and of diaconal work in general. Some of these problems have been common to all Churches, but a high proportion is caused entirely by local situations. In order to understand this process, it is necessary to look at the contemporary and historical contexts from which the discussion arises.

The contemporary context indicates that Christianity is at present going through one of the greatest crises in its history, which can be compared only with the early Church transition from Jewish to Hellenistic Christianity, as a revolutionary stage and the first step towards realizing the universality of faith. In a way similar to that earlier transition, Christianity is currently involved in the worldwide process of change caused by globa-

lisation, and this signifies, in our times, quite a new phase in Christian history. The Christian faith has always had a universal dimension, but it has only now become global with the churches of all continents. As the Church has become global, it has had to face several problems that test its identity. One of these relates to the historical process in which all the churches need to re-evaluate their relationship to society, to the state and to authority in general. In addition, the churches need seriously to work out their relationship to their culture and to other religions. The future of the churches is largely dependent on how they respond to these questions.

The current discussion on the nature of the diaconate is arguably reaching global proportions and may be usefully seen as a contribution to the contemporary re-evaluation of the churches' identity and their relationship to their social and cultural context.

The Gospel to all realms of life

Part of the current discussion on the diaconate is informed by the New Testament material and by the way it has been interpreted in a variety of periods of history. Historical and eschatological dimensions of biblical themes are both important: the expectation of God's people for the day that would change the course of history and give the nations hope for the future; the hope that the Messiah promised by God would break the power of death and sin and usher in a new era; the fulfilment of expectation and hope in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom

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the Kingdom of God was seen as breaking into the world and who began his public ministry by proclaiming, 'The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15)

A brief overview of relevant points in the life of the early Church may be useful here, to highlight the early development of *diakonia* and to see how this early period influenced later trends in diaconal ministry. From the start, the kingship and power of Jesus were not manifested as expected. Many wished to make him a national leader (John. 6:15) who would liberate Israel from the yoke of Rome. Even his disciples asked him to destroy his adversaries, yet, before the representative of Rome, the mightiest temporal power of the day, Jesus is pictured declaring: 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36). Though he embodied the greatest power imaginable, Jesus' power could be seen in service, humility, weakness and love.

When he set out on his ministry, Jesus did not identify with those in power but with those who were rejected by others. His mission to those who were on the margins of society, because of poverty, misfortune or exploitation, is declared in his 'manifesto' in the synagogue in Nazareth: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed' (Luke 4:16-20).

This 'manifesto' of Jesus aptly sums up the whole Gospel: it is more than words; it is also a matter of demonstrating love and is intended for the whole person; it brings both forgiveness of sins and renewal of life. For this reason, J. H. Wichern, the 19th century pioneer of *diakonia*, reminded the Church that 'love is a matter for the Church just as much as faith is'. Faith without love is dead. 'Saving love (*die rettende Liebe*) should also be manifested in good works, so that people might believe. Faith and love belong together'.¹

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit introduced a new phase in the dissemination of the Gospel. In the power of the Holy Spirit, faith spread spontaneously to new areas. The Holy Spirit broke down man-made barriers, and gradually it became apparent to the nascent Christian community that the Gospel was intended for the whole world. In Jerusalem, the first Christian Church was soon formed, and others grew up later in Antioch and everywhere in the known world. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note that an integral part of the spontaneity of faith was the purposeful organisation of the churches, which appointed people to internal positions of responsibility.

From the very beginning organised church life involved mutual care, love and service among the members. Even the weakest were to be cared for. As the churches grew, mutual care demanded special arrangements. According to Acts 6:1, widows, and apparently other lonely people too, were in danger of

1. Wichern, Johann Hinrich, *Sämtliche Werke, (Collected Works)*, Meinhold, Peter (ed.), vol. 1, Berlin and Hamburg, 1962, pp. 155-171.

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receiving less in the distribution of aid by the church. To solve the problem, the apostles chose seven men to be responsible for the diaconal service of the church. The calling of the Seven is often regarded as the beginning of Christian *diakonia*. Although the job description of these men cannot be seen as a direct precursor of the later office of deacon, their work included many typical features of *diakonia*, above all helping the weak and those in trouble as well as preaching the Word. The choice of the Seven gives a clear picture of how *diakonia* was from the very beginning an integral part of the life of the Christian Church.

As the organisation of churches progressed, various offices were established. Of these, three gradually became distinguished from the rest. They were linked together so that almost everywhere the offices of bishop, presbyter and deacon came to be regarded as essential. In the threefold ministry of the early Church, the office of deacon was closely linked to the office of bishop, the deacon usually acting as the bishop's 'right hand'. The deacon's duties included, in particular, organising Christian service in the congregation, teaching and taking part in liturgy.²

From the 4th century, the union of Church and State established by the Emperor Constantine substantially strengthened the social position of the Church. In Europe, Charlemagne (742-814) in particular laid the foundation for a uniform European culture where Church and State together formed the prevailing social system. As a result of this historical development, the

2. Campenhausen, Hans Frhr., *Kirchliches Amt und geistliche Vollmacht in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*. 2. Durchgesehene Auflage, Tübingen 1963, pp. 82-89, 128-134; Collins, John N., *Diakonia. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, New York-Oxford 1990, pp. 238-244.

Church, especially in Europe, has wielded tremendous power. The strong position of the Church has brought it many indisputable benefits, and Christianity has become a major part of Western culture.

The Church as a Spiritual Community

In the life of the great majority churches, the position of supremacy has often blurred the real spiritual nature of the Church. The tragic events of the 20th century and recent social developments have compelled the churches once more to look to their roots. As the State prunes its functions in Europe and favours privatisation (industry, business, universities) the thousand-year-long union of Church and State is for natural reasons crumbling. In future the Church must stand on its own feet. The Church must not seek its right to exist in power but rather in the preaching of the Gospel and in service.

The churches of Asia and Africa, which are the result of missionary work, together with the Oriental churches, can teach other churches a great deal about how the Church can serve society without being part of the prevailing order. Although, in the future, many large churches may still exist, the typical form of the Church will increasingly be that of a minority church. Having a large number of members has its indisputable advantages in creating financial security and in strengthening the Church's cultural role in society. However, the Church's message and power are not ultimately dependent on its external position but on the renewing power of the Gospel. The Chris-

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tian Church will always finally have to confess that the Gospel is 'treasure in earthen vessels... to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us' (2 Corinthians 4:7).

After World War II a number of writers hastened to re-evaluate the meaning of ecclesiology. The inner erosion, which resulted from the two world wars and from secularism, proved to be a most frustrating experience for the churches. The world wars added the finishing touches to the deterioration of the ancient pattern of thought, according to which Christendom could be defined geographically and its borders pushed forward, by means of missionary work, until finally the boundaries of Christendom and those of the globe would be one.³ The world wars and secularism in its diverse forms have ushered in a new situation for the churches of the Western world: Christianity is no longer the self-evidently dominant religion in the West. While religious indifference and even primitive neo-paganism have gained ground in the Western world, the other great world religions, in particular Islam, have challenged Christianity in its former strongholds. Surprisingly enough, the Church has met with acrid criticism and heavy attacks in its heartlands, and the central tenets of the Christian faith have been called into question. Deteriorating outward circumstances have taught the churches a new kind of realism in which it is necessary to pay close attention to what the Church actually is and what it has been called to do.⁴

3. Teinonen, Seppo A., *Missio Politica Oecumenica*, Helsinki 1961, pp.13-20.

4. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (repr.), New York 1991, pp. 363-369.

The rapid changes in the ecclesiastical and religious situation of the Western world are a major influence behind the fact that ecclesiology became one of the most significant areas of theological study towards the end of the 20th century. This exchange of views has been conducted both inside and between all major churches.⁵ For quite some time, the basic problem in ecclesiology has been the one-sided focusing on the institutional features of the Church. This type of interpretation has in fact given a theological validation to the existing situation, in which the Church has been seen, above all, as part of the prevailing social system. This interpretation has obscured many essential features of the Church, but it has also tended to accord the Church the kind of powers that do not belong to it in the realm of Christian faith. The clearest manifestations of this questionable trend can be found in the viewpoints of the Roman Catholic Church in the period between the First Vatican Council (1869–70) and World War II. This period saw the virtual identification of the empirical Church with the earthly kingdom of God. A kind of culmination of this way of thinking was reached in Pope Pius XII's encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943), in which a parallel was drawn between the spiritual image of the Church as Christ's mystical body and institutional-hierarchical structures. The problematic nature of this metaphor, in itself useful and apt, is illustrated by the fact that at the same time the Roman Catholic Church was considered the sole competent representative of Christ on earth.⁶

5. Bosch, pp. 368–372.

6. On the Encyclica of Pope Pius XII, Finkeneller, Josef, *Katholische Kirche*, TRE, vol. XVIII, Berlin-New York 1989, pp. 227–250. Dantine, Wilhelm and Hultsch, Eric, *Lehre- und Dogmenentwicklung im Römischen Katholizismus. Die Lehrentwicklung im Rahmen der Ökumenizität, Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte* 3, Andresen, Carl (ed.), Göttingen 1984, pp. 397–405.

This same type of thinking, albeit in a slightly different form, has manifested itself in the Orthodox Church, which has traditionally considered itself the faithful representative of the undivided Church of the first millennium, as well as the preserver of the theological heritage of that Church. This emphasis, in itself worthy of all respect, has been coloured by the Church's polemic insistence that the other churches, to a greater or lesser extent, have abandoned this common foundation. The Orthodox Church's credibility has also been undermined by the fact that the individual Orthodox churches have often been tightly bound to the State in their areas of religious dominance and have given their tacit approval to its policies.⁷

The Protestant churches have been afflicted by a forgetfulness of the dynamic ecclesiological views of the Reformers and by an emphasis on outward order and stability. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) effectively divided the central European countries into Roman Catholic and evangelical regions, and historical development since that time has led to an interdependence of Church, state and society even in the Protestant areas. The evangelical churches, after the fashion of the other major churches, have had a significant role in serving society in the realm of popular education and by identifying with people's destinies. People have felt, and with good reason, that the Church is a haven of security and support in times of trial. Throughout its history, whenever it has been part of the prevailing system, the Church has tended to drift into a state of authoritarian patro-

7. Nissiotis, Nikos, *Die Theologie der Ostkirche im Ökumenischen Dialog, Kirche und Welt in orthodoxer Sicht*, Stuttgart 1968, pp.141-158.

nage. She has lost sight of herself as a 'communion of saints' (*communio sanctorum*) and rejected the gift and resource of the general spiritual priesthood.⁸ In summary, however, it can be said that, despite their great differences, the ecclesiological emphases of the major churches have, to a great extent, been along the same lines: the institutional features stressing the Church's outward position have risen to prominence in ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology from the mid-twentieth century

By comparison with this greatly simplified sketch of the historical background, a great change has taken place in ecclesiological thinking since the 1960s. In the Roman Catholic Church, as a consequence of the Second Vatican Council, this change can even be called drastic. The Council's foundational document, *Lumen Gentium*, described the Church first and foremost as a spiritual community, a mystery in which God himself is present through his Spirit. The manner and tone of the description of the Church was entirely different from what had gone before. The Church was no longer characterized in terms that were imperial in quality, with overtones of aspirations to global dominance; the focus was on the work and influence of the Triune God in the Church. The Church was portrayed as called to be a servant of people, instead of their master or judge. It was also significant that the universal Church was found to be manifested not so much in administrative structures as in local churches and congregations, in participation in the word and

8. Schwöbel, Christoph, The Quest for Communion, in Holze, Heinrich (ed.), *The Church as Communion*, LWF Documentation 42/1997. pp. 228-235, 264-265.

the sacraments. The term 'the people of God' was chosen as a central metaphor to describe the Church. Although the perspective was that of the hierarchical tradition of ministry, this term served as a reminder of the origin, nature and goal of the Church. The Church's historical roots were seen to reach all the way back to the choosing and calling of Israel. Bearing this heritage, the Church, the people of the new covenant, was seen as journeying towards consummation.⁹

Protestant churches have also been compelled to re-evaluate their ecclesiology completely. The Reformers considered the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments to be the two essentials of the Church. From the standpoint of the Lutheran confession, the passage referring to this, in Article 7 of the *Augsburg Confession*, defines the conditions of ecclesiastical unity. It has succeeded in expressing what the Church's life and growth is based on. At the same time, it has accorded a great deal of freedom for arranging the activities and structures of the churches. The churches' practice of relying excessively on secular rulers is a problem that has plagued the evangelical churches. This arrangement, which was meant to be temporary, became more or less permanent: the Church was responsible for doctrinal matters and the divine services; the German princes and other rulers shaped the outward form and order of the Church as they wished. To a large extent, this is the background behind the development of the evangelical churches into national or 'folk' churches. The com-

9. Finkenzeller, pp. 249-250. Dantine and Hultsch, pp. 405-413.

munity of faith uniting the Church and the nation has been the essential factor in the folk church model, but in actual practice the most noticeable mark of identification has often been the inseparable union of Church and State.

At the beginning of a new millennium, a number of national churches in central Europe have changed or are gradually changing into minority churches in their respective geographical areas. This has brought about the realization, once again, that historical development has not done full justice to all essential characteristics of the Church. A number of essential ecclesiastical factors have either been forgotten or been relegated to an entirely subordinate role.

Some recent studies have given remarkable new insights to this discussion by elucidating what Luther really thought about the Church.¹⁰ Luther described the Church as 'a holy people' that believes in Christ. A differentiation between the activities of God and man is characteristic of his ecclesiological view. In the final analysis, everything in the Church is based on the work of God, on the doctrine of justification. God justifies sinful people and calls them to a communion of faith with him. More than that: he calls those who believe in him to a communion of faith with one another. It is man's privilege to give an affirmative answer to this call of God. The Church is both human and divine. On the one hand, she is a community of sinners; on the other hand, she is holy, because of Christ. The Church is made what she is by the word of God, for the word creates the

10. Schwöbel, pp. 264-265.

Church. The Church is a creation of the word (*creatura verbi*). Luther examines all of this from the standpoint of a central concept, *communio*.¹¹

Luther's view on this concept is clearly expressed in his sermon, in 1519, on the Eucharist. In this sermon, he examines the Church's essential nature as 'a communion of saints' (*communio sanctorum*) from the standpoint of the Eucharist. According to Luther, this communion is a communion of love, in which God gives himself to man. In love, God pronounces sinful man free and forgives all his sins (*favor Dei*). Simultaneously he also justifies man (*donum Dei*). Above all, 'communion of saints' signifies unification with Christ. This communion signifies a real participation in Christ and his merits, and a miraculous exchange (*commercium admirabile*) takes place. Christ distributes his gifts and good things to man: man in turn brings his sins and anguish to Christ. Secondly, this communion is actualized between Christians in the Eucharist, which gives each Christian an equal opportunity to show and receive love and to bear the burdens and also the wickedness of his fellow members. According to Luther, 'the communion of saints' is made real in the Eucharist specifically between Christ and his Body, the Church, and her members.¹²

Among Luther scholars, Paul Althaus, to give one example, has asserted that in Luther's later writings the *communio* concept

11. Kühn, Ulrich, Kirche. *Handbuch Systematischer Theologie*, vol. 10, Ratschow, Carl Heinz (ed.), Gütersloh 1980, pp. 21-27, 173-174.

12. Peura, Simo, The Church as Spiritual Communion in Luther, in *The Church as Communion*, LWF Documentation 42/1997, pp. 97-104.

is pushed to the background, and a strong emphasis on Christ's presence in the Eucharist (real presence) emerges instead. According to Althaus, the *communio* concept belongs to Luther's early years, and later on Luther saw fit to drop the subject.¹³ However, a number of scholars, for example, Simo Peura and Christoph Schwöbel, have shown that this concept is preserved in Luther's thinking throughout his life, even if the later emphasis differs slightly from the earlier one. In his Large Catechism, Luther comments on the Apostles' Creed from the standpoint of the Trinity. He explains that 'the communion of saints' is no separate, unattached matter, something that exists between people alone. On the contrary, it is part of the totality of faith and is given its deepest significance by the mutual communion of the persons of the Trinity as well as the communion between God and man. There exists a *communio* of love between the persons of the Trinity, and this communion is reflected in those activities of God that are directed to the world. The communion existing between the persons of the Trinity also signifies a sharing, a transmitting, a revealing, of this communion, a communication (*communicare*) in which the Father reveals himself in the Son through the Holy Spirit. The form and content of this communion is the word of God, which creates the Church. In his Large Catechism, Luther stresses the fact that the Holy Spirit unifies everything that God does in creation and redemption, and that this also points forward to the coming consummation. That is why it is possible to say: 'I believe in the holy

13. Peura, pp.104-121; Schwöbel, 257-281 and, in the same volume, Schäfer, Rolf, Communion in Lutheran Ecclesiology, pp.142-161.

catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.¹⁴

In the ecumenical discussion of the past few decades, particularly in the 1990s, the Greek term *koinonia* has come to the fore in efforts to explain the nature of the Church and the communion of Christians.¹⁵ A number of churches have joined enthusiastically in the discussion focusing on *koinonia*, as this term provides a totally new basis for understanding the nature of the Church and the communion of Christians. Luther's views on *communio* have exerted a strong influence over this discussion, as they have shown that the basic tenets of the Lutheran Reformation give rise to a theological position that has many significant points of contact with the ongoing discussion on *koinonia*. This ecumenical discussion has once again raised to the surface the realization that one and the same word, *koinonia*, is used in the New Testament to describe the communion of the persons of the Trinity, the communion of God and man, participation in Christ's sufferings and victory, the eucharistic communion, as well as the communion and cooperation of Christians (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-22, 1:9, Philippians 1:9, Philemon 6). *Koinonia* is a relational concept, something that, in itself, is in relation to something else. It is not some unattached attribute used to explain communion in the Church, something that ought to be striven for separately; communion is something

14. Schwöbel, pp. 271-281.

15. Döring, pp. 117-128. Saarinen, Risto, The Concept of Communion in Ecumenical Dialogues, in *The Church as Communion*, LWF Documentation 42/1997, pp. 287-311.

that is inbuilt in *koinonia*. Unlike many other theological terms, *koinonia* does not remain on an abstract level, since it draws attention to a number of concrete issues. According to this term, the Christian faith is communion with and participation in Christ, the sharing, giving out and receiving of faith – in a word, interaction.¹⁶

An acknowledgement of realities is characteristic of Paul's description of *koinonia*. In painting a picture of the communion of Christians he does not use a sentimental, romantic palette, for he is not dealing with an unrealistic, utopian concept. *Koinonia* is at work in the midst of people's everyday experience, something that is tellingly described, for example, in 1 Corinthians 1:9, where Paul reminds the Corinthians that God has called them into 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) with his Son Jesus Christ. In the following verse, he wastes no time in starting to settle the Corinthian church's disputes and the schisms that were dividing that church into separate camps. Similarly in 1 Corinthians 10, as Paul is addressing the issues of the Lord's Supper and participation in Christ's sacrifice, the stark realities of earthly life are brought before our eyes. Paul is warning church members against vacillation between idolatry and proper worship.

Judging from Paul's description, the faith of Christians in that first generation seems to have been extremely fragile, and their

16. Reumann, John, *Koinonia* in Scripture: Survey of Biblical Texts, in Best, Thomas, and Gassmann, Günther, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper no. 166, Geneva 1994, pp. 37–64; Meyer, Harding, *That All May Be One. Perceptions and Models of Ecumenicity*, Grand Rapids 1999, pp. 63–72.

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unity seems to have hung on a thread. Against this background, Melancthon could differentiate between the more extensive, external church (*ecclesia large dicta*) and the actual Church consisting of believers (*ecclesia proprie dicta, ecclesia stricte dicta*). These were not, however, parallel concepts; they contained one another. Only God could see where the borderlines of the genuine Church ran. St. Augustine was thinking along the same lines when he used the term 'mixed body' (*corpus permixtum*), which encompasses genuine believers in Christ as well as hypocrites.¹⁷ According to Paul, sin does not nullify God's gift or the unity created by him, for the power of God is manifested in the midst of human frailty. However, man's weakness and the reality of sin do not give man licence to lead a life of sin. According to Paul, Christians need to repent and seek to maintain the communion that has been given to them, to be ready to go to great pains in order to maintain and develop communion.

The ecumenical discussion on *koinonia* is a telling reflection of the fact that in the ecclesiology of the past few decades the tendency has been to try to define the Church from the standpoint of the basic principles of faith, the Trinity, and the redemptive work of the Triune God. The part of God's work that focuses on the world has been interpreted as God's mission, in which the Father sends the Son and the Holy Spirit into the world. Therefore, it has become necessary to ask, once again, what the Church's position, role and responsibility is in God's mission. The theological discussion of the past few decades has been

17. Hefner, Philip, *The Church*, in Braaten, Carl E and Jenson, Robert W. (eds.), *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2, Philadelphia 1986, pp.199-200.

characterised by a tendency to examine and justify the missionary nature of the Church from the standpoint of the Church's distinguishing characteristics and the central definitions of the Church's nature.¹⁸

In theological and ecclesiastical discussion over recent decades, alternative expressions have been sought which, rather than describing the institutional character of the Church, emphasise its dynamism, movement, flexibility and continuity as well as its supra-temporal and transcendental nature. Thus the Church has been descriptively characterised as the people of God on the move, on a journey, travelling towards fulfilment, to the final manifestation of the Kingdom of God.

Douglas J. Hall has pointed out that in the New Testament the Church is compared to 'leaven', 'salt', 'light', 'a mustard seed' and 'a city set on a hill'. All these metaphors lack all outward pomposity, but they exude a mysterious inner strength. The size of the Church is not important. The strength of the Church is in the life-changing and renewing Gospel.¹⁹

The Church as a spiritual community is a creation of the Word (*creatura verbi*). The Church is born and lives by the Word of God. The Word is not at anyone's beck and call, for it comes from outside a person. Because the Church is entirely dependent on the Word of God, it must again and again in commu-

18. Gensichen, Hans-Werner, *Glaube für die Welt. Theologische Aspekte der Mission*, Gütersloh 1971, pp. 140-162.

19. Hall, Douglas J., *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Leominster, 1997, pp. 1-20, 51-52.

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nity and in private come to hear the Word. The Word, the words and acts of God, also leads the Church to act for the benefit of the neighbour. The message of love leads her members to perform deeds of love, to help those who suffer.

Diakonia Arising from the Nature of the Church

The position and significance of *diakonia* in the life of the Church can be explained for very historical reasons. *Diakonia* has from very early times been in one form or another an integral part of the life of the Christian Church. In the early days the Church was even known for the mutual care and love of its members. An examination of the foundations of ecclesiology shows that *diakonia* can be derived from the epithets and marks of the Church as the way of life and mission of Christians.

According to Luther, the marks of the Church (*notae ecclesiae*) are, above all, the means of grace, i.e. the word of God and the sacraments. In a wider sense, he included penance, prayer, the cross, mutual consolation, confession, and the offices of the Church among the means of grace. That the life of the Church in the final analysis is built on the word and sacraments means that the Church is expressly present where God's people gather for divine service, to be ministered to by the word and the sacraments. For Luther, the divine service was a dynamic meeting place of God and man, in which the presence of God is connected with concrete, tangible marks: the bread and the wine, and the audible word. Luther held that the life of the

Church needs the support and protection of institutional structures, in particular the multi-faceted ordained ministry, which has been given for the distribution of the word and sacraments. Luther's understanding of the word of God is basically of a missionary nature, since nobody can limit the effects of the word. The word must be proclaimed so that it will resound to the ends of the earth.

In connection with these thoughts, the missionary nature of the divine service has been emphasized in the ecclesiastical discussion of the past few decades. According to this line of thinking, this missionary nature can be seen in the divine service, particularly in the interaction of the centrifugal and the centripetal movement, the gathering in and sending forth, in the invitatory and sending ministry of the Holy Spirit as well as in the dialogue of the Triune God and man, which will not leave man cold or stationary. The missionary nature of the divine service is not a separate element; it is in fact one of its central features. This is clearly seen, among other things, in the fact that thanksgiving and praise combine to strongly motivate man to step out into the world and serve Christ. The people of God gather in the divine service in order to repent of their sins, to hear the word of God, and, above all, to praise God.²⁰

20. Kühn, pp. 22-29.

Unity

As scholars have sought to understand the diaconal and missionary nature of the Church, some parts of the Nicene Creed that define the nature of the Church have gained prominence. According to these, the Church is 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic'. These descriptive terms often wield a concentric influence in the Church and complement one another. In relation to the discussion surrounding *koinonia*, it has been pointed out with good reason that the unity of the Church can be understood to be the starting point for everything, since it expresses the fact that the Christian faith and the Church are based on the communion and participation which have been given in Jesus Christ. This communion with Christ opens the way for the communion of his followers. The unity of the Church and the communion of saints is never something that concerns interpersonal relationships only, nor is it merely a question of the total number of individual Christians. It is much more than that, because the starting point for unity is the communion of the persons of the Trinity as well as the communion of God and man. This unity is a gift, and it has an effect on all churches and all Christians. Unity is seen in that there is only one Gospel that is able to save humankind. There is just 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all' (Eph. 4:5-6).²¹

In contrast with this existing unity, the division and internal disunity of the Christian churches manifests itself as a glaring inconsistency. The number of churches as such is not necessarily

²¹ Pannenberg, W., *Systematische Theologie*, vol.3, Göttingen 1993, pp. 442-448.

a problem, for local churches are often born as a result of natural cultural and linguistic causes. The problem is the lack of unity. The existence of the unity that has been given to the Church creates a compelling inner need: the need to seek communion with others and to create proper circumstances for visible, tangible communion. The unity of the Church contains a significant dimension that is connected with the diaconal and missionary nature of the Church: this work always includes the call to participation in the Gospel, to enter into communion with the one true God, the Creator and Father of all. Secondly, this communion serves as a reminder of the absolute necessity of cooperation. No individual church or group is capable of coping single-handedly with the missionary task that has been given to the Church.²²

Holiness

The attribute, 'holy', is a reminder of the calling and choosing of the Israel of the old covenant and God's people in the new. The holiness of the Church of Christ is Christ's holiness. Ephesians 5:25-27 expresses this fact in the following way: '...just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless'. In Christ the reality of a holy God brings human beings

22. Schwöbel, pp. 227-235; van Gelder, Craig, *The Essence of the Church. A Community Created by the Spirit*, Grand Rapids 2000, pp. 120-122.

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again and again into contact with the forgiveness of sins. The Church and its members always have the opportunity of repentance and renewal. The Old Testament usage of the term 'holy', denoted separation for a holy task, that of serving God. The holiness of the Church of Christ also includes a task: the Church has been called and separated from the world so that it might be sent back into the world to proclaim Christ. In this connection *diakonia* not only concentrates on the consequences of social problems but also on the reasons for them (structural poverty, oppression and injustice)²³

Catholicity

The 'catholic' (general, universal) nature of the Church is an important reminder to the Christian and missionary effort of this present age of the comprehensiveness of faith. The attribute 'catholic' is not so much a reference to the quantitative spreading of the Christian faith throughout the world as a reference to a qualitative universality which encompasses the believers of all ages, God's people of past, present, but also future generations. It is an expression that refers to the coming eschatological consummation, to the time when everything will be united in Christ. In the midst of the fragmentation and globalisation of this present world, a true integration is taking place, hidden from the eyes of men. Ephesians 1:22-23 is an impressive commentary on this process: 'and God placed all things under his

23. *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, Faith and Order Paper No. 181, Geneva 1998, p. 19; van Gelder, pp. 116-118.

feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way'. (See also Colossians 1:19.) Understood in this way, catholicity is also a reference to the fact that all creation will one day be united and renewed in Christ.²⁴

Catholicity is a reminder of the fullness of faith, which only Christ and his entire Church possess. Without communion with this universal Church something essential will always be lacking in the life of a local church. Each church is linked by many bonds in a common destiny with other churches. The boundaries of the church are transparent so that behind them can be seen the silhouette of churches in the vicinity and on other continents. The diaconal and missionary responsibility of the churches extends by degrees from the close circle to the whole world. The catholicity of the Church on a local level is expressed, first and foremost, in the divine service. As was pointed out earlier, in discussing the Church's unity, both unity and catholicity are expressed in the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the Eucharist. The Christian Church is living in the fruitful tension between universality and particularity, i.e. localness: in denying her universality she severs her roots and life nerve; in neglecting her particularity she fails to establish contact with the people and the culture of its geographical location. In summary, the Church's catholicity is a reminder of the nature and great goal of mission, of the totality of the Gospel, of the great commission that encompasses all nations, and

24. Pannenberg, pp. 444-445; Hefner, pp. 207-210; *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, p. 40.

of the coming eschatological consummation. Mission is a means of making this catholicity a reality.²⁵

Apostolicity

The Church's apostolicity raises the issue of the Church's origin and the commission with which she has been entrusted. The life of the Church is built on the apostolic tradition, the eyewitness testimony provided by the apostles who walked in close communion with Christ during his life here on earth. The message and teaching, with which the Church has been entrusted, is meant to be preserved incorruptible. This does not, however, mean that the apostolic message should be embalmed; on the contrary, it must be made relevant and arresting. The apostolic heritage contains the obligation of interpreting the apostolic message in such a way that people living in this day and age will understand it correctly, the way the apostles themselves meant it to be understood.²⁶ Peter Brunner notes, with good reason, that a theological defining of the borderline between the apostolic faith and the false doctrines of salvation is necessary in this interpretative task. Communion based on *koinonia* is possible on the foundation of apostolic faith only.²⁷ The apostolic continuity of the Church has been seen as expressing itself particularly in the office of the bishop, whose responsibility it is to maintain this communion as well as the purity of the Gos-

25. van Gelder, pp. 118-120.

26. Pannenberg, p. 443; *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, p. 19.

27. Brunner, Peter, *Pro Ecclesia. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur dogmatischen Theologie*, 2, Berlin and Hamburg 1962, pp. 227-234.

pel. In spite of the central role of the episcopal office and the Church's offices in general, the whole congregation and church bear the responsibility for the interpretation of faith and its practical application in daily life.²⁸

On the theology of *diakonia*, many theologians (Paul Philippi, Matti Järveläinen, for example) have pointed out that '*diakonia* leaves the altar from the communion table and returns there again'. *Diakonia* arises from Christ's atonement and sacrifice. In the Eucharist Christ himself is present, bringing us into participation in his death and resurrection. The Eucharist is a meal of forgiveness of sins and a communion that makes Christians ask what they can do for Christ. From the altar Christ sends his people into the world to serve, and week after week he calls those who are weary in the Lord's work to come to the altar to receive new strength.²⁹

The diaconal nature of Holy Communion is illustrated by the fact that, since the early days of the Church, the office of deacon has been closely linked to the celebration of the Eucharist. The apostles chose the Seven (Acts 6) to 'serve tables'. Clearly it was a matter of accepting responsibility for *agape* meals, which were held in connection with the Eucharist. In the early Church it became the custom for deacons to be responsible for the arrangements for the celebration of the Eucharist and to

28. *Together in Mission and Ministry. The Porvoo Common Statement with Essays on Church and Ministry in Northern Europe*, London 1993, p.22-23.

29. Brodd, Sven-Erik, *Diakonater från ekklesiologi till pastoral praxis*, Uppsala 1992, pp. 70-87; Järveläinen, Matti, *Miltä usko näyttää. Diakonia - uskon demonstraatio*, Kuopio 1977, pp. 47-53; Philippi, Paul, *Christozentrische Diakonie. Ein theologischer Entwurf*, Stuttgart 1975, pp.163-166, 170-171.

take communion to those who, because of sickness or some other cause, could not come to the service.

Against this background, the nature of the church can be understood as basically diaconal. The marks of the church explain and describe what *diakonia* is.

The Deacon's Ministry as Part of the Ordained Ministry of the Church

In ecumenical discussion, broad agreement has been reached on the fact that the ordained ministry, being of divine institution (*de iure divino*), is part of the constitution of the Church. Although none of the Church's present offices as such derive from apostolic times, it may nevertheless be said that the ministry given to the Church is essential. The churches have a very varied tradition of ministry, influenced by local conditions, culture and religious concepts. The forms of ministry may vary. In general it is, however, possible to assert that, over the centuries, the offices of priest (presbyter) and bishop have been preserved as the basic ministries of the churches. The deacon's ministry also has a long and honourable tradition, but in many churches it has disappeared over the years, so that responsibility for *diakonia* has usually been transferred to the priests or pastors. In the Middle Ages it was transferred to the monasteries.³⁰

In many churches, the rediscovery of the diaconal character of the Church has led to the reviving of the office of deacon.

30. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Faith and Order paper No. 111, Geneva 1982, pp. 25-27.

Rapid change in the world have also led people to ask whether the deacon's ministry could more flexibly meet the many needs of our day better than the priest's or pastor's ministry. The Church's traditional order of ministry is often too slow and turgid to react to swift changes. The problems of the cities with their slums require much attention on the part of the churches in the future. The need for diaconal work is growing apace with increased urbanisation. Thus the necessity of diaconal ministry is based both on theological factors arising from the nature of the Church and on the new tasks facing the Church.

In recent years many churches have widely engaged in discussion as to how and on what basis the diaconal ministry should be seen as part of the Church's ordained ministry. At the same time there have been efforts to define precisely the special tasks involved. One of the main bases of the diaconal ministry is the nature of the Word of God. The revelation of God has from the very beginning been characterised by the words and acts of God, through communication to individuals or through historical events. The Word has not remained an abstract idea or general moral code but it has in many ways become concrete in human lives. The fulfilment of revelation – 'the Word became flesh' – took place in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself provides a model of what the Gospel is. It is not merely a verbal utterance but the holistic saving and liberating of people for new life.

In the Lutheran churches, the ordained ministry has often been understood in a narrow sense as a 'preaching office' (*Predigtamt*). Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession states that '... the

ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments' was instituted. In the Lutheran view the ordained ministry is by nature one, although it can have several strands. On the basis of the Lutheran confessions it has been asked whether in this context the Word can be understood in a wider sense, so that it is possible to see the diaconal ministry as a ministry of the Word. The diaconal ministry after all does include much that is directly linked to the administration of the means of grace.³¹

The tasks of the diaconal ministry have been defined in different churches in accordance with their own traditions. In line with the model provided by the German Home Mission, emphasis has been placed, in the Lutheran churches, on the socio-caritative aspect of diaconal ministry, in which nursing, work with the disabled, feeding the hungry and pastoral care have been primary tasks. In the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, however, the liturgical function of the deacon's ministry has been considered of importance, so that in practice the diaconal ministry has functioned as a preliminary stage of the priesthood. In the Roman Catholic Church, deacons have been responsible for many general duties that the priests have not had time to take care of.

In international discussion about *diakonia* in recent years, it has been considered important that the churches develop the deacon's ministry as an independent ministry, which is to be

31. See Lazareth, William H., *Two Forms of Ordained Ministry. A Proposal for Mission in the Light of the Augsburg Confession*, Minneapolis 1991, pp. 66-86.

understood as a permanent life-long task and not merely as a stepping-stone to the priesthood. The diaconal ministry cannot be an extra or auxiliary ministry to the priesthood: it has its own justification and its own function distinct from the priesthood. In spite of the existence of different traditions the diaconal ministry is generally considered to have three main tasks – the socio-caritative, the catechetical and the liturgical – but *diakonia* is seeking everywhere new forms of service. The Anglican and Lutheran Churches of Northern Europe have committed themselves in the Porvoo Common Statement ‘to work towards a common understanding of diaconal ministry’. The Churches must clarify the ecclesiological basis and nature of *diakonia* so that this kind of goal can be reached.

Diakonia as a Common Ministry of the Local Church

In some theological discussion the word ‘diaconate’ has been used to describe both the general ministry of Christians and the special responsibility of the deacon’s office. In the wider sense, ‘diaconate’ has been seen as referring to all Christians’ responsibility in the world. Every follower of Christ is called to help those who are in trouble. *Diakonia* is in this sense the common task of the whole Church. Many have been afraid that the responsibility of the laity might become blurred if great emphasis is placed on the ministry of the deacon. Rightly considered, lay responsibility and the ministry of the deacon can, however, simultaneously be strengthened through mutual support.

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Deacons have many demanding tasks in their work and they alone must deal with them. In addition, their main task is to guide and equip the Church for the work of service. According to the Apostle Paul, the minister is 'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up' (Ephesians 4:12).

The globalisation of the world seems to be dividing the world into two to an even worse extent than it ever was. Those who benefit from the international market economy, communications and communications systems are those who belong to the privileged group of humankind. However, the population of the poor countries, and those who 'fall in-between' in the rich countries, form the great majority of the human race. Everywhere human life is very vulnerable, at the mercy of poverty, sickness, hopelessness and natural upheavals. The Christian Church of the future, if it is faithful to its Lord, will be a diaconal Church, ready to face people's distress everywhere. The theological discussion on *koinonia* is an apt reminder that *diakonia* and the Church in its wholeness is essentially sharing, loving, giving and receiving of faith, interaction and participation in Christ.

Luther aptly compared the Church to a large hospital that Christ walks through. According to Luther, the Church cannot be anything but a hospital for the incurably sick: 'This is the sum of the Gospel: the Kingdom of Christ is the kingdom of mercy and grace. It is nothing more than constant carrying. Christ carries our misery and sicknesses. Our sins he takes upon

himself and he is patient when we go astray. He still carries us on his shoulders and constantly does so, and he does not get tired of carrying... The preachers in this kingdom should comfort consciences, keep friendly company with people, feed them with the nourishment of the Gospel, carry the weak, heal the sick and care for each according to his needs.³²

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32. Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe* 10 I 2, 366, 18-34.