



DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



Why Not Women?

by Bishop Emil A. Wcela | October 1, 2012

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Can women receive sacred orders? Let us consult several authoritative sources. Canon 1024 of the Code of Canon Law states, "A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly." In 1994 Pope John Paul II said, "I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful." And the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has weighed in on the issue more than once. A statement in 1995 read, "This teaching requires definitive assent, since, founded on the written word of God and from the beginning constantly preserved and applied in the tradition of the Church, it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium." And in 2010 the doctrinal congregation stated, "both the one who attempts to confer sacred ordination on a woman, and she who attempts to receive sacred ordination incur a *latae sententiae* [automatic] excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See." And so the issue is settled. Or is it?

Development of Early Church Ministries

Jesus chose the Twelve and others to help spread the word that God was working in the world uniquely through him. After his death and resurrection, local communities of believers formed; and within them leaders emerged or were chosen. In a natural way, the shape of such leadership was often borrowed from contemporary society. There were *episkopoi*, or "overseers," in synagogues, who managed finances and sometimes settled disputes, and overseers in the civic world responsible for community projects, like the building of a road. There were *presbyteroi*, or "elders," councils of men who formed administrative boards in synagogues and other religious institutions. Adopted by the Christian communities, these offices would develop into the episcopate and priesthood.

Very early in the life of the church, around A.D. 55, the Letter to the Philippians names the *episkopoi* and *diakonoi* among its addressees. This latter group is our focus. Many ministries contributed to the fruitful life of the community. Some were transient, like speaking in tongues or prophecy, while others, like teaching, required more permanence. In the New Testament, a whole range of such contributions to community well-being are clustered under the heading of the Greek verb *diakonein* and its related nouns. An inclusive translation of these words would be "to minister," "ministry," "minister." A *diakonos* in the secular society of the day was someone chosen and entrusted by another person with carrying out a specific task. This meaning carries over in the ministry words found in letters written by or attributed to St.

Paul. Such services entrusted to a believer by God and/or the community could range from preaching the Gospel to encouraging the community to taking up a collection for hungry believers in Jerusalem during a famine.

In the First Letter of Timothy, which most scholars date at the end of the first century, the word “deacons” appears to be used in a more narrow way. Requirements for the office (3:8-12) are not especially “spiritual” but basic to living with integrity: “dignified,” “not deceitful,” “not addicted to drink,” “not greedy,” “holding fast to the mystery of faith,” “tested first,” “must be married only once and manage their children and their households well.” What exactly the deacons did is not spelled out, although in Acts 6 and 7 they care for the needy and preach.

1 Timothy also stipulates that “women, similarly, should be dignified, not slanderers, but temperate and faithful in everything.” Much has been written about whether these women are the wives of deacons or deacons themselves. There is good reason to believe that they, too, are deacons. Paul in the Letter to the Romans famously calls Phoebe a diakonos, the only named individual explicitly so designated in the New Testament.

Here a note of caution is called for. It would be premature to make judgments about the diaconate today from these passages, since the specific nature of this ministry is not clearly defined.

What Deacons Did

By the third century, the hierarchical structure of church communities had developed into the now familiar pattern: bishop at the top, then priest, then deacon. Deacons, ordained with an imposition of hands, taught, cared for the needy and assisted in the celebration of the Eucharist and baptism. In some places they administered the finances of the community.

Circumstances also created a need for women to serve as deacons. Since persons were unclothed when they were baptized, having men ministering to women would have been highly improper. The same reservation would apply to men visiting sick women in their homes.

Women deacons instructed women converts

and greeted women who came to the Christian gatherings. There is no evidence that they had a public role in teaching or preaching. By the end of the fourth century in the Eastern churches, they were considered part of the clergy, made so through the laying on of hands.

Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek in *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*, sum up the situation in the East: “Female deacons...exercised liturgical roles, supervised the lives of women faithful, provided ongoing care for women baptizands, and were seen going on pilgrimage and interacting with their own families and the general population in a variety of ways.”

Testimony about women deacons in the West is much scarcer and does not appear until the fifth century. Inscriptions from Africa, Gaul, Rome and Dalmatia, for example, each name a woman deacon. The decrees of three church councils in France, in 441, 517 and 533, prohibiting their ordination are testimony that the institution continued for at least 80 years after its prohibition. It is remarkable to note that in 1017, Pope Benedict VIII wrote to the bishop of Porto in Portugal giving him authority to ordain presbyters, deacons, deaconesses and subdeacons.

By the end of the sixth century, however, the office of deacon for women outside monasteries was already in decline. One of the reasons given for this is the notion of cultic purity, meaning a suitability to approach sacred places and objects. It was believed that menstruation and childbirth made a woman ritually “impure.” Another factor was the move away from adult baptism—with its attendant nudity and need for modesty—to infant baptism. Communities of nuns would take over the nursing, charitable and teaching ministries without being ordained deacons. By the 12th century, women deacons anywhere were rare.

The permanent male diaconate was also disappearing. Tensions arose over the understanding and practice of the ministry of priest and deacon. Many of the services of the deacon were gradually absorbed into the priesthood or taken up by other orders: subdeacons, acolytes, doorkeepers. The diaconate changed from a permanent office into a step on the way to

priesthood.

The Current Situation

In recent years, several Eastern Orthodox Church conferences have called for the ordination of women to the diaconate. The Armenian Apostolic Church, which is not in union with Rome but is recognized by Rome as being in the line of succession to the apostles, with mutual recognition of sacraments and orders, has always had women deacons, though only a few serve today. Their ministry includes service at the Eucharist. But what about the Roman Catholic Church?

The Second Vatican Council opened a new era by returning the diaconate to a permanent order. Today about 40,000 men throughout the world are deacons. Knowledge of the historical presence of women deacons would raise the issue of their ordination. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a declaration in 1976 that reaffirmed the exclusion of women from the priesthood. The official commentary commissioned by the C.D.F., however, had acknowledged the existence of "deaconesses" in the early church but was uncertain whether they had received sacramental ordination. The congregation had decided that this discussion "should be kept for the future."

The first draft of what was to be a pastoral letter by the bishops of the United States on the role of women in society and the church appeared in 1988. It stated, "we recommend that the question of the admission of women to the diaconal office" be submitted to thorough investigation and that "this study be undertaken and brought to completion soon." Differences of opinion emerged as the letter worked its way through discussions by the full body of bishops. When the letter was finally approved in November 1992, it noted that admission to the diaconate was among the concerns women had brought to the committee. The letter acknowledged "the need for continuing dialogue and reflection on the meaning of ministry in the church, particularly in regard to the diaconate, the offices of lector and acolyte and to servers at the altar." The document was approved for release not as a pastoral letter of the episcopate but as a committee report. The sense of urgency or priority had disappeared.

Obstacles to considering women for ordination to

the diaconate were formidable. Canon 1024 limited sacred ordination to males, as we have seen. This exclusion was based on the practice of Jesus and the church's long tradition of ordaining only men and on the so-called iconic argument. Articulated regularly, as in Pope John Paul II's "Letter to Women" of 1995, the reasoning is that the person ordained is to be an icon, or living representation, of Jesus as bridegroom and shepherd and therefore male.

In 2009 a very significant paragraph was added to Canon 1009 of the Code of Canon Law. It states that bishops and priests "receive the mission and capacity to act in the person of Christ the Head; deacons, however, are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word and charity." This wording had already appeared in the modified Catechism of the Catholic Church issued in English in 1997. In other words, the diaconate is a sacred order but with a difference from the episcopate or priesthood. Bishops and priests represent "Christ the Head," but this characteristic is not included in the description of deacons in their service to the people of God. Iconic maleness is not a requirement for them.

The International Theological Commission advises the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on important doctrinal matters. In 2002, it issued the results of its study on the diaconate under the title "From the Diaconate of Christ to the Diaconate of the Apostles." This study also anticipates the change in Canon 1009 by emphasizing that "the unity of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, in the clear distinction between the ministries of the bishops and priests on the one hand and the diaconal ministry on the other, is strongly underlined by ecclesial tradition, especially in the teaching of the magisterium." As for the ordination of women to the diaconate, it concludes, "It pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question." It leaves the ordination of women to the diaconate an open question. It is rumored that more than one bishop, from the United States and other countries, has raised the issue during ad limina visits to the Vatican.

Why Women Deacons?

Women already minister extensively in the church. Consecrated religious serve in various fields. Thousands of other women serve in diocesan offices; in parishes as administrators, pastoral associates, directors of religious education, in the whole spectrum of parish life; in hospitals; in prisons. In contrast to the women of ancient times, women today play a very important part in public life, holding high offices in government, business, the professions and education. Cultural reasons to exclude women from the diaconate, at least in the West, no longer apply.

Ordaining women as deacons who have the necessary personal, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral qualities would give their indispensable role in the life of the church a new degree of official recognition, both of their ministry and of their direct connection to their diocesan bishop for assignments and faculties. Besides providing such women with the grace of the sacrament, ordination would enable them to exercise diaconal service in the teaching, sanctifying and governing functions of the church; it would also make it possible for them to hold ecclesiastical offices now limited to those in sacred orders. And as the International Theological Commission document points out, what the Second Vatican Council was proposing was not a "restoration of a previous form" but "the principle of the permanent exercise of the diaconate [italics in the French original and in the English translation] and not one form which the diaconate had taken in the past." Who knows what new and grace-filled enrichment of that ministry might grow from the ordination of women as deacons?

The ordination of women to the diaconate is separate from the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood, as this discussion has, I hope, shown. That issue was addressed by the 1995 declaration of Pope John Paul II. Regarding the ordination of women to the diaconate, it is up to episcopal conferences and bishops, to theologians and historians and to concerned Catholics to raise the issue for wider and more public consideration.

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