



DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



Luke Hansen, S.J., an associate editor at America Magazine from 2012 to 2014, is a student at the Jesuit School of Theology, a graduate school of Santa Clara University, in Berkeley, California.

Excerpts from

Archbishop Durocher: Address Violence against Women, Empower Women in the Church

by Luke Hansen, S.J.

Archbishop Paul-André Durocher of Gatineau, Canada, who devoted his intervention at the Synod of Bishops to the reality of violence against women within families and encouraged his brother bishops to consider an increased role for women in the church, told America in an interview on Oct. 22 in Rome that violence against women is a “whole social phenomenon we’re still not dealing with adequately,” and he described several factors that influenced his decision to speak about women at the synod.

As a young parish priest, he said, part of his rectory was used as a shelter for abused women, so he had close contact with these women and even had to “intervene” in some cases. The archbishop said he recently read that 30 percent of women in the world are abused by their husbands, a statistic he described as “abominable.” He also recently attended two international conferences on human trafficking, and he praised the work of religious women on the issue.

Turning to the status of women in the church, Archbishop Durocher described the challenge of “clericalism” and said, “If we have power and decision-making structures where women are not included, then the message is sent that somehow women’s voices are not important to the decision-making process.”

He said that every priest, bishop, and national conference could “identify roles and ministries open to women right now” and then ask: “Do we have women in these roles or not? And when we do, do we treat them as equal partners?”

The archbishop said he also supports further study of ordaining women to the diaconate. “It’s not a closed issue,” he explained. “There has been no dogmatic statement saying that women cannot be ordained deacons.”

Asked about the work of the Holy Spirit in the synod, Archbishop Durocher said there is an “important realization” at the synod that God’s grace is “broader than what we often imagine” and that the Spirit “is working in a lot of situations that, on the face of it, do not correspond to church teaching.” As a concrete example, he pointed to divorced and remarried couples “where one of them develops Alzheimer’s and the other one is caring for them and is faithful to the end,” which he called a “love of kenosis.”

The interview has been edited for clarity and length. The excerpts below address the role of women in the Church specifically. To read the entire interview go to: <http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/>

What inspired and informed your intervention about domestic violence and the role of women in the church?

I think my experience as a parish priest, having accompanied women who are victims of violence. As a young priest, two-thirds of our rectory was used as a shelter for abused women—the first of its kind in that part of our country. So I was very aware; it was part of my daily life. And in some situations I had to intervene.

Last year when I asked the Canadian bishops for suggestions on what to talk about, the cardinal of Toronto [Thomas Collins] told me it was one of the issues I should address, and he wrote a very strong paragraph that stayed with me.

I read an article recently that quoted the World Health Organization saying that 30 percent of women in the world are abused by their husbands. I find that statistic just abominable.

And the recent number of shootings where men who are angry kill their wives or their exes before taking their own lives. It's the tip of the iceberg that we see, but it hides a whole social phenomenon we're still not dealing with adequately.

In "Familiaris Consortio," John Paul II said we need resolute action to stop this [violence]. Thirty years later, what have we done as a church? I'm not sure that we've taken the pope's words to heart.

That's not true. That's not fair. A lot of people have, particularly communities of religious women. Also, during the past year I have participated in two international conferences on the trafficking of human beings, and most of those victims are women. I have heard women speak about the violence they have experienced, and that has shaped my mind.

How can the church, at the parish and regional levels, effectively and concretely address this

violence?

At the parish level, we can inform parishioners about local resources available for women who are victims of abuse. We can have fliers in the back of church, put a little article in the parish bulletin and preach about it once in a while.

Every time the text comes up in the liturgy—you know, "wives be submissive to your husbands"—in my preaching I always bring it around to the issue of violence against women. We need to be doing that. Every time I do it, people come to me and say, "Thank you."

In Canada we don't have to set up new centers, but we can certainly support those who are doing it, and we certainly have people in our parishes who are involved in some of these organizations. We could celebrate them and give them a chance to speak about their work.

And among bishops at the regional level?

In Quebec there a huge thrust a few years ago to look at the whole question of partnership between men and women in ministry and in the vocation to marriage. The bishops of Quebec held a lot of workshops and developed resources. That's the kind of thing a conference of bishops could be doing. And as we look at tools for marriage preparation, we could be touching on these issues.

In an interview with Salt + Light Media on Oct. 11, you offered this question: "Can we in the church manifest as an institution the equal dignity of women?"

All institutions that have a strong presence in society—by the way they are structured and work—send messages. If we have power and decision-making structures where women are not included, then the message is sent that somehow women's voices are not important to the decision-making process. As an institution we have to be asking ourselves that question.



Canadian Archbishop Durocher of Gatineau, Quebec, arrives for opening Mass of Synod of Bishops on the family in St. Peter's Basilica at Vatican (CNS Photo / Paul Haring).

This is not about, first of all, allowing women to be priests. It's a question about how we exercise priesthood within the church. It is a question, ultimately, of what Pope Francis is identifying as one of the difficulties within the church: clericalism, where only those who wear a Roman collar have the gift of discernment in the church.

We need to be open to seeing how we can bring lay men and women into decision-making bodies. There are some countries that have a lot of experience with that. Many dioceses have women as chancellors, financial administrators and executive directors of offices and pastoral services. These women are playing important management and decision-making roles within their dioceses. That says something when people know that and see it as the parish level.

It's a practice that could spread throughout the church. Pope Benedict said it is a just question to

ask ourselves: Are there new areas of ministry that could be open to women in our church?

Why did you ask the synod to consider the ordination of women to the diaconate?

It's been said a few times that we should open new ministries for women. Well, what kind of ministries are we talking about? So I thought I would give three examples we could study.

The first is assigning positions that are presently open within diocesan curias and the Roman Curia to women. The second is allowing lay women and men, couples, to share in the preaching responsibility at Sunday Mass, where they could witness to the relationship between the Word of God and their lives as a parents and a married couple. And third, why not look at the question of ordaining women to the diaconate? It's not a closed issue. There has been no dogmatic

statement saying that women cannot be ordained deacons.

So I threw those three out as possible avenues to explore, and there are others. It was an effort to get the wheels turning and to get people to start thinking in this sense.

How can the church move forward with these suggestions?

We could identify roles and ministries open to women right now and ask: Do we have women in these roles or not? And when we do, do we treat them as equal partners? Every priest in his parish, every bishop in his diocese, and every national conference could be asking that kind of question. No special permission is needed.

Academic centers, theology centers and centers of pastoral ministry could be looking concretely at how ministry is exercised and how we receive various gifts in the church. Somebody once said that, theologically, we speak of hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts. Well, it's very clear how we receive hierarchical gifts in the church, but how do we identify and receive charismatic gifts in the church and integrate them into the church?

As the synod concludes, what will you bring home with you?

A desire to look at how our diocese could be doing more to help, elevate and recognize the role families play in church and society.

There is a beautiful response in the French liturgy, just before the Preface: "For the glory of God and the salvation of the world." Is there a way we could help couples and their families to discover that their marriage is doing something for the glory of God and for the salvation of the world? It would bring a sea change in attitudes.

In my diocese we have a four-year project to develop attitudes that will invite and support people. Last year our focus was on being a welcoming community. This year we're looking at being communities that affirm. Next year: accompanying. And then: inviting. When I go back, I want to look at what that means for families. How do we invite, affirm, accompany and invite families? I want to bring together some people to think about it and to work on it.

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