

John N Collins

The problem with values carried by *diakonia* /“*Diakonie*” in recent church documents

Abstract

Since Vatican II *diakonia* has been a commonplace in theology for loving Christian service. The term and its values were imported into Roman Catholic theology from largely German Protestant scholarship of the 1930s. However, the concept was severely criticised at the 1990 Synod of Bishops by Cardinal Ratzinger for obscuring the true nature of ordained ministry. In more recent years, however, the concept has been represented in some significant documents emerging from the magisterium (*Deus caritas est*). The development is unfortunate and is a disservice to the theology of ministry at a time of its crisis. Moreover the concept has been exposed by linguistic research as having no basis in what early Christians meant by *diakonia*.

Dr John N. Collins
21 Kananook Avenue
Seaford, Vic. 3198
Australia

Seaford is a bayside suburb of Melbourne.

03 97861510 / 0418 138 663
johnncollins21@gmail.com

John N Collins retired in 2011 as a lecturer on the theology of ministry and on ministry in the early church at Yarra Theological Union, an affiliated teaching institute of the Melbourne College of Divinity. He continues to write on exegetical and pastoral matters.

The problem with values carried by *diakonia* / “*Diakonie*” in recent church documents

1. *The emergence of diakonia* / “*Diakonie*”

In the German Evangelical Church (EKD), *Diakonie* is a term described in the following paragraph from one of the EKD webpages (translated):

Diakonie is the social work of the Evangelical Churches. Because faith in Jesus Christ and an active love of the neighbour must go together, *diakonic* organisations deliver many forms of service to men and women. They help people in need and in unjust social situations. They also seek to remove the cause of such distress. “*Diakonie*” derives from the Greek word for “service.”¹

This Greek word is basically *diakon-* (with endings in *-ia* for “service”, *-os* for “servant”, and *-ein* for “to serve”; these endings change according to requirements of sentence structure).

In Germany “The Diakonic Work” (*das Diakonische Werk*) is a charitable organisation whose members include the 22 Lutheran, Reformed and United regional churches (of the German *Länder* or states) that make up the Evangelical Church of Germany. Also belonging to the organisation are a number of Free Protestant churches, and over 80 professional associations (medical, psychiatric, etc). More than 450,000 people work full or part-time in 27,000 independent institutions of various sizes.

For these people and for the church at large the term *Diakonie* is a constant reminder of the selfless love taught by Jesus in such passages from the gospels as the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). This selfless love is thought of as *Diakonie* because in some passages the gospels speak of “serving” others, and the Greek word *diakon-* appears. This is the case when Jesus himself states that he came “to serve (*diakon-*) and give his life as a ransom for others” (Mark 10:45). Special inspiration for engaging in service of this kind is taken from the image of the judgement of the nations when those on the left of the king say to him “when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger ... and did not take care of you?” (Mt 25:44 NRSV). Here, “take care of” is more often translated as “serve”; in the Greek, the verb is *diakon-*

In the organisation of most churches – and this from the earliest times – one of the leaders has been known by a title clearly related to the *diakon-* words. It is of course the deacon (German *Diakon*). Accordingly, much theology of the modern diaconate and of the spirituality associated with it today wherever a diaconate has been restored, has been deeply affected by values which have accrued around the *diakon-* words. These words signalled an ecclesial ministry to others in selfless love. This slant on the diaconate began to develop with the first stirrings of the modern diaconate within the German Evangelical Church and generated there the emergence of the neologism *Diakonie*.²

¹ <http://www.ekd.de/diakonie/45618.html> (accessed 091210)

² Thus an early instance of the term occurs in a proposal to a church council by Theodor Fliedner in his “Gutachten ‘die Diakonie und den Diakonat betreffend’ (1856)”, in *Diakonie pragmatisch*, eds, Norbert Friedrich, Christine-Ruth Müller, Martin Wolff (Neukirchen-Blun: Neukirchener Verlag, 2007), 25-54.

As the deacon movement spread and the works of *Diakonie* multiplied, so too did interest in the theological reach of the Greek word *diakonia*. In the course of the rapid development of scholarly biblical method in the early 20th century, one study of worldwide influence was the multi-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* initiated in Germany by Gerhard Kittel in the 1930s. The pages in that dictionary by Hermann W. Beyer on the *diakon-* words presented *diakonia* as “the symbol of all loving care for others” and “a mark of true discipleship of Jesus.” As applied to Jesus at Mark 10:45, “to serve” is “much more than a comprehensive term for any loving assistance rendered to the neighbour”; rather, it expresses the notion of “full and perfect sacrifice, as the offering of life which is the very essence of service, of being for others, whether in life or in death.”³ In the second half of the 20th century, writings on the relevance of these dictionary meanings to the task of reappraising the nature of the church’s ministry and authority have been voluminous.⁴

One aspect of the present-day conventional semantic profile of the Greek *diakon-* words demands closer attention. This is the supposition that the rich theological and powerful ethical values now attributed to the words in the New Testament derive exclusively from usage within the early Christian communities. For this convention to be effective within especially ecclesiology we have to suppose that in pre-Christian usage the *diakon-* words had been – in Eduard Schweizer’s description – “entirely unbiblical and non-religious and never include[d] association with a particular dignity or position.”⁵ In a much cited passage from *The Church*, Hans Küng added, “Diakonia means an activity which every Greek would recognise at once as being one of self-abasement.”⁶ In fact, because early Christians felt a need to avoid any current terms that expressed “a relationship of rulers and ruled”, they felt obliged “to develop a new word”, namely, “*diakonia*, service”: “Jesus, however, gave this notion of service a radically new meaning...”⁷ Thomas O’Meara, probably the most influential North American voice in the theology of ministry, emphasised that *diakonia* is an “ordinary Greek word for serving.”⁸ In particular, the term did not suggest the “sacral”⁹ but was part of “a language-event” through which “the church fashioned a language that disclosed its way of life.”¹⁰ The new terminology looked towards “a theological reappraisal of every church role ... as inescapably one of service.”¹¹

2. Cardinal Ratzinger addressing diakonia at the Roman Synod of Bishops 1990

The impact of this pervasive but originally German conceptualisation of the *diakon-* terms in early Christian writings was striking. The scope of the impact may be measured by the strong reaction against it in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s address opening the Roman Synod of Bishops on the formation of priests in October 1990.¹² A synod on such a topic was itself

³ W. H. Brandt, *TDNT* 2 (1964): 92, 85-86.

⁴ For overviews of such developments see my *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, reprinted 2009), 1-72, and “Ordained and Other Ministries: Making a Difference,” *Ecclesiology* 3, no.1 (2006): 11-32.

⁵ *Church Order in the New Testament*, Eng. trans. (London: SPCK, 1961), 174 (21c)

⁶ *The Church*, Eng. trans. (Garden City, NY: Image Books), 498.

⁷ *The Church*, 497, 498.

⁸ *Theology of Ministry*, ed. 2 (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 64.

⁹ *Theology of Ministry*, 74.

¹⁰ *Theology of Ministry* 75.

¹¹ *Theology of Ministry*, 64.

¹² “On the Essence of the Priesthood” in his *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, Eng. trans. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 105-131. See “Vom Wesen

evidence of the crisis in the provision of pastoral ministry that is today a talking point in every Roman Catholic parish. In the late 1980s the Vatican was seeking a solution to the failing supply of ordained ministers, and the synod was chosen as a means to revamp the training offered to candidates for the priesthood.

Cardinal Ratzinger began by expressing strong criticism of developments within the theology of priesthood in the post-conciliar period. “The Catholic model of priesthood,” he began, had entered “a profound crisis.” Evidences were the great numbers of resignations from the priesthood and “the dramatic decline in new priestly vocations.” However, the situation could not have arisen, he proposed, if “this ministry had not become dubious from within.” The essential factors contributing to this inner doubt Ratzinger identified as the ascendancy in the modern period of “the old Reformation-era arguments combined with the findings of modern exegesis”, the latter also being Protestant in character.

Essentially the issues came down to the introduction of a new “terminology” whereby the essentially sacerdotal and cultic character of the Roman Catholic priesthood had been obscured.¹³ Protestant “philological considerations” had made it “indisputably clear” to Catholic theologians “that the teaching of Trent concerning the priesthood had been formulated on false assumptions.”¹⁴ The crucial issue for them was the perception that “the nascent Church named her developing ministries, not with a sacral, but with a profane vocabulary”, thus opening up a “purely functional” theology of ecclesial roles and limiting these to proclamation of the gospel and “the ministry of love.”¹⁵

The last phrase is a clear reference to the German “*Diakonie*” already described,¹⁶ and Ratzinger was deploring the deleterious effect the German understanding of the term had had upon the modern churchwide perception of the Roman Catholic priesthood. The linguistic nature of the issue he made explicit in a note critical of the Protestant claim that early Christians adopted “profane vocabulary” for ecclesial roles. Ratzinger did not enlarge on his thinking here, although the issue was crucial to his argument. He wrote simply, “This opinion [i. e., *diakon*- terms are “profane vocabulary”], which is current in modern exegesis, has recently been energetically contested – especially in relation to the semantic field *Diakonia, diakonein, etc...*”¹⁷

3. “*Die Collins-Debatte*”

Ratzinger’s rejection in 1990 of the semantic values attaching to the German tradition of *Diakonie* seemingly passed unnoticed. “Diakonic” values continued to be identified as those of loving service. Over the last decade, however, in some quarters a shift of opinion has been occurring in regard to the reliability of the lexical description presented in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. In fact, recent German-language discussion of

des Priestertums” in *Zur Gemeinschaft gerufen: Kirche heute verstehen* (Freiburg im B.: Herder, 1991, reprinted 2005), 101-128.

¹³ “On the Essence of the Priesthood,” 106-107.

¹⁴ “On the Essence of the Priesthood,” 109.

¹⁵ “On the Essence of the Priesthood,” 106-107. The German for the latter phrase is “der Dienst der Liebe”, “Vom Wesen”, p. 103.

¹⁶ “der Dienst der Liebe” and “der Liebesdienst” are standard synonyms for *Diakonie*.

¹⁷ The reference provided by Ratzinger was to my dissertation at the University of London in 1976, “*Diakonein* and Associated Vocabulary in Early Christian Tradition”. The published version (note 4 above) did not appear until July 1990. How Cardinal Ratzinger came to access the thesis remains mystifying to me, but the published volume would have greatly strengthened the linguistic case he wished to make at the Roman Synod.

Diakonie and the diaconate refers to “the Collins-debate” as a means of referencing fundamental differences between conventional understandings of the Greek *diakon-* words and the re-interpretation of these words first published in my research volume of 1990.¹⁸ The German phrase originated in connection with a lecture I presented at the Evangelische Fachhochschule in Ludwigsburg in June 2005.¹⁹ The press release for this occasion announced “Eine internationale Debatte zu: Diakonia²⁰ – Diakonie²¹ – Diakon/innen²²“, and named the topic “The Biblical Foundations of the Diaconal Office.”²³

The institute’s yearbook duly noted “a vigorous controversy.”²⁴ The novelty of the situation was evident in the headline of the weekly Württemberg church paper, “Is *Diakonie* a big mistake? How an Australian Catholic forces a rethink of the Evangelical Church’s social work.”²⁵ An introductory note to the article alludes to the “shock” the new linguistic findings were causing within *Diakonie*.²⁶ Several weeks later Professor Annette Noller of the Fachhochschule, who had been both the host of the occasion for the debate and a member of the debating panel, contributed a reassuring article to the newspaper entitled “The foundations of *Diakonie* are not shaking.”²⁷ Here she initiated some critique of the new interpretation in the interests of maintaining the legitimacy of concepts that had gone into the making of *Diakonie* over the previous 160 years.

Independently of the Ludwigsburg event, an earlier and more incisive German initiative supporting the re-interpretation of *diakonia* had been a forthright publication by Hans-Jürgen Benedict, a professor at Hamburg’s Rauhes Haus, the 19th century home of Johann Hinrich Wichern, founder of the Inner Mission of the Evangelical Church and champion of *Diakonie*. Benedict explained that he had first been made aware of the existence of a re-interpretation of *diakonia* at a Finnish conference in 1998 that had been addressed by Kjell Nordstokke, currently professor at Diakonhjemmet University College in Oslo.²⁸ His curiosity aroused,

¹⁸ See note 4.

¹⁹ “Dazwischengehen. Die Rekonstruktion eines neuen Diakoniebegriffs aus den neutestamentlichen Quellen” (unpublished).

²⁰ The Greek term which, with its cognates, occurs 100 times in the New Testament in reference to pastoral activities in the early churches in Acts and the Epistles and to household tasks in the gospel narratives.

²¹ The German neologism discussed above.

²² German terms for deacons (male and female), who form the foundational body of social workers within *Diakonie*.

²³ “Eine kontroverse Debatte der biblischen Grundlagen des diakonischen Amtes wollen Prof. Dr. John Neil Collins aus Melbourne / Australien, Dr. Wilfried Brandt, Direktor der Karlshöhe i.R. und Prof. Dr. Annette Noller, EFH Reutlingen-Ludwigsburg, am Donnerstag, 30. Juni 2005, führen.”

²⁴ Jahresbericht 04/05, p. 9 (www.efh-reutlingen-ludwigsburg.de): “Lösten eine heftige Kontroverse aus... “ – although for my part, after I had read my German script, participation in the German exchanges was limited!

²⁵ M. Ernst Wahl, “Diakonie, ein grosser Irrtum? Wie ein Australischer Katholik die evangelische Sozialarbeit zum Nachdenken zwingt,” *Evangelisches Gemeindeblatt für Württemberg* 29 (17 July 2005) *Thema der Woche*.

²⁶ ‘seine Erkenntnisse, die innerhalb der Diakonie für Aufregung sorgen...’

²⁷ “Die Grundlage der Diakonie wankt nicht: Gedanken zur diakoniewissenschaftlichen Diskussion um John Collins,” *Ev. Gemeindeblatt* 34 (24 August 2005), again “theme of the week.” My response to this article was in English and did not appear in the newspaper.

²⁸ Nordstokke’s most recent publication evidences his continued support of the re-interpretation of *diakonia*; see *Liberating Diakonia* (Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag,

Benedict made a close study of the new research and in 2000 published a skilful précis of the research.²⁹ The task of drawing attention to the new information he lightheartedly characterised as “pouring a little water into the wine of diakonic self-satisfaction” in Germany.³⁰ He concluded his review, however, on a much more sober note. The new research, he wrote, “effectively brings into question the dominant diakonic line of thinking [in Germany] which brooks no opposition; the new research removes the possibility of identifying Christian existence with humble and benevolent service, and it leaves us to confront once more the question of what ... this *diakonia* is.”³¹

In laying down such a challenge to German theologians and church leaders, Benedict did not hesitate to direct a sharp criticism against German scholarship for a decade-long neglect of new research that undercut a core value of the Evangelical Church.³²

In response to this in-house critique, within little more than two years the University of Heidelberg’s Academic Institute for *Diakonie* published a collection of essays under the title *Diakonische Konturen*, Part I of which contained three evaluations of *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*³³ and one theological reflection upon it. This last was again

2011). Chapter 2, “Theoretical Framework of the Science of Diakonia”, 29-39, is based on the lecture in Lahti which evoked the strong reaction from Benedict noted above, and Chapter 3 is an article co-authored by Nordstokke and myself for the Swedish church paper *Svensk Kyrkotidning* 50 (1998), 650-655, “Diakonia – Theory and Praxis”, 41-47.

²⁹ “Beruht der Anspruch der evangelischen Diakonie auf einer Missinterpretation der antiken Quellen? John N. Collins Untersuchung ‘Diakonia’,” *Pastoraltheologie* 89 (2000): 343-364, reprinted in id., *Barmherzigheit und Diakonie: Von der rettenden Liebe zum gelingenden Leben* (Stuttgart 2008), 114-28, and in Volker Herrmann and Martin Horst, eds, *Studienbuch Diakonie*, vol. 1: *biblische, historische und theologische Zugänge zur Diakonie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2006, 2nd ed. 2008), 117-133.

³⁰ Benedict, “Beruht der Anspruch,” 351.

³¹ Benedict, “Beruht der Anspruch,” 363.

³² Benedict, “Beruht der Anspruch,” 352. This criticism he expressed more trenchantly in the First Thesis of his paper at the Rummelsberg conference of 2005 to be reported above; see note 38.

³³ Volker Herrmann, Rainer Merz, Heinz Schmidt, eds, *Diakonische Konturen: Theologie im Kontext sozialer Arbeit*, Veröffentlichungen des Diakoniewissenschaftlichen Instituts an der Universität Heidelberg 18 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003); see Stefan Dietzel, “Zur Entstehung des Diakonats im Urchristentum. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit den Positionen von Wilhelm Brandt, Hermann Wolfgang Beyer und John N. Collins,” 136-170; Ismo Dunderberg, “Vermittlung statt karitative Tätigkeit? Überlegungen zu John N. Collins’ Interpretation von *diakonia*,” 171-183; Dierk Starnitzke, “Die Bedeutung von *diakonos* im frühen Christentum,” 184-212. Note that in his more recent study, *Diakonie in biblischer Orientierung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011), Starnitzke substantially modifies his positive rating of my re-interpretation by differentiating between Pauline usage, where he accepts my semantic description, and usage in gospel narrative, where he reverts to the service values supporting the traditional German conceptualisation of *Diakonie*; clearly the usages are different, but neither usage evidences a caritative dimension. The partial reservations expressed by Dunderberg and Dietzel cannot be discussed here but are dismissed by Anni Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament. Studien zur Semantik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle von Frauen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 21 n57, 58; 280 n445, a work discussed below.

by Benedict,³⁴ engaging in what the editors of the collection called the necessary further explorations of diaconate in the light of the research.³⁵

Benedict continued his advocacy of the new interpretation at the Rummelsberg conference of October 2005. The conference aimed principally at locating the extensive educational activities across the German diakonic training and research institutes within the Bologna process of European further education. An undercurrent, however, was the issue of how to relate the traditional diaconal initiatives of the churches within the new theological framework created by the re-interpretation of *diakonia*. The invitational brochure announced the theme of the conference as “The Professional Identity of Deacons” and invited participants to reflect on the following situation:

What is a deacon? What will characterise this profession in the future? In former years only a few could give clear answers to these questions, but because of recent developments the question has become more difficult. The Australian theologian John N. Collins has brought into question the traditional understanding of the biblical term *diakonia*....

In this context the first working session addressed “The biblical foundations of the professional self-understanding of deacons and the outcomes for diaconal praxis.” The first contribution on this theme, by Folker Siegert, sought to deepen the spirituality of diakonic praxis within the traditional framework of the German *Diakonie* and, in the course of these reflections, the paper made some oblique connections with the new research.³⁶ The second by Benedict was typically lively and was closely aligned with the tenor of the research that he had introduced to German theology in 2000; he expressed the view that had German theology acknowledged the research earlier, the large volume of the 1990s, *Diakonie: biblische Grundlagen und Orientierungen*,³⁷ “would have to have been thoroughly revised.”³⁸ His final

³⁴ H. J. Benedict, “Die grössere Diakonie: Versuch einer Neubestimmung in Anschluss an John N. Collins,” *Diakonische Konturen*, 127-35. In his Rummelsberg paper to be reported above, “Diakonie als Dazwischengehen,” 134 (see note 38 below), Benedict acknowledged the grounds of my reservations about his attempted extension of the semantic range of *diakonia* in “Die grössere Diakonie”.

³⁵ Einleitung, *Diakonische Konturen*, 9.

³⁶ It is surprising that the opening lecture by Folker Siegert (“Biblische Grundlagen der kirchlichen Diakonie”) did not engage the leading question confronting the conference. The lecture developed exclusively within the conventional framework of German *Diakonie*, failing to engage the basic semantic and exegetical issues raised by the re-interpretation, but directing against it in passing a number of critical comments. I cannot take up the detail here, but do note that his advocacy of Estienne/Stephanus (p. 21) appears to overlook the close attention given to this 17th century lexicon within the context of ancient (e. g., Pollux) and contemporary (Georgi) scholarship in *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (see 93, 169-173, and index). Siegert’s paper (published in 2008 but without reference to A. Hentschel, on whom see below) appeared in Rainer Merz, Ulrich Schindler, Heinz Schmidt, eds, *Dienst und Profession: Diakoninnen und Diakone zwischen Anspruch and Wirklichkeit* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008), 16-30.

³⁷ Gerhard K. Schäfer and Theodor Strohm, eds, *Diakonie – biblische Grundlagen und Orientierungen*, 2nd edn (Heidelberg: HVA 1994, originally 1990).

³⁸ “Diakonie als Dazwischengehen und Baauftragung. Die Collins-Debatte aus der Sicht ihres Anstossgebers,” *Barmherzigkeit und Diakonie*, 129-137, citing p. 130. This paper did not

comment, however, is that the German term *Diakonie* is so deeply enshrined in German spiritual aspirations that to change it would be to deprive the church of “the freedom to develop fully the ecclesiological implications of the *diakon-* words.” To this thought he added, “We hear the objections and choose the freedom to do things differently.”³⁹

Anni Hentschel was so not politic. Introducing a handbook on *Diakonie* with a reflection on “Diakonie in the Bible”, she concluded:

In the 19th century the concept of “Diakonie” was introduced as the foundation for the offices of deaconesses and deacons. This concept owes much less to biblical terminology, however, than people thought. Judged from the perspective of biblical sciences, a number of errors of interpretation occurred. Some of these, we must say, were “productive” mistakes in that they contributed in practice to a strengthening of love of neighbour. Nevertheless, the idea that *Diakonie* should develop in its practitioners a special kind of humble service and self-denial is far from what the biblical text means.⁴⁰

The confidence with which Hentschel asserted these views was founded on her recent “studies in semantics.”⁴¹ This German scholar was not merely reporting and endorsing the findings already established in an English-language semantic study of *diakonia*, as perhaps Benedict had done, but was corroborating them on the basis of her own research. From within the German academic context she was asserting that the values long enshrined in the German term *Diakonie* could not be traced back to early Christian thinking. The first paragraph of her introduction to the volume advised her readers in these terms (translated):

In the German Protestant churches the loanwords “*diakonia*” and “*diakonic*” designate commitments of a social-charitable character. However, this diakonic profile, so highly lauded among German Protestant churches, has its biblical roots much more in passages about love of the neighbour than in New Testament occurrences of the Greek words *diakonia* and its cognates. In reality, these words express neither lowly service nor merciful concern.

Her methodology included an extensive review of 20th century scholarly research into the Greek *diakon-* words, including the studies by Beyer and Schweizer mentioned above but focusing – over some 70 pages – on *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*. The close focus on this work was required in order to evaluate its claim to have overturned the traditional German understanding of the Greek term. She tested the re-interpretation by independently examining Greek usage in a wide range of selected ancient authors, including Plato, Dio Chrysostom, Epictetus, and Lucian along with Hellenistic Jewish writers, Philo and Josephus among others. Her examination of this range of the usage led her to the conclusion that “the results of Collins’ monograph in regard to the field of meaning of the *diakon-* words can be fully upheld.”⁴²

appear with those of Siegert and other participants at the Rummelsberg conference in *Dienst und Profession* but in Benedict’s own later *Barmherzigkeit* collection.

³⁹ “Diakonie als Dazwischengehen,” 134.

⁴⁰ “Diakonie in der Bibel” in Klaus-Dieter K. Kottnik and Eberhard Hauschildt, eds, *Diakoniefibel: Grundwissen für alle, die mit Diakonie zu tun haben* (Gütersloh: CMZ Gütersloher Verlag, 2008), 17-20, citing p. 20; see also her “Gibt es einen sozial-karitativ ausgerichteten Diakonat in den frühchristlichen Gemeinden? [“In the early church did a diaconate exist that was characterised by charitable service?”], *Pastoraltheologie* 97 no. 9 (2008): 290-306, in which her response is a definitive negative.

⁴¹ *Diakonia im Neuen Testament* (note 33 above).

⁴² *Diakonia im Neuen Testament*, 85.

This established, Hentschel proceeded to initiate her own semantic and exegetical investigation into usage in the New Testament. In two or three instances here her interpretation presents a difference of emphasis from interpretations given in my work,⁴³ but the semantic principles at work are the same. This is evident very clearly in connection with the passage from the gospels that lies at the root of the German tradition of *Diakonie*. This is the saying of the Son of Man that he “came to serve” (Mark 10:45). We have seen how Beyer evaluated “serve”/*diakon-* here as “the very essence of service, of being for others, whether in life or in death.” This notion is represented in one major lexical study as “the Son of Man did not come in order for people to serve him but in order to serve people”,⁴⁴ and appears in a once popular bible as “even I, the Messiah, am not here to be served, but to help others...”⁴⁵ By contrast, the meaning of the Son of Man’s service is presented in my writings as “The Son of Man did not come to have attendants waiting on him, but to carry out the mandate he has received by giving his life as a ransom for many.”⁴⁶ Remarkably, Hentschel stated that she “fundamentally agrees with Collins.”⁴⁷ Even more remarkably, a marginal note in the Geneva Bible of 1602 commented that in this saying the Son of Man was announcing that he was “a Minister of his Fathers will.”⁴⁸

4. Roman Catholic reception of the re-interpreted “diakonia”

While we have noted Cardinal Ratzinger’s warm reception of the re-interpretation of *diakonia* at the Roman Synod of 1990, we have little evidence, outside of book reviews,⁴⁹ of other expressly Roman Catholic interest in or advocacy of the re-interpretation. One may have expected that the novel appeal in the Second Vatican Council’s Latin documents to a notion called *diakonia* – in particular, in *Lumen Gentium* – would have sparked sustained exploration of the relevance of the re-interpretation of this term to ecclesiology. There (n. 24) the bishop’s office is called “verum ... servitium quod in sacris Litteris ‘diaconia’ seu ministerium significanter nuncupatur”, in the translation presented on the Holy See’s webpage, “a true service, which in sacred literature is significantly called ‘diakonia’ or

⁴³ See my discussion of such passages in the review article “Re-interpreting *diakonia* in Germany: Anni Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament*,” *Ecclesiology* 5 no.1 (2009): 69-81.

⁴⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 460.

⁴⁵ *The Living Bible Paraphrased New Testament* (Wheaton, Ill., Tyndale House Publishers, 1971).

⁴⁶ See the discussion in Collins, *Diakonia*, 248-252.

⁴⁷ She translated: “Der Menschensohn ist nicht gekommen, um *für sich selbst Aufträge ausführen zu lassen*, d. h. Aufträge zu erteilen und somit eine herrschaftliche Rolle ausfüllen, sondern *um selbst einen Auftrag auszuführen*, der in Mk 10:45b genannt wird.” *Diakonia im NT*, 278, and see there note 438.

⁴⁸ *The Geneva Bible (The Annotated New Testament, 1602 Edition)*, ed. G. T. Sheppard (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989). In regard to the interpretation of the statement at Luke 22:27 (“I am among you as one who serves”) and its relationship to the tradition recorded at Mark 10:45, the convergence on each count between Hentschel and myself is again extremely close; see Hentschel, *Diakonia*, 286-289; Collins, *Diakonia*, 245-247.

⁴⁹ See reference to reviews by Jerome Murphy O’Connor, Jerome H. Neyrey, and Timothy Radcliffe among others in my “A Ministry for Tomorrow’s Church”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 32 no. 2 (Spring 1995), 159-178, esp. 166-168.

ministry.”⁵⁰ In ecclesiological writings Roman Catholics have largely confined comment on *diakonia* to promoting ethical⁵¹ or churchwide⁵² dimensions of ministry or – and especially – to theological and pastoral perspectives of the renewed diaconate. In some instances the latter has been in an attempt to enrich the theology through the re-interpretation⁵³ but, overwhelmingly, other comment focuses on the lowly loving service represented in the German notion of “*Diakonie*”.

Indeed, resistance to disturbing the German model has been much in evidence.⁵⁴ The most striking instance has been the “Historico-Theological Research Document” published in 2003 after a decade-long investigation by the International Theological Commission.⁵⁵ The report opened its consideration of the diaconate in the New Testament under the heading “Difficulties in terminology” but was wholly silent about the semantic research published in 1990 in *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, drawing instead on eight German-language resources both older and more recent than the preceding, including H. W. Beyer, and strongly endorsing the philological views of Eduard Schweizer referred to above.

What really surprises is the terminological volte-face evident in the homiletic uses to which Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, has put the German *Diakonie*. At the creation of 24 cardinals at the consistory of 20 November 2010 Pope Benedict developed reflections upon the gospel reading for that occasion, Mark 10:32-45. In an early reference to “the icon

⁵⁰ Why “significanter”? The Spanish has “con toda propiedad”; the French, “expressément”.

⁵¹ Thus, Hans Kung, *The Church*, Eng. trans. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1976), 495-502.

⁵² Thus, Thomas F. O’Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, revised ed. (New York: Paulist, 1999), 62-65; 171.

⁵³ Richard R. Gaillardetz, “On the Theological Integrity of the Diaconate” in Owen F. Cummings, William T. Ditewig, Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Theology of the Diaconate: The State of the Question* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 67-97; Bart J. Koet, “Diakonie ist nicht nur Armenfürsorge. Neuere exegetische Erkenntnisse zum Verständnis von Diakonie” in C. Gramszow & M. Sander-Gaiser, eds, *Lernen wäre eine prima Alternative: Religionspädagogik in theologischer und erziehungswissenschaftlicher Perspektive* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008), 303-318; Ralf Miggelbrink, “Die ‘verschiedenen Dienstämter’ (LG 18) und die Einheit des Ordo: Zum Spezifikum des diakonalen Amtes” in Klemens Armbruster and Matthias Mühler, eds, *Bereit wozu? Geweiht für was? Zur Diskussion um den ständigen Diakonat* (Freiburg: Herder, 2009), 204-221.

⁵⁴ Thus Thomas Söding, “‘Nicht bedient zu werden, sondern zu dienen’ (Mk 10:45): Diakonie und Diakonat im Licht des Neuen Testaments” in *Bereit wozu?* 30-62 (compare Miggelbrink [preceding note] in the same volume) ; Herbert Haslinger, *Diakonie: Grundlagen für die soziale Arbeit der Kirche* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009), see esp. 348-350; Christian Wessely, *Gekommen um zu dienen: Der Diakonat aus fundamental theologisch-ekklesiologischer Sicht* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2004), 13; 246-247; Walter Kasper, “The Diaconate,” *Leadership in the Church*, Eng. trans. (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 13-44.

⁵⁵ *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, International Theological Commission Historico-Theological Research Document, Eng. trans. (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2003). For information on the two committees engaged in this project see *La civiltà cattolica* 154 no. 3663 (Feb. 2003) 253-336, *Nota preliminare*, 253. Introducing the German translation of the document, Gerhard L. Mueller, a member of the second committee, stated that ‘Christian existence is participation in the Diakonia that God himself has exercised towards humankind in Christ’ and that ‘it is most incisively described as service to people’; see G. L. Mueller, ed., *Der Diakonat - Entwicklung und Perspektiven* (Wuerzburg: Echter, 2004), p. 7.

of Jesus ... who did not come to be served, but to serve”, Pope Benedict evoked the image of the Messiah’s “style of life” as “the basis of new relationships ... and a new way of exercising authority.” Such phrasing already suggests the values of the German *Diakonie*, and the reference becomes explicit as the homilist moves to the contention that “The criterion of greatness and primacy according to God is not dominion but service”, adding at this point that “*diakonia* is the fundamental law of the disciple and of the Christian community.” This *diakonia* shows its authentic character in “the logic of bending down to wash the feet, the logic of service, the logic of the Cross....”⁵⁶ This pattern is indeed the mirror image of the logic of H. W. Beyer, for whom, as we saw above, *diakonia* expresses the notion of “full and perfect sacrifice, as the offering of life which is the very essence of service, of being for others, whether in life or in death.”

While Pope Benedict’s usage here is in striking contrast to the usage he preferred in his address to the Roman Synod of 1990 cited above, it echoes the notion of *diakonia* embedded in his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*. Introducing Part 2 of the encyclical on “*Liebesdienst*” (“this service of charity”), Pope Benedict is immediately invoking the terminology of *Diakonie* and develops its full dimension as “an ordered service to the community” (20). This he sees embodied in the work of the Seven in Acts 6, who perform their “*diakonia*” as a “ministry of charity” that becomes “part of the fundamental structure of the Church” (21). *diakonia* thus envisaged becomes part of the church’s “deepest nature” alongside the proclamation of the Word of God (*kerygma-martyria*) and the celebration of the sacraments (*leitourgia*) (24).

Essential to the authenticity of the *diakonia* of the individual Christian, Pope Benedict later observes, is the personal character of the service, this again closely echoing the sentiments in H. W. Beyer’s presentation, who in turn drew upon his own mentor, Wilhelm Brandt, in stating that *diakonia* “presupposes a Thou, and not a Thou towards whom I may order my relationship as I please, but a Thou under whom I have placed myself as a *diakonōn* [servant].”⁵⁷ Pope Benedict XVI expressed this sentiment as follows (34):

My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation [for the recipient], I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift.

In addressing the hierarchy of England and Wales in May 2008 on the subject of Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical, Cardinal Cordes, then President of the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* for Human and Christian Development, drew upon this citation to support his own proposition that “Whoever dedicates himself to *diakonia* thus takes on the opposite of reputation, power, and rank that leaders and political entities claim for themselves.”⁵⁸ Such a comment points back to a deeper connection with the German (Evangelical) tradition when we read on the website of *Cor Unum* that its activities include the “promotion and encouragement of theological reflection among Pastors in order to strengthen *the Christian roots*

⁵⁶ Text of Pope Benedict’s homily from *Zenit.org* ZE101122.

⁵⁷ Beyer, *TDNT* p. 85, citing Wilhelm Brandt, *Dienst und Dienen im Neuen Testament* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1931), 71.

⁵⁸ <http://www.zenit.org/article-22486?l=english>. In writing an introduction to the Festschrift presented to Cardinal Cordes upon his retirement, Pope Benedict extended a warm expression of thanks to the cardinal for insights the cardinal had provided into *caritas* in conversations between the two while Pope Benedict was preparing to write the encyclical.

of Charity; the Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* has a special place in this area.”⁵⁹ This citation takes on greater significance in the light of the German-language page where we read the preceding italicised phrase as “die christlichen Wurzel der Diakonie”. No wonder then that on the occasion of Spiritual Exercises for members of *Cor Unum* in December 2010 the website issued the invitation to “Responsibles [sic] of the Church’s *Diakonia*”. The term appears also in the invitations in French, Italian and Spanish; in the German version, however, the phrasing appears in the form “those with responsibilities for *the church’s services to the neighbour* (Dienste am Nächsten)”. In April 2011 the Preacher to the Papal Household, Raniero Cantalamessa, chose charity as the theme of his Lenten addresses, the fourth of which he devoted specifically to the theme of service under its New Testament guise of *diakonia*.⁶⁰

Given such patronage – indeed, such dominance – of a theological concept hardly older in Roman Catholic discourse than the Second Vatican Council itself, we are not to be surprised that in 2010 the French Bishops Conference should have announced a three-year pastoral programme named *Diaconia 2013*. Nor ought we to be surprised that the main inspiration for the initiative is identified as Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical of 2005 *Deus caritas est*.⁶¹ Influential as well was a publishing event closer to home in the aspirational book by the Etienne Grieu of the Jesuits’ faculty of theology in Paris, *So tight a link: When love of God becomes diaconia*,⁶² nor should we overlook the precedent established in Belgium where the bishops had organised “the year of *Diaconia*” in 2003.⁶³

In this connection, of interest are the misgivings apparent in observations about the French initiative by the ecclesiologist Alphonse Borrás of the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve. Borrás has written extensively and sympathetically on the diaconate but, confronted with the concept of *Diaconia 2013*, his first reaction (in September 2011) was the difficulty of coming to grips with what “this famous *diaconia*” might mean. The expression is new in “church jargon” and “alien to the usage of the vast majority of catholics”, and different groups within the church can make what they want of it.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/corunum_en/profilo_en/istituzione_en.html. Italics added. See the German text of the introduction at the Cor Unum website under Publications.

⁶⁰ “Love Must Be Active: The Social Relevance of the Gospel”, as reported by ZENIT news, 8 April, 2011, <http://www.zenit.org/>

⁶¹ See the address by the President of the National Council for Solidarity, Bishop Bernard Housset of La Rochelle/Saintes, “Diaconie et solidarité: du témoignage au service”, *Diaconat Aujourd’hui* 151 (August, 2010).

⁶² My translation of the title: *Un lien si fort. Quand l’amour de Dieu se fait diaconie* (Paris: Editions de l’Atelier, 2009). Grieu is gracious in acknowledging that *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* has introduced ‘a broad revision of how the term is to be understood’ (p. 15), but in the pages devoted to a critique of the revision (pp. 99-108) fails to take account of the basic semantic reality that the Greek term draws all its meaning from the context in which it occurs and outside of a context has no identifiable meaning at all; further, he misconceives the relational element within the semantics: in the usage of *diakon-* terms the relational orientation is exclusively to the mandating authority, not to the recipient of the mandated action.

⁶³ See Déclarations des évêques de Belgique 29, *Envoyés pour servir. Année de la diaconie* [2003], <http://www.catho.be/index.php?id=582>

⁶⁴ <http://diaconie.eklablog.com/alphonse-borras-diaconie-de-l-eglise-et-ministeres-ordonnes-a5932867>

A sense of theological uneasiness arises here, not to say of impatience. Borras' words bring to mind the no-nonsense outburst from the eloquent Claude Bridel who had the same sense of something being out of place. His lines from 1971 concluded the first chapter of my 1990 *Diakonia* which offered a critique of the newfound theological values of *diakonia* of that period under the title "The Latter-Day Servant Church":

...we have the inflation of the term and its erection into a veritable myth. To such an extent does everyone speak of serving – baptising the administrative, parish-pump or philanthropic activity with a word that has become banal – that Christian declarations in this style appear merely to be following in the wake of the spirit of the times without any expression being given to just where the service of the church is to be distinguished from various humanitarian projects unless this is by way of a vocabulary that is obscurely technical (ministry, diakonia) and of a pious phraseology which attempts to give substance to it.⁶⁵

The committee which the French bishops established to make preparations for *Diakonia 2013* contributes – like its Belgian predecessor in 2003 – to the misunderstanding of the ancient Greek word which the Evangelical Churches in Germany occasioned in the early 19th century by the founding of the first modern groups of deaconesses and deacons. The new coloring of the word and its entrapment within a narrow semantic spectrum focused on the notion of benevolent service continue to dominate institutional and professional discourse about diaconate and ministry within the EKD and associated traditions.⁶⁶ From that base it has long permeated Roman Catholic discourse in those same areas,⁶⁷ a practice which recent usage at the highest levels of curial and even papal pronouncements would seem to have canonised.

5. Conclusion

The problem with this, however, is that over the course of the last twenty years scholarly re-interpretations (Collins, Hentschel) disavow any semantic connection between ancient *diakonia* and benevolent activity. The German *Diakonie*, as an expression for loving service of another, is a misnomer. It might better be named the misconceived brainchild of an era now past. This fact raises a further and disturbing problem. If we continue to legitimise the

⁶⁵ Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting*, p. 45 (my translation), citing Claude Bridel, *Aux seuils de l'espérance: La diaconat en notre temps* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1971), 62.

⁶⁶ See the recent collection of papers illustrating contemporary pastoral practice in the light of the 19th century tradition of *Diakonie* in Michael Herbst and Ulrich Laepple, eds, *Das missionarische Mandat der Diakonie: Impulse Johann Hinrich Wicherns für eine evangelisch profilierte Diakonie im 21. Jahrhundert*, 2nd ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag: 2010).

⁶⁷ See my account of such developments prior to 1990 in *Diakonia: Re-interpreting*, 5-45. For the ongoing trend in contemporary Roman Catholic thinking in Germany, see the papers from a conference in Fulda in 2008 on the diaconate in Richard Hartmann, Franz Reger and Stefan Sander, eds, *Ortsbestimmungen: Der Diakoniat als kirchlicher Dienst* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josep Knecht, 2009). With one exception, the papers show no cognisance of any other than the conventional German perception. The exception is Bettina Eltrop's "Biblische Grundlagen zum Diakoniat", 91-99; even so, her brief account of the Collins/Hentschel re-interpretation (91-93) makes room for overriding values based on the traditional Beyer/TWNT perceptions of lowly service.

German term and its derivatives in other languages, we raise the expectation in all who read the New Testament that when they encounter a *diakon-/service* word they are reading an encoded message about love. Such mass misreadings of the Scriptures have no place in a church. Nor is it enough to concede the existence of a century of mistranslations and misreadings and attempt then to discount these misreadings as nonetheless “productive” because the 19th century view of *diakonia* had laid the ground for a century and more of high-minded outreach to the neglected of our societies through widespread organisations under that name.⁶⁸ In so doing we merely distract the churches from the tasks, firstly, of discerning the foundational ecclesial reality trumpeted by Paul in “the *diakonia* of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18) and, secondly, of confronting the challenges of embodying that reality in their institutions.

⁶⁸ This “productive” view of the errors of the past is presented by both Hentschel and H.-J. Benedict. The former, however, urges the priority of the real meaning of the biblical text (“*Diakonie in der Bibel*”, 20), while the latter pragmatically resigns himself to seeing *Diakonie* maintaining its place in the church’s vocabulary (“*Diakonie als Dazwischengehen*”, 133).