
In Persona Christi: Applying Diaconal Life to Liturgical Presiding

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The 2019 decision of the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to ratify ordination as the entrance rite to the Word and Service (diaconal) ministry roster inaugurated a new era of polity and praxis. Among other things, the decision demonstrates the church's willingness to adapt to the changing needs of its constituents and the norms of its partners, while simultaneously maintaining the dignity and standards required for ordained ministry. Shared seminary formation, the rite of ordination, and mutual ministry expectations all point to a renewal of the church's diaconal call to faith and service in Christ.

Liturgically, however, the implementation of the ordained role of Word and Service (deacon) has, in effect, produced a contrary result. After all, the diaconal liturgical role has been prevalent among North American Lutherans since at least 1978 in the form of the non-ordained assisting minister. Add to this the long-standing communities of deaconesses and the more recent development of synod-authorized ministry (SAM), we recognize that the distinct liturgical role of the ordained deacon is not a foregone conclusion. Should he supplant the lay assisting minister? Should they limit their role to preaching? Should she fill the role of co-presiding minister?

Each of these possible scenarios presents its own set of challenges. Yet it is the practice of the ordained deacon as co-presiding minister or as substitute presiding minister in the absence of a person ordained to Word and Sacrament ministry (pastor)—along with similar practice among SAMs—that most muddies our shared understanding of mission by ritually reinforcing deacons as pastoral assistants and not as ordained ministers with a distinct formation and bearing. Ironically, this refocuses the liturgical celebration inwardly toward a mission rooted in the preservation of the local assembly and its facilities rather than outwardly toward a life of service for all creation. By inviting pastors and deacons to fully embody their distinctive liturgical identities, we can discover a clearer image of the diaconal Christ, who gives life away for the sake of the world.

The eucharistic assembly

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The reformers of the sixteenth century continued this pattern, “celebrat[ing] [the Eucharist] every Lord’s day and on other festivals.”¹ This assembly, according to the Lutheran confessions, constitutes nothing less than the Christian church itself, for “at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”² The church is continually at Word, Bath, and Table.³ This assembly of believers further places Sunday—both first and eighth day of creation, redemption, and sanctification—as the “primary day on which . . . to worship.”⁴ The importance of Sunday as the primary feast day of the Christian calendar demands all assemblies be afforded the opportunity to gather on Sunday, the day God’s children gather at Table.

For the sake of order and under the discernment of the Holy Spirit, Lutheran assemblies hold that “no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper (public) call,” and so lifts up as presider a called and ordained

1. “Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 258.

2. “The Augsburg Confession,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., trans. Eric Gritsch (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 42.

3. See Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

4. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament” (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 13.

minister to serve in the name of Christ within the pastoral office.⁵ Therefore, in order for the assembly—the local church—to exist in its fullest expression, a person ordained to Word and Sacrament ministry ought be present and active in that assembly’s life to ensure those at Table are fed not merely with crumbs, but with all God’s fullness. In such a way, the church-at-large is to institutionally support, govern, and encourage the local church—that is, the assembly—by discerning, educating, and forming individuals called to such public ordained ministry.

In the absence of a person ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, however, how should the assembly constitute itself and still gather around the fullness of God’s gifts in both Word and Sacrament? Certainly, the institutional church allows for extended absences in the form of interim and pulpit-supply pastors, but to what extent is this the best use of pastoral human resources? In other cases, such as dual or multiple-point parishes, is the pastor’s health and well-being at stake when required to travel many miles to various eucharistic assemblies in the course of a given Sunday, to say nothing of the problematic lack of environmental stewardship considerations in such fossil fuel consumption?⁶ And what about the case of emergencies that call the pastor away from the assembly without time to provide for a substitute? At times like these, does not the assembly cry out to be fed, reminding all leaders, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mark 7:28)?

In partnership with pastoral ministry, diaconal ministry provides additional human resources for our assemblies. By doing so, however, deacons do not and should not wish to overturn the work and ministry of the universal church in and through pastors, nor establish a new type of Eucharist separate from one at which a pastor presides. Rather, ordained (and consecrated) diaconal people are and should first be about complementing this work and ministry, calling it beyond itself toward the larger world it inhabits. To keep and emphasize this complementarity, deacons seek to maintain Word and Sacrament presiders at the Eucharist as the norm of Christian assembly, while also working to ensure that all Christians have local access to the means of grace each Sunday and feast day. Therefore, the diaconal call and purpose is nothing less than to enable and encourage the church—the local assembly—to be its truest, fullest self. In doing so, deacons broaden the classic definition of *in persona Christi*, encouraging a deepened understanding of Christ’s own *persona* as both the model for ministry and the sacramental habitus of both pastors and all the baptized.

In Persona Christi

The axiom *in persona Christi* may sound foreign to most contemporary Lutherans in the twenty-first century. The idea that a pastor represents or takes on the persona of Christ in a substantial

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way in the celebration of the Eucharist appears to venture away from an internalized sense of the priesthood of all believers than might seem comfortable to most Lutherans. Historically, the axiom flirts with such profound doctrinal divides as *ex opere operato* and even transubstantiation. Yet at the heart of conceiving the ordained pastor *in persona Christi* when presiding at the Eucharist is a truly Lutheran understanding of the means of grace. Namely, it is God’s Word joined with earthy elements of water, bread, and wine, that effect the sacrament by faith.

Dennis Michael Ferrara made this case in scholarly debate regarding the perceived lack of authority the Roman Church claims over the ability to admit women to the order of presbyters, the priesthood. Numerous declarations and other statements by the Holy See over many years affirm that the original sense of the axiom *in persona Christi*, along with other historical factors, means that the celebration of the Eucharist as ordained by Christ is restricted to those who can exercise *his* presence fully. Challenging this notion, Ferrara argues *in persona Christi* “bear[s] a primarily ‘apophatic’ rather than representational sense.”⁷ That is, to speak of the ordained presiding minister as being *in persona Christi* is to say that he/she/they do not so much perform the role of Christ in a eucharistic pageant as to indicate with poignancy the absence of the physical risen Christ at the eucharistic table. In this model, to preside *in persona Christi* speaks not to the presider’s “likeness to Christ, [rather] to his [*sic*] otherness from Christ.”⁸

In observing this apophatic nuance, Ferrara relies heavily on Aquinas’ use of the axiom in *Summa Theologica*. Of note for Lutherans, Aquinas emphasizes that “the ministers of the church operate instrumentally in the sacraments...an instrument does not act in accordance with its own form or power, but in accordance with the power which moves it.”⁹ Likewise, the words of consecration “are spoke in the person of Christ, they receive an

5. “The Augsburg Confession,” 46.

6. While I do not seek to impose Roman canon law upon other communions, something may be said for the relationship between self-care and the restriction on Roman priests to preside at no more than three masses per day.

7. Dennis Michael Ferrara, “Representation or Self-Effacement? The Axiom *In Persona Christi* in St. Thomas and the Magisterium,” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 196.

8. Ferrara, “Representation,” 199.

9. Aquinas, *ST* 3. q. 64, a. 5 c., quoted in Ferrara, “Representation,” 200.

instrumental power by virtue of his mandate.”¹⁰ By this, Ferrara contends, “the priest appears not as ‘another Christ’ but as ‘another than Christ,’ one whose entire being as priest is ministerial and instrumental unto the glory of the Lord.”¹¹

Understanding the eucharistic presidency as a role that sublimates itself into Christ’s action in the sacrament should ring true for Lutherans who recall these questions from their confirmation instruction:

What is the Sacrament of the Altar? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and drink.

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? The words ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sin’ show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.

How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing? Eating and drinking certainly does not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sin.’ These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes these very words has what they declare and state, namely, ‘forgiveness of sin.’¹²

At the core not only of Ferrara’s interpretation of Aquinas regarding the ministry of Word and Sacrament but also for Luther is God’s action in Christ through human hands, human presence in the form of the presiding minister, whose presence *in persona Christi* is a manifestation of the absence of Christ’s bodily presence and the presence of Christ’s sacramental presence.

What is this persona of Christ made manifest in the presiding minister? Certainly, the presider functions as an instrument of Christ’s action in the sacrament. But to speak of presiding *in persona Christi*, even in the apophatic understanding Ferrara elucidates, requires some form of identification with and understanding of Christ’s own persona, Christ’s own nature. Though Paul uses the word δούλου (*doúlou*—slave) to describe Jesus’ self-emptying in the great hymn of Philippians 2, in John’s Gospel, Jesus uses a different term to describe such self-emptying: “Whoever serves (διακονέω) me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant (διάκονος) be also. Whoever serves (διακονέω) me, the Father will honor” (John 12:26). Taken in

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the context of the Johannine narrative, to be where Jesus is means to be enthroned upon the cross, to empty oneself for the life of the world. Here, at least, this self-emptying Christly persona is *diaconal*.

Historically, of course, deaconesses and deacons have not expressed their vocation as primary presiding ministers of the eucharistic liturgy. Concerned first with ministries of service, diaconal ministers have most often served as emissaries or go-betweens in the context of liturgical celebration. Deacons and deaconesses express the words of a bishop or presbyter to the larger assembly, guide the assembly through the liturgy, and ensure that all is taken care of in support of the bishop’s or presbyter’s ministry of presiding and preaching. Though called upon to preach at times, the deaconess’s/deacon’s long-standing liturgical role calls forth a preaching in deed more often than in word.

Such deedly preaching is commonly understood in the modern diaconal community as originating in liturgical praxis other than presiding at the eucharistic table. In her chapter in *The Deacon’s Ministry*, “Finding Images,” Anglican Deacon Antonia Lynn discerns five primary images of diaconal ministry: “the Servant, the Table-Layer, the Story-Teller, the Door-Keeper, and the Guardian of Lights.”¹³ Each of these images conjure various dimensions of social ministry in the life of the diaconate, yet each image takes its origin from the liturgical assembly:

1. the Servant is most often expressed as Foot-Washer, as seen in the *Mandatum* rite of Maundy Thursday;
2. the Table-Layer is seen at every Eucharist, where the Deacon sets and clears the Table before and after the Meal;
3. the Story-Teller reminds the assembly of the Deacon’s historic

10. Aquinas, *ST 3*, q. 78, a. 4 c., quoted in Ferrara, “Representation,” 200.

11. Ferrara, “Representation,” 201.

12. Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 1166.

13. Antonia Lynn, “Finding Images,” in *The Deacon’s Ministry*, ed. Christine Hall (Leominster, UK: Gracewing/Fowler Wright Books, 1991), 103.

role in proclaiming the Gospel from the ambo for the assembly to hear while the presider spoke it within the sanctuary for the sake of the rite;

4. the Door-Keeper speaks of hospitality and welcome, as well as defense of the assembly from external threats;
5. the Guardian of Lights refers to the Deacon's role in carrying the Paschal candle and proclaiming the *Exsultet* at the Easter Vigil.

Deaconess E. Louise Williams, L.D.A., took up these images in a 2002 keynote address to the quadrennial conference of Diakonia of the Americas and the Caribbean in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Examining their implications beyond the liturgical assembly, she observed:

Part of the vision that we in the diaconate see is that this ministry belongs to all the people of God not just to us. Yes, sometimes we do the *diakonia* in the name of the people of God. Sometimes we teach, equip, empower, liberate others for doing this ministry in the world. Always we are sign, living reminders that God calls us all, all the people of God, to *diakonia*.

This *diakonia* spans the whole spectrum from washing feet on bended knee to standing on tip toes and prophetically challenging the principalities and powers. And the spirit, the one spirit that is upon us all, gives us differing gifts for this rich variety of ministry.¹⁴

It is precisely this "rich variety of ministry" that the Christian assembly, the very constitution of the church itself according to Lutheran theology, not only requires but yearns for now and in every age.

As we have seen, the ordained pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament, called to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments, does so *in persona Christi* when it presents itself not as "another Christ," but as "another than Christ,"¹⁵ pointing the assembly to where Christ has promised to be in water, bread, and wine. In partnership with this, the ordained or consecrated diaconal ministry of Word and Service similarly takes on the *persona Christi* through different roles in the life of the church. Though ultimately instruments of God's action in Christ, deacons are called to ministries other than that of pastors and therefore ought to fulfill different liturgical roles. Because of this, the idea that deacons and deaconesses (and, by extension, SAMs) can and should lead the eucharistic liturgy either as co-presiders or substitute pastors using the exact same rubrics and verbiage fails to harness and express the rich variety of ministry present in the church.

14. E. Louise Williams, "Keynote Address: June 23, 2002," DOTAC Conference, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, unpublished.

15. Ferrara, "Representation," 201.

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A way forward

Amid this tension of Sunday need and limited pastoral presence, by what other means might deacons, deaconesses, and SAMs participate in the church's long-standing imperative that the Eucharist be celebrated on every Sunday and feast day? One place to start might be the Roman Catholic "Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest."¹⁶ While holding to the ecumenical pattern of Gathering—Word—Meal—Sending, this order is substantially different from both the normal Lutheran Service of Holy Communion and the current practice of deacons, deaconesses, and SAMs being authorized to celebrate roughly the same liturgy as a pastor. Instead, this liturgy ritually marks that a pastor is absent both through announcement and marked shifts in positionality.

Crucially, the leader of such an assembly does not sit where the presider normally sits nor precisely inhabit the presider's role. This is most pronounced during the Meal. Instead of presenting gifts of bread and wine, setting the table, and praying the Great Thanksgiving, consecrated elements either from a former local Eucharist or another nearby eucharistic table are placed on the altar. The assembly then prays the Lord's Prayer together, before sharing in Communion. The canticle "Holy, Holy, Holy" is not sung, nor are the Eucharistic Prayer or Words of Institution spoken, which makes clear the difference of this celebration. Rather, a song or act of thanksgiving follows the reception of communion.

Lutherans may recognize this liturgical form as similar to the rite of Sending of Holy Communion.¹⁷ This rite holds when the sick, homebound, and others are not able to be present in the assembly. The Words of Institution are spoken by the minister (lay, consecrated, or ordained) in an anamnestic, non-consecratory

16. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, Inc., 2007).

17. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Sending of Holy Communion," in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), accessed via sundaysandseasons.com.

manner. They recall that the assembly has recently recalled God's saving acts and given thanks for the gift of Christ's body and blood, now to be shared with the person otherwise unable to join the assembly for whatever reason. Like the Roman Catholic "Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest," the rite of Sending of Holy Communion allows an assembly (however small) to reverently share in Christ's body and blood without confusing the different ministries embodied in its ministers.

In both instances, the assembly ritually perceives the distinct role of Word and Sacrament ministry, its absence, and the uniqueness of the one leading it at any given time. Such a shift allows deaconesses, deacons, and SAMs the opportunity to express liturgical, eucharistic ministry distinct from and not in imitation of pastoral ministry. This further underscores the purpose of diaconal ministry as that of service in and among the world, not limited by church buildings or organizational charts. Members of the assembly would benefit from the liturgical distinctions and limitations of pastors and deacons by seeing the mutuality of ministry that empowers the other minister to express her gifts fully without trying to do her tasks for her, and vice versa.

Adopting such a liturgical practice would further allow an expansion of the possibilities of ecumenical partnership without diminishing the ministry of Word and Sacrament as the norm for Lutheran congregations. Assemblies in a given area could receive Christ's body and blood from the altars of another nearby church in full fellowship with the ELCA. Such practice, especially when done in consort with a baptismal font shared between denominational assemblies, could bring greater clarity to ecumenical activities of service, while maintaining the independence and diverse traditions of the various assemblies.

Living into clarity about its own identity and calling, the diaconate (and, by extension, SAMs) can be freed from notions of pastoral assistants or pastors-in-training to liturgically represent the

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reality of its diaconal ministry and mission. In doing so, we may find more than a few pastors discerning their call to be diaconal rather than pastoral—especially since until very recently Word and Sacrament ministry was the only ordained path available. The possibility of a rostering exchange may be desirable.

Further, all the baptized might perceive more clearly their own call to faith and service in Christ. In so doing, all might embrace a Christian life not encapsulated within the church building but symbolized therein and thence transformed to be the body of Christ in the world—to be *in persona Christi*.

By broadening the classic definition of *in persona Christi* to include the uniqueness of pastoral, diaconal, and lay ministry—and by encouraging a deepened understanding of Christ's own *persona* as both the model for ministry and the sacramental habitus of all the baptized—ministers of all kinds and all rosters have the opportunity to express their authentic role in the life of the church, the assembled body of Christ.