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Diakonia of Women in the New Testament

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Introduction

'Simon Peter said to them: "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus, "I myself lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven".¹ I think this interesting episode narrated on the apocryphal book of the Gospel of Thomas is very apt for us today to start with our reflection on the *Diakonia* of women as it is presented in the New Testament.

The current interest in the *diakonia* of women is to be viewed in the total context of self-awareness in the Church about the function of membership and ministry. It indicates the growing awareness of the Church that, like her Lord, her role in the world is 'to serve' and not 'to be served'.² This growing self-awareness makes her realize that her mission of *diakonia* is no longer the pursuit of the clergy alone, but of all the people of God as they participate in it, each in his own or her own way.

Starting with the negative tones given to the role of women in the Pauline letters, and the identification of God with male symbolism, there has been a tradition of male domination in theology as well as Church administration. The outcome of this has been the exclusion of women from the ministries of the Church. But lately, resonant with the developing self-understanding of the Church, there has occurred a growing awareness, specially among women, both in Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic Churches, that it is high time for a rethinking of their role in the Church. That this awareness sometimes leads to extremes is clear from the fact that some American women recently filed a petition

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¹ R. McL. Wilson (ed.), 'The Gospel of Thomas', in *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol. 1, London, SCM Press, 1973, p. 299.

² Cf. Mk. 10 : 45.

to Rome to change the words of Institution in the Eucharist from '... it will be shed for you and for all men' into 'it will be shed for you and for all' omitting the word 'men'. Our present task is not to argue for the addition or omission of any word but to analyse the role played by women in the early Church as evinced by the New Testament.

The basis of the claim made by these women can be traced in the Gospel proclamation which stood as a revolutionary challenge to the traditional rabbinical attitude of the age. St. Paul announced that by the power of Christ all barriers separating human beings were broken down and that in Him there is no more discrimination between men and women than between freeman and slave.³

On the stage of human history, which was filled with discrimination against women through the existing socio-cultural patterns of the day, Jesus appeared as a revolutionary to re-establish the harmony of all men and women as envisaged in the beginning by the Creator. The evangelists portrayed Jesus in the Gospels as some one defying man-made boundaries and taboos in order to accept women as persons, capable of intelligent discourse, journeying with him on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, remaining faithful beyond most of his male disciples and being entrusted with the most fundamental proclamation, i.e., that of his resurrection. In this paper we are just trying to analyse this role of women's *diakonia* in the New Testament.

1. Service of Women in the Synoptic Gospels

A good number of Synoptic Gospel passages narrate the praiseworthy services given by several women. Among the Synoptic evangelists it is Luke who highlights their role more clearly than the others. First we will look at the passages common to the Synoptics concerning the services of women, and then we will turn our attention to the texts proper to the evangelist Luke.

More directly connected with the question of services is the presence of women in the inner circles of Jesus' disciples 'ministering' to the group out of their means. 'Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means' (Lk. 8 : 1-3 ; Cf Mk. 15 : 41 ; Mt. 27 : 55). According

³ Cf. Gal. 3 : 28 ; WEph. 2 : 14.

to the best manuscripts Luke has those women 'serving them', which would mean the whole apostolic group and not Jesus alone. In other words, the *diakonia* of these women was related to the activity of the Twelve. It is these women who are said to have followed Jesus right up to his death, watching from afar.⁴ They also saw the grave and stood watching while his body was buried. The *diakonia* of these women is inserted by the evangelists in the context of the evangelizing activity of Jesus and of the Twelve. Without any difficulty one could describe them as 'proto-deaconesses' equal to the seven 'deacons' mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.

All the Synoptic Gospels record the loving service rendered to Jesus by Simon's mother-in-law, after she had been cured from her sickness. We read in the Gospels 'He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she rose and served him' (Mt. 8:15; Mk. 1:31; Lk. 4:39).

Contrary to the Jewish mentality which did not accord great value to the testimony of women, it was nevertheless women who were the first to have the privilege of seeing the risen Lord, and it was they who were charged by Jesus to take the first paschal message to the apostles themselves.⁵ Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, Salome, Joanna and some other women were involved in this kerygmatic proclamation. According to some scholars, since Mary Magdalene is the first among them, the title of honour *apostola apostolorum* has rightly been bestowed upon her.⁶

In Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9 Jesus accords the highest praise to the loving act of anointing performed by Mary of Bethany. In Matthew 26:13 and Mark 14:9 we read 'Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.' What Mary had done may not be taken simply as a material anointing but one which had a deeper meaning and value. We are inclined to think in this way since Jesus made a prophetic proclamation about it. This prophetic proclamation can be taken as a positive indication to the mind of Christ that the services of women are to be recognized by the Church at all times.

Particular Lucan Texts Concerning Women

For Luke women represent in a special manner mankind standing before God in its attention to God's work. Mary, the lowly

⁴ Cf. Mt. 27:55; Mk. 15:40ff; Lk. 23:49.

⁵ Cf. Mt. 28:7-10; Lk. 24:9-10; Mk. 16:9-11.

⁶ Elizabeth Koffmahn, 'Women', in J. B. Bauer (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Biblical Theology*, vol. 3, London, Sheed and Ward, 1970, pp. 985-991, p. 989.

handmaid mentioned in Luke 1:38 is the living image of this attitude. Soon after receiving the Word she goes to the service of Elizabeth her kinswoman. Thus she proves her generous availability to the service of the Word. Moreover Mary participated in the Incarnation not with her body only but above all by her trusting obedience to God's promise: 'I am the Lord's servant; as you have spoken, so be it' (Lk. 2:38).

Luke is keen to report on a prophetess Anna who was a widow (Lk. 2:36-38). She lived in the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer; Moreover, she spoke of the Messiah to all who were looking for his coming, for the redemption of Israel.

Luke 10:38-42 tells us of two sisters Martha and Mary welcoming Jesus. Here Martha appears as one who is busy 'with all the serving'. But it was only one form of service. While appreciating that service, Jesus called her attention to another important dimension of *diakonia*, namely listening to the word. This reveals to us the mind of Christ concerning the *diakonia* of women in the Church. It has to remain not merely in the material realm, but it should be extended also to the spiritual realm of the ministry of the word.

2. Service of Women in John

All the women in the Fourth Gospel are presented positively in intimate relation to Jesus. But this positive presentation of women is neither one-dimensional nor stereotyped. Women do not appear in the Fourth Gospel as dry, bloodless representatives of the 'eternal feminine'.⁷ On the contrary, in John women appear as striking individuals and unique characters rendering immense service as the need arises.

In John 4:1-42, the Samaritan woman becomes a mediator, establishing a link between Jesus and those who are willing to listen. The witness which the woman bears is quite clearly apostolic in the Johannine perspective.⁸ John ascribes the conversion of at least one Samaritan town to this woman apostle who acts out of her belief in Jesus' self-revelatory word. 'Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony.'⁹

At the wedding at Cana, Mary the mother of Jesus intercedes with Jesus for the needy people and thus becomes a mediator between Jesus and them (Jn. 2:3-5). She was conscious of her mission of being at the service of all.

⁷ Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Eternal Feminine*, London: Collins, 1971.

⁸ R. E. Brown, 'Role of Women in the Fourth Gospel', *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, New York/Ramsey/Toronto, Paulist Press, 1979, pp. 188-189.

⁹ Cf. Jn. 4:39.

When Jesus sat at supper in Bethany, John specially mentions that Martha was serving at table, 'diēkonei' (Jn. 12 : 2)—the same work assigned to the early 'deacons' mentioned in Acts 6 : 1-6. And Mary performs the usual anointing of Jesus on her own initiative and Jesus spoke in appreciation of that service (Jn. 12 : 1-8).

John does not forget to appreciate the suffering dimension of *diakonia* by the women who were with Jesus at the foot of the cross. As John reports, Mary, Jesus' mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene were included among those who witnessed Jesus' suffering and death.¹⁰

John takes a special interest in mentioning the role of *diakonia* played by Mary Magdalene. According to him she is a powerful witness not only of the suffering and death of Jesus (Jn. 19 : 25) but also of his resurrection (Jn. 20 : 14-16). Her role of *diakonia* is well shown in her coming to the grave of Jesus on Easter Sunday when it was still dark, in her running to the Apostles when the tomb was found empty, in her proclamation of resurrection to the apostles after having seen the risen Lord. From the analysis of the above texts it seems that behind these female characters of John there stand the Christian women, actually engaged in theological discussion, competently proclaiming the Gospel, publicly confessing their faith and serving at the table of the Lord as well as in the community.

R. E. Brown rightly says : 'Whoever the author of the fourth Gospel was, it was some one who had a remarkably rich and nuanced understanding of feminine religious experience. Historically this knowledge could have been the product of an active literary imagination but it is much more likely that it was the result of actual experience of Christian women who played prominent roles in the community of the fourth evangelist.'¹²

3. *Diakonia* of Women in the Acts of the Apostles

When the Church turns missionary in the Acts, Luke continues to mention women associated with that activity. A group of women including Mary, the mother of Jesus, joins with the Twelve in prayer in the upper room (Acts 1 : 14), and receives the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit (Acts 2 : 3-4 ; 2 : 17). It is true that Peter is the primary spokesman for the group ; but we should not conclude that only men spoke on that occasion. Luke does not describe the speakers beyond the detail that they were Galileans (Acts 2 : 7), but in his Gospel he makes specific reference to women:

¹⁰ Cf. Jn. 19 : 25-26.

¹¹ Cf. Jn. 20 : 1-18.

¹² R. E. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

present at Jesus' crucifixion and burial 'who had followed him from Galilee' (Lk. 23 : 49-55). It would seem reasonable, therefore, to suppose that some of these very women may have received the Spirit of prophecy and exercised that gift from the inception of the Christian community. Prophecy was a highly valued gift in the early Church¹⁸ and many Christian women, particularly Philip's four daughters, continued in that tradition (Acts 21 : 9).

Included in the *diakonia* of women we also notice the ministry of teachings. In Acts 18 : 24 it is said that Priscilla (along with Aquila her husband) took the learned Apollos of Alexandria aside and 'expounded to him the way of God more accurately.'

Many influential women, like Mary the mother of John Mark and Lydia Paul's convert, opened their homes as meeting places for the first assemblies (Acts 12 : 12 ; 16 : 14, 15, 40).

Acts preserves the names of women in the early community of disciples. Tabitha was a 'disciple' in the city of Joppa (Acts 9 : 36-43). She is the only woman in the New Testament to be described as a 'disciple'. She was full of good works and acts of charity.

Acts 16 : 13-15, 40 tell of another woman named Lydia from Thyatira. She worked as an apostle and won her husband to the Christian faith after having been converted by Paul.

4. Service of Women in the Letters of Paul

Women were not merely converts to Christianity in its earliest phase but also very important workers in the spread and administration of Christianity. Paul, the chief missionary of Christianity to the Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire and to the gentiles, refers in his letters to many such co-workers in the spread of the gospel.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul speaks of two women Euodia and Syntyche 'struggling' along with him and other fellow missionaries in the 'gospel' (Phil. 4 : 2-3). Clearly, if Paul used such a strong verb, these women did not simply supply material support for Paul and the other men, but preached, taught, and spread the gospel as vigorously as they. In fact, Paul thought

¹⁸ According to 1 Cor. 14 : 1 in the early Church gift of prophecy is earnestly to be sought, and prophets were listed right after apostles in lists of gifts (1 Cor. 12 : 10; Eph. 4 : 11). The purpose of prophecy was primarily to convict and call sinners to account (1 Cor. 14 : 24-25) and for the 'education' and 'exhortation' and comfort of the Church (1 Cor. 14 : 3-4).

Euodia and Syntyche so important to the life of the Church at Philippi that he bade them by name to overcome their differences.¹⁴

In Romans 16 : 1 f. Paul refers to a woman named Phoebe who was a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae. Paul goes on to call her a *prostatis*, literally 'one who stands in front of' either as protector or helper or a leader. Thus she is given two titles *diakonos* and *prostatis*. In the deutero-Pauline letter, 1 Timothy 3 : 8ff there is a lengthy exhortation about deacons. Although v.11 is sometimes translated to refer to deacon's wives, it more logically refers to deaconesses. Although those named in Acts chapter six were all men it is held that both men and women were ordained in this office in some areas throughout the Church's first millennium.¹⁵ The duties of both sexes included the practical work of the community. Serving the communal meal, taking communion to those unable to attend services, instructing converts, assisting in baptisms, distributing food and funds to the needy, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and caring for orphans. Obviously it was a very important post in the Church. Women were necessary because they could visit, instruct and baptize other women, whereas society would not have permitted a man such contacts.

Paul sends greetings to the Christians of Rome and first of all to Priscilla and Aquila who were his fellow workers in Christ Jesus (Rom. 16 : 3). They have risked their necks for him (v.11) and have offered their house for the gathering of the brethren (v.5). In the further list of twenty-six people to whom Paul sends greetings, eight women are mentioned and singled out for words of praise (vs 6-13). There one 'Mary' is mentioned as the one 'who has worked hard among you !' 'Tryphaena and Tryphosa'—probably two sisters, which would account for the similar names—as 'those workers in the Lord'; the 'beloved Persis' as the one 'who has worked hard in the Lord' and Rufus' mother as the one who has been a mother to him.

Not only did many women work for the spread of the gospel, but they also made their houses the first Christian churches.¹⁶ Clear references are made to the houses of Prisca (Rom. 16 : 3, 5), and Nympha (Col. 4 : 15).

Another official group within the Church was that of the widows. 1 Timothy 5 : 10, 16 speaks of them as a definite order into which

¹⁴ Cf. Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmation of Woman*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1979, p. 295.

¹⁵ Elise Cúlva, *Woman in the World of Religion*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1967, p. 68.

¹⁶ Cf. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church*, Chicago Moody Press, 1958, p. 82.

mature women of good reputation were enrolled. Their primary ministry seems to have been intercessory prayer, although they also went from house to house collecting gifts, helping others and caring for the orphans.

In the apocryphal book *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla is described as the one who teaches Christian doctrine as a co-worker of Paul in his ministry. Though judged apocryphal, there is some probability for this ; because of the indication of other co-workers whom we have mentioned above.

Conclusion

From the brief analysis of the *diakonia* of women in the New Testament, I would like to draw the following conclusions :

1. The services of women have always been a vital aspect of the life of the Church from apostolic times onward. They played an extensive role in the development and extension of the early Church even when they did not have official titles, definite offices and special consecrations.

2. Even though the New Testament has not failed to *mention* the important roles women played in the *diakonia*-dimension of the Church, enough stress and prominence is not given to this matter by the New Testament writers due to the low esteem of women inherent at that time. Though their positive roles are not stressed, the very fact that their services are recorded in the New Testament is a positive sign that the significance of their *diakonia* has paramount importance in the Church.

3. The changing roles of *diakonia* of women within the early Church serve to remind us that the patterns of service as they came to exist in the Church have to be considered not as frozen structures, but as living realities capable of modification as new needs and circumstances arise from time to time in the living Church.

These reflections bring us back to the heart of the problem we are here to discuss and reflect on. We must ask ourselves : Is not one of the-tasks facing Christians today that of creating in the Church, and in society, a new style of relationships and new structures in which free men and women can join together to work for their common task in a spirit of fraternal love, respecting one another's dignity and distinctiveness ? Much pain will be involved for all of us in striving to let go all old stereotypes of leadership in the Church and come to see one another as co-ministers with different but complementary functions in the life of the Church.

The ultimate aim of all our striving should be the *theosis* the advent of the new humanity in men and women renewed by the Spirit who unites them with Christ. For this, it is not enough to refer mechanically to tradition and to the sacred canons, but they are to be constantly adapted to the life situation of the living Church according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who guides her through ever new experiences in the world.