

## For Discernment: The Ordination of Women as Deacons

On May 12, 2016, in an audience with the leaders of religious congregations of women, Pope Francis agreed to constitute an official commission to study the history and nature of women deacons in the Church. "It will be good for the Church to clarify this point," he said. The membership and precise scope of the commission has not yet been determined.

In 2002, the International Theological Commission issued a lengthy report on the historical development of the diaconate, but only two brief sections (comprising 2,660 of 42,000 total words) examined the ministry and subsequent disappearance of women deacons. Notably, the ITC arrived at no definitive conclusion about whether women can be ordained as deacons today, saying it "pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question."

The present commission presents an opportunity for the Church to explore the matter in greater depth and breadth and to engage in a *pastoral discernment* involving prayer, dialogue, listening and a full assessment of missionary opportunities, pastoral needs and the gifts, charisms and actual ministry of women in the Church today. The recent Synod of Bishops, which involved a global survey of Catholics and the encouragement of Pope Francis to bishops to speak with *parrhesia* (boldness and courage), provides a model for a pastoral discernment concerning whether local Churches should be able to call forth both men and women as deacons for the *diaconia* of liturgy, word and charity.

### History

- *Scripture*. The only person in Scripture with the title "deacon" is Phoebe (*Rm* 16:1), and the First Letter to Timothy lists characteristics of women who are deacons (3:8-11). A majority of Christian scholars for a thousand years believed women deacons were sanctioned by Scripture and had an apostolic foundation.
- *Tradition*. Women deacons were ordained in the West until the 12th century, and still exist today in the East. Women deacons were sacramentally ordained by bishops in the sanctuary with an epiclesis and the laying on of hands. The Council of Chalcedon (451) required women deacons to be 40 and celibate. Pope Benedict VIII (1018) perpetually authorized a cardinal bishop to ordain women deacons. The Orthodox Church of Greece and the Armenian Apostolic Church, which have valid sacraments and orders, presently allow for the ordination of women as deacons.
- *Ministries*. At various times in various places, women ordained as deacons assisted at the altar, administered finances, cared for sick and poor women, assisted women in baptism, proclaimed the Gospel, maintained order in the women's part of the assembly, catechized children, and preached.
- *Recent developments*. The Second Vatican Council suppressed the minor orders and major order of subdeacon, and revived the diaconate. For the first time in one thousand years, people are ordained solely and finally into a major order other than presbyterate.

### Benefits for the Church

- *Mission*. Having women ordained as deacons would allow the Church to expand its ministries of liturgy, word and charity. These ministries are modeled on servanthood of Christ, embody the Servant Church, and help the Church fulfill its mission to proclaim the Gospel and baptize all nations.
- *Grace*. Women already engaged in diaconal ministries like preaching, ministering the works of charity and leading a parish would be able to receive the grace of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, exercise ecclesiastical jurisdiction, serve in offices currently restricted to clerics, and be officially recognized by the Church in a lifetime commitment to its ministry.

- *Pastoral need.* The early Church called forth deacons out of pastoral need. In many places today facing severe shortages of clergy, women ordained as deacons could assist in the sacramental ministries of baptism and marriage, preside at funerals and give homilies. Women deacons could also exercise ministry in places where it is difficult for men to serve, like the homes and hospital rooms of women, domestic violence shelters and in women's prisons.
- *Empower local Churches.* The local Church should be allowed to call forth and ordain men and women who can effectively serve in this ministry. It would expand the resources of local bishops by allowing them to train, ordain and give faculties to women, and it would also expand the presence of ordained ministers in many spheres of life, connecting them with parishes, pastors and local bishops.

### Some Concerns

- Women deacons will lead to women priests. *Response:* The Magisterium has already decided against the possibility of women priests. Pope Francis has confirmed this teaching. The ordination of women as deacons does nothing to change it. The diaconate is a proper and distinct ministry in the Church. In the one Sacrament of Holy Orders, there is unity and distinction. The Catechism explains: "Bishops and priests receive the mission and faculty ('the sacred power') to act *in persona Christi Capitis* [in the person of Christ the Head]; deacons receive the strength to serve the People of God in the *diaconia* of liturgy, word and charity, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate." (No. 875)
- It is against Canon 1024: "A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly." *Response:* This canon was developed only after the permanent diaconate faded in the West, so it relates to priesthood, not the diaconate as a separate and permanent ministry. The present prohibition of women deacons is an administrative law, not doctrine, and can be changed. All papal and curial statements against the ordination of women specifically address the "ministerial priesthood" and "priestly ordination," not the diaconate.
- The permanent diaconate is not working well. *Response:* Many local Churches in the United States and other countries are served very well by permanent deacons. It is up to each local Church whether to ordain permanent deacons or not. It need not be universal practice.
- Cardinal Walter Kasper and others have suggested that women could serve as non-ordained "deaconesses." *Response:* Women did not always belong to a separate order of "deaconesses." In fact, women deacons were ordained by a bishop in the sanctuary with an epiclesis and the laying on of hands. The argument that women cannot be ordained suggests that women are not ontologically equal to men and cannot image Christ, which contradicts the Catechism.
- Women are not asking to be ordained as deacons. *Response:* Many women are already leading parishes, preaching, teaching and serving in the ministries of charity, and some of these women have expressed a desire to be ordained as deacons. If the diaconate serves important pastoral needs in the Church today, then it should be open to men and women.

### Resources

- Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (Paulist, 2012)
- Emil A. Wcela, "Why Not Women? A bishop makes a case for expanding the diaconate," *America Magazine* (October 1, 2012), <http://americamagazine.org/issue/5152/article/why-not-women>
- Phyllis Zagano, *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church* (Crossroad Publishing, 2000)
- Phyllis Zagano, "It's Time: The Case for Women Deacons," *Commonweal* (December 10, 2012), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/it's-time>
- Phyllis Zagano, editor, *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers* (Liturgical Press, 2016)