

**THE DIACONATE
IN IGNATIUS' EPISTLES**
(A short essay on Early Church History)

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INTRODUCTION
(Ignatius and his writings)

Ignatius is an exceptional figure of Christianity, «*a man of intense devotion*»¹, who lived and offered his episcopal ministry in the years of the so-called primitive Church.

Ecclesiastical History has only preserved a few biographical elements about Ignatius; most of them come from his own writings. But his Epistles are not historical-biographical texts. Thus, they contain only very few details about Ignatius.

From what we know he had been the second bishop of Antioch, starting his ministry at about 70 A.D. It is certain that he had met with some of the Apostles. The social environment in which he was brought up might have been Greek, or at least influenced by Greek culture (this is a conclusion we reach by studying his writings).

During the years of the Roman persecution by Emperor Trajan, Ignatius was arrested and was brought to Rome in order to receive martyrdom. The common view today is that he was put to death at the Roman Stadium called Colosseum², sometime between the years 107 and 117.

1. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Penguin Books, London 1988, p. 30.

2. Στυλ. Παπαδόπουλου, *Πατρολογία*, vol. I, Athens 1982, p. 178. E. W. Barnes (in *The Rise of Christianity*, London 1948, p. 261) believes that «*the story of the martyrdom of Ignatius is edifying legend, not contemporary history*», suggesting that this is «*the invention of a hagiographer*», because «*of Ignatius himself little is known*».

He called himself «*Θεοφόρος*» (Theophorus)³, which is a very distinctive title for Christians and means the «*God-bearer*». The title signifies the close spiritual relationship that he had with Christ. His memory is commemorated in the Eastern Orthodox Church on 20th December and in the Roman on the 1st of February.

At his last days before he died he wrote seven Epistles. These are as follows: to the Ephesians, to the Magnesians, to the Trallians, to the Romans, to the Philadelphians, to the Smyrnaeans and to Polycarp. The first four were written from Smyrna and the remaining three from Troas, in Asia Minor⁴.

The Epistles of Ignatius, written at a relatively early date, «*have played an important role in the theological reflections of the Church and represent a central point of contention in the scholarly discussions of Christian origins*»⁵.

The significance of the Epistles is so great, basically because in them we find the first clear and direct reference to the threefold ministry and the settlement of the ecclesiastical authority, the centre of which is the bishop⁶.

These texts are of great importance to all of Christendom and because of them Ignatius has been acknowledged as «*the first great theologian of the post-apostolic period and the first Father and Teacher of the Church*»⁷.

I. THE PURPOSE OF THE VARIOUS DIACONAL REFERENCES IN IGNATIUS' EPISTLES

It is true that the Epistles of Ignatius are full of references to the *diakonos* and to the diaconal function in the early Church. But it is also true that those references do not constitute the central theme in any of the Epistles.

The diaconal theme appears in these texts as part of the greater discussion concerning the ecclesiastical authority and the threefold

3. Παν. Χρήστου, «*Ἰγνάτιος*», in *Θρησκευτική καὶ Ἠθική Ἐγκυκλοπαίδεια*, vol. 6, Athens 1965, col. 705.

4. M. W. Holmes (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, Apollon - Leicester 1989, p. 80.

5. W. R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters*, Philadelphia 1985, p. 1.

6. Δημ. Μπαλάνου, *Πατρολογία*, Athens 1930, p. 43ff.

7. Στυλ. Παπαδόπουλου, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

ministry. Diaconal references may be found in all the Epistles except that addressed to the Romans.

For the first time in the history of the Church the three ranks of priesthood are clearly mentioned together⁸, in exactly the same order as we know them today. *Diakonos* is placed on the lowest level, or on the first rank of the Christian ministry, while *presbyteros* is on the second and the *episkopos* on the third and obviously the highest.

Ignatius is very clear on this matter of the Church ministry. He makes a great contribution to Ecclesiastical History by:

1. offering the names of the titles of the three officers (*diakonos, presbyteros, episkopos*)⁹,
2. presenting their functions, liturgical and pastoral, as they are found in his time¹⁰,
3. making the point that they are different in function and distinct among themselves¹¹,
4. interpreting the threefold Church ministry as the earthly and visible ministry which resembles the heavenly prototype¹², and
5. emphasising the idea of unity in the Church, in accordance with the unity experienced within the Holy Trinity¹³.

Ignatius firmly believes that deacons, presbyters and bishops are «appointed according to the will of Jesus Christ»¹⁴. He supports the view that deacons, presbyters and bishops are definitely a separate category of people, called to minister to the faithful. With his «prophetic voice»¹⁵ Ignatius calls the lay people to pay attention¹⁶ to them.

Therefore it becomes quite clear that the diaconal references in

8. A. D. Salapatas, «The Diaconate in the Eastern Orthodox Church», in *Diaconal Ministry, Past, Present & Future*, edited by Peyton G. Craighill, Rhode Island 1994, p. 41.

9. *Trall.* 3,1; *Trall.* 7,2; *Smyrn.* 8,1; *Polyc.* 6,1.

10. Ιακ. Πηλίλη, *Ἡ Χριστιανικὴ Ἱερωσύνη*, Athens 1988, pp. 289-294.

11. Μεθ. Φούγρια, *Γένεσις καὶ Ἀνάπτυξις τῆς Χριστιανικῆς Ἱερωσύνης*, Athens 1972, p. 79.

12. *Magn.* 6,1; *Trall.* 2 & 3,1. J. Pelilis, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

13. According to Hans von Campenhausen, «Just as Christ was united to his Father, so must Christians be subject to their presbyters and deacons, and all of them to the bishop...». (*Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, London, p. 100).

14. J. R. Wright, «The Emergence of the Diaconate», in *Liturgy (Journal of the Liturgical Conference)*, vol. 2, No 4, Washington D.C. 1982, p. 20.

15. L. Goppelt, *Apostolic and Post - Apostolic Times*, London 1970, p. 193.

16. *Philad.* 7,1.

Ignatius are obviously offered as part of his theory of the ecclesiastical authority and the Christian ministry.

II. EPISKOPOS - DIAKONOS RELATIONSHIP ACCORDING TO IGNATIUS

There are many interesting passages in Ignatius' Epistles, where references may be found to the spiritual and even pastoral and liturgical relationship between *episkopos* and *diakonos*. Some of them are symbolic, others are realistic.

The bishop Ignatius calls the deacons his «*fellow slaves*»¹⁷ and this is obviously a very important symbolic expression, which shows how highly the bishop regarded his deacons. The word «*σύνδουλος*» means that they are both (bishop and deacon) following the same spiritual path; they believe and follow the same Christ and to Him they are both spiritually answerable.

The deacon is «*subject to the bishop*»¹⁸. A big discussion could open here. In our case we prefer only to point out some of the questions. Which are the areas in which the deacon is subject to the bishop? Is it on the administrative level? Is it connected to the pastoral work and responsibility that the deacon might have had? Or is it related to the diaconal liturgical function?

The actual fact is that the deacon in all these Ignatian writings seems to have been an «*assistant to the bishop*»¹⁹. He does the will of the bishop as Jesus did the will of the Father²⁰. At the same time he is regarded by Ignatius as «*most dear to him*»²¹, who has been «*entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ*»²².

According to W.R. Schoedel, «*There is an especially close bond between bishop and deacon in Ignatius*»²³. He interprets this relationship by suggesting that «this may reflect an earlier stage in the

17. «*σύνδουλος*», in *Ephes.* 2,1; *Magn.* 2; *Philad.* 4; *Smyrn* 12,2. *Βιβλιοθήκη Ἑλλήνων Πατέρων καὶ Ἐκκλησιαστικῶν Συγγραφέων*, «*Ἰγνατίου ὁ Ἀντιοχείας*», vol. 2, Athens 1955, p. 261ff.

18. *Magn.* 2.

19. James M. Barnett, *The Diaconate - A Full and Equal Order*, New York 1981, p. 50.

20. *Magn.* 6,1; *Trall.* 3,1.

21. «*τῶν ἐμοὶ γλυκντάτων*», in *Magn.* 6,1.

22. *Magn.* 6,1.

23. W.R. Schoedel, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

development of the ministry when these two offices had not yet merged with the presbyterate. But other factors probably suffice to explain the special attention given to deacons by Ignatius: their active role in practical matters; in particular, their service to Ignatius personally; and a special concern on Ignatius' part to support those whose position sometimes put them in difficult situations»²⁴.

As far as the relationship between the deacon and the presbyters is concerned there is only one reference²⁵ in Ignatius' writings, where the *diakonos* appears to be responsible «to the presbytery»²⁶. This relationship has not been defined very well «presumably because this is not the essential mark of the office»²⁷.

III. *DIAKONOS*: MODEL OF CHRIST

In Ignatius text references are found of the *diakonos* being a model of Jesus Christ Himself²⁸. It is quite obvious that Ignatius loves his deacons and regards them very highly.

The *diakonos*, who is closely working with his bishop, is «respected»²⁹ as Jesus Christ, having been «entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ»³⁰.

According to Ignatius the *episkopos* is set over the people «in the place of God»³¹, being «a type of the Father»³². The presbyters are also compared with the apostles³³.

In all the relevant references the *diakonos* appears to be a model, or a «symbol»³⁴, or even a «representation»³⁵ of Christ. This idea seems to have been based on the New Testament. Our Lord, speaking about Himself and His ministry on earth, states that «the

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Magn* 2.

26. The particular term used here by Ignatius is «presbytery» not «presbyters», although this does not seem to have any great significance.

27. J.N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, New York - Oxford 1990, p. 240.

28. W.R. Schoedel, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-4.

29. *Trall.* 3,1.

30. *Magn.* 6,1.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Magn.* 13,2; *Trall.* 3,1; *Smyrn.* 8,1.

33. *Trall.* 2,2 & 3,1; *Philad.* 5,1; *Smyrn.* 8,1.

34. J.M. Barnett, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-1.

35. *Ibid.*

Son of Man came not to be served (διακονηθῆναι) but to serve (διακονῆσαι)»³⁶. Thus, He regarded Himself as a *diakonos* of the Church and of the people, offering therefore a diaconal prototype to the Christian Church.

It could also be suggested that the *diakonos*, as an ecclesiastical figure who represents Christ, according to Ignatius, appears to have been more important than the presbyter, at least in the Church of Antioch, although he (the *diakonos*) certainly stands in the third place³⁷ of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

It is interesting to note that the Ignatian view of the *diakonos* being a model of Jesus Christ, is also found in some other early Christian writings, such as *The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*³⁸, *Didascalia Apostolorum*³⁹ and *Apostolic Constitutions*⁴⁰.

At a later stage *diakonos* becomes the model of an angel. This is due to the liturgical development of the office. Saint John Chrysostom⁴¹ and Theodore of Mopsuestia in *Catecheses*⁴² are clearly stating that the diakonos as he wears his orarion⁴³ during the Church Services is like a flying angel. He also moves «between the sacred and the profane bearing messages»⁴⁴ like the angels.

CONCLUSIONS

Ignatius Theophorus, the bishop of Antioch, is a great figure of the ancient Christian Church. He is the first most important theologian after the Holy Apostles. By studying his Epistles the modern scholar may find in them many details regarding the actual life of the Church in Ignatius' era.

Among the main themes in Ignatius' written thoughts are the

36. *Matt.* 20,28; *Mark* 10,45.

37. *Smyrn.* 8,1; *Polyc.* 6,1.

38. *Polyc. Phil.* 5,3.

39. R. H. Connoly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Oxford 1929, p. 88.

40. *Apostolic Constitutions* 2,26,5.

41. Παντ. Χανόγλου, *Διακονικόν*, Edessa 1989, p. 214.

42. A. Mingana (ed.), *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*, Cambridge 1933, p. 84.

43. *Diaconal stole*.

44. R. F. Grein, *The Renewal of the Diaconate and the Ministry of the Laos*, Rhode Island 1991, p. 9.

ecclesiastical authority and the three ranks of the Christian priesthood. The diaconate which is the first and the lowest rank of priesthood is clearly mentioned in Ignatius' texts, although this is not his central theme.

The holy writer considers the *diakonos* and his diaconal ministry to be of a great value for the Church of Antioch and beyond. He, as the bishop of Antioch, is closely co-operating with the deacons in order to secure the best possible ministry for his flock.

Ignatius is related spiritually to the deacons, according to his own writings, in exactly the same way as God the Father is related to Jesus Christ. Thus, the *diakonos* is considered as a model of Jesus, who according to the New Testament had been the first diakonos of the Church.

The diakonos is always following the orders of his bishop, being answerable to him. But there is no clear reference in Ignatius' texts as to the actual functions, pastoral, liturgical, or any other, of the *diakonos*. Finally, there is no direct mention to the deaconesses.

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