

## **What is a Deacon and what are the duties of this Ordained Minister of Christ within the Anglican (“Episcopal”) Churches?**

This question would not normally be raised in public, even if discussed in seminaries and by theological commissions. However, it has now become a topical, even a hot question, in Anglican churches.

Why so? Because the Synod of the Anglican [arch] diocese of Sydney, Australia, voted on October 28 to allow Deacons, male and female, with the bishop’s permission, to “preside” at the Lord’s Supper and “celebrate” Holy Communion.

This action created a wholly new situation in the Anglican Way, where universally it has been the rule and custom that only the Presbyter (Priest) or Bishop has the authority of Christ to be the Presiding Minister of the Eucharist. In other words, the decision by Sydney represented an “innovation” in doctrine. Until this Synod declared otherwise in late 2008, the Deacon had been understood by Anglicans as the assistant of the Priest (or Bishop) in the administration of this Sacrament.

To be clear about the identity and duties of the Deacon in the Anglican Way, we have to look at the Anglican Formularies, for they interpret Scripture and the tradition of the Early Church for us in terms of the ordained Ministry. Unless we answer our question from this authoritative basis and stay with it, then we are open to a very diverse and contradictory use of the word “deacon” both in contemporary biblical studies and by evangelical and charismatic churches.

We recall that in the historic Anglican Way, there are three Formularies, “The Book of Common Prayer,” “The Articles of Religion,” and “The Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests and Deacons.” Obviously the third of these directly relates to our search for a clear view of the identity and duties of a Deacon.

In the service entitled, “The Ordering of Deacons,” the specific duties of the deacon at Holy Communion are stated as following: to read the Gospel ; to preach the sermon (if and when asked); and to assist in the distribution of the

sacramental body and blood of Christ. Also the Deacon is required to instruct the youth in the Faith (Catechism), to baptize infants if (and only if) the Priest is absent, and to be involved in the care of the sick and needy of the parish. Finally, the Deacon is to set an example of personal godliness and Christian family life to the people of the parish.

If we move on to the Service entitled, "The Ordering of Priests," then we see very clearly that the Deacon, when ordained to the Presbyterate and becoming a Priest, is given specific authority from Christ through the ordaining Bishop: e.g., to declare absolution of sins, to proclaim the Word of God, and to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In other words, the Priest is given authority to do certain most important things which the Deacon is not authorized to do.

The text of the Order for Holy Communion is in "The Book of Common Prayer." If we read through this Rite, we see that it is the Priest (or Bishop) who is specifically required by the instructions (rubrics) to do certain things. Again these are the general presidency of the whole service, the pronouncement of forgiveness of sins to the penitent, the praying of the Eucharist/Consecration Prayer, and the giving of the Blessing to the people before they depart.

In the light of all this, why have Deacons been allowed to baptize infants in the absence of the priest? First of all, many infants died (and around the world still tragically die) within a short time of birth. Thus there is an urgency in baptizing the children of baptized Christians as soon after their birth as possible. Secondly, the basic administration of Infant Baptism (using the BCP of 1662) does not include or require the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sin or the giving of the Blessing by the Minister. Primarily it requires the use of the holy formula: "I baptize thee in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

So while it is good and right for the Pastor of the local church to be the Minister of Baptism under normal circumstances, it is not absolutely essential. By contrast, matters are very different with The Order for Holy Communion, where a Priest or Bishop is required for the Service to occur at all.