CHAPTER EIGHT

A EUCHARISTIC MINISTRY FOR MARTHA:
THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH ORDER AND THE ACTS OF PHILIP

The analysis of the connection of Martha to διακονία in Luke 10:38–42 and its interpretation in the early Church demonstrated the flexibility of the narrative and its use for a range of rhetorical purposes. Even so the use of the narrative to support or prohibit a Eucharistic ministry for women in the manner proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza could not be substantiated from extant patristic exegesis of the text. Two other, non-canonical narratives link Martha to διακονία, the Apostolic Church Order (ACO) and the Acts of Philip (A. Phil.). While the connection of Martha’s διακονία to questions of the participation of women in the Eucharist remained a matter of debate in the case of Luke, in the ACO it becomes explicit. Furthermore, the ACO and Acts of Philip reveal radically different attitudes towards Martha’s διακονία.

8.1 The nature and function of church orders

This study has already examined a broad range of different materials including Gospel narratives, sermons, hymns and images. The Apostolic Church Order represents yet another different genre of text and consequently raises new issues of interpretation. Like Gospels, church orders are living literature, notorious both for emendation over time and for the incorporation of a range of different materials, such as catechetical and liturgical materials. The ACO, for example, has two distinct sections: a catechetical section (chap. 4–14) that adapts the ‘Two Ways’ known from the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas, and a ‘church order’ (chap. 15–30), which contains regulations for various offices in the community. Besides these, there is also an introduction (chap. 1–3) that presents a fictive setting for the church order reminiscent of the fictive setting of the Epistula Apostolorum. As in the Epistula, the apostles are gathered as a college to give instructions to the whole church. All the instructions of the ACO are set in the mouths of the apostles in the format ‘John said…Peter said…’
Attributing texts to apostles is a common strategy for claiming authority for a text, as is the setting of a text in a fictitious gathering of the apostles after the resurrection. In the first three centuries local Christian communities were still quite independent, more global synodical authority structures not yet having developed. While these local communities needed to solve novel problems, the church’s self-understanding as a united body also meant that the resultant increasing local divergence produced friction, as for example in the paschal controversy. Schöllgen (1996: 96–97) suggests that church orders emerged in this tension between local autonomy and the search for more global authority. Their claim to authority is based on the apostles whom they claim as authors and speakers—the only recourse, suggests Schöllgen, for early Christian writers seeking to make binding regulations beyond local borders.

As is the case elsewhere, the question needs to be asked how these texts reflect the historical context from which they emerged. While traditionally church orders were taken as records of the praxis of the churches from which they derived, more recent scholarship has suggested that the ideal envisaged by the texts might reflect historical reality better by contrast than by simple mirroring. Commenting on the canon laws of the ecclesiastical synods, Laeuchli observes that scholarship which examines the texts in relation to earlier, contemporary, and subsequent texts, treating them as if they were explicit renderings of what the church believed and enacted at the time, does not suffice, no matter how minutely it is done. It fails to offer meaningful explanations for many of the extraordinary inconsistencies in what seem to be naïve and simple canonical decisions…The failure is due to a basic misunderstanding as to what such texts represent. Time and again, they have been treated as abstract legal statements with a given, static meaning. What if they were not static legal formulations, but end products of violent group clashes, the last verbalized stage in a series of events, namely the conciliar debates, and behind them the tumultuous history of…Christianity? (1972: 4)

The same question has been asked of the church orders: do these texts represent records of early church life or rather ‘Tendenzschriften’ (Schöllgen 1997: 57), writings which seek to correct abuses or find new regulations for changed circumstances (Schöllgen 1996: 109)? Are church orders descriptions of current church practices or prescriptions of an ideal envisaged by their editors (Penn 2001: 6; Bradshaw 2002a: 93–97; cf. Methuen 1995)?