

‘**DIAKONIA**’ in the New Testament era

Charles Buttigieg

Introduction

“The son of man came not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10,45). Jesus himself gave us an example of authentic *diakonia*. By his baptism in the river Jordan by John the Baptist he descended into the mud of the river, he became misery for us. At the last supper he himself washed the feet of the apostles. He taught the great parable of *diakonia* in the story of the Good Samaritan. Therefore Jesus true God and true man lived and taught this *diakonia*.

From the beginning, the New Testament church immediately recognized *diakonia* as preaching the gospel of the Risen Lord in charity instead in words. “Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor” (Mk 10,21), and “Sell your possessions, and give to the poor” (Lk 12,33), were the prophetic words of Jesus which we find concretized into the actual life among the christian communities in the Acts of the Apostles where everyone held all things in common. Everyone sold his/her possessions and goods, like land and houses and distributed them to all between the church, as any had need: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need” (Acts 2,42-47). “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any need.” (Acts 4,32-35).

Therefore *diakonia* in the New Testament was regarded as one of the ways of proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ. The Church as an active community had to be present where there was human need in order to help and heal. Hence *diakonia* was above all a bearing witness to faith. For the Pagans and Jews this *diakonia* was something unusual and striking. For christians, *diakonia* was turning earth into heaven, transforming poverty, sadness and sickness through the power of great commandment of love. This is the reason why our Mother Church took great care to see that there was always a *diakonia* in all the beginning local christian communities.

The term '*diakonia*'

First we must distinguish between two important dimensions in the church, that of *koinonia* which is the unity of the fellowship of believers and *diakonia*, which is the service, also service to those who are strangers and opponents. Therefore the service to others extends outside the community of the church. The Greek term *diakonia* literally means waiting at tables but is usually translated as service or ministry.

In the Old Testament we encounter the Hebrew word '*avad*' meaning 'to work' as closest to *diakonia*. In the New Testament we actually encounter four different words for service. First we have *diakonia* which occurs 96 times. We have *douleia* which is related to slavery and occurs 165 times. We have *latreia* the service of adoration to God and occurs 25 times and *liturgos* the service with others in worship and this occurs 15 times in the NT. The apostles themselves were involved in the *diakonia* of the Word. Also the deacons ordained by the apostles were involved in the *diakonia* of tables and then they became involved also in the *diakonia* of the word.

"It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty ...and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them" (Acts 6,2-3. 5-6).

There were also female deacons, deaconesses, involved in this ministry. The other usage which we are going to elaborate here, signifies the service of helping others which every christian was called to do in faith and in love. *Diakonia* hence implies subordinate service. It can be used for christian pastoral ministry (cf. Acts 1,17; Rom 11,13) or for some particular service as for example Paul's great theme of bringing famine relief to the christians in Judea as one reads in Rom 15,31ff. Paul frequently uses the word *diakonos* for himself and his companions. It can refer to the entire ministry of a local Church as in Rev 2,19 and of the universal Church as in Ephesians 4,12;

Therefore *diakonia* in the NT is neither exclusively liturgical nor exclusively

clerical but it belongs to everyone. In fact it implies a 'charisma', it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In order for the early Church to exercise this *diakonia* effectively some as we have mentioned, were chosen, to the special order of these ministers who are called *diakonoi*.

We must also note here that *diakonia* which is service with love is different from slavery (*douleia*) which is servanthood without choice. "If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant (*diakonos*) of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, he must be the slave (*doulos*) of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served (*diakonethenai*); he came to serve (*diakonesai*) and to give his life to redeem many people" (Mk 10,43-45). Jesus is the model of such freely chosen service because he has made choices of self-giving and self-sacrifice rather than allowing his background to dictate his behaviour. *Diakonia* is realised in the life of Jesus, the founder of our Church called for the *diakonia*.

"See how they love one another"

These were the words often applied by the pagan to the christians. Hence this was a pagan observation and not a christian observation. There was no other religion who had this service and social initiative as obligatory as in the new religion founded by Jesus Christ. Christians in fact insisted on the obligatory nature of the ministry of *diakonia* as service for others since the Church of Christ was a church for others. According to the Greek Christian Athenagoras writing in the second century:

"Among us you can find uneducated people, craftsmen and old women, who cannot discuss the usefulness of christian teaching in words, but who can prove the usefulness of their decision by their activity. They are not constantly using words, but are exhibiting good deeds. When they are struck, they do not hit back and when they are robbed, they do not go to court. They give to those who ask them and they love their fellow-men as themselves." (*Suppl.* 11).

The core of christianity is therefore selfless activity and selfless attitude. Also in the second century, Minucius Felix wrote: "We do not speak of good things. We do them" (*Oct.* 38.6). Evidence about this *diakonia* is given also in some mocking way in pagan documents. We encounter for example the non-Christian Emperor Julian (361-363) nicknamed by the christians, 'the Apostate' who was influenced in some way by the christians in his childhood; he tried to introduce

this diakonia to his people through his pagan priests. In fact he urged his priests to help the poor, including the poor of the enemy, to take care for prisoners and to show hospitality as found in christian *diakonia*. Therefore from all this testimony we can understand the great impact and influence of the christian diakonia in the early church.

“Making earth into heaven”

St. John Chrysostom (died 407) as a bishop realized the importance of the question of service and help to his people. He created a vision of redistribution of all the possessions of christians so that there would be no more poor people. This was therefore his preaching: “God said: I have made earth and heaven. I give you too creative power. Make earth into heaven! You can do this!” (cf. *Ep. I ad Tim. Hom. 15,4; PG 62, 585f.*). He saw this *diakonia* or living for others as something that could transform the earth, as salvation that had already began.

St. Paul in Gal 6,10: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith”, gives us clear light on the *diakonia* in the Church that is solidarity within in the Church. One must note however that aid was not given without a process of selection in the sense that the degree of the need had to be assessed and the age and status of the persons had to be considered without any form of discrimination. All this meant that the christians in being generous to a beggar: “Give to him who begs from you” (Mt 5,42), had to sensibly ascertain the need of everyone too since *diakonia* has no limits.

St. Augustine says that the bishop is the ‘procurator’, a servant. The spiritual goods which the bishop distributes to the faithful are not his own but God’s. He takes them from the divine ‘storeroom’, since he is only God’s servant, to share them with the faithful, his ‘fellow servants’, who work in the company with himself in their Lord’s vineyard. He continues to argue that according to the etymology of the Greek noun, a bishop (*episkopos*) is one who keeps watch from height, like a watchman who guards the vineyard from an elevated position. “But the account we have to render from this raised place is in danger, unless we stand there so humble in heart as to pray for you, that he who knows your souls may keep watch over them” (cf. *Commentary on Psalm 126, 3*).

The organization of the diakonia in the NT Church

Jesus himself gave an example of service in his life. The apostolate itself was a ministry. The word *diakonia* is applied beyond the apostolate as we have seen since it refers also to certain material services in the community. The early church institutionalized the *diakonia* ministry in order to exercise always, without prejudice, and everywhere. As we have said earlier, the apostles have chosen seven deacons from the community in order to help them. The diaconate in which the deacons were ordained by the impositions of hands, was responsible for the material goods of the Church but in helping the poor and organizing the *diakonia* but they became concentrated on the service of the Word also. In fact St. Stephen (died c.35), the first deacon and the first christian martyr was martyred because of his preaching, whose wisdom was irrefutable.

There was unlimited care for a number of widows as we can find in 1 Tim 5,8: "If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." This care of widows is an early form of the *diakonia* which in turn they themselves were involved in. From the middle of the second century, Sunday collections were set aside as a precondition for helping the needy and the poor. The organization of the *diakonia* in the early church was in the control of the bishop who had some deacons helping him in such an important ministry. St. Laurence Martyr was one of the seven deacons (he is known as the 'achdeacon', the head of the deacons) of the bishop of Rome, the Pope. The bishop was in charge of the treasury and of the places where the food was stored. There were other donations and collections made during days of fast. Therefore the *diakonia* managed by the bishop provided the care to everyone in the community.

"Christ in the poor"

This *diakonia* administered to those in need was not a profane activity, rather the church encountered Christ in helping the needy as we find in Mt 25,35-46 with regards the corporal works of mercy where Jesus finishes by saying: "As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to Me". Gregory of Nyssa states expressly that: "Christ is for you a stranger, naked, in need of food, sick, in prison and everything that is predicted in the Gospel. He goes around without a home, naked, sick and lacking the most necessary things" (*Orat. I*). Gregory of Nazianzen also declares: "As long as there is still time,

we want to visit Christ, care for Christ, feed Christ, clothe Christ, gather up Christ ... since the All Powerful wants mercy and not sacrifices and mercy is more valuable than thousands of fat lambs, we are to take these things to him in the poor and in those who have been thrown today to the ground. Christ is there in the poor" (*Orat.* 14, 40; PG 35, 909).

Diakonia as we have seen is serving Christ in others, Christ who is calling for help, who is himself directly in need of help of the poor. According to St. Jerome: "Christ is clothed in the poor, visited in the sick, fed in the hungry and given shelter in those who have no roof over their head" (*Ep.* 130, 14).

Conclusion

The fate of the Church in the coming future will not depend on her external success but on her return to the *diakonia*, to the service of mankind. No man will believe in the message of salvation and of the Saviour, if the Church has not worked to the bone being herself a living testimony in the service of man, whether he be sick in mind or body or in need in his social, economic or moral life. During World War II the protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoefer in his prison cell came out with a famous statement about the subject of *diakonia* in the Church: "The Church is only the Church when it is there for others." Above all, the image of the *diakonia* is to try to end the hell on earth for many people. It is therefore when the Church stands for others as Christ became the man for others. Christ's example is not only a model but it is He himself who meets the Church in suffering human beings naked of their dignity, poor and weak.

The Church follows the footsteps of her founder Jesus who he himself was the diaconal human being. The *diakonia* in the Church enables the Church to help the needy and the least among us (cf. Mt 25,31ff). The Church of the *diakonia* is also the Church of the first commandment, that of love of God and all people. The Church of the *diakonia* is the Church of the body of Christ where we are the different members working and helping each other in the body having Christ as the head. The Church of the *diakonia* is the Church of peace where differences are put aside. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3,28). The Church of the *diakonia* is the Church for the disabled, for the suffering, of the dying. Above all the Church of the *diakonia* is the Church in motion towards heaven, its homeland for ever.

Bibliography

FREND, W.H.C., *The Rise of Christianity*, London 1984.

HALTON, T., *The Church. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, IV, Delaware 1985.

HANSON, A., *Church, Sacraments and Ministry*, Oxford 1975.

McBRIEN, R.P., *Catholicism*, New York 1994.

TILLARD, J.-M., *Church of Churches. The Ecclesiology of Communion*, Minnesota 1992.

J.E. ROTELLE (ed.), "*We are your servants*". *Augustine's homilies on ministry*, Philadelphia 1986.

*"Buttigieg House",
Dalelands Street,
Qala, Gozo.*

