

What is the Deacons' Mission in the Universal Church and in the World?

by Klaus Kießling

I would like to start by extending my heartfelt thanks for the invitation to join you here at the other end of the earth. The pleasant thought creeps to my mind that our presence here is the result of an ecumenical relationship. A few years ago, the IDC Board made numerous attempts to establish contacts with Australian deacons. Trying the Roman-Catholic addresses that we had, we didn't have much luck; but suddenly we moved forward very quickly. In 2013, during its International Conference in Berlin, the IDC's elder and bigger sister, the Diakonia World Federation, elected its new President. I attended that conference – I was the only Catholic to do so – and so I had the opportunity to meet the new President: Sandy Boyce. And when – months later – I asked her whether she could build a bridge to the Catholic deacons on her continent, it took her less than one hour to point me to Nick Kerr. Were it not for Sandy Boyce, Nick Kerr and his beloved wife Eveleen would not have come to Johannesburg in 2014, and who knows whether Anthony Aspinall would have then taken part in our Jubilee in Rome in 2015? And who knows whether Anthony Gooley would have come to meet us, Stefan Sander and myself, in Rome, during the Holy Year of Mercy in 2016? In short: Were it not for Sandy Boyce, the two of us would not be here in Hobart in 2017. According to your fellow-Australian John Collins, mediation is one of the hallmarks of diakonia. Therefore, Sandy Boyce, were she not already a "deacon" in her own Church, should be made an honorary deacon by the Catholics.

Ever since we met him, we have known Nick Kerr as a caring and thoughtful, committed and reliable man. As such, he sent us, in preparation for this meeting, several questions which could be of interest for you, but also indicated that we could focus on whichever points we saw fit. It is on this basis that I will start with my lecture, and I am looking forward to our exchange.

If I were to synthesize the various questions I had been given, I would sum them up in a single one: What is the deacons' mission in the universal Church and in the world? This question is very much in keeping with the topic of your congress: "Go therefore and make disciples to the ends of the earth! Deacons as ministers of the new evangelisation". I decided, therefore, to choose this question as my title: What is the deacons' mission in the universal Church and in the world? Of course, we haven't come to Australia "to make disciples" but otherwise we took Mt. 28,19 quite seriously: "Go therefore to the ends of the earth!"

1. What moves me

I will start with a flashback, quoting from a letter which I wrote many years ago – and without which I wouldn't be among you today: "What moves me ... is the certainty which has grown over the years – that I am a 'deacon in secret'. The call I am feeling, I am now trying to 'announce' and to effect. This development became apparent through several biographical stations ..."

With these words, I started the written motivation addressed to my home diocese on my way towards the diaconate. The biographical stations I was talking about include my own beginnings, my parents' house where two denominations happily co-exist, with my thoroughly Catholic father and my thoroughly Lutheran mother. Then came the church youth group in my home parish and some nursing activity and, finally educating children and teenagers with multiple disabilities as well as psychiatric challenges – a task which left a lasting mark on me and confirmed my decision to pursue a career as a theologian and also as a psychologist. During my studies, I had the opportunity to assist prison inmates. Then came the first experiences as a psychotherapist and as a pastoral psychologist which I associate especially with persons at risk of suicide, followed by teaching experiences in my country as well as in Lahti, Finland, a city I had previously known only as the home of the ski jumping venues which we saw on our TV screens during winter Olympics. From the North of Europe even bigger wings were given to me – for different missions, as for example those with *Caritas International*.

Many images appear before my inner eye, I still feel very acutely numerous challenges which have made me discover my own limitations – and still do so today. At the same time, I thank Heaven for the richness of experience which I acquired through all of this and made me grow spiritually; I am particularly grateful to my wife and to our sons, without whom I could not imagine life and who remind me, at times, that although I am the oldest of the four, I happen to behave, on my long journeys, as if I were the youngest of the four.

I am moved by solidarity which is very much needed very close to home as well as in the wide, wide world, and I am also moved by a spirituality which makes me exercise humility. For all the gifts I was given, I don't have them from myself and they can only live if I don't keep them for myself. I still recall very vividly how a colleague – again, a Lutheran – shared with me her conviction that talents always mean duties as well, and this expression went immediately to my heart. If talents are a gift and a sign from Heaven, then I am spiritually compelled not to let them go to waste, even if they might seem to me or to others as uncomfortable. This insight is part of the story of my vocation.

Solidarity and spirituality mean a lot for me, worldwide solidarity and spirituality of the universal Church. This is how I came to the IDC and this is also a first answer, a personal one to the question what is the deacons' mission in the universal Church and in the world. Without the international networking which we undertake in the IDC, I would probably never have come to discover John Collins, with the bit of irritation that he entails, an irritation which though interfering in a way also favours learning processes. So after we have come to Hobart by way of Collins' hometown Melbourne, the obvious continuation after this introduction of a personal character (1) is to call to mind what he had to say about the issue of the deacons' mission in the universal Church and in the world (2). I will go on to my confrontation with him (3) and I try to draw a provisional conclusion (4) before referring to other Church authorities, beginning with the Second Vatican Council (5) and continuing with our Pope (6). I will end with another personal conclusion which will be a provisional answer to our main question (7).

2. Diakonia in John Neil Collins' texts

Not only the post-Council plurality of diakonia and diaconate within the worldwide Church but also the New Testament contexts of the *diakonia / diakonein* semantic field are difficult to embed in a 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 the reconciliation (2 Cor. 5,18). What, then, distinguishes diaconal action then and now?

Ever since my days as a student, I have been consulting the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. The first volumes thereof were published in the 1930's. That is to say between the two World Wars. In this dictionary, Hermann Wolfgang Beyer formulates – not hiding his anti-Judaism impulses – a basic concept of *diakonein* which has been formative in my country up to this day and 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, *diakonein* means an inferior, even degrading activity, as one can read in 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 his or her own accord. It should be noted that, as a biblical term, *diakonos* applies to men as well as women.

John Collins disputes this finding. Still, it is his interpretation which is referred to, time and again, in the “Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and Guidelines for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons” issued by the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference. 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. Quite on the contrary, he sees several notions having to do with *diakon-* 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 but in the 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 very different fields of the social, political, cultural and religious life.

Anni Hentschel, 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 what about the deacons’ mission in the universal Church and in the world, we must look not only at those to whom we are sent, but especially to 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 Cor. 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 evangelization – 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 – and, since they take their commission seriously, they cannot but accept to serve, including at the tables, but also in a diakonia of reconciliation. From person to person, but also in a worldwide perspective, the ever-growing globalisation and ever-escalating violence make this diakonia of reconciliation an urgent necessity.

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 a research carried out by Wilhelm Brandt in 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 the 19th century German Protestantism had a strong impact on Brandt's conclusions and hence might also have influenced Beyer. 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.

3. A critical appraisal of John Neil Collins

Now is the moment for me to face this Australian challenge. I see it as a genuine challenge, since what we are discussing here is not merely a notion or a lexical root, but our very understanding of ourselves as deacons and hence the question: what is the deacons' mission in the universal Church and in the world?

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, Lk.

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 motif 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 a role-switching is verified, on a large scale, only within the framework of carnivalesque events, whose exceptional character interrupts what – hitherto and thereafter – constitutes the norm, for a clearly determined period of time. But I cannot discern such a game in Lk. 22,27. In Luke, Jesus’ admonition to the disciples, as they were disputing over who was the greatest, remained just not without consequences: “But among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant.” (Lk. 22,26) Next comes the reference to temptations: “It is you who have stood by me in my trials.” (Lk. 22,28) Then comes the eschatological outlook on the Last Judgment – In whose description Matthew also uses the *diakon*- semantic field – and on the Kingdom of God (Lk. 22,29f). All these indications point to the great and durable seriousness of this scene.

Collins points out that in Lk. 22,27 we are actually dealing with a comparison; “like a servant” is to be understood, consequently, as a toning-down: only like 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 proxy for them and for us all, he will become *the* proxy. For the above-mentioned reasons I don’t consider the word “like” as a mere comparative particle, but as a strong metaphor: Jesus creates a new reality here. I would also like to draw your attention to Mk. 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.”

In this sense, one could differentiate between a Gospel tradition which stresses the service character of the diaconal action and a Pauline language emphasizing 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 – and seize it. But what is, then, the deacons’ mission: service-like waiting on tables or missionary going-between?

I see no reason for playing off one aspect against the other, that is Paul’s understanding within a missionary context and that of the Gospels in the context of a feast. Quite on the contrary, everything speaks in favour of taking all these biblical – hence also Jewish! – traditions very seriously. For that “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 as being 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 that, I do not push the motif 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, 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” is also needed between these various sources.

4. What moves me as a deacon of God

I agree with John Collins that a definition of diakonia and diaconate exclusively based on their character of service is inadequate. All ministries are ministries of service – and more. And, by ascribing to himself the role of a deacon of God (2 Cor. 6,4), Paul doesn’t express any subservience but the divine authority of his mission. In this sense, diakonia encompasses all this what we must simply do because we cannot counterpoise the authority of this principal with anything of the same weight. But at the end of the day, I am not interested in a formal description of my diaconal identity but in a qualification with regard to contents.

From time to time I receive mail from the administration of my diocese or from the city hall. 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 and, at other times, there is a signature, but before the name of the official one sees the note “on behalf of”. This official is generally not a deacon, the person does not act on his or her own behalf but on behalf of a third party.

And whenever I carry out a task – and you might experience the same thing –, it is different if I act on behalf of my wife, of one of my sons, of my university, of a bishop, of the IDC or, even in the name of Jesus Christ. And I am convinced that you would notice in each case on whose behalf I do something. You will notice that from the contents of my mission and certainly from the way in which I try to fulfil my task. And, for this reason, I am also convinced that the fact that my mission is connected to a certain principal 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”, then it follows that I act out of love. Then I exercise love as a deacon, then the love for my neighbour appears as the primary act of God’s love and then the diaconate and charity are inextricably linked to each other. John Collins and Anni Hentschel are still right – in the sense that the Greek lexeme *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 (Rajah Scheepers) for this reason, precisely because a deacon of God takes responsibility for the diakonia of love.

I owe my understanding of the unity between the love for one's neighbour and the love of God to the Gospel, but also to the reflections of the Jesuit Karl Rahner. He is considered one of the great theologians of the Second Vatican Council. He was contacted after World War II by somebody who back then had no other choice but to be a "deacon in secret" – and this encounter had a lasting effect: Hannes Kramer, first a forest ranger then a social worker who was to become, subsequently, a permanent deacon, 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 created, from 1951 onwards, diaconal circles along with Karl Rahner, sounding out possible contributions towards a diaconate for women and men. As the Council was reinstating the permanent diaconate, the year 1965 saw in Rome the foundation of the International Diaconate Centre, whose development was to benefit from Hannes Kramer's long-lasting influence, as manager and then advisor. Stefan will also refer to his personality; I myself will turn my attention for the time being to the Council.

5. The diaconate in the Council documents

For the renewal of the diaconate, the decisive Council document is the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*: 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 diaconate of the liturgy, of the Word and of charity" (LG 29), and the theological motivation for the reinstatement of the diaconate is found – certainly not by chance – in the Decree on the missionary activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*. It states the following: "There are men who actually carry out the functions of the deacon's office ... It is only right to strengthen them by the imposition of hands ... 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). In this way, they may publicly announce their vocation. Most obviously, there were many "deacons in secret" even before the Council.

In their mission, it is the contents of the message which provide the absolutely decisive standard: You can only evangelise what you deeply love! For actually our faith is not the condition for God's love; faith is rather the disclosure that God loves every man and woman unconditionally, so that they may change. Without the spiritual connection and rooting of the mission in God's love which goes beyond all boundaries, the mission would remain only a human concoction and a result of people's exclusions.

The Church doesn't do mission on its own authority. The Church as such is a result of the mandate of Jesus Christ and continues His mission according to its possibility. It lives on

through those who bear witness to what they themselves live. The experience of being accepted and loved unconditionally can only live on if people do not think of it as a thing to be grasped and do not keep it to themselves but share it with their fellow human beings. The mission's aim is to share the Gospel. Not only does the Church not do mission on its own authority, but also not for itself; it does it in favour of those whose dignity is being abused and who have the most need of our solidarity – regardless of whether or not they belong to the Church.

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, 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 divided – in a Lord and in a servant. And I might add: Neither can the Ordo be divided – in heads and in servants.

Your national Norms and Guidelines state, making reference to the same Pope: “Saint John Paul II's taught that the diaconal order participates in the Church's mission to make known the ‘mysteries of Christ’. This led him to insist that the deacon is an agent of the new evangelization and a witness to Christ amid the hostility shown to the truth of the Gospel. He emphasised that the presence of the deacon in the secular sphere, especially his living the vocation of marriage with his wife, contributes to the effectiveness of his witness.”

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 to the Church's mission as a whole. Charity and solidarity are the very sources from which diakonia draws those mediator qualities with which John Collins describes it.

Solidarity gained importance with the Council and its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 4, 32, 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 (2 Cor. 5,21). When the Crucified One goes down to the realm of the dead, he enters, by his death and resurrection, a relationship of solidarity with the dead and their suffering; in this way, he offers a motivation for a solidarity among human beings which goes beyond death; he opens the vision of a worldwide community based upon divine solidarity.

In this perspective, the “globalisation of indifference”, mentioned by Pope Francis more than once, can be countered by a globalisation of solidarity. The *global prayer* is thus entrusted to the universal Church, which is the oldest *global player* in history: the option for the poor and the duty to act as a proxy and lift one's voice on behalf of the voiceless, of those who are ignored or muted, are all part of the Church's mission.

Solidarity is indebted to the biblical idea of proxy – not in the sense that sacrifices are needed in order for God to be reconciled, but rather in the sense that people must support each other. Solidarity does not attempt to take away the place of the one it is addressed to,

but to give him space for his own existence. Proxy means a kind of commitment which does not replace the other but liberates him. I take as an example the role of parents and grandparents: in multiple ways they are called to act on behalf of their children and grandchildren, but never in such a way as to replace the latter, rather in a way which strengthens them so that they can take this place themselves one day.

Joseph Ratzinger – long before he became Benedict XVI – also spoke about a diakonia of proxy. Referring to Moses and the Song of the Servant of God, he elaborates thus: “The idea of proxy is one of the primary circumstances of biblical witness, whose rediscovery could help Christianity ... achieve a decisive renewal and deepening of its identity”. And the longer I am a deacon, the more important this practice of proxy is for me personally – also in the hope that a specific form of diaconal spirituality could arise from it.

6. The diaconate in Pope Francis’ texts

From Benedict I come now to Francis. Our Pope is inspired by the vision of a diaconal universal Church. What is the place which he ascribes to us permanent deacons in our Church? We know of several statements of the Holy Father in this respect.

In his homily for the Jubilee of the Deacons during the Holy Year of Mercy, on May 29th, 2016, he exhorts us to be “available to brothers and sisters and ever open to the unforeseen which is never missing and which often is God’s ceaseless surprise”. Furthermore, he calls on our meekness. “And meekness is one of the virtues of deacons, isn’t it?”, Francis asks his listeners. Moving away from the prepared text he adds: “When a deacon is meek, then he ... is not trying to mimic priests ...” Deacons, according to the Pope, should please not mimic the priests, but rather God who is love.

I would like to elaborate on this Papal signal: a deacon doesn’t mimic the priest. A priest exercises leadership roles which are in keeping with priesthood, but also exercises a ministry of service; a deacon is a servant, but in the diakonia he is also well suited for leadership tasks. Either way, these two ministries remain non-interchangeable. Although I see the urgent need, for pastoral reasons, to rethink and to change the conditions of access to the ministry, the constantly circulating proposal that permanent deacons should be ordained to presbyterate irritates me and seems to me sometimes abusive and sometimes treasonous. I do suspect, of course, with an auto-critical look on our ministry as deacons, that the possibility of a presbyteral ordination might be a temptation for some of my brothers who, in their innermost, think of their diaconate only as a step towards presbyterate. Whenever the proposal to allow permanent deacons to presbyterate comes from deacons I think it is somewhat treasonous. Whenever priests, bishops and lay people come up with such a proposal, I think it can be abusive. I, personally, know myself committed to a diaconal vocation and try to fulfil it, with humility in a serving role, but also with responsibility in a leading role. I have my own vocation, as I tried to express in the introduction. It is true that the relationship between diaconate and presbyterate must constantly be redefined, but we need deacons as deacons, not as replacement priests, and we do need deacons even in those places where there are enough active priests.

For the sake of a diaconal Church, one question is very important for me: why does one exclusively ask and look for *virī probati* – and never for *mulieres probatae*? Be it as it may, we should note that a few weeks ago, for the first time in centuries, a woman was ordained in an Orthodox Church. The Patriarch of Alexandria, Theodoros II, ordained a woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo to be a missionary deacon.

In a recent interview with Giovanni di Lorenzo, Pope Francis makes it clear that the commission he appointed should only research the issue of female deacons in the ancient Church. The Pope said verbatim: “It was about researching the topic and not about opening any door.” To the subsequent question about the results achieved so far by this research, Francis answered the following: “A Syrian professor stated that the question is not whether or not ordained women existed, the question is what they exactly did. He mentioned three things: women helped with baptisms, they gave the anointing of the sick to other women, and if a woman complained to the Bishop that she had been beaten up by her husband, the Bishop sent a female deacon to inspect the bruise. Let’s see what else the commission will discover. As far as I know, they meet again in March and I will visit them and get information on the status of things.” This was the Pope’s verbatim answer on the matter.

During our audience on June 4th, 2016, I expressed my conviction to him that even though creativity is desirable in the issue of Holy Orders, three forms of respect should remain intact: the respect for the dignity of the diaconal ministry, the respect for the dignity of ordained men, and the respect for the dignity of all women, especially of those who ask to be admitted to this sacrament. For any attempt to introduce a non-sacramental ministry for women and admit them to the diaconate in this way is likely to lead to degradations, first of all of those women who feel they have such a vocation.

In his speech during the audience granted to the IDC, Francis starts by saying: “The Lord Jesus entrusted to the Apostles a new Commandment: ‘A new command I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also love one another.’ (Jn 13,34)” The Pope, too, confronts us with the unity between the love of God and the love for one’s neighbour and continues: “Deacons manifest the Commandment of Jesus in a particular way: imitating God in the service of others; imitating God who is love and even goes so far as to serve us ...” And, to my mind, if God serves us out of love, the mission of the deacons in the universal Church and in the world can also be understood in this way. In Francis’ words: “Deacons ... are the face of the Church in the daily life, the face of a community which lives and journeys in the midst of the people and in which the greatest is not the one who commands, but the one who serves (cf. Lk 22,26).”

Finally he states in his greeting message to the IDC Jubilee 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.”

7. What the deacons’ mission might consist of

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 the way as “go-betweeners” build bridges – between people, between languages, between cultures, between Heaven and Earth. In so doing, we deacons around the world are struggling with very different pastoral challenges. In our countries we have different diaconal traditions, some longer, some shorter. Those traditions have different faces and each has its own spirituality which for me can be, at the same time, strange and touching like, for instance, in Cuba where deacons and their wives give a diaconal witness together and totally do not understand how and why European and North American deacons travel without their wives. But it is precisely these differences and this abundance of colours which make the International Diaconate Centre such an inspiring space of learning within the universal Church and a bridge-building network.

What, then, is the deacons’ mission in the universal Church and in the world? As a deacon, I understand myself as an ambassador of our incarnate God who shows solidarity up until death and beyond it. I believe that with God’s incarnation our humanity also starts to take shape. As ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we are called to accompany other people on their ways towards their own humanity, those who are closest to us in our daily pastoral care and even those farthest away, everywhere in the world. If we carry each other’s burdens (Gal. 6,2), it may happen that the few who are convened will pray for the many who are absent for the moment. Conversely, those who are active in the world may act for those who live a contemplative life. Parishes, local Churches and communities of the universal Church are also interconnected – as proxies for each other. And for me personally, it means a lot to feel that somewhere in the world somebody is praying for me – and I for that person. A mission which reaches beyond one’s own church tower, a mission at the level of the universal Church does not represent, therefore, any additional burden, but a resource, a spiritual and inspiring resource.

Diakonia is our mission and we remind all the Christians, ex officio, that diakonia is the mission of the universal Church in favour of the whole world. Go, therefore, to the ends of the earth!