



DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



A Brief History of Women Deacons in the Catholic Church

**“Please Lord,
look on this your
maidservant
and dedicate her
to the task of
your diaconate,
and pour out
into her the rich
and abundant
giving of your
Holy Spirit...”**

(8th century ordination
prayer)

Background

The evolution of women’s ministerial leadership in early Christianity is a complex phenomenon. It is well documented that even though our earliest writings (Romans 16) give evidence that women served in apostolic ministerial roles alongside their brothers, over the next three centuries their public ministry was increasingly circumscribed. Wealthy women patrons, often widows, played an indispensable role in the expansion of Christianity throughout the Greco-Roman world. Not surprisingly, there is also evidence that they exercised significant political, liturgical and administrative leadership within the earliest Christian communities, including presiding at Eucharist in their homes, at least during the late first and early second centuries.¹ In some places, including Rome, enrolled widows were accepted as a part of the clergy, though male church leaders soon sought to control their ministry in both the east and the west.

In the early third century, Hippolytus of Rome’s treatise *The Apostolic Tradition*, forbade the ordination of widows. This is the first known proscription of women’s ordination and it almost certainly means widows were being ordained, or why the need for a rule? It is an irony of history that Hippolytus was not in communion with the great church when he wrote *The Apostolic Tradition*.² A dispute with Pope Callistus led him to break away and scholars believe *The Apostolic Tradition* was probably written for his schismatic community.³ Though recent scholarship raises questions about the authorship and origins of the document, no one disputes its antiquity since subsequent church orders such as the Apostolic Constitutions and Testamentum Domini rely in it for some teachings.⁴

On the other hand, a late fourth or early fifth century church order, the Testamentum Domini (from eastern churches in Syria, Asia Minor or Egypt) not only permits widows to be ordained, but identifies them as part of the Church hierarchy. While it distinguishes between deaconesses, widows and female presbyters, the greatest responsibility and honor belong to the widows. Clearly, there was significant diversity in the early church about women’s leadership roles. That said, in late antiquity it is important to distinguish between sacramental ministry and female ordination, liturgical ministry and membership in the clergy as these are not one and the same. For example, while the Testamentum Domini attests that women were ordained and belonged to the clergy, scholars do not believe they exercised sacramental ministry in the sense of presiding at Eucharist or baptizing,

beyond assisting with female anointing.⁵

Nevertheless, though some male church leaders in both east and west sought to curtail the wide-ranging ministry of widows, there is ample literary and archaeological evidence for the acceptance of ordained female deacons. Many scholars believe this was because of the need to control what public ministries women leaders could and could not perform.⁶

About the Ministry of Deacon

First millennium titles for church orders such as bishop, priest, and deacon did not carry the same meaning as today. For example, in some 3rd and



4th century church communities, deacons served as important administrators of church properties whose authority was second only to that of the bishop.⁷

The earliest references to deacons in the New Testament are found in Paul's letters. According to Carolyn Osiek, the opening lines of Paul's letter to the Philippians "contain a reference found nowhere else in the greetings of his letters: he and Timothy greet not only the holy ones or saints in Philippi, but add a greeting to their *episkopoi* and *diakonoi*."⁸ The Greek word *episkopos* "overseer" does not yet mean what later came to be the office of bishop but "is more likely a reference to the leaders of house churches, groupings of believers that met in private houses for worship and other means of nurturing

their faith life."⁹ The term *diakonoi* is "a general word for official representatives, ministers, attendants, and agents. Here it refers to a designated group of persons who provide some kind of assistance in the community."¹⁰

Acts 6: 1-6 tells us about the first formal installation of deacons. Seven men were ordained deacons to minister to the needy. The early deacon Stephen performed miracles, preached and was eventually martyred, and Philip the deacon preached and baptized in Samaria (Acts 6:1-6, 6:7-7:60; 8:4-40). In later centuries the role of deacon came to include pastoral work, baptism, care of the poor, assistance at liturgies and in the 4th century, could include management of church property, the upkeep of churches and cemeteries and care of the sick and widows. According to John Wijngaard: "In a word, the entire government of the temporal affairs of the Church lay in the hands of deacons."¹¹ By the 12th century, the separate ministry of deacon was subsumed into the priesthood, becoming a preliminary step to ordination. Only at the second Vatican Council did the separate ministry of permanent deacons reemerge.

Women Deacons in the New Testament

Women deacons are specifically identified in two places in the New Testament: Romans 16: 1-2 and 1 Tim: 3:11. In the first two verses of Roman's 16, Paul writes: *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon (diakonos) of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor [prostatis] of many people, including me.* In the first century the use of the masculine singular title *diakonos* for a female leader does not have the specificity of meaning that it acquired in later centuries. Therefore it can be translated as either minister or deacon. It has been falsely assumed that the *diakonos* title was replaced with the feminine *diakonissa* by the third century. However, though the evidence for what these women did is vague, the *diakonos* title for women deacons, as well as the term *diakonissa* recurs in both literary and archaeological inscription until the sixth century.¹³

In the first century, the title *diakonos* is thought to connote an official leadership function such as minister, attendant, or envoy. The latter is the likely

meaning in Romans since most scholars believe Paul's recommendation of Phoebe to the Christian community in Rome indicates that she is in fact the carrier of his letter to that community. However, Phoebe's other title: "benefactor" or patron (*prostatis*) may be the more significant since it reveals that she is among the many wealthy women patrons who hosted house churches and financially provided for Paul and other evangelists in the burgeoning early Christian missionary movement. It is a sad fact that Phoebe's important leadership in the early church is inexplicably deleted from the Lectionary when the Roman's 16 text is read on week 31 Year 1.

The first letter of Timothy describes qualifications for diakonoi concluding with what is probably a reference to women deacons. *In the same way, [male] deacons (diakonoi) are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.* (1 Tim 3: 8-11)

While it is possible that the wives of deacons are meant, it is likely that the text refers to women ministering in Timothy's community. The majority of scholars today believe the letter to Timothy was not written by Paul himself but by an author from the Pauline tradition writing some years later when leadership roles were more developed. Carolyn Osiek believes women deacons and local overseers could also have been included in the *episcopoi* and *diakonoi* named in the opening greeting of the letter to the Philippians.¹²

Women Deacons in the East

The office of female deacon or deaconess was more prevalent in the East than the West. A fourth century tombstone on the Mount of Olives with a Greek inscription reads: "Here lies the minister and bride of Christ, Sofia the deacon, a second Phoebe. She fell asleep in peace on the 21st of the month of March. . . ." The Christian community in Jerusalem apparently understood Sofia's ministry to be part of a 300-year-old tradition dating back to the Phoebe of Romans 16. Notable is the fact that for both Phoebe and Sofia, the Greek word *diakonos* is used, a masculine ending. There is ample archaeological evidence of other female deacons who ministered from the first to the sixth centuries in Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, and Macedonia.¹⁴



Scholars Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek surmise that "Phoebe and other unnamed women deacons like her in the first and perhaps second century belonged to an office or function that was not distinguished by sex."¹⁵ Nevertheless, Phoebe's first century leadership role probably bore little resemblance to those of later deaconesses. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Teachings of the Apostles) is a document that reflects the pastoral situation of Church in Syria and Palestine in the late third century. It concerns itself among other things with the organization of ministry and leadership in the Church. The *Didascalia* goes to great lengths to restrict the role of widows, but it approves the public ministry of female deacons, permitting them to teach and anoint but not to baptize.

A subsequent church order, *The Apostolic Constitution*, further restricts the ministry of women deacons by forbidding them to teach. Listings of church rules (canons), however, are often found to be more prescriptive than descriptive. Hence literary and archaeological data not infrequently point to more expanded roles for women than one would surmise from the written rules. Hence we read of Olympias, Dionysia, and other women deacons assisting in the liturgy, financially supporting and advising male church leaders, serving the poor, and, most usually, teaching women and anointing them at the time of their baptism. There is ample archaeological

and literary evidence of other female deacons who ministered in the East from the first to the sixth centuries.^{16,17}

Women Deacons in the West

The literary and archaeological evidence for female deacons in the West does not appear until the fifth century when texts proscribing women presbyters appear. Western Conciliar documents plainly indicate the displeasure of churchmen over women's ordination to the diaconate or any other office. Canon 26 of the Council of Orange held in November 441, forbade the ordination of female deacons. Likewise in 517, the Council of Epaon abolished "the consecration of widows who are called women deacons."¹⁸

Yet, texts written by male church authorities are one thing and the actual ministry of women is quite another. Literary references to women deacons in the west, while not abundant, are definitely present over a seven-century period. They are found in wills, letters and chronicles of women deacons. For example, Remigius, the bishop of Reims (433-533) left a will bequeathing part of a vineyard to "my blessed daughter, Helaria the deaconess" well after the Council of Epaon forbade such a ministry.¹⁹

In the mid sixth century, the Frankish queen Radgund, was ordained a deacon by Bishop Medard, a bishop of Noyons and Tounai. Other women deacons in the West known to us by tombstone inscriptions include Anna, a sixth woman deacon from Rome, Theodora, a female deacon from Gaul buried in 539 and Ausonia, a sixth century woman deacon from Dalmatia. In 753 the Archbishop of Ravenna, Sergius, "consecrated his wife, Euphemia, a deacon (*diaconissa*)." And in 799, an account of Pope Leo III's return to Rome reports that he was greeted by the entire population including "holy women, women deacons (*diaconissae*) and the most notable matrons."²⁰ Abbesses in the western church were sometimes deacons as well. Some commentators on canon law in the 9th and 10th centuries simply assumed that abbesses were deacons.²¹

Despite persistent early efforts to suppress women deacons in the west, we find a letter written in 1017 by Pope Benedict VIII conferring on the Bishop of Porto in Portugal "in perpetuity every episcopal ordination not only of presbyters but also of deacons or deaconesses (*diaconissis*) or subdeacons."²² This privilege was continued by subsequent Popes in various dioceses up to the time of Bishop Ottone, the Bishop of Lucca in Italy (1139-1146). Abelard and Heloise – 12th century theologians—both referred to Heloise as a deacon.²³

Female Ordination Rites in the East

For centuries scholars have agreed that the earliest ritual used to ordain female deacons is the same one used for male deacons. Jean Morin, a 17th century liturgical expert, catalogued a large collection of ordination rites in Greek, Latin and Syriac:

Three of the most ancient Greek rituals, uniformly one in agreement, hand down to us the ordination of women deacons, administered by almost the same rite and words by which deacons [were ordained]. Both are called ordination. Both are celebrated at the altar by the bishop, and in the same liturgical space. Hands are placed on both while the bishop offers prayers. The stole is placed on the neck of both, both the ordained man and the ordained woman communicated, the chalice full of the blood of Christ placed in the hands of both so they may taste of it.²⁴

An eighth century prayer for ordaining a woman deacon reads:

Holy and Omnipotent Lord, through the birth of your Only Son our God from a Virgin according to the flesh, you have sanctified the female sex. You grant not only to men, but also to women the grace and coming of the Holy Spirit. Please, Lord, look on this your maidservant and dedicate her to the task of your diaconate,

and pour out into her the rich and abundant giving of your Holy Spirit. Preserve her so that she may always perform her ministry with orthodox faith and irrefragable conduct, according to what is pleasing to you. For to you is due all glory and honor.²⁵

Female Ordination Rites in the West

An eight-century liturgical book of Bishop Egbert of York contains a single prayer used for ordaining either a male or female deacon. This is the earliest ritual in the West for the ordination of a woman deacon. The prayer reads: *Give heed, Lord, to our prayers and upon this your servant send forth that spirit of you blessing in order that, enriched by heavenly gifts, he [or she] might be able to obtain grace through your majesty and by living well offer an example to others...*²⁶ Other rituals for the ordination of female deacons appear in 9th, 10th and 12th century sacramentaries and pontificals. By the 13th century the ordination rites for women deacons were eliminated from the Roman Pontifical and do not appear again.

What Happened?

By the 12th century, women deacons in the East had become very rare. A 12th century Greek canonist Theodore Balsamon wrote: "In times past, orders of deaconesses were recognized and they had access to the sanctuary, but the monthly affliction banished them. . . ." ²⁷ In the 14th century, another eastern canonist, Matthew Blastares, acknowledged that while women deacons had existed, this was eventually forbidden by later fathers "because of the monthly flow that cannot be controlled." In the west, even though Pope Gregory I [590-604] said that menstruation should not be an obstacle to women attending church, the purity rules eventually prevailed. In the end, women deacons would be banned in the main, because of their normal biological functions.

Perhaps the most significant factor leading to the demise of women deacons in the west came in the mid-12th century when the definition of ordination underwent a dramatic shift. In the first millennium, a Christian was ordained, consecrated or blessed to perform a specific job or ministry needed in the community. Gary Macy writes: "Ordination did not give a person, for instance, the irrevocable and portable power of consecrating the bread and wine, or of leading the liturgy; rather, a particular community charged a person or persons to play a leadership role within that community (and only within that community) and that person or persons would lead the liturgy because of the leadership role they played within the community."²⁸

During the 12th century, the definition of ordination came to signify that recipients were given an indelible character marking them as different from other Christians. Now the priest and only the priest received the power to consecrate bread and wine. Further, the indelible character and power to consecrate was portable and could be exercised anywhere, in any community. Ordination came to include only ministries that related to service at the altar. Thus only the orders of priest, deacon and subdeacon were recognized. Finally, "all of the other earlier orders were no longer considered to be orders at all."²⁹

A highly influential late 12th century western canonist, Huguccio of Bologna, wrote that even if a woman were to be ordained it would not "take" because of "the law of the church and sex."³⁰ In other words, the fact of being biologically female prevented women from being ordained, and what is more, because they were biologically female, they never could have been truly ordained in the first place. Therefore all past female ordinations were not ordinations at all, at least according to the new understanding of ordination. Given that male ordinations in previous centuries also entailed a different understanding of the meaning of orders, one could argue that those male ordinations didn't "take" either, a point that seems to have escaped our esteemed canonists.

Conclusion

By the early 13th century, the ancient tradition of women deacons had been defined out of existence. But

female diaconal service did not disappear. One wonders if it is more than mere coincidence that as women deacons were being extinguished, a new movement of ministerial women was coming to birth. These were newly forming independent female communities who operated outside the control of male church leaders, called the Beguines. The Beguines served as prototypes (though not without persecution) to the later meteoric rise of women's apostolic religious communities. Beginning with Mary Ward, these women religious often seem to have attracted the ire of clerics, perhaps because their advocacy for the marginalized often unsettled the status quo.

Epilogue

In 1995 the Canon Law Society of America issued a report noting that only a few adjustments in Canon Law were needed to ordain women deacons.³¹ With the creation of a commission to study women deacons under Pope Francis there is a greater hope than ever that women will be ordained to the permanent diaconate. Of the many documents under study is Cipriano Vagaggini's detailed research that women deacons in church history were ordained within the sanctuary by the bishop, in the presence of the presbyterate, and by the imposition of hands (traditional historical requirements for ordination.). In 2001, over 30 years after Paul VI asked the International Theological Commission to explore the question of the female diaconate; the commission stated that the teaching office of the Church had yet to decide on women deacons.³²

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