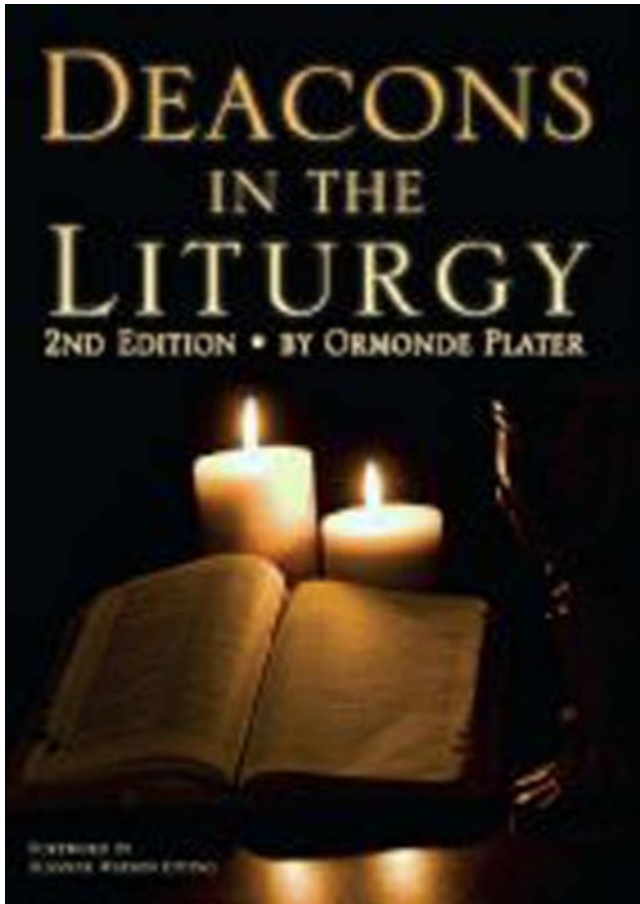


A Ceremonial Touchstone:

A review of Deacons in the Liturgy, second edition, by Ormonde Plater. (New York, Church Publishing, 2009). \$16.00.

Book review by The Ven. Keith McCoy, Archdeacon, Diocese of New Jersey

There was a time, not long distant, when interest in liturgy by prospective deacons was the equivalent of contact with the third rail in the subway. Touch the topic, and see your hope for ordination evaporate. In those suspicious days, persons in search of a diaconal role in the Episcopal Church needed to be worker bees only, and those who showed too much interest in liturgics or vestments were thought to be sacristy rats and priest wanna-



bees, only wanting to play dress up or theater. Of course, a lot of that sentiment was projection by those who had already made the ordination hurdle, but, nevertheless, it was prevalent.

It is thanks to the scholarship and proclamation of Ormonde Plater that today, deacons can take their proper, historic, and necessary role in the

workings of our church, including the liturgy. Plater does not write out of fantasy, but from the roots of Christian history, and then ably adapts those original practices for modern life. With his published works (Many Servants, Intercession, among others), deacons can speak up for themselves and for better ways of employing our servant ministry within the Episcopal Church.

Deacons in the Liturgy, second edition (hereafter DL2), is actually the third version of a book Plater first wrote almost thirty years ago. The Deacon in the Liturgy (1981) was published by the National Center for the Diaconate, the predecessor of NAAD. It had most of the chapter headings DL2 has, but there was less explanation, and was, in some respects (such as who leads the Prayers of the People) more dogmatic in its approach. One could almost say it was self-published, as, in the late 1970's and early 1980's, deacons were few, and Ormonde was one of the few leaders in our community speaking and writing, besides being the only deacon at that time on the NCD board.

A revised edition, renamed Deacons in the Liturgy, came out from Morehouse Publishing in 1992. That had more detail than in the 1981 version, but not as much as this latest edition. Looking the three books over together, one can see how Plater has added to the knowledge he shares with us, and how the church's practice and familiarity with deacons over the ensuing years, has affected how we operate around the altar. Deacons were a novelty in 1981; today they are more of an expectation.

Deacon-centric liturgical instruction helps offset the myriad of books about Episcopal liturgy in general, most of it written for the parish priest, with a nod to the annual visit by the bishop. Until recently, those were about how to be a one-man (sic) show, and now too often about how priest and congregation work together in worship.

Liturgy, in the Episcopal Church, is not call-and-response, not simply priest talking to people, with some audience participation. It is, correctly, the work of all of God's people, lay and ordained together, with particular roles for each. Priests, in their proper role, need to preside and lead. To do that prayerfully and decently, someone else needs to be the organizer of the worship, the director of prayers and attention. That is the role of the

deacon. That is where Plater shows us how to do it, and why it should be done that way.

DL2 has, as its major divisions, General Norms; Christian Initiation; The Holy Eucharist: The Daily Office; Seasonal Liturgies; Pastoral Liturgies; Liturgies with a Bishop; most of them subdivided into more specific discussions. For example, under “The Holy Eucharist”, one can turn to specific sections on the entrance and the dismissal, among others. “Pastoral Liturgies” has components on the blessing of a civil marriage, an order for burial, and so on. The book also has an appendix with some simple lists of what happens in what order.

There’s a lot of minutiae, as well, such as the Latin phrase to use when asking the presider for a blessing before reading the gospel. No one will use all of this; everyone will use much of it. What Plater has done is show the breadth of diaconal use in worship over the centuries, emphasize the core practices, and allow for each congregation to have its deacon (or deacons -- there are references to multiple deacons in a service) function as a deacon should, and as the worshipping community feels most comfortable.

There’s an old church joke, to the effect that the difference between a liturgist and a terrorist is that you can negotiate with a terrorist. We’ve all run into those people: certain in their belief that what they learned from whomever, whenever, is the only way to worship. Those ways tend to be protective of prerogative, be it priest or lay pope holding the ground (I’ve met a few deacons who dig their heels in, too, but they are much fewer in number).

With DL2, we can now say, backed by Plater’s authoritative writing, that the norms of old, when deacons were non-existent, no longer hold. Here is what a deacon should be doing, written from the perspective of the historic diaconate, and written by someone who knows what he is talking about. This is a *vade mecum* in every sense for moving through the liturgy, and bringing others along. It is an essential tool for every deacon, and for every person with an interest in how our church worships as a community.