



DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



Reasons to Restore the Tradition of Ordaining Women Deacons



1. Expanding women's roles will help meet many unmet ministerial needs in the Catholic Church in the midst of the priest shortage. Permanent deacons may preach, baptize, witness marriages and perform other services for the people of God. It is a little known fact that women religious and lay ministers are the "glue" helping to hold the Church together. Worldwide, there are an estimated 739,000 apostolic women religious serving the Church's 1.17 billion Catholics, compared to 409,000 priests. Add the sisters to 3 million lay catechists, missionaries, and members of secular institutes (at least half of whom in all categories are likely to be women), and it becomes clear that expanding women's roles would go a long way to meet many unmet ministerial needs in the Catholic Church.

2. Women's voices are silenced in our churches, creating significant pastoral challenges to evangelizing 21st century women and men accustomed to seeing women

in professional, corporate and civil leadership roles. If we wish to reach the next generation, Catholic preaching must reflect the gender balance found in Jesus and St. Paul's inclusive practice.

3. Restoring the tradition of women deacons will allow women to preach a homily at Mass. Their perspectives as women and mothers living the Gospel in a secular world will give new life and meaning to Catholic women and men trying to relate the scriptures to their lived experience.

4. Most women ministers in the U.S. and around the world already have qualifications to be ordained deacons. In the US, 80% of 39,651 paid lay ecclesial ministers and 66% of 2600 chaplains are women. In 2015, 58% of 22,145 students enrolled in lay ecclesial minister formation programs were women. All of these constitute a large new pool of ministers who could be immediately available to meet the growing needs of an expanding church.



5. The Church has a long and constant teaching and tradition of women deacons. The earliest reference to a female deacon occurs in Romans 16 when Paul describes Phoebe as diakonos, a title he sometimes applied to himself (see 1Cor 3: 5, 2Cor 3:6). There is no distinction by sex. The original diakonos continued to exist side by side with a later title diakonissa after the fourth century in contexts that suggest the interchangeability of the two titles. The vast preponderance of women deacons were in the Eastern Church. (see *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*: John Hopkins University Press, 2005 by Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek)



6. Ordination rituals for women deacons were performed by the bishop in the sanctuary as were rituals for the male deacons. In 1974 a member of the International Theological Commission, Cipriano Vagaggini OSB (1909-99), published detailed research demonstrating the Church's ancient tradition of women deacons, who were ordained within the sanctuary by the bishop, in the presence of the presbyterate, and by the imposition of hands.

7. Recent changes in canon law may open the way for female deacons. In late December 2009, Pope Benedict made changes in canon law to clarify the role of deacons. According to female diaconate expert, Phyllis Zagano, the changes "may have ended the controversy over whether women can be ordained deacons." The changes make it explicit that governance rests with bishops and priests, while deacons are to serve in "the liturgy, the word and charity." After the 1974 analysis by Fr. Cipriano Vagaggini OSB confirmed the tradition of ordained women deacons in the Church, the argument among the prelates revolved around how to restore women to the diaconate while barring them from the priesthood. Zagano believes Pope Benedict's canonical change could be interpreted as addressing that issue, though she acknowledges there are still many hurdles to be overcome. (*The Tablet*, January 8, 2010)



8. More and more, Catholic bishops are expressing an openness to talking about ordaining women deacons. Catholic bishops who have recently spoken or written publicly about women deacons include: Archbishop Paul Andre Durocher from Quebec (<http://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/speaking-advising-and-deciding>); Bishop George Murry from Youngstown, OH (<http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/bishop-george-murry-discusses-synod-process-supports-more-lay-involvement>) Retired Auxiliary bishop Emil A. Wcela from Rockville Center, NY (<http://americamagazine.org/issue/5152/article/why-not-women>); Bishop Emeritus Francis A. Quinn from Sacramento, CA (<http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/california-bishop-voices-support-ordination-women>).