

*belief*, not to its traditional *text*. The Church can supply acceptable readings, not in the sense that they have any quality of scriptural inspiration, but in the sense that being contained in versions which the Church receives, they can be interpreted as acceptable statements of the Church's traditional and divinely guaranteed belief.



## THE DEACON IN THE PARISH—I<sup>1</sup>

JOSEPH HORNEF

**I**N Easter 1955 at Freiburg-Wallenried, Father Conrad Fischer, parish priest and general secretary of *Catholica Unio*, was suddenly snatched from the fruitful field of his activities by a malignant disease. One year before his death he wrote to me on the question of the revival of the diaconate in the following terms:

I personally am deeply pre-occupied with the question, more deeply, perhaps, even than yourself. In very truth it could be the source of a unique renewal of vitality within the Catholic Church. The presence of one or several deacons living with their families in a parish would bring the Church to the notice of many laymen. People would be compelled to a far greater extent to take 'churchfolk' into account. The concerns of the Church would be more deeply impressed on the minds of lay-people. . . . Through the diaconate something would come to life again in the Church; the layman's sense of responsibility towards his parish.

Do these words amount to no more than a kindly exaggeration, or are they the precious legacy of a wise and far-seeing priest, filled with love for the Church—the sort of message that we may not ignore? The discussion which follows will provide grounds for an unequivocal answer.

Efforts have been made in many different ways to re-vitalize the parish community. The specialized forms of the apostolate

<sup>1</sup> The original of this article was published in *Liturgisches Jahrbuch* 1956 Heft 1/2. It is reprinted here by kind permission of the editor of that periodical, and is translated by Joseph Bourke, O.P.

which concentrate on particular social or occupational *milieux* are extremely important. But still the parish must continue to provide the basic framework within which liturgical worship and apostolic work are carried out. It is true that the deacon has also a profoundly significant part to play in the more specialized forms of apostolate mentioned above. One has only to visualize the possibility of the worker-deacon, who could perhaps be more effective among his workmates than the worker-priest; for the latter is always regarded as an alien even though he stands at the same work-bench. Here however we shall confine ourselves to speaking of the deacon's place in the parish. Neither shall we enter into the question of the employment of deacons in specialist capacities.<sup>2</sup> Here too the deacon could make a valuable contribution to the Church by releasing many priests for more directly apostolic work in the parishes. Among our Evangelical brethren the use of deacons in such positions has already proved its value over a period of several hundreds of years (since the days of Wiechern). Today the problem is being discussed in Evangelical circles of how to make the parish deacon too a reality. And it is over the works of charity in particular that the question has been arising so persistently in the German Evangelical Church. Our question therefore can be put like this: If the office of deacon were revived, what would be the significance for the Catholic Church of the deacon ordained specifically for the parish community?

### *Deacon and Liturgy*

The aim of the liturgical revival is not to revive ancient forms and usages at any cost. Still less does it stem from aesthetic desires. It is a question of the vital participation of the faithful in the liturgy. In this direction much has already been achieved, and still more remains to be accomplished. The revival of the diaconate would be of invaluable assistance in inducing the faithful to take an active part in the liturgy and life of the Church.

Such a revival would have the effect of bringing back a practical living function to correspond to the sacramental consecration; as things are today, little more than the ordination ceremony survives.

The diaconate constitutes the first degree of *ordo*, the sacrament

<sup>2</sup> *Der Anstaltsdiakon*: i.e. employed in schools, hospitals, etc. (Translator.)

of consecration by which the Church has maintained her priestly office in existence throughout the centuries. The office of deacon is thus a priestly office. This is how the early Church regarded it. According to her terminology (cf. Benedict and Leo the Great), the *ordo sacerdotalis*, order of priesthood, was comprised of bishop, priest, and deacon; the priest and deacon were to see to the priestly offering, *sacerdotio fungi*.

The characteristic feature of the deacon's office is, as its name implies, humble and unassuming service. It follows from the unity of the sacrament of order that the deacon is called to all priestly activities which are not reserved to the higher degree of the sacrament and which do not require a further sacramental consecration for their exercise. This applies to the whole range of priestly activities.

If the Church decides to restore the diaconate to its ancient significance, the lower orders will be restored together with it; in fact these will come first. This does not imply that all the minor orders must re-emerge as ecclesiastical offices. But it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the Church could ordain members of the Caritas organization as acolytes, and catechists as lectors. Let us go a step further and suggest that the diaconate might be introduced both as a whole-time and part-time office in the parish. This would have the effect of equipping every parish, each according to its size, with a group of clerics of various degrees of order, in addition to the parish-priest.

He who undertakes an office in virtue of sacramental consecration incurs with that office a quite definite responsibility and undertakes with it grave obligations with regard to the Church and the parish. Once the priest ceases to be the sole bearer of such an office, once the body of consecrated ministers grows, it will follow that the sense of responsibility towards the Church will increase not only in those ordained, but among the rest of the faithful too. The heightened sense of responsibility which ordination and its corresponding function in the Church carry with them cannot fail to make itself felt in the family and among the professional acquaintances and friends of the ordained minister. So conspicuous a position carries with it both a vocation and a warning for those involved. Neither in public nor in private can the ordained person allow himself the same latitude as those others who have not been specially chosen as he has from the

community. It is essential that each of these degrees of order should be related to the worship of the altar. To the office which is transmitted symbolically in the ordination ceremony corresponds not only actual positive ministry at the altar in the fullest sense, but also the practical work appropriate to the particular order. Thus in the ordination of a lector, the book from which the liturgical readings are taken is handed over. In the liturgy the lector has the task of reading this to the community; then he leaves the altar to enter his field of practical activity as catechist. The same is true, as will be shown forthwith, of the part the deacon plays in the worship of the altar. Each of these clerics, called from the ranks of the laity, will do service at the altar in some form or other. Instead of altar-boys (incidentally these need not necessarily disappear), men either young or old will assist the priest and serve at the altar as ordained ministers. This was the express wish of the Council of Trent, namely that ordained ministers only should exercise the functions for which a special order has been provided. Moreover the Council was ready, in order to achieve this end, to admit married men too to the lower orders. In this way each of the ordained would participate directly at the altar in the Church's liturgy. Each of them would be able to utter his *Introibo ad altare Dei*. Each would be drawn into the *opus Dei*, the everlasting adoration of God through the Church. At the same time each would have among the faithful his own brothers, sisters, parents, children. All of these would feel themselves represented at the altar in a special way by one who belonged to them; through him all would be included in the sacred act. Such a measure could not fail to bring genuine new life into the community of the faithful, in the form of active participation in the liturgy.

The deacon himself would stand day by day at the side of the priest to assist him in the holy sacrifice, as well as to act as minister of the blessed Sacrament. In Cistercian monasteries, and in certain other orders, the *missa cum diacono* (i.e. with the deacon alone and no sub-deacon) is still celebrated even today. This is an ancient rite which could be revived together with the revival of the diaconate; for it is so simple in form that it could be adapted for daily use, even where the full-scale high mass with sub-deacon would be impracticable. Incidentally, even abstracting from the question of the revival of the diaconate, one would like

to see this ancient form of the mass liturgy brought to life again.

Priest and deacon alike live by the altar. It is the source from which they draw strength for the holy sacrifice. In the person of the deacon the married man stands at the altar in an attitude of service. One may well say that he can dedicate this unassuming, and yet most exalted, ministry in a special way to God's married people, whom he represents. This attitude of service is most beautifully symbolized in the deacon's part in the offertory ceremony; when the priest raises the chalice, the deacon supports the priest's arm with his left hand and the chalice with his right.

It is not important that the liturgy should attract people by the multiplicity of its forms, nor that the bearing of adults on the altar, instead of the often quite unseemly fidgeting and stammering of the altar-boys, would be more appropriate to the solemnity of the act of adoration. But if a group of men from the parish could participate directly in the service of the altar as ordained ministers, and if through them their relations, friends and acquaintances could be given a personal connection with the sacred ministry, if above all the laity could be given an opportunity to receive orders and so to take an active part in the liturgical ceremonies, then one of the most valuable advantages of the revival of this office would have been achieved.

The question must also be considered from the point of view of the approaching liturgical reform. Here the revival of the diaconate becomes quite especially significant for the parish. Perhaps the deacon could assume the role of intermediary between the priest and the parish community. The priest could preserve the symbol of the Church's unity by continuing to carry out the liturgy for the most part in Latin, while the deacon could render his part of the prayers and proclaim the divine word in the vernacular. It need not be emphasized what broad perspectives open out here, or what possibilities are offered of the parish actively co-operating in the liturgy.

### *The Deacon and Charity*

It was not merely material considerations which led the apostles to choose out the seven to serve the tables at the *agape*; otherwise they would not have prayed over them with the imposition of hands. The *agape* was connected with the sacrificial meal, and here too the deacon assisted. When the faithful brought their

gifts of bread, wine, oil, and so forth, to the altar, it was the deacon who received the gifts and divided them up. First he set aside what was needed at mass, then he took the rest (apart from what was needed for the upkeep of the clergy) to the houses of the poor. In the old days the deacon distributed the Precious blood to the faithful; so also today he could give holy communion. It was his duty then, as it could be again, to take holy communion. It was his duty then, as it could be again, to take holy communion to the sick in their homes.

How closely then was the deacon's service at the altar bound up with his service of the poor and sick! The one function was absolutely continuous with the other. The service of the sick was liturgical and apostolic too. This unity has been lost. It must be restored again in the diaconate.

To the Church as such the task has been given of preaching our Lord not only by words but by the works of active charity as well. She cannot fulfil this task in its deepest significance by means of organizations (for these are not the Church herself!). She must fulfil it too through her ordained ministers. Now the priest, burdened as he is with the manifold responsibilities of the cure of souls, can hardly manage to discharge this responsibility to the poor and sick brethren in person; therefore let the deacon do it, and let him do it from the altar. Without this immediate bond between charity and the altar, the Church's charitable works are in danger of degenerating into mere welfare work and routine benevolence. The Church's practical charities demand not only subjectively right religious dispositions but also an objective bond with the sacramental sphere. In the diaconate this could be achieved. Social problems are so urgent today! In the social encyclicals the Church has tackled these problems and indicated the right lines for solving them. But she must also come to grips in practice with social needs. This is particularly true of missions where social problems are often far more difficult. The deacon would be the appropriate figure for this task. But the whole-time deacon would have to be equipped with the necessary specialized knowledge. Apart from him the part-time deacon would have to dedicate himself whole-heartedly to the work of charity. For this purpose a group of lay-helpers would have to be enlisted to work under the deacon's leadership. Thus the parish community would have to appreciate the fact that all those who partake of the

holy eucharist at the table of our Lord are responsible for their brothers and sisters, and that the body of the faithful must themselves undertake the care of their poor and sick to the utmost of their ability. What can be done on the spot must be done without expecting external assistance. It cannot be denied that in this sphere there is endless work to be done and that this side of the Church's activity is particularly pressing.

*(To be concluded)*



## ST BRIDGET OF SWEDEN

MICHAEL MUMMERY

**M**EDIEVAL saints are often difficult to understand. They flourished at a period when things were so very different from today that, however hard we try, we just cannot enter into their minds. We can't apply their lives to our own. Joan of Arc was inspiring but rather terrifying; some of the early monks did heroically saintly things which just amaze us. This is true, also, to a great extent of the mystics, but there is one big exception to the rule, and that is St Bridget of Sweden. She was, indeed, a mystic—she had more than her fair share of visions—and yet there was much in her life which can appeal to the modern Catholic. That she was an outstanding personality is attested by the great respect that the Swedes still bear for her even though the majority of them have abandoned the faith which was her guiding principle in life.

Bridget's life spans about three-quarters of the fourteenth century, which by any standards may be reckoned to have attained the nadir. The more pessimistic are inclined to view modern times as uniformly bad, but a cursory glance at the century in which Bridget lived reveals that the general level of spirituality and morals was depressingly low. From all this the saint was shielded in her early life, because, being born of a noble family closely allied to royalty, she spent her formative years on her father's vast estate in Uppland, north of Stockholm. Her birth