

WORLDWIDE SOLIDARITY: THE VISION OF A DIACONAL CHURCH

Klaus Kießling

Abstract

With the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the Catholic Church reintroduced the ministry of the permanent diaconate. Since then, ministers have been living and working in many regions of the world, now also in Lithuania. What is their mission? How will they have a lasting and fruitful impact? This article clarifies which biblical sources of diakonia and diaconate and which early Church texts can provide orientation, and raises the urgent question of a diaconate for women, as only men have been admitted to this ministry to date. This article goes on to examine those sources that can be considered fundamental for the reintroduction of this ministry by the Second Vatican Council, before turning to the Amazon Synod initiated by Pope Francis. The resulting synodal and post-synodal documents are presented, discussed and taken further, towards the vision of a Diaconal Church. KEY WORDS: deacony, diaconate, Catholic Church, Second Vatican Council, solidarity, Amazon Synod.

Anotacija

Po Vatikano II Susirinkimo (1962–1965 m.) Katalikų Bažnyčia vėl įvedė nuolatinio diakonato tarnybą. Nuo tada ministrai gyvena ir dirba daugelyje pasaulio regionų, dabar ir Lietuvoje. Kokia jų misija? Koks bus ilgalaikis vaisingas poveikis? Straipsnyje aptariami bibliniai diakonijos ir diakonato šaltiniai, nurodoma, kurie ankstyvieji bažnyčios tekstai gali padėti orientuotis, be to, keliamas neatidėliotinas moterų diakonato klausimas, nes iki šiol į šią tarnystę priimami tik vyrai. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjami šaltiniai, kurie gali būti laikomi esminiais, siekiant, kad Vatikano II Susirinkimas vėl įvestų šią tarnystę, prieš kreipiantis į popiežiaus Pranciškaus inicijuotą Amazonijos sinodą. Gauti sinodiniai ir posinodiniai dokumentai pristatomi, aptariami ir nukeliami toliau – diakoninės bažnyčios vizijos link.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: diakonija, diakonatas, Katalikų Bažnyčia, Vatikano II Susirinkimas, solidarumas, Amazonijos sinodas.

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Introduction: pastoral ministry as confrontation

Pastoral ministry lives and grows from the confrontation of the Gospel with the present time, and of the present time with the Gospel. Pastoral ministry relies, in

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this confrontation, on creative processes which come from the interaction, coexistence and contrasts between biblical culture, especially agriculture, on one hand, and the cultural worlds of the 21st century on the other hand (Kießling, Mertensacker, 2019). All those working in pastoral ministry are in this tension: some feel it as vital that they can creatively develop traditions, whilst others may perceive it as unbearable if the necessary mark has to be overstepped and threatens literally to break the pastoral workers. Of course, permanent deacons, a ‘young and fresh’ (Jurevicius, 2004 and 2023) group in Lithuania, are also living in this tension, as they ask themselves how they can stay faithful to their task and their mission, and how they can work today for tomorrow, that is to say, sustainably and fruitfully.

This is the issue to which I devote the present article, as a researcher who takes into consideration the most recent results of diaconal research and develops a critical posture towards them, as well as a deacon who tries to take his universal-ecclesial mission and to develop seminal perspectives from current developments, especially from the Amazon Synod (Kießling, 2023).

The relevant exegesis provides us, in the figure of the untiring John Neil Collins (1990 and 2014), with some degree of irritation, provoking one not only on an academic level, but also on an existential level, inasmuch as the diakonia and the diaconate are not only an object of study, but also one’s personal vocation. Based on the knowledge that irritation not only disturbs, but can also facilitate learning processes (Latvus, 2017), and thus give an incentive to personal steps, I will also structure this article gradually. The introduction on a pastoral note (1) is followed by central New Testament findings, as presented by the Australian John Collins on the basis of decades of meticulous work (2). I am going to confront them, formulating a further inquiry (3), and situating myself with regard to these research results in my quality as a deacon (4). The biblical sources will be followed by patristic witness (5), and the urgent call for female deacons (6). In the further course, this article will initially draw on those sources which could be considered fundamental for the reintroduction of the permanent diaconate by the Second Vatican Council (7). This vision of a diaconal Church is shared by Pope Francis, who in 2017 announced the Amazon Synod, advanced its preparation, shaped it, and published his post-synodal letter *Querida Amazonía* in 2020 (8). I will critically evaluate the documents on the Amazon Synod (9), which rely, as a matter of perspective, on deacons of any gender as messengers of Jesus Christ (10).

1. Biblical sources: diaconal research by John Neil Collins and Anni Hentschel

Not only the post-Council plurality of diakonia and diaconate within the Church worldwide but also the New Testament contexts of the *diakonia/diakonein* seman-

tic field are difficult to embed in the common spectrum of meaning: we have the material and tangible diakonia at the tables (Acts 6,2), then the diakonia of the Word, to be understood spiritually (Acts 6,4), and also the Pauline diakonia of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5,18). What, then, distinguishes diaconal action, then and now?

1.1. Hermann Wolfgang Beyer

Ever since my days as a student, I have been familiar with the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. The first volumes thereof were published in the 1930s, that is to say between the two world wars. In this dictionary, Hermann Wolfgang Beyer (1935) formulates, not hiding his anti-Jewish impulses in the process, a basic concept of *diakonein*, which can be described as ‘waiting on tables’ and as ‘providing meals, nourishment, sustenance’. Accordingly, *diakonein* encompasses services which are provided to others. In secular Greek, however, *diakonein* means an inferior, even degrading activity, as one can read in the said dictionary, an activity performed by those confined to the lowest positions, and an activity of those who do things unsuitable for those who strive for success and prestige in the conventional sense.

From a biblical point of view, *diakonein* is understood as a voluntary service, as voluntary self-giving, as opposed to *douleuein*, which is performed as a result of constraint and describes slave-like submission. Therefore, the word *diakonos* can describe only a person who does not belong to the social class of slaves and enters an employment relationship in favour of others of their own accord. It should be noted that, as a biblical term, *diakonos* applies to both men and women.

1.2. John Neil Collins and Anni Hentschel

John Collins disputes this finding. Collins’ assumption is that the *diakon*-semantic field in the biblical texts is precisely not to be contrasted with its significance in the Greek environment. On the contrary, he sees several concepts having to do with *daikon*, having their place precisely in (other) religious discourses: in the ears of people living in the Hellenistic era, the *diakonos* of the Word is the mouthpiece of God, the spokesman, the messenger; and therefore is not in contradiction with, but in continuation of, that ancient philosopher, the Cynic, who, as *diakonos* of Zeus, was his worldwide missionary. Collins comes to the conclusion that the *diakon*-semantic field applies primarily to functions of mediation, to the tasks of a middleman, who, for example, would transport agricultural products from the countryside to the cities, or to the tasks of an agent. Resulting from this is an accumulation of focal points: from serving, through charity-type tasks up

to mediation activities in the very different fields of social, political, cultural and religious life (Koet, Sengers, 2018).

Anni Hentschel (2007 and 2013), a Frankfurt-based Lutheran theologian who collaborates with John Collins, points out that this mediating action is never performed on one's own authority, but constantly needs to be commissioned: in this sense, diaconal activities are not, first and foremost, services rendered to someone else, but rather activities performed on behalf of another person. Consequently, if we ask about the mission of the deacons, we must look not only at those to whom the deacons are sent, but especially at the one on behalf of whom we carry out our mission.

John Collins' understanding of a mediating action echoes the language of St Paul, who uses the *diakon*- semantic field to describe the proclamation of the Gospel as well as the conveying of news and collections as, for instance, in 2 Corinthians 3,4–6: 'Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that of ourselves we are qualified to take credit for anything as coming from us; rather, our qualification comes from God, who has indeed qualified us as ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life.' The characteristic activity appears to be that of a messenger who is committed to missionary proclamation and mediates as a go-between.

In this perspective, the diakonia at the tables (Acts 6,2) and the diakonia of the Word (Acts 6,4) are no longer in contrast. They appear as false alternatives if mediation and commissioning come to the fore, because these can describe both evangelisation, as the diakonia of the Word, and the service at the tables. Collins does not regard the service at the tables as the primary significance of *diakonein*, but he allows it as a possible activity of a go-between, since whoever waits on the tables must go to and fro between kitchen and dining room. But at this point a question comes to my mind: does not the one who acts as a mediator in this case practically also act in favour of somebody to whom he therefore renders service? However, what is obviously the determining factor for a *diakonos* is not his servility, but his mobility. In this sense, it is all a question of Christians seeing themselves as commissioned; if and because they take their commission seriously, they cannot but accept serving, including at tables, but also a diakonia of reconciliation. From person to person, but also in a worldwide perspective, ever-growing globalisation and ever-escalating violence make this diakonia of reconciliation an urgent necessity.

1.3. Wilhelm Brandt

Conversely, Hermann Wolfgang Beyer also makes it explicitly clear that diaconal activities should take place with the strength that God supplies, coming from God and directed towards Him. John Collins observes that Beyer's understanding

of diakonia draws upon research carried out by Wilhelm Brandt (1931). Now Brandt maintained very close relationships with some renowned German diaconal institutions, such as Kaiserswerth and Bethel. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to assume that the development of diakonia in 19th-century German Protestantism had a strong impact on Brandt's conclusions, and hence might also have influenced Beyer. John Collins disagrees with the resultant assumptions concerning the word diakonia. According to him, the attribute 'diaconal' should not be ascribed to those traditions at all.

2. Further inquiry: subservient waiting at tables or missionary go-between?

I see the confrontation with John Collins as a genuine challenge, since what we are discussing here is not merely a notion or a lexical root, but the way in which deacons (Ferstl, 2019; Hark, 2023) understand themselves, and hence the question of how they can stay faithful to their mission and how they can work today for tomorrow.

2.1. 'As one who serves'

While reading the above-mentioned texts, I noted that Brandt, in tackling the New Testament understanding of the *diakon* – semantic field, starts with the Gospels before consulting the Pauline texts, whereas Collins does exactly the opposite, approaching the Gospels only after the Epistles. One should note that for the *diakon* – semantic field, Luke 22,27 has an outstanding importance: 'For who is greater: the one seated at table or the one who serves? Is it not the one seated at table? I am among you as the one who serves.'

For Collins, this motive is situated in the context of the eschatological banquet. It reminds him of a Greek festive custom, in which the masters served their slaves. According to Collins, this idea of reversed circumstances is limited to the situation of a ceremonial banquet. In it, Jesus, like an ancient dignitary, assumes the role of a servant, again in continuity with the religious practices of the environment. In reality, such role-switching is verified, on a large scale, only within the framework of carnivalesque events whose exceptional character interrupts that which, hitherto and thereafter, constitutes the norm for a particular period of time. But I cannot discern such a game in Luke 22,27. In Luke, Jesus' admonition to the disciples, as they were disputing over who was the greatest, is anything but inconsequential: 'But among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant' (Luke 22,26). Next comes the reference to temptations: 'It is you who have stood by me in my trials' (Luke 22,28). Then follows the eschatological outlook on the Last Judgment, in whose description in

Matthew 25 the semantic field *diakon-* also appears, and on the Kingdom of God (Luke 22,29ff). All these indications point to the great and durable seriousness of this scene.

Collins points out that in Luke 22,27 we are actually dealing with a comparison: 'as one who serves' is to be understood, consequently, as a reduction of sorts: only as a servant, but without actually and effectively being one. I venture to think, however, that this imagery means more, and that it means something different: from the playful role-switching a new perspective arises, from the metaphor something new appears. In this episode, Jesus becomes his disciples' servant, and they benefit from it. It will be the same in the eschatological perspective: Jesus' passion, death and resurrection is for the benefit of people, he will be a substitute for them and for us all, he will become *the* substitute. For the above-mentioned reasons, I do not consider the word 'as' to be a mere comparative particle, but as a strong metaphor: Jesus establishes a new reality here. I would also like to draw attention to Mark 10,45: 'For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

2.2. The diversity of biblical traditions

In this sense, one could differentiate between a Gospel tradition which stresses the service character of the diaconal action and a Pauline language emphasising mediation, which also has political and provocative qualities. But it is precisely these relationships between power and powerlessness that the Gospels address as well, if I do not ascribe to the *diakon-* semantic field a pusillanimously submissive attitude, but rather see in it the opportunity to reshape the fabric of my relationship with God and with my fellow human beings. What is, then, the mission of the deacons: subservient waiting on tables, or missionary going-between?

I see no reason for playing off one aspect against the other, i.e. Paul's understanding within a missionary context, and that of the Gospels in the context of a feast. Quite to the contrary, everything speaks in favour of taking all these biblical (hence also Jewish!) traditions very seriously. For the go-between may act out of a socially motivated solidarity and also foster solidarity; and service should not be understood as being limited to charitable motives, which, by the way, are important in themselves, and confined to the apolitical sphere. From a New Testament point of view, Jesus, who is at the same time the Lord of the Kingdom of God, appears also as the one who serves voluntarily and thereby turns human hierarchies upside-down, as, for example, in the washing of the feet episode (John 13), or downside-up.

By saying this, I do not push the motive of the go-between into a corner; rather, I find the confrontation with Collins' research an inspirational one because it

shakes up some things which were taken for granted, and therefore irritates and by this very fact brings about progress. I am glad to see the added significance of the *diakon*- semantic field in the light of Collins' lexical analysis, in contrast to an interpretation based on Brandt and Beyer and going beyond the traditions linked to them. I appreciate the theological plurality of biblical texts, and I consider them indispensable; therefore, I think a go-between and some bridging are also needed between these various sources.

3. Who and what moves me as a deacon of God

I agree with John Collins that an exclusive definition of diakonia and diaconate based on their character of service is inappropriate. All ministries are ministries of service, and more. And, by ascribing to himself the role of deacon of God (2 Corinthians 6,4), Paul does not mark any subservience, but the divine authority of his mission. In this sense, diakonia encompasses all things which we must do simply because we cannot counterpoise the authority of the employer with anything of the same value. But at the end of the day, I am not interested in a formal description of a diaconal identity, mine or anybody else's, but in a contentual qualification.

I keep receiving letters from authorities, both ecclesiastical and others. At the end of those letters there is sometimes the indication that the document was issued mechanically, and hence it is valid even in the absence of a signature. At other times, there is a signature, but before the name of the official one sees the note 'by proxy'. This official is generally not a deacon, male or female, the person does not act on their own behalf but on behalf of a third party.

And if I carry out a task it is different if I act on behalf of my wife, or one of my sons, or my college, or a bishop, or, even in the name of Jesus Christ. And, I am convinced that others would notice in each case on whose behalf I do something. It will become evident by the contents of my mission and certainly by the way in which I try to perform it. And for this reason, I am also convinced that the fact that my mission is connected to a certain employer does not disconnect it from the target group for which this mission is destined.

If I understand myself as a deacon of God, then my action points to the One whom I chose to serve. And if God is love, if the biblical witness and Benedict XVI are right in stating that '*Deus caritas est*' (2006), then it follows that I act out of love. Then as a deacon I exercise *caritas*, so the love for my neighbour appears as an essential act of God's love, and also the diaconate and *caritas* are inextricably linked to each other. John Collins and Anni Hentschel are still right, in the sense that the Greek lexem *diakon*- is not to be translated by the Latin word *caritas*. However, the Church's practice, the Church's *caritas*, does not lose any ground for

this reason, precisely because a deacon of God takes responsibility for the diakonia of love, for the *diakonia caritatis Dei*.

4. Patristic sources: ‘Love greets you...’

En route to his martyrdom in Rome, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, writes letters to some communities in Asia Minor, including one to the church of Tralles, which he concludes in a way characteristic of him: ‘The love of the Smyrnaeans and Ephesians greets you’ (Ignatius von Antiochien, 1942, 31). It is not the Church, but love which greets (Kießling 1998). It is Ignatius who, together with Burrhus of Ephesus, Zotion from Magnesia, Philo from Cilicia, and Rheus Agathopus from Syria, first mentions deacons under this name (Theobald, 2014, 178), and expresses his great appreciation for their commitment.

Also from the second century comes the witness of Polycarp, which, as Bishop of Smyrna, describes deacons as ‘the servants of God and Christ and not of men’ (Polykarp, 1918, 165), whilst the qualification ‘servant of all’ (Polykarp, 1918, 166) does not refer to those giving a commission, but to the people who benefit from this service. Thereby, Polycarp also draws attention to the bipolarity which marks this semantic field; diaconal action moves in the field of tension between the people giving the commission and those to whom diaconal care is shown.

In his biblical-patristic reflection, Michael Theobald (2014, 208–263) gives a particular emphasis to the collections: to the great ecclesiological importance given to the monetary collection made by the gentile Christians for the Judeo-Christian mother Church in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16,1–4), at the time when Paul’s addressees celebrated new life on Sunday, the day of the Resurrection; to the gift of the first-fruits to the poor in the early Christian *Didache*, in which thanks were given to the Creator for the fruits of the earth, and the giving of the first fruits to the poor were an expression of this gratitude; to Justin and his first Apology, which presents the collection within the framework of the Sunday liturgy as a stable institution, thereby placing diakonia at the heart of the liturgical act; to Irenaeus of Lyon, who, like Justin, understands the collections in terms of the theology of Creation, insofar as the gifts are shown to be ultimately gifts of God. The givers, in the knowledge of this, are free to donate these gifts to those who need them.

This original interlocking of service to God and to neighbours, of love of God and of neighbours, is also evident in the writings of Tertullian (Theobald, 2014, 264–281), for whom the Roman ideal of *pietas* and the social commitment in the *caritas* constitute a unity. And just as breaking the bread and having a meal together leads to the borders between earth and Heaven becoming permeable, so also

does diakonia, Church-wide and worldwide, seek, to the extent of its capabilities, to put an end to the hell represented by the earth for so many people.

5. Further inquiry: female deacons in the early Church

My understanding of the unity between the love of neighbours and the love of God is due to the Gospel and the patristic sources, but also to the reflections of the famous Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1965). He was contacted after the Second World War by Hannes Kramer, who was a forest ranger, then a social worker, and later a permanent deacon. He worked between 1959 and 1990 in the headquarters of the German Caritas Association. Inspired by Alfred Delp and other anti-Nazi resistance fighters, Hannes Kramer and Karl Rahner created diaconal circles, from 1951 onwards sounding out possible contributions towards a diaconate for women and men, for the renewal of diakonia. As the Council was reinstating the permanent diaconate, the year 1965 saw in Rome the foundation of the International Diaconate Centre (IDC), whose development was to benefit from Hannes Kramer's long-lasting influence, as manager and then advisor.

It is obvious that once the ministry was reintroduced, the issue of the diaconate for women was raised, and still remains an issue. It is equally obvious that a possible admission of women to diaconal ministry and the decision necessary in this regard which still did not happen must feel like a degradation for those women who are performing diakonia and feel themselves called to this ministry. I also consider unfair, and indeed most unfair, those attempts, sometimes sheepishly, at other times very vocally, to introduce a non-sacramental ministry for women and give them access to the diaconate in such a way. To doubt the existence of female deacons in the early Church can be possible, at best, if one declares the women mentioned in 1 Timothy 3,11 to be the wives of the deacons mentioned in this context (1 Timothy 3, 8–13), even though those women were not designated as *their* wives (Theobald, 2014, 175ff). And should not even those not convinced of the existence of clergy women in the early Church wish, or at least have to further develop the tradition, in whichever way it is reconstructed, if the said tradition is to remain alive and not limited and suffocated by traditionalism?

In favour of a diaconal Church is a question very important for me: why one keeps asking and looking only ever for *viri probati* and never for *mulieres probatae*. Be that as it may, in 2017 a woman was ordained for the first time in hundreds of years in an Orthodox Church. The Patriarch of Alexandria, Theodoros II, ordained a woman as a missionary deacon in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

6. Council sources: *Lumen Gentium*, *Ad Gentes*, *Gaudium et Spes*

6.1. 'Diakonia of the liturgy, of the Word and of charity'

For the renewal of the diaconate, a decisive Council document is the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (LG): Upon deacons, hands are imposed not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service: *non ad sacerdotium, sed ad ministerium* (LG 29). The Council irritates, for *Lumen Gentium* also applies the word *sacerdotium* (LG 10) to the common dignity of *all* the faithful. Therefore, this term is not adequate for differentiating between the diaconate and the presbyterate. At the same time, however, one finds in *Lumen Gentium* an unequivocally positive appreciation of the diaconate, whose bearers are strengthened by sacramental grace and have a very broad horizon for their diaconal action: deacons serve the people of God 'in communion with the Bishop and his group of priests ... in the diakonia of the liturgy, of the Word and of charity' (LG 29). The theological motivation for the reinstatement of the diaconate is found, certainly not by coincidence, in the decree on the missionary activity of the Church *Ad Gentes* (AG). It states the following: '...it is only right that men who actually carry out the functions of the deacon's office ... be strengthened by the imposition of hands which has come down from the Apostles, and to bind them more closely to the altar, that they may carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate' (AG 16). One has to recall the fact that, already during the Council's proceedings, some bishops, mostly from Latin America, insisted on such a sacramental strengthening; not for men only, but explicitly also for women, who already at that time, for instance in Brazil, were essential bearers of diakonia and evangelisation (Weber, 2019, 169).

The Council leaves no room for doubt that 'deacons ... are also sharers in the mission and grace of the Supreme Priest ... in their own way' (LG 41). According to John Paul II (1996, 9), the deacon acts in the person of Jesus Christ, for Jesus Christ *as* Lord and Head of the Church also became the servant of all. Jesus Christ cannot be split into a Lord and a servant. And, I might add, neither can the *Ordo* and the ordained be divided into masters and servants.

If with the Magnificat (Luke 1,46–55) the mighty are cast down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up, this reversal cannot refer exclusively to one of several ministries and be restricted to the diaconate, because then: 'the leadership task of the priest and of the Bishop would be a faculty within the scope of a certain domination which does not correspond to the Magnificat. For this very faculty is linked to the inversion; it is namely meant to create space for the domination of the *Gospel* against all other dominations. It is a shallow kind of argument to speak about the diaconate as a subservient ministry and to declare it a particular form of

self-giving in contrast to other hierarchical ministries, whereas the latter possess a faculty of leadership, derived from presiding over the Eucharist, all the more as it means a more radical kenosis. Quite to the contrary, the diaconate must no longer cower, but rather rebel, when others within the Ordo disconnect from charity' (Fuchs, 2017, 139ff).

6.2. Solidarity beyond death

The newest research does not deprive charity and solidarity of their legitimacy as characteristic features of the diaconal ministry. But the ministry itself does not owe its legitimacy to the notion of diakonia, this was clearly demonstrated by John Collins and Anni Hentschel, but from the Church's mission as a whole. Charity and solidarity are the very sources from which diakonia draws those mediator qualities ascribed to it by John Collins.

Solidarity gained importance with the Second Vatican Council and its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 4, GS 32, GS 90) as a category of redemption: the idea of God's satisfaction through Jesus' death on the Cross takes a step back, an expiation sacrifice to appease an angry God is no longer needed. A new motivation for solidarity comes to the fore, through the incarnation of God, who does not need reconciliation, but offers it himself (2 Corinthians 5,18). As the Crucified One goes down to the realm of the dead, he enters, in death and through his resurrection, into solidarity with the dead and their suffering; in this way, he gives a basis for solidarity among human beings even beyond death, and opens up the vision of a worldwide community which relies on divine solidarity.

6.3. Vision of a diaconal Universal Church

Pope Francis also situates himself in this tradition of the pastoral Council, inspired by the vision of a diaconal Universal Church, as he states the following in his greeting on the occasion of the Jubilee of the International Diaconate Centre (IDC) in 2015: 'In view of the first International Study Conference on the Permanent Diaconate, Paul VI stated on 25 October 1965: "Surely the Council acted in accordance with a providential inspiration of the Holy Spirit when it decided to renew the original ministry of diaconate at the service of the People of God." It is in this conviction that I ask you not to relent in your commitment to a diaconal Universal Church and a world of solidarity. You are ambassadors of Jesus Christ who rejects anything related to authority and puts human hierarchies upside-down like anyone who serves. You are ambassadors of our incarnate God who shows solidarity up until death and beyond death. You are called to accompany other people on their way to incarnation, in solidarity, everywhere in the world' (Francis, 2016, 17).

I am convinced that we may and must contribute to making our Pope's vision of a diaconal Universal Church come increasingly true. Deacons who are on a journey as go-betweens build bridges, between people, between languages, between cultures, between the Gospel and the present time, between Heaven and Earth.

7. The Amazon Synod

7.1. Francis' synodal initiative

The Amazon Synod was announced by Pope Francis on 15 October 2017, with the twofold purpose of finding new ways of evangelisation and of confronting the environmental crisis. 'The Amazon Basin has an extreme biodiversity. Between 30 and 50 per cent of the Earth's flora and fauna are native to this area; 20 per cent of the planet's reserves of fresh, and therefore drinking, water, which is not frozen in ice, flows here. The Amazon region encompasses the world's most compact rain forest area, accounting for one-third of the planet's virgin forests. On account of its ecological function in matters of oxygen production and CO₂ storage, the Amazon region is dubbed the "green lung" of the Earth. As such, it is crucial for the stability of the global climate. This geographical area, therefore, has a key role to play in the survival of the whole humankind and its importance exceeds by far the scope of the Latin American continent' (Büker, 2019, 43).

During his journey to Chile and Peru, in an impressive speech given on 19 January 2018 in Puerto Maldonado, southwest Peru, before an estimated number of 1,500 representatives of indigenous peoples, the Holy Father said: 'The native Amazonian peoples have probably never been so threatened on their own lands as they are at present' (Francis, 2018). And he continued, quoting from his encyclical *Laudato si'* (Francis, 2015, No 145): 'Let us not forget that "the disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a species of plant or animal"' (Francis, 2018). Pope Francis aims at 'a Church with an Amazonian face, a Church with a native face' (Francis, 2018).

7.2. The working and final documents of the Synod

The working document of the Amazon Synod, under the heading *Evangelización de las culturas*, mentions explicitly '*el proyecto del buen vivir*', the good living project, and describes inculturation as '*un proceso ... de un mútuo enriquecimiento de culturas en diálogo intercultural*' (Red Eclesial Panamazónica, 2019, 44), a process of mutual enrichment through intercultural dialogue.

The final document of the Synod, dated 25 October 2019, includes under the title 'Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology' some

recommendations for the Pope, which were adopted with a two-thirds majority. They aim at a comprehensive reorientation: ‘At the present time, the Church has the historic opportunity to distance itself from the new colonising powers by listening to the Amazonian peoples and acting in a transparent and prophetic manner’ (Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, 2019, No 15). This listening leads the Church (1) to a *pastoral* reorientation and a missionary breakthrough (No 21), (2) to a *cultural* reorientation and the proposal to create ‘a bilingual education network ... for schools in the Amazon’ (No 62), (3) to an *environmental* reorientation, whereby the Church may ‘overcome any tendency toward colonising models that have caused harm in the past’ (No 81), (4) to a *synodal* reorientation: ‘It is urgent for the Church in the Amazon to promote and confer ministries for men and women in an equitable manner’ (No 95). ‘Let us not reduce the involvement of women in the Church, but instead promote their active role in the ecclesial community’ (No 99). Given that in the Amazon region it is women who lead most Catholic communities, the Synod asks for the institutionalisation of a ministry of ‘women community leadership’ (No 102). Therefore, the issue of the permanent diaconate for women was also present in the Synod (No 103). The document underscores the necessity of the diaconate in the Amazon region, particularly in the indigenous communities, formulating the task that this ministry ‘should also promote integral ecology, human development, social pastoral work, and service to those in situations of vulnerability and poverty’ (No 104). The Synod sees the deacons as being under the leadership of the bishops, and priests ‘have an obligation to support permanent deacons and to act in communion with them’ (No 105). Given that years can sometimes pass between the times a priest can visit a community and celebrate the Eucharist with it, the Synod suggests ‘to ordain as priests suitable and respected men of the community with a legitimately constituted and stable family, who have had a fruitful permanent diaconate and receive an adequate formation for the priesthood’ (No 111). The document concludes with the recommendation that a proper Amazonian rite be devised (No 119).

7.3. Francis’ post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonía*

Querida Amazonía (Francis, 2020), beloved Amazon region, is the title of the Pope’s post-synodal exhortation. In the introductory paragraph, Francis makes a reference to the Synod’s final document (Francis, 2020, No 1), which he does not wish to substitute (No 2). Instead, he invites everyone to read the final document in full (No 3). The Amazon region inspires the Pope with four great dreams: (1) a *social* dream, aimed at ‘good living’ (No 8) and in contrast to the current situation, described by Francis in very clear words: ‘The businesses, national or international, which harm the Amazon and fail to respect the right of the original

peoples to the land and its boundaries, and to self-determination and prior consent, should be called for what they are: *injustice and crime*. When certain businesses out for quick profit appropriate lands and end up privatising even drinkable water, or when local authorities give free access to the timber companies, mining or oil projects, and other businesses that raze the forests and pollute the environment, economic relationships are unduly altered and become an instrument of death. They frequently resort to utterly unethical means such as penalising protests and even taking the lives of indigenous peoples who oppose projects, intentionally setting forest fires, and suborning politicians and the indigenous people themselves. All this is accompanied by grave violations of human rights and new forms of slavery affecting women in particular, the scourge of drug trafficking used as a way of subjecting the indigenous peoples, or human trafficking that exploits those expelled from their cultural context' (No 14); (2) a *cultural* dream and an appeal to strengthen the indigenous peoples in their own languages, cultures, forms of communication and aspirations (No 39); (3) an *ecological* dream, in which Francis stresses that the water of the Amazon does not divide, but rather unites (No 45), and in which he relies upon the wisdom of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon region and their respectful approach to creation and makes it clear that: 'To abuse nature is to abuse our ancestors, our brothers and sisters, creation and the Creator, and to mortgage the future' (No 42); (4) an *ecclesial* dream, according to which the inculturation of the Gospel in the Amazon region should 'better integrate the social and the spiritual, so that the poor do not have to look outside the Church for a spirituality that responds to their deepest yearnings' (No 76), and 'be increasingly reflected in an incarnate form of ecclesial organisation and ministry' (No 85). In this context, the Pope takes up the complaint of the Amazonian communities, which was mentioned in the final document of the Synod (Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, 2019, No 111), that they were 'deprived of the Sunday Eucharist for long periods of time' (Francis, 2020, No 86). 'Priests are necessary, but this does not mean that permanent deacons (of whom there should be many more in the Amazon region), religious women and lay persons cannot regularly assume important responsibilities for the growth of communities' (No 92). 'A Church of Amazonian features requires the stable presence of mature and lay leaders endowed with authority' (No 94). The Pope argues in favour of a culture strongly marked by the laity, and indicates explicitly that, because of the shortage of priests, a bishop can 'entrust "participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish ... to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons"' (Code of Canon Law, 517, §2)' (No 94, footnote 136). At the same time, Francis underscores the 'presence of strong and generous women' (No 99). He writes further: 'This summons us to broaden our vision, lest we restrict our un-

derstanding of the Church to her functional structures. Such a reductionism would lead us to believe that women would be granted a greater status and participation in the Church only if they were admitted to Holy Orders. But that approach would in fact narrow our vision; it would lead us to clericalise women, diminish the great value of what they have already accomplished, and subtly make their indispensable contribution less effective' (No 100). Shortly thereafter, *Querida Amazonía* states: 'Women make their contribution to the Church in a way that is properly theirs, by making present the tender strength of Mary, the Mother' (No 101). The Pope wishes 'to encourage the emergence of other forms of service and charisms that are proper to women and responsive to the specific needs of the peoples of the Amazon region at this moment in history' (No 102). Women should 'have access to positions, including ecclesial services, that do not entail Holy Orders and that can better signify the role that is theirs. Here it should be noted that these services entail stability, public recognition and a commission from the bishop. This would also allow women to have a real and effective impact on the organisation, the most important decisions and the direction of communities, while continuing to do so in a way that reflects their womanhood' (No 103).

8. A critical appraisal of the Amazon Synod documents

8.1. Appraisal of *Querida Amazonía*

Querida Amazonía is, one could almost say, a poetic text, written in a language capable of reaching, and thereby opening, the heart of the reader. It is inspiring by virtue of its rich imagery, and expands its own horizon. The four (re-)orientations of the final document become four visions. The Pope presents the social, cultural and environmental visions in an impressively energetic and unambiguously empathic way. The sketch of his ecclesial vision also has some powerful features and, as he bases his view of a Church of Amazonian features on lay women and men, on their charisms, on their joy of assuming responsibilities, and on them being given certain faculties, he makes Amazonia itself and its people the starting point of his concept. If the inculturation of the Gospel means joining together the social and spiritual aspects, this can be the origin of an important catalyst for a diaconal Church and for the way the diaconate understands itself. And, in pointing out that the inculturation of the Gospel should be reflected in the organisational forms of the Church, the Pope *does not* play off evangelisation and structural issues against each other, which is quite uplifting.

8.2. Criticism of *Querida Amazonía*

Some fundamental features of the ecclesial vision remain vague, and they disappoint even more, as Francis has previously encouraged bold moves, on multiple occasions. The Pope has taken a stance against clericalism; but this is spoken of only once in *Querida Amazonía*, and it occurs precisely within the context of the issue of the possible ordination of *women*. If the implication is that ordination would corrupt the Marian character of potential female candidates, such passages sound paternalistic. Generally speaking, the traditional image of the woman and the gender-specific anthropology which are transferred here prevent us from considering the ecclesial vision, in contrast with the other ones, as any breakthrough at all, despite all the encouragement which the Pope wishes to give to women. And yet, what would matter very much, in this regard, precisely given the environmental challenges, would be to develop an anthropology which considers human beings in their dependence upon and their co-creativity (Rombach 1994) with the whole creation; such an anthropology would remind us of the earthly being from the creation narrative (Genesis 2,7) who, as *homo*, comes from *humus*, who does not enslave the earth, does not make it his subject, but protects it, and perhaps finds orientation in this attitude: Make yourselves subject *to* the Earth!

8.3. Criticism of the Synod's final document

I would also criticise the final document of the Synod, when it comes to the eligibility conditions for ecclesial ministries. Granted, the document contains much refreshing clarity and bold proposals, ideas on the relationship between bishops, priests and deacons, which merit a careful reading, as well as a clear emphasis on women and a serious approach to the diaconate for women and to the demand for married priests. However, the idea of choosing expressly, for this purpose, men who have previously proven themselves as permanent deacons does not seem to me to be a recognition for, or strengthening of the diaconate, but rather an undermining and disrespectful approach to the permanence and autonomy of this ministry. I myself exercise it in the conviction that I am thereby following a specific, diaconal vocation; furthermore, the fortunate circumstance that, among my brothers in the diaconate, there are some who live in celibacy without seeking priestly ordination goes to show that priests and deacons do not differentiate themselves merely in their respective forms of life or in the extent of their competences. I also have a suspicion that among those of my fellow deacons who look forward excitedly to the possibility of a married priesthood there are some who would thereby abet further clericalisation. The question concerning the beckoning temptation of abuses of power is one that *all* clergymen have to ask themselves, before and after ordination. If one is to credibly oppose clericalism and all the male-bonding as-

pects associated with it, then the diaconate, for this is the ministry I am primarily concerned with, urgently needs women to be admitted to it, and not for diaconal clergymen as married clergy to be shifted into the priestly clergy.

Conclusion

As a researcher who critically assesses the latest findings of diaconal research, and as a deacon who seeks to fulfil his mission, it is very important to me, both professionally and personally, to draw consistent conclusions from the developments outlined here, and to work out promising perspectives for the future.

It is clear that recent research has by no means taken away the legitimacy of the traditional specifics of the diaconal ministry, i.e. love and solidarity. And with the Second Vatican Council, worldwide solidarity gains in importance, becoming the vision of a diaconal universal Church. Pope Francis is inspired by this and convened the Amazon Synod. *Querida Amazonía* emerged from this. I have expressed my criticism of it, but in conclusion I would like to emphatically commend Pope Francis for bringing a much-overlooked region of the world into the spotlight of the world and of the Church, and for placing his eagerly awaited letter not *above*, but *beside* the synodal text, which he presents together with *Querida Amazonía*. This particular way of looking at things gives reason for hope: in a ministry which generates creative processes and opens up new perspectives, in deacons, of any gender, as messengers of Jesus Christ. Hope for the Amazon region, for the world, and for the Church worldwide.

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