

IDC – The beginnings of the diaconate movement and of the IDC in Germany

In 1947, Forestry Office intern J. Kramer felt touched by Acts 6, 1-7¹. The vocation of the men who were supposed to help the Apostles in their charitable work captivated him. Hannes Kramer, very sensitive as he was to issues of social justice, had been confronted very early with the harshness of the Nazi regime. As a high school student he gave his school snack to an emaciated concentration camp inmate, only to be forced to witness how the man was then beaten up by camp guards. Through this occurrence and many more his inner-readiness to become a social worker in order to carry out his idea of diaconate grew constantly. Karl Rahner among others was, at this time by his side as an advisor. And so in 1950 Kramer started his formation of the Social Workers Seminary of the German Caritas Association in Freiburg.

During this formation, in 1951, he picked up on the keyword “Franciscan attitude” and asked: “Should we, the social workers at the service of the Church’s own charity work, not aim for diaconate, just as it carried out its task in early Christianity and as this service is recognizable symbolically in Acts 6, 1-7?”² His former close connection to the German Caritas Association would become, in time, a “hot spot” without which the Council wouldn’t have come to the point of reinstating the Diaconate.

In the spring of 1952, H. Kramer presented a thesis entitled “Bases of the Ordained Diaconate”³. In it the deacon is seen as part of the Ordained Ministry, directly responsible to the Bishop or to “his representatives particularly put in charge of charitable work”. His main task is seen as a multitude of works of Christian charity. He should also stimulate the communities in performing them. Kramer gives an unusual motivation for the pastoral dilemma and, at the same time, for the re-instatement of diaconate: It is pointless to have the priest ‘fill the gap which was caused by the lack of the diaconate’.⁴ From the very beginning, therefore, he sees this ministry as independent, based upon its rooting in the salvific action of Jesus Christ Himself, who, as *diaconos*, lovingly turned towards the man in need.

Over the following years, the first diaconate circles were founded, whereby the close connection to Caritas, including now the *Caritas Internationalis*, remained in place. Monsenior Rodhain, one of the co-founders of C.I., considers a close connection between Caritas and diaconate very fruitful. Such a connection could end the “charity crisis”. However, surely, some 50 years would be needed to free the diaconate from its degradation as a mere preliminary step to presbyterate. At the 1960 Eucharistic Congress in Munich, it is the same Monsenior Rodhain, founder and long-time Secretary General of the French charity “Secours catholique”, who spoke in favour of the permanent diaconate. He said: “A Stephen or a Francis are lacking in the clergy of 1960”⁵. The international contacts which developed on this occasion would be bundled and further developed in the “International Diaconate Circle”.

¹ C.f. as to the following: M. Morche, *Zur Erneuerung des Ständigen Diakonats*, Freiburg 1996, p. 36 sq.

² H. Kramer, *25 Jahre Diakonatskreis und Diakonatsbewegung*, in: *Diaconia XP 12* (1977), 1-2, 5-57, S. 7.

³ ADCV 058.6.025, brochure. 5

⁴ loc.cit., p.11

⁵ Quoted in M.Morche, *Erneuerung*, p.46.

A couple of years before, the Diaconate Circle in Munich contacted K. Rahner, among others. In the following period, Rahner was to become an indispensable theological advisor and companion of the diaconate movement. It was in the spring of 1956 that he first presented his theological ideas to the Diaconate circle. The important points he made then are: The sacramental character of the Church requires that essential exercise of the ministry be associated with ordination. However, the multiple tasks of the Church cannot be carried out by the priest only. The ecclesial situation calls for the diaconate—which, in keeping with both Scripture and tradition, does not necessarily mean a mere preliminary step towards presbyterate, but possesses an autonomous character within the Holy Orders.⁶

The discussion concerning the reinstatement of the permanent diaconate by the Council was stimulated, to a large extent, by K. Rahner and by his efforts prior to and during the Council itself. Eventually, it was the International Diaconate Circle, which, even before the conclusion of the Council, seized the opportunity and organized the International Study Conference on “The Deacon in the Church and World of Today” (Rome, October 22nd -24th, 1965). More than 250 persons from 27 countries participated—more than half of them were bishops and Cardinals. H. Kramer, René Schaller (Lyon) and Georg Hüßler, Ph.D., were intensively involved and acted as representatives of the organizers. Reports came in from every region of the world, which were subsequently published in the first issue of the *Diaconia XP* magazine, which has been published regularly ever since. The summary of the press conference following the meeting would be in telegraphic style: Deacon’s ordination—sacramental; deacon is a part of the hierarchy; formation has to be independent; a deacon with a civilian profession makes sense; service character; tasks in three basic actions of the Church not a restoration of the ministry, but a renewal within the context of modern society; age of ordination—still an open question. The crowning conclusion of this first ever diaconate congress was represented by an audience with Pope Paul VI on October 25, 1965 at 8 p.m. in the Vatican:

“Venerable brothers and dear sons,

We are happy to receive you and give you a warm welcome. Under the presidency of the Cardinals Julius Döpfner, Raul Silva Henriquez and Franjo Šeper you have reflected since last Friday together with zealous pastors and illustrious theologians, in an international studies meeting on the topic of what the deacon could and should be in the Church and in the society of today. In so doing, you have responded to one of the intentions of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, an intention which We have made Our own by the promulgation of the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. This Constitution explicitly says, after enumerating the tasks of the deacon and declaring those as ‘vital’ for the Church to the greatest extent: “The diaconate may be reinstated in the future as an autonomous and permanent step of the hierarchy.” You have set for yourselves the task of deepening the Council’s doctrine on diaconate and have also reflected on the formation and the tasks of the deacon, celibate or married, according to the multiplicity of conditions in different countries. Who does not see the great importance that the diakonia can have in our Christian communities, in the proclamation of the Word of God as well as in the service of the sacraments and in the exercise of charity? For this reason the pastors in charge will carefully select the new deacons and give them the best spiritual, theological, professional and pastoral formation for even if it is very appropriate to take into account very different ways of life according to each particular case, it remains true that only the pious and zealous deacon, living from the Gospel, can offer the bishops and priests the brotherly help which they expect from him for the greater good of the people of God entrusted to their care.

⁶ Cf. Loc.cit., p.49

Venerable brothers and beloved sons, may the almighty God stimulate your work with His grace to his greater glory and for the growth of His kingdom. 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. Now the hour has come for this decision of the Council to be put into practice. May Stephen the first deacon, Lawrence the martyr and all the deacon saints of the Church keep watch from heaven on those who are preparing themselves to receive the Holy Ordination to the diaconate and may the Lord bless all those who, following His call wish to service the people of God following their traces and their example. This is Our heartfelt wish!

From all Our heart We impart Our special apostolic blessing as a guarantee of the fullness of God's grace (Pope Paul VI)⁷

- The International Diaconate Circle, already before the Council, came to have an enormous amount of tasks. For this reason, even before the studies conference—during the council—one came to the logical decision to found an International Information Centre for Diaconate Issues. This should “be at the service of all those who deal with the practical and theoretical problems concerning the diaconate, by means of an exchange of information and suggestions”⁸. This marked the foundation of the International Diaconate Centre. It had its headquarters in the building of the German Caritas Association in Freiburg. Its first president was the Secretary General of the GCA, Georg Hüssler, PhD, and H. Kramer was elected as its first secretary. Even before the beginning of the audience Pope Paul VI was informed about the Congress and the founding of the International Diaconate Centre. He expressed agreement and encouraged further work.

Later that same year the Centre began sending out information. Models for formation were compiled; the first issue of the Diaconia Christi Magazine was published in 1966. In 1968 the first major diaconal conference took place in San Miguel, Argentina. Planned by the CELAM it was prepared jointly with the IDC. Hüssler and Kramer were among the participants. Five years after the foundation, the statistics are not so encouraging as originally expected. At the time there were 97 deacons: 2 in Algeria, 9 in Belgium, 13 in Brazil, 8 in Cameroon, 9 in Chile, 5 in France 45 in Germany, 2 in India, 1 in Indonesia, 1 in Paraguay and 2 in South Africa.

- In the year 1969, the International Diaconate Centre was given the legal form of a registered non-profit association. In the previous four years, the Centre had proven its importance most impressively. Now came the time for its legal consolidation. The structure of the first Board corresponded to the international and ecumenical objective and orientation. The IDC, which from the very beginning has found many supporters and road companions, was also confronted with many financial impasses. Beside the publication of the magazine, it acts in an advisory capacity all over the world; it publishes guidelines for the implementation of the diaconate, supports publications, organizes conferences, forces ecumenical co-operation.

The co-operation and support soon gained an international character and global dimensions; so, for example, as soon as 1970, a questionnaire was sent to the leaders of the African Bishops' Conference: Is there a place for diaconate in the Churches of Africa? In November of the same year, a Studies' Conference was organized in Belgium, in the years around 1970, the IDC offered its assistance to many Bishops' Conferences (CELAM, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Argentina, Canada, USA, Italy, France, France, Cameroon, Africa, Switzerland). In Pianezza, Italy, a Studies' Conference was organized in 1977, in

⁷ Diaconia XP, 1 (1966), p. 13-15

⁸ G. Hüssler, H. Kramer, VI. Treffen der Mitglieder und Freunde der Diakonatskreise, in: Diaconia Christi (1966), 2, p. 97.

1978 a Symposium on Diaconate for Women took place in Freiburg. The International Diaconate Conference was hosted by Belgium in 1979.

In the Board, A. Gondan replaced H. Kramer in 1979. Various financial difficulties eventually lead to a change of headquarters in late 1992, the IDC moved from Freiburg to Rottenburg-Stuttgart. Bishop W. Kasper integrated the IDC in the structures of his diocese; all the while, in agreement with the IDC Board, he sought the official recognition by the Church. This was granted by the German Bishops' Conference in 1994.

On Holy Thursday of the same year, H. Kramer gave an interview in which he speaks about the beginnings of his vocation and those of the diaconate movement. What is still relevant, after all those years? Given that even the written word is still imbued with some of the charisma that this pioneer brought with himself, we would like to quote here a brief excerpt from that interview. In it, Hannes Kramer says:

"However, there is also, a fundamental criterion of the diaconate which the Church as a whole adopted in the council: 'ordained not for the priesthood, but for service'. For the service of Jesus, at the tables of the poor, in –as I like to say– diaconal Church. Has the Church as a whole converted to a God of the poor, to a Church of the poor and small ones, of the sick and enslaved ones? Even in her proclamation of the Gospel, in her *diakonia*, in her approach to her own riches and to power? What does this mean 'concretely' today... in our context: To be able to see with the eyes of the other, of the asylum-seeker, of the immigrant, to see the 'other Christ' in him and act accordingly? We deacons are still on the way towards that, together with our Church.

Moreover; are the criteria from that time still valid today? As early as 1952, in the first Diaconate Circle... we formulated 'nine principles for the ordained diaconate'. Do these have anything to say to the deacons of today? The most important: 'Diaconate is a vocation'. To what, from whom?

'To be pervaded by God's love for all people' which also includes the 'others', non-Christians and foreigners and loving them in our concrete actions. 'To strengthen the spirit of Christian charity' and to stimulate, as well as perform oneself, such works as would correspond to it, as 'main' (but not only) task; this is what we set as the objective of the service. A modern welfare/social work formation, together with a thorough religious/catechetical formation were, for those times, a somewhat high standard as a pre-requisite for the service. In a nutshell: called, educated, competent in the social-diaconal field, spiritually well-formed, preserved in the family, chosen by the parish community, sent out and commissioned by the bishop. What of all that still has a meaning today, what doesn't and why? In our criteria, we were surely closer to Acts 6, 1-7- precisely because of their example character, than Vatican II with its catalogue of tasks (drafted, back then, by Bishop Kloppenburg, based on his memories of the lack of priests in Brazil). The deacon should live and work in the midst of the Christian people; that, for us, meant being a deacon existentially and not just functionally, 'not different in anything on the outside', 'marriage should be the natural state'-without thereby touching celibacy as a charisma in all the different states, including diaconate.

For the young diaconate movement-and for those young men and their wives-the following was important, above all: *Diakonia*, charity, love of one's neighbour should be newly understood and lived in the parish communities not only as an essential ecclesial action, beside and together with liturgy and proclamation-this also; not merely as the task of the Caritas association, as a free organization of social care-this also; but primarily as a fundamental ecclesial dimension of the Christian life of faith and community life ('the Seven'). A fundamental dimension means that the community services are

intertwined, that they sustain the life of the community and that none of these acts, especially charity/diakonia can be split off or evacuated from the community without damage to the same. Logically, we wanted a church whose treasure is the poor (St. Lawrence), we wanted our own conversion to a simple life, full of respect for the poor and we also wanted the conversion of the Church as a whole (St. Francis of Assisi). Love to all, especially to the poor, service of the Church in the midst of society meant that the agenda of the Church had to be determined by the agenda of the world and its human and social needs. 'The primary act of love towards God is love towards one's neighbour' (Karl Rahner). . . .

The Church and the parish community should see the signs of the times and carry out their service of reconciliation in the light of the Gospel, primarily with the weak and the poor, for the life of the world, in order to save, not to judge (Jn. 12, 47). Today, one would speak, in the terms of liberation theology, about the Church turning towards the poor, about the preferential option for the poor, perhaps also about liberation from one's own chains of dependence of the social and individual power systems. For us, then, it was not so important to reinstate a ministry and secure a place for it in the organizational structure of the Church. I hope that this will not become too big of a worry for the deacons, to the extent that they establish and install themselves in that structure. Getting involved in this could become a bondage and bring an end to our cause. " ⁹

In his book "Faith as an Option: Future Opportunities of Christianity" ¹⁰, the sociologist Hans Joas, in the chapter "The Future of Christianity", lists three key notions which have a great importance for him. The third of those is "The Globalisation of Christianity" ¹¹. For a religious diagnosis of the present one must—according to Joas—adopt a global perspective, certainly not a Euro-centric one. The thesis that the 20th century was an era of secularisation only has a partial validity for Europe. In the U.S.A. church membership was on the increase during the same period; in Africa Christianity and Islam expanded heavily; in Asia, the various religious traditions took up the challenge posed by Christianity in various ways. Moreover, the proportion of religious persons in the world population is on the increase not only with regards to Islam, but also with regards to Christianity. From a demographic point of view Christianity is expanding worldwide. According to estimates, in present day Africa, 23,000 persons become added to the number of Christians each day (by birth or by conversion). In South Korea one third of the population declare themselves Christians. In China, it seems that more Christians attend a Sunday Church service than in the whole of Western Europe. And these are just a couple of highlights. They show, however, that we shouldn't doubt Christianity's chances of survival. It is more likely that we are witnesses "of one of the most intensive expansion phases in the whole history of Christianity." ¹² This fact and others which we cannot consider here will loosen even further the identification of Christianity with Europe. Actually, in the first century of its existence, Christianity was not centred in Europe at all "an African observer has characterised the current globalisation of Christianity very aptly as "a renewal of a non-Western religion". ¹³

⁹ M. Morche, Erneuerung, p. 215 sq.

¹⁰ H. Joas, Glaube als Option. Zukunftsmöglichkeiten des Christentums, Freiburg 2012.

¹¹ Cf. loc. cit.. p. 192 sq.

¹² Ibid., p. 195

¹³ Ibid, p 197

If our faith establishes itself in the world outside our own cultural space (shaped by Christianity for such a long time) and even in conditions of mass poverty and uprooting, then Christianity must reflect upon the shape it will take in the future. Hans Joas sees above all the need for a more intensive ecumenical dialogue and co-operation. For the future, one would have to give really good justifications for failing to interact ecumenically. The globalisation of Christianity also increases “the importance of inter-religious dialogue and of the co-operation between Christian Churches and non-Christian religious communities.”¹⁴ But especially important for Joas is a certain love ethos which would stress the Biblical tradition against the selfish-utilitarian and expressive-narcissistic individualism. For the Biblical tradition, as we know, is all about a moral decentralisation: people do not feel indebted only towards persons belonging to the same family, nation or religion, but to all people including future generations. No philosophy in the world has so far managed to give sufficient motivation for why a person should adopt such a life orientation. Becoming sensitive to the suffering of others is also part and parcel of the Biblical responsibility ethics. Justice and love as key notions are the force of our Christian ethos which can and must be made valid throughout the world. The notion of “Network of Agape”¹⁵ initiated by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor could be, in this respect, the image of a sustainable Church. He writes: “The heart and soul of this new relationship is the Agape, which should not be understood as the mere reference to a set of rules, but as the extension of a certain relationship, which expands into a network”.¹⁶ This is also a wonderful image of the history and importance of the IDC.

¹⁴ Ibid p. 199

¹⁵ C. Taylor, Ein säkulares Zeitalter, Frankfurt/Main 2009.

¹⁶ Loc.cit., p. 480