



# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



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## Ordain Catholic Women as Deacons by Phyllis Zagano

Much of the world may be charmed by Pope Francis, but what has he done to include women as decision makers in the Catholic Church? More to the point, what can he do?

Francis has, of course, been busy with other things. The seventy-eight-year-old Jesuit now in the third year of his papacy seems quite serious in his efforts to reform the Roman Curia, by all accounts a bloated bureaucracy resistant to change. The pope's early movement toward transparency in Vatican financial matters earned him enemies within the system, and his ongoing efforts to uncover fiscal improprieties do not exactly grease the wheels needed to move the Curia forward to reform. Francis's dual efforts—curial and financial reform—support his larger agenda and aim: preaching the Gospel and living its message.

But, what about women? In interviews and writings, the pope often returns to the topic of women's roles in the Church. Within a few months of his election, Francis called for a "more widespread and incisive female presence in the Church" in an interview with Antonio Spadaro, the Jesuit editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, one of Italy's oldest periodicals and the only one whose text is approved by the Vatican's state department.<sup>1</sup> The papal interview, translated into several languages and printed in sixteen Jesuit journals, caught the attention of the major Spanish daily newspaper *El País*,<sup>2</sup> which suggested Francis might be considering female cardinals. The report brought a papal response: "I don't know where that comment came from!"

Even so, Francis repeated the same call a few months later in his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel): "we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church."<sup>3</sup> He repeated that phrase when speaking before the Pontifical Council for Culture's February 2015 plenary assembly on women in the church.<sup>4</sup> The event was perhaps a response to another papal suggestion—development of a "theology of the woman in the Church"—made on the papal plane ride back to Rome from the 2013 World Youth Day in Brazil.

Even with papal interest—on the airplane from Rio Francis seemed to complain about woman's limited roles<sup>5</sup>—the sticking point is ordination. The Catholic Church teaches it cannot reverse Jesus's decision to choose male apostles, predecessors to priests and bishops. Sacramental power and juridical authority come with priestly ordination and episcopal consecration. Barred from these, women can cooperate with but not share authority.



Late 3rd Century painting from the catacombs of Priscilla. Some scholars believe this image of a women, clothed in a dalmatic, depicts a women who served as a deacon in the Church. Used with permission from the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology, Rome.

Such is not necessarily the case. In order to fully hold (the canonical word is “obtain”) certain church offices, an individual must be a cleric, not a lay, or non-ordained, person. But priest and bishop are not the only clerical ranks in the church. Deacons are also ordained clerics, and history documents women ordained to the diaconate from the earliest centuries of Christianity to the Middle Ages, when the diaconate faded as a separate order. As priests absorbed the work of deacons, ordination to the diaconate became simply a step in the *cursus honorum* on the way to priesthood. Fewer and fewer women—mostly monastic abbesses—were ordained as deacons, primarily for service within their own convents.

However, the Catholic Church restored the diaconate as a permanent grade of order following the Second Vatican Council. Some bishops actually brought up the historical fact of women deacons during conciliar debate,<sup>6</sup> but the promulgated documents clearly specify only men would be called to the order of deacon. When Pope Paul VI restored the diaconate as a permanent grade of order for the entire Church (it never fully disappeared in the Eastern Catholic Churches), he asked about women deacons, possibly of the International Theological Commission but at least of one of its more prominent members, Cipriano Vagaggini. By 1974, a journal of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome published Vagaggini’s densely reasoned historical and theological findings in Italian:

yes, women had been ordained as deacons and could be so ordained again.<sup>7</sup>

Coincidentally, interest in Catholic women’s ordination as priests was on the rise, partly in response to the 1974 priestly ordinations of eleven Episcopal women in Philadelphia. In 1976, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the curial office responsible for matters of faith and morals, published its opinion that women could not be ordained as priests with the document *Inter Insigniores*. The question of women deacons was specifically omitted. Separate debates ensued, one on women deacons, another on women priests; at times it was argued that the history of ordained women deacons gave precedent for both.

Then, in 1994, Pope John Paul II issued a four-paragraph Apostolic Letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* affirming that the ban on women priests “pertains to the Church’s divine constitution” and that the Church’s determination that it did not have the authority to ordain women as priests “is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”<sup>8</sup> The statement raised several areas of concern, not the least of which was dueling opinions on whether it is “infallible.” Notably, the document does not mention women deacons.

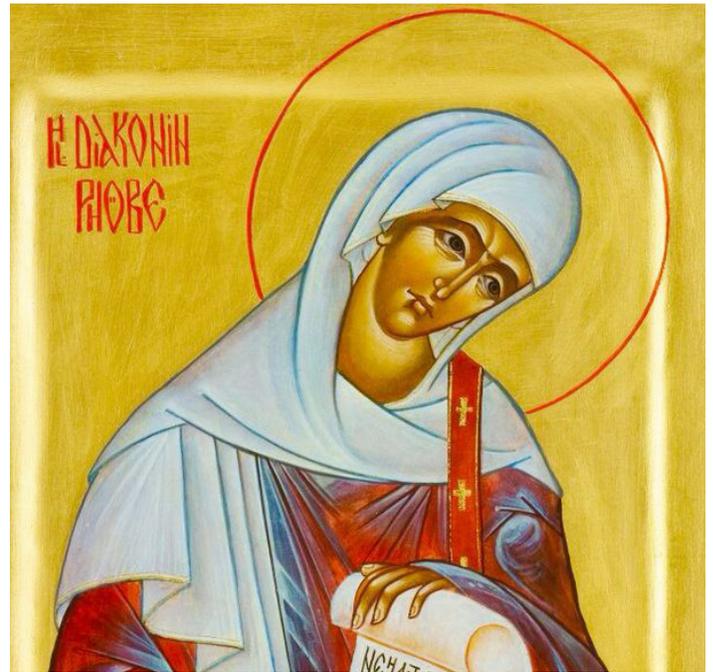
An interesting argument from the first document on women priests (*Inter Insigniores*) is not in the second: the so-called iconic argument, which states that a person must be male in order to represent Christ. Yet,

if one holds that all people are made in the image and likeness of God and that Christ is the second person of the Trinity and therefore God, it makes no sense to say that a woman cannot image Christ. What makes sense, although it carries no theological weight in this regard, is to say that women cannot image Jesus. The distinction is critical because it is the risen Lord, not the restricted male human Jesus, who is represented by the ordained person.

Recognizing that all persons, including women, are made in the image and likeness of God—actually a staple of Catholic teaching—does not automatically grant women access to priesthood. Even given the abandonment of the iconic argument (some still say it is “implied” in the 1994 document) there is the question of authority, supported by the assertion that the ban on women priests is of divine law. Hence the specter of women priests cannot really be raised with the ordination of women deacons.

Further, if the ban on women priests is permanent and binding, then the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate becomes less complicated, specifically because the current practice of not ordaining women deacons is arguably a “merely ecclesiastical law”—a regulation, not a doctrine. The assertion of divine law pertaining to priestly ordination refers to the presumed intent of Jesus with the apostles. But the initial choice of servants—deacons—by the apostles was from among those put forth by the community following Jesus’s death and resurrection. (Acts 6:1-6). Although she is not mentioned in Acts, given that Phoebe is the only person in scripture called deacon (Rom. 16:1), and given the many evidences of women deacons throughout history, the restoration of women to the diaconate seems to be something Francis could do easily.

Here the debate heats up. In 2002, the International Theological Commission, a body within the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published a long-awaited study document on the diaconate.<sup>9</sup> It appears that a subcommittee in the International Theological Commission’s 1992–97 session completed a seventeen- or eighteen-page positive document about women deacons that its then-president, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, refused to sign. Finally, in 2002, the ensuing International Theological Commission session approved a much longer and relatively inconclusive document, which stated that male and female deacons had different roles in the early church, that priesthood



An Icon of Phoebe, the deacon, named by Paul in Romans 16.

and the diaconate are separate and distinct ministries, and that the question of admitting women to the diaconate was something for the church’s “ministry of discernment” to decide.

The reconfigured subcommittee, chaired by one of Cardinal Ratzinger’s former Regensburg students, Henrique Noronha de Galvão, produced a second study that strangely misses much of the history about women deacons despite its thirty thousand words. Further, the study implies that the person ordained as deacon must image Christ, especially in uncited passages from and paraphrases of an earlier book by subcommittee member Gerhard L. Müller, who was named bishop of Regensburg just days after the document’s publication.<sup>10</sup> Müller, appointed prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith seven months before Benedict XVI resigned and affirmed by Francis, is also editor of the “Opera Omnia,” the collected writings of Joseph Ratzinger.

Positive scholarship about women deacons, such as Vagaggini’s long article and his briefer intervention before the 1987 Synod of Bishops, remains known to scholars and joins other major research by Roger Gryson, Corrado Marucci, Pietro Sorci, and Philippe Delhaye, among others, that was ignored or discounted by the writers of the 2002 document.<sup>11</sup>

While Francis may be interested in better situating women within Church governance and ministry, and even though there is sufficient theological

evidence to readmit women to the order of deacon, significant curial roadblocks keep him from moving in the obvious direction. Women deacons could take up significant posts, at the Vatican and around the world. Women deacons could even become cardinals. But in 2008 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decreed ordination of women a crime worthy of automatic excommunication.<sup>12</sup>

Francis calls priesthood's connection to power and authority problematic, writing that it "presents a great challenge . . . with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church's life."<sup>13</sup> But if priesthood is the problem barring women from a "more incisive presence in the Church," the diaconate is the solution.

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1. An edited English translation, titled "A Big Heart Open to God," of Spadaro's interview that omitted these words about women appeared in the September 30, 2013, issue of *America*, and the words were later changed in the online publication, [americamagazine.org/pope-interview](http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview).
2. Juan Arias, "¿Una mujer cardenal?" *El País Internacional*, September 22, 2013.
3. "Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of the Holy Father Francis . . . on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World," November 24, 2013, 103.
4. Laura Ieraci, "Pope Urges 'More Widespread and Incisive Female Presence' in Church," *Vatican Radio*, February 7, 2015.
5. The official translation is: "All we say is: they can do this, they can do that, now they are altar servers, now they do the readings, they are in charge of Caritas (Catholic charities). But there is more! We need to develop a profound theology of womanhood. That is what I think." Earlier translations correctly quote Francis as saying: "We need to make a profound theology of the woman. This is what I think." See "Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro on the Occasion of the XXVIII World Youth Day: Press Conference of Pope Francis during the Return Flight, Papal Flight Sunday, 28 July 2013," [w2.vatican.va](http://w2.vatican.va).
6. *Acta et documenta Concilio oecumenico Vaticano II apparando, series prima (antepreparatoria)* (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1960–1961), II/II, 121, as cited in Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (Paulist Press, 2011).
7. Cipriano Vagaggini, "L'ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974): 146–189. The creation and suppression of this paper is reported in Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* (Paulist Press, 1993), 640.
8. "Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of John Paul II to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone," May 22, 1994, [w2.vatican.va](http://w2.vatican.va).
9. Written and originally printed in French, then Italian and English, the document is now published in nine languages online, at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).
10. Compare, for example, *From the Diakonia of Christ 3 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 183, 185–186; *From the Diakonia of Christ 4 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 186, 184, 186, 187; *From the Diakonia of Christ 5 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 190–191; *From the Diakonia of Christ 6 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 187; *From the Diakonia of Christ 19 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 216; *From the Diakonia of Christ 20 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 216, 217, 204; *From the Diakonia of Christ 22 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 218; and *From the Diakonia of Christ 23 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 217. Some citations and footnotes are identical. See Gerhard L. Müller, *Priesthood and Diaconate: The Recipient of the Sacrament of Holy Orders from the Perspective of Creation Theology and Christology*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Ignatius, 2002). German original, *Priestertum und Diakonat: Der Empfänger des Weihesakramentes in schöpfungstheologischer und christologischer Perspektive* (Johannes Verlag, 2000).
11. *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches: Essays* by Cipriano Vagaggini, ed. Phyllis Zagano (Liturgical Press, 2013). A book of translations including these essays and others is forthcoming from Liturgical Press in 2016.
12. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "General Decree regarding the Delict of Attempted Sacred Ordination of a Woman," [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).
13. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 104.