

The ordination of Catholic women as deacons: The state of the question

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The report of a commission set up by Pope Francis to study the question of women as deacons in the Catholic Church was issued in May 2019. Whilst it is well known that the Catholic Church refuses to ordain women, the form of the diaconate being discussed is that of the 'permanent diaconate' for men, which was established after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). This article first discusses how this issue has arisen, clarifies the types of deacons and reviews the reasons why the Catholic Church refuses to ordain women. It then looks at Scripture and the history of the Church to assess the historical role of women deacons. The issue of women's ordination emerged after Vatican II (1962–1965). Women's ministries have grown immensely since then and this is a factor in the question about the ordination of women deacons. There are important theological issues involved in the study around women deacons. Lastly, the article raises questions about the future of this issue under Pope Francis and his successors.

Contribution: The issue of the ordination of women deacons in the Roman Catholic Church is a current and contentious issue. This article reviews the historical evidence for women deacons and the views of theologians and Church leaders in order to assess whether there are grounds for hope.

Keywords: Catholic Church; Women; Deacons; Ordination; Ministry.

Introduction

Those who follow news of the Catholic Church know that its all-male hierarchy refuses to ordain women as deacons, priests and bishops. However, recently the issue has focused on the possible ordination of women to the permanent diaconate, which is not a 'stepping stone' to the priesthood.

This article discusses the origin of this issue, analyses the meaning of the diaconate and reviews the reasons why the Catholic Church refuses to ordain women. It looks at Scripture and the history of the Church to assess the historical role of women deacons. The issue of women's ordination emerged in a significant way after the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) (1962–1965). In these past 50 plus years, women are ministering in ways not dreamt of at the Council and this is a factor in the question about the ordination of women deacons. There are significant theological issues involved in this issue, which include how women are regarded as persons, and what can women hope for under Pope Francis, especially in light of the Amazon Synod?

The state of the question

In 2016, the Union of International Superiors General (UISG), which is the umbrella organisation of leaders of Catholic women's religious congregations around the world, asked Pope Francis to set up a commission to study the question of ordaining women to the 'permanent diaconate'.

This is a separate issue from ordaining women to the priesthood and episcopacy, which the Church has said is not possible. Pope Francis set up an international commission comprising six women and six men to study the question. One of the members is Phyllis Zagano of the United States of America who has studied this issue and written extensively on it for many years. The commission submitted its report to the pope in May 2019; however, the members could not agree on whether women can be ordained as deacons or not.

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The question about women deacons has arisen because, since Vatican II, women's ministries in the Catholic Church have grown and developed in a dramatic way. Women minister in parishes as pastoral assistants, visit the sick, are spiritual directors and lead justice and peace organisations, and much more. Many of their ministries reflect the diaconal service of charity. People then ask 'why can't the church affirm their diaconal ministry and ordain them?'

The meaning of the diaconate

The Acts of the Apostles describes how the needs of the emerging Christian community led to the ministry of the 'deacon':

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word'. And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. (Ac 6:1-6 RSV)

Stephen was later stoned to death, becoming the first martyr of the Christian community (Ac 6:8-15).

The ministries of the Church evolved over many centuries into the triad of deacon-priest-bishop. In the Catholic Church there are two types of deacons: transitional and permanent. 'Transitional' deacons are celibate men on their way to ordination as priests after a short period of diaconal ministry usually in a parish. 'Permanent' deacons are what the word says: it is not a path to priesthood but a distinct ministry of itself. The permanent diaconate was established after Vatican II and is open to married and single men who usually minister in a parish on a part-time basis. This is the type of diaconate that is under study for women.

Some commentators see the permanent diaconate for women as a door to priestly ordination but its promoters say that this is not so because priestly and episcopal ordination is directed *ad sacerdotium*, that is, to priesthood whilst the diaconate is ordered *ad ministerium*, that is, to ministry (McElwee 2015). Zagano (2000:76) regards the fear that women deacons will lead to women priests 'as a red herring, possibly presented to deter investigation of the latter'. Male permanent deacons are not going forward to priestly ordination. Neither would these women deacons. These are two separate issues and two different types of vocations.

Women priests: The magisterium has said 'no'

Although women deacons and women priests are two different ministries, it is useful to review the reasons why the Catholic Church refuses to ordain women as priests, since some issues overlap.

In 1975, Pope Paul VI announced that the Papal Biblical Commission would study the question of women's ordination from the biblical perspective. The Commission 'voted unanimously that the New Testament alone seemed unable to settle the question of the possibility of women priests' (Zagano 2000:54).

In 1976, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published the Declaration *Inter Insigniores: On the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*. This document had a threefold argument against ordaining women. The first is that Jesus did not call any woman to be an apostle: 'Jesus Christ did not call any women to become part of the Twelve' (II 2). The second is the argument from tradition: the Church has never ordained women. The document (II) states:

The practice of the Church therefore has a normative character: in the fact of conferring priestly ordination only on men, it is a question of unbroken tradition throughout the history of the Church, universal in the East and in the West, and alert to repress abuses immediately. This norm, based on Christ's example, has been and is still observed because it is considered to conform to God's plan for his Church. (4)

The third argument is from 'natural resemblance', the priest must be a man in order to represent Christ because Jesus was a man. The document (II) states:

The whole sacramental economy is in fact based upon natural signs, on symbols imprinted on the human psychology: 'Sacramental signs', says Saint Thomas, 'represent what they signify by natural resemblance'.¹ The same natural resemblance is required for persons as for things: when Christ's role in the Eucharist is to be expressed sacramentally, there would not be this 'natural resemblance' which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man: in such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man. (5)

Focusing on the maleness of Jesus puts women's salvation in jeopardy. Johnson (1992) asserts:

[I]f maleness is essential for the christic role, then women are cut out of the loop of salvation, for female sexuality is not taken up by the Word made flesh. If maleness is constitutive for the incarnation and redemption, female humanity is not assumed and therefore not saved. (p. 153)

This 1976 document did not end the controversy, and in the 1990s under Pope John Paul II, two documents were issued to strengthen the ban. In 1994, in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* he said that 'the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in

1. Saint Thomas, *In IV Sent.*, dist. 25 q. 2, quaestiuicula 1a ad 4um.

accordance with God's plan for his church' (Pope John Paul II 1994:#1). The argument then shifted to the topic that 'the church has no authority to ordain women', often interpreted as 'Jesus did not tell the apostles to ordain women'. A second letter from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later to be Pope Benedict XVI) in 1995 invoked this teaching as infallible but was highly criticised because only a pope can make an infallible statement (Rakoczy 2004:242).

Women deacons: The evidence from scripture

There are two important scripture texts that point to women as deacons. The first one is Romans 16:1–2 in which Paul speaks about his co-worker Phoebe: 'I commend to you our sister Phoebe (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae'. He uses the same word to describe Apollos and himself (1 Cor 3:5–9). As we have seen, Acts 6:1–6 portrays the selection of the first deacons including Stephen, later the first martyr.

1 Timothy 3:8–11 describes the qualities of a deacon: 'serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine' (v 8, RSV). The text continues to describe the women as ones 'who likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things' (v 11, RSV). There is a clear parallel with the qualities for a male deacon although some commentators state that Paul is talking about the wives of deacons. However, the word 'likewise' establishes the similarity.

The fluid and egalitarian ministries of the early Christian community, exemplified in Galatians 3:28: '[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (RSV), gave way to accommodation to the Graeco-Roman household codes. 'Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord' (Eph 5:22 RSV) became the norm in Christian homes.

Women deacons: The evidence from scripture and Church history

There have been a number of studies which demonstrate that women were addressed as deacons and functioned in this ministry in the first centuries of Christianity. The evidence is stronger in the East than it is in the West, remembering that until 1054 Christianity was unified.

The Orthodox Church honours a number of women deacons as saints: St Phoebe, St Marcia, St Nona, St Melania and St Appolonia amongst others (Zagano 2000:93). What did women deacons do? The *Didascalia Apostolorum* of the 3rd century in the East instructs the bishops to appoint women deacons (Didascalia 2020):

Also, because in many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required. In the first place, when women go down into the [*baptismal*] water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a

deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen [*naked*] by men (III, 12, 2). (n.p.)

There were separate baptisteries for men and women.

The ordination prayers for women and men were nearly identical and the intention was the same: ordination as a deacon. Zagano (2000:91) stresses that '...whatever ordination meant at the time, it was granted equally to men and to women deacons'.

There is ample evidence about women deacons in the Church in the East. John Chrysostom (d. 407 CE) wrote 'four letters to the woman deacon Amproukla in Constantinople, thanking her for her support while he was in exile' (Macy 2011:12). The Deacon Olympias was ordained in her 30s and was a patron and support to Bishop Nectarius of Constantinople who died in 397 CE. Macy (2011:13) notes that there are headstones from the graves of women deacons from the 5th to 7th centuries.

St Gregory Nyassa (335–394 CE) was the brother of St Macrina, a renowned holy woman. He wrote about the preparations for her funeral and the ministry of a woman deacon:

There was a woman in charge of the choir of virgins [= *nuns*]. She was in the order of the diaconate [*εν τῷ τῆς διακονίας βαθμῶι*]. Her name was Lampadia. She declared that she knew Macrina's wishes in the matter of burial exactly... When our work [of preparing Macrina's body] came to an end and the deceased had been covered with the best we had on the spot, the woman deacon [*ἡ διακονος*] spoke again, pointing out that it was not fitting that [*the deceased*] should be seen by the eyes of the virgins robed like a bride [= *in a rich, colourful dress*].²

In the Western Church women deacons appeared only in the 5th century, much later than they appeared in the East. They were not welcome; perhaps they had come from the East and were seen as foreigners. The First Council of Orange (441 CE) stated, '[w]omen deacons are by no means to be ordained' (Macy 2011:13). If they were married, they were obliged to celibacy.

Yet, 10 years later the Council of Chalcedon (451), which made historic statements on the humanity and divinity of Christ, spoke affirmatively about women deacons:

Canon 21. A Woman shall not be ordained [*Greek original: not receive the laying on of hands*] as a deaconess under forty years of age, and then only after searching examination. And if, after she has had hands laid on her and has continued for a time to minister, she shall despise the grace of God and give herself in marriage, she shall be anathematized as well as the man united to her.³ (n.p.)

2. On the Life of St. Macrina, see Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 46, cols. 960–1000; here cols. 988–990; English translation by W.K. Lowther Clarke, *The Life of St. Macrina*, London n1916; Wilson-Kastner (1979:105–117).

3. This canon was later incorporated in the *Corpus Juris Canonici*, Gratian's *Decretum*, Pars II., Causa XXVII, Quaest. I., Canon xxii, viewed 04 May 2020, from <http://www.womendeacons.org/minwest-council-of-calcedon-451ad/>.

The number of women deacons in the West is far less than that from the East, but there are references 'in wills, letters, and chronicles of women who were deacons' (Macy 2011:15). Bishop Remigius of Reims (d.c. 533) left part of a vineyard 'to my blessed daughter Helaria the deaconess' (Macy 2011:15).

References to women deacons continue to appear in documents from the 8th to the 12th centuries. Macy (2011:16) notes that Pope Gregory II wrote three letters to women deacons between 715 and 730 whilst 'In 1018, Benedict VIII conferred on the cardinal archbishop of Porto the right to ordain bishops, priests, male or female deacons (*diaconibus vel diaconissis*), subdeacons, churches and altars' (Macy 2011:17).

The Pope wrote (Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research 2020):

In the same way we grant and confirm to you and your successors for all time [*the power*] to perform every kind of episcopal ordination, that is of priests as well as of deacons or deaconesses, or also of subdeacons, church buildings or altars, whatever might be required in the whole of the Transiberine region, unless the person is to become a cardinal priest, or cardinal deacon, or subdeacon, or acolyte of the sacred Lateran Palace [= *the papal residence*]. That means that we grant you and your successors, or whatever bishops you have invited, all power to ordain, bless or consecrate ...⁴ (n.p.)

Women and men deacons did 'service', which meant care of the poor, the sick and the needy. The Roman Empire did not provide social services so the ministry of the deacons was both needed and welcomed. The 4th century *Apostolic Constitutions* instructed the deacons (cited in Macy 2011):

And let the woman (deacon) be diligent in taking care of the women. Both of them (male and female deacons) should be ready to carry messages, to travel about, to minister, and to serve. (p. 24)

Over time as monastic life for women and men developed, there is evidence that the office of abbess in a woman's community was seen as the equivalent of that of a deacon. Commentators on canon law in the 9th and 10th centuries stated, '[a] female deacon is an abbess' (quoted in Macy 2011:29). Abbesses functioned in ways that recalled the early women deacons: they read the Gospel, instructed women and sometimes distributed the Eucharist.

The French medieval theologian Abelard (1079–1142) wrote a strong defence of women deacons at the request of his wife Heloise (1090–1164) who was an abbess. He argued that the 'abbess' was the new name for a woman deacon. Clark (2013, 2019) states:

In the Rule that he composed for the Paraclete, he refers to the office as that of 'deaconess, who is now called abbess'. But despite acknowledging the present practice of calling the

4. Translation by John Wijngaards, viewed 04 May 2020, from http://www.womendeacons.org/minwest-benedict_viii/.

monastic leader an abbess, he consistently refers to the prelate of the nuns as diaconissa.⁵ (p. 9)

There are two major reasons why women deacons began to disappear. Firstly, the male church leaders viewed women as impure because of menstruation and childbirth, and secondly, the diaconate was transformed into a stage before priestly ordination.

Furthermore, misogyny has stalked Christianity since its earliest days. Women have been considered impure and unclean. Thus, they must not approach the altar of God.

Theodore Balsamon, a 12th-century Greek canonist, remembered that there used to be women deacons but '[t]he monthly affliction banished them from the divine and holy sanctuary' (quoted in Macy 2011:31). In the 14th century, another canonist, Matthew Blastares, also spoke about women deacons who ministered in the past. They (quoted in Macy 2011):

[W]ere allowed to approach the holy altar and perform nearly all the functions done by male deacons. They were forbidden access and performance of these services by later fathers because of their monthly flow that cannot be controlled. (pp. 31–32)

The purity laws inherited from the Hebrew Scriptures (Lv 17–26) had entered Christian life and thus women were considered impure.

There were various local church laws which restricted women's physical place in the church. Canon 44 of the 4th century Synod of Laodicea in present-day Sicily states that '[w]omen may not go near the altar' (Zagano 2018:592). In the 5th century, Pope Gelasius complained about events in southern Italy and Sicily (Zagano 2018):

With impatience, we have heard that divine things have undergone such contempt that women are encouraged to serve at the sacred altars, and that all tasks entrusted to the service of men are performed by a sex for which these [tasks] are not appropriate. (p. 594)

In the 12th century Peter Damian raged against women, calling them 'appetizing flesh of the devil' (Zagano 2018:599). The fear that touching a woman would make a priest impure was a major reason for the imposition of clerical celibacy by the Second Lateran Council in 1139 for diocesan clergy, that is, those not in monastic communities.

Misogyny is evident in the 1901 *Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique* which states that 'a woman, even a religious, cannot cense the altar nor touch sacred vessels, and cannot serve Mass' (Zagano 2018:605). They are not allowed to give the responses at Mass, which at that time was in Latin, 'because Paul said that they must keep quiet' (Zagano 2018:605).

5. Clark's reference is *The Letter Collection of Peter Abelard and Heloise* edition with a revised translation by David Luscombe (2013; Clarendon Press, Oxford), pp. 386, 387, 388, 389, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 411, 415.

Fortunately, the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* overturned these misogynist stipulations and affirmed that women and lay men can be altar servers, lectors and Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist.

A second development was the introduction of the *cursus honorum*, the ranking of ministers, which was an 11th-century reform. It was based on Roman culture which required 10 years of military service in the Roman army for a man before he could assume a political office. No one could advance to a higher state from a lower state unless they were qualified.

In the Church, gender was the determinant. Women could not be ordained as priests; thus, they could not be deacons. For men, the diaconate became a transitional state to priestly ordination. This did not change until after Vatican II when the permanent diaconate was established. Only men, married or single, could be ordained to this form of the diaconate.

Vatican II and the permanent diaconate

There were a number of reasons why the Council Fathers at Vatican II reformed the diaconate to encompass two types: the transitional diaconate leading to priestly ordination and a 'permanent' diaconate for either married or single men. During the 19th and early 20th centuries in Germany, there was discussion about expanding the role of the deacon. The office of a deacon in Protestant communities was often significant. Might it also be so in the Catholic Church? The experiences of priests who survived the Nazi concentration camps, especially at Dachau, also raised questions about a new mode of the diaconate. The theological reflection by Karl Rahner was also important, together with growth in catechetical mission studies. Pope Pius XII issued documents on the sacrament of orders in 1947 and 1957.

At the Council 101 proposals concerned the renewal of the diaconate. Two bishops from Peru and Italy spoke about women being deacons: 'deaconesses be instituted' and 'the order of deacons be restored and extended to women with the obligation of celibacy' (Ditewig 2011:115). In June 1967, Pope Paul VI published the Apostolic Letter *Diaconatus Ordinem* in which he established the permanent diaconate in the Latin Church.

The Council's decision to institute the permanent diaconate for men is based on these principles. The diaconate is distinct from the presbyterate or priesthood. It is its own distinct vocation. Thus, deacons may be married and will necessarily work in society, not only in the church. The local bishop may decide whether or not to have permanent deacons in his diocese.

Most significantly (Ditewig 2011):

The renewed diaconate is not simply a restoration of the ancient diaconate. It is a new expression of this ministry in the Church.

This means that appeals to history, while helpful, are not prescriptive or delimiting. (p. 60)

This is the diaconate which is the subject of both controversy and hope for women.

Studies of woman deacons

After Vatican II there were several studies which included the mention of women deacons. In 1973, Pope Paul VI created a study commission on women in society and the church comprising 15 women and 10 men (priests and laymen). A member of the International Theological Commission, Cipriano Vagaggini, researched this question. He concluded 'quite plainly that women were indeed ordained to the diaconate, by the bishop, in the sanctuary, with the laying on of hands' (Macy, Ditewig & Zagano 2011:3). However, the results of this study, 'Women in the Diaconate', 'have never been fully made public' (Hebblethwaite 1993:640). There was great tension at that time between the women members and Paul VI because other Vatican officials were drafting a document on women's priestly ordination. The result was *Inter Insignores* in 1976 which asserted that women cannot be ordained.

In 1992, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger assigned the International Theological Commission (ITC) the task of studying the diaconate for women. The 1992–1997 ITC report was positive. Zagano (2019:n.p.) comments that '[b]y all accounts, the ITC voted to approve women deacons in a paper that its president, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, refused to promulgate'. From 1997 to 2002, the ITC wrote another study, about four times longer than the first, which said that the topic of women deacons was a question for the Magisterium to decide. 'That is, they did not say no; they just did not say yes' (Zagano 2019).

In its 2002 report the ITC spoke of the unicity of the sacrament of orders so that (Ditewig 2011):

[O]ne could argue that an inability to ordain a person to one order would make ordination to any other impossible. If the focus is on the diversity within order one might argue that we risk losing the unity of the sacrament as participation in the one priesthood of Christ. (p. 63)

This report (Grogan 2019):

[C]oncluded that female deacons in the early Church had not been equivalent to male deacons and had no liturgical function, nor a sacramental one. It also maintained that even in the fourth century 'the way of life of deaconesses was very similar to that of nuns'. (n.p.)

In 1995 the Canon Law Society of America did its own study on the question of women deacons, titled 'The Canonical Implications of Ordaining Women to the Permanent Diaconate'. It concluded (cited in Ditewig 2011):

The amount of adjustments in law which would be required to open the permanent diaconate to women are within the authority of the Church to make, and are relatively few in number. The

practical effect, however, would be to open up ordained ministry as permanent deacons to women, enabling them to receive all seven sacraments, and making them capable of assuming offices which would entail the exercise of the diaconal order and of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, which are now closed to women because they are closed to lay persons. (p. 65)

The Church is on a see-saw regarding women as deacons and priests. On the one hand, it asserts that women cannot be ordained. But then Pope Benedict XVI several times called for women to be included in governance and ministry. As a historical theologian, he knew clearly that 'only clerics (including deacons) can exercise governance and ministry' (Macy et al. 2011:7). In a public dialogue with a priest, he said, '[y]ou rightly say: "we want to see even more visibly, in a ministerial way, women in the governance of the church"' (quoted in Zagano 2007:353). Zagano (2007:350) comments, '[h]owever, even prescinding from ordination to priesthood, the pope still allowed that there might be more "space" for women'. That is, he asked, '[w]hy not allow women to minister and share governance in the Church?' (Zagano 2007:351). She comments that 'Canon law clearly holds that women cannot participate in governance although women may be consulted and cooperate in it' (Zagano 2007:352). Yes, women do minister in countless ways. However, governance or jurisdiction requires ordination. The impasse remains.

The 2016 Commission on women deacons

As mentioned earlier, the May 2019 report of the Commission which was led by Cardinal Luis Ladaria revealed that the 12 members could not agree. Speaking at the Union of International Superiors General (UISG) meeting, Pope Francis said, '[t]hey came to a certain point. Everyone agreed. Then each had his or her own idea' (McElwee 2019b). However, even though they had stopped working as a group, they would continue their research individually. He said 'that some members thought the church "must go forward" and reinstitute an order of women deacons.' Others, he said, 'say we must stop here'. 'We must study this', said Francis. 'I cannot make a sacramental decree without a theological, historical foundation' (quoted in McElwee 2019b).

A key question is whether the ordination women deacons received was 'sacramental' or not. Referring to historical documents evaluated by the commission giving the formulas for ordination showed, the Pope said 'they are not the same as for men's diaconal ordination. They looked more like those for what would today be the blessing of an abbess' (McElwee 2019b).

An encouraging point is that 'he does not consider the matter of understanding how women deacons served as closed' (McElwee 2019b). However, one can study an issue to death, especially if it is controversial.

Pope Francis is known for his expansive outreach to the poor, to people at the 'peripheries', physical, psychological and spiritual. Jamie Manson notes that when the issue of women is raised, he cannot do this (cited in Giangravè 2019):

The fact is, women are severely marginalized in this Church. Their gifts are not welcomed, their voices are largely silenced, they are barred from serving, leading, and making decisions in their church. (n.p.)

Theological analysis

There are four significant theological issues related to the question of women as deacons: sacramentality, women as persons, complementarity between men and women and the power of patriarchy.

Pope Francis has raised the question of whether the ordinations of women deacons in the early church were ordinations, or perhaps blessings. Research has shown that '[t]he sacramentality of the women's diaconate can be seen from the six features recognised by contemporaries at the time' (Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research 2019):

1. Ordination in front of the altar
2. Public election through the Divine Grace formula
3. Laying on of hands with the invocation of the Holy Spirit
4. A second ordination prayer with renewed laying on of hands and the calling down of the Spirit
5. Receiving the distinctive diaconate stole
6. Receiving the power to hold the chalice with the consecrated body and blood. (n.p.)

'Moreover, male deacons were ordained with substantially the same rite. If women were not sacramentally ordained as deacons, then neither were the men' (Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research 2019:n.p.).

Ordination must involve valid matter; for example, water, not juice, must be used in baptism. The argument is that as women are not men thus they cannot be ordained because there appears to be 'something' in the female person which blocks the sacramental grace and so they cannot image Christ because Jesus was a male person. One of the first statements of the Women's Ordination Conference in the 1970s, 'Ordain women or stop baptising them', remains significant. Either women can receive all seven sacraments, or they cannot and should not be baptised. Christianity has a long and tragic history of denying the dignity of women as persons created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:27). Various Fathers of the Church raged against women. In the 2nd century Tertullian in his treatise 'On the Apparel of Women' (Book 1) wrote of women as follows: '[y]ou are the devil's gateway. You are unsealer of the forbidden tree...On account of your desert that is death, even the Son of God has to die' (quoted in Rakoczy 2004:31). John Chrysostom thundered against women: '[a]mong all the savage beasts none is found to be so harmful as woman' (quoted in Rakoczy 2004:31). We can ask what psychological distress led to such hateful statements.

Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, who are lauded as great theologians, are not helpful to women. For Augustine, women are not the full image of God by themselves (De Trinitate 12.1; cited in Rakoczy 2004):

[T]he woman with her husband is the image of God in such a way that the whole of that substance is one image, but when she is assigned her function of being an assistant, which is her concern alone, she is not the image of God... (p. 34)

Aquinas, following Aristotle (cited in Rakoczy 2004):

[D]escribes the girl child as defective human being (ST I q.92, a 1), the result of an accident to the male sperm (conceived under a full moon with the south wind blowing. (p. 34)

The statements of these two theologians shaped the Church's understanding of woman as person until nearly the end of the 20th century. In 1988, in his document *Mulieries Dignitatum* Pope John Paul II wrote, '[f]or every individual is made in the image of God, insofar as he or she is a rational and free creature capable of knowing God and loving him' (MD 7). This statement finally asserted women's full human dignity after almost 2000 years of denial.

However, the Catholic Church does not accord women dignity as persons. Patriarchy, clericalism and sexism rule. Thus, the question of women deacons sets up a seismic shift in the bastion of patriarchy. If women are truly the image of God, why is this not recognised and affirmed?

A favourite theological term of male theologians in discussing women in the Catholic Church is 'complementarity'. Women and men have distinct roles and 'complementarity' implies that each brings something to the other which is lacking. However, as the 'underlying assumption is that "masculine nature" is human nature, a man cannot lack what a woman has' (Rakoczy 2008:171). Feminist theologian Sandra Schneiders (1991) comments that:

Women have been seen to complete men the way a second coat of paint completes a house, whereas men have been seen to complete women the way a motor completes a car. (p. 13)

This interpretation of the relationship of men and women excludes women from positions of authority and governance in the Church because a woman must be 'completed' by a man who has the fullness of human nature.

Patriarchy, 'the rule of the father', permeates the Catholic Church. Men rule – women serve. This social structure in both society and religious institutions is considered 'natural', the way things are and should be. Women have unconsciously aided the strength and endurance of patriarchy because, as scholar Gerda Lerner (1986:218) states, 'they have been psychologically shaped so as to internalize the idea of their own inferiority'. Sr. Rekha M Chennattu, superior general of the Religious of the Assumption in India, states, '[p]atriarchal cultures regard women as psychologically sentimental, intellectually inferior, socially marginal, religiously impure

and culturally insignificant, and thus incapable of leadership' (Joseph 2019:n.p.). The Catholic Church reflects this in its structure and teaching. The repeated assertions that women cannot be ordained rest on the bedrock of patriarchy, even though theological arguments are advanced to justify Church teaching and practice.

Millions of Catholic women, lay women and members of religious congregations, in Africa and around the world, exercise pastoral ministries as hospital and prison chaplains, in social services to the poor and needy including abused women, as spiritual directors, as catechists with people of all ages and more. This raises an important theological issue pointed out by the Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch in 1997 because '[i]n the Catholic Church, the structure of which is sacramental, it is problematic for people to carry out orderly ministries without having the sacrament of the corresponding order' (Join-Lambert 2019).

But which Pope will be brave enough to say the time is now to ordain women as deacons?

Those who advocate for the ordination of women as permanent deacons argue that the Church needs to welcome and affirm the diaconal service which women exercise throughout the church. Ordination would do that. However, others fear that acceptance of women deacons would create another layer of clericalism in the Church, which suffers the burden of extreme male clericalism.

But we do not know what would happen until it happens.

What can we hope for?

Massimo Faggioli (2019) commented that today:

[T]he Catholic Church has a stronger theology of women deacons than it did during the time of Paul VI, but the political conditions for such a development are now less auspicious. (n.p.)

He noted the growing traditionalism amongst young Catholics, including young priests and seminarians. The Catholic Church in Africa is known for its conservatism.

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Austria commented in 2018 that because 'there had been female deacons in times past and basically, this question is open' (Wimmer 2018). We can wonder if his position has changed since the May Commission report.

Will the members of the 2016 Commission ever publish their research? What will Pope Francis do? Whilst he is bold with statements about the environment (*Laudato Si'*), justice and peace issues, inter-religious dialogue and many more, this stops when women are mentioned.

His language about women is regularly very unfortunate. He called the six women on the 30-member International Theological Commission 'strawberries on the cake' (Roberts

2014). During the February 2019 conference in Rome on the sexual abuse scandal, he said that (Oppenheim 2019):

Inviting a woman to speak is not to enter into the mode of an ecclesiastical feminism, because in the end every feminism ends up being a machismo with a skirt. (n.p.)

The tired and condescending terms 'feminine genius' and 'women's proper nature' appear in his writings.

Manson (2019) commented that:

Francis has communicated – like so many popes before him – that women's legacy of leadership requires further questioning, and their participation in ministry alongside men could be a dangerous step, and therefore must be indefinitely stalled. In the six years of his papacy, Francis has been celebrated for his constant calls for courage, encounter, dialogue and risk-taking. How long must we wait until he offers the same to the women of his own church? (n.p.)

Pope Francis has indicated that he will discuss important issues such as a married clergy if they are proposed from 'below'. So what is needed is that two or more bishops' conferences from different continents, or several brave bishops, must say to Pope Francis and later his successors, '[w]e must look at the issue of women deacons in a different way'. Pope Francis is a Jesuit and discernment is essential to his spirituality. His cultural background and theological perspectives are huge obstacles to his perspectives on women. What is the Spirit saying to him? Where is he resisting the Spirit? And does he know this?

Meanwhile, Catholic women's diaconal service continues to be the backbone of the Church. The People of God know this and affirm this. But the hierarchy is compromised by patriarchy and fear. Yet fear is not a Christian virtue as the Scriptures attest because Jesus frequently told the disciples not to fear as he is with them (Mt 14:27) and remains with the Christian community today.

Women deacons and the Amazon Synod

When Pope Francis received the report of the Commission in May 2019 which showed that the members could not agree, this seemed to be the end of the discussion for the foreseeable future. But then the issue was raised at the Amazon Synod held in Rome in October 2019.

Pope Francis called the Synod – a representative group comprising bishops, clergy, women (but who could not vote) and men of religious and lay leaders – to discuss important pastoral issues in the region which encompasses nine countries, with Brazil having the largest area of the Amazon forest.

As the discussions continued about the pastoral needs of the people who often live in isolated small communities, two issues emerged. The first issue is that as the Eucharist is the heart of Catholic faith, how can these communities be Eucharistic communities when in some places priests visit

only once or twice a year to celebrate the liturgy? The second issue is the reality that about 60% – 70% of these small Christian communities are led by women. But because the Catholic Church refuses to ordain women, these leaders are only seen as volunteers with no ecclesial position.

In addressing the first issue, the male voters (bishops, priests and a non-ordained religious brother) voted in large numbers (128 'yes' votes vs. 41 'no' votes) to recommend the ordination of married men, specifically permanent deacons. The second issue – women deacons – also received high support, with 137 'yes' votes compared to 30 'no' votes.⁶

In the Final Document which was sent to Pope Francis, the delegates stated that '[i]t is urgent for the Amazon Church that ministries for men and women are promoted and conferred in an equitable way' (#95) (Final Document of the Amazon Synod 2019).

Speaking strongly, the Synod (2019) delegates asserted that:

The wisdom of ancestral peoples affirms that Mother Earth has a feminine face. In the indigenous and Western world, woman is the one who works in multiple facets, in the teaching of children, in the transmission of the faith and of the Gospel, they are a testimonial and responsible presence in human promotion, so it is requested that women's voice be heard, that they be consulted and take part in decision-taking and, in this way, be able to contribute with their sensibility to ecclesial synodality. (#101)

Then going a step further the Synod (2019) stated that:

In the new contexts of evangelization and pastoral en Amazonia [sic], where the majority of Catholic communities are led by women, we ask that the instituted ministry be created of 'the woman directress of the community' and to recognize this within the service of the changing needs of evangelization and care of the communities. (#102)

The Synod also said, '[w]e acknowledge the ministeriality that Jesus reserved for women' (#102).

This is new language and not the language of the diaconate. There is still great fear of women in actual ordained leadership. In response, Pope Francis said (McElwee 'Amazon Synod' 2019b):

I am going to try to reconvene this commission with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and appoint new people in this commission and take up the challenge. (n.p.)

This new Commission was announced on 26 May 2020. In addition to a cardinal president and a priest secretary, it comprised five women and five men from Europe and the United States of America. Regrettably, there are no members from Africa, Asia and Latin America (Reis 2020).

'Beloved Amazon'

On 12 February 2020, Pope Francis issued his long-awaited response to the Amazon Synod, including the issue of women

6.The voting results are from McElwee (2019b).

deacons. Titled *Querida Amazonia* [Beloved Amazon], it is a compassionate response to the ecological crises of the Amazon. However, those who hoped for a positive response to the Synod's request that women be ordained as deacons met a closed door.

The Pope used traditional language about Mary and women to argue that the ordained ministry is not women's place in the Church. Women have their proper place in the Church and that is not as a deacon, let alone a priest (or bishop). He said, '[a]s a result, we do not limit ourselves to a functional approach' (#101). He argued:

Such a reductionism would lead us to believe that women would be granted a greater status and participation in the Church only if they were admitted to Holy Orders. But that approach would in fact narrow our vision; it would lead us to clericalize women, diminish the great value of what they have already accomplished, and subtly make their indispensable contribution less effective. (#100)

He has frequently strongly criticised the clericalism of Roman Catholic clergy (a key factor in the sexual abuse scandal). However, neither men nor women as ministers should be characterised by clericalism which assumes special status and privileges.

For Francis, Mary is the model of women's ministry. This was also John Paul II's favourite image because in his writings he would link 'women's roles with Mary's obedience and receptivity' (Rakoczy 2008:163). Francis wrote, '[w]omen make their contribution to the Church in a way that is properly theirs, by making present the tender strength of Mary, the Mother' (#101), which is an entry 'into the inmost structure of the Church' (#101). Mary's ministry is a hidden ministry. Men lead and women assist.

Whilst the ordination door stays firmly shut, the Pope is open to some form of ecclesial service for women:

The present situation requires us to encourage the emergence of other forms of service and charisms that are proper to women and responsive to the specific needs of the peoples of the Amazon region at this moment in history. (#102)

Again we see dualism: what are these charisms and forms of service that are proper to women? In the Catholic Church, ordination and decision-making are joined: only clergy can exercise leadership and make decisions. Thus, the 'forms of service' that 'are proper to women' do not and cannot involve ecclesial leadership. The Amazon women who actually lead small Christian communities are subject to the parish priest who seldom visits the people and has no idea about what their needs are.

Then the Pope tries to modify his stance but still cannot go further:

In a synodal Church, those women who in fact have a central part to play in Amazonian communities should have access to

positions, including ecclesial services, that do not entail Holy Orders and that can better signify the role that is theirs. Here it should be noted that these services entail stability, public recognition and a commission from the bishop. This would also allow women to have a real and effective impact on the organization, the most important decisions and the direction of communities, while continuing to do so in a way that reflects their womanhood. (#103)

What is significant here is that women who lead the small Christian communities in the Amazon Synod would be recognised as having an ecclesial ministry. Presently they are regarded as volunteers, much like the women who clean the church. But again Francis falls into the pit of male-female dualism with his stress that what these women do reflects their womanhood.

Francis is under enormous pressure by the ultra-conservative faction in the Church not to ordain married men and women deacons and so in 2020 this appears to be as far as he can go. Maybe he cannot go further. Maybe the next pope will feel freer to move to approve the ordination of women deacons. Meanwhile women with vocations to the diaconate and priesthood wait, pray and continue their valuable service to the People of God.

Conclusion

This article has traced the history of women deacons in the Catholic Church from the evidence in the New Testament and the first centuries of Christianity. Women were deacons and exercised their ministry in diverse settings. But gradually male Church authorities first limited and then ended their ministry. In the 20th century when movements for the ordination of women began, various Church documents said a clear 'no' to the possible ordination of women as priests. However, priest and deacon are different ministries and in the last few years the study has continued. The Amazon Synod in October 2019 raised the hope that women who lead the Christian communities in the Amazon could be ordained as deacons. But the latest document from Pope Francis has argued that women are to imitate Mary in ways that are proper to their womanhood even as he proposed that their ministry could have some form of ecclesial recognition.

For Catholic women with vocations to the ordained ministry, their lament is 'how long O God, how long?' must we wait?

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