

Pro Diakonia in the German Speaking Area

Who is the **deacon**? What specific role is assigned to him? Does he function as a bridge between the parish charity work and the Caritas Association? Or as a representative of the poor? How does this ministry develop since its reinstatement by the Second Vatican Council in the various continents?

The **Pro Diakonia Project** is devoted to strengthening the permanent diaconate and its independence within the relationship existing between the ranks of the hierarchy, for otherwise the permanent diaconate would not be viable. The project started in the year 2001 in the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart—with the intention of strengthening both the parish charity work and that performed by the Caritas Association in 11 specific locations and in doing so to give the permanent diaconate therein. The process thus triggered was supervised from a theological, sociological and empirical-scientific point of view (Kießling 2006).

Due to the interest aroused by this project in the Church **on an international level** and also thanks to the networking efforts of the International Diaconate Centre, the project could be continued—by means of momentary recordings obtained through template-based interviews during which permanent deacons outlined the specific pastoral challenges of their region as well as their understanding of themselves. Furthermore, they gave information in response to questions about spirituality, family, formation and their civilian professions as well as the future of the diaconate both in their region and in the world: first in Latin America (Kießling & Mähr 2007) then in Southern Africa (Kießling & Mähr 2011) and most recently in India (Kießling 2012 as well as Kießling & Wagner 2012).

Permanent **deacons** work as such either **exclusively as deacons or in a civilian profession**. According to the report recently released by the working group setup in 2009 by the Commission for Vocations and Ministries of the German Bishops' Conference, there are 2,987 permanent deacons in Germany of whom 2,368 are active, among these 895, that is 38% work exclusively as deacons and 1,473 (62%) have a civilian profession. The latter exercise the profession they had trained for even after their ordination. But they are not deacons beside or with their civilian profession; they are deacons also **in** their civilian profession. It is precisely through the civilian profession that the Church ministry acquires a specific closeness to life and a specific chance to give a credible witness also in the professional world—and bring it back in the liturgy. However, a reflection on how deacons are present with the whole diversity of their civilian professions, as Church in the midst of society and on what opportunities are, conversely, linked to the fact that the deacons bring a wide spectrum of professional competence into the Church, has scarcely taken place.

Since the beginning of this project, Pro Diakonia was dedicated to the activity of deacons working full time for the Church, because it was only within this framework that they could take upon themselves the responsibility of leading the *diakonia* in the selected locations for the duration of the project. But at the very latest as the project went on to an international level, it became evident what an important role was attributed by e.g. the Latin American deacons to their civilian professions. Anyhow, in a Church of the poor, the deacon in a civilian profession will have a greater future than the deacon working exclusively for the Church, the latter being even today a reality present only in some regions of the world where the Church is financially stronger. Therefore all arguments are in favour of giving special attention to the **diaconate in a civilian profession**, especially as we prepare to continue Pro Diakonia.

When it comes to the **German speaking area** considerable inter-diocesan differences are manifested, both in the understanding the deacons have of themselves and in the assessment of the diaconate in a civilian profession by the Church as a whole a fact revealed constantly by the Austrian, Swiss and German nation-wide diaconal events. For this reason it appears as definitely worthwhile to start the Pro Diakonia project with clergymen with civilian professions living and working in the German speaking area before engaging in a certainly very exciting internationalisation thereof.

The German speaking area comprises of **27 German, 9 Austrian and 6 Swiss dioceses**; in the latter the deacon without a civilian profession is really at the centre. 42 conceptions about the diaconate in a civilian profession and its specific opportunities and limitations are, therefore, at work at the same time. Before one can endeavour to engage in a representative survey of the diaconate in a civilian profession in the German speaking area, it is important to assess this diversity of contents empirically. Given the pilot character of this study, a qualitative research is needed which, on the one hand raises those questions about the way a deacon in a civilian profession understands himself, that constitute the driving force of this project and, on the other hand, opens up the necessary space in which the interviewees in the position of experts express even unasked-for experiences which have an important role for themselves and their diocese. Faced with the diversity of the diocesan formation procedures, and with the different pastoral positioning of the deacons in a civilian profession, the qualitative research has a value of its own. It will reveal some contents and some ways of seeing oneself from which an innovative and inspiring force will come forth. At the same time, a crucial pre-requisite condition is met for the subsequent creation and use of quantitative–empirical research approaches upon a solid basis, which would lead to the testing of the previously generated theses and would be tailor-made for the requirements which are representative for the German speaking area.

As was the case with Pro Diakonia before, the project involving German speaking deacons in a civilian profession also lives from the joining together of the competences present in the International Diaconate Centre and in the Institute for Pastoral Psychology and Spirituality of the Sankt Georgen Jesuit Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology in Frankfurt. Given the already existing connections a field work would be easily structured in such a way that one full-time researcher or two people sharing a job would contact all 42 dioceses in the space of a year. They will create a conversation template together with the project leaders; subsequently make an appointment with a deacon in a civilian profession who is knowledgeable enough about his diocese in order to collect the data on-site; carry out interviews with all the 42 subjects in accordance with well-established sociological methods; transcribe the interviews completely and start evaluating them. The traveling connected with the **data collection** will be coordinated; the **data treatment** will take, even for trained personnel, one working day per hour of interview; only then can the **evaluation of the data** begin. The data has to be consolidated thematically. To the full-time job limited in time to one year another 50% job will be added to last for another 3 years. During this time individual portraits can result from the **consolidated data** before **grouping** them according to a central theme—across the person-centred and diocesan evaluations. While the individual portraits would provide a plastic representation of the expected plurality of the faces of the diaconate, the grouping will have the task to possibly reveal the common fundamental features of such a face. In this way one will obtain both a general result which will provide practical orientation and the basis for the quantitative research. Within the total timeframe of 4 years, the qualitative research will be connected with the additionally given research status and be embedded in it in such a way that from these empirically desired aims a **scientific qualification work** will arise. The aim seems attainable also in view of the fact that with this procedure rich and encouraging experiences have already been collected—within the framework of Pro Diakonia as well as in numerous other projects of the Institute for Pastoral Psychology and Spirituality

A selection of keynote German language publications by Klaus Kießling on Pro Diakonia

Ständige Diakone – Stellvertreter der Armen? Projekt Pro Diakonia: Prozess – Positionen – Perspektiven (Diakonie und Ökumene / Diakonia and Ecumenics; Bd. 2), Münster: Lit, 2006.

Pro Diakonia Latina oder: Vom lebensnahen Mut der Diakone in Lateinamerika (Parts I and II), in: *Diaconia Christi* 42 (2007) 25 – 60 und 158 – 172 (with Michael Mähr).

Pro Diakonia Africana: Die Diakone im Südlichen Afrika als Brückenbauer zwischen Gesellschaft und Kirche, in: *Diaconia Christi* 46 (2011) 9 – 68 (with Michael Mähr).

Pro Diakonia Asiatica I: Ständiger Diakonat in der kulturell pluralen Welt Indiens, in: *Diaconia Christi* 47 (2012/1) 22 – 27.

Pro Diakonia Asiatica II: Portraits von Diakonen, Kandidaten und Diözesanverantwortlichen in der kulturell pluralen Welt Indiens, in: *Diaconia Christi* 47 (2012/1) 42 – 53.

Pro Diakonia Asiatica III: Weitere Portraits von Diakonen in der kulturell pluralen Welt Indiens, in: *Diaconia Christi* 47 (2012/1) 77 – 88 (with Hermann-Josef Wagener).