THE PARTICIPATION OF THE DEACONS IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF COMMUNION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Paul L. Gavrilyuk

The question whether the deacons may distribute communion to the laity is a cause for some liturgical confusion in the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). In some dioceses the practice is taken for granted; in other dioceses some parishes are given special dispensation for their deacons to distribute communion if there is need; while there are also dioceses in which this practice is discouraged or even prohibited. The tacit assumption behind the latter prohibition, as I understand it, is that the distribution of communion by the deacons is a violation of the proper liturgical order and an infringement on the prerogatives of priests and bishops. My purpose in this paper is to investigate whether the leaders of the early Church perceived the situation similarly, i.e., whether the participation of the deacons in distributing communion was seen as a disciplinary relaxation at best or as a violation of the proper ecclesial order at worst?

I should note that the issue has never affected me existentially: serving for the last three years as one of the three deacons at St Mary's Cathedral in Minneapolis, Minnesota, I have always been invited and indeed encouraged to participate in the distribution of communion. However, I possess anecdotal evidence that the difference between local customs has proved to be a cause for embarrassment for some deacons, especially those who travel often. As a patrologist, I would like to inquire whether the practice of the early Church could shed any light upon and help to bring consistency to the OCA's present policy? The conclusion of this study is that such guidance is indeed available.
I will proceed by considering the evidence from patristic period diachronically paying particular attention to the liturgical manuals and church canons. I will subsequently summarize my findings and offer some suggestions on how the current practice of the OCA may be made more consistent.

**The Evidence**

Traditionally the precedent described in Acts 6:1–6 has served as a reference point for discussing the duties of the deacons:

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution (διακονία) of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables (διακωνεῖν τραπέζαις). Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint for the task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving (διακονία) the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (NRSV).

It should be noted that the seven men chosen are not identified explicitly as deacons in this text. However, such somewhat anachronistic identification was widely accepted in patristic age. For example, Irenaeus of Lyons (130–200) spoke of the protomartyr Stephen as "the first deacon chosen by the apostles." Later it became common to depict St Stephen holding the censer (a historical impossibility) on one of the deacons' doors of the iconostasis.

2 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3. 12. 10; cf. 4. 15. 1; Cyprian, *Ep.* 54. 3; 57. 4; Ps.-Tertullian,
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Assuming that the ordination described in Acts 6 referred to the institution of the diaconate, the church in Rome has for some time had the custom of restricting the number of deacons to seven in the capital.\(^3\)

According to Acts 6, the primary responsibility for which the apostles' assistants were chosen was to “wait on tables” \(\text{διακονεῖν τραπέζαις}\), specifically, to supervise the daily distribution \(\text{διακονία}\) of the food to the widows in Jerusalem community (Acts 6:2–3). The expression \(\text{διακονεῖν τραπέζαις}\) designated more than a casual participation in the charitable activities of the church. \(\text{Diakonia}\) referred to a broad range of responsibilities associated with church administration requiring respected, reliable and faithful individuals for the task (Acts 6:3,5). Whether “waiting on tables” included not only the charitable meals for the poor described in Acts 6, but also the participation of those who would come to be called \(\text{diakonoi}\) in the distribution of the Eucharistic gifts cannot be inferred from this text, although the latter practice would certainly be compatible with the former.

It would be a mistake to differentiate too sharply between the

\[\text{Adversus omnes haereses} 1; \text{Council of Neocaesarea (314), canon 15; Eusebius, H. E. vi. 43; Jerome, Ep. 146. 1, 2; Sozomen, H. E. vii. 19; Canons of Hippolytus 5; John Chrysostom, In I Cor. Hom. 3. 6, although Chrysostom was somewhat hesitant to identify the seven men of Acts 6 with the deacons in In Act. Ap. Hom. 14.}\]

\(^3\) Eusebius, H. E. 6. 43. The custom is attested (e.g., \(\text{Didascalia Apostolorum [DA]}\)) iii. 30), but was never enforced in the East. In Rome it was abrogated by the Council of Trullo (692), canon 16: “Since the book of the Acts tells us that seven deacons were appointed by the apostles, and the synod of Neocaesarea in the canons which it put forth determined that there ought to be canonically only seven deacons, even if the city be very large, in accordance with the book of the Acts: we, having fitted the mind of the fathers to the apostles' words, find that they spoke not of those men who ministered at the mysteries but in the administration which pertains to the serving at tables. ... But on this account therefore we also announce that the aforesaid seven deacons are not to be understood as deacons who served at the mysteries, according to the teaching before set forth, but that they were those to whom a dispensation was entrusted for the common benefit of those that were gathered together, who to us in this also were a type of philanthropy and zeal towards those who are in need.” This canon betrays an unusual sense of historical development of the diaconal office. Trans. H. R. Percival, The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church, in \(\text{NPNF, 2nd ser. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991) xiv. 373.}\)
Eucharist and non-eucharistic common meals in the New Testament. Clearly, the Lord’s Supper described in 1 Cor 11:17–34 was a Eucharist that included a potluck dinner (the unequal sharing of which caused Paul’s ire in the letter). There is fragmentary evidence that a similar practice of combining the Eucharist with the table fellowship continued in some house-churches into the second century and even later. Although Paul in this instance showed his concern for the proper order, he did not specify who should preside and assist at such Eucharistic celebrations. Other relevant New Testament texts are likewise silent on this matter.

The earliest hint at the participation of the deacons in the distribution of the Eucharist comes from Ignatius of Antioch in the very beginning of the second century (ca. 107). Admonishing the church in Tralles to obey the local bishop and presbytery, Ignatius adds: “Furthermore, it is necessary that those who are deacons of the mysteries of Jesus Christ (τοὺς διακόνους δύτας μυστηρίων Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) please everyone in every respect. For they are not merely servers (διάκονοι) of food and drink, but ministers of God’s church.” In this passage Ignatius echoes Paul’s expression “stewards of God’s mysteries” (οἱκονόμοι μυστηρίων θεοῦ) and points out, on my interpretation, that those who belong to the third rank

4 For example, Didache 10. 1 is widely held to describe precisely a eucharistic fellowship including a meal. Things changed towards the fourth century. The redaction of Didache 9–10 contained in Apostolic Constitutions (AC) vii. 25–26, compiled ca. 380, eliminated the reference of Didache 10.1 to the meal. The council of Hyppo (393) issued the following prohibition: “Bishops and clergy shall have no meals in the church.” Trans. C. J. Hefele, A History of the Councils of the Church (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896) ii. 399.

5 The admonition to the deacons not to “indulge in much wine” in 1 Tim 3: 8 is unlikely to be a reference specifically to the communion wine (although it is quite compatible with this narrow and somewhat anachronistic reading). We should note that this exhortation is as relevant to the deacons’ involvement with waiting on tables, as the next admonition, not to be “greedy for money” is pertinent to their involvement in the church administration. For the invectives against particularly rapacious deacons see Hermas, Sim. 9. 26; Cyprian, Ep. 58. 1.

of the clergy are involved with the Eucharistic mysteries, not merely with food and drink.

On four occasions Ignatius uses the NT term "fellow-servant" (σύδουλος) with reference to the deacon known to him, to indicate their mutual participation in one Eucharistic ministry. Commenting on Ignatius's words in Smyrneans 8, "you should regard the Eucharist as valid which is celebrated either by the bishop or by someone he authorizes," James Barnett conjectures that "it is entirely conceivable that the bishop could have authorized a deacon to preside at the Eucharist when he was unable to be present at this early time." It is more plausible, however, that Ignatius had in mind primarily the presbyters, not the deacons, when he wrote these words. Likewise, the Didache (2nd c.? ) mentions the appointment of the bishops and deacons in conjunction with the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, without specifying their liturgical functions.

The first clear attestation of the practice under investigation is found in Justin Martyr's much discussed account of the Eucharist in his Apology 1:65–67. Towards the end of his description of the baptismal liturgy Justin states: "When the president (προστάτης) has given thanks and the whole congregation has assented, those whom we call deacons (διάκονοι) give to each of those present a portion of the consecrated bread and wine and water, and they [the deacons] take it to the absent." It follows from this description that in Justin's congregation in Rome it was the special task of the deacons, not of the presiding minister, to distribute the consecrated elements under

7 Ignatius, Ephesians 2.1; Smyrneans 12.2, Philadelphians 4; Cf. esp. Col 1:7; 4:7.
9 Didache 15.1–2. See Barnett, Diaconate, 47–49.
10 Justin, Apol. 1.65. It is unclear from Justin's turn of phrase whether the ritual involved one cup of wine mixed with water, or whether there were two cups, one containing water only and the other containing wine mixed with water. In Apol. 1.66 Justin laments that Christian worship is mimicked in the Mithraic cult in which a cup of water (only) is consecrated together with the bread. This seems to imply that Justin's community in Rome used a separate cup of water during communion. If two cups are meant, the ritual would require the three deacons minimum: one to carry the consecrated bread and the other two to hold two cups. For an exhaustive discussion see A. McGowan, Ascetic Eucharists (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 151–55.
the two separate kinds to the present and absent faithful. Although Justin refers to the presiding minister vaguely as *proestōs*, he feels the need to point out to his non-Christian imperial addressees in this fairly sketchy description that the Eucharist is served by the specifically designated *diakonoi*. In his subsequent description of the regular Sunday worship Justin repeats that “the consecrated elements … are sent to the absent by the deacons.” It is possible that the ministry of the deacons to those who are sick and in prison was an external aspect of Christian life already familiar to some outsiders.

Justin’s report of the mid-second century Roman practice is confirmed a half-century later by the Hippolytean *Apostolic Tradition* (*AT*, ca. 215), a church order with a notoriously tangled redaction history. Similar to Justin’s *Apology* 1.65, the first passage of interest from *AT* 21 describes a baptismal Eucharist. We read that after the kiss of peace, “the oblation is brought at once by the deacons to the bishop.” The items brought by the deacons include bread and wine, as well as two other cups, one containing milk mixed with honey and the other containing water. After the consecration and the explanation of the meaning of each element to the newly baptized, the bishop breaks the bread and hands it to the communi-

14 For the most recent study of this text see Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *Hippolytus: On the Apostolic Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001).
15 *AT* 21. 27; cf. *AC* viii. 12. The same function is emphasized in the prayer of deacon’s ordination in *AT* 8. 11, which states addressing God that the deacon is “to serve your church and to present in your holy of holies that which is offered to you by your appointed high-priest.” Trans. Stewart-Sykes, *Hippolytus*, 86.
16 According to Gregory Dix, the somewhat archaic and vague theology of the fifth-century Latin version of this text was considerably edited in later Ethiopic and Arabic versions. See Dix, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St Hippolytus of Rome* (London: Alban, 1992), 40. *AT* 23. 28–29 may be interpreted as saying that
The content of the three cups is distributed in the following way:

The presbyters, and if there are not enough the deacons also, shall hold the cups; they should stand in good order \( (\varepsilonυταξία) \) [and with reverence]. First the one who holds the water, second the one with milk, third the one with the wine. And they who partake shall taste of each cup three times, as he who gives says: "In God the Father Almighty." And the one who receives shall say: "Amen." "And in the Lord Jesus Christ." And he shall say: "Amen." "And in the Holy Spirit and the holy church." And he shall say: "Amen." And thus let it be done to each.\(^{17}\)

Likewise, during the Sunday liturgy, it was the responsibility of the presiding bishop, and not of anyone else, to distribute the consecrated bread. This is different from Justin, who speaks of the deacons as distributing all consecrated elements, including the consecrated bread. Interestingly, the Ethiopian version of \( AT^{22} \) adds that it is the deacons who break the bread before it is distributed: "On the first of the week the bishop, if he is able, should himself distribute to all the people with his own hand, while the deacons break."\(^{18}\)

In addition to the presiding bishop, the ritual described in \( AT^{21} \) requires at least three more eucharistic ministers to carry the three cups. One could conjecture that because the communion dialog was rather involving, the content of the cups on some occasions could have been split into several portions that would in turn require more servers.

Let us note the \( AT^{2} \)'s emphasis upon the good order in which the ministers holding the cups are to stand. The original author or the

milk and honey symbolize the fulfillment of the promise made to the patriarchs and the entrance of the neophytes into the church, where as water is offered as a sign of their baptism. For the use of milk and honey in Christian rituals see McGowan, \textit{Ascetic Eucharists}, 110–15.


subsequent redactors of the *AT* were concerned to put the deacons in their place and stressed that their status was lower than that of the presbyters: "[The deacon] is not a participant in the council of the clergy but looks after and indicates to the bishop what is necessary, not receiving the spirit of the presbytery which the presbyters share, but that which is entrusted him under the power of the bishop."\(^{19}\) It follows from *AT* 21 that the participation of the deacons in the distribution of communion was not regarded as an infringement on the status of higher orders, but rather was as a liturgical expediency.

*AT* 24 addresses the ritual functions of the deacons who serve the sick: "The deacon, in an emergency, shall give the sign to the sick with diligence if no presbyter is present, and when he has given, for as long as is needful, so he shall himself accept what is to be apportioned, shall give thanks, and they shall consume it there."\(^{20}\) The meaning of the key term "sign" in this enigmatic text taken from the Ethiopic version, has been debated.\(^{21}\) Gregory Dix proposes that unction is intended. However, it makes no sense to consume anything associated with this rite. I am more persuaded by the suggestion of Alistair Stewart-Sykes that the chapter is stating that the deacon should distribute communion to the sick in the absence of a presbyter, in much the same way that the deacons administer cups at the baptismal mass if there are insufficient presbyters. The context would then demand us to suggest that what follows is a direction that, if there are not enough presbyters, the deacon should receive bread and give thanks and distribute it; in other words, he is to celebrate the eucharist!\(^{22}\)

It is more likely that the passage speaks of the deacons bringing the already consecrated gifts to those who are for some reason unable to come to the church. As I noted discussing Justin’s *First  

\(^{19}\) *AT* 8. 3–4. For the discussion of the possible levels of redaction in this text, see Stewart-Sykes, *Hippolytus*, 27–29.  
\(^{21}\) Stewart-Sykes, *Hippolytus*, 132.  
\(^{22}\) Stewart-Sykes, *Hippolytus*, 132.
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Apology, such practice was well attested in other sources. Some prayer or blessing on behalf of the sick person would have been fitting on such an occasion, although it is far less likely (although not altogether impossible) that the deacons performed emergency consecrations, as Stewart-Sykes proposes.

The last piece of evidence from AT 25 is only tangentially relevant for the present study, since in the opinion of most scholars the text describes a non-eucharistic evening meal. After the meal, it is the deacon, who in the presence of the bishop and presbyter, “takes the mixed cup of the oblation” and “says one of the psalms in which ‘alleluia’ is written.” The rubric continues that “if the presbyter has commanded” the deacon may utter another similar blessing over the cup. Afterwards the cup is handed to the bishop, who likewise blesses the cup and the bread, reciting a suitable psalm.

The later rubric, describing a similar gathering, states:

And if the faithful are present at supper in the absence of a bishop but a presbyter or deacon is present, let them act in a similarly proper manner. And let everyone be glad to accept a blessed portion from the hand of the presbyter or the deacon. In the same way let a catechumen receive the same, though exorcized. If the laity are present together let them act with understanding. For a layperson cannot give the blessing.

The implication is that in the absence of the higher clergy, the

23 John Moschos, Pratum Spirituale 48, narrates a story of a lady by the name of Cosmiana who, on account of her communicating in the churches of the Severan monophysites, was miraculously barred from entering the church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem that belonged to the pro-Chalcedonians. Cosmiana found the following solution to her problem: “She sent for the deacon and when the holy chalice arrived, she partook of the holy body and blood of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ; and thus she was found worthy to worship unimpeded at the holy and life-giving sepulchre of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Trans. John Wortley, The Spiritual Meadow (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 39. In Pratum Spirituale 49, the seventh-century duke of Palestine found himself in a similar situation and was offered the same solution.

24 AT 25. 12. On the psalms that may have been recited over the offerings see “Hippolytus On the Psalms,” in Stewart-Sykes, Hippolytus, 175–82.


27 AT 28. 5. Trans. Stewart-Sykes, Hippolytus, 144.
deacon may preside over the non-eucharistic common meal, bless the food, and distribute it to those present.

In North Africa, in Tertullian’s time, the deacons could perform baptisms, if authorized to do so by the bishop. Later this provision came to be restricted to emergency situations only. According to Cyprian of Carthage (†258), in cases of imminent death the lapsed could make their final confession and be reconciled to the church in the presence of the deacons, if presbyters or bishop were unavailable.

According to another third-century (?) church order, the Didascalia Apostolorum (DA), the non-liturgical duties of the deacons included: assisting bishop in the daily distribution of charitable gifts among the poor; visiting the sick, those in prison, and others in need; supporting and supervising the widows; keeping the church guesthouse; catechizing and baptizing, if commissioned by the bishop. It has been observed that the DA ascribes wide-ranging functions and has an unusually exalted view of the deacons, equating their salaries (but not their status) with that of the

28 Tertullian, De baptismo 17; cf. De exhortatione castitatis 7. It should be noted that in emergency situations Tertullian allowed even the laypeople to baptize and to offer the Eucharist. Such liturgical laxity was not generally encouraged.
29 Testamentum Domini ii. 11.
31 DA ii. 30; ix. 103–4; xv. 169; xvi. 173–76; xviii. 179–80, 184. I follow the chapter divisions and the pagination of the text of the fourth-century Syriac translation from the Greek original (extant in fragmentary form) in Arthur Vööbus, The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac; in CSCO 175–76, 178–79 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1979). Cf. Testamentum Domini i. 19: “Let the church have a house of hospitality near by, so that the chief deacon may receive strangers.” Trans. Sperry-White, Testamentum Domini, 47. St Ephrem the Syrian saved the poor of Edessa from famine by arranging the food distribution in his capacity as deacon. See Palladius, Lausiac History 40. On the deacon involved in preliminary catechesis see Istoria katekhizatsii v drevnei tserkvi [A History of the Catechumenate in the Early Church] (Moscow: St Philaret’s Institute, 2001), 227–32.
32 For the discussion of the status of the deacons see Barnett, Diaconate, 67–70. Cf. DA ix. 104: “But the deacon stands in the place of Christ, and you should love him. The deaconess, however, shall be honored by you in the place of the Holy Spirit.” Cf. DA ix. 107: “Let the bishop also be honored by you as God, and the deacon as a prophet.” Cf. DA ix. 108: “And again, if any man shall speak evil against a deacon,
33 The deacons provide an indispensable link between the bishop and the laity:

And let the deacon make known everything to the bishop, as Christ to His Father. But let the deacon settle some of these things [disputes in the church], those which he can, and the rest, the other things, let the bishop judge. But, nevertheless, let the deacon be the hearing of the bishop, and his mouth and his heart and his soul.  

This text envisions that the deacons function as the bishop’s envoys and even take upon themselves some of the bishop’s judicial responsibilities.

The same document provides a rare insight into the realities of daily church life and stipulates in minute detail some of the liturgical functions of the deacons:

As for the deacons, let one continue and stand by the oblations of the eucharist, but let another stand outside the door and observe those who come in. And afterwards, when you offer, let them serve together in the church. And if anyone be found sitting in a place which is not his, let the deacon who is within, reprove him and make him rise up and sit in the place that is proper for him [...]

So it is likewise required in the church that those who are young shall sit by themselves, if there be room, and if not, let them stand up; and those who are advanced in years shall sit by themselves [...] And let the deacons see that as each of them enters, he goes to his place, so that no one may sit in a place that is not his. And again let the deacon also observe that no one whispers or sleeps, or laughs, or makes signs. For whether by word or by deed, he stumbles against Christ.” Trans. Vööbus, Didascalia, 100, 103.

33 DA ix. 105–6: “But if anyone wished to honor the presbyters also, let him give him a double [of what the widows receive], as to the deacons... Everything therefore that [the lay people] desire to do, let them make known to the bishop through the deacons, and (only) then do them.” Trans. Vööbus, Didascalia, 101.

34 DA xi. 128. Trans. Vööbus, Didascalia, 120. Cf. Canons of Hippolytus, 22, 24. For the deacon functioning as the bishop’s official representative at the local council, see Socrates, H. E. iii. 6.
thus it is required that with good manners and (great) care they watch in the church, and with their ears open to the word of the Lord.

But if there comes a person from another congregation, a brother or a sister, let the deacon ask and learn whether she is a wife of a man, or again whether she is a widow, a believer; and whether she is a daughter of the church, or whether she is of one of the heresies; and then let him conduct her and set her in a place that is right for her.\(^{35}\)

The picture is that of the deacons combining the functions of porters, greeters, ushers, and the guardians of proper liturgical manners. The author subsequently belabors the point that the deacons must watch that the young offer sitting places to the elderly. Women are located separately from men, children from adults, virgins from the married, heretics from the faithful, clerics from the laity. The people of late antique society, as this passage illustrates, were extremely status-conscious. While the church preached the equal worth of all human beings in the eyes of God, the order of worship both accommodated and transformed the preoccupation with social distinctions.

The DA's somewhat vague reference to the deacons as "standing by the oblations of the eucharist" and "serving together in the church" received further elaboration in the fourth-century redaction of this text found in Books 1–4 of the Apostolic Constitutions (AC), a liturgical collection which acquired its final form in the West Syria ca. 380.\(^{36}\) The redaction of the passage in questions reads: "As to the deacons, after the prayer is over, let some of them attend upon the oblation of the Eucharist, ministering to the Lord's

\(^{35}\) DA xii. 144–46. Trans. Vööbus, Didascalia, 131–32; emphasis added.

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body with fear." It is not clear from this text whether the deacons merely waved the fans over the elements, helped to break the consecrated bread, or also participated in the distribution of communion.

Jeannine Olson aptly summarizes the scope of the deacons' ritual functions in the urban hierarchical liturgy described in AC8:

Deacons called for silence at Scripture readings; announced the stages of the service; directed everyone to kneel; dismissed the hearers after the sermon and released the penitents, catechumens, and energumens after they had been prayed over and before the Eucharist; announced the kiss of peace [...]; brought the gifts to the bishop at the altar; stood beside the altar with fans to keep insects away from the cups; partook of Communion after the bishop and presbyters but before the subdeacons, readers, singers, ascetics, deaconesses, virgins, widows, children, and the rest of the people in that order.

Olson adds that the deacons also administered the communion cup, said the litanies, and addressed the congregation during services. The responsibilities of those distributing communion were divided in the following way:

And let the bishop give the prosphora, saying, "The body of Christ." And let the one who receives say, "Amen!" Let the deacon hold the chalice, and giving it, say, "The blood of Christ, the cup of life." And let the one drinking say, "Amen!" Let Ps 33 be said while all the others are communicating. When each and everyone has communicated, let the deacons gather up the remains and bring them into the pastophoria.

Similar to the practice attested by the AT, this account makes the

38 It is also possible that they held the gifts in their hands in front of the officiating minister, if necessary. See Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Philotheos historia xx. 4.
39 Jeannine E. Olson, One Ministry Many Roles: Deacons and Deaconesses through the Centuries (St Louis: Concordia, 1991), 55. See also E. P. Echlin, The Deacon in the Church (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1971), 62–64.
distribution of communion bread the responsibility of the presiding bishop. As the reader may recall, AT 21 enjoys upon the deacons to offer the cups to the faithful only if there are not enough presbyters present. In contrast, the account just cited makes the offering of communion cups to the minor clergy and laity the responsibility of the deacons, without making reference to the concelebrating presbyters.

Along with the testimony of such influential manuals of church discipline as the AT and AC, in patristic literature one finds numerous casual references to the deacons offering the communion cup to the laity during the services.41 Ancient authors as a rule take this practice for granted, as nothing remarkable or irregular.

The same order of communion that one finds in AC 8:13—the presiding minister distributing the bread and the deacons offering the communion wine to the laity—is reflected in the rubrics of the following sources: the liturgy of the Abyssinian Jacobites,42 the liturgy of Addai and Mari,43 and the Sahidic ecclesiastical canons.44

Other sources, including the ninth-century version of the liturgies of St John Chrysostom and St Basil, do not specify the rank of the clerics that are to administer the Eucharist.45 To give several examples, the deacon’s participation is not mentioned in the liturgy of the Syrian Jacobites, the liturgy of the Coptic Jacobites, and the Ethiopic liturgy.46 This does not mean, however, that the deacons were thus implicitly prohibited to communicate the laity. For

41 Cyprian, De lapsis 25; Ambrose of Milan, De officiis ministrorum 1. 41. 214; John Moschos, Pratum Spirituale 219, 228.
43 Brightman, Eastern Liturgies, 298.
44 Brightman, Eastern Liturgies, 462. In this source, as in AT 21. 27 discussed earlier, it is the deacons who bring the gifts before the consecration and place them on the altar in front of the bishop, while the presbyters stand at the right and at the left hand of the bishop. Ibid. 461.
45 Brightman, Eastern Liturgies, 341. Cf. Cyril(?) of Jerusalem, Myst. Cat. 5. 20–21; the liturgy of St Mark in Brightman, Eastern Liturgies, 140.
46 See Brightman, Eastern Liturgies, 104, 186, 192 correspondingly.
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instance, Testamentum Domini contains the accounts of two liturgies, one of which does not mention the deacon’s participation, while the second one contains the rubric: “Let the deacon give [the eucharist] to the people by his hand.”

In the Coptic ordination rite, “the Eucharistic spoon (kokliarion) is presented to the [newly ordained] deacon, who holds it throughout the Liturgy,” a clear indication that taking care of the sacred vessels and the administration of communion are the primary diaconal functions. The bishop’s instruction prescribed in this service includes the following admonition to the deacon: “Be appreciative of the honor accorded to thee, as you hold [the chalice of] the Real Blood, which gives salvation to the world.”

According to the rubrics of the liturgies of St John Chrysostom and St Basil that are currently in use in the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and the OCA, after the clergy have communicated in the sanctuary, the priest gives the chalice to the deacon, who carries it out of the sanctuary exclaiming: “With the fear of God, faith [and love] draw near!” However, the subsequent rubric makes it clear that it is the priest who communicates the laity, uttering the appropriate words. Could this rubric be interpreted as implicitly prohibiting the deacon to administer the sacrament? Certainly the evidence that has been offered thus far suggests that the answer is “no.” In order to resolve this question definitively, one needs to turn to the relevant canons of the church councils.

The first piece of ecclesiastical legislature to be considered here is

50 Brightman, Eastern Liturgies, 396. The Byzantine rite of the liturgy of the Armenians also follows this usage. See Brightman, Eastern Liturgies, 452.
the fifteenth canon of the Council of Arles (314), which runs as follows: "Ut diacones non offerant. De diaconibus quos cognovimus multis locis offere, placuit minime fieri debere." The succinct phrase ut diacones non offerant is somewhat vague. The nineteenth canon of the same council uses the verb offerre in the sense of "to celebrate the liturgy." Since it is reasonable to expect that the fifteenth canon deploys the verb in the same sense, Charles Hefele takes the prohibition to mean that the deacons are not to celebrate the Eucharist on their own. The latter practice could have developed due to the dearth of priests and bishops during the Great persecution (303–311). Additionally, due to the rapid growth of Christianity in the fourth century, rural parishes and distant monastic settlements had limited number of clergymen authorized to celebrate the liturgy. It is unlikely that this influential Western council prohibited the deacons to distribute the Eucharist to the faithful, since such practice continued undisturbed throughout the Empire.

The Council of Ancyra (314), summoned shortly before the council of Arles, put forth the canon that sheds further light upon the matter under investigation:

The deacons who have sacrificed [to the pagan gods], but afterwards returned to the church will retain their other honors, but will abstain from every sacred ministry, τῆς τοῦ ἡμῶν ἁρτον ἡ ποτήριον ἀναφέρειν ἡ κηρύσσει. Nevertheless, if any of the bishops observe in them distress of mind and meek humility, the bishops have the authority to relax the prohibition or take away [the relaxation].

The canon of the Council of Ancyra (314) assumes a practice, according to which, the deacons who are not subject to any disciplinary restriction are normally responsible for ἡ ποτήριον ἡ ποτήριον

51 See e.g., Paphnutius, Life of Onnophrius 32; Historia monachorum in Aegypto xii. 6.
52 Cf. the 38th canon ascribed to the Fourth Council of Carthage (398): "When obliged by necessity, the deacon, in the absence of the priest, and by his command, shall administer the Eucharist (Eucharistia Corporis Christi) to the people." Trans. Hefele, History, ii. 413–14.
άναφέρειν during the liturgy. The latter ambiguous expression may in principle refer to any of the following liturgical actions: (1) "to pronounce the anaphora over bread and cup"; (2) "to bring forth bread and cup" to the celebrant before the offertory; or (3) "to distribute bread and cup," presumably to the faithful. If our interpretation of the fifteenth canon of the Council of Ancyra is correct, the deacon's presiding over the liturgy was seen as highly irregular. Therefore, the first interpretation of ἀρτον ἡ ποτήριον αναφέρειν is highly dubious. In contrast, the second and third interpretations are equally plausible.54 Some interpreters rule out the third interpretation on the grounds that by the fourth century the deacons no longer distributed the eucharistic bread, but offered only the cup. However, according to the rubrics of the liturgy of St James, in some Syrian churches the deacons appear to have continued to distribute both species of the sacrament.55

If the canon prohibits the lapsed deacons to bring forth bread and cup to the altar before the offertory (the second interpretation), it would most likely follow that they also could not perform a more sacred duty of handling the consecrated elements (the third interpretation). Whichever of the three interpretations one accepts as correct, it must be stressed that the canon does not restrict regular diaconal functions, but imposes temporary restrictions, including the inability to κηρύσσειν, however this verb is to be interpreted,56 upon the deacons who lapsed during the persecution.

54 Compare an equally ambiguous expression specifying the deacons' regular duties in the prayer of ordination in AT8. 11: "to present in your holy of holies that which is offered to you by your appointed high-priest ..." Trans. Stewart-Sykes, Hippolytus, 86.
56 I am inclined to interpret κηρύσσειν in a narrow sense, as referring to the deacon's public reading of scripture in the church, attested by AC ii. 57; Jerome, Ep. 147. 6; Sozomen, H. E. vii. 19. Hefele, in contrast, translates the word more broadly, "to proclaim," and argues that it included preaching, public reading of scripture, and saying litanies and exclamations. See Hefele, History, i. 203. However, preaching was hardly a regular responsibility of the deacons in the fourth century. See also Barnett, Diaconate, 78.
The eighteen canon of the Council of Nicaea (325) imposed a restriction upon a number of widespread abuses:

It has come to the attention of this holy and great synod that in some places and cities deacons give communion to presbyters, although neither canon nor custom allows this, namely that those who have no authority to offer should give the body of Christ to those who do offer. Moreover it has become known that some of the deacons now receive the eucharist even before the bishops. All these practices must be suppressed. Deacons must remain within their own limits, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and subordinate to the presbyters. Let them receive the eucharist according to their order after the presbyters from the hands of the bishop or the presbyter. Nor shall permission be given for the deacons to sit among the presbyters, for such an arrangement is contrary to the canon and to rank. If anyone refuses to comply even after these decrees, he is to be suspended from the diaconate.57

This canon prohibits the deacons three things: (1) to communicate the higher clergy; (2) to communicate before the higher clergy; (3) to sit among the presbyters in a semicircle around the bishop.58 The reason cited for these prohibitions is that the deacons must remain “within their own bounds,” i.e., their liturgical functions as well as the place assigned to them must correspond to their subordinate rank. Consistent with this canon, the Testamentum Domini instructs: “The deacon does not give the oblation to a presbyter.”59 Similarly, the fourth-century(?) Egyptian(?) collection of church canons based upon the AT states: “If a presbyter is sick the deacon is

59 Testamentum Domini ii. 10.
to take the mysteries to him and the presbyter is to take [them] himself."60 The purpose of these injunctions is to make sure that the lower clergymen do not communicate the higher ones. It is clear, however, that the canon assumes that the deacons regularly distribute communion to the lower clergy and lay people. As a rule, the subdeacons and altar servers were prohibited to distribute communion in the church.61

Interestingly, the eighteenth canon of the Council of Nicaea cited earlier does not seem to have affected at least one church outside of the boarders of the Roman Empire. In Persia, according to one liturgical manual, the communion of priests and deacons was reciprocal: the priests gave the consecrated bread to the deacons and the deacons gave the cup to the priests. The communion dialogue of the liturgy of Addai and Mari runs as follows:

And when the priest gives the body he says: “The body of our Lord to the discreet priest or to the deacon of God or to the circumspect believer: for the pardon of offences.” And the deacon says over the chalice: “The precious blood for the pardon of offences, the spiritual feast for everlasting life to the discreet priest or to the deacon of God” and everyone according to his degree.62

One should note that this document is equally concerned with the preservation of the proper hierarchical order. It is clear from this description that the priest does not partake of the cup himself, but is rather communicated by the deacon in the same way as other communicants are. Unlike the eighteenth Nicene canon, this liturgical manual does not regard the deacons handing of the communion cup to the priest as a violation of church discipline. We should emphasize, of course, that this particular practice is attested by the

62 Brightman, *Eastern Liturgies*, 298; emphasis in the original.
liturgy of Addai and Mari alone and is, therefore, an exception to the rule.

Conclusions

On the basis of this study, we can make the following conclusions:

1. The deacons are prohibited to communicate the higher clergy, or to partake before the higher clergy.
2. Neither canons nor the liturgical manuals explicitly prescribe the deacons to distribute communion to the minor clergy or the laity.
3. The participation of the deacons in distributing at least one species of the sacrament, the Blood of Christ, to the minor clergy and laity is a well-attested ancient liturgical practice. This practice was not irregular or in violation of the proper order.
4. It was common for the deacons to bring both species of the Eucharist to the faithful who could not be physically present at the liturgy.

I suspect that these conclusions will not come as something altogether new to most readers of this article. In the light of the overwhelming evidence showing that the deacons regularly participated in the distribution of communion to the laity, it is surprising to find the following categorical statement in P. I. Nechaev's Practical Guide for the Clergy (1907): “Only the presbyters or bishops can offer the holy gifts to the laity.”63 Nechaev goes on to discuss what special arrangements could be made when the number of communicants is unexpectedly large, but does not contemplate an optional participation of the deacons in the distribution.

T. S. Tikhomirov's Parish Life (1915, revised edition published in 2002) leaves no room for interpretation: “To follow the meaning of the deacon’s certificate of ordination (stavlennicheskaia gramota), the deacons cannot communicate the faithful, even if the priest

63 Prakticheskoe rukovodstvo dlia sviaschennosluzhitelei, 9th ed. (S.-Peterburg: Tipografiia I. N. Skorokhodova, 1907), 221.
The Participation of the Deacons in the Distribution of Communion

...does not feel well or is tired." It is unclear to what part or expression from the deacon's certificate of ordination the author refers. It is obvious, however, that the custom to bar the deacons from the distribution of communion was so widely assumed that it did not require any justification.

Along the same lines, S. V. Bulgakov's encyclopedic Handbook for Church Servers (1913), reprinted in 1993 and presently used by the Russian Orthodox Church as an authoritative guide, does not mention the distribution of communion among the responsibilities of the deacon (but does not explicitly prohibit this practice either). The manual stipulates that "the breaking of the particles of the Lamb must be done by the priest, not by the deacon." Referring to P. Zabelin's The Rights and Responsibilities of the Presbyters (1884), Bulgakov explains that the priest who breaks the Lamb represents Christ giving bread to his disciples—a representational function that would be unbecoming for the deacon to assume. It is the priest who administers communion to the lay people, while the deacon's responsibility is to consume the remaining gifts.

The reasons for the development reflected in Russian handbooks are not entirely clear. The argument is sometimes made that since most narratives of the Last Supper in the NT mention only one cup, the same practice must be followed today. It is easy to challenge the underlying assumption of this argument that all elements

64 Na prikhode (Moskva: Pravoslavnii Sviato-Tikhonovskii Bogoslovskii Institut, 2002), 364. The passage is quoted without the attribution to Tikhomirov by the anonymous compiler of the following liturgical website: http://www.liturgy.ru/nav/trebi/tainsva/5_prichast1.php
65 The form of contemporary certificates of ordination in the ROC varies. Such documents are typically very brief, stating the date and place of ordination, as well as the name of the hierarch who performed the ordination. One could speculate that Tikhomirov had in mind a different document, namely Izviesstie uchitelnoe, kako dolozenstvet iereiu i diakonu sluzenie v tserkvi sviatiei sovershati (Moskva, 1705).
66 S. V. Bulgakov, Nastol'naia kniga dla sviashchenno-tserkovno-sluzhitelei (Moskva: Izdatel'skii otdel Moskovskogo Patriarkhata, 1993), 792.
67 Ibid. 792; Zabelin, Prawa i obiaazannosti presviterov (Kiev: Tip. G.T. Korchak-Novitskago, 1884), 152.
68 Bulgakov, Nastol'naia kniga, 798 n. 3, 799.
of the biblical account must be followed literally in the modern practice. First, the accounts of the Last Supper in the NT differ in some important details: for example, Lk 22:17,20 describes two distinct prayers over the two cups, not one. Second, the modern practice reflects a complex evolution of the Byzantine liturgy over several centuries; it is by no means a close reproduction of the first-century Jewish meal.

The “one cup” argument aside, one could also offer a pragmatic justification that the second eucharistic minister was no longer needed when communion came to be offered to the laity under both species jointly in one cup. This is hardly a convincing argument, since when the number of communicants is large an equally practical need arises for several chalices. On a number of occasions, I have witnessed what looked like a never-ending communion line in the large Russian cathedrals, with the deacons assisting at, but never distributing, communion from a separate chalice.

Arguably, before the eucharistic renewal in the OCA there was simply no practical need to engage an extra clergyman in distributing communion, since the number of communicants at a given liturgy was usually manageable for one person. Today, however, this is far from being the case in most mid-size and larger parishes, where the breaking of one communion line into two or more would be desirable. Moreover, the deacons could also regularly share the responsibilities of the priests by bringing communion to the sick, disabled, bedridden, and others in need.

Special circumstances aside, the issue whether the OCA deacons may on a regular basis distribute communion to the laity needs to be clarified and settled. I am not arguing that the practice of the early church must be applied normatively to the contemporary situation. To resort to such liturgical fundamentalism would be

69 Such a project would involve, among other things, the restoration of communion of the laity under the two separate species, as well as the reinstatement of the order of the deaconesses to distribute communion in women’s monasteries. For the latter practice attested near Edessa, see Aimé Georges Martimort, Deaconesses: A Historical
against the spirit of the Fathers. In this matter, as in everything pertaining to specific liturgical customs, it is proper to allow for some development of an ecclesial office throughout the ages. I am arguing, however, that in standardizing the contemporary OCA practice it is more appropriate to follow the canonical mind of the early Church, than the questionable pre-revolutionary practices of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is simply wrong to put outdated Russian handbooks reflecting a medieval decline of the diaconal office above the ancient canons. As the evidence presented in this study makes abundantly clear, to allow those who were originally ordained to “wait on tables” to distribute communion is in accordance both with the spirit of the New Testament and with the letter of the canon law.

Study (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 140. Both of these issues are beyond the scope of the present study.