

## Who are the Deacons?

In the Coptic Orthodox church, as well as many other churches like Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic churches, a deacon is an ordained assisting minister carrying a cleric ranking just below a priest. The word deacon anglicized from the Late Latin "diaconus", and from Greek "diakonos" meaning "attendant, messenger, assistant, or servant."

Many Old Testament passages foreshadow the onset of this rank and reveal much about it. **The Holy Books**, Numbers 1:50, 3:5-8, and 1 Chronicles 23:25-30 tell us that the Levites were assigned the task of serving the tabernacle of the testimony and its furnishings, serving Aaron the priest and his sons in the work of the House of the Lord, attending to the congregation's needs, attending to the children of Israel, and standing every morning and evening as well as during feasts and other spiritual occasions to thank and praise the Lord. Another symbol of this order may be seen in the **Holy Book** of Exodus (18:21-25) which relates how Moses chose seventy of the elders of Israel to help him judge the people. Moses selected them from all the people's able men: those who feared God, were men of truth, and hated covetousness.

Moreover, the deaconship appears in the New Testament in many occasions such as: deacons associated with bishops in (Philippians 1:1), the work of ministering ("diakonia") the saints in (1 Corinthians 16:15-18), Archippus who received the ministry ("diakonia") in the Lord (Colossians 4:17), and Phoebe the servant ("diaconus") of the church in Cenchrea. Yet, the origin of deaconship in the New Testament may be found in the Holy Book of Acts of the Apostles 6:1-6 where the apostles advised the disciples to choose seven men of good report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, who should take en-

tire charge of the service of "serving tables" leaving the apostles free to devote themselves entirely to the spiritual functions of their office. The deacon's office was at first secular, but it afterwards became also spiritual, for among other qualifications they must also be "apt to teach" (1 Timothy 3:8-12). Both St. Philip and St. Stephen, the archdeacon and the first martyr, who were of "the seven," preached; they did the work of evangelists.

The Coptic Synaxarium discloses that at least two of the seven first deacons: St. Timon (reading on Babah 26), and St. Prochorus (readings on Tubah 20) were among the seventy disciples who were called by the Lord (Luke 10:1-20). They were sent to preach His name, and were granted the gift of healing and of casting out evil spirits. Those deacons received their servant training from our Lord Himself; He taught them how to minister, gave them instructions, granted them authority, and received their feedback when they returned with joy. More importantly, our sweet Lord honored the deaconship by being the First Deacon and the outstanding model, seeing that the four **Holy Gospels** used the word "diaconus" to express The Christ as a minister of humanity's salvation (Luke 12:37). It is worthy to mention that, on Covenant Thursday, the Lord Jesus described Himself as a servant ("diaconus"). St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch [A.D. 30-107] in his epistle to the Magnesians, said "I exhort you to study to do all things with a divine harmony, literally, 'in the harmony of God.' while your bishop presides in the place of God, and your presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, along with your deacons, who are most dear to me, and are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ."

### Deacon's Corner

Written by  
A Mighty Arrow





In our Coptic Church, there are five ranks of deaconship. In ascending order, they are:

**Epsaltos (hymnist or chanter) – “altyc:**

Epsaltos is derived from the Coptic word “epsalmos” meaning “psalm” or “hymn”. Hence, “epsaltos” means “hymnist” or “chanter”. According to his title, the epsaltos’ responsibilities include learning and singing the hymns and praises of the church. This rank is mentioned in some of the early Church Canons: “Hymnists also must be blessed by the bishop”. “... They (epsaltos) also teach others how to sing without envy... If the epsaltos are not singing with the Holy Spirit, let them not sing” [Canons of Pope Athanasius II (A.D. 489-496)] . The epsaltos is permitted to wear the tunic without the stole.

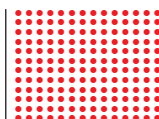
**Ognostis (reader) - Anagnwctyc:**

“Ognostis” is from the Greek word “anagnostes” derived from two words: “anagnosma”, meaning “reading”, and “tis”, meaning “related to”. Thus, “ognostis” means “the reader”. He must read the epistles clearly and without mistakes to enable the congregation to hear and understand

them. He must be able to teach and explain the scriptures, and thus must constantly read the Holy Bible as well as the explanations of the holy Church fathers. He also reads the list of Patriarchs - “Let those who read recite the name of our holy patriarchs...” - after the commemoration of the saints. The ognostis wears a white tunic with the stole. He wears the red stole crossing over the shoulders and around his waist as a belt, and the ends of the stole hang from his shoulders. The Greek word for “stole” is “patrachelion” meaning “grace”. The rank of deacon is a grace which is taken by an individual and carried on his shoulders. It hangs on the back like a cross to symbolize that he is carrying the cross. The stole comes around the waist like a belt, as proof of preparation and readiness for service, like St. John the Baptist who wore a leather belt around his waist.

**Hepodiakon (subdeacon) - Hupodiakwn:**

Hepodiakon is a Greek word composed of two parts: “hepo” meaning “assistant”, and “diacon” meaning “deacon”. Hence, “Hepodiakon”



means "assistant deacon". He must keep watch over the church doors to forbid the entry of heretics and false teachers, organize people's seating in the church, light the church lamps, and keep in order the church books and the priestly and servants' vestments. He is responsible for preparing the censers and replacing them if necessary, while also helping the other deacons. He wears the white tunic with the red stole hanging from his right shoulder.

### **Diakon (full deacon) - Diakwn:**

"Deacon" in Syrian or "diakon" in Greek and Coptic mean "servant". He is responsible for praying the responses to the prayers of the priest during the raising of incense and liturgy and other services. He maintains order and silence in the church, helps the priest in visiting the church's congregation, and records the names of the people who have offered gifts and oblations to the church so that the priest can remember them during the Litany of Oblations. In the Apostolic Canons (Didascalia), it is written "The deacons write every day the names of those who have given offerings, whether they are alive or departed, so that they may be remembered during the readings and prayers" (Didascalia 35). The deacon is responsible for cleaning the altar and preparing the bread, wine, water, vessels, candles, books, and the sanctuary for the Divine Liturgy. He is permitted to read the Holy Gospel of the Divine Liturgy. During the deacon's ordination, the bishop says: "... he is honored to read the Gospel." He is permitted, when necessary, to carry the chalice and give the congregation the precious Blood, by permission from the priest. He also teaches, distributes money to the needy, visits and comforts the ill, widows, orphans, and prisoners. In the early Church, deacons also baptized (Acts 8:4-18), and delivered communion to the sick. A consecrated deacon may marry only before the ordination. He may not re-marry after ordination, even if his wife dies. His attire during the services is a black robe with a white tunic and the red stole hanging from his right shoulder and a "crown" on his head. During all other times, he wears a black robe, a cross, and a belt around his waist to distinguish him from priests.

### **Archdiakon (leader of deacons) - Ar,ydiakwn:**

"Archdiakon" is a Greek word composed of two parts: "arch" meaning "leader", and "diakon" meaning "deacon". Hence, "archdeacon" means "the leader of deacons". He is the head of all ranks of the diaconate. His duties are:

makes all necessary arrangements for church services; assigns various tasks to deacons, sub-deacons, readers, and psalters; keeps church books, vessels, and vestments; ensures that charity is received by the needy; acts as a contact on behalf of the bishop; and participates in recommending candidates for the priesthood. His attire is similar to that of the deacon.

Finally, there exist two deacon services which are in a "special" category:

### **Deaconess:**

This service is for females and is mentioned by St. Paul in chapter 5 of his first epistle to St. Timothy. This servant must be a virgin or a widow and be consecrated wholly to the service. She would be ordained by the bishop as would be the case with any of the other deacon servants. She would assist the priest in the service of the women, such as visiting the poor and sick, baptisms and anointing, and keeping order among the ladies in the church during communion. Famous examples of deaconesses in the Holy Bible and church history are Phoebe in the Holy Book of Romans 16:1 and Olympias, the deaconess of St. John Chrysostom.

### **Qayem:**

This servant is responsible for making the bread used for the oblations in the Divine Liturgy. He must be a deacon and know the psalms which he would recite while preparing the oblations.

Let us, as deacons, read carefully what St. Polycarp, the disciple of St. John the beloved, advised us to heed: "Knowing, then, that 'God is not mocked,' we ought to walk worthy of His commandment and glory. In like manner should the deacons be blameless before the face of His righteousness, as being the servants of God and Christ. Some read, 'God in Christ' and not of men. They must not be slanderers, double-tongued, or lovers of money, but temperate in all things, compassionate, industrious, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who was the servant of all [compare with (Matthew 20:28)]. If we please Him in this present world, we shall receive also the future world, according to His promise to us that He will raise us again from the dead and that if we live worthily of Him, 'we shall also reign together with Him,' provided only we believe" [The Epistle of Polycarp (A.D. 65-100-155) to the Philippians].