

Ecumenical Diaconical Work as a Cultural Contribution to the Humanization of our Contemporary Society

Daniel Munteanu

The Liturgical Dimension of Diaconical Work

“All diaconical work goes out from the altar.” This famous sentence of Wilhelm Löhe, who was a “liturgical personality” and an “*anima naturaliter liturgica*,”¹ expresses the ecumenical truth about the internal connection between the liturgy and the diaconical work.² The WCC plenary assembly of Vancouver in 1983 defined the diaconical work as a “liturgy after the liturgy.”³ The social welfare work belongs to the being of the Church as a sharing, curative, and reconciling ministry of the Church.⁴

Not only in the Protestant but also in the Catholic⁵ and Orthodox⁶

¹ Hans Kressel, Wilhelm Löhe als Liturg und Liturgiker, Neuendettelsau 1952, 11ff.

² Ulrike Suhr, Gottesdienst und Diakonie, in: Hans-Christoph Schmidt-Lauber, Michael Meyer-Blanck, Karl-Heinrich Bieritz (ed.), Handbuch der Liturgik, Göttingen 2003, 673f.

³ See Theoder Strohm, Diakonie an der Schwelle zum neuen Jahrtausend. Die gemeinsame Zukunft im Dienste der Menschheit und der Schöpfung, in: idem (ed.), Diakonie an der Schwelle zum neuen Jahrtausend. Ökumenische Beiträge zur weltweiten und interdisziplinären Verständigung, Heidelberg 2000, 19; see R. Turre, Diakonische Einsichten. Theologische Impulse und ethische Reflexionen, Stuttgart 2001, 49: he describes the diaconical work as „Liturgy after Liturgy“.

⁴ Theoder Strohm, Diakonie an der Schwelle zum neuen Jahrtausend, 19.

⁵ See M. Heimbach-Steins, G. Steins, Die Einheit von Liturgie und Diakonie in der Feier der österlichen Tage, in: BiLi 73, 2000, 60-68; see J. Ratzinger, Eucharistie – Mitte der Kirche, München 1978; see Freiburger Materialdienst für die Gemeindepastoral, Gottesdienst und Menschendienst. Kirche als eucharistische und diakonische Gemeinschaft, 3/2003 (<http://www.seelsorgeamt-freiburg.de/download/MD2003-3.pdf>)

⁶ See Ion Bria, Die Liturgie nach der Liturgie, in: K. Raiser (Ed.), Ökumenische Diakonie – eine Option für das Leben. Beiträge aus der Arbeit des ÖRK zur theologischen Begründung ökumenischer Diakonie, Frankfurt am Main 1988, 138f; see Alexandros Papaderos, Die liturgische Diakonie, in: K. Raiser (ed.), Ökumenische Diakonie, 104ff; see D. Stăniloae, Spiritualitate si comuniune in liturgia ortodoxa, Bucuresti 2004.

understandings, the authentic diaconical work is based on the eucharistic dynamism of the restoration of human dignity. Social welfare work as a struggle for justice and human dignity has its roots in the eucharistic spirituality that understands the human as a being, which is appointed to the everlasting community with God. Diaconical work has a liturgical dimension because any support of the human being is an expression of God's love in bodily and spiritual needs. True diaconical work is a liturgical service because the charity shows a correlative to God's love (1 Jn 4:12). The diaconical work is a form of action, as well as concretion of the faith. "Allowance to the person is service. It is an expression of the faith in God who has turned to the people in Jesus Christ. The Church serves this God in liturgy (service), martyria (testimony), koinonia (communion) and diaconical work (service to the next)."⁷

The concept of deacon (*diakonos*) found its primary meaning in the language of liturgy because it was used primarily for the service at the table (i.e., mainly for serving and worrying about the poor).⁸ The Church appeared from the beginning as a "service" in the word and "service" for the poor. The meaning of social-welfare work hangs together inseparably with the message of Christ, who put the service for fellow human in the centre of his sermon: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45). The fact that the broadcasting of the Son dealt with allowance to the people, in particular to the poor, sick, and oppressed, shows during the foot washing (Jn 13:4f). The message of love reveals the value of the service: "Whoever wants to be great among you, should be your servant" (Mark 10:43f; Mark 9:35).

In what does the liturgical dimension of diaconical work consist now? The caritative and social office of the Church cannot be

⁷ Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben. Grundlagen, Aufgaben und Zukunftsperspektiven der Diakonie. Eine evangelische Denkschrift, 1998, 17.

⁸ See P. Müller, "Diakonie", in: LKStKR, Bd. 1, 2000, 416-419; see Gottfried Hammann, Die Geschichte der christlichen Diakonie. Praktizierte Nächstenliebe von der Antike bis zur Reformationzeit, Göttingen 2003, 21.

separated from the liturgy, as long as every Christian mercy has an *epicletic dimension*. The inspiration of Christian diaconical work, or the determining sign of the diaconical identity,⁹ lies not only in the “cultural memory” with the commands of Christ (in the anamnesis), but also in the ability of Christian action with the Spirit of Christ. “The real reason behind liturgical diaconical work is the Holy Spirit, Inspirator, bearer and preserver of the really Christian Dienens, according to the model of Christ.”¹⁰

Diaconical work as an exercise of the service in the need of the destitute is called Service of Christ and Praising of God. Diaconical work reflects the “kingdom of heaven as kingdom of charity”¹¹ and is at the same time an expression of the liturgical anticipation of God’s eschatological coming. This anticipation happens by the Holy Spirit, who helps people to overcome the sinful self-centering, solipsism, and egoism. The reason diaconical work never leads to narcissistic imagination and self-admiration lies in the fact that every diaconical work occurs through the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is effective in every act of love: love of neighbors, creation, and God. The Christian as a deacon sees the other with the eyes of the everlasting love of God and recognizes the dignity as a subject on which this love of God is oriented. Christian diaconical work is not only christocentric¹² but also pneumatocentric.¹³ It assumes, therefore, not only pneumatology, but also certain anthropology.

⁹ Karl-Fritz Daiber, *Diakonie und kirchliche Identität. Studien zur diakonischen Praxis in der Volkirche*, Hannover 1988.

¹⁰ Alexandros K. Papaderos, *Aspekte orthodoxer Sozialethik*, in: Ingeborg Gabriel, idem, Ulrich H. J. Körtner, *Perspektiven ökumenischer Sozialethik. Der Auftrag der Kirchen im größeren Europa*, Mainz 2006, 69.

¹¹ Gottfried Hammann, *Die Geschichte der christlichen Diakonie. Praktizierte Nächstenliebe von der Antike bis zur Reformationszeit*, Göttingen 2003, 241.

¹² See Paul Philippi, *Christozentrische Diakonie. Ein theologischer Entwurf*, Stuttgart 1963.

¹³ See Henning Schröer, *Von der “christozentrischen Diakonie” zur diakonischen Geistesgegenwart*, in: Theodor Schober (ed.), *Grenzüberschreitende Diakonie. Paul Philippi zum 60. Geburtstag*, Stuttgart 1984, 71ff.

Homo Diaconus—Christian Anthropology as Base of Diaconical Work

A well understood diaconical work is not founded on compassion, but on the trust in the indestructible value of every human being. If the human being is *imago Dei*,¹⁴ (i.e., image of the imperishable beauty of God), help to a person in need encloses a recognition of their universal, permanent human dignity and at the same time makes a direct contribution to the restoration of the image of God. However, this restoration is not referring to the image of God in the disabled persons, the oppressed, and the neglected of society, but concerns rather the image in the deacon who ministers.

If one human being serves another, the minister is treating the other in accordance with the self's own dignity. If a person resists this, on account of egoism, inattentiveness or disinterest, then his or her own image of God suffers damage. A human being cannot lose their image of God because this means an ontological orientation towards God's community. Nevertheless, humans can stain the beauty of the image of God through sins, and thereby close themselves voluntarily to the inviting love of God.

Every act of diaconical work has also an aesthetic dimension. The acceptance of the other through service and by being willing to help means a restoration of the aesthetic order of inter-human communication. The practice of diaconical work as a practice of sharing and healing in solidarity with the poor, aims at the restoration of community (*koinonia*).¹⁵ Diaconical work as a service for Christ who meets us in the poor is at the same time an effort toward the preservation of one's own dignity and dynamism for the realization of humankind.

Psalm 8 especially underlines the divine beauty and dignity of every human being:

What is man that you are mindful of him,

¹⁴ See D. Balfour, *Saint Gregory the Sinaite: Discourse on the transfiguration*, San Bernardino California 1986, 41.

¹⁵ Martin Robra, *Diakonie im ökumenischen Dialog*, in: Günter Ruddat, Gerhard K. Schäfer (ed.), *Diakonisches Kompendium*, Göttingen 2005, 145

and the son of man that you care for him?
Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet.

The recognition of the universality of human dignity, which forms the basis of the diaconical work, helps overcome discrimination, patriarchalism, and racism in society.¹⁶ Regardless of sex or race, every human being carries the imperishable beauty of the Trinitarian God in the self. Every person is a revelation and a “grammar of the possible self-statement of God.”¹⁷

True diaconical work is integral. It treats not only bodily pains and needs of a person but also aims at an integral healing of the human being. The love of God for humankind and the love of humans for God reveal a freeing and healing potential for broken human relations.¹⁸

The Christian world view is affected by the paradigm of the creative love of God. God loves the world with the love that is in God. Divine love as a foundation of eschatological joy shows a transforming dynamism. God’s love, light, and truth transform humans, and make them receptive to the suffering of the other: “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezechiel 36, 26). There is no true diaconical work without a heart of flesh (i.e., a sensitive or sharing heart). The sense of Christ’s incarnation lies not only in the apotheosis, but also in the humanization of human beings. True human being — “*ecce homo*” (Jn 19:5)— is an existence rooted in charity, social justice, and peace.

¹⁶ See Beate Hofmann, *Feministische Spiritualität. Entdeckung bei der Begegnungen zweier Frauenkulturen*, in: idem, Michael Schibilsky (ed.), *Spiritualität in der Diakonie. Anstöße zur Erneuerung christlicher Kernkompetenz*, Stuttgart 2001, 27-45.

¹⁷ K. Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens. Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*, Freiburg Basel Wien 1976, 221.

¹⁸ Peter Zimmerling, *Evangelische Spiritualität: Wurzeln und Zugänge*, Göttingen 2003, 124.

Dumitru Stăniloae showed that true love means to forget one's self for others (involving a real and deep kenosis).¹⁹ Today one can speak about the need of an ecumenical kenosis, for without the renunciation of triumphalism, no authentic communication can occur. One cannot be "orthodox" without perceiving the presence of Christ by the Holy Spirit in all human beings.

This perception encloses a refusal of any marginalization of people who are physically or spiritually disabled. "Disability can entail not only economic lack of rights, but also the impoverishment of relations and the loss of opportunities. People with disabilities are often victims of discriminatory trends in the society."²⁰

The fifth meeting of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi maintained, "If the churches search and wish the authentic unity, they must be open for all people."²¹

In a society affected by social Darwinism, the human dignity of poor and disabled persons will be denied. The mission of the Church consists in acting for the inviolable dignity of every human being. The value of a society depends on its social level, on its humanism.

Diaconical Work as a "Signature of Christianity"²²

Diaconical work, as defined as the "being and sign of Church's life,"²³ has an ecumenical dimension²⁴ because it crosses the confessional

¹⁹ D. Munteanu, *Der tröstende Geist der Liebe. Zu einer ökumenischen Lehre vom Heiligen Geist über die trinitarischen Theologien* von J. Moltmann und D. Stăniloae, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2003.

²⁰ <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments2003.nsf/index/plen-1.1-ge.html>.

²¹ Theodor Schober, *Diakonie und Theologie bedingen einander*, in: Jürgen Moltmann, *Diakonie im Horizont des Reiches Gottes: Schritte zum Diakonatum aller Gläubigen*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984, 7ff.

²² See Gerhard K. Schäfer, *Evangelisch-theologische Konzeptionen und Diskussionslinien der Diakonie*, in: Günter Ruddat, Gerhard K. Schäfer (ed.), *Diakonisches Kompendium*, 93.

²³ Karin Löber, Armin Zielke (ed.), *Diakonie - was ist das? : Diakonie als Wesens- und Lebensäußerung der Kirche. Referate im Rahmen der 13. Jahrestagung des Diakonischen Werkes der Selbständigen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche (DW-SELK) am 28. März 2003, Oberursel 2003.*

²⁴ Siehe R. Turre, *Diakonik. Grundlegung und Gestaltung der Diakonie*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1991, 126-136.

borders by putting charity into practice. In common responsibility for the poor, Christian engagement can be co-ordinated ecumenically. On the horizon of charity, confessional walls collapse. The spirit of love who blows wherever he wishes cannot be limited. The Spirit encourages excess of particulars and allows interconfessional and international cooperations. Today ecumenical diaconical work²⁵ is called not only to increased sensitivity and recognition of the diaconical work of the other but also perhaps towards a liturgical opening up to the presence of God's Spirit manifested in every work of charity.

If the Orthodox Church appears today as ready to learn from the diaconical experiences and values of its Western brothers and sisters, she thereby admits indirectly that all diaconical work is carried and inspired by God's Spirit. All diaconical work is an expression of God's love, "who poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5, 5). In this recognition of the universal presence of the Holy Spirit, I see the essential bridge toward a convergence of the churches: "*Ubi Spiritus Sanctus, ibi ecclesia.*" (Where the Holy Spirit is, there is the Church).

Diaconical work always has a cultural meaning when it becomes a life style.²⁶ As a "Signature of Christianity" it contributes to the renewal of our culture. The *Charta Oecumenica — Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation of the Churches in Europe* points to the meaning of diaconical work: "On account of our Christian faith we exert ourselves for human and social Europe in which human rights and basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation, and solidarity are effective. We stress reverence for life, the value of marriage and family, prioritizing action for the poor, and the willingness to forgive all in mercy."²⁷

²⁵ About the concept of ecumenical diacony see K. Raiser (ed.), *Ökumenische Diakonie – eine Option für das Leben. Beiträge aus der Arbeit des ÖRK zur theologischen Begründung ökumenischer Diakonie*, Frankfurt am Main 1988.

²⁶ See Elisabeth Eicher-Dröge, *Im Dialog mit Kirche und Welt?* Berlin Hamburg Münster 2004, 253f: speaks about "cultural diakonia".

²⁷ <http://www.cec-kek.org/Deutsch/ChartaFinG.htm>.

Ecumenical diaconical work is therefore a sign of the Christian's world responsibility. *The Magna Charta* of diaconical work as presented in Matthew 25 serves as an orientation for the Christian mission in today's world. A culture inspired by diaconical work of charity, service, and reconciliation influences and changes the face of our culture. Today, the credibility of Christianity depends upon willingness to engage in diaconical work ecumenically.

Christian diaconical work contributes to the correction of the inhuman forms of society and is therefore an anticipation of an eschatological justice. The work of the Holy Spirit makes us more sensitive to injustice and urges us to improve the protection of the poor and to increase the social extent of justice.²⁸

Christian diaconical work is always realized on the horizon of God's kingdom because it is determined by hope and by the anticipation of this kingdom. It remains a "messianic fragment,"²⁹ which maintains the eschatological moment in history.

Even so, the theological consultation of Neuendettelsau dismissed the *Charta Oecumenica Diaconica*. The document it issued has a historical, theological, and cultural meaning for the dialogue of the Romanian-Orthodox and the Protestant-Lutheran churches. Although the diaconical work has never really been a subject of inter-church disputation,³⁰ today the rediscovery of the ecumenical dimension of diaconical work has a great contribution to make towards restoring the unity of the body of Christ. The *Charta Oecumenica Diaconica* argues that there is "no *consensus fidelium*, without having consensus with the poor, sick, and the disadvantaged, who are in need and stand powerless in society."³¹

²⁸ See Michael Welker, *Kirche im Pluralismus*, Gütersloh 1995, 37-57.

²⁹ Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *Phantasie für das Reich Gottes. Die Theologie Jürgen Moltmanns. Eine Einführung*, Gütersloh 2000, 101; see Gerhard K. Schäfer, *Evangelisch-theologische Konzeptionen und Diskussionslinien der Diakonie*, in: Günter Ruddat, Gerhard K. Schäfer (ed.), *Diakonisches Kompendium*, 119.

³⁰ See D. Munteanu, *Dimensiunea ecumenică a teologiei Părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae*, in: I. Tulcan, C. Ioja (ed.), *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă la începutul celui de al III-lea mileniu*, Arad 2006, 336f.

³¹ See http://ack-nuernberg.de/website/uploads/charta_oecumenica_diaconica.pdf.

The Political Diaconical Work of the Church

The diaconical work of the Church is always diaconical engagement within society.³² The *Charta Oecumenica Diaconica* expresses this truth, when it describes Christian diaconical work as public diaconia: “The churches take their social political responsibility”³³ through diaconical work.

The conditions of society determine the concrete development of diaconical work.³⁴ Christian testimony cannot be isolated in a spirituality that is separated from the world in which the person lives and works. That is why socio-political engagement shows no divergence with the spirituality of a community but rather shows its real appropriation. If the human being is an “*animal rationale et sociale*,” its religiousness must also have an historical and social character. Political engagement can create new basic conditions, useful for the development and the practice of authentic diaconical spirituality. Therefore, Christian diaconical work always has a political dimension, as long as the message of the Gospel aims at the renewal of the whole human being.³⁵ This work should transform the society of all human beings through the strength of Christ’s love. Diaconical work understood as an “interpreted Bible”³⁶ is the seed of hope for a society transformed in and through love.³⁷ The transforming strength of diaconical work has its roots in the omnipotence of Christ and in *missio Dei*. The dynamism of Christian diaconical work cannot be limited as long as it is a sphere of a divine activity, namely an energy of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of cosmic renewal and eschatological community in God’s Kingdom.

³² See Olaf Meyer, “Politische” und “Gesellschaftliche Diakonie” in der neueren theologischen Diskussion, Göttingen 1974.

³³ See http://ack-nuernberg.de/website/uploads/charta_oecumenica_diaconica.pdf.

³⁴ See Karl-Fritz Daiber, *Diakonie und kirchliche Identität. Studien zur diakonischen Praxis in der Volkskirche*, Hannover 1988, 75.

³⁵ Tullio Vinay, *Die politische Diakonie der Kirche*, Tübingen 1987, 1.

³⁶ R. Turre, *Diakonische Einsichten. Theologische Impulse und ethische Reflexionen*, 11.

³⁷ See Jürgen Moltmann, *Diakonie im Horizont des Reiches Gottes*, 41.

The *Charter Oecumenica Diaconica* emphasizes the liturgical-epicletic dimension of each act of diaconical work: “Christian diaconical work is liturgical and lives through the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit,” so that there is no ecumenical diaconical work without ecumenical spirituality.³⁸

The Gospel did not intend to be an abstract theory but a life in communion, which is affected by divine mercy. Communion with God as a spring of kenotic love enables sensitivity and action towards alleviating any form of human suffering.

Such a renewal or freeing of society from sinful structures, which support suffering and need in the world, can occur only if we are ready to take on political responsibility. In our contemporary pluralistic and globalized world, no true diaconical work can be pursued on a local level without considering international problems. Global responsibility and international interlinking determines the face of adequate Christian and ecumenical diaconical work. Diaconical work permeates all areas of human life and is as varied as are human beings and their problems. The Church takes on its responsibility for the poor and weak through its diaconical work, while it contributes to the political restructuring of the society for the purposes of social justice.³⁹

If politics is the “art of the impossible,” political diaconical work makes possible in the history the “impossible” of the eschatological life; namely through the work and the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The Church must not be shy before politics, if it takes seriously its responsibility and mission concerning diaconical work. By engaging politics, it can lend to the society a Christian, human, heart. The *Charta Oecumenica Diaconica* emphasizes the political relevance of an ecumenical diaconical work when it concludes that ecumenical diaconical work contributes to the renewal of social culture, and works particularly hard “in responsibility (...) for a humane society.”⁴⁰

³⁸ See http://ack-nuernberg.de/website/uploads/charta_oecumenica_diaconica.pdf.

³⁹ Gerald Kruhöffler, *Grundlinien des Glaubens. Ein biblisch-theologischer Leitfadens*, Bd. 1, 3rd revised and extended edition Göttingen 2002, 255f.

⁴⁰ See http://ack-nuernberg.de/website/uploads/charta_oecumenica_diaconica.pdf.

Diaconical Work as Praxis Pietatis or as a Living Spirituality

The fifth plenary assembly of the WCC in Nairobi (1975) underlined the significance of spirituality for diaconical work: “We long for a new spirituality which penetrates our planning, thinking and action.”⁴¹ Every Christian is a bearer of Christ through baptism (of the divine and diaconical love). Diaconical work is, therefore, not a function of the Church but rather its very being. One cannot separate Christian identity from Christian practice. That’s why *lex orandi, lex credendi and lex agendi* belong inseparably together. One cannot be Christian without being engaged in the spreading out of diaconical love.

Moreover, Christian diaconical work contributes to a culture of charity and is a sign of the liveliness of Christ’s Church. Not only diaconical work is ecumenical but also ecumenism is based on diaconical work. There is not only a diaconical ecumenism but also an ecumenism of diaconical work.⁴² The renewal of social welfare work is an “ecumenical task,”⁴³ and at the same time, a great opportunity for renewing ecumenism. Diaconical work contributes to the overcoming of confessional borders and to promoting action in communion of one serving Church.⁴⁴

The social responsibility of faith becomes clear if one also notes that diaconical work is connected with theological anthropology. Because God, in Jesus Christ and in his Holy Spirit, is open to the world, social responsibility belongs to the essence of the Christian faith demanding that it be open to the world and to all human beings in their concrete needs.⁴⁵

⁴¹ See Bernward Wolf, *Diakonische Identität und Spiritualität*, in: Beate Hofmann, Michael Schibilsky (ed.), *Spiritualität in der Diakonie. Anstöße zur Erneuerung christlicher Kernkompetenz*, 68.

⁴² Reinhard Turre, *Diakonie. Grundlegung und Gestaltung der Diakonie*, 127

⁴³ Elsie A. McKee, Risto A. Ahonen, *Erneuerung des Diakonats als ökumenische Aufgabe*, Heidelberg 1996.

⁴⁴ Theodor Schober, Hermann Kunst, Hand Thimme, *Oekumene – Gemeinschaft einer dienenden Kirche. Lernen Verstehen Wagen*, Stuttgart 1983.

⁴⁵ Sozialwort des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen in Österreich.

E. Levinas understood diaconical work as a responsibility for others.⁴⁶ Responsibility for others is perceived only in the cultural space of diaconical work. That is why the culture of diaconical work belongs in the centre of ecumenical anthropology. This anthropology contributes to the preservation of human dignity and of social rights. In the broader sense, one can speak of a direct contribution of ecumenical diaconical work to the social face of the entire world.

A culture of diaconical work makes decisions about the future ability of Christianity. Diaconical work is not only a service in justice but also a symbol of justice and peace. It has a social dimension because justice is possible only in a social space. Ecumenical diaconical work, therefore, offers an important foundation for the equality of all human beings as creatures of God and enables more justice.

Christ became human so that human beings might become more human (that is the true image of God), released from the hell of egoism and alienation. A human being is fulfilled, then, only in communion namely through kenotic love. Without love and communion there is no authentic diaconical work. The diaconical appeal hangs together with the task of the human being to be or to become a spring of Trinitarian love. Therefore, diaconical work forms the heart of Christian spirituality and constitutes the eschatological hope for a society transformed through God's love, which affects and works in us.⁴⁷

Today diaconical work occurs in global responsibility as a serving solidarity and as protest of faith against the suppression of human rights. It is a curative service, a participation in the process toward the new creation, an anticipation of new life, of the new eschatological communion. It is oriented not only toward overcoming human suffering but also toward the kingdom of God as the real future of our entire cosmos.

⁴⁶ Tamar Kron, Cornelia Muth, Hearing Levinas and the Revelation of Responsibility, in: Sybille Fritsch-Oppermann (ed.), *Das Antlitz des "Anderen". Emmanuel Lévinas' Philosophie und Hermeneutik als Anfrage an Ethik, Theologie und inrerreligiösen Dialog*, Rehburg-Loccum 2000, (185-196).

⁴⁷ J. Moltmann, *Diakonie im Horizont des Reiches Gottes*, 41.

The human being in Christian diaconical work has an inviolable and eternal dignity. A Christian anthropology inspired by diaconical work understands love and philanthropy as having the highest value. One does not start any more with the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* but instead assumes *amo ergo sum*. The perception of the other in its mysterious dimension has salutary effects for inter-human communication and communion. That is why ecumenical diaconical work contributes to the therapy of the society. “Particularly in the ecumenical debate the Church has been also understood as a healing community. (...) Only a healthy communion can also be a curative community.”⁴⁸

Charta Oecumenica Diaconica points out the fact that the healing of society and ecumenical spirituality are interdependent: “In the Spirit of ecumenical solidarity we commit ourselves to do common work for the development of social forces, which lives from the dynamism of the divine love (Jn 15:12–13).”⁴⁹

The Public Relevance of Ecumenical Diaconical Work

Ecumenical diaconical work is social diaconical work. Christian diaconical work influences culture through a different understanding of human beings. Through diaconical work as an “enterprise of mercy,”⁵⁰ one sees the person not only as a destitute being but also as a deacon, that is, as a caretaker in an act of mercy. Diaconical work forms not only a bridge to the ecumenism of practical Christianity, but is itself a form of the living ecumenical unity of the Church. In diaconical work the lost unity of the Church is recovered, and that unity discloses a confessing Church which expresses itself in love for the person as *imago Dei*.

Ecumenical diaconical work understood as a “grammar of attention” contributes to the transformation of the social state because it promotes a culture of help, respect, solidarity and equal rights. By doing this it contributes to the “regeneration of society’s moral resources” and

⁴⁸ R. Turre, *Diakonische Einsichten. Theologische Impulse und ethische Reflexionen*, 69.

⁴⁹ See http://ack-nuernberg.de/website/uploads/charta_oecumenica_diaconica.pdf.

⁵⁰ *Idem*, 217.

offers a value orientation for the purposes of a culture of responsibility towards the other. It reveals the sense and the depth of human life when it describes the very Christian existence as a diaconical existence.

Ecumenical diaconical work has a cultural importance, because it deeply influences the humanization of culture. It can be understood in my opinion as an epicentre of Christian-humanistic impulses for contemporary culture. Ecumenical diaconical work is also connected with the efforts to build a new ecumenical theology. Culture has been understood as essentially a care for the soul (*cultura animi*). That is why ecumenical culture deals with what is a basic aspect of care, namely healing (*cura, curatio*).⁵¹ The care that concerns itself with an ecumenical civilization process supports a culture of strangers and intercultural communication.⁵²

Ecumenical diaconical work contributes to public cultural impulses of Christian faith and theology. Each person as a social creature lives in society and is responsible for its design. The language of Christian theology influences public discourse and public history.⁵³ Christian theology aims at not only a private spirituality but also a change of the world through communion with God. To incarnate God's love in the world means to contribute to the world; the concrete structures and internal mechanisms of the world's history are affected by the principle of love. Ecumenical diaconical work as a contribution to culture encourages ecumenical action. Each human being becomes active in its social and confessional system, by transcending the borders of any confessional world view, and adopting a paradigm of communication and humanitarianism. Social communication can be deepened and formed anew by an ecumenical culture, which recognizes the uniqueness of each human being.

⁵¹ Armin Klein, Kulturpolitik, 37.

⁵² See Christian Wehlte, Die Kultur des Fremden, in: Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik (ed.), Verstehen und Verständigung, Würzburg 2002, (36-48); see Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Hermeneutik und Politik des Fremden. Ein philosophischer Beitrag zur Herausforderung des Zusammenlebens in multikulturellen Gesellschaften, in: W. Schmied-Kowarzik (Ed.), Verstehen und Verständigung, (49-59).

⁵³ Mike Higton, Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology, London 2004, 1f.

Culture and Social Structure

Social action belongs in cultural anthropology. Clifford Geertz understands cultural research as the real object of “informal logic of the actual life.”⁵⁴ Culture is not only a symbolic system without meaning for action, as long as culture and social structure show the same phenomena in different perspectives. Culture is a “system of meaning and symbols by means of whose social interaction takes place,” while social structure is “the very social interaction system itself” (Geertz, 1987, 99).⁵⁵ Geertz defines culture as a fabric of meaning⁵⁶ in which humans are attached by intertextual connections.⁵⁷

For Geertz religion is a cultural system,⁵⁸ a fabric of meaning that can be understood only interpretatively.⁵⁹ Religion is not interesting from a sociological point of view because it expresses the social order, but especially because it influences it.⁶⁰ The human being simultaneously lives in a culture and creates culture. The transformative strength of humankind is oriented not only outwardly but also can and should begin with its own culturalization (metanoia). A human being’s mind can change, can be reborn, and become a “New Creation” (2 Cor. 5, 17) through the inhabitation of God. In today’s cultural multi-dimensionality an ecumenical diaconical work can point to an internal matrix of sensible communication and justify work for a symphony of cultures.

⁵⁴ Ingo Mörth, Gerhard Fröhlich, geertz@symbolische-anthropologie.moderne Auf Spurensuche nach der “informellen Logik tatsächlichen Lebens”, in: Gerhard Fröhlich, Ingo Mörth (ed.), *Symbolische Anthropologie der Moderne. Kulturanalysen nach Clifford Geertz*, Frankfurt am Main 1998, (7-50), 13f.

⁵⁵ Ingo Mörth, Gerhard Fröhlich, geertz@symbolische-anthropologie.moderne Auf Spurensuche nach der “informellen Logik tatsächlichen Lebens,” 14.

⁵⁶ C. Geertz, *Dichte Beschreibung. Beitrag zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme*, Frankfurt am Main 7. Aufl. 2001, 9.

⁵⁷ Florian Steger, *Einleitung Kultur: ein Netz von Bedeutungen*, in: idem (ed.), *Kultur: ein Netz von Bedeutungen. Analysen zur symbolischen Kulturanthropologie*, Würzburg 2002, 22.

⁵⁸ See Clifford Geertz, *Religion als kulturelles System*, 1966; see Franz-Peter Burkhard, *Anthropologie der Religion*, E.B. Tylor, B. Malinowski, C. Lévi-Strauss, C. Geertz, Dettelbach 2005, 115ff.

⁵⁹ Carola Lipp, *Politische Kultur oder das Politische und Gesellschaftliche in der Kultur*, in: Wolfgang Hardtwig, Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Ed.), *Kulturgeschichte heute*, Göttingen 1996, 96f.

⁶⁰ Hans G. Kippenberg, *Religionssoziologie*, 27, in: TRE 27.

Ecumenical Diaconical Work as a Contribution to a Culture of Reconciliation

The paradigm of soteriology means not only *theosis* but also the reconciliation of human beings with God, of humans with each other and with the whole creation. Welfare as restoration of communion supposes reconciliation. It is the essential condition of salutary communication. Ecumenical diaconical work that lives from the paradigm of reconciliation between different denominations or traditions contributes to a theoretical differentiation of the concept of reconciliation, as well as to a culture of reconciliation. Human beings are reconciled with the creator through Jesus Christ. They are also called to take initiative and to participate in the divine and creative dynamism of reconciliation. One speaks about reconciled life as a life in and for reconciliation. In addition, ecumenical diaconical work shows humans to be conciliatory beings. The relevance to society of an ecumenical diaconical work as the basis of a culture of reconciliation lies in the political and economic implications of reconciliation. Without a culture of reconciliation there is no salutary peace and no justice in society. Actually, in this cultural dimension lies the social relevance of theological diaconical work, which has implications for the politics of liberation and justice.⁶¹

Reconciliation is the key to resolving internal human conflicts. The strength of reconciliation transforms human beings, and the whole of society, by giving a healing dynamic; moving from confrontation to salutary union in love, justice and peace.⁶² Ecumenical diaconical work can serve in this regard as a bridge between theology and society. In addition, the paradigm of reconciliation is a synthesis between an empirical Christian anthropology and ethics in favor of a creative dynamism of enduring dialogue. “The value of the idea of reconciliation is precisely that it serves as a medium for dynamic dialogue by virtue of its social, psychological, and theological meanings.”⁶³

⁶¹ R. Paul Olson, *The Reconciled Life: A Critical Theory of Counseling*, Westport 1997, 8.

⁶² *Idem*, 11.

⁶³ *Idem*, 15.

Diaconical work in a Christian sense means service for fellow humankind, compassion, love, and realization of koinonia through the kenosis of love. In the spirit of diaconical work the human being forgets one's self and puts the love of Christ in the center. This dynamism has a conciliatory dimension because it opens space for the reconciliation.⁶⁴ In this sense Christian diaconical work becomes diaconical work of reconciliation (see I Cor. 5.19) with direct consequences for a culture of peace, help, recognition and reconciliation. Accordingly the humanization of society through Christian ecumenical diaconical work is ever based on a culture of human dignity, and is witnessed in the way in which it encourages a process of social change toward social justice, freedom, and equality. This is the program of Philanthropia that offers its challenge to our world today.

⁶⁴ Theoder Strohm, *Diakonie an der Schwelle zum neuen Jahrtausend*, 20f.