CHAPTER 12

From Function to Ontology: The Shifting Diaconate of the Middle Ages

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12.1 Introduction

The subject of this chapter—the theological and historical account of the diaconate in the Middle Ages—is shrouded in mystery. At best, it can be said that it was a period of extraordinary transition due to multiple factors: shifting theologies of Holy Orders, changing political, societal, and ecclesial landscapes, and the development of new pastoral institutions (such as monastic and conventual ministries), which eventually supplanted the efforts previously provided by deacons. During the Middle Ages, the diaconate transitioned from a mature, respected and even powerful order of ministry into a shadowy, secondary order whose members were in the final stage of preparation for ordination as presbyters. Popular histories of the diaconate often simply pass from its pre-Constantinian “Golden Age” almost immediately into the first hints of a renewed permanent diaconate in the 19th century. The task of this chapter, then, is to cast some light onto this often-overlooked and often mysterious period of diaconal history.

How a Christian church understands a theology of ordained ministry has been a fluid enterprise from the earliest days of the Church. In general, what can be said about the diaconate as an order in its own right? Kenan Osborne once wrote:

The deacon’s office is called an exalted office—in some texts even a ‘high and exalted office,’ or in one of the Ethiopic manuscripts (Horner’s) an ‘exalted priesthood.’ From the earliest times, the deacon has been seen as a high office or ministry in the Church. Later, it will be called a major order in the Church. The vicissitudes of the diaconate in the Christian Church cannot be denied, but from the early Church onward there has never been a time when the Church had no deacons.1

By the time the Middle Ages began, the diaconate was already in decline and transition, so it is necessary to turn the clock back a bit further, and offer a snapshot of the so-called “Golden Age” of the diaconate in order to provide the backdrop against which we can examine the fall and transformation of the medieval diaconate.

One further introductory note: I have titled this chapter “From Function to Ontology.” This describes the theological trajectory of the period vis-à-vis the sacrament of Holy Orders. As we shall see, the early understanding of what it meant to be a minister in the Christian church was quite “functional”: the minister provided a very specific service, or set of services, for a particular community of the faithful. These did not flow from any particular “power” held by the person in isolation from that community. During the Middle Ages, however, this meaning will shift, and ordination will come to refer to the reception of a sacred power by the ordinand—who thereby is changed in his very personhood—and who is then able to exercise that power in any community to which he may be assigned. This change to a more ontological understanding of Holy Orders affects the understanding of all ordained ministry in the Church, and is especially evident in the transformation of the diaconate.

By the time of the Council of Nicaea, the diaconate—as indeed all ministry—had already traced a steady yet varied trajectory; in fact, the Council of Nicaea will address several concerns which had already arisen concerning deacons. Contrasted with the sketchy biblical data available on the diaconate; patristic, conciliar, and canonical testimony abounds. Deacons are found in both urban and rural settings, sometimes serving communities without resident pastors, sometimes serving as part of “teams” of clergy. They were legates and messengers; they were deeply involved in the community’s jurisprudence and in the provision of charity. Deacons were responsible for the Church’s “temporalities.” They served in Rome, Syria, Asia Minor, southern Gaul, and Northern Africa. While primarily assistants to their bishops, some deacons served closely with presbyters. Diaconal functions were varied and, often, extreme pastoral circumstances, such as persecution, led to extraordinary functions being confided to presbyters and deacons in the absence of the bishop.

The study of the ancient diaconate has become quite extensive, and a review of this literature is beyond the scope of the present project. Still, several pre-Nicene themes emerge during this time, which will characterize the diaconate

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