

ON THE REVIVAL OF THE DEACON RANK

Deacon Dr. Medhat R. Wassef

Coptic Orthodox Church of St. Mark – Jersey City USA

CopticChurch.net

Introduction:

Deacon is an English word derived from the Latin *diaconus*, which originated from the Greek *διακονος*, “Diaconos”; and “*διακονια*” which means “ministry”. The Coptic root analog of “Greek word *διακονια*,” is “*Περϣεμϣι*” “Rev-Shemshi”. The word “*ϣεμϣι*” “Shemshi” “شمشى” means “Service, worship”. Stress on the worship component of the service should be noted as opposed to other types of servitude. [1&2] This is frequently encountered in current liturgical prayers and deacons and congregation responses, most familiar of which is “*ϥεν ϣεμϣι εμμοκ*” “ten **shemshi** emmok” which means (we **serve** you).

The Arabization of the current Coptic name is “Shammas”. شماس . The broad sense of the meaning of the word Deacon, is shown as its application to the apostolic ministry at large. “*Ου ουν απολλω ου δε πε παυλος ζανδιακων πε*” “*Who then is Paul and who is Apollos, but ministers*” (1 Cor. 3: 5) – the Arabic translation of which is “*خادمان – two servants*”.

It should be noted that, irrespective of any language’ linguistic form, the meaning of “servant” definitely denotes servants in the **context of ecclesiastic understanding**, in a wide sense, and not a demeaning secular worldly servitude. [3]

Incidentally, the **Hebrew** word “*שָׂמַשׁ*” means attendant, servant, caretaker or orderly, which has similar phonetic Coptic and Syriac “word pronunciation”. However, another synonym for this word is found in the “New Testament in Hebrew and English” for the verse above mentioned (1Cor. 3:5). It is conceivable, one might say, the origin of the word **Shammas** “شماس” is Semitic, Hebrew and Syriac. However, the **Coptic** word “*ϣεμϣι*” “Shemshi” “شمشى” points to a possible Egyptian Demotic origin. The **Hieroglyphic** word for a member of “god’s” guard or servant is “Neter **Shemsu**.” [4]

Currently, as an act of Coptic humility, a deacon, as well as a Sunday school teacher, both could be called servants. It is unfortunate that, in current public understanding, anyone who wears a tunic “Tonia” is called Shammas “Deacon”, irrespective of ordination rank lower than that of the “proper Deacon”. This erroneous public understanding has to be corrected to avoid confusion in the interpretation and limitation of the liturgical and non-liturgical role and function of each ordained rank.

Historic Note:

In the seventies of the twentieth century **H.H. Pope Shenouda** appointed three deacons, in the rank of “**Clerical Deacon**”, being graduates of the Clerical College, endowed with specific clerical privileges of preaching, visitations and teaching hymns. [5] These deacons were sent to the USA, and were the pioneers of this rank, and afterward they became priests and pursued an honorable service to the church in the diaspora.

H.H. Pope Tawadros II revived and **re-initiated** the original rite of the “**Full Deacon**”. On March 2018 H.G. Anba David, the Papal Exarch, ordained the **first full deacon in North America**, who later became “the first” **archdeacon** by the blessed hands of H.H. Anba Tawadros II during his visit to the USA on Tuesday 15th of Touth 1735 AM, the 25th of September 2018 AD. Deacon ordinations became gradually systematic and spread in the various dioceses of the United States and Canada.

His Holiness blessed and honored the forty deacons, assembled in Sept. 2018 in the Papal residence at Cedar Grove New Jersey during his visit to the USA. Of the attendance were 38 deacons ordained in the USA, together with two deacons ordained in Egypt very long time before. The earliest one was ordained by the late Metropolitan Anba Lukas 1st of Manfaloot and Abnoub in 1954. The second was ordained in 1994 by the late Metropolitan Anba Domadios of Giza.

This event represented the special meeting with his first fruits, the deacons, was remarkable, and happened to be on the commemoration day of St. Stephen the Deacon and Protomartyr. H.H. addressed his sons the deacons with fatherly exhortation. The meeting of His Holiness with deacons is the first of its kind in the New World, the USA in particular, and is considered an historic one.

Since the apostolic period, the individual **liturgical and non-liturgical roles** of the deacon, are documented by the individual writings of the church fathers and the canons of some of the church councils, in successive periods.

The **purpose of this article** is to present some **roots** of the **existential reality** of the **rank of the Full Deacon**, with some relevant documental references. Ever since its **inception** by the holy apostles in Jerusalem, including St. Mark the Evangelist in Egypt, this was followed progressively by the church bishops of the first few centuries. Although there were **long periods of decline**, yet its basic principle remained inherent in the core of the **Coptic Church oral tradition**, transmitted along the centuries. The **Title** of the Full Deacon was known in the 14th century Egypt. The description and role of the Full Deacon is found in the writing of **Ibn Kabar** in his famous manuscript known as Misbah al-Zulmah fi Idah al-Khidmah “The Lantern for Darkness in the Clarification of the Service.” [6]

On the Historic Origin of the Deaconship:

The marked foundation of the **Deaconship** by the apostles is found in (**Acts 1-6**) expressed as a **service** “Coptic Πιψεμμι” “Greek διακονια”. Also, **the first citations** of the word **deacon** “Coptic: ψεμμι” or “ΔΙΑΚΩΝ”, “Greek: διακον”, as a permanent servant in the primitive church, is explicitly found in some of St. Paul’s epistles. In (**Phil 1:1**) about (A.D. 63) as deacons “**ΝΙ ΔΙΑΚΩΝ**” and again in (**1Tim 3:8-10**) at Ephesus a few years later, as deacons “**ΣΑΝ ΔΙΑΚΩΝ**”. However, afterwards, every church seems to have had its own deacons, expressed as permanent servants in the primitive church.

In St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans and preceding a long series of greetings of to the church in Rome, we find a recommendation for **Phoebe, a servant “ογρεμμι” “a deacon”** of the church at Cenchreae. “*I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant “ογρεμμι” of the church in Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself.*” (Rom. 16:1-2)

St. Paul called Phoebe a sister, entrusted her with carrying his important letter to the church in Rome, on a long risky journey, and to be well received “*in the Lord, in a manner worthy of the saints*”. St. Paul ended with a statement of Phoebe’s proven hospitality for her community and for St. Paul himself. His description of Phoebe “a deacon”, as opposed to “deaconess”, implies she exercised the ministry of “service” (*diakonia*) of the church at Cenchreae, being a person with some means able to undertake business journeys with an entourage of some size, accords well with the subsequent description of her as helper “patron” of many and myself as well. [7]

The initial and apparent duty assigned to the seven deacons was the charge to “serve tables” i.e. (ψεμμι ενθαν τραπεζα) so that the apostles would be free to serve the word of the God. (Acts. 6:2). The initial factor initiating their appointment is not just “serving tables”, but it is the need to extend an equal and just distribution (επεμμι εμμι) which means “daily service”, tables included, as the number of the disciples “believers”, Hebrews and Hellenists, multiplied. Conditions for the deacon’s selection was “*good reputation, fullness of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.*” (Acts 6:3) The essence of the real intent is the **servitude as “the following and the discipleship of Lord Jesus Christ”** as expressed “*If any one serves Me let him follow Me.*” (Jn. 12:26) “ΦΗΕΤΝΑπεμμι εμμοι μαρεφοραεε ενωιχ”

St. Polycarp (AD. 69-155) defines the nature and duty of the deacon “*as being the servant of God and Christ and not of men.*” [8]

Very soon this “primitive” deaconship was not restricted to “daily service”. Stephen, the first of the seven deacons was largely a preacher, full of wisdom and Spirit (Acts. 6:8), so also was Phillip who “*preached the things concerning the Kingdom of God*” (Acts 8:12), “*performed miracles and signs*” (Acts 8:13), and his baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38-39). It should be emphasized that the act of baptism by Phillip, being then as deacon, is exceptional and circumstantial by the order of the Holy Spirit and is not used as a precedent for the rank of deacon.

The seven deacons evidently ranked next to the apostles, and have much the same position at Jerusalem as the presbyters. In (1Tim. 3:8. 1:1). The **qualifications** of deacons and the necessity to be tested first are mentioned after those for the bishop. Similarly, salutation of St. Paul was addressed to the bishops and deacons, in this order (Phil. 1:1). This fact expresses early documentation of the **unity** of the deacon with the bishop.

It is worth mentioning the biblical passage of the two disciples and the man carrying a pitcher of water to prepare the upper room for the Passover (Mark 14:12-16). Likewise, the commission of Mary Magdalene (John 20:14-17). This is a kind the **primitive nucleus of deaconship** of both **men** and **woman** as **servants** of Lord Jesus Christ. According to the **Didascalia** *“For this cause (Baptism of Women) we say that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially needful and important. For our Lord and Savior was **ministered** also by women ministers, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the daughter of James and mother of Jose, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee [Mt. 27:56], with other women beside.”* [9]

On the Apostolicity of the Deacon Rank:

The ordination of the seven deacons by the apostles was through a **process of selection** from the faithful brethren (Acts 6:3-4). It is noteworthy to mention that the **collective laying of the hands** was done by **all the apostles** (Acts 6:6) and not St. Peter alone. Incidentally, this fact is a refutation against the Roman Catholic belief of the primacy of St. Peter. [10] The apostolic **rite of ordination of deacons** is thus established.

Consequent to the introduction of Christianity to Egypt, **St. Mark** the Apostle consecrated St. Anianus Bishop of Alexandria together with three priests and ordained **seven deacons**. [11] Thus the origin of the **Deaconship in Egypt** has been established.

In the first few centuries (AD), a tradition existed of restricting **number of seven** to deacon ordinations whenever a bishop is consecrated. Limitation of deacon's number to seven was an emulation of the apostle's initiation of the deaconship (Acts 6). This practice was confirmed in the **15th canon** of the **Council of Neo-Caesarea** (AD 315) *“The deacons ought to be **seven in number**, according to the canon, even if the city be great. Of this you will be persuaded from the book of Acts.”* **Eusabius** (AD 260-340), the church historian and bishop of Caesarea, mentioned the Church of Rome had seven deacons. However, the practice was by no means universal. Indeed, in Alexandria and Constantinople, their number was much greater. [12]

With the spread of proclamation and preaching the word of the Lord, deacon ordinations in every city in the Roman Empire and beyond, by the respective apostle, took place. The book of acts mentioned the ordination of **St. Timothy**, by St. Paul, as a deacon, who was from Lystra (Acts 16), in present day Turkey. **Deans of the Clerical School of Alexandria** were deacons, and some of them became patriarchs. **Pope Heraclius** the 12th in Papal succession of St. Mark and **Pope Cyril** the First, who presided over the Council of Ephesus, both were deacons. **St. Athanasius the Apostolic** was a deacon, at the time of Pope Alexandros, who defended the faith

whilst in the rank of deacon at the Council of Nicea. Such is an historic attestation to the place of the rank of deacon in the Coptic Church. [13]

On the Canonicity of the Deacon Rank.

Deacon ordinations were followed, on a larger scale, in the apostolic period “first century AD”. The apostles appointed bishops and deacons through their travels while expanding and laying foundation of the Christian church.

Never any appointment for a single bishop was without a deacon. “*The deacon is the soul and mind of the bishop*”. [14] This is exemplified in St. Paul’s epistle to all Philippian saints with the **bishops and deacons**. (Phil. 1:1)

In the following centuries written **Patristic** canonic instructions by the holy fathers of the church, inspired by the holy apostles, with regards to the **appointment of bishops and deacons**, began to appear. The number of episcopates rose and so was the number of ordained deacons. The **deaconate** became integral part in the **Church Holy Tradition**.

Apostolic collective canonic instructions regarding the deaconship are manifested in the early Christian literature. The **Didache** (late 1st or early 2nd century) is considered the oldest source of the ecclesiastical law of the **church order** in the early sub-apostolic period. The Didache calls on any community of the believers or congregation to choose their own **ecclesiastical officials** from among themselves. “*Select, then, for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, mild-tempered men who are not greedy, who are honest and proven, for they too perform the services of prophets and teachers for you. So do not disregard them, for they are the persons who are honored (by God) among you, together with the prophets and the teachers.*” [15]

Conditions for election and deacons’ ordination by bishops is also found in the early third century literature **Didascalia Apostolorum** (c. 220 AD). “*On the appointment of Deacons and Deaconesses: Wherefore, O bishop, appoint thee workers of righteousness as helpers who may co-operate with thee unto salvation. Those that please thee out of all people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacon: A man for the performance of the most things that are required*” [16] Also, about the character of the elected deacons: “*Let the deacon be ordained; when he has been elected according to what has been already said, if he be of good behavior, if he be pure, if he have been elected on account of his purity...one who is witnessed of by all the believers...*” [17]

Patristic canons published in subsequent periods, namely the sub-apostolic and pre-nicene, attest to the **early reality of the deaconship** in the church. These canons were written **individually or through** fathers convened in synods and councils.

Clement (c. 30-c. 100), a fellow worker with St. Paul (Phil. 4:3) who later became Bishop of Rome, wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, concerning the order of ministers in the church. “*For thus saith the scripture in certain place, I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and*

their deacons in faith". "The appointment of bishops and deacons came from God through Christ." [18]

Notice the **continual simultaneous** ordination of deacons with their bishops.

St. Ignatius (died ca. 115) wrote to the **Magnesians** "Let the deacons my special favorites be entrusted with ministry of Jesus Christ". [19] He also testifies to the **liturgical role of the deacon**, in his epistle to the **Trallians**, writing, "And those likewise who are *deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ* must please all men all ways. For they are *not deacons of meats and drinks* but servants of the Church of God." [20]

On the third century **Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus** (early third century) we find the deacon is not ordained in the priesthood but receives **what is confined in him**. "But the deacon, when he is *ordained* ... the bishop laying his hands on him ... he is not ordained in the priesthood but to *serve the bishop and to carry out his commands* ... He receives only what is confined in him under the bishop's authority." [21]

However, it is important to point out that there are some sporadic canons, of some local and regional synods and councils, seem to be contradictory. They were issued with strictly **limited application** and were pertinent to certain situations occurring at their time and place. Naturally, some of these canons were not applicable to other places in their times, and obviously, nor should be applicable at the current time.

Processing the apostolic canons continued centuries later, elaborating on those of the earlier centuries. Some are found in the thirteenth century Coptic Arabic manuscripts. In the canons collected by al-Safi abi-al-Fadael **Ibn al-Assal** (1205-1265) found in his book named *al-Magmou al-Safawi*, we find **section 7** containing **5 chapters** concerning the deacons. He described the **Full Deacon** as worthy of respect and his role as the servant of God, who serves the bishop and the priests in everything, not necessarily just for celebration of the mass. [22]

On the Hierarchy and the Honor of the Deacon Rank.

The rank of deacon, as instituted by the apostles, became an integral one in the church hierarchy. At the beginning as Lord Jesus Christ appointed apostles they in turn appointed bishops and deacons. The rite of deacon's ordination is specific and different from that for the lower ranks.

The **Didache** (late first century literature) stated that the actual **liturgical ministers**, namely, the bishops and deacons, are entitled to no less honor and respect on the part of the faithful. "So do not disregard them (*deacons*), for they are the persons who are **honored by God among you**, together with the prophets and teachers." [23]

On his exhortation to the young men, **St. Polycarp** describes them as "being subject to the presbyters and *deacons*." [24]

The **Didascalia Apostolorum** describes the characteristic nature of the **association of the deacon with the bishop**: "Exhortation to the bishops and *deacons* that they govern justly and that

*they be with one another with **accord and love**...Let therefore both bishops and deacons **be of one mind**, and let them feed the people carefully in one opinion. For it is required for you twain (both) that you be **one flesh, father and son**, for you are in the likeness of the divinity. Let the deacon **make known everything to the bishop**, as the **Christ does to His Father**; Let the **deacon settle some of them himself** that he can...but nevertheless let the **deacon be the ear of the bishop, and his mouth and his heart, and even his soul**; For when ye twain (both of you) are in one mind and in one consent there is peace in the church.” [25]*

The **Teaching of the Apostles** expressed the **dignity** of the deacon as Aaron and the bishop as Moses, then elaborated on his relationship with his bishop. **Honor** bestowed to the bishop and the deacon is exemplified as being similar to the relationship between Moses and Aaron. “*And, as Christ did not do anything without the Father, so also the deacon does not do anything without the bishop. Thus let every deacon submits to the bishop.*” [26]

Also, the **Didascalia Apostolorum** affirms the **respect for the deacon**: “*But again, against the deacon if any one speak evilly by word or by deed, he offends the Christ.*” [27]

Furthermore, **St. Ignatius**, in his letter to the **Trallians**, indicated, and with conformity with the **Didascalia**, the rank of deacon should be held in **high esteem**. “*Everyone must show the deacons respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as the bishop has the role of the Father, and the presbyters are like God’s council and an apostolic band. You cannot have a church without these.*” [28]. Thus, St. Ignatius affirms the **indispensability of the deacon**.

St. Ignatius continues by exhorting the **Trallians** by saying “*He who acts in anything apart from the bishop and the presbytery and the deacons is not pure in conscience*”. [29]

Endearing feeling and closeness of **St. Ignatius** to a deacon is shown in his epistle to the **Magnesians**. “*Since therefore I have been permitted to see you ... and **my fellow servant**, the deacon Zotion, **of whom may I have joy**, because he is subject to the bishop, as unto the grace of God, and to the presbytery as unto the law of Jesus Christ.*” [30]. The Greek expression “**συνδουλου**” “**fellow slave**” is synonymous to **fellow servant** in this context.

This shows how **close association** of the deacon is with his bishop in the **ministerial** services.

The same is found in **St. Ignatius’** letter to the **Philadelphians**, in observance of a single Eucharist. “*Be careful, then, to observe a single Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and one cup of His Blood that makes us one, and one altar, just as there is one bishop along with presbytery and the deacons, my “**fellow slaves**” **συνδουλοι**”. In that way whatever you do is in line of God’s will.*” Deacons share with bishops and presbyters the **oneness and equality of servitude** to Lord Jesus Christ. [31]

St. Ignatius, in his letter to the **Smyrnaeans**, acknowledged their honorary reception of some deacons. “*It was good of you to welcome ... as **deacons of the Christ God**.*” [32]

It became clear that the deacon’s close association with the bishop as his assistant, both in liturgical and non-liturgical matters, gave the **Diaconate** a rising importance and **dignity** similar, though less equal in the serving capacity, to that of the **Episcopate**. [33]

On Some Liturgical and Non-Liturgical Roles of the Deacon.

Generally and irrespective of the nature of the rank, the **full deacon** should act according to the heavenly **gift** “spiritual talent” he received from God. “*There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences in ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God Who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.*” (1Cor. 12: 4-6) The deacon must “*minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold **grace of God (Charism)** ...If anyone ministers let him do it as with the **ability** that God supplies...*” (1Pet. 4:10-11)

St. Ignatius wrote to the **Trallians** concerning the **crux of the deacon’s function**: “*Those too who are **deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ** must give complete satisfaction to everyone. For they do not serve mere food and drink, but **minister to God’s Church.***” [34] Thus here, St. Ignatius **infers** to the deacon’s role in the **liturgical services**.

Traditionally, among the various “qualified” **roles** shared by the lower ranks, other **honorable roles** are solely characteristic and specifically bestowed upon the “**Full Deacon**”. The participation in six roles, out of others, will be discussed here, namely the **Distribution of the Holy Communion**, the **Private Agape Meals**, the **Visitations**, very limited and specific roles in the rite of the **Holy Baptism**, and likewise in the rite of the **Anointing of the Sick**, and **Some Non-Liturgical Services**. These roles are presented in accordance to the **degree** of deacons’ **limited** involvement in each. All quotations, for any relevant subject matter, are cited from literature of the Church Fathers of the first few centuries of church history, **as they were understood and expressed at their times and places**.

1. The Distribution of the Holy Body and the Precious Blood.

Introduction:

- A. According to the **Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus** the deacon is involved with the **presentation of the Lamb** at the Liturgy for the consecration of a bishop: “*To him (the bishop) let the **deacons bring the oblation** (προσφορα) and he with all the presbyters laying his hand on the oblation shall say giving thanks (ευχαριστων).*” [35]
- B. Also, according to the **Didascalia Apostolorum** on the exhortation to the bishop with regard to Church Order we find: “*As for the **deacons**, let one of them **stand constantly over the gifts of thankfulness**, and let another stand outside the door and look to those who come in; and afterword when you make offerings, let **them** serve together in the church....*” To keep order in the church. [36]

Elaboration is given to this quotation. “*As to the deacon, after prayers have been completed, let some of them (**deacons**) attend upon the **offering of the Eucharist**, ministering to the Lord’s Body with reverence. Let others (**deacons**) keep watch on the people, ensuring silence. But let*

*that deacon standing next to the high priest (Bishop) say to the people, “Let no one have any quarrel with his neighbor; let no one come in hypocrisy.” Then let the Lord’s kiss be exchanged, men with men, women with women. But let no one do it deceitfully, as Judas betrayed the Lord with a kiss After this, let the **sacrifice** follow, the people standing and praying silently, and when the offering have been made, let every rank separately partake of the Lord’s Body and the precious Blood, approaching in order and with reverence and holy awe, as to the body of their king Let the women approach with heads covered, as is becoming the rank of women. And let the door be kept under observation, lest any infidel, or one not yet initiated, should come in.”* [37]

The Distribution of the Holy Communion:

The **Apostolic Traditions of Hippolytus** states that after receiving the Holy Body and the Precious Blood, from the hands of the bishop or the celebrating priest, the **deacon receives the chalice** and then starts the **administration of the Holy Blood** to the lower ranks first then to the laity. “*And the presbyters – or if there are not enough presbyters, the **deacons** – shall **hold the cups**, and shall stand by with reverence and modesty; ...and the recipient shall say **Amin**.”* [38]

It is worth noting that in the context of this reference (milk and honey mixed together) were presented together with the oblations (Bread and Wine mixed with Water), brought by the catechumen before baptism. This is described under the title of “The Baptismal Mass” which is performed after the process of baptism of the catechumens. “*The blessing at the Eucharist of food other than the bread and wine is a remnant of a primitive custom when the rite included a meal; in Hippolytus’ day, presumably, the cheese and olives ... **this custom soon disappeared**.”* [39]

However, **Tertullian** (*Against Marcion* 1: 14) and **Clement of Alexandria** (*Pedagogue* 1:6) bear contemporary testimony to the custom of giving new Christians milk and honey, so the rite might have been widespread. It is **not** in the Constitutions or the Testament, but the other sources have it. And the 37th canon of the **Third Council of Cartage** (397) reads: “*The first fruits, namely milk and honey, which are offered on a most solemn day for the mystery “baptism” of infants, although offered on the alter should **have a blessing of their own**, that they may be distinguished from the sacrament of the Lord’s body and blood.*” **Clement**, like Hippolytus cites the Old Testament prophesies of the Promised Land, so the meaning of the rite was to assure the participants of a share of salvation. **Hippolytus** adds a further explanation of his own; the milk represents Christ’s flesh and the honey His gentleness. [40]

Ibn-al-Assal (AD 1205-1265) affirms, concerning the “*Qurbaan offerings*,” known as (Presentation of the Lamb), only objects necessary for completion of the Holy Communion Rite are allowed entry into the Alter. “*The priest **does not enter the Alter** with milk, honey, bird, or any other animal. And any priest who enter with anything other than what the Lord commanded shall be **cut off**. Only oil for the oil lambs and incense during the Holy Liturgy.*” [41]

Only **Justin Martyr** (AD 100-165) in his first Apology describes the **deacon’s** participation in the distribution of the **Eucharistic gifts**. “*Those who are called by us **deacons** give to each of those*

*present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent to carry away a portion. And this food is called among us the **Eucharist**, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things we teach are true...For **not as common bread and common drink** do we receive these, but in like manner as Jesus Christ our savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise having we being taught that **the food which is blessed by prayer of His Word**, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, **is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.**” [42]*

Inference to the role of deacons in the distribution of the Holy Blood is found in the Canons of **St. Athanasius**. Canon 37 states “*Of the **deacons**, that none may speak while he beareth (**carrying**) **the Cup**.*” In the Arabic version, this is added “...and not a single person should talk while the Cup is in situ” [43] In other words, while the deacon is carrying the cup.

Ibn al-Assal stated in his collection of canons, named “Al- Magmou al-Safawi”, that “***the deacon carries the Cup** if there is not enough priests. The blessing Bread is accepted from his hands in a party if a priest or a bishop is not present.*” [44]

The Restriction of the Eucharist Distribution:

In the **most extreme situation** and by implicit instruction of the presbyter, the **deacon** is permitted to offer the communion. This is found in the canons of early 4th Century **Synod of Elvira** in Spain. From the historic perspective, **church organization**, in Spain at that time, when persecution ceased after the accession of Emperor Constantius (father of Emperor Constantine), this necessitated the affirmation of the distinction between the laity and the various ranks of the clergy. The role of the deacon in the sacramental services is expressly provided.

*“The bishop had supreme control over the Sacraments of the Church, while the presbyter and the deacon derived an accessory power from his sanction....The bishops had monopolized the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacraments, baptism, confirmation “Chrismation”, ordination, the Eucharist, and even preaching were primarily and essentially the privilege of the bishop, and in matter of discipline he had the supreme voice. He might **under certain conditions delegate** a part of his function to a presbyter, **or even to a deacon**, in case of **extreme need**, but the episcopal supremacy was the fundamental conception of the new order.”* [45]

Canon 32 of the **Synod of Elvira** states “*If anyone, through grave sin, has fallen into grave ruin, he shall not do penance before a presbyter but rather before the bishop; however under the pressure of illness it is necessary that a presbyter shall offer communion, **and even a deacon, if the priest orders him.***” [46] This concession would of course especially necessary in **rural districts** in charge of inferior clergy, where the presence of a bishop could not be easily secured. [47]

Canon 18 of the **Council of Nicea** (AD 325) states “*It has come to the knowledge of the Holy Synod that, in some districts and cities, the deacons administer the Eucharist to the presbyters, whereas neither canon nor custom permits that **they who have no right to offer should give the***

*Body of Christ to them that do offer. And this also has been made known that certain deacons now touch the Eucharist even before the bishops. Let all such practices be utterly done away, and let the **deacons remain in their own bounds** knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and the inferiors of the presbyters. Let them receive the Eucharist according to their order, after the presbyters, and let either the bishop or the presbyters administer to them. Furthermore, let not the deacons sit among the presbyters, for that is contrary to canon and order. And if after this decree, any one shall refuse to obey, let him be deposed from the diaconate.”*

By this ruling, the fathers of Nicea wanted to eradicate abuses in the conduct of certain deacons, stating that it is abnormal that those who have the power to consecrate the Eucharist should receive communion from those who do not possess this power. Deacons should not overstep their limits.

In the primitive church, priests formed a college presided over by the bishop, and **deacons** were his **councilors**. But with the increasing number of churches the bishop delegated to the priests his authority to preach the word and celebrate the sacraments. As for the **deacons**, they helped the bishop in the **administration** of the church, particularly in taking care of the charitable and material needs of the church. But their number remained unchanged at **seven** in conformity with what has existed in Jerusalem church at the time of the Apostles. Because they were close collaborators of the bishop, enjoying his confidence, certain deacons in the important cities had a tendency to see themselves as above the priests. Soon, limitation of the number of deacons to seven became obsolete. [48]

There is an inherent understanding that **canon 18 of the Nicene Council did not take away from the deacons the authority to distribute the Eucharist to the laymen**, but only reproves their insolence and audacity in presuming to administer to presbyters who were concelebrating with the bishop or another presbyter. However, the interpretation of this canon lies beyond the scope of this article. [49]

In a comment on **Canon 13 of the Council of Nicea** regarding the necessity of the **terminally ill** to partake of the Holy Communion: “*The dying are to be communicated.*” It was mentioned that **St. Justin Martyr** (AD 100-165), writing less than half a century after the death of St. John’s the apostle, mentions that “*the deacons communicate each of those present, and carry away to the absent the blest bread, and wine and water.*” It was evidently a long established custom in his day. [50]

Meanwhile, **Canon 21 of the Council of Laodicea** (AD 367) states with regards to the subdeacons “*The Subdeacon shall not touch the vessels.*” [51]

Later in the 13th century Coptic manuscript “al-Magmu al-Safawi” by **Ibn al-Assal** states (The deacon) “*carries the Cup if there is not enough priests*”. He reiterates: *He does not give the bread of blessings but accepts it from the bishop or priest and does not carry offerings (Body) but if the bishop or priest has need, he (the deacon) can carry the cup not because he is a priest but the servant of the priests*” This is based on the norms and traditions of the Coptic Orthodox Church at that time. [52]

A conclusion could be drawn that it **was** permissible for the deacon to administer the Holy Communion only and strictly in compelling or dire situations, such as grave illness or the brink of death, and specifically in the case of the unavailability of bishop or presbyter. Deacons' distribution of the Holy Eucharist and the Holy Blood was **not the norm** at their times nor any other time, or other place.

It took some time in the first few centuries of the spreading Christianity to finally settle on what is now current; namely as far as the distribution of the Holy Communion. The deacon is only allowed the distribution of the Holy Blood, and under prescribed conditions.

2. The Private Agape Meals:

The traditional **presiding** role of the bishop and the deacon at a private agape is expressed in **canon 26** of the **Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus**. *“For it constantly happens that someone wishes to make an offering – and such a one must not be denied – and then the bishop, after breaking the bread, must in every case taste and eat it with the other believers. At such an offering each shall take from the bishop’s hand a piece of this bread before breaking his own bread. This service has a special ceremonial for it is “a Blessing”, not “a Thanksgiving” as is the “the service of” the Body of the Lord...And even if the bishop is absent when the faithful meet at a supper, if a presbyter or a **deacon** is present they shall eat in the same orderly fashion and each shall be careful to take the blessed bread (**Eulogia** – as in the Arabic and Sahidic version) from the presbyter’s or **deacon’s hand.**” [53]*

In addition, “the Ethiopian version”, shows in the absence of the bishop or the presbyter the deacon shall **give thanks** and shall take note of those who take away (food to be distributed to the sick) that they perform this with care and distribute the Blessed Bread (Agape). [54]

3. Visitations and Charitable Services:

Currently and apart from visitation of the sick, there are other types of visitations and charitable services, such as those for the poor and the needy, family issues, the newly immigrants, the prisoners, the prisoners are accomplished, with the close association and consultation of the church priest. All accomplished *“As each one has received a gift, minister it “ερετηνευειωι” to one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God”* (1Peter 4:10)

In the literature of the earlier centuries of Christianity, the role of deacon in visitations is documented in the **Didascalia Apostolorum** (Sahidic Codex). *“According to the number of the congregation of the church, let there be **Deacons** that they may be able to **distinguish** and **comfort** every one, so that the **aged women** who have no strength, and to the brothers and sisters who are in **sickness**, they may prepare for every one of them the service that is fitting for him...It is therefore required of you **deacons** that you **visit all those who are in want**, and **make known to the bishop** those who are in afflicted; that **you be his soul and his mind**; and you **labor** and **obey** him in everything.” [55]*

In the **Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus** (a later Ethiopian addition) we find “*In time of need the **deacon** shall be diligent in giving the **blessed Bread** to the **sick**. If there is **no presbyter** to give out what is to be distributed, the **deacon** shall **pronounce the thanksgiving** and shall supervise “count” those who carry it away, to make sure that they attend to their duty and [properly] **distribute the blessed food**; the distributors must give it to the **widows** and the **sick**. Whoever is entrusted with the duty by the church must distribute it in **the same day**; if he does not, he must do so in the next day with the addition of what is given him. For it is not his own; it is given only [in trust] **as bread for the poor**.” The blessed bread in this context is the **Agape not Eucharistic**. [56]*

As a reminder “*Each of the **deacons** and of the subdeacons, shall be alert on the bishop’s behalf, for the **bishop must be informed** if any are sick so that, if he pleases, he might visit them, for a sick man is greatly comforted when the high priest is mindful of him” [57]*

An admonition to the deacon to **inform the bishop** if a person is in any sort of **distress** and to be compassionate, is found in the **Apostles’ Teaching**. [58]

In the **Didascalia Apostolorum** we find the administration of people’s offerings (**tithes** and **oblations**.) are carried out by the bishop through the **deacon**. “*In the exhortation to the people that they bring heave “appropriate” offerings of prayers and confession to God, and that they honor the bishop as they honor God...and they do nothing without his permission...but make everything known to him (the bishop) by means of the deacon, and he (bishop) will administer whatever is given ...for the supply of the need of the poor and the orphans and the widows...” [59]*

With respect to **deacons Visitation** we find: “*Let then the service (of the **deacon**) be like this: First, those things that are commanded by the bishop, so that they only may be done at the ministrations, and of all the clergy he (the **deacon**) may be the councilor and secret of the church. He who minister to the **sick**, he who ministers to the **strangers**, who helps the **widows** and **goes round all the houses of those who are in want**; lest there should be **anyone in distress or sickness or in misery** he goes round to the houses.” [60]*

Again, in the **Didascalia Apostolorum** on the exhortation to bishops and **deacons** we find: “*That they watchfully take care not to receive gifts from those who are guilty (reprehensible), as for the provisions of **widows** and **orphans** and the **poor**, not even if they are constrained by hunger, and that they are guilty if they accept; ...It is fitting that they receive from the believing and the honest for the provision of the **poor**, and for the redemption of the **prisoners** and the **oppressed**...Therefore O bishops and **deacons**, be constant in the service of Christ’s Alter For, we have said about **widows and orphans**, that with all care and diligence you shall observe the things that are given (gifts of alms)... Therefore take care and be diligent that you serve the **widows** with the service of a pure mind...And those who are in straits (**poor**) let the **deacons** go to them, **let them visit every one** and provide them with what they are in want of.” The last sentence is from the **Sahidic** version of the Didascalia. [61]*

In the **Sahidic version of the Didascalia Apostolorum**, the exhortation to the deacons states: “*According to the number of the congregation of the church, let there be deacons, that they may be able to distinguish and to comfort everyone, so that the aged women who have no strength, and*

to brothers and sisters who are in sickness they may prepare for every one of them the service the service that is fitting for him.” [62]

Also, in the **Didascalia Apostolorum** we find: “*Do you the Bishops and the **deacons** ... make it your care and endeavor to **minister to widows** out of the ministry of clean conscience that what they ask or request may be granted them at once upon their praying for it.” [63]*

Finally, the admonition of the Holy Apostles in their teachings continues later in the 13th century by **Ibn al-Assal** stating: “**Deacon**, you must visit those in need and **inform your bishops** with these needs, because to the bishops you are the soul and senses, and in everything obey them and follow their commands as fathers, leaders and teachers.” [64] This seems a reiteration from the Didascalia.

4. Participation in the Holy Baptism:

The role of the deacon in the Liturgy of Baptism found in the **Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus** is very minor and certainly **not liturgical**. “*At the hour set for baptism (of the catechumens) the bishop shall give thanks over oil and put it into a vessel: this is called “oil of thanksgiving.” And he shall take other oil and exorcise it: this is called “oil of exorcism.” The anointing shall be performed by a presbyter. A **deacon** shall bring the oil of exorcism, and shall stand at the presbyter’s left hand; and **another deacon** shall take the oil of thanksgiving, and shall stand at the presbyter’s right hand.” [65]*

After the anointment with the oil of exorcism followed by the process of immersion: “*...Let the candidate stand in the water, naked, a **deacon** going with him likewise.” In the Sahidic, Ethiopic and Arabic version “*the **deacon** causes the candidate to repeat a rather elaborate creed*”, then the presbyter continues the rite of baptism. Then the presbyter anoint the candidate with the oil of thanksgiving. Strangely, in a footnote #2: the presbyter and the deacon “naked” go down into the water with the catechumen to be baptized. This ritual performance, apparently, seems rather peculiar and impractical, however, it might have a ritualistic symbolism. [66]*

In addition, in the **Didascalia Apostolorum** we find: “*On the instruction to the bishop: O bishop ... As of old the priests and kings were anointed, in Israel, do you in like manner, with the imposition of hand, anoint the heads of those who receive baptism, whether of men or of women, and afterwards – whether you thyself baptize, or you **command the deacons** or the presbyters to **baptize**, let a woman deacon, as we have already said, anoint the woman. But let a **man pronounce** over them the invocation of the Divine Names in the Water” [67]*

In addition, the **Testament of Our Lord**, a 7th century Syriac translation of a lost 4th or early 5th century Greek expansion and adaptation of **Hippolytus’ treatise**, states in situation “concerning the gift to the sick” “*Let the **deacon**, when the presbyter is not present, of necessity **baptize**.” [68]*

However, in the pre-nicene **Synod of Elvira**, we find in canon 77, the deacon can perform the sacrament of baptism in a **most extreme situation**. “*If a deacon in charge of common people **without bishop or presbyter** baptizes some of them, the bishop shall perfect them by his blessing;*

but if they leave the world before that, a man can be regarded as justified depending on the faith by which he believed.” [69]

Also, *“Baptism was ordinarily the prerogative of the bishop and the presbyter, but in extreme need **deacon in charge of a rural congregation** might administer this sacrament in the absence of the superior clergy.” [70]*

In conclusion, the Oil of Thanksgiving mentioned above is, in the Coptic Orthodox tradition, the synonym the Holy Meyron which have a special procedure for preparation, and the deacon is not allowed to touch, nor to participate in the Sacrament of “The Meyron - The Holy Anointment - Chrismation”, and “Confirmation” in the Roman Catholic Church.

5. Participation in the Anointment of the Sick with the Blessing Oil.

In a situation when a priest is not available the **deacon** can visit the sick person and says a general **prayer of the sick** or read an appropriate **passage from the Bible** without praying the litany for the sick or laying of the hand. However, the deacon can only anoint the sick with the already Blessing Oil but the deacon cannot pray on or bless the oil, as previously mentioned in the Visitation section. [71]

This is corroborated in the Ethiopian version of the **Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus** concerning the **Gift to the Sick**, *“The **deacon** in time of need shall be diligent in giving the sealing to the sick.” [72]*

6. Some Non-Liturgical Services:

- a. *Deacons should **consult the bishop** in every work ought to be done. Nothing should be done without the Bishop’s advice.* Elaboration of this canon is detailed in 34 examples. [73]
- b. An **admonition to the people** – Role of the **deacon** in reception of people’s offerings: *“Therefore present your offerings to the bishop, either you yourselves, or **through the deacons**, and when he has received, he will distribute them justly. For the bishop is well acquainted with those who re in distress, and dispenses and gives to each one as is fitting for him” [74]*

A General Comment:

The role of the deacon, with respect to the bishop and the presbyter, is expressed in the **Synod of Elvira**: *“The Bishop had supreme control over the Sacraments of the church, while presbyter and **deacon** derived an accessory power from his sanction.”* While **limitation** of the liturgical and non-liturgical role deacon are succinctly emphasized in the canons of the **Synod of Elvira** as follows: *“The Bishops had monopolized the ministry of the word and the ministry of the*

*sacraments. Baptism, confirmation, ordination, the Eucharist, and even preaching, were primarily and essentially the privilege of the bishop, and in matters of discipline he had the supreme voice. He might **under certain conditions delegate part of his functions** to a presbyter or even a **deacon** in case of **extreme need**; but episcopal supremacy was the fundamental conception of the **new order** (On the organization of the church hierarchy of Bishop, Presbyter and Deacon)” [75]*

The **new order** mentioned in the canons of The Synod of Elvira (Spain), convened in early 4th century, most probably in (AD 309), was issued as part of church organization and discipline after the disruption caused by the frequent periods of persecution of the church. This happened after abrupt cessation of the persecution of the West after the accession of Emperor Constantius (Father of Emperor Constantine). [76]

The role of the Rural Deacon is mentioned in the Canons of Elvira: “*Now in the city itself, or the in the surrounding country, **new churches were founded as the faith extended** its work and gained new converts. These new churches however, were not directed at first, sometimes not at all, by bishops of their own, but were **delegated to the charge of presbyter, or even of a deacon**, while they still remained subject to the mother church.*” [77] However, this system was temporary and local in the early fourth century.

Attention should be pointed out that the Synod of Elvira is a regional and not an ecumenical council and was attended by Bishop Hosius of Cordoba, who took the second seat after St. Alexander of Alexandria, over the Council of Nicea, and may have some impact on some of its canons.

Conclusion:

The deacon rank is **not a new rank** issued recently by papal decision for mere elevation in the deaconship order. It is a crucial **clerical rank**, endowed with specific duties, established by the holy apostles and consecrated by the **laying of their hands collectively**, and documented in the **literature of the church fathers**. It is a rank intended not to be temporary, just for the time of the apostles, but to stay and to be an integral part of the clerical life of the church, indefinitely and uninterruptedly along the ages, together with the priesthood rank.

It should be noted that cited references, weather from the Church Fathers or Councils, for any specific deaconship role are eclectic and concise. No one particular literature was found that wrote about the subject matter of the role of the full deacon at large “as a compendium or manual” in a complete and comprehensive structure. Rather they are scattered information gleaned from literature sources, of the first few centuries of the Orthodox Christianity, which constitute a clearer and comprehensive picture of the subject matter at those times. Meanwhile, extensive **scholastic** citations is required to give this subject a definite **historic** and **patristic** documentation.

The true existence of the rank of **full deacon** showed some periods of strengths and weaknesses along the centuries. Thanks to efforts of H.H. Pope Tawadros II for his **assertion for the revival**

and the active expansion of this rank ordinations, particularly outside Egypt, starting with the U.S.A.

Finally, it is very essential to have the congregation be well informed about the understanding of the rank of the deacon, particularly its clerical duties, and how it was evolved and sanctified by the holy apostles. Similarly, and of equal importance, the deacon rank remains an **integral part** of the liturgical and non-liturgical services of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

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Feast of the Apostles and the Martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul.

Epip 5th, 1736

July 12th, 2020