



DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



Theological Explorations: Women Deacons in the Catholic Church¹

Why should the Church be denied the gift of women as well as men serving as deacons?

Cardinal Suenens
Second Vatican Council



The historical record shows us that ministry, including ordained ministry, varied across time and region and that the theological meaning of ordination shifted over time. The record also shows that women were there from the beginning and were key in building and shaping the church and its ministries.

From the letters of Paul throughout the first millennium of Christian development, male and female deacons ministered in the church. Ordination and consecration was understood to be a call from the community to take up certain ministries and roles. There was no irrevocable or portable power given at ordination. But by the mid-twelfth century, the meaning of ordination was radically re-ordered and came to signify an indelible change in the person receiving it. Thus the diaconate as a distinct order disappeared and diaconal ordination became a step toward the priesthood.²

Second Vatican Council

But with the Second Vatican Council, the sacrament of orders was completely restructured. The Council suppressed first tonsure (a step toward priesthood), minor orders (porter, lector, exorcist, and acolyte), and the major order of sub-diaconate. The diaconate was re-instated as a separate, permanent order apart from priesthood that was open to married and celibate men. Vatican II's Theology of the Sacrament of Orders.

Four major pre-conciliar influences drove the Council's discussions on the permanent diaconate.

1. The German Catholic Church began to discuss the need to expand the role of the deacon in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
2. The impact of World War II and the experience of priest survivors in concentration camps gave existing discussions about a permanent diaconate new urgency. During this period, Karl Rahner made significant contributions to diaconal theology.
3. The 1950s saw a growth in the missionary thrust of the church.
4. Pope Pius XII's teachings on the sacrament of orders fueled new discussions

on the permanent diaconate.³

These influences set the stage for over 100 proposals for a renewal of the diaconate at the Second Vatican Council. At least two addressed opening the diaconate to women. In the end, the sixteen conciliar documents reflected the diaconal functions envisioned by the council including:

- preaching
- baptizing
- distributing Holy Communion
- giving the Eucharistic blessing
- taking Holy Communion to the sick
- assisting in marriages
- proclamation of the Word of God
- administration of the goods of the church
- teaching and catechizing
- presiding at Solemn Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament
- extraordinary minister of extreme unction
- bringing solace to the faithful in extreme situations

Since the diaconate was perceived as distinct from the presbyterate, it was argued that the men should be a more mature age and that they could be married. Although opening the diaconate to married men was hotly debated, a majority of bishops favored the move.

One proponent, Cardinal Julius Döpfner of the Archdiocese of Munich-Freising, argued that many married men were already serving in diaconal roles. He asked, "Why should these people be denied the grace of the sacrament?"⁴



Another proponent, Cardinal Leo-Joseph Suenens of Malines-Brussels, presented some of the strongest arguments in favor of a restored permanent diaconate. Suenens argued that the diaconate was one of the ministries consistently recognized in the life of the Church. He wrote, "The restoration of the Permanent Diaconate finds its fundamental clarification and justification in the sacramental character of the diaconate itself." He

cited the authority of Scripture, the apostolic fathers, constant tradition, and the liturgical books of the East and West. He noted the many charisms distinct from the priesthood which were established to provide direct assistance to the bishop in the care for the poor and the nurturing of the community.⁵

Thus in the final vote, support for a renewed diaconate passed with overwhelming support and, for the first time in more than a millennium, it was possible to ordain someone to a major order of ministry other than the priesthood.

Sacrosanctum Concilium, *Dei Verbum*, and *Ad Gentes* all addressed the renewed diaconate, but *Lumen Gentium* was most significant in creating the diaconate as a "proper and permanent order" distinct from priesthood. Paragraph 29 of *Lumen Gentium* states, "At the lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, who received the imposition of hands 'not unto the priesthood', but unto service." Further it stated that deacons were to be "strengthened by sacramental grace".

Second Vatican Council revived the permanent diaconate in the following ways.



1. The diaconate was distinct from the presbyterate.
 2. Deacons could be married as well as celibate.
 3. The diaconate was a flexible response to the needs of the Church at the discretion of the local conferences of bishops.
 4. The renewed diaconate was not simply a restoration of the ancient diaconate. It was a new expression of the ministry. Appeals to history were not delimiting.
 5. The renewal of the permanent diaconate took place within the renewal of the episcopacy. The bishop and the deacon have a unique relationship.
 6. The diaconate's sacramental significance is with the larger context of the serving Church. The permanent diaconate extended the reach of the Church
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into the world.⁶

Post Vatican II Development

The institutional church began to articulate the theology of the diaconate and overall progressed in treating the diaconate as an order in its own right. Still, it is clear that much of the evolving clarity about the permanent diaconate was achieved through a post conciliar focus on keeping women out of the priesthood.

1976

o *Inter Insigniores: Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood* was promulgated at the request of Paul VI. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wrote that the Church did not have the authority to ordain women to the ministerial priesthood, but the diaconal order is never mentioned. It also argued that women could not “image Christ.”

1992

o The International Theological Commission (ITC) analyzed the ecclesiological questions involved as part of the 1992 – 1997 agenda. Phyllis Zagano notes that the seventeen or eighteen page document they developed with a positive conclusion was rejected by then Prefect, Joseph Ratzinger.

1994

o *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* restricted presbyteral ordination to men. The iconic argument from *Inter Insigniores* about women not being able to “image Christ” is left out. Ordaining women as deacons is not addressed.

1995

- o *Responsum ad dubium* further cements the teachings of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.
- o A gathering of cardinal members from the Congregation for Clergy and the Congregation for Catholic Education reviewed drafts of two documents on the diaconate. The question of women deacons was raised but not resolved.
- o The Canon Law Society of America which, is not a Vatican entity, released a study on the canonical implications of the ordination of women to the diaconate (see separate resource with their findings).

1997

- o The topic of the diaconate was reassigned to the International Theological Commission again for its next five-year term because the findings of the previous sub commission were not accepted.
- o The Catechism of the Catholic Church contained significant changes with regard to the diaconate.
- o The *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of the Priest* muddled the theological understandings of the diaconate.

1998

o *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* was promulgated. There was no mention of women deacons.

2002

o The ITC published its report on women deacons. It found that the question of ordaining women deacons, “pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question.”

2009

o Pope Benedict XVI released a motu proprio, *Omnium in mentem* clarifying the canonical standing of deacons.

2010

o The CDF issued *Norms on Graviora Delicta* saying the “attempted ordination” of women was a “more serious delict.”

William Ditewig notes three parallel courses the Vatican took. One set of documents was devoted specifically to the presbyterate with a focus to keep women out. Another set focused on the development of the diaconate. And a third set lacked clarity and tended to create confusion as in the 1997 *Instruction on Certain Questions*....

He also observes that the theology of this period often defined the diaconal role and other ministries by what they were not (ex: a deacon cannot preside at Mass, etc.). In his commentary on permanent diaconate in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, canonist Rev. James H. Provost noted, “there is still no coherent treatment of permanent deacons as a ‘proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy’ comparable to the treatment given presbyters and bishops in the code; rather they are treated as exceptions to the norms for presbyters.”⁷ Provost believed this theological deficit had to be overcome if the permanent diaconate is to become a “proper and permanent order” as envisioned at Vatican II.

Theological Support for Women Deacons?

It is clear that the sacrament of orders has always been characterized by its great sacramental diversity and flexibility. And while the theology of the permanent diaconate as envisioned at the Second Vatican Council is still evolving, it is clear that some of the underlying theological principles are applicable to women as they were for married men more than fifty years ago.

1. There is one sacrament of orders with two distinct modes of participation. The first is the ministerial priesthood consisting of the order of bishops and priests; and the second is the order of the diaconate. Within the second mode, it is theologically and canonically justifiable that women would be ordained as deacons in the contemporary Church.
2. Just as older systems of ministry have given way to the changing needs of the Church, the current system will need to be responsive to the “signs of the times in light of the Gospel.” Just as the Council leaders made certain features of the diaconate distinct from the priesthood, it seems clear that the Church can do the same by ordaining women as deacons.
3. Women have been carrying out diaconal work in the church since its foundation and as Cardinal Doepfner’s question suggests, “Why should these people be denied the grace of the sacrament?”

Finally, as we consider how to employ both women and men in the full sacramental life of the Church, we recall the pioneering spirit of Cardinal Suenens and his prophetic interventions at Second Vatican Council and ask, “Why should the Church be denied the gift of women as well as men serving as deacons?”

References

1. Much of this article is excerpted from “Women Deacons: Present Possibilities” written by William T. Ditewig found in *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* by Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano. (New York: Paulist Press, 2011).
2. Gary Macy. “Women Deacons, History” found in *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* by Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano. (New York: Paulist Press, 2011). 65.
3. Ditewig. Location 766 (Kindle Version)
4. AS, II/II, 227-30.
5. Leo Cardinal Suenens, “The Co-responsibility of Deacons,” in *Diaconal Reader: Selected Articles from the Diaconal Quarterly*, ed. Rev. John J. Ziegler (Washington, DC: NCCB, 1985), 47.
6. Ditewig. Location 857-876 (Kindle Version)
7. James H. Provost, “Permanent Deacons in the 1983 Code,” in *Canon Law Society of America Proceedings* 46 (1984): 175.