

The Rank of the Deaconate

By Amgad Salama

Introduction

The Holy Order of the Deaconate is the third and lowest rank in the hierarchy of orders in the Orthodox Church, being subordinate to the episcopate and presbyterate. The deaconate is a hierarchical order of 5 ranks: Archdeacon, Deacon, Sub-deacon, Reader, Psalter. It is considered as the extended arm of the priesthood as the priesthood is the arm of the episcopate. The term "deacon" is derived from the Greek diakonos which means "servant".

Establishment of the Deaconate Rank

The general rank of deacons originated at the time of the apostles, when the apostles were not able to attend to every small need of the believers. "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon and Parmenas, and Nicolus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them" (Acts 6:1-6).

Qualifications of Deacons

St. Paul clearly stated the qualities of deacons: "Likewise must the deacons be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; holding the mystery of the Faith in a pure conscience... Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well" (1 Tim 3:8-13).

Duties of Deaconate Ranks

St. Paul referred to the deacon in his epistles as one who performs both temporal and spiritual services. The spiritual duties are primarily during Liturgies, which may not be performed if the deaconate are not present. The following is a brief summary of the general duties of each of the deaconate ranks, beginning with the highest to the lowest.

The Archdeacon is the head of all ranks of the deaconate. He is a deacon, who is additionally charged with making all necessary arrangements for church services, assigning various tasks to deacons, sub-deacons, readers, and psalters; safekeeping of church books, vessels, and vestments; ensuring that charity is received by the needy; acting as a liaison on behalf of the bishop; and participating in recommending candidates for the Holy Orders, playing a role also at the ordinations.

The Deacons help the bishop and the priests by preparing the bread, wine, water, vessels, candles, books, and the Sanctuary for the Liturgy. During the Divine Service itself, the deacons are to keep order

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Deacons of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

in the Church, assist the priests and bishop, hold the chalice of the Blood of Emmanuel, and guard the Holy Mysteries during Communion. The deacon is to also teach, distribute money to the needy, visits and comforts the ill, widows, orphans, and prisoners.

The Constitutions of the Apostles states: "The deacon does not bless. He does not give a benediction, but receives it from the bishop and the priest. He does not baptize. He does not offer (sacrifice). However, when the bishop or priest has offered, the deacon gives it to the people, not acting as a priest, but ministering to the priests." In this manner, the deacons "receive the imposition of hands not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry", and hence are the "eyes and hands" of the bishops and priests.

The Sub-deacons are the helpers of the deacons, as the title implies; the Greek word "epideacon" means the helper or assistant. Sub-deacons may be young men who have excelled in their role as readers, having learned and truly lived the teachings of the Holy Scriptures which they read to the congregation during the Divine Services. The sub-deacons guard the doors of the church during the Divine services so that there is no disturbance caused inside by the outside.

The rank of Reader is given to men who are able to read well out loud to the congregation. In order that the reader reads well, he must understand what he is reading, not only for the sake of adequate reading, but also for the duty of teaching. Therefore he must constantly read in the Bible and expand his knowledge, not in theory, but in practical living the words of God as well as dedicate part of his time to reading the explanations of the holy Church fathers. The reader is permitted to help in the preparation and arrangement of the vessels before and after the Divine Liturgy, as the prayers of ordination indicate.

Psalters are the chanters during the Divine services. The title "Psalter" is derived from the Coptic word psaltis, from which is derived the word "psalm," because the psalms are the chanted praises to God. Psalters are to learn the hymns chanted in the various services throughout the year. The learned hymns ought to be chanted by the psalters in a harmonious prayerful tune to God so that the listeners are touched and inspired to also pray with depth of heart.

Summary

Regardless of the rank, each individual must not lust the honor of a higher rank, but rather strive to perform his duties in the best of his abilities to please God. The service of each member must follow the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give His Life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:26-28). Those who offer honest service to the Master are rewarded as His loyal servants: "If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor" (Jn 12:26). May we hear His tender voice that is full of loving-kindness saying: "Well done, good and faithful servant, you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Mt 25:21).

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