



# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



## Frequently Asked Questions -- Using These Materials

**Who Created the DeaconChat Initiative?** DeaconChat is a joint initiative of The Association of US Catholic Priests (AUSCP), FutureChurch, and Voice of the Faithful.

**Why DeaconChat?** On May 12, 2016 Pope Francis -- responding to a question posed by members of the International Union of Superiors General (IUSG) -- said that he would establish a commission to study the question of ordaining women deacons in the Roman Catholic Church. That commission was formally announced in August and began its work in November of 2016. As the commission undertakes its work, it is important that Catholics -- lay and ordained -- undergo their own study and discernment of the history and present possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate. Unfortunately too many Catholics -- clergy included -- are under-educated on this topic. **Our goal is to bring the ordained and the laity together in conversation to continue to learn and discern together.**

**What are we asking you to do?** We are asking you to engage a local member of the clergy (your parish priest, deacon, or your local bishop) in a conversation about women deacons.

**Learn:** Begin by taking some time to educate yourself. This packet includes a Brief History of Women Deacons, biographies of women who served as deacons in the early Church, and articles by Phyllis Zagano, Ph.D. who was named by Pope Francis to serve on the study commission and by retired auxiliary Bishop Emil Wcela of Rockville Centre, NY.

**Share:** Consider sending your local clergy member a copy of Dr. Zagano's *Women Deacons Past Present and Future* which includes essays by Church historian Gary Macy, Ph.D. and Deacon William Ditewig, Ph.D. Copies can be purchased directly from the publisher, Paulist Press, at <http://www.paulistpress.com/Products/4743-4/women-deacons.aspx> or through other retailers. Please note that each bishop in the U.S. has already been sent a copy of this text. Alternatively, we also welcome you to print or make additional copies of any of the resources in this packet to send. We have also included a sample letter that you can customize to send with these materials.

**Connect:** After you have sent the materials and letter to your local clergy member, follow up by inviting them to discuss them with you. You might suggest meeting for coffee or lunch. During this conversation you might consider asking them to host an information session or educational gathering on women deacons for local Catholics. If you yourself experience a call to the diaconate, you may wish to tell your story.

**We Will Contact You with a Brief Survey** In the months ahead, we will email you a very brief survey to get your feedback about how your conversation went and what follow-up actions you and clergy were able to take together to learn and educate others about the history and present possibility of ordaining women deacons.

Thank you for becoming a part of this important ministry!



# 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>).



# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



Phyllis Zagano, Ph.D., is Senior Research Associate-in-Residence and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Hofstra University. Dr. Zagano was named to the Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate by Pope Francis.

## Ordain Catholic Women as Deacons by Phyllis Zagano

Much of the world may be charmed by Pope Francis, but what has he done to include women as decision makers in the Catholic Church? More to the point, what can he do?

Francis has, of course, been busy with other things. The seventy-eight-year-old Jesuit now in the third year of his papacy seems quite serious in his efforts to reform the Roman Curia, by all accounts a bloated bureaucracy resistant to change. The pope's early movement toward transparency in Vatican financial matters earned him enemies within the system, and his ongoing efforts to uncover fiscal improprieties do not exactly grease the wheels needed to move the Curia forward to reform. Francis's dual efforts—curial and financial reform—support his larger agenda and aim: preaching the Gospel and living its message.

But, what about women? In interviews and writings, the pope often returns to the topic of women's roles in the Church. Within a few months of his election, Francis called for a "more widespread and incisive female presence in the Church" in an interview with Antonio Spadaro, the Jesuit editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, one of Italy's oldest periodicals and the only one whose text is approved by the Vatican's state department.<sup>1</sup> The papal interview, translated into several languages and printed in sixteen Jesuit journals, caught the attention of the major Spanish daily newspaper *El País*,<sup>2</sup> which suggested Francis might be considering female cardinals. The report brought a papal response: "I don't know where that comment came from!"

Even so, Francis repeated the same call a few months later in his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel): "we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church."<sup>3</sup> He repeated that phrase when speaking before the Pontifical Council for Culture's February 2015 plenary assembly on women in the church.<sup>4</sup> The event was perhaps a response to another papal suggestion—development of a "theology of the woman in the Church"—made on the papal plane ride back to Rome from the 2013 World Youth Day in Brazil.

Even with papal interest—on the airplane from Rio Francis seemed to complain about woman's limited roles<sup>5</sup>—the sticking point is ordination. The Catholic Church teaches it cannot reverse Jesus's decision to choose male apostles, predecessors to priests and bishops. Sacramental power and juridical authority come with priestly ordination and episcopal consecration. Barred from these, women can cooperate with but not share authority.



Late 3rd Century painting from the catacombs of Priscilla. Some scholars believe this image of a women, clothed in a dalmatic, depicts a women who served as a deacon in the Church. Used with permission from the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology, Rome.

Such is not necessarily the case. In order to fully hold (the canonical word is “obtain”) certain church offices, an individual must be a cleric, not a lay, or non-ordained, person. But priest and bishop are not the only clerical ranks in the church. Deacons are also ordained clerics, and history documents women ordained to the diaconate from the earliest centuries of Christianity to the Middle Ages, when the diaconate faded as a separate order. As priests absorbed the work of deacons, ordination to the diaconate became simply a step in the *cursus honorum* on the way to priesthood. Fewer and fewer women—mostly monastic abbesses—were ordained as deacons, primarily for service within their own convents.

However, the Catholic Church restored the diaconate as a permanent grade of order following the Second Vatican Council. Some bishops actually brought up the historical fact of women deacons during conciliar debate,<sup>6</sup> but the promulgated documents clearly specify only men would be called to the order of deacon. When Pope Paul VI restored the diaconate as a permanent grade of order for the entire Church (it never fully disappeared in the Eastern Catholic Churches), he asked about women deacons, possibly of the International Theological Commission but at least of one of its more prominent members, Cipriano Vagaggini. By 1974, a journal of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome published Vagaggini’s densely reasoned historical and theological findings in Italian:

yes, women had been ordained as deacons and could be so ordained again.<sup>7</sup>

Coincidentally, interest in Catholic women’s ordination as priests was on the rise, partly in response to the 1974 priestly ordinations of eleven Episcopal women in Philadelphia. In 1976, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the curial office responsible for matters of faith and morals, published its opinion that women could not be ordained as priests with the document *Inter Insigniores*. The question of women deacons was specifically omitted. Separate debates ensued, one on women deacons, another on women priests; at times it was argued that the history of ordained women deacons gave precedent for both.

Then, in 1994, Pope John Paul II issued a four-paragraph Apostolic Letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* affirming that the ban on women priests “pertains to the Church’s divine constitution” and that the Church’s determination that it did not have the authority to ordain women as priests “is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”<sup>8</sup> The statement raised several areas of concern, not the least of which was dueling opinions on whether it is “infallible.” Notably, the document does not mention women deacons.

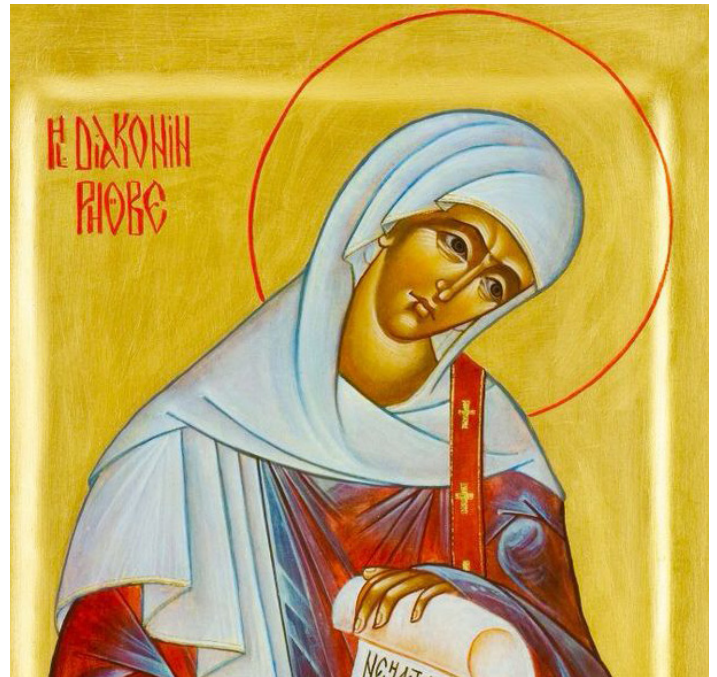
An interesting argument from the first document on women priests (*Inter Insigniores*) is not in the second: the so-called iconic argument, which states that a person must be male in order to represent Christ. Yet,

if one holds that all people are made in the image and likeness of God and that Christ is the second person of the Trinity and therefore God, it makes no sense to say that a woman cannot image Christ. What makes sense, although it carries no theological weight in this regard, is to say that women cannot image Jesus. The distinction is critical because it is the risen Lord, not the restricted male human Jesus, who is represented by the ordained person.

Recognizing that all persons, including women, are made in the image and likeness of God—actually a staple of Catholic teaching—does not automatically grant women access to priesthood. Even given the abandonment of the iconic argument (some still say it is “implied” in the 1994 document) there is the question of authority, supported by the assertion that the ban on women priests is of divine law. Hence the specter of women priests cannot really be raised with the ordination of women deacons.

Further, if the ban on women priests is permanent and binding, then the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate becomes less complicated, specifically because the current practice of not ordaining women deacons is arguably a “merely ecclesiastical law”—a regulation, not a doctrine. The assertion of divine law pertaining to priestly ordination refers to the presumed intent of Jesus with the apostles. But the initial choice of servants—deacons—by the apostles was from among those put forth by the community following Jesus’s death and resurrection. (Acts 6:1-6). Although she is not mentioned in Acts, given that Phoebe is the only person in scripture called deacon (Rom. 16:1), and given the many evidences of women deacons throughout history, the restoration of women to the diaconate seems to be something Francis could do easily.

Here the debate heats up. In 2002, the International Theological Commission, a body within the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published a long-awaited study document on the diaconate.<sup>9</sup> It appears that a subcommittee in the International Theological Commission’s 1992–97 session completed a seventeen- or eighteen-page positive document about women deacons that its then-president, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, refused to sign. Finally, in 2002, the ensuing International Theological Commission session approved a much longer and relatively inconclusive document, which stated that male and female deacons had different roles in the early church, that priesthood



An Icon of Phoebe, the deacon, named by Paul in Romans 16.

and the diaconate are separate and distinct ministries, and that the question of admitting women to the diaconate was something for the church’s “ministry of discernment” to decide.

The reconfigured subcommittee, chaired by one of Cardinal Ratzinger’s former Regensburg students, Henrique Noronha de Galvão, produced a second study that strangely misses much of the history about women deacons despite its thirty thousand words. Further, the study implies that the person ordained as deacon must image Christ, especially in uncited passages from and paraphrases of an earlier book by subcommittee member Gerhard L. Müller, who was named bishop of Regensburg just days after the document’s publication.<sup>10</sup> Müller, appointed prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith seven months before Benedict XVI resigned and affirmed by Francis, is also editor of the “Opera Omnia,” the collected writings of Joseph Ratzinger.

Positive scholarship about women deacons, such as Vagaggini’s long article and his briefer intervention before the 1987 Synod of Bishops, remains known to scholars and joins other major research by Roger Gryson, Corrado Marucci, Pietro Sorci, and Philippe Delhaye, among others, that was ignored or discounted by the writers of the 2002 document.<sup>11</sup>

While Francis may be interested in better situating women within Church governance and ministry, and even though there is sufficient theological

evidence to readmit women to the order of deacon, significant curial roadblocks keep him from moving in the obvious direction. Women deacons could take up significant posts, at the Vatican and around the world. Women deacons could even become cardinals. But in 2008 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decreed ordination of women a crime worthy of automatic excommunication.<sup>12</sup>

Francis calls priesthood's connection to power and authority problematic, writing that it "presents a great challenge . . . with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church's life."<sup>13</sup> But if priesthood is the problem barring women from a "more incisive presence in the Church," the diaconate is the solution.

Reprinted with permission from: *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* SUMMER/AUTUMN 2015 (VOL. 43, NOS. 3 & 4)

1. An edited English translation, titled "A Big Heart Open to God," of Spadaro's interview that omitted these words about women appeared in the September 30, 2013, issue of *America*, and the words were later changed in the online publication, [americamagazine.org/pope-interview](http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview).
2. Juan Arias, "¿Una mujer cardenal?" *El País Internacional*, September 22, 2013.
3. "Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of the Holy Father Francis . . . on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World," November 24, 2013, 103.
4. Laura Ieraci, "Pope Urges 'More Widespread and Incisive Female Presence' in Church," *Vatican Radio*, February 7, 2015.
5. The official translation is: "All we say is: they can do this, they can do that, now they are altar servers, now they do the readings, they are in charge of Caritas (Catholic charities). But there is more! We need to develop a profound theology of womanhood. That is what I think." Earlier translations correctly quote Francis as saying: "We need to make a profound theology of the woman. This is what I think." See "Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro on the Occasion of the XXVIII World Youth Day: Press Conference of Pope Francis during the Return Flight, Papal Flight Sunday, 28 July 2013," [w2.vatican.va](http://w2.vatican.va).
6. *Acta et documenta Concilio oecumenico Vaticano II apparando, series prima (antepreparatoria)* (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1960–1961), II/II, 121, as cited in Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (Paulist Press, 2011).
7. Cipriano Vagaggini, "L'ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974): 146–189. The creation and suppression of this paper is reported in Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* (Paulist Press, 1993), 640.
8. "Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of John Paul II to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone," May 22, 1994, [w2.vatican.va](http://w2.vatican.va).
9. Written and originally printed in French, then Italian and English, the document is now published in nine languages online, at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).
10. Compare, for example, *From the Diakonia of Christ 3 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 183, 185–186; *From the Diakonia of Christ 4 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 186, 184, 186, 187; *From the Diakonia of Christ 5 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 190–191; *From the Diakonia of Christ 6 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 187; *From the Diakonia of Christ 19 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 216; *From the Diakonia of Christ 20 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 216, 217, 204; *From the Diakonia of Christ 22 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 218; and *From the Diakonia of Christ 23 and Priesthood and Diaconate* 217. Some citations and footnotes are identical. See Gerhard L. Müller, *Priesthood and Diaconate: The Recipient of the Sacrament of Holy Orders from the Perspective of Creation Theology and Christology*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Ignatius, 2002). German original, *Priestertum und Diakonat: Der Empfänger des Weihesakramentes in schöpfungstheologischer und christologischer Perspektive* (Johannes Verlag, 2000).
11. *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches: Essays* by Cipriano Vagaggini, ed. Phyllis Zagano (Liturgical Press, 2013). A book of translations including these essays and others is forthcoming from Liturgical Press in 2016.
12. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "General Decree regarding the Delict of Attempted Sacred Ordination of a Woman," [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).
13. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 104.

## Not a Novelty

## The Eastern Orthodox Case for Deaconesses

By Carrie Frederick Frost

May 18, 2017

I watched with interest in August 2016 when Pope Francis made good on his promise to convene a commission to study the female diaconate. I was especially attentive to this development because I am a supporter of the renewal of the order of deaconesses in my own church—the Orthodox Church. Later last year I was astonished when one of the self-governing churches of the Orthodox world, Alexandria, decided to revive the female diaconate in Africa and proceeded to consecrate five women as deaconesses this past February. These moves by the Synod of Alexandria surprised those of us in the United States working on this issue—we did not know the female diaconate was even under consideration by the African church. Rarely does anything happen this fast in the Orthodox world.

That we were unaware of support for the female diaconate in Africa is evidence of two Orthodox realities. First, our church is fragmented: we do not yet have established international mechanisms for theologians and historians, or even hierarchs, to communicate with one another. Second, the autocephalous Orthodox churches throughout the world are self-governing, which means that any one of them could decide to revive the female diaconate tomorrow and ordain a deaconess the next day.

As my Catholic sisters and brothers await the report from Pope Francis's commission, we in the Orthodox Church are waiting to learn more about the ministry of the new deaconesses in Africa. The Synod of Alexandria has not yet published an official description of their duties, but it has informally suggested that these women will assist with missionary work, such as catechism and baptism, as well as conducting services in mission parishes that have no regular priest. We are also waiting to see if another Orthodox church will follow in Alexandria's footsteps, and to find out what the female diaconate will look like in other parts of the world.

We know at least one thing already: it will not be a novelty. There is ample evidence of a female diaconate through the twelfth century in the Orthodox Church—a fact of great importance in a tradition that zealously values precedent. From the third century on,



*Publia (Poplia) the Confessor and Deaconess of Antioch (Menologion of Basil II)*

there are several extant texts that include or mention ordination rites for deaconesses. From these texts, we know that deaconesses were ordained at the altar during the Divine Liturgy, that they received the Eucharist with the other ordained orders and had an *orarion* (deacon's stole) placed over their necks, and that their bishop laid hands on them.

There are also ample records of women who were deaconesses in the Christian East, starting with Paul's esteemed benefactor Saint Phoebe in the middle of the first century. (Though the term Saint Paul uses to describe her is somewhat ambiguous, the Orthodox Church has long presented Phoebe as a deaconess in its prayers, hymns, and iconography, which often shows her holding a diaconal censor.) We still have detailed records of some of these women: Saint Olympias, the friend and confidant of Saint John Chrysostom; Saint Nonna, the mother of Saint Gregory the Theologian; Saint Irene of Chrysovalantou, an abbess of the ninth century. At the height of the Byzantine Empire, one could find deaconesses in many places, including Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Thessalonica.

The precise historical roles and responsibilities of deaconesses are less clear. The language of a surviving eighth-century ordination rite is broad: "Bestow the grace of your Holy Spirit also upon this your servant who desires to offer herself to you and fill her with the grace of the diaconate just as you gave the grace of your diaconate to Phoebe whom you called to the work of ministry." Deaconesses were said



## FIRST ARCHERY LESSON

a February rain  
has soaked the grass  
and the hay bales  
no one shooting but me  
as my teacher watches  
I fumble with the arrow  
and drop it  
but when I reset it  
and shoot it hits straight  
on to the bullseye  
and I fumble again  
with the second  
and again it falls  
on the wet grass  
but when I try again  
it splits the first  
right in the center  
of the bullseye  
my teacher shrugs  
doesn't smile  
says I do it all the time  
but for me  
forever after  
never again

—Ellen Cooney

*Ellen Cooney was born in 1948 and grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, and Montclair, New Jersey. She lives in San Francisco, California, and has written ten volumes of poetry published by Doir Press.*

The big question about the female diaconate in the Christian East is why it diminished so rapidly in the late Byzantine era. Was it monastic influence? During this period, liturgical rites that included rubrics for deaconesses were replaced with rites from male monasteries that lacked such rubrics. Was it geopolitical forces? There was enormous pressure from the Crusades and the Ottoman Turks, and this destabilized the church, perhaps in ways that undermined the female diaconate. Was it a revival of Christian concern with Mosaic law—but only as it applied to women? During this era menstruation and childbirth were linked to impurity for the first time in the Christian East. Whatever the reasons for the decline of the order, no decree or canon law ever prohibited it.

Just as there is ample historical evidence of the female diaconate, so there are also plentiful and authoritative calls for the renewal of the female diaconate in recent Orthodox history. The Russian Church was poised to renew the female diaconate on the eve of the Bolshevik revolution. Multiple pan-Orthodox consultations have formally called for the female diaconate to be revived, including one in Rhodes in 1988 that was convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. In 2004, the Church of Greece decided to “bless” (rather than ordain) deaconesses, and has since blessed a few nuns. In the past decade or two, several Orthodox organizations advocating for deaconesses have sprung up: Saint Catherine’s Vision, Orthodox Deacons, and Saint Phoebe Center for the Deaconess (of which I am a board member). Prominent historians and theologians continue to urge the Orthodox Church to consider the revival of the female diaconate—including perhaps the most influential living Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware.

At the same time, there has been an upsurge in ordinations of male deacons, as the Orthodox Church has discovered more ways to make use of the diaconate. This follows centuries of decline. In the Christian East, the role of the deacon had withered over time till deacons were little more than liturgical assistants. This decline may have been the result of the disentanglement of church and state in many parts of the Orthodox world. When church and state overlapped, deacons often worked as administrators. As soon as the state had its own non-ecclesial administrators, deacons suddenly had less to do. Now, however, the male diaconate is again being remembered as a boon to parish life and a ministry unto itself, rather than just a procedural stage on the path to priesthood. This is why several North American Orthodox seminaries have established diaconal training programs.

Deaconesses would also be a boon to parish life. Even in twenty-first-century America, a woman can often go where men are either not as welcome or not as comfortable. Deaconesses could minister to other women in cases of miscarriage, infertility, sexual and domestic abuse, for example. An order of deaconesses would also help the Orthodox Church recognize and make use of women’s gifts. Today, Orthodox

to serve their bishops by being available for “many things,” as noted in the third-century Christian treatise, the *Didascalia apostolorum*. Surviving lists of their duties include: assisting with female baptism; administrative work, such as management of church properties; processing and chanting during liturgy; and many ministries to other women, such as catechetical instruction, spiritual advising, charitable care of widows, ministry to the ill, and bearing the Eucharist to the homebound. The job description of deaconesses changed according to time and place, adapting to new needs. But then, so did the job descriptions of deacons, priests, and bishops.

---

women are lawyers, artists, theologians, chaplains, doctors, real-estate agents, historians, educators, scientists, and so on. It is discouraging to see their gifts embraced and put to use in the world but not in the church. The Orthodox woman who works as a chaplain at my local jail ought to be able to bring Communion to Orthodox inmates. Imagine the inspiration of seeing her ordained at the altar so that she could do just that.

**W**ith so many calls for renewal of the female diaconate and so many needs that could be met, why would anyone oppose it?

First, some claim that there is no longer any need for a female diaconate. In the early church, these opponents say, deaconesses anointed and baptized unclothed female converts, but today this function is all but obsolete since few adults enter the Orthodox Church. This objection simply overlooks the many other duties of the diaconate.

The second claim is that, if the Orthodox Church were to ordain women to the diaconate, this would inevitably lead to the ordination of women to the priesthood, which would in turn lead to a massive decline—just as, in this view, the ordination of women has led to the decline of the Anglican Church. This claim overlooks too many important differences between the culture and theology of the Orthodox Church and those of the Anglican Church. More fundamentally, it disregards Orthodoxy's robust understanding of the diaconate as something more than a way station to the priesthood. Nor is it clear that the Anglicans' difficulties can all be attributed to the ordination of women. That doesn't mean that Orthodox Christians should ignore the experience of other churches, but we must take into account the many relevant differences between our tradition and theirs.

The same critics assert that seeing deaconesses at the altar would have an unconscious effect on the faithful, leading to thoughtless support for female priests. There is no doubt that the effect of seeing women serve would indeed be powerful, but the critics underestimate the sophistication of the faithful. They forget that icons of deaconess saints, the celebration of their feast days, and the remembrance of their lives in hymns already surround the faithful, who have internalized this rich legacy. In fact, there is no movement in the Orthodox Church to ordain women to the priesthood, nor has there been anything like a sustained exploration of the matter; the theological spadework simply has not been done. There is plenty of precedent in the Orthodox Church for a female diaconate, none for a female priesthood. Nor is there any support for a female priesthood from the faithful or clergy. This means we ought to be able to discuss the female diaconate on its own merits without confusing the issue.

Finally, some critics worry that reviving the female diaconate—or even acknowledging its history—would erode the Orthodox Church's understanding of men and women as meaningfully different. Given the many ways in which the Orthodox Church's theology, homiletics, iconography,

and hymnography support a vision of man and woman as equal but not equivalent, the ordination of deaconesses seems unlikely to compromise this vision. Not ordaining deaconesses may even undermine the Orthodox claim that men and women each have distinctive charisms. For to make this claim while ordaining only men to holy orders skews the entire church toward the masculine charisms. Ordaining deaconesses would allow the distinctive female charisms to benefit the whole church. Refusing to ordain them, lest this be misunderstood as a capitulation to secular trends, sends the wrong message, a message of fear rather than faithfulness.

**W**hat would a female diaconate look like today? It would revive the historical roles of deaconesses that are still relevant while also adapting to the church's current needs, as is happening at this very moment in Africa. My ideal vision of the female diaconate in our own time and place would involve allegiance to a bishop, formal ordination, and commitment to *diakonia*—some type of ministerial service, as a chaplain, parish administrator, spiritual advisor, or pastor to women. Ideally, deaconesses would be paid for their services to the church, both to demonstrate that their work is valued and to prevent overwork. A deaconess ought to be vetted, educated, and trained by her bishop.

Then there are the questions of eligibility: How old do deaconesses need to be? Do they need to be married, or unmarried? Early canons stated that a deaconess must be at least sixty; canons from the fifth century lowered that age to forty. These canons are still on the books, but canon law in Orthodoxy is largely particular to time and place. Today it would make sense to make the minimum age for deaconesses the same as that for deacons: twenty-five. As for marital status, there is historical evidence of both celibate and *married* deaconesses. There were even cases of celibate married deaconesses, who were ordained to the diaconate when their husbands became bishops or monks. Today it would make sense to adopt the same discipline for deaconesses as for deacons: that they remain married if already married, and celibate if not.

A women's diaconate would demonstrate that there is a place in the Orthodox Church for women to serve in roles of leadership. Seeing deaconesses offer their gifts to the church, serve at the altar, preach, and be recompensed for their work would demonstrate that women's gifts really are as important as men's, in practice as well as in theory. Just as importantly, it would show that the Orthodox Church is more concerned with fidelity to its own traditions than with keeping up resistance to secular trends. In short, it would demonstrate confidence, not capitulation. ■

---

**Carrie Frederick Frost** is a professor of theology at Saint Sophia Ukrainian Orthodox Seminary, a mother of five, and a board member of Saint Phoebe Center for the Deaconess.



# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



---

## Association of U.S. Catholic Priests Statement Regarding Ordination of Women Deacons

August 22, 2016

We who are entrusted with leadership on behalf of the one thousand members of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests, welcome with praise and prayer the recent decision by Pope Francis to establish a commission regarding the possible ordination of women deacons. We praise the openness of this discussion and offer our prayers that the Holy Spirit will guide the members of the commission. We are pleased to learn that Professor Phyllis Zagano from Hofstra University in Hempstead, NY, is one of the six women who have been named to serve with six men as members of the commission.

We enthusiastically welcome these developments.

We believe the ordination of women deacons will enhance pastoral ministry and serve the common good of the People of God. Our association has supported the ordination of women to the diaconate with a resolution adopted in our 2013 assembly, and with a letter to the U.S. bishops in 2014. We noted that many priests "find ourselves very stretched in ministry with more and more demands being made on us daily . . . One way to help assist us in our duties would be to allow the ordination of women to the diaconate, a practice that was familiar to the early church, in order to help us better serve the people entrusted to us."

We believe that ordination is a matter of justice for women who are our associates and partners in providing ministry. Women have traditionally done 80 to 85 percent of the ministry of our Church. Since the restoration of the permanent diaconate following the Second Vatican Council male candidates were chosen among those who were already performing diaconal service. We see it as a matter of justice that women who likewise are leaders in such ministries not be deprived of the graces of the Sacrament."

Today we continue to speak on behalf of our members serving in dioceses and religious communities with day-to-day ministerial joys and challenges. Our experience leads us to believe that having men and women deacons as parish administrators would be more effective than closing parishes and establishing super parishes.

We value the position of FutureChurch and other organizations of Catholics concerned about pastoral ministry. FutureChurch states that many women who lead parishes and serve as catechists and chaplains and in other ministries should be ordained. "In light of mission opportunities and pastoral needs, local Churches should be empowered to call forth women for the ordained diaconia of liturgy, word and charity."

(over)

---

---

(Signed)

The Leadership Team: On behalf of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests

Father Louis Arceneaux, Congregation of the Mission

Father Bob Bonnot, Diocese of Youngstown

Father Kevin Clinton, Archdiocese of St. Paul - Minneapolis;

Father David Cooper, Archdiocese of Milwaukee;

Father Dan Divis, Diocese of Cleveland

Father Frank Eckart, Diocese of Toledo;

Father Jim Kiesel, Archdiocese of Baltimore

Father Daniel Ramirez Portugal, Diocese of Laredo

Father Joe Ruggieri, Diocese of Youngstown

Father Jim Schexnayder, Diocese of Oakland.

Father Bernie Survil, Diocese of Greensburg;

Father Clarence Williams, National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus

Sister Jackie Doepker, a member of the Franciscan Sisters, Tiffin, Ohio, serves the AUSCP as Executive Secretary.

Email [office@uscatholicpriests.org](mailto:office@uscatholicpriests.org) / The Association of US Catholic Priests, 200 St. Francis Avenue, Tiffin OH 44883-3458





# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



## Why Not Women?

by Bishop Emil A. Wcela | October 1, 2012

\*originally published by America Magazine. Reprinted with permission.

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.

*The Most Rev. Emil A. Wcela, auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre from 1988 until his retirement in 2007, served as president of the Catholic Biblical Association in 1989-90. He also served on the Pastoral Practices, Liturgy and Doctrine committees and the Translations subcommittee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.*







# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



Luke Hansen, S.J., an associate editor at America Magazine from 2012 to 2014, is a student at the Jesuit School of Theology, a graduate school of Santa Clara University, in Berkeley, California.

*Excerpts from*

## **Archbishop Durocher: Address Violence against Women, Empower Women in the Church**

*by Luke Hansen, S.J.*

Archbishop Paul-André Durocher of Gatineau, Canada, who devoted his intervention at the Synod of Bishops to the reality of violence against women within families and encouraged his brother bishops to consider an increased role for women in the church, told America in an interview on Oct. 22 in Rome that violence against women is a “whole social phenomenon we’re still not dealing with adequately,” and he described several factors that influenced his decision to speak about women at the synod.

As a young parish priest, he said, part of his rectory was used as a shelter for abused women, so he had close contact with these women and even had to “intervene” in some cases. The archbishop said he recently read that 30 percent of women in the world are abused by their husbands, a statistic he described as “abominable.” He also recently attended two international conferences on human trafficking, and he praised the work of religious women on the issue.

Turning to the status of women in the church, Archbishop Durocher described the challenge of “clericalism” and said, “If we have power and decision-making structures where women are not included, then the message is sent that somehow women’s voices are not important to the decision-making process.”

He said that every priest, bishop, and national conference could “identify roles and ministries open to women right now” and then ask: “Do we have women in these roles or not? And when we do, do we treat them as equal partners?”

The archbishop said he also supports further study of ordaining women to the diaconate. “It’s not a closed issue,” he explained. “There has been no dogmatic statement saying that women cannot be ordained deacons.”

Asked about the work of the Holy Spirit in the synod, Archbishop Durocher said there is an “important realization” at the synod that God’s grace is “broader than what we often imagine” and that the Spirit “is working in a lot of situations that, on the face of it, do not correspond to church teaching.” As a concrete example, he pointed to divorced and remarried couples “where one of them develops Alzheimer’s and the other one is caring for them and is faithful to the end,” which he called a “love of kenosis.”

The interview has been edited for clarity and length. The excerpts below address the role of women in the Church specifically. To read the entire interview go to: <http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/>

*What inspired and informed your intervention about domestic violence and the role of women in the church?*

I think my experience as a parish priest, having accompanied women who are victims of violence. As a young priest, two-thirds of our rectory was used as a shelter for abused women—the first of its kind in that part of our country. So I was very aware; it was part of my daily life. And in some situations I had to intervene.

Last year when I asked the Canadian bishops for suggestions on what to talk about, the cardinal of Toronto [Thomas Collins] told me it was one of the issues I should address, and he wrote a very strong paragraph that stayed with me.

I read an article recently that quoted the World Health Organization saying that 30 percent of women in the world are abused by their husbands. I find that statistic just abominable.

And the recent number of shootings where men who are angry kill their wives or their exes before taking their own lives. It's the tip of the iceberg that we see, but it hides a whole social phenomenon we're still not dealing with adequately.

In "Familiaris Consortio," John Paul II said we need resolute action to stop this [violence]. Thirty years later, what have we done as a church? I'm not sure that we've taken the pope's words to heart.

That's not true. That's not fair. A lot of people have, particularly communities of religious women. Also, during the past year I have participated in two international conferences on the trafficking of human beings, and most of those victims are women. I have heard women speak about the violence they have experienced, and that has shaped my mind.

*How can the church, at the parish and regional levels, effectively and concretely address this*

*violence?*

At the parish level, we can inform parishioners about local resources available for women who are victims of abuse. We can have fliers in the back of church, put a little article in the parish bulletin and preach about it once in a while.

Every time the text comes up in the liturgy—you know, "wives be submissive to your husbands"—in my preaching I always bring it around to the issue of violence against women. We need to be doing that. Every time I do it, people come to me and say, "Thank you."

In Canada we don't have to set up new centers, but we can certainly support those who are doing it, and we certainly have people in our parishes who are involved in some of these organizations. We could celebrate them and give them a chance to speak about their work.

*And among bishops at the regional level?*

In Quebec there a huge thrust a few years ago to look at the whole question of partnership between men and women in ministry and in the vocation to marriage. The bishops of Quebec held a lot of workshops and developed resources. That's the kind of thing a conference of bishops could be doing. And as we look at tools for marriage preparation, we could be touching on these issues.

*In an interview with Salt + Light Media on Oct. 11, you offered this question: "Can we in the church manifest as an institution the equal dignity of women?"*

All institutions that have a strong presence in society—by the way they are structured and work—send messages. If we have power and decision-making structures where women are not included, then the message is sent that somehow women's voices are not important to the decision-making process. As an institution we have to be asking ourselves that question.



Canadian Archbishop Durocher of Gatineau, Quebec, arrives for opening Mass of Synod of Bishops on the family in St. Peter's Basilica at Vatican (CNS Photo / Paul Haring).

This is not about, first of all, allowing women to be priests. It's a question about how we exercise priesthood within the church. It is a question, ultimately, of what Pope Francis is identifying as one of the difficulties within the church: clericalism, where only those who wear a Roman collar have the gift of discernment in the church.

We need to be open to seeing how we can bring lay men and women into decision-making bodies. There are some countries that have a lot of experience with that. Many dioceses have women as chancellors, financial administrators and executive directors of offices and pastoral services. These women are playing important management and decision-making roles within their dioceses. That says something when people know that and see it as the parish level.

It's a practice that could spread throughout the church. Pope Benedict said it is a just question to

ask ourselves: Are there new areas of ministry that could be open to women in our church?

*Why did you ask the synod to consider the ordination of women to the diaconate?*

It's been said a few times that we should open new ministries for women. Well, what kind of ministries are we talking about? So I thought I would give three examples we could study.

The first is assigning positions that are presently open within diocesan curias and the Roman Curia to women. The second is allowing lay women and men, couples, to share in the preaching responsibility at Sunday Mass, where they could witness to the relationship between the Word of God and their lives as a parents and a married couple. And third, why not look at the question of ordaining women to the diaconate? It's not a closed issue. There has been no dogmatic

statement saying that women cannot be ordained deacons.

So I threw those three out as possible avenues to explore, and there are others. It was an effort to get the wheels turning and to get people to start thinking in this sense.

### *How can the church move forward with these suggestions?*

We could identify roles and ministries open to women right now and ask: Do we have women in these roles or not? And when we do, do we treat them as equal partners? Every priest in his parish, every bishop in his diocese, and every national conference could be asking that kind of question. No special permission is needed.

Academic centers, theology centers and centers of pastoral ministry could be looking concretely at how ministry is exercised and how we receive various gifts in the church. Somebody once said that, theologically, we speak of hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts. Well, it's very clear how we receive hierarchical gifts in the church, but how do we identify and receive charismatic gifts in the church and integrate them into the church?

### *As the synod concludes, what will you bring home with you?*

A desire to look at how our diocese could be doing more to help, elevate and recognize the role families play in church and society.

There is a beautiful response in the French liturgy, just before the Preface: "For the glory of God and the salvation of the world." Is there a way we could help couples and their families to discover that their marriage is doing something for the glory of God and for the salvation of the world? It would bring a sea change in attitudes.

In my diocese we have a four-year project to develop attitudes that will invite and support people. Last year our focus was on being a welcoming community. This year we're looking at being communities that affirm. Next year: accompanying. And then: inviting. When I go back, I want to look at what that means for families. How do we invite, affirm, accompany and invite families? I want to bring together some people to think about it and to work on it.

*Reprinted with permission of America Press, Inc.*

*Originally published online at:*

<http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/archbishop-durocher-address-violence-against-women-empower-women-church>



# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



## A Brief History of Women Deacons in the Catholic Church

**“Please Lord,  
look on this your  
maidservant  
and dedicate her  
to the task of  
your diaconate,  
and pour out  
into her the rich  
and abundant  
giving of your  
Holy Spirit...”**

(8th century ordination  
prayer)

### Background

The evolution of women’s ministerial leadership in early Christianity is a complex phenomenon. It is well documented that even though our earliest writings (Romans 16) give evidence that women served in apostolic ministerial roles alongside their brothers, over the next three centuries their public ministry was increasingly circumscribed. Wealthy women patrons, often widows, played an indispensable role in the expansion of Christianity throughout the Greco-Roman world. Not surprisingly, there is also evidence that they exercised significant political, liturgical and administrative leadership within the earliest Christian communities, including presiding at Eucharist in their homes, at least during the late first and early second centuries.<sup>1</sup> In some places, including Rome, enrolled widows were accepted as a part of the clergy, though male church leaders soon sought to control their ministry in both the east and the west.

In the early third century, Hippolytus of Rome’s treatise *The Apostolic Tradition*, forbade the ordination of widows. This is the first known proscription of women’s ordination and it almost certainly means widows were being ordained, or why the need for a rule? It is an irony of history that Hippolytus was not in communion with the great church when he wrote *The Apostolic Tradition*.<sup>2</sup> A dispute with Pope Callistus led him to break away and scholars believe *The Apostolic Tradition* was probably written for his schismatic community.<sup>3</sup> Though recent scholarship raises questions about the authorship and origins of the document, no one disputes its antiquity since subsequent church orders such as the Apostolic Constitutions and Testamentum Domini rely in it for some teachings.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, a late fourth or early fifth century church order, the Testamentum Domini (from eastern churches in Syria, Asia Minor or Egypt) not only permits widows to be ordained, but identifies them as part of the Church hierarchy. While it distinguishes between deaconesses, widows and female presbyters, the greatest responsibility and honor belong to the widows. Clearly, there was significant diversity in the early church about women’s leadership roles. That said, in late antiquity it is important to distinguish between sacramental ministry and female ordination, liturgical ministry and membership in the clergy as these are not one and the same. For example, while the Testamentum Domini attests that women were ordained and belonged to the clergy, scholars do not believe they exercised sacramental ministry in the sense of presiding at Eucharist or baptizing,

beyond assisting with female anointing.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, though some male church leaders in both east and west sought to curtail the wide-ranging ministry of widows, there is ample literary and archaeological evidence for the acceptance of ordained female deacons. Many scholars believe this was because of the need to control what public ministries women leaders could and could not perform.<sup>6</sup>

### About the Ministry of Deacon

First millennium titles for church orders such as bishop, priest, and deacon did not carry the same meaning as today. For example, in some 3rd and



4th century church communities, deacons served as important administrators of church properties whose authority was second only to that of the bishop.<sup>7</sup>

The earliest references to deacons in the New Testament are found in Paul's letters. According to Carolyn Osiek, the opening lines of Paul's letter to the Philippians "contain a reference found nowhere else in the greetings of his letters: he and Timothy greet not only the holy ones or saints in Philippi, but add a greeting to their *episkopoi* and *diakonoi*."<sup>8</sup> The Greek word *episkopos* "overseer" does not yet mean what later came to be the office of bishop but "is more likely a reference to the leaders of house churches, groupings of believers that met in private houses for worship and other means of nurturing

their faith life."<sup>9</sup> The term *diakonoi* is "a general word for official representatives, ministers, attendants, and agents. Here it refers to a designated group of persons who provide some kind of assistance in the community."<sup>10</sup>

Acts 6: 1-6 tells us about the first formal installation of deacons. Seven men were ordained deacons to minister to the needy. The early deacon Stephen performed miracles, preached and was eventually martyred, and Philip the deacon preached and baptized in Samaria (Acts 6:1-6, 6:7-7:60; 8:4-40). In later centuries the role of deacon came to include pastoral work, baptism, care of the poor, assistance at liturgies and in the 4th century, could include management of church property, the upkeep of churches and cemeteries and care of the sick and widows. According to John Wijngaard: "In a word, the entire government of the temporal affairs of the Church lay in the hands of deacons."<sup>11</sup> By the 12th century, the separate ministry of deacon was subsumed into the priesthood, becoming a preliminary step to ordination. Only at the second Vatican Council did the separate ministry of permanent deacons reemerge.

### Women Deacons in the New Testament

Women deacons are specifically identified in two places in the New Testament: Romans 16: 1-2 and 1 Tim: 3:11. In the first two verses of Roman's 16, Paul writes: *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon (diakonos) of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor [prostatis] of many people, including me.* In the first century the use of the masculine singular title *diakonos* for a female leader does not have the specificity of meaning that it acquired in later centuries. Therefore it can be translated as either minister or deacon. It has been falsely assumed that the *diakonos* title was replaced with the feminine *diakonissa* by the third century. However, though the evidence for what these women did is vague, the *diakonos* title for women deacons, as well as the term *diakonissa* recurs in both literary and archaeological inscription until the sixth century.<sup>13</sup>

In the first century, the title *diakonos* is thought to connote an official leadership function such as minister, attendant, or envoy. The latter is the likely

---

meaning in Romans since most scholars believe Paul's recommendation of Phoebe to the Christian community in Rome indicates that she is in fact the carrier of his letter to that community. However, Phoebe's other title: "benefactor" or patron (*prostatis*) may be the more significant since it reveals that she is among the many wealthy women patrons who hosted house churches and financially provided for Paul and other evangelists in the burgeoning early Christian missionary movement. It is a sad fact that Phoebe's important leadership in the early church is inexplicably deleted from the Lectionary when the Roman's 16 text is read on week 31 Year 1.

The first letter of Timothy describes qualifications for diakonoi concluding with what is probably a reference to women deacons. *In the same way, [male] deacons (diakonoi) are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.* (1 Tim 3: 8-11)

While it is possible that the wives of deacons are meant, it is likely that the text refers to women ministering in Timothy's community. The majority of scholars today believe the letter to Timothy was not written by Paul himself but by an author from the Pauline tradition writing some years later when leadership roles were more developed. Carolyn Osiek believes women deacons and local overseers could also have been included in the *episcopoi* and *diakonoi* named in the opening greeting of the letter to the Philippians.<sup>12</sup>

### Women Deacons in the East

The office of female deacon or deaconess was more prevalent in the East than the West. A fourth century tombstone on the Mount of Olives with a Greek inscription reads: "Here lies the minister and bride of Christ, Sofia the deacon, a second Phoebe. She fell asleep in peace on the 21st of the month of March. . . ." The Christian community in Jerusalem apparently understood Sofia's ministry to be part of a 300-year-old tradition dating back to the Phoebe of Romans 16. Notable is the fact that for both Phoebe and Sofia, the Greek word *diakonos* is used, a masculine ending. There is ample archaeological evidence of other female deacons who ministered from the first to the sixth centuries in Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, and Macedonia.<sup>14</sup>



Scholars Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek surmise that "Phoebe and other unnamed women deacons like her in the first and perhaps second century belonged to an office or function that was not distinguished by sex."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Phoebe's first century leadership role probably bore little resemblance to those of later deaconesses. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Teachings of the Apostles) is a document that reflects the pastoral situation of Church in Syria and Palestine in the late third century. It concerns itself among other things with the organization of ministry and leadership in the Church. The *Didascalia* goes to great lengths to restrict the role of widows, but it approves the public ministry of female deacons, permitting them to teach and anoint but not to baptize.

A subsequent church order, *The Apostolic Constitution*, further restricts the ministry of women deacons by forbidding them to teach. Listings of church rules (canons), however, are often found to be more prescriptive than descriptive. Hence literary and archaeological data not infrequently point to more expanded roles for women than one would surmise from the written rules. Hence we read of Olympias, Dionysia, and other women deacons assisting in the liturgy, financially supporting and advising male church leaders, serving the poor, and, most usually, teaching women and anointing them at the time of their baptism. There is ample archaeological

---

---

and literary evidence of other female deacons who ministered in the East from the first to the sixth centuries.<sup>16,17</sup>

### Women Deacons in the West

The literary and archaeological evidence for female deacons in the West does not appear until the fifth century when texts proscribing women presbyters appear. Western Conciliar documents plainly indicate the displeasure of churchmen over women's ordination to the diaconate or any other office. Canon 26 of the Council of Orange held in November 441, forbade the ordination of female deacons. Likewise in 517, the Council of Epaon abolished "the consecration of widows who are called women deacons."<sup>18</sup>

Yet, texts written by male church authorities are one thing and the actual ministry of women is quite another. Literary references to women deacons in the west, while not abundant, are definitely present over a seven-century period. They are found in wills, letters and chronicles of women deacons. For example, Remigius, the bishop of Reims (433-533) left a will bequeathing part of a vineyard to "my blessed daughter, Helaria the deaconess" well after the Council of Epaon forbade such a ministry.<sup>19</sup>

In the mid sixth century, the Frankish queen Radgund, was ordained a deacon by Bishop Medard, a bishop of Noyons and Tounai. Other women deacons in the West known to us by tombstone inscriptions include Anna, a sixth woman deacon from Rome, Theodora, a female deacon from Gaul buried in 539 and Ausonia, a sixth century woman deacon from Dalmatia. In 753 the Archbishop of Ravenna, Sergius, "consecrated his wife, Euphemia, a deacon (*diaconissa*)." And in 799, an account of Pope Leo III's return to Rome reports that he was greeted by the entire population including "holy women, women deacons (*diaconissae*) and the most notable matrons."<sup>20</sup> Abbesses in the western church were sometimes deacons as well. Some commentators on canon law in the 9th and 10th centuries simply assumed that abbesses were deacons.<sup>21</sup>

Despite persistent early efforts to suppress women deacons in the west, we find a letter written in 1017 by Pope Benedict VIII conferring on the Bishop of Porto in Portugal "in perpetuity every episcopal ordination not only of presbyters but also of deacons or deaconesses (*diaconissis*) or subdeacons."<sup>22</sup> This privilege was continued by subsequent Popes in various dioceses up to the time of Bishop Ottone, the Bishop of Lucca in Italy (1139-1146). Abelard and Heloise – 12th century theologians—both referred to Heloise as a deacon.<sup>23</sup>

### Female Ordination Rites in the East

For centuries scholars have agreed that the earliest ritual used to ordain female deacons is the same one used for male deacons. Jean Morin, a 17th century liturgical expert, catalogued a large collection of ordination rites in Greek, Latin and Syriac:

*Three of the most ancient Greek rituals, uniformly one in agreement, hand down to us the ordination of women deacons, administered by almost the same rite and words by which deacons [were ordained]. Both are called ordination. Both are celebrated at the altar by the bishop, and in the same liturgical space. Hands are placed on both while the bishop offers prayers. The stole is placed on the neck of both, both the ordained man and the ordained woman communicated, the chalice full of the blood of Christ placed in the hands of both so they may taste of it.<sup>24</sup>*

An eighth century prayer for ordaining a woman deacon reads:

*Holy and Omnipotent Lord, through the birth of your Only Son our God from a Virgin according to the flesh, you have sanctified the female sex. You grant not only to men, but also to women the grace and coming of the Holy Spirit. Please, Lord, look on this your maidservant and dedicate her to the task of your diaconate,*

---



---

and pour out into her the rich and abundant giving of your Holy Spirit. Preserve her so that she may always perform her ministry with orthodox faith and irrefragable conduct, according to what is pleasing to you. For to you is due all glory and honor.<sup>25</sup>

### Female Ordination Rites in the West

An eight-century liturgical book of Bishop Egbert of York contains a single prayer used for ordaining either a male or female deacon. This is the earliest ritual in the West for the ordination of a woman deacon. The prayer reads: *Give heed, Lord, to our prayers and upon this your servant send forth that spirit of you blessing in order that, enriched by heavenly gifts, he [or she] might be able to obtain grace through your majesty and by living well offer an example to others...*<sup>26</sup> Other rituals for the ordination of female deacons appear in 9th, 10th and 12th century sacramentaries and pontificals. By the 13th century the ordination rites for women deacons were eliminated from the Roman Pontifical and do not appear again.

### What Happened?

By the 12th century, women deacons in the East had become very rare. A 12th century Greek canonist Theodore Balsamon wrote: "In times past, orders of deaconesses were recognized and they had access to the sanctuary, but the monthly affliction banished them. . . ." <sup>27</sup> In the 14th century, another eastern canonist, Matthew Blastares, acknowledged that while women deacons had existed, this was eventually forbidden by later fathers "because of the monthly flow that cannot be controlled." In the west, even though Pope Gregory I [590-604] said that menstruation should not be an obstacle to women attending church, the purity rules eventually prevailed. In the end, women deacons would be banned in the main, because of their normal biological functions.

Perhaps the most significant factor leading to the demise of women deacons in the west came in the mid-12th century when the definition of ordination underwent a dramatic shift. In the first millennium, a Christian was ordained, consecrated or blessed to perform a specific job or ministry needed in the community. Gary Macy writes: "Ordination did not give a person, for instance, the irrevocable and portable power of consecrating the bread and wine, or of leading the liturgy; rather, a particular community charged a person or persons to play a leadership role within that community (and only within that community) and that person or persons would lead the liturgy because of the leadership role they played within the community."<sup>28</sup>

During the 12th century, the definition of ordination came to signify that recipients were given an indelible character marking them as different from other Christians. Now the priest and only the priest received the power to consecrate bread and wine. Further, the indelible character and power to consecrate was portable and could be exercised anywhere, in any community. Ordination came to include only ministries that related to service at the altar. Thus only the orders of priest, deacon and subdeacon were recognized. Finally, "all of the other earlier orders were no longer considered to be orders at all."<sup>29</sup>

A highly influential late 12th century western canonist, Huguccio of Bologna, wrote that even if a woman were to be ordained it would not "take" because of "the law of the church and sex."<sup>30</sup> In other words, the fact of being biologically female prevented women from being ordained, and what is more, because they were biologically female, they never could have been truly ordained in the first place. Therefore all past female ordinations were not ordinations at all, at least according to the new understanding of ordination. Given that male ordinations in previous centuries also entailed a different understanding of the meaning of orders, one could argue that those male ordinations didn't "take" either, a point that seems to have escaped our esteemed canonists.

### Conclusion

By the early 13th century, the ancient tradition of women deacons had been defined out of existence. But

---

---

female diaconal service did not disappear. One wonders if it is more than mere coincidence that as women deacons were being extinguished, a new movement of ministerial women was coming to birth. These were newly forming independent female communities who operated outside the control of male church leaders, called the Beguines. The Beguines served as prototypes (though not without persecution) to the later meteoric rise of women's apostolic religious communities. Beginning with Mary Ward, these women religious often seem to have attracted the ire of clerics, perhaps because their advocacy for the marginalized often unsettled the status quo.

## Epilogue

In 1995 the Canon Law Society of America issued a report noting that only a few adjustments in Canon Law were needed to ordain women deacons.<sup>31</sup> With the creation of a commission to study women deacons under Pope Francis there is a greater hope than ever that women will be ordained to the permanent diaconate. Of the many documents under study is Cipriano Vagaggini's detailed research that women deacons in church history were ordained within the sanctuary by the bishop, in the presence of the presbyterate, and by the imposition of hands (traditional historical requirements for ordination.). In 2001, over 30 years after Paul VI asked the International Theological Commission to explore the question of the female diaconate; the commission stated that the teaching office of the Church had yet to decide on women deacons.<sup>32</sup>

---

## References

1. Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet Tulloch. *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005),
2. William A. Jurgens. *The Faith of the Early Fathers, Vol 1*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 162.
3. Henry Chadwick. *The Early Church*. (London: The Penguin Group, 1967) p.88.
4. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter. *The Oxford handbook of Early Christian Studies*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). 430.
5. Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 61.
6. Francine Cardman. "Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity." As found in *Women and Christian Origins*, Ross S. Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 310,311,
7. John Wijngaards. *Women Deacons in the Early Church: Historical Texts and Contemporary Debates*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002) 12.
8. *The New American Bible Revised Edition*, translates these respectively as "overseers" and "ministers".
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Wijngaard, 12.
12. Osiek, "The Women in Paul's Ministry."
13. Madigan and Osiek, 3.
14. Ute E. Eisen *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000)
15. Madigan and Osiek. 5
16. *Ibid.*
17. Eisen.
18. *Ibid.* 145-146.
19. Gary Macy. "Women Deacons, History" as found in *Women Deacons, Past, Present, Future* by Gary Macy, William Ditewig and Phyllis Zagano. (New York: Paulist Press, 2011) 13.
20. *Ibid.* 17.
21. *Ibid.* 29.
22. *Ibid.* 17.
23. *Ibid.* 29.
24. *Ibid.* 19.
25. *Ibid.* 20.
26. *Ibid.* 20.
27. *Ibid.* 31
28. *Ibid.* 33
29. *Ibid.* 34.
30. *Ibid.* 36.
31. William T. Ditewig. "Women Deacons: Present Possibilities" as found in *Women Deacons, Past, Present, Future* by Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig and
32. Phyllis Zagano. (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 65.



# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



## Names of Women Who Served as Deacons in the Early Church

### Syria

Publia, fourth century Deacon (diakonos), Antioch  
Zaortha, late fourth century Deaconess (shamashta), Zebed  
Valeriana, 488-512 Deaconess (diakonissa), Antioch  
Jannia, 488-512 deaconess, Antioch  
Casiana, fifth century Deacon  
Romana, fifth century Deaconess, Antioch  
Zoe, 594 Deacon (dik), Rihab, Transjordan  
Anastasia, sixth century Deaconess, Antioch  
Eugenia of Antioch, sixth century Deaconess, Antioch  
Elladis, Deaconess (diakisa), Umm Qeis, Jordan

### Palestine

Severa of Jerusalem, 383-397 Deacon, Jerusalem  
Sophia, fourth century Deacon (diakonos), Jerusalem  
Susanna, fourth century Deacon (diakonos)  
Manaris of Gaza, fourth century Deacon, Gaza  
Marthana, 400-417 Deaconess (diakonissa), Jerusalem  
Anastasia of Palestine, sixth century Deacon (diak), Deir el Qilt, Wadi Kilt  
Maria of Moab, sixth century Deacon (dk), Mahaiy, Moab, Jordan

Basilis, sixth century Deacon (diako)

Eneon, Deacon (diakonis), Silwan (Siloam), Jerusalem  
Nonna of Palestine, Deacon

### Constantinople

Olympias, fourth century Deacon (diakonos), Constantinople  
Eusebia, fourth century Deacon of the Macedonian sect, Constantinople  
Celerina, fifth century Deacon, Constantinople  
Amproukla, fifth century Deacon (diakonos), Constantinople  
Basilina, 543-558 Deacon, Constantinople  
St. Irene, ninth century Deacon, Constantinople  
Nicarete, member of the diaconate, Constantinople

### Bithynia and Pontus

St. Macrina, 324-379 Deacon, Pontus  
Matrona, 379 Deacon, Inscription at Cosila, Bithynia  
Lampadion, fourth century Deacon (diakonias), Annesi, Pontus  
Aeria, 532-562 Deacon (diakonos), Amisos, Pontus  
Basilike, Deaconess, Neoclaudiopolis, Pontus  
Eugenia, Deacon (diakonos), Topallar, Bithynia

### Cappadocia

Sabinia, 404-407 Deacon (diakonos), Armenia  
Dionysia, 543-558 Deacon in Melitene, Armenia  
Maria of Archelais, sixth century Deacon (diakonos), Archelais  
Nektaria, member of Diaconate, Satala, Armenia

### Caria

Eusebia (Xene) first century Deacon, Mylasa  
Arete, Deaconess (diakonissa), Aphrodisias

### Cilicia

Athanasia of Korykos, Deacon (diakonos)  
Theodora of Korykos, Deacon (diakonos)  
Theophila, Deacon (diakonos), Korykos  
Timothea, Deacon (diak), Korykos  
Charitina- sixth century Deacon (di), Korykos

### Galatia

Philogonis, sixth century Deacon (diakonos), near Ankara  
Domna, Deacon (diakonos), Bulduk  
Nonna of Galatia, Deacon (diakonesa)  
Magna of Ancyra, Deacon (diakonos), Ancyra

## Lycaonia

Basilissa, Deacon (diakonos), Iconium

Goulasis, Deaconess (diakonissa), Cesme

## Lydia

Epiphaneia, fourth century Deacon (diakonese), Daldis

Epipania, sixth century Deaconess (diakonissa), between Philadelphia and Magnesia

Lampadia of Smyrna, Deacon (diakonos), Smyrna

## Phrygia

Aurelia Faustina, fourth century Deacon (diakonos), Laodicea Combusta

Elaphia, late fourth century Deaconess of the Encratites (diakonissa), Nevinne, Laodicea Combusta

Dipha, fourth-sixth century Deacon, Kuyucak

Nune, fifth/sixth century Deacon (deakonnuse), Karadilli, Axylos

Eistrategis, Deacon (diako), Goslu

Celsa, Deaconess (diakonissa), Tyriaion

Magna of Laodicea Combusta, Deacon

Masa, Deacon (diak), ancient Laodicea Combusta

Matrona of Axyfos, Deaconess (diakonissa)

Mesalina, Deaconess (diakonissa)

Paula of Laodicea Combusta, Deacon (diakonos), Laodicea Combusta

Pribis, Deacon (diakonos), Axylos

Severa, Deacon (diakonissa), Hadrianopolis

## Italy

Anna, sixth century Deaconess (diac), Rome

Grapte, Deacon, Rome

## Egypt

Pentadia, fourth century Deaconess (diakonissa)

Theodula, fourth/fifth century Deacon

## Macedonia

Theoprepeia, late fourth century Deacon (diak), Bonitsa

Matrona of Stobi, fourth or fifth century Deacon (diak), Stobi

Posidonia, fourth/fifth century Deacon (diak) Philippi

Axia, 423-451 Deacon, Cyrrhus

Agathe, fifth century Deacon (diakonos), Philippi

Agathokleia, fifth/sixth century Deacon (diakonos), Edessa

Theodosia, fifth/sixth century Deacon (diakonos), Edessa

## Dalmatia

Theophila, fourth century Deacon (diakonos), Chersonesus

Ausonia, sixth century Deaconess (diac), Doclea

## Moesia

Celerina of Novae, sixth century Deaconess, Novae

## Achaia (Greece)

Phoebe, first century Deacon (diakonos), Corinth

Alexandria of Elis, fourth century Deacon (diak), Elis

Eirene, fourth century Deacon (diakonos), Thebes, Thessaly, Greece

Agrippiane, early Byzantine period Deacon (diakonos), Patras, Greece

Athanasia of Delphi, fifth century Deaconess (diakonissa), Delphi, Greece

Eugenia, 538 Deacon (d), Nicopolis, Thrace

Andromacha, sixth century Deacon (diak), Klauseios

Tetradia of Volos, Deacon (diakonos), Volos, Thessaly, Greece

Nikagora, Deaconess (diakonissa), Mount Hymettus, Athens

Alexandra of Pontus, Subdeacon (hypodiakon), Apollonia, Pontus, Thrace

## Greek Islands

Agaliasis, early fourth century Deacon (diakonos), island of Melos in the Cyclades, Aegean Sea

## Africa

Accepta, sixth/seventh century Deaconess, Rukuma, Africa

## Gaul (France)

Radegund, sixth century Deaconess (diaconam), Poitiers

Abess Respecta, sixth century Deacon, Marseilles

Theodora, sixth century Deaconess (diakonissa), Tinici

## Pisidia

Kyrie, Deacon

## References

Eisen, Ute E. *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity*. (Collegeville, M.N.: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

Madigan, Kevin and Carolyn Osiek. *Ordained Women in the Early Church*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).



# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



## Phoebe of Cenchreae: Deacon of the Church

*St. Phoebe was a first-century Christian who is identified in Paul's Letter to the Romans as a deacon and benefactor of the church at Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth. She was the carrier of the Letter to the Romans.*

### Historical and Biblical Background



Phoebe set off from her home, the bustling port of Cenchreae, to carry the gospel of redemption and freedom, of God's love and the gift of faith to her sisters and brothers of Rome. They were divided among themselves, the weak from the strong. They needed to hear again Christ's call, "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law," (Rom 13:8). She knew the importance of her task, as along with the epistle, she carried with her the experience of her own community's conflict and factionalism. Her own people also had forgotten their unity in the Body of Christ. Such nonsense like, as their founder put it, the foot saying, "'Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,'" (1 Cor 12:15). How had they all forgotten so quickly the one Spirit who had begun such great work in them?

So, with missionary zeal, she undertook the long and arduous journey. All along the 300 mile way from the Corinthian port to the imperial capital, her Gentile heart was pregnant with gospel love and freedom. Arriving there, she herself would deliver the good news of Christ which was first proclaimed in her city by the same Paul who now addressed the Romans. She was entrusted with Paul's teachings, and with his request for support for his next missionary expedition to Spain.

But in that day (the Letter to the Romans was written between 54-59 C.E.), she would find no super-highways by which to travel. It would take her eight days to reach her destination. Nor would she encounter franchise-lined cities in which to find rest. No handy credit card

---

or Motel 6 would ease her voyage. Rather, she would rely on the hospitality of Christian strangers along her way, and the kindness of her Roman hosts to take her in. Travelers visiting new cities were dependent upon the introduction of a mutual friend in order to be received into someone's home. The following introduction from the epistle's author was her ticket to warmth and welcome. Paul wrote, "*I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well,*" (Rom 16:1-2).

This introduction is the only record of Phoebe's life to have survived for the Church of the twenty-first century. We are fortunate that it is so rich. It is like a keyhole through which we can catch a glimpse of our ancient sisters and brothers in their community of faith.

### **Sister, Deacon, Benefactor**

First, Phoebe is called "our sister." This epithet parallels that which Paul gives to Timothy in the Second Letter to the Corinthians. Though not a formal title, it denotes a special relationship to Paul himself and a status within the community. "Our sister" identifies Phoebe as the author's coworker in ministry. Her transport of the letter, and request for support for Paul's mission to Spain (Rom 15: 23ff) are two examples of her ministry which lie latent in the text itself. As Elizabeth Castelli observed, they "assure us that women, as well as men, were traveling missionaries in the earliest church," (Castelli, 277).

Second, Phoebe is identified as "a deacon of the church at Cenchreae." The original Greek, *diakonos*, is also sometimes translated as

deaconess, minister or servant. "Deaconess" is clearly an incorrect translation, as it does not reflect the masculine ending of the original Greek. This translation is probably tainted with the patriarchal insistence that women's leadership in the church be tightly circumscribed and recognizably distinct from the roles open to men. It also may be an anachronistic reading which attempts to assign a formal ministerial title of the fourth century (and its corresponding duties) to the much more fluid situation of the first.

In fact, *diakonos* was a word Paul used to describe himself (see 1 Cor 3:5, 2 Cor 6:4). This parallelism indicates that Phoebe could, like Paul, Timothy, and Apollos, have been a preacher and a teacher. The secular meaning of the title in her world suggests other possibilities for the range of Phoebe's ministry. Joseph Fitzmyer says, "In the Greco-Roman world *diakonos* denoted a 'waiter' at table, a royal 'servant,' or even a religious (non-Christian) office," (Fitzmyer, 729). The connection to the table points toward a eucharistic function for a Christian *diakonos*. Whatever her specific duties, it is clear that Phoebe was a leader in the Christian assembly at Cenchreae.

Third, Paul calls Phoebe his "benefactor." The original Greek, *prostatis*, may also be translated, "patron." Here again, there is no gender-specific ending. And as with *diakonos*, Paul is borrowing the terminology of the secular world to describe the life of a just-emerging church. In other Pauline texts, the same Greek language is translated, "those who are over you," (see Rom 12:8, 1 Thess 5:12). From this appellation, we can deduce that Phoebe was an "independent woman...of considerable means," (Bassler, 135). Her patronage of Paul and the church at Cenchreae may have benefited

---



the community in a number of ways. Most obviously, she supported the work of the church financially. We have already seen that Paul was dependent upon the generosity of the community to support his missionary activity. In addition, Phoebe could have hosted meetings. As a deacon and a patron, she may have hosted the eucharistic liturgies in her home. Lastly, a benefactor introduced those in her patronage to society circles. In the first century, benefactors managed the relationship between those in their care and the influential people of the city. Paul would have been especially dependent upon this kind of support because of his itinerant evangelization.

### **Leader of the Church**

Sister, deacon, benefactor. Missionary, evangelist, fund-raiser. There can be no doubt about Phoebe's leadership in the church. She provided generously for the needs of her community at Cenchreae. She used her personal and material resources to create space for the Body of Christ to meet,

to be fed, and to grow. She courageously undertook a difficult journey across land and sea to bring the message of God's redemptive love to the church at Rome. Hers was a practical leadership, attending to a wide array of needs, offering the gifts she had been given for the work of the Spirit.

Like the Romans and the Corinthians, we are the beneficiaries of Phoebe's generous leadership that sustained the early Church. The fledgling faith of Jesus' first disciples survived a very harsh environment because of the efforts of Phoebe and women and men like her. In our day, we would have no Church to call home, nor gospel in which to find life without these, our ancestors. Therefore, like the first century Romans, we should heed Paul's direction "to receive her in the Lord, in a manner worthy of the holy ones."

To receive Phoebe is to acknowledge her life and leadership. It is to recognize with honesty and gratitude the contribution she made to the proclamation of the gospel, the

---

---

sustenance of the community, and the life of the world. As the Romans to whom she carried Paul's epistle welcomed her into their homes, we welcome her into our hearts. We pray with her for a Church marked by unity and charity. We assume the responsibilities that come with our gifts.

We respond to our call as she did to hers: Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others (*prostatis*), with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness, (Rom 12:6-8).

The manner in which Paul introduces Phoebe demonstrates clearly that women exercised ecclesial ministry from the earliest days of Christianity. The breadth of her work provides inspiration for present-day imaginings about women of the Church. If she was able to be coworker, deacon, and patron in a cultural context far more deeply entrenched in a patriarchal worldview than our own, what possibilities does her example open up for the Church today? How are women today responding with their unique gifts to the need

of the Church? And how is their response being received? Is the twenty-first century assembly receiving gifted women leaders "in a manner worthy of the holy ones, "and helping them "in whatever [they] may need from [us]"?

Phoebe's emergence as a leader from the midst of a community struggling with division and liturgical turmoil makes her an especially significant model in our day. Into the midst of the Romans' infighting and disputes over dietary laws, Phoebe brought the message of Christ's liberating self-sacrifice. Her own presence and her delivery of Paul's astounding epistle urged the community toward unity, patience, mutual respect and trust in the loving providence of God. As she came from the Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth, she most likely had endured a similar struggle in her own community. She carried in her experience and ministry a living message of the "more excellent way," the way of love (1 Cor 13:31). And what is more necessary in our day, or in any day, than love? Especially Phoebe's kind of love. Not the love of empty sentiment, but the love of courageous deeds, generous aid, and servant-leadership.

---

#### References

ed. Carol Myers, Toni Craven, Ross S. Kraemer, 134-136. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000.

Castelli, Elizabeth A. "Romans." In *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*. v. 2. ed. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, 272-300. New York: Crossroads, 1994.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1993.

Lang, Judith. *Ministers of Grace: Women in the Early Church*. Slough, England: St. Paul Publications, 1989.

MacDonald, Margaret Y. "Reading Real Women through the Undisputed Letter of Paul." In *Women and Christian Origins*. ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, 199-220. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.







# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



## Radegund of Gaul: Deacon of the Church



### Prize of War

Radegund was born sometime between 518 and 521 C.E. in Thuringia. The Thuringian kingdom was located in what is now central Germany. United by dialect, the Thuringians were a loosely organized group of pagan tribes governed by several kings. Tension between rival kings and their factions often led to discord. Records of its inhabitants and its history prior to 531 are scarce.

Radegund was born into the political turmoil that would become commonplace in her life. She was a Thuringian princess whose life was often less than a fairy tale. At a young age she and her unnamed brother were orphaned after their parents were killed by her uncle, Hermanfred. Hermanfred had plotted with the Frankish ruling dynasty, the Merovingians, to divide her parents' land and wealth between them. But when Hermanfred failed to deliver half of the land to the Merovingians, they came to collect. Hermanfred's treachery, coupled with increased Thuringian-Frankish tension led to a Frankish invasion. The Franks overthrew Hermanfred and in the aftermath both the

Merovingian and Thuringian royal households were in ruins.

The Franks took Radegund and her brother as spoils of war. Her aunt and cousin fled into Byzantium, settling in Constantinople. The Frankish King of Soissons, Clothar I (497-561), "gambled with his brothers and won the young princess" on the battlefield.<sup>1</sup> Radegund recalled the trauma of this experience years later in her poem, *The Thuringian War*, which gave gruesome details about the battle that stole her childhood.

*Alas, the corpses lie shamefully unburied on the field,  
An entire people, strewn in a common grave.  
Not Troy alone must mourn her ruins:  
The Thuringian land suffered equal slaughter.<sup>2</sup>*

The Franks returned to their newly expanded kingdom with many confiscated goods including Radegund and her brother. Once they reached Gaul, Radegund was separated from her brother, the only family

---

member she had left. She was deposited at the royal villa of Athies in Vermandois where she learned she was to become the wife of King Clothar I, whom she did not know.

In Athies, Rade Gund learned to read and write and was taught domestic skills. She was also educated in Latin and Greek. For the first time, she was exposed to Christianity and began to pray to the martyrs. In fact, she took to the practice of charitable asceticism with great zeal. One of her biographers, Venantius Fortunatus (530-609), wrote that she “would often converse with other children about her desire to be a martyr if the chance came in her time.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to her studies she cared for the children of Athies. She taught them to build wooden crosses, which they would then carry while parading as a band of penitents singing psalms.<sup>4</sup>

### **Reluctant Queen**

In 538 Rade Gund was summoned from Athies to become the official queen of Clothar I. Clothar had previously married his brother’s widow, Guntheuc, as was the custom of the time. Guntheuc had three sons by that marriage. Two were subsequently assassinated by Clothar and one, Clodoald, was later canonized (St. Cloud). Neither Rade Gund nor Guntheuc had children by Clothar though he later fathered seven sons and two daughters by three other wives.

Rade Gund was now surrounded by Clothar’s wives and children. The palace was full of unfamiliar people who had little in common with her. Using her education to find her niche, Rade Gund began to exert her political prowess and understanding of Christianity in royal circles. She soon made a name for herself through almsgiving, devotion, and concern for the underprivileged. Her charity led to the establishment of several hospitals and shelters. It was at this time that she began her ascetic practices. She restricted her intake of food to lentils and beans, barely slept, spent her nights in prayer vigils, and wore coarse hair garments under her royal dress. Rumors of these practices circulated and her great faith came to define her character.

Rade Gund could not escape the consummation of her marriage to Clothar but she was frequently able to excuse herself from unwanted marital visits by

claiming hygienic needs. Forced to live with a cruel man who had abducted her, and murdered his own relatives, Rade Gund did not submit to his tyranny.

### **Consecrated Deacon**

Rade Gund remained with Clothar until 550. Upon learning that he had orchestrated her brother’s murder, she feared for her own safety and fled the palace. Clothar had now removed the last obstacle from his claim to total authority over Thuringia. No male Thuringian heir survived. In desperation, Rade Gund sought help from the bishop of Noyon, Medard, himself a close friend and advisor of Clothar. Medard tried to send Rade Gund back to Clothar, but she refused, even threatening God’s wrath upon Medard. An account of this event is captured in Fortunatus’ work:

*She left the king and went straight to holy Medard at Noyon. She earnestly begged that she might change her garments and be consecrated to God ... entered the sacristy put on monastic garb and proceeded straight to the altar, saying to the blessed Medard: “If you hesitate to consecrate me, and fear man more than God, Pastor, God will require God’s sheep’s soul from your hand.” Thunderstruck by that argument, he laid his hand on her and consecrated her a deaconess.*<sup>5</sup>

As a married woman Rade Gund could not be accepted into a religious order. Medard therefore consecrated her a female deacon, sidestepping the rules barring her entry. She traded her royal garments for monastic garb and remained to serve the Church as a deacon. Though the king tried several times to remove her, he was unsuccessful.

Carolyn Osiek believes Rade Gund’s diaconal ordination is an “indication that earlier canonical prohibitions against consecrations and ordinations of deaconesses were, for a long time, simply a dead letter in Gaul and that, as late as the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, women were still put in office.”<sup>6</sup>

The role of a female deacon had close ties to religious orders. These women served female catechumens, the poor, sick, and imprisoned. Rade Gund’s status as a female deacon allowed her entry into a religious community while still acknowledging that she was both married and a queen. The historical text states clearly that she removed her royal garments and donned monastic

---

---

robes. Scholars argue whether monastic robes were something that women in the religious order would have worn, but it does remind the reader that Radegund's practices and devotion often paralleled those of great men in the church. The bishop had consecrated her a deacon and performed the rites necessary to do so.

After being consecrated a female deacon, Radegund began to travel. She hoped to be free of the obligations of marriage and life in the royal court. She made a pilgrimage to Tours and visited the shrine of Martin, whose ascetic practices and spirituality were akin to her own. During this journey she learned Clothar planned to capture her and make her return to the palace. Fearing abduction, she travelled to an estate she owned at Saix in Poitou. She contacted the bishop of Paris, Germaine, and asked him to intercede. Though the church's authority in Gaul was not minor, it was closely linked to the power of the crown and often overlapped. Germaine reluctantly agreed to mediate Radegund's request for freedom from her marriage to Clothar. Germaine persuaded Clothar to release Radegund from his household and to fund her work in the church. In fact, in the years that followed, Clothar underwrote the foundation of several institutions including a hospice at Radegund's villa in Saix.

Though she herself did not care for worldly possessions Radegund saw their value in bettering the lives of others. With great fervor, she threw herself into almsgiving travelling throughout Gaul leaving clothing, gold, and gems for the poor. Radegund used her personal wealth to build hospitals and minister to the poor and sick. While at Saix she "followed a simple vegetarian diet and soon developed a reputation as a contemplative and mystic."<sup>7</sup> She opened her villa to pilgrims, and fed, bathed, and cared for them with her own hands.

### **Daughters, I Chose You**

In the mid 550's Radegund, with support from King Clothar, founded a monastery at Poitiers. Clothar provided the land and buildings and Radegund obtained a copy of the religious Rule of Arles. It required the women to live in cloister, isolated from the outside community, for their own safety. It also "provided for the recitation of eighteen psalms during the night office, six psalms during each of the

day offices, and scripture readings during vigils."<sup>8</sup> It gave authority to the abbess of the community and prohibited her from transferring her authority to any bishop. The abbess was responsible for securing the safety and spiritual well being of the community.

At Poitiers, Radegund sponsored a community of women who cared for the lives of the sick and indigent. Since her family had been taken from her she created her own. A nun of that monastery, and later biographer, Baudonivia, noted that she would tell her sisters, "Daughters, I chose you. You are my light and my life. You are my rest and all my happiness, my new plantation." No longer an orphan or a captive wife, Radegund had at last found her place. She became a beacon of light for spiritual travelers. Her fame continued to grow. Though not yet a member of the monastery herself because of her marriage to Clothar, many women were drawn to join it because of her holiness.

### **Spiritual Guide**

After Clothar died in 561 Radegund at last entered the monastery. Though the Rule required her to live in the cloister, she lived in a cell adjacent to the building and continued to travel and correspond with those outside. She was asked to serve as the abbess, but declined and installed her friend Agnes instead. Radegund served as a spiritual guide to her sisters and lived the example of the Rule in practice. She continued austerities begun at the palace but increased them in both frequency and vigor.

Radegund had a talent for pastoral care and spiritual direction. She dedicated time to private prayer, studied and preached daily, and was well versed in the writings of early church leaders. She shared her own experiences with women in the community who sought her guidance, including her service of others, her travels, and her visions. She instructed women in spiritual practices never expecting them to take on a task she had not already performed.

While at Poitiers, Radegund met Venantius Fortunatus, the Italian poet who was highly popular with Franks in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. She and the abbess, Agnes, formed a friendship with him, writing and visiting often. Fortunatus penned Radegund's first biography shortly after her death.

---

---

Fortunatus shows us that Radegund was a talented writer and composed poems and letters that expressed her experiences in vivid language. Though only few survive, they provide insight into her life. She wrote to family and friends as well as to other political leaders. She expressed the need for peace and urged them to avoid war. Her work, *The Thuringian War*, written to her cousin exiled in Constantinople, conveys her longing for family and the pain she experienced at seeing her kinsmen slaughtered on the battlefield:

*Anguish is private and public both to me.  
Fate was kind to those  
whom the enemy struck down.  
I, the sole survivor, must weep for them all.  
Not only must I mourn the near ones who died:  
I also grieve for those still blessed with life.*<sup>10</sup>

Like many Christians of her time, Radegund was known to reverence the relics of saints. She travelled to their shrines and brought relics back to venerate at the monastery. She believed the relics brought her closer to the saints in her meditation. Radegund's political skills proved quite astute when, sometime in 567-578, she was able to secure what was believed to be a relic of the true cross. Owning such a relic brought fame and greater authority to her monastery. Accounts of Radegund's ability to perform miraculous healings and expel demons began to circulate, some of which are included in

Fortunatus' biography.

Radegund died unexpectedly on August 13, 587. She was greatly mourned by her community.

### Legacy

Radegund was a leader and friend to her sisters at Poitiers. Though her young life was defined by death, loss and mourning, she was able to overcome her pain and work for peace. Her humble service and maternal care for the poor and sick, along with her intellectual and persuasive abilities, earned her the freedom she desired. She is a shining example of how "women were capable of forging their own spiritual ideal by drawing on values associated with female identity."<sup>11</sup> As a female deacon she was a spiritual guide for many and her charity was renowned.

Radegund's "foundation at Poitiers became one of the most influential women's houses of early medieval Gaul, and her community developed into such an important diplomatic and religious center that it challenged the authority of the local bishop."<sup>12</sup> She pushed herself to be better, to be an example of good works, and though "she was merciful to others, she judged herself."<sup>13</sup> In her biographies her devotion to God and the service of others is paramount. She serves as a "declaration of women's capacity to embody Christ."<sup>14</sup> Surely, God had come to dwell within her.

---

### References

- 1Sainted Women of the Dark Ages. Edited and translated by Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg with E. Gordon Whatley. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992), 61.
- 2Ibid, 66.
- 3Ibid, 71.
- 4Ibid, 71.
- 5Ibid, 75.
- 6Madigan, Kevin and Carolyn Osiek. *Ordained Women in the Early Church*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 143.
- 7Swan, Laura. *Forgotten Dessert Mothers*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2001),148.
- 8Ibid, 147.
- 9Sainted Women, 91.
- 10Ibid, 66.
- 11Wemple, Suzanne Foray. "Female Spirituality and Mysticism in Frankish Monasteries: Radegund, Balthid, and Aldegund," *Peace Weavers*. Edited by Lillian Thomas Shank and John A. Nichols. (Kalamazoo, M.I.: Cistercian Publications, Inc, 1987), 49.
- 12Coon, Lynda. *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 122.
- 13Sainted Women, 90.
- 14Smith, Julia M. "Radegundis peccatrix: Authorizations of Virginity in Late Antique Gaul," *Transformations of Late Antiquity*. Edited by Phillip Rousseau and Manolis Papoutsadkis. (Burlington, V.A.: Ashgate, 2009), 321.



# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



## Dionysia of Melitene: Deacon of the Church



### Introduction

Dionysia was a fourth century wife and mother whose story is recorded as details in the life of her son, St. Euthymius the Great (377-473). Ordained by the bishop, Otreius, Dionysia served as a deacon at the cathedral of Melitene in Armenia. Melitene was an ancient city located on the Melas River, a tributary of the Euphrates. Though the city does not survive today, the small village of Eski-Malatia sits atop one of its original walls, about five miles outside the modern day city of Malatia. In the fourth century, Melitene was an Armenian Catholic see and titular archbishopric. Though one of the ten provinces of Cappadocia, Melitene had its own cathedral and bishop.

Cyril of Scythopolis, a sixth century historian, provides the only documentation of Dionysia's life as part of *The Life of St. Euthymius*. As a young man Cyril met St. Sabas and left home for the eremitical life at the age of 18. Cyril spent some time in Jerusalem and lived as a hermit near the Jordan River. Within a year Cyril joined the monastery

of Euthymius in the Judean desert and remained there for a decade before moving to the monastery of St. Sabas. His work, *The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, offers insight into the reality of monastic life during this period.<sup>1</sup>

### Struggle with Infertility

Dionysia's story begins shortly before the birth of her son, St. Euthymius, in 377 C.E. She lived with her husband Paul, both "of most noble birth and adorned with Godly virtue."<sup>2</sup> Her date of birth is not included, but the story tells us that she and Paul had been married many years without a child. Cyril goes so far as to refer to her as sterile. Dionysia was a devoted wife. She and Paul struggled with infertility and begged God for help.

They prayed fervently to be parents. At this time a woman's inability to have a child was grounds for divorce. Paul would have been within his rights to demand a separation from a

---

woman who could not bear children. Though they did not divorce, the infertility strained their relationship. The stress of being childless in such a climate would have been more than many couples could bear. In support of their loving relationship with each other and God, Paul stood by Dionysia. He even accompanied her to the Church.

Mirroring the experience of many biblical couples, Dionysia and Paul entreated God for a child. In the biblical record Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth, and many others are put forward as examples of women whose fertility was a point of contention. Dionysia's story fits this motif. Like these women, she was a faithful wife for many years and her prayers were answered through an unanticipated conception.

Dionysia and Paul travelled to the nearby shrine of the martyr Polyeuctus where they remained in prayer for several days. They pleaded with God until they received an answer. Late one night they received a vision that advised them to "be confident; for behold God has granted you a child who will bear the name of confidence (*euthymia*), since at his birth [God] who granted you a child will give confidence to [God's] Churches."<sup>3</sup> They left the shrine and went home, excited at the prospect of becoming parents. Soon they knew the vision to be true. When the baby was born they named him Euthymius, as they had been directed, and, like Hannah did with Samuel, promised to offer their son to the work of God.

### **A Survivor of Her Husband's Suicide**

Dionysia, renewed by the birth of her son, was busy preparing him to be offered to the work of God. In Euthymius' third year, Dionysia was visited by another crisis: her husband took his own life. Paul's suicide would have meant danger for his family. After suicide the surviving family was vulnerable to acts of violence, hate, and general cruelty. To make matters worse the Church had condemned suicide and the Council of Braga denied burial rites to the victims, adding to the fear

and shame that surrounded these acts. By issuing such penalties the Church sought to discourage martyrdom by one's own hand. Though the reason for Paul's act is not apparent, it is unlikely his motivations were of a religious rather than personal nature. Committing suicide for personal reasons had been specifically condemned at the Council of Carthage. Dionysia's noble lineage may have saved her from some of the unsavory backlash to which families were often prey after a suicide. But now she was raising a baby alone. As a woman, even a woman of wealth and power, she needed to find guardianship for herself and her child. Dionysia took her son to her brother, Eudoxius, who served as her advisor and intermediary. His guardianship kept her assets and son safe from seizure or harm.

Dionysia was now a widow of suicide and a mother of a young child. Eudoxius was an advisor to the bishop and assisted her in presenting Euthymius to the Church. He took the child to Otreius, the Bishop of Melitene, whose important role at the Council of Constantinople is noted by Cyril. The Bishop was fascinated by the story of the divine vision and the child's conception. After meeting Euthymius he baptized him and made him a lector in the Church. Thus Euthymius was welcomed into the Bishop's household and educated in the workings of the Church. The Bishop's adoption of Euthymius would have been a tremendous aid in curtailing those who claimed that suicide destroyed the family's relationship with God. By presenting Euthymius to Bishop Otreius, Dionysia kept the promise she had made to God and secured a safe upbringing for her only child.

Bishop Otreius baptized Euthymius and made him a lector even though he was only a toddler. This "motif of the prodigious child born to parents of advanced age and dedicated to God from childhood is, of course, modeled on 1 Samuel 1."<sup>4</sup> Dionysia completes this motif and becomes a second Hannah. Bishop Otreius' reaction to the child and his link to Samuel, foreshadows Euthymius' legacy in

---

---

Palestine. He is credited with the reorganization and revitalization of monastic life, even founding the monastery where Cyril later took up residence. The character of her son shows the love and care of Dionysia. She laid the groundwork for his legacy as St. Euthymius the Great.

### **Assiduous Service of God**

Now that her son was safe in the household of the Bishop, Dionysia devoted herself to the Church. Bishop Otreius took note of her service and “since she was devoted to God and the things of God, he ordained [her] deacon of the holy Church.”<sup>5</sup> Cyril wrote that Dionysia was “ordained deacon” (*echeirotenesen diakonon*) because of her devotion.

We hear no more about her in the *Life of St. Euthymius*, though the account of her ordination is also included in the *Life of Euthymius*, written later. In this account she is ordained “in order that she might assiduously serve the divine.”<sup>6</sup>

Without a husband or son to care for, and having lived for many years in marriage, Dionysia was welcomed into the community of deacons. As a deacon she worked in the community and the Church. Women deacons served the women: teaching, healing, baptizing feeding the poor; visiting the sick, widowed, orphaned, and imprisoned. “Many were actively involved in outreach to the poor, training and baptizing female catechumens, and preparing women to receive the sacraments.”<sup>7</sup>

In fourth century Armenia, “hostelries, hospitals, leprosaria, orphanages, and poor houses with their own revenues ministered to the poor, the abandoned, the stranger, and the sick under the supervision of deacons and bishops.”<sup>8</sup> Women deacons served the women of these institutions and filled other roles in the Armenian Church. As a noble woman Dionysia was a two-fold asset to the community, offering her service and financial resources for the

Church. In fact, many Church institutions, including monasteries were funded by the wealthy.<sup>9</sup> Though Cyril does not offer any more information about Dionysia in the life of her son, she would have interacted with him often through her work in the Church.

### **Her Legacy**

The story of Dionysia’s life is missing many details. It is unknown when she was born or died, how she became a Christian, what her husband’s trade was, or how she came to Melitene. Though her story is sparse what is known about her character is substantial. She was a wife, a mother, a widow, a sister, a devoted Christian, and a deacon. Though she struggled against the pressures of society she persevered. When she found herself alone, she devoted herself to the work of God as a deacon.

Cyril’s account of the life of St. Euthymius, a figure for whom he had much reverence, provides an example of a woman whose life had meaning. He could have offered just her name, that she was a good person, and that she loved her son, but he includes a bit more. This story presents a glimpse into the expectations of women in the fourth and fifth century. Dionysia was a model wife and mother. Yet, she was more than a mother, a noblewoman, a wife, more than recipient of a divine vision-- she was remembered as being an ordained deacon.

Dionysia served God assiduously, unrelenting. She was the model servant, and it was her example that her son knew as he began his work in the desert. As he brought a renewed spirit to the faithful, he was driven by the persistence he had learned from his mother. Her service is linked intrinsically to the memory of her son. Not the least among her accomplishments was the formation of a person who is remembered not only as a saint but also as “the Great,” and it is through his story that she became known as a deacon and also remembered.

---

---

## References:

<sup>1</sup>Madigan, Kevin and Carolyn Osiek. *Ordained Women Deacons in the Early Church: A Documentary History*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 2005, 30.

<sup>2</sup>Cyril of Scythopolis. *The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*. Trans. R.M. Price. Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI: 1991, 4.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 5.

<sup>4</sup>Madigan, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>6</sup>As noted in Madigan, 33-34.

<sup>7</sup>Swan, Laura. *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*. Paulist Press, New York: 2001, 106-107.

<sup>8</sup>Garsoian, Nina. *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*. Edited by Richard Hovannisian. St. Martin's Press, New York: 1997, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 83.

## Other Work Consulted:

Coon, Lynda and Katherine Haldane. *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*. University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville: 1990.







# DEACONCHAT

A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



## Conclusions of 1995 Canon Law Society of America Study

### THE CANONICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ORDAINING WOMEN TO THE PERMANENT DIACONATE

This study has been designed to determine the canonical implications of ordaining women to the permanent diaconate. It has found the following:

1. Historically, women have been ordained as deaconesses. While it would be anachronistic to call "deaconesses" the women whose ministry is recorded in the New Testament, by the third century there clearly were women deacons. What their ministry involved has varied from place to place, and from century to century. Although some debate whether they were indeed "ordained," the evidence points to an ordination parallel to that conferred on men to be deacons. Although this past experience does not require that women be ordained to the permanent diaconate today, it does indicate that this possibility is not foreclosed to the Church.
2. Cultural factors play a significant role in decisions to introduce the permanent diaconate today. Cultural factors were also significant factors in the decision to ordain deaconesses in local churches in the past. It is appropriate, therefore, that contemporary cultural factors recognized by church officials involving women be taken into consideration in determining whether to ordain women to the permanent diaconate today.
3. The diaconate is presented in canon law as a sacrament, a grade in the sacrament of holy orders. It is a permanent or character sacrament, and those ordained deacons stand in a different kind of relationship within the community and not just a difference of degree. Ordination provides sacramental grace for the witnessing presence of the ordained, but does not impede or denigrate the proper role of laypersons in the Church or in the world.
4. The supreme authority of the Church is competent to decide to ordain women to the permanent diaconate. It would require a derogation from canon 1024 that restricts all ordinations, including that to the permanent diaconate, to males. This can be done by legislation or individual indults to episcopal conferences.
5. It would not be necessary to adopt ordination of women to the permanent diaconate throughout the entire Church; as with the ordination of men to the permanent diaconate, this is a question properly left to decisions by the episcopal conference and individual diocesan bishops.
6. Women ordained to the permanent diaconate would be bound by the canon law which applies to men ordained to the permanent diaconate, and women who are members of religious institutes would be bound by the law which applies to male religious who are clerics. Some adjustments would be required in some specific provisions concerning clergy that are currently expressed in masculine terms.

---

7. Women ordained to the permanent diaconate, moreover, would be able to exercise ministries and to hold offices from which they are now excluded, but which are in keeping with the services women currently provide in the Church. They would be given the added assistance of sacramental grace as a result of ordination, in the same manner that men already involved in church service have received this sacramental aid through their own ordination as permanent deacons.

In light of these conclusions from its research, the committee has reached the conclusion that ordination of women to the permanent diaconate is possible, and may even be desirable for the United States in the present cultural circumstances.





# DEACONCHAT

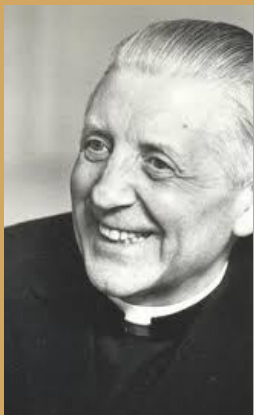
A CONVERSATION ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS



## Theological Explorations: Women Deacons in the Catholic Church<sup>1</sup>

**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.<sup>2</sup>

### 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.<sup>3</sup>

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?"<sup>4</sup>



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.<sup>5</sup>

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
-

---

into the world.<sup>6</sup>

## 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.