

PHYLLIS ZAGANO

Inching towards a yes?

Shortly before Christmas, Pope Benedict issued a brief *motu proprio* clarifying canon law on the distinction between the diaconate and the priesthood. It appeared to be a technical step, but it could pave the way for women to be admitted to the permanent diaconate

With 29 words and the stroke of his pen, Benedict XVI may have ended the controversy over whether women can be ordained as deacons. There remains much canon law between women and the diaconal stole, but changes in the two canons defining the nature of the Sacrament of Orders reflect what the Church has always taught: priests and bishops are different from deacons.

The additions to canon 1008 and canon 1009 make things crystal clear: priests and bishops are ordained to act in the person of Christ, the head of the Church; deacons are

ordained to serve the people of God in and through the liturgy, the Word, and charity.

Why would these changes, announced in Benedict's new *motu proprio*, *Omnium in Mentem*, signal the return to the tradition of women deacons? Essentially, Benedict has split the difference between the two vocations, returning to an ancient view of ministry in which the bishop has a dual cadre of helpers: priests, who represent him and assist him in sacramental ministry and governance, and deacons, who assist him in his ministry of charity, in the preaching and teaching of the Word, and in the liturgy.



By more clearly distinguishing between diaconate and priesthood, Benedict underscores the constant church teaching that the diaconate does not necessarily imply the priesthood. That diaconate implies priesthood is a centuries-old misunderstanding resulting from subsuming the diaconate into the priesthood – so much so that for many years the diaconate became only a stopping-off vocation on the way to priesthood. Now, without diminishing the import of the diaconate – or changing the notion that it is included within the priesthood – Benedict has clarified the role of the permanent deacon.

What difference does it make? Well, an underlying argument against the restoration of the female diaconate in the Catholic Church is “if you can ordain a woman a deacon, you can ordain her a priest”. Even though there is nothing about the diaconate that implies or requires priesthood, the nearly irrational fear that the one is a natural step towards the other has paralysed the Church ever since Paul VI reportedly asked the obvious question when he approached the restoration of the permanent diaconate: What about women deacons? The question went to the International Theological Commission (ITC) in 1972, which produced no document on the diaconate until nearly 30 years later, in 2001. Even then, the commission said only that the teaching office of the Church had yet to decide on women deacons.

Pope Benedict – once a member of the commission – cannot forget Paul's question, which, while not yet definitively answered, is inching towards a yes. Serious scholars have long speculated that the immediate answer proposed as the ITC's response to



St Paul's Cathedral

FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL

Wednesday 20 January

1600 **BBC Live Broadcast of Choral Evensong**
 Introit Ecce dominus veniet *Victoria*
 Canticles *Francis Jackson* in G
 Anthem For lo, I raise up that bitter and hasty nation *Stanford*

Saturday 23 January

1230 **Diocesan Festival Eucharist of St Paul – Transformative**
 Celebrant and preacher: the Bishop of London
 Setting Messe solennelle *Vierne*
 Anthem Ave verum corpus *Colin Mawby*
 1700 **Evensong** sung by the Vicars Choral
 Introit Christe qui lux es et dies
Humphrey Clucas
 Canticles *Stainer* in D
 Anthem Thou, O God, art praised in Sion *Macpherson*

Sunday 24 January

0800 **Holy Communion** (*Book of Common Prayer*)
 1015 **Mattins**
 Canticles Te Deum & Jubilate *Deane*
 Preacher The Reverend Canon Lucy Winkett, Precentor, Canon in Residence
 Voluntary Voluntary in C minor *Greene arr. West*
 1130 **Sung Eucharist**
 Setting Missa Brevis in C (Orgelsolo Messe, K259) *Mozart*
 Anthem O salutaris hostia *Rossini*
 Preacher The Dean
 Voluntary Prelude & Fugue in G (BWV 541) *J.S. Bach*
 with the installation of new Vicar Choral and choristers
 1515 **Evensong**
 Canticles *Dyson* in F
 Anthem Light out of Darkness *Elgar*
 Preacher The Reverend Canon Mark Oakley, Priest-in-charge, Grosvenor Chapel, Mayfair
 Voluntary Prelude & Fugue in A flat (op.36 no.2) *Dupré*

Monday 25 January

THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL

0730 **Mattins**
 0800 **Holy Communion**
 1230 **Sung Eucharist** sung by the Cathedral Consort
 Setting Missa O quam gloriosum *Victoria*
 Anthem Magni Sanctus Paulus [a 4] *Palestrina*
 1700 **Evensong** attended by the College of Canons
 Canticles *Stanford* in G
 Anthem Blessed be the God and Father *S.S. Wesley*
 Preacher The Reverend Canon Lucy Winkett, Precentor, Canon in Residence

Related event:

Friday 22 January

INTERNATIONAL EUCHARISTIC SYMPOSIUM Transformative

1030 – 1600 King's College, London

Visiting speakers: **Professor Oliver Davies**, Professor of Christian Doctrine, King's College London
Rev. Dr Lillian Daniel, Senior Minister of First Congregational Church, Glen Ellyn, Illinois
The Revd Professor Sam Wells, Dean of Chapel, Duke University, North Carolina

Workshops by:

Canon Lucy Winkett, Fr Philip North and the Reverend Professor Ben Quash
 £20 (£5 for students) incl. lunch
Registration: The Reverend Andrew Hammond, Succentor
 Tel: 020 7246 8338
 succentor@stpaulscathedral.org.uk

More details at: www.london.anglican.org/transformative

For further information visit: www.stpauls.co.uk or telephone: 020 7236 4128 or 020 7246 8350

Paul was, simply, “yes”. Yes, women were deacons, yes, women were ordained and, yes, women can be ordained.

No official document came from the commission, but a valued member, Cipriano Vagaggini OSB, Cam. (1909-99), later published a detailed analysis of the Church’s tradition of women deacons. His paper did not become an official Vatican document, appearing instead in 1974 in the widely respected journal *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*. Vagaggini’s research is clear: the Church once had women deacons who were ordained within the sanctuary by the bishop, in the presence of the presbyterate, and by the imposition of hands.

Since then, the question seems to have revolved around the problem of restoring women to the diaconate while simultaneously respecting the desire to bar them from priesthood. The more developed argument, after all, has long been against ordaining women as priests, and rests on two legs. The stronger leg in the argument is that the Church simply does not believe it has the authority to do so. Jesus, it teaches, only chose men as apostles. The other, somewhat feeble leg, says only a male can represent Christ, the head of the Church, apparently placing maleness above humanity in the overpowering mystery of the Incarnation.

The first of these two objections to women priests is known as the “argument from authority”. The second is called the “iconic argument”. As far as priesthood is concerned, even with the changes in canon law, both arguments remain in place.

But now, even those who join the hierarchy in accepting both objections must recognise that neither necessarily applies to women deacons. As for the argument from authority, it was the apostles, not Jesus, who chose the first deacons (Acts 6:1-6), and so Jesus’ choice of male apostles does not apply. As for the iconic argument, the deacon is ordained to serve the people of God, not to serve *in persona Christi Capitis*. Hence, no longer may the deacon, who serves, be confused with the bishop and priest, who act as specific icons of Christ.

Admittedly, the changes – the result of voluminous consultation among Vatican dicasteries and episcopal conferences – may have primarily been aimed at legally distinguishing the diaconate from the episcopate and priesthood. But law, while it does not create doctrine, does reflect it. In so reflecting the distinctions between and among the grades of the one Sacrament of Orders, Benedict’s *motu proprio* could signal the restoration of women to the ancient order of deacon.

■ Phyllis Zagano is author of the award-winning *Holy Saturday: an argument for the restoration of the female diaconate in the Catholic Church* (Crossroad, 2000) and several other works in Catholic studies. She holds a research appointment at Hofstra University, New York, USA.

LAURENCE FREEMAN

‘Overall it seemed that religion was a good thing, a well of hope in a world run dry’



It’s time for good news. We have had political leaders fail to make the sacrifices necessary for a new global vision transcending the ancestral egotism of nations; the Irish Church has continued to self-erode and betray the grace of kenosis. There has been unrepentant greed from those who make money out of nothing at the expense of those who have been fooled into trading in their citizenship for consumerism; we struggle with the uncomfortable question of why years of prayer and devotion can reinforce rather than dissolve an innate narcissism.

It is easy to justify pessimism. The Bible is full of it. And it can almost be a relief from the facile optimism peddled by those looking just for another term in office. When the Scriptures step into the abyss of darkness and failure, however, they tip into the light. There we find grace in a totally new way that makes hope unavoidable and unpredictably revives and evolves our knowledge of the mystery of God that dissolves every previous idea of God we had clung to.

In *Clockwise*, John Cleese plays a militaristic headmaster whose life, in less than a day, unravels with the fatalism of Greek tragedy and the humour of Monty Python. In one scene he despairs and joins a monastery of caricatured refugees from the real world. He relaxes in a bath, relieved by the absence of hope, till he hears the sound of a car outside and realises he has another chance. “It is not the despair that hurts,” he complains, “it’s the hope.”

When the media plays with the fire of pessimism, it merely flirts with it. We are not given the opportunity to be serious. When the news gets too bad, the newsmakers begin to entertain us. We turn to feel-good stories and tales of unfaithful golfers and other people’s marital woes.

The failure of Copenhagen followed soon after another global event with a less specific agenda that received much less attention, the Parliament for World Religions. Held in a huge conference centre in Melbourne, representatives from 230 religions – who would have thought there were so many? – came

together at great expense and, yes, with carbon footprints the size of a yeti – mostly to talk. It was a visual feast too, with costumes and rituals on display, and made one love the human race more because it seemed to be God’s box of colouring pencils. Egotism was tucked under the robes as usual and demands for global action were hurraed. The Iranians were caught photographing the Baha’i, but otherwise it was all good-natured. The networking and idea-spinning, especially among the young participants, promised benefits. It was difficult to evaluate but overall it seemed that religion, despite the people promoting it, was a good thing, a sign of radical human innocence, even a well of hope in a world run dry.

But after the last day I was pleased to step into a taxi to the friendly Catholic cathedral presbytery that was so graciously accommodating me. I asked the young Indian cab driver to take me there. He had no idea what or where the cathedral was. I had forgotten the street name but tried other landmarks which also drew a blank. After a few phone calls and precise directions, we set off, but my universal goodwill had haemorrhaged. I tried hard not to vent my irritation but felt it must be obvious. He was looking at me in the mirror, and seeing my monastic habit, he said, “I’m sorry to trouble you, sir, but are you a kind of priest?” The question hit me hard, as a rebuke, because of my uncharitable mood, but it was not intended to.

He was Hindu, deeply religious but now unable to practise because the temple was far away and he had to work all hours. He wanted to know about confession in the Catholic Church and was amazed at the idea. “People can really just go in and talk to a priest about anything?” When we reached the cathedral, we stayed talking in the car park. He told me how worried he was about his inability to concentrate and his loss of a spiritual life. No, he had never meditated, he said, and he seemed grateful when I explained how he could worship interiorly in the temple of his heart. I gave him the Indian prayer beads someone had given me at the Parliament.

I stepped out, humbled by the epiphany, hope restored, grateful to have felt the gentle breeze of God passing through the realms of the local. The global is sometimes just too big.

■ Laurence Freeman OSB is director of the World Community for Christian Meditation (www.wccm.org).