



WOMEN DEACONS Why Not Now?

“I commend
to you
our sister
PHOEBE,
a deacon of
the church at
Cenchreae”

Romans 16

IN THIS RESOURCE

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Dear Friend,

Thank you for deciding to participate in the effort to expand women's roles in church leadership by purchasing the **Women Deacons: Why Not Now?** packet. This resource is designed to promote dialogue and advocate for the restoration of women to the permanent diaconate in the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church. At present women's voices are silenced in our churches, their names and stories omitted from our lectionary, and their service unwelcome at our Eucharistic table. Female permanent deacons could preach at Mass, baptize, witness marriages and perform other services for the people of God.

Throughout history, women have served the church in many ways and have taken on different roles. Women's roles were restricted and redefined as the definitions "deacon" and "ordination" were developed and society changed. Recent scholarship, however, supports a reexamination of these definitions in order to understand the role women deacons served in the early church. Women, along with men, were *diakonoi*, deacons, in service of the people and of the Church. They proclaimed the good news, they served at the Eucharistic table, and they ministered to the sick and impoverished.

In the same manner as our **Celebrating Women Witnesses** project, the **Women Deacons: Why Not Now?** packet is grounded in extensive historical and biblical research by experts in the field. We have created essays and prayer services for each of five historic women deacons. To assist you in promoting dialogue in your community we have created resources that outline the history of women deacons, name women who served as deacons, and provide structure for an educational program. We offer tools instructing you on ways to advocate for women deacons, reasons for restoring the tradition, and the process of finding and nominating women for the diaconate.

As you make use of these materials, keep in mind that resources like this one take staffing and financial support. If you are not already a contributor to FutureChurch, please take a moment to read the enclosed information about FutureChurch or visit our website to join today!

Thank you for your commitment to promoting the participation of women in the Church. The time has come to restore women to the permanent diaconate.

Sincerely Yours,

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WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?



9 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>).

9. Petitioning for women deacons does not mean FutureChurch has stopped requesting continued discussion and prayer about church teaching on women's ordination. Along with the Catholic Theological Society of America, we believe further discussion, study and prayer about present teaching on the non-ordination of women is important and necessary.



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How to Use this Packet: Five Ways to Advocate for Women Deacons

Learn. Become knowledgeable about women deacons in the early church. Begin with the enclosed essay, "A Brief History of Women Deacons in the Early Church" and "Names of Women who Served as Deacons in the Early Church." Then read materials about the actual women who served as deacons, including Phoebe, Dionysia, Olympias, Macrina and Radegund. To dig deeper, take a look at the "Further Reading" list of books and resources.

Pray. Each of the essays about women who served as deacons includes comes with a prayer service. Encourage your prayer group, small faith community or parish education or spirituality programs to use the prayer services after reading and discussing the essays.

Educate. Invite those in leadership in your community to read and discuss the enclosed materials on women deacons with you. Consider hosting an adult education series on early women deacons using the enclosed sample education program. Be sure to open the program to the larger faith community in your area/diocese or invite other communities to cosponsor the program with you.

Discern. If you feel you may be called to the diaconate, make arrangements to discuss this calling with a spiritual director or your pastor. Begin a process in your parish or faith community to identify women who have the qualifications and gifts to be considered as candidates to the permanent diaconate. Encourage other communities to conduct a similar discernment process. Use the enclosed resource: "Finding and Presenting Women Candidates for the Permanent Diaconate." Let FutureChurch know if your community would like to present a candidate so we can support you through the process.

Advocate. Using the enclosed sample letter as a guide, initiate a letter writing campaign to your local bishop. Encourage those who wish to write letters to use the factual information contained in the letter but to speak from their own heart and with their own words. Alternatively, you may wish to schedule a meeting with your bishop. The enclosed "A quick look at the question" as well as the information in both the sample letter and enclosures will help you prepare for your meeting.

Be sure to subscribe to FutureChurch's emails at futurechurch.org or Like us at [facebook.com/futurechurch](https://www.facebook.com/futurechurch) or follow us on twitter @FutureChurchUSA to stay up to date on all of the latest news and efforts for Women Deacons. Email FutureChurch at info@futurechurch.org to make us aware of your efforts and any support you may need.

WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?

WOMEN DEACONS: Why Not Now?

A QUICK LOOK AT THE QUESTION

WHY NOT NOW?

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council recognized “there are men who actually carry out the functions of the deacon’s office” and thus “it is only right to strengthen them by the imposition of hands which has come down from the Apostles, and to bind them more closely to the altar, that they may carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate” (*Ad gentes*, 16). Today the same is true of many women in the Church who lead parishes and serve as catechists and chaplains and in other ministries.

In response to missionary opportunities and pastoral needs, local Churches should be able to call forth both men and women as deacons for the *diaconia* of liturgy, word and charity.

HISTORY

Scripture. The only person in Scripture with the title “deacon” is Phoebe (Rm 16:1), and the First Letter to Timothy lists characteristics of women who are deacons (3:8-11). A majority of Christian scholars for a thousand years believed women deacons were sanctioned by Scripture and had an apostolic foundation.

Tradition. Women deacons were ordained in the West until the 12th century, and still exist today in the East. Women deacons were sacramentally ordained by bishops in the sanctuary with an epiclesis and the laying on of hands. The Council of Chalcedon (451) required women deacons to be 40 and celibate. Pope Benedict VIII (1018) perpetually authorized a cardinal bishop to ordain women deacons. The Orthodox Church of Greece and the Armenian Apostolic Church, which have valid sacraments and orders, presently allow for the ordination of women as deacons.

Ministries. At various times in various places, women ordained as deacons assisted at the altar, administered finances, cared for sick and poor women, assisted women in baptism, proclaimed the Gospel, maintained order in the women’s part of the assembly, catechized children, and preached.

STATUS IN THE CHURCH

BENEFITS FOR THE CHURCH

Recent developments. The Second Vatican Council suppressed the minor orders and major order of subdeacon, and revived the diaconate. For the first time in one thousand years, people are ordained solely and finally into a major order other than presbyterate.

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.

In late December 2009, Pope Benedict made changes in canon law to clarify the role of deacons. According to women deacons expert, Phyllis Zagano, the changes "may have ended the controversy over whether women can be ordained deacons."

All papal and curial statements against the ordination of women specifically address the "ministerial priesthood" and "priestly ordination," not the diaconate.

The International Theological Commission in 2002 concluded about the ordination of women as deacons: "It pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question."

There is no church doctrine against ordaining women as deacons. It relates to church law.

Our mission. Having women ordained as deacons would allow the Church to expand its ministries of liturgy, word and charity. These ministries are modeled on servanthood of Christ, embody the Servant Church, and help the Church fulfill its mission to proclaim the Gospel and baptize all nations.

Sacramental grace. Women already engaged in diaconal ministries like preaching, ministering the works of charity and leading a parish would be able to receive the grace of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, exercise ecclesiastical jurisdiction, serve in offices currently restricted to clerics, and be officially recognized by the Church in a lifetime commitment to its ministry.

Pastoral need. The early Church called forth deacons out of pastoral need. In many places today facing severe shortages of clergy, women ordained as deacons could assist in the sacramental ministries of baptism and marriage, preside at funerals and give homilies. Women deacons could also exercise ministry in places where it is difficult for men to serve, like the homes and hospital rooms of women, domestic violence shelters and in women's prisons.

Empower local Churches. The local Church should be allowed to call forth and ordain men and women who can effectively serve in this ministry. It would expand the resources of local bishops by allowing them to train, ordain and give faculties to women, and it would also expand the presence of ordained ministers in many spheres of life, connecting them

with parishes, pastors and local bishops.

Will women deacons lead to women priests?

Response: The Magisterium has already decided against the possibility of women priests. Pope Francis has confirmed this teaching. The ordination of women deacons does nothing to change it.

Is it against Canon 1024: "A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly" to ordain women deacons?

Response: This canon was developed only after the permanent diaconate faded in the West, so it relates to priesthood, not the diaconate as a separate and permanent ministry. As regards ordaining women as deacons, it is an administrative law, not doctrine, and can be changed. In an interview in 2012, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago said that the topic of women deacons was an "open theological question" and "is being talked about very slowly."

Why ordain women deacons when the permanent diaconate isn't going well?

Response: Many local Churches in the United State and other countries are served very well by permanent deacons. It is up to each local Church whether to ordain permanent deacons or not. It need not be universal practice.

Could we have women serve as non-ordained "deaconesses" as Cardinal Walter Kasper and others have suggested?

Response: Women did not always belong to a separate order of "deaconesses." In fact, women deacons were ordained by a bishop in the sanctuary with an epiclesis and the laying on of hands. The argument that women cannot be ordained suggests that women are not ontologically equal to men and cannot image Christ, which contradicts the Catechism.

Why aren't more women asking to be ordained as deacons?

Response: Many women are already leading parishes, preaching, teaching and serving in the ministries of charity, and some of these women have expressed a desire to be ordained as deacons. If the diaconate serves important pastoral needs in the Church today, then it should be open to men and women.

Shouldn't we wait for the pope to decide on the question of women deacons?

Response: Pope Francis has asked bishops' conferences to state their needs and be "courageous" in making proposals to him.

**GOOD ANSWERS
TO QUESTIONS
COMMONLY ASKED
BY CHURCH
OFFICIALS**

HOW YOU CAN HELP

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A Brief History of Women Deacons in the Catholic Church

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.¹ 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.

One of the earliest church documents, *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? *The Apostolic Tradition* is thought to have been written in 3rd century Rome by the presbyter Hippolytus who is also known as the first anti-Pope.² It is an irony of history that Hippolytus was not in communion with the great church when he wrote the *Apostolic Tradition*. A dispute with Pope Callistus led him to break away and some scholars believe *The Apostolic Tradition* may have been written for his schismatic community.³ Though recent scholarship is raising questions about the authorship and origins of the document, no one disputes its antiquity because numerous later church orders such as the *Apostolic Constitutions* and *Testamentum Domini* rely on it for some teachings.⁴

On the other hand, a late 4th or early 5th 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 ordaining women as a widow or deacon; their leadership in liturgical ministry (the Divine Office); and the extent to which they were considered to be members of the clergy. 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.⁵

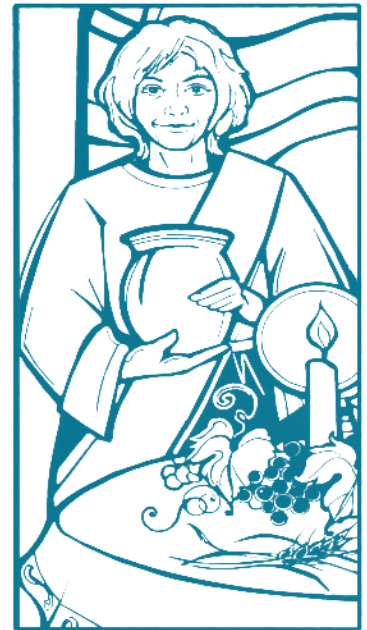
Nevertheless, though some male church leaders in both East

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.⁶

About the Ministry of Deacon

Because of the work of scholars such as Gary Macy and others, we now know that first millennium titles for church orders such as bishop, priest and deacon are not equivalent in meaning to the same titles 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.⁷

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*."⁸ The Greek word *episkopos* 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."⁹ 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."¹⁰



Acts 6: 1-6 tells us that seven men were called to do the *diakonia* (service) of the table leaving the apostles to do the *diakonia* of the word. This text is commonly cited as the first installation of men to the diaconate. However, it is notable that the men are never given the title *diakonos* [deacon, minister] as was Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2. They did receive a laying on of hands to minister to the needy, and because of this, the text is often cited as the first example of ordained deacons. 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 St. John Chrysostom's time: "...the entire government of the temporal affairs of the Church lay in the hands of deacons."¹¹

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 Romans 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 1st 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, but not deaconess, since this title did not emerge until later.

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 Romans 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.¹²

Women Deacons in the East

The office of female deacon or deaconess was more prevalent in the East than the West. We first see the Greek title *diakonos* with a masculine grammatical ending given to the female deacon Phoebe in Roman 16. It has been falsely assumed that the *diakonos* title was replaced with the feminine deaconess (*diakonissa*) by the 3rd 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 6th century.¹³

One example is a 4th century tombstone on the Mount of Olives with a Greek inscription that 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 1st to the 6th centuries in Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, and Macedonia.¹⁴

**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)

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."¹⁵ Nevertheless, Phoebe's 1st 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 the Church in Syria and Palestine in the late 3rd 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 later 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. 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. (See comprehensive listing in box - pg. 4). There is ample archaeological and literary evidence of other female deacons who ministered in the East from the 1st to the 6th centuries.^{16,17}

Women Deacons in the West

The literary and archaeological evidence for female deacons in the West does not appear until the 5th century when texts proscribing women presbyters also 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.”¹⁸

However, as we have seen, 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. 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.¹⁹

In the mid 6th century, the Frankish queen Radegund, was ordained a deacon by Bishop Medard, a bishop of Noyons and Tournai. Other women deacons in the West known to us by tombstone inscriptions include Anna, a 6th century woman deacon from Rome, Theodora, a female deacon from Gaul buried in 539 and Ausonia, a 6th 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.”²⁰ 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.²¹

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.”²² 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.²³

Female Ordination Rites in the East

For centuries scholars have agreed that the earliest rituals used to ordain female deacons are the same as those 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.*²⁴

An 8th 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 irreproachable conduct, according to what is pleasing to you. For to you is due all glory and honor.*²⁵

Female Ordination Rites in the West

An 8th 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...*²⁶ 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. . . .”²⁷ 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, 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.”²⁸

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.”²⁹

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.”³⁰ 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 the Beguines, independent female communities operating outside the control of male church leaders. 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 frequently attracted the ire of clerics, perhaps because their advocacy for the marginalized unsettled the status quo.

Epilogue

At the present time, the possibility of ordaining women to the permanent diaconate may be back on the table. In 1995 the Canon Law Society of America study reported that it is within the authority of the Church to ordain women to the permanent diaconate, and only a few adjustments to canon law would be needed.³¹ In 1974, a member of the International Theological Commission (ITC), Cipriano Vagaggini OSB (1909-99), published 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 had asked the commission to explore the question of a female diaconate; the Theological Commission said only that the teaching office of the Church had yet to decide on women deacons.³²

A listing of literary references describing the ministry of named and unnamed female deacons :

Female deacons:

- prepared women for baptism and offered them hospitality during the transitional time before and after (Manaris, Romana).
- provided hospitality and protection to socially vulnerable women (unnamed deacon of Caesarea).
- served as advocates and agents for laywomen in the church (Susanna)
- travelled with women pilgrims (Theophilia)
- conducted pilgrimages themselves (Severa of Jerusalem)
- served as monastic superiors (Eugenia, Jannia, Olympias, Theodula, Valeriana)
- served as trusted teachers (unnamed deacon of Theodoret).
- were members of monastic communities but not superiors (Lampadion, Elisanthia, Martyria, and Palladia).
- supervised important centers of pilgrimage (Marthana, Matrona of Cosila)
- lived in their own houses (Eusebia)
- supervised liturgical roles of women and led them in liturgical prayer (Elisanthia, Martyria, Palladia)
- raised a foster child (Athanasia of Korykos).
- poured wine and water into the chalice at the Eucharist and other actions in the sanctuary in the absence of a priest or deacon (women deacons in 5-6th century Edessa)
- proclaimed the Gospel and other Scriptures in assemblies of women (5th century unnamed woman deacon with multiple later historical citations)

References

- Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet Tulloch. *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005), 161-163.
- ³⁰William A. Jurgens. *The Faith of the Early Fathers, Vol 1*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 162.
- ³¹Henry Chadwick. *The Early Church*. (London: The Penguin Group, 1967) p.88.
- ³²Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter. *The Oxford handbook of early Christian studies*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 430.
- ³³Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 61.
- ³⁴Francine 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.
- ³⁵John Wijngaards. *Women Deacons in the Early Church: Historical Texts and Contemporary Debates*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002) 12.
- ³⁶The New American Bible Revised Edition, translates these respectively as “overseers” and “ministers”.
- ³⁷Ibid.
- ³⁸Ibid.
- ³⁹Wijngaard, 12.
- ⁴⁰Osiek, “The Women in Paul’s Ministry.”
- ⁴¹Madigan and Osiek, 3.
- ⁴²Ute E. Eisen. *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000)
- ⁴³Madigan and Osiek, 5
- ⁴⁴Ibid.
- ⁴⁵Eisen.
- ⁴⁶Ibid. 145-146.
- ⁴⁷Gary 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.
- ⁴⁸Ibid. 17.
- ⁴⁹Ibid. 29.
- ⁵⁰Ibid. 17.
- ⁵¹Ibid. 29.
- ⁵²Ibid. 19.
- ⁵³Ibid. 20.
- ⁵⁴Ibid. 20.
- ⁵⁵Ibid. 31
- ⁵⁶Ibid. 33.
- ⁵⁷Ibid. 34.
- ⁵⁸Ibid. 36.
- ⁵⁹William T. Ditewig. “Women Deacons: Present Possibilities” as found in *Women Deacons, Past, Present, Future* by Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig and Phyllis Zagano. (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 65.
- ⁶⁰Phyllis Zagano. “Inching towards a yes?” *The Tablet*, January 9, 2010, 10-11.

This essay was written by Christine Schenk CSJ. Schenk has Masters degrees in Theology and Midwifery and serves as the Executive Director of FutureChurch.

WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?

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
 Matriona, 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

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

WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?



Women Deacons in Catholicism? An Educational Program

Consideration of ordaining Catholic Women to the Permanent Diaconate is still “on the table” for discussion in the Vatican. In fact, recent reports indicate the discussion is heating up behind the scenes.

THREE PART EDUCATION PROGRAM Sponsor a three part adult education series in your parish or small faith community using the **Women Deacons: Why Not Now?** resource.

Session One

1. In small groups, first invite people to read the essay: “A Brief History of Women Deacons in the Catholic Church”. Ask them to keep three questions in mind: What inspires you? What confuses you? What challenges you? Then discuss in small groups. Depending on the size of the group, share pertinent discussion points with the whole group.
2. Then invite people to read and discuss the essay Phoebe of Cenchrae again keeping the three questions in mind. (Another good resource to distribute is the brochure by Dr. Carolyn Osiek: Women in the Ministry of Paul available in the packet)
3. Close with the prayer service from the Phoebe essay.

Session Two

1. Depending on the number of small groups, distribute the different essays about the early women deacons: Olympias, Macrina, Dionysia and Radegund to each group. If there are just two groups, distribute two to each group. Again, encourage the groups to read the essays keeping three questions in mind: What inspires you? What confuses you? What challenges you? Then discuss. Depending on the size of the group, and time available, ask individuals to share highlights of each woman’s life with those who didn’t read that essay, and share pertinent discussion interests with the whole group.
2. Close with a prayer service from one of the essays.

Session Three

1. In this session, invite the groups to read Dr. Zagano’s “A Woman at the Altar?” (*US Catholic* 1/1/2012) available in the **Women Deacons: Why Not Now?** resource, “Ordain Catholic Women as Deacons” (*Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer/Autumn 2015 - <http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2015/ordain-catholic-women-deacons>) by Dr. Zagano and “Inching Toward a Yes” (*The Tablet*, January 9, 2010. Available for free download at www.futurechurch.org) a. Again, keep the three questions in mind: What inspires you? What confuses you? What challenges you? b. Spend

time considering how to advance this issue in the Church. Ideas may include sponsoring a petition or letter writing initiative asking your bishop, the President of the USCCB and/or Vatican officials to restore the female diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church (See FutureChurch postcard campaign, and Finding and Presenting Women Candidates for the Permanent Diaconate in the **Women Deacons Why Not Now?** resource).

2. Alternatively invite a local Catholic scholar and/or Canon Lawyer to give a one time educational presentation on ordaining women to the permanent diaconate in the Catholic Church. (See below)
3. Close with 2012 St. Mary of Magdala prayer service featuring women deacons.
Adapt as necessary. (Available for free download at www.futurechurch.org)

ONE TIME EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATION: Invite a local Catholic scholar and/or Canon Lawyer to give a presentation on ordaining women to the permanent diaconate in the Catholic Church. Make sure to give your local expert Dr. Zagano's articles (see above) and "Inching Toward a Yes" (*The Tablet*, January 9, 2010 available for free download at www.futurechurch.org) Make the **Women Deacons Why Not Now?** resource available the night of the program, especially the essay "A Brief History of Women Deacons in the Catholic Church."

SUGGESTIONS FOR BOOK GROUPS: Have your group read one of the four books named below and/or discuss Dr. Zagano's January 1, 2012 article published in *US Catholic* "A Woman at the Altar?" (Available in the **Women Deacons: Why Not Now?** resource) Discuss in small groups their reflections about the three questions: What inspires you? What confuses you? What challenges you? Spend time considering how to advance this issue in the Church.

KEY RESOURCES

Books

Macy, Gary, Ditewig, William and Zagano, Phyllis *Women Deacons, Past, Present, Future*. New York: Paulist Press, 2011.

Madigan, Kevin and Osiek, Carolyn. *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Wijngaards, J.N. *Women Deacons in the Early Church: Historical Texts and Contemporary Debates*. New York: Crossroad, 2006.

Zagano, Phyllis. *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church*. New York: Crossroad, 2000.

Articles

Zagano, Phyllis. "A Woman at the Altar?" *US Catholic* January 1, 2012

Zagano, Phyllis. "Ordain Catholic Women as Deacons. *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer/Autumn 2015 (Vol. 43, Nos. 3 & 4). Available online: <http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2015/ordain-catholic-women-deacons>

Zagano, Phyllis. "Inching Toward a Yes." *The Tablet* January 9, 2010, p. 10.

(Available for free download at <http://www.futurechurch.org/main/FutureChurch-InchingTowardAYes.pdf>)

Zagano, Phyllis. "Whatever happened to women deacons?" *National Catholic Reporter*, February 4, 2011. <http://ncr.travdia.com/SS/Page.aspx?sstarg=&facing=false&secid=97033&pagenum=8>

Advocacy Resources

1. Go to <http://futurechurch.org/actions/openletter/2014/> to sign our open letter to the USCCB which calls for the restoration of women deacons.
2. Send an email to info@futurechurch.org to let us know you're interested in advocating for women deacons.
3. Adapt the sample letter included in this packet and send to your bishop.



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WOMEN DEACONS: WHY NOT NOW?

A Project to Restore Women Deacons in the Catholic 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

PHOEBE OF CENCHREAE Deacon of the Church



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

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 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.

Sister, deacon, benefactor, missionary, evangelist, fundraiser. 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.

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.



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This essay was written by Claire Noonan who holds a Doctorate in Ministry from The Catholic Theological Union. Noonan currently serves on the staff of the St. Catherine of Siena Center in River Forest, IL.

The feast day for Phoebe is celebrated on September 3. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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Prayer Service to Honor
Phoebe of Cenchreae

Celebrate Phoebe on September 3 or at any other time

Prepare the gathering space with a center pillar candle and small, votive candles surrounding it.

Greeting: *(the prayer leader welcomes people, invites, introductions, etc.)*

Opening Song: *All Are Welcome* (Marty Haugen, © 1987 GIA Publications, Inc.)
or *Anthem* (Tom Conry, © 1978 New Dawn Music)

Presider: The grace and peace of Jesus the Christ be with you.

All: And also with you.

Presider: This day I commend to you Phoebe, our sister and benefactor, a deacon of the first-century Church or Cenchreae. We gather to celebrate her life, her story and witness. *(Light the center candle.)* May we receive her in Christ as is fitting for the saints.

All: Amen.

Presider: We gather to bless those who follow Phoebe's example of faith and ministry.

All are invited to come forward, light a small candle and name those outstanding in their service to the community, especially lectors, missionaries, benefactors, pastoral ministers, St. Vincent de Paul Society members, Eucharistic ministers, religious educators, deacons and their wives, etc. When the naming has come to a natural end, the presider continues.

May we receive one another in Christ as is fitting for the saints.

All: Amen.

First Reading: Romans 12: 1-13

Response: *Servant Song* (Richard Gilliard, © 1977, *Scripture in Song*, Arr. David Haas, © 1999 Gather GIA Publications, Inc. #476)

Gospel: John 15: 12-17

Reflection/Preaching: *A brief homily is offered on the readings and the life of Phoebe, or if the assembly is small, reflections may be shared by all present.*

Intercessions

Response: Loving God, hear our prayer.

Presider: O God, Phoebe was called sister by your servant, Paul. Give us the grace to live together in love as sisters and brothers, daughters and sons of you, our one Creator.
We pray...

Presider: O God, Phoebe was called deacon. Grant us the courage and humility we need to embrace our own vocations and to recognize the gifts given by the Spirit to each member of the community.

We pray...

Presider: O God, Phoebe was called benefactor. Make us generous people who care for the needy and the stranger.

We pray...

All: *(Other prayers may be added as the community wishes.)*

Closing Prayer

Presider: Let us pray.

All: Spirit of Christ, you filled our sister, Phoebe with courage, generosity and faith. May we receive her witness with gratitude. May the memory of her life fill us with hope. And may we be today a Church in service to the world. Thanks be to God!

Closing Song: *Sing a New Church* (Delores Dugner, OSB, © 1991 Srs of St. Benedict, #388 Today's Music Missal Issue by OCP Publications)

Prayer service developed by Claire Noonan who holds a Doctorate in Ministry from The Catholic Theological Union. Noonan currently serves on the staff of the St. Catherine of Siena Center in River Forest, IL.

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WOMEN DEACONS: WHY NOT NOW?

A Project to Restore Women Deacons in the Catholic Church

Family History

Macrina was a 4th century woman renowned among laity and clergy alike as a teacher of the Word and defender of Christian doctrine. She was the leader of a religious community on which St. Basil of Caesarea, otherwise known as ‘the Great’ based his monastic rule. Yet she probably did not hold the title of Deacon or Deaconess. Still, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Church of England both name her as such and, with the Roman Catholic Church, celebrate her as a saint. Her feast is celebrated with her brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa, on July 19th. How could Macrina help but be a saint when her paternal grandmother, both her parents and three of her brothers became saints? But sainthood is attained through a life well-lived and so our story begins.

Even in the womb there was a mystagogic aura about Macrina. According to Gregory of Nyssa, his mother fell asleep while in labor (a miracle in itself!) and dreamt that Thecla, the virgin and companion of Paul¹ appeared to her. Thecla addressed the child in her womb by the name of Thecla, presaging the kind of life Macrina would lead.²

Macrina was born in 327, the eldest of ten children. Her paternal grandmother, Macrina the Elder, and her husband were persecuted for their faith under the Roman Emperor Diocletian. They were forced to flee their home and endured many hardships. Her father, Basil the Elder, was a prominent rhetorician (lawyer) in Neocaesarea in Pontus (northeastern Turkey). Her mother Emmelia was a noble woman from Cappadocia in Syria (now modern-day Turkey). She too came from a line of staunch Christians – one of her forbears had died a martyr.

They were a wealthy, aristocratic family who educated their daughters as well as their sons, although not in entirely the same

manner. Gregory of Nyssa writes in his biography of Macrina “. . .[S]he (her mother) did not educate her (Macrina) in the customary secular curriculum which for the most part instructs . . . by means of poems. . . which through their degrading tales concerning women tend to the corruption of character. Instead . . . God inspired Scripture . . . especially the Wisdom of Solomon. . . and whatever bears on the moral life.”³ Macrina carried the Psalter with her and “kept up the psalmody wherever she went like a good travelling companion that never left her at any time”⁴ even as she went about weaving wool and attending to worldly duties.

MACRINA More than a Deacon



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

Domestic Ascetic Movement

To understand Macrina’s family, household, and upbringing, some knowledge is necessary of a movement, which Silvas refers to as the “domestic ascetic movement,”⁵ prevalent in 4th century Anatolia (Asia Minor) and throughout the Mediterranean world. After Constantine declared Christianity the state religion in 325, it became socially convenient for people to declare themselves at least nominally Christian. There were many catechumens who would delay baptism until the end of their lives, because they believed that all sins would be forgiven and

they would go straight to heaven. In a Cappadocian family like Macrina's, however, this was not the case. Families like hers committed to baptism early on (usually at the wife's behest). Christian practices such as reading, chanting, memorizing the Scriptures and learning Church traditions were practiced at home which translated into a lived Gospel hospitality, personal frugality and care for the poor.⁶ This unapologetic Christian stance was a phenomenon of 4th century Christianity in both the East and the West where families practiced asceticism in their homes and women functioned as the leaders.

Another aspect of the "domestic ascetic movement" was spousal celibacy. After having children, one spouse usually the wife, would convince the other that they should remain celibate in order to consecrate themselves more fully to God. Eventually the household came to imitate a monastic community where husband and wife lived together as brother and sister and class distinctions between themselves and their servants were nonexistent. This sort of domestic ascetic community emerging from an aristocratic household and transforming it into a monastic community was not entirely without social consequences, as it threatened the status quo. Yet it was happening all around the Mediterranean.⁷

Virgin Widow

By the age of twelve Macrina was becoming quite a beauty and on account of the "great swarm of suitors that buzzed about her parents",⁸ her father found her an appropriate fiancé. Macrina was promised to a young man, from a good Christian family who, like her father Basil, was a superb rhetorician. Unfortunately, the young man met an untimely death and Basil set about finding Macrina another suitable husband. Macrina, however, took the "promise" of her marriage as if it had actually occurred and when her parents brought her other marriage proposals she argued that marriage like birth and death could take place only once. Her betrothed was "alive to God (Lk 20:38, Rom 6:11) through the hope of the resurrection (Acts 23:6), and was away on a journey, not dead, and that it was out of order not to keep faith with one's bridegroom who had gone abroad".⁹ Imagine the precocious thirteen year old using the knowledge of Scripture with which her mother, Emmelia, had unwittingly taught her, not to mention her father's skill at rhetoric, and besting him at his own game!

Shortly thereafter Basil died (c. 341), and the household moved to Annisa, a day's journey west of Neocaesarea near the river Iris. Macrina shared in all her mother's household responsibilities -- and there were many. Emmelia had properties spanning several provinces and paid taxes to three governors. She had five daughters and four sons to look after. Apart from helping with all her mother's duties, Macrina took it upon herself to prepare meals and bake bread, chores well beneath her station in life. The relationship was symbiotic. Under Emmelia's guardianship Macrina's virtue was preserved. She not only helped her mother with mundane affairs, but she also guided Emmelia in her own vocation: the pursuit of philosophy. Today we would call philosophy wisdom, "a life of communion with the truth, which is life in communion with God."¹⁰ Now far from the city, she persuaded her mother to live as sisters with her slave girls and servants.

Her Brothers' Teacher

Macrina's influence on her brothers soon became evident. Her second brother Naucratus, having achieved success as a rhetorician in the city, followed her ascetic lead and retired with his servant Chryaphius to a campsite he made in the forest on the banks of the Iris. There he lived as a hermit, hunting and fishing and caring for a group of poor and infirm elderly people. He may well have been his mother's favorite as he spent his time, "philosophizing and making his mother very happy" because of the way he lived his life in moderation and did all his mother's bidding.¹¹

Macrina took her youngest brother, Peter II of Sebasteia born the same year their father died, under her wing. She taught him in the same way she herself had been educated becoming "father, teacher, guardian, mother and counselor of every good" to him.¹² When he had the choice of going away to study as his brothers had, he chose to stay home and live in the monastic community Macrina had created at Annisa. He was eventually canonized. One wonders how much her brother Basil's vocation was inspired by Macrina. Gregory tells us, that when Basil came home from school "excessively puffed up with the thought of his own eloquence," Macrina "took him in hand" and led him speedily "towards the goal of philosophy."¹³ After that Basil did a complete turn around, renouncing all worldly goods and desires and -- as we know -- became St. Basil the Great, the father of monasticism.

Tragedy Breeds Fortitude

Approximately five years after the move to Annisa, tragedy struck. Naucratus was caught in one of his fishing nets and drowned. Now the full force of Macrina's character was brought to bear, for her mother upon hearing the news "collapsed . . . like some noble athlete felled by an unexpected blow."¹⁴ Macrina, held her own grief for her "dearest brother" in check "rising superior to nature," and through her own courageous example showed her mother how to overcome her suffering. Some years later, after Emmelia had died, Macrina did the same for Gregory who, after their brother Basil's death, went to visit Annisa only to find Macrina about to depart this life (c. 379). Macrina, seeing Gregory's distress distracted him from the "grief of soul" by philosophizing about her convictions on "the life here below."

The Community at Annisa

We know about the life at Annisa both from Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of St. Macrina* and St. Basil's *Small Asketikon*, a question and answer manual on living the ascetic life. Annisa became a single community referred to as a fraternity including sisters. Nevertheless, originally it was a community of virgin/widows headed first by Emmelia and later Macrina. The community only incorporated male ascetics after Peter professed celibacy (c. 362).¹⁵

There was a men's section and a women's section where men and women lived and dined apart. A church divided the two areas where they worshipped communally but in separate choirs. Macrina headed the women's section and was in all likelihood the mastermind behind the community as Gregory frequently refers to her as "the great one." Basil ordained their youngest brother Peter a priest and he then headed the men's section and provided the sacraments for the entire community. There was a deaconess, Lampadion, who headed the women's section under Macrina and who led the choir of virgins ("Virgin" was the name given the female ascetics -- although some were widows).¹⁶ Sometime in the late 50's or early 360's, there was a great famine in the area and people came from all over because they knew of the great generosity of their monastery.¹⁷ Apparently during this time Macrina brought in women and children whom "she had rescued when they had been exposed by the roadside" and cared for them herself.¹⁸ A hospice and a place for visitors were provided. The atmosphere was well ordered,

communal and humble. "Their luxury was in self-control and their glory in being unknown. . . . Above all unceasing prayer and uninterrupted hymnody. . . [continued] throughout the night and day, so that it became for them both work and respite from work."¹⁹ After her death, Macrina's funeral was directed by Gregory. Yet in making the preparations for dressing Macrina's body he collaborated with the other women in charge. He followed his elder brother Basil's instructions that although there may be a male "superior" over the whole community, he may not act unilaterally without consulting the woman superior.²⁰ The local Bishop to whom Macrina had left her inheritance attended along with a multitude of his priests.²¹ There was such a throng of people "pressing around the bier . . . "insatiable for that sacred sight" that it was difficult to make progress.²²

She has been called "the Fourth Cappadocian" although in truth she was the first. If St. Basil is the father of monasticism, surely she is the mother.

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw about the life of this extraordinary woman and saint? Naucratus was the first brother to follow her into the ascetic life. Her youngest brother, Peter, originally Macrina's protégé became her co-leader at Annisa. St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote two works about his sister: *Life of St. Macrina* from which most of this essay is gleaned and *On the Soul and Resurrection*. Although the latter is a fictitious conversation said to have taken place on Macrina's deathbed, much of it was surely taken from conversations they had in their youth. By revealing her as a second Thecla, "he presents her as a teacher, evangelist and leader following a pattern validated by apostolic authority."²³ Thecla was a heroine and role model well known to fourth century ascetic women. She was not ordained and in all likelihood neither was Macrina. Macrina was too humble to seek ordination and Gregory of Nyssa does not mention it, although as superior of her community she could certainly have held the title of Deacon, Deaconess or Presbytera.

At a time when heresies abounded Macrina, like her brothers Gregory and Basil, defended the orthodox teachings of the Church. St. Gregory Nazianzen, another Cappadocian theologian, defender of neo-Nicene orthodoxy and archbishop of Constantinople admired her as an exemplary ascetic.²⁴ St. Basil the Great's *Small Asketikon*, was written c. 363-365 (much of it on a visit to Annisa) as a legacy to that community,²⁵ and clearly his form of monasticism is modeled upon Annisa. Even though he does not mention his sister by name he defends the "feminine ascetic endeavor and consecration to the Lord" and states that women are superior to men in "the pursuit of piety."²⁶ How can one help but see Macrina and her community at Annisa in his words? She has been called "the Fourth Cappadocian"²⁷ although in truth she was the first. If St. Basil is the father of monasticism, surely she is the mother.



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- ¹(*Acts of Paul and Thecla*)
²Gregory of Nyssa. "Life of St. Macrina." *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*. Trans. Anna M. Silvas. (Belgium: Brepolis, 2008),112.
³Ibid. 113.
⁴Ibid. 114.
⁵Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*. (Belgium: Brepolis Publishers, 2008), 3 – 4.
⁶Ibid. 3 – 4.
⁷Ibid. 4-9.
⁸Nyssa, 114.
⁹Ibid. 116.
¹⁰Maria Poggi Johnson. "Daughter, Sister, Philosopher, Angel: The Life and Influence of St. Macrina the Younger." *Diakonia* 31.3 (1998) 181.
¹¹ Nyssa ,119.
¹²Nyssa 122.
¹³Ibid. 117.
¹⁴Nyssa, 120.
¹⁵Silvas, 39.
¹⁶Ibid. 39.
¹⁷ Nyssa, 123.
¹⁸Ibid. 137.
¹⁹Ibid. 121-122.
²⁰Silvas, 41.
²¹Nyssa. 143.
²²Ibid. 143.
²³Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Macrina; Virgin and Teacher." *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 17.1 (Spring 1979), 105.
²⁴Silvas, 79, 82.
²⁵Ibid. 40.
²⁶Ibid. 57.
²⁷Jaroslav Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 9.

This essay was written by Robin G. Senior who speaks at parishes and retreat houses in the Tri-state area on the roles of women in early Christianity and teaches in the adult formation programs in her diocese. Robin has a Master in Arts in Theology.

The feast day for St. Macrina is celebrated on July 19, Consider using the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

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A Prayer Service honoring
Macrina the Younger
Celebrate Macrina on July 19th or at any other time.

The worship space should have a large, clear bowl of water on a table with two branch bundles for the sprinkling ritual placed next to the bowl.

Opening Song: *(to the tune of God of Day, God of Darkness)* Nettleton

As we gather here in worship, we extol God's holy grace,
Join our hearts and souls and spirit, into one within this place.
All creation shows God's glory, heav'n and earth draw near to sing,
Holy, holy, holy, holy, praise together do we bring.

St. Macrina saw creation with a bright and piercing eye,
Sang God's power penetrating into all works low and high,
She described God's holy purpose: weaving unlikes to one end,
In a sacred, redeeming harmony for us all now to attend.

Gathering Prayer: Gracious God, we pray that you send your Spirit upon this gathering in honor of your servant, Macrina the Younger. May we learn from her life how to be strong of purpose yet humble of heart; grateful for blessings and quick to share them; open to dialogue and dedicated to your service. Open our hearts and minds to the inspiration of example and the blessings of your grace exemplified best in your Son, our model, Jesus Christ.

Reading: From *On the Soul and Resurrection*, dialogue between Macrina and her brother, Gregory of Nyssa (<http://www.ccel.org/ccell/schaff/npnf205.x.iii.ii.html>) :

The Creation proclaims outright the Creator; for the very heavens, as the Prophet says, declare the glory of God with their unutterable words. We see the universal harmony in the wondrous sky and on the wondrous earth; how elements essentially opposed to each other are all woven together in an ineffable union to serve one common end, each contributing its particular force to maintain the whole; how the unmingling and mutually repellent do not fly apart from each other by virtue of their peculiarities, any more than they are destroyed, when compounded, by such contrariety;

Response: Psalm 19 *(Left/Right antiphonal readings)*

Left: The heavens herald your glory, O God, and the skies display your handiwork.

Right: Day after day they tell their story, and night after night they reveal the depth of their understanding.

Left: Without speech, without words, without even an audible voice,

Right: their cry echoes through all the world, and their message reaches the ends of the earth.

Left: For in the heavens the sun has pitched a tent.

Right: It comes forth with the grandeur of a wedding procession, with the eagerness of an athlete ready to race.

Left: It rises at one end of the sky and travels to the other end,

Right: and nothing escapes its warmth.

Reading: Wisdom 7: 23-8:1

Reflection: *In small groups, discuss Macrina's vision of creation where "elements essentially opposed to each other are all woven together in an ineffable union to serve one common end". Does this correspond to the description of "Wisdom" from scripture? Where do we see or not see this today? Are we proclaiming this vision of God's creation in our church and society now? Discuss how Macrina's vision could inspire a better world.*

Reading: From *On the Soul and Resurrection*, dialogue between Macrina and her brother, Gregory of Nyssa:

Indeed, it was for this that intelligent beings came into existence; namely, that the riches of the Divine blessings should not lie idle. The All-creating Wisdom fashioned these souls, these receptacles with free wills, as vessels as it were, for this very purpose, that there should be some capacities able to receive His blessings and become continually larger with the inpouring of the stream. Such are the wonders that the participation in the Divine blessings works: it makes him into whom they come larger and more capacious; from his capacity to receive it gets for the receiver an actual increase in bulk as well, and he never stops enlarging. The fountain of blessings wells up unceasingly, and the partaker's nature, finding nothing superfluous and without a use in that which it receives, makes the whole influx an enlargement of its own proportions, and becomes at once more wishful to imbibe the nobler nourishment and more capable of containing it; each grows along with each, both the capacity which is nursed in such abundance of blessings and so grows greater, and the nurturing supply which comes on in a flood answering to the growth of those increasing powers.

Response: Song: to the tune of (God of Day, God of Darkness) Nettleton
Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, mount of thy redeeming love.

Ritual: Blessings Abound Sprinkling Rite

Leader: Macrina's imagery portrays a world where humanity is created by God in order to receive God's blessings – in a fountain that "wells up unceasingly". Our human spirit opens and enlarges to receive these blessings and – wonder of wonders – the greater the abundance of blessings, the greater the capacity to receive becomes. "Each grows along with each" becoming a "flood" of mutual increase.

What blessings have you received in your life? What do you hope for?

(A few minutes of silent meditation, with instrumental music in background, softly)

Leader: In honor of Macrina's vision of flowing beneficence, we will form two processional lines and come forward to the blessing bowl. Two people at a time will name some blessings, dip the branches in the water, and ritually sprinkle each other. They will proceed back to their seats and the next two will come to the bowl, and so on until all have participated.
(the soft music can continue for this procession, but it is recommended that the blessings be heard out loud)

Prayer: Bounteous Creator, who called your servant Macrina to reveal in her life and her teaching the riches of your grace, grant that we will follow her example in seeking Wisdom and upholding truth, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Leader: From adolescence on, Macrina displayed extraordinary strength of character, intellectual ability and spiritual discipline. She became the effective head of her remarkable family and, through her influence on her brothers, shaped the development of Eastern monasticism and church doctrine. Living in a time of great theological upheaval, she entertained complex philosophical concepts and managed a thriving monastic community while living in utter simplicity. When the time came to clothe her body for burial, Gregory asked one of the sisters if Macrina had some garments in readiness. "Nothing," was the reply. "She gave everything away. Here is her hairshirt, here is her patched cassock and her ragged mantia. She kept nothing else on earth; rather, she concentrated on storing treasures in heaven."

Closing Litany:

Leader: May Macrina's vision of a world overflowing with a "fountain of blessings" inspire us to greater gratitude and generosity,

All: Gracious God, hear our prayer.

Leader: May Macrina's ability to teach and engage in intellectual inquiry encourage our own explorations of scripture and theology,

All: Gracious God, hear our prayer.

Leader: May Macrina's creation of a new kind of monastic community living help us to practice spiritual discipline in our own lives,

All: Gracious God, hear our prayer.

Leader: May Macrina's belief in universal harmony and the ultimate "ineffable union" of diverse entities lead us to reconciliation and peace,

All: Gracious God, hear our prayer.

Leader: May Macrina's creative and humble leadership in the fourth century become a model for the twenty-first century,

All: Gracious God, hear our prayer.

Closing Song: "In Christ there is no East and West" (*Today's Missal*)

This prayer service was created by Sheila Peiffer. Sheila has an M.A. in Theology and over twenty-five years of experience in Catholic education, campus ministry and retreat presentation. She is the Administrative Coordinator of the American Catholic Council.

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WOMEN DEACONS: WHY NOT NOW?

A Project to Restore Women Deacons in the Catholic Church

Background

Born in Constantinople in 360-370, Olympias is perhaps the most famous Christian woman leader of her time. This is due in no small part to her generosity in distributing her great wealth to Church leaders and to the poor. At the time of Olympias' birth, Christianity was experiencing a meteoric rise in social prestige and influence. Constantine's fateful victory at the Milvian Bridge began his conversion to Christianity and subsequent consolidation of power as the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. In 313, the Edict of Milan proclaimed tolerance for all religions, though Christianity would benefit the most. Soon thereafter Christian bishops began to function as advisors to the emperor and acquired more and more political power and wealth.

Constantine soon moved from tolerating pagan religions to a more hostile stance. He put an end to pagan sacrifice and distributed the riches of pagan temples to Christian bishops who built churches and basilicas such as those at the site of the present day St. John Lateran and St. Peter in Rome. In 330 Constantine founded Constantinople as a new capital of the Roman empire. He eventually commissioned even more churches including *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom) that would eventually become the site of Olympias' ascetic community.

Constantine and his successors appointed Christians from the lower classes to high-ranking positions. Olympias' grandfather, Ablabius was such a Christian. Born into an obscure family, he advanced rapidly after being appointed praetorian prefect and consul in 331. One of Ablabius' daughters married the king of Armenia, and his other daughter, (Olympias' mother) married Seleucus, one of the *comites*, or companions of the emperor, a noble order created by Constantine.¹

In a span of only 68 years, Christianity moved from a persecuted minority to being declared the state religion in 380 under Emperor Theodosius I. As thousands of

Christians amassed great wealth and power, many others fled to the desert, valuing an ascetic life more than worldly power and material goods. The ascetic influence of men such as Anthony of the Desert and St. John Chrysostom was widely admired by Christians such as Olympias, who sought a deeper spiritual life than that afforded by wealth and prestige.

We have more historical documentation about Olympias than for most women in the early church. *The Life of Olympias* was written by a fifth century anonymous author. Another ancient source, *Narration Concerning St. Olympias* was written about 630 by the Sergia, the superior of Olympias' monastery and recounts miraculous events that occurred when her remains were moved back to her convent. Other early documents, Palladius' *Dialogue*, the *Lauriac History*, and *Sozomen's Church History* also give testimony about Olympias.²

Last, but far from least, are seventeen letters St. John Chrysostom wrote to her from exile. Sadly we have no documents written by Olympias herself since none of her letters to Chrysostom survived.

Early Life and Upbringing

Orphaned at an early age, Olympias' education was overseen by Theodosia, the sister of the Bishop of Iconium. Theodosia gathered a circle of pious women around her and Olympias' future community at *Hagia Sophia* may have been

inspired by her example. Olympias was well educated for a woman of her era. She undertook a serious study of Scripture, and Palladius described her as "pursuing in everything the thought of the Sacred Scripture."³

In 384 or 386, Olympias was married to an influential man named Nebridius who was appointed prefect of Constantinople in 386. The famous church father, Gregory of Nazianzen, who was bishop of Constantinople in

OLYMPIAS Greatness of Soul



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

Olympias' youth, wrote a poem on the occasion of her marriage. The poem (*Ad Olympiade*) addresses the duties and correct behavior of a Christian matron and praises Theodosia as providing a "living example" for Olympias.⁴ Nebridius was considerably older than Olympias, having a nearly full-grown son by an earlier marriage. The marriage was short-lived. He died after a period of twenty months leaving Olympias an extremely wealthy young widow.

Finding her Voice

After Nebridius' death the emperor Theodosius tried to convince Olympias to marry one of his own relatives, Elpidius, because he believed such great wealth could not be entrusted to a young woman. But Olympias refuses, telling the emperor she has a different call:

*If my King, the Lord Jesus Christ wanted me to be joined with a man, he would not have taken away my first husband immediately. Since he knew I was unsuited for the conjugal life ... he freed him, Nebridius, from the bond and delivered me of this burdensome yoke and servitude to a husband, having placed upon my mind the happy yoke of continence.*⁵

After standing up for the right to follow her own destiny, Olympias is falsely accused of reckless expenditure of her money and property. This gave the emperor a reason to place it under guardianship. He commands the new prefect of Constantinople, Clementius, to keep her possessions under guard until she turns thirty. At the behest of Elpidius, the prefect brings even more pressure on Olympias to remarry but she refuses with clever words that reveal her own priorities while putting the avaricious to shame:

*You have shown toward my humble person, O sovereign master, a goodness befitting a king and suited to a bishop, when you commanded my very heavy burden to be put under careful guard, for the administration of it caused me anxiety. But you will do even better if you order that it be distributed to the poor and to the churches, for I prayed much to avoid the vainglory arising from the apportionment, lest I neglect true riches for those pertaining to material things.*⁶

What was the creative source for Olympias' discovery of her own voice and refusal to abide by imperial conventions for women in her day? The author of the *Life of Olympias* offers us a clue. Olympias does not agree with "the apostolic rule" then widely cited to make sure young widows remarried: "I wish young widows to marry, run a household" (1Timothy 5:14). Instead her biographer cites another passage from the same source: "For the law was not laid down for the righteous man, but for the unruly, the impure and the insatiable" (1Timothy 1:9). Olympias' knowledge and love of Scripture permeates her sense of self. With simplicity she claims her own "righteousness" and quotes Scripture pointing to the importance of conscience over law.⁷ This woman is knowledgeable, wise and courageous in opposing any powers beyond her own that seek to control her or her wealth.

Ordained a Deacon and Founding a Monastery

In 391, Emperor Theodosius restored Olympias' fortune to her control. Why the change of heart? The death of the Emperor's wife, Flacilla, in 387 is the key. According to historian Peter Brown, poverty was a dangerous reality in Constantinople owing to rapid immigration from Asia Minor. It fell to the women of the noble class to serve as "intermediaries of the governing class of the city by ministering to the urban poor."⁸ Flacilla tended to the poor, visiting them in their hospitals and feeding them through special meals akin to today's soup kitchens. A year after Flacilla's death and subsequent decline in services to the poor, an ugly riot burned down Archbishop Nectarius' palace. Clearly something had to be done. By ordaining Olympias a deacon, even though she didn't meet the age criteria of 60 years, Nectarius solved a number of problems. Not least among them was regaining control of an impoverished populous by replacing the social safety net that had disappeared with his wife's demise.⁹

While political motivations may have led to her diaconal ordination, her new official status also allowed Olympias to fulfill a deep desire to use her fortune for the good of the Church and for the poor. No sooner did she regain her wealth than she began to distribute it with a prodigality unrivaled for her time. Churches in Greece, Asia Minor and Syria were given generous donations of land and money.¹⁰ Palladius testifies that her support actually maintained Archbishop Nectarius' financial needs so much that he took her advice in ecclesiastical affairs. She also made gifts to "every priest who visited the city and a host of ascetics and virgins."¹¹ The *Life* reports that Olympias donated "10 thousand pounds of gold, 20 thousand of silver and all of her real estate situated in the provinces of Thrace, Galatia, Cappadocia Prima, and Bithynia," as well as the houses belonging to her in Constantinople.¹²

Shortly after her ordination, Olympias built a large monastery close to the cathedral of *Hagia Sophia*. Here, "she enclosed her own chambermaids, numbering 50, all of whom lived in purity and virginity."¹³ In addition, three relatives, Elisanthia, Martyria, and Palladia joined her and were ordained deacons. The *Life* recounts that many other Roman women of senatorial families came to live at the monastery so that the number of women living a monastic life numbered 250 in all.

Duties as a Deacon

What were Olympias' duties as a female deacon? A late 4th century document, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, tells us that the main duty of a female deacon was the pastoral care of women. In this capacity, Olympias would have taught women in her care at the monastery, as she herself had been taught by Theodosia. She instructed women in the faith in preparation for baptism. When they were baptized, it would be her responsibility, according to the customs of the time, to undress the female catechumen, anoint her body with oil, immerse her in the baptismal waters, and rub her dry.^{14,15} The *Life* tells us about one such woman, Marina who was "Olympias' relative and spiritual daughter, whom,

as has been said, she received from the holy, undefiled, salvatory baptism.” Marina assumed leadership of the monastery after Olympias’ death.¹⁶

Friendship with St. John Chrysostom and Reform of the Church

Olympias was a confidante and benefactor of John Chrysostom who became Archbishop of Constantinople in 398 after the death of Nectarius. John was a renowned orator whose powerful sermons as Bishop of Antioch inspired the people of that city. Christianity still saw itself as a minority in Antioch, and John’s simplicity, love of the poor and ascetic lifestyle was greatly respected. When John arrived at Constantinople, his way of life proved incompatible with beliefs in the capital about wealth and the prominent social status thought to be appropriate to church leaders. Rejecting the opulent practices of his predecessor, John no longer entertained the high and mighty with lavish dinners, choosing instead to dine alone with food prepared by the women in Olympias’ monastery. According to the *Life*,

*[Olympias] prepared for the holy John his daily provisions and sent them to the bishop for there was not much separation between the Episcopal residence and the monastery, only a wall. And she did this not only before the plots against him but also after he was banished; up to the end of his life she provided for all his expenses as well as for those who were with him in his exile.*¹⁷

John made enemies among the rich and powerful of Constantinople when he persuaded Olympias to stop giving money to the wealthy and give to the poor instead. This severely restricted the free flow of funds for entertaining visiting ecclesiastical dignitaries. Founding a leper colony on the edge of a fashionable suburb further estranged John from the nouveau riche. He embarked upon a vigorous reform of the clergy by deposing bishops who had paid large sums of money for their episcopal titles, and defrocking deacons who were guilty of terrible crimes. His fiery sermons denouncing the abuses of the powerful culminated in banishment in 404 to central Asia Minor.¹⁸ Shortly after he left Constantinople, arsonists destroyed the cathedral. Pro and anti-Chrysostom factions blamed each other.

Followers of Chrysostom “were accused of arson, summoned by the authorities for investigation, tortured, and even put to death.”¹⁹

Letters from Exile

Even though she protested her innocence, Olympias herself was fined and sent into exile, probably to the city of Nicomedia. From exile she and John exchanged numerous letters of which only John’s survive. We can deduce several things about Olympias from John’s letters to her. One is that she was understandably devastated by his sufferings and by her own. But John encourages her, and one surmises himself, by writing long, reflective epistles.

In letter IV, he writes:

*Why do you lament? Why do your belabour yourself and demand of yourself a punishment which your enemies were not able to demand from you, having thus abandoned your soul to the tyranny of dejection? ... For perhaps it seemed good to God that I should be set to run the longer double course in order that the garland of victory might be rendered more glorious....”*²⁰

“She had a life without vanity, an appearance without pretence, character without affectation, intelligence without conceit, an untroubled heart and undying hope in God.”

In letter II he instructs Olympias to take care of her own health since “dejection causes sickness” and asks her to send medicine that has greatly helped him with severe vomiting. He encourages her: “Nothing, Olympias, rebounds so much to the credit of anyone as patient endurance in suffering. For this is indeed the queen of virtues....”²¹

In letter III we learn that though Olympias was “brought to the verge of death,” she has overcome her despondency and has become a source of strength for others. Chrysostom writes:

*[I am] cheered, and brightened, and not a little proud on account of your greatness of soul, and the repeated victories which you have won, and this, not only for your own sake, but also for the sake of that large and populous city (Nicomedia?) where you are like a tower, a haven and a wall of defense, speaking in the eloquent voice of example...”*²²

John Chrysostom died in the city of Comana in Asia Minor September 407, probably overcome by physical exhaustion from the rigors of his journey. The exact year of Olympias’ death is unknown, though the date is thought to be the 25th of July between 410 and 420. After her death, Olympias’ relics were revered and there were many reports of healing and miracles, which occurred through her intercession.²³

Conclusion

Olympias' unparalleled generosity in supporting both powerful bishops and the powerless poor, place her among the most well-known and loved women of her time. Her solidarity and support of John Chrysostom in working for reform of the Church is of a piece with the efforts of many other women and men in Church history. St. Phoebe and St. Paul, St. Clare and St. Francis, the male and female martyrs of El Salvador and many other women and men supported one another in working for the reign of God despite severe persecution and opposition. Perhaps the *Life* describes the source of Olympias' dedication the best: *She had a life without vanity, an appearance without pretence, character without affectation, intelligence without conceit, an untroubled heart and undying hope in God.*"²⁴



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

This essay was written by Sr. Christine Schenk, CSJ who has Master's degrees in Theology and Midwifery.

The feast day for St. Olympias is celebrated on July 25. Consider using the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

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- ¹¹Clark, 113
- ¹²Ibid. 113
- ¹³Ibid. 131.
- ¹⁴John WijnGaards, *Women Deacons in the Early Church*. (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 4.
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- ¹⁹Clark, 116.
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- ²¹Ibid.
- ²²Ibid.
- ²³*Sergia's Narration* as found in Elizabeth A Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*. (New York: Edwin Mellen Press,1979), 151.
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A Prayer Service Honoring Olympias

Celebrate Olympias on July 25 or at any other time

Opening Song: *Blest are They* (David Haas C 1985 G.I.A. Publications as found in *Gather*
Or *Companions on the Journey* vs. 1 and 3 *Today's Missal Music*. Carey Landry C 1985)

Leader: In the name of God who is both mother and father to us, of Jesus who heals and saves, and of the Holy Spirit who guides us, we gather to remember the life of Olympias the Deaconess. Olympias worked with her friend John Chrysostom to care for the poor and to reform the 4th century Church at Constantinople. Olympias supported John as he reformed the clergy by defrocking deacons guilty of heinous crimes and deposing bishops guilty of obtaining their office by simony. Olympias and John were eventually sent into exile because of their desire to see the Church reflect a God who is loving, just, and who raises up the lowly. Let us begin our celebration by asking for the gifts of perseverance and trust as we work for reform and renewal of the Church in our day.

Reading I: St. John Chrysostom Letters to Olympias Letter I [sent from John in exile to Olympias, also in exile] *To my Lady, the most reverend and divinely favored Deaconess, Olympias, I John, Bishop, send greeting in the Lord. Come now let me relieve your despondency, and disperse the thoughts, which gather this cloud of care around you. For what is it that upsets your mind, and why are you sorrowful and dejected? Is it because of the fierce black storm which has overtaken the Church, enveloping all things in darkness as of a night without a moon, and is growing to a head every day, travailing to bring forth disastrous shipwrecks, and increasing the ruin of the world? I know all this as well as you...*

Nevertheless even when I look at these calamities I do not abandon the hope of better things, considering as I do who the pilot is in all this--not one who gets the better of the storm by his art, but calms the raging waters by his rod..Nevertheless, you will say, adversity is a terrible thing and grievous to be borne. Yet look at it again compared with another image and then also learn to despise it.

For the railings, insults, and reproaches inflicted by enemies, and their plots are compared to a worn-out garment, and moth-eaten wool when God says "Fear not the reproach of human beings, neither be afraid of their revilings, for they shall wax old as does a garment, and like moth- eaten wool so shall they be consumed." Therefore let none of these things which are happening trouble you, but...persistently call upon Jesus, whom you serve, merely to bow his head; and in a moment of time all these evils will be dissolved.

But if you have already called upon Him, and yet they have not been dissolved, such is the manner of God's dealing...; God does not put down evils at the outset, but when they have grown to a head, when scarcely any form of the enemy's malice remains ungratified, then suddenly God converts all things to a state of tranquility and conducts them to an unexpected settlement. For the God who is Love, is not only able to turn as many things as we expect and hope, to good, but many more, yes infinitely more.

Psalm: Holy is Your Name/Luke 1:46-55 (Music *Wilde Mountain Thyme*, Irish traditional arr by David Haas (1989 GIA) as found in *Gather*)

Refrain: And holy is your name, through all generations! Everlasting is your mercy to the people you have chosen, and holy is your name.

Reading II: Matthew 23 [selected texts] 23 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: "The religious leaders have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on peoples' shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.

But woe to you, religious leaders, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. "Woe to you, religious leaders, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to human beings, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise people and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, "Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not."

Wisdom Sharing: *At this time a brief reflection on the readings and the life of Olympias may be given or, if a small group, participants may share their own reflections after a time of silence.*

Suggested reflection questions:

- Do you see any parallels in the Church of Olympias' time and the Church of our day?
- What do you make of Matthew's account of Jesus' harsh criticism of the religious leaders in first century Israel?
- Can you recall other examples in Church history of women and men supporting each other in the work of reform and renewal of the Church? How about examples today?

Leader: Let us take time to voice aloud what gift or grace we ask of God for ourselves, for another or for the world. (*Once everyone has finished, begin the sung refrain and prayer for our Church below*)

Refrain: *If you believe and I believe And we together pray, The Holy Spirit must come down And set God's people free, And set God's people free, And set God's people free; The Holy Spirit must come down, And set God's people free.* [Zimbabwean Traditional Hymn found in Gather]

A Prayer for our Church (*If a small group, have each person take a phrase. If a large group, have a different person read each section*)

Leader: *Let us pray for deliverance of the Church:*
from its own infidelities
from those who would make the church captive to a cause
from the wrath of its own righteousness
from images of God that it has made into idols
from the disease of power and privilege
from the delusions of celebrity
from sins of too quickly forgetting and too long remembering

Refrain: *If you believe and I believe ...*

Leader: *Lead us as a Church once again into the wilderness:*
Pilgrim and penitent, an insecure, wandering, rag-tag, remnant, who have only one Hope
Tent makers, at whose hearth anyone may find a home
People whose midwives can dance before the altar or lead a revolution against the Pharaoh
Orphans, who have made a Dwelling for the Love of God, where all flesh and creatures of earth my touch, heal and hallow one another
Community where each can be all things to each.

Refrain: *If you believe and I believe ...*

Leader: *Bless this ancient timbered Ark wherein we shall strive two by two-or perish in the threatening flood of hatred, ignorance, and violence.*

Two by two we shall live or die
Jew and Greek,
Slave and free,
Black and white, East and West, North and South
Arab and Israeli, Hispanic and Anglo, the right and the left.
The haves and the have-nots, and most of all
Man and woman, women and men

Refrain: *If you believe and I believe ...*

Leader: *We are descendants of Magdalen and Paul, Peter and Martha, Olympias and John. Let us meet in Jerusalem the city of peace. Let us confront Peter and James and our sisters and brothers.*

All in unison: *Reconciliation is not some distant reincarnation, worlds apart, eons away, the substance of our hope only. It is kenosis, and resurrection, here and now, the fruit of bittersweet, but life-giving struggle. Let us pray. Let us greet each other as saints. Let us speak to one another. Let us hear one another. Amen*

(Prayer by Madonna Kolbenschlag HM mildly adapted by Chris Schenk CSJ)

Closing song: *The Summons* (Text John L. Bell b. 1949, 1987, Iona Community, GIA Publications, Tune, KelvinGrove, Scottish traditional as found in *Gather*.) Or *Companions on the Journey* vs. 1 and 3 (*Carey Landry 1985 Today's Missal Music*)

This prayer service was created by Sr. Christine Schenk CSJ. Schenk is the Executive Director of FutureChurch and has Master's degrees in theology and midwifery.

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WOMEN DEACONS: WHY NOT NOW?

A Project to Restore Women Deacons in the Catholic 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.

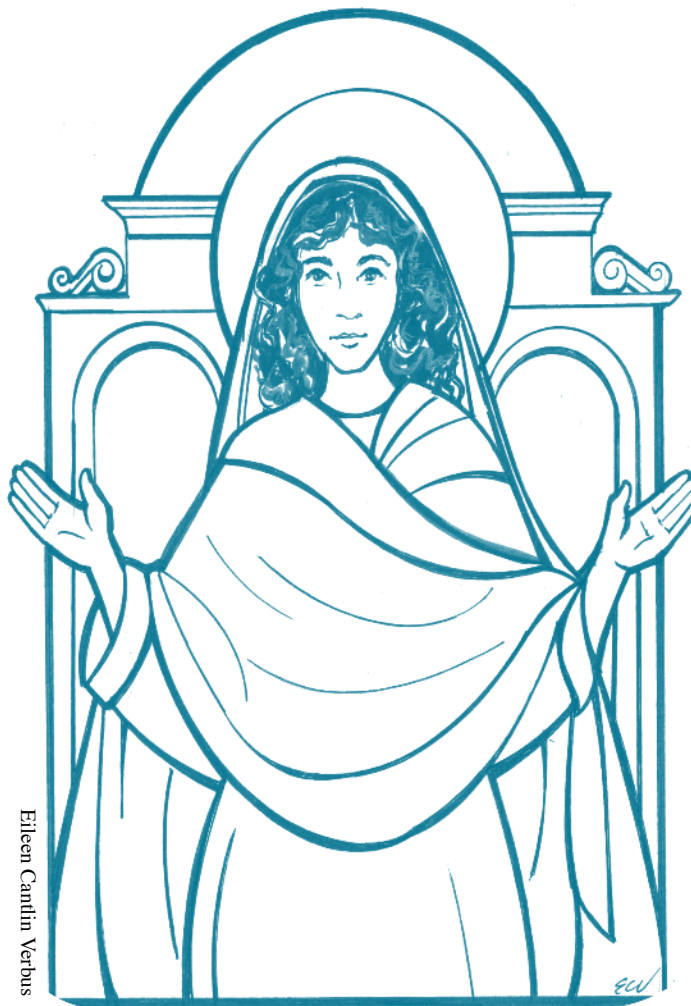
Cyril of Scythopolis, a sixth century historian, provides the only documentation of Dionysia's life as part of *The Life of St. Euthymius*. As a young man Cyril met St. Sabas and left home for the eremitical life at the age of 18. Cyril spent some time in Jerusalem and lived as a hermit near the Jordan 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.¹

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."² 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.

DIONYSIA of Melitene



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.”³ 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.

Since she was devoted to God and the things of God, he ordained her Deacon of the Holy Church.

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.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶

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.”⁷

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.

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.”⁸ 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.⁹ 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.

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.

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.

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Eileen Cantlin Verbus

This essay was written by Elizabeth England, Program Coordinator at FutureChurch. She has a Master of Arts in Religious Studies.

Dionysia of Melitene taught her son the virtues that led him to be remembered as the visionary leader St. Euthymius the Great, whose feast day is celebrated January 20. Consider using the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

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A Prayer Service Honoring
Dionysia of Melitene
Celebrate Dionysia on January 20 or at any other time.

Create an altar with a vessel of water at its centerpiece

Opening Song: *Eye Has Not Seen* (Marty Haugen, 1982, GIA Publications, Inc.)
God of Day and God of Darkness (Marty Haugen, 1985, GIA Publications, Inc.)

Welcome and Opening Prayer:

Leader:

Welcome! We gather to celebrate the life of Dionysia, a life marked by profound and painful yearning, by sudden reversals both joyful and sorrowful, and by responding deeply to God's call to liberating ministry within her community.

O God, we yearn! To know your Presence in times of darkness. To experience your tender Love. To hear your Word when none other rings true. Let your justice and mercy rain down like water. O God, we yearn!

Psalm 30

Antiphon (All): Like the deer that yearns for flowing streams, so my soul is longing for you, my God.

Side 1: I will praise you, O God, you have rescued me and have not let evil triumph over me.

O God, I cried to you for help
and you have healed me.

You have raised my soul from the dead,
restored me to life from among
those gone down to the grave

Side 2: We sing praises to you, we your people, and give thanks to your holy name.

For your anger lasts but a moment,
your favors for a lifetime.

At night there may be weeping,
but joy comes with the morning

Side 1: I said to myself in my prosperity, - "Nothing will ever disturb me."

By your favor, O God,
you have made me strong as a mountain;
when you hide your face, I am dismayed

Side 2: O God, to you I cried,
to you I make supplication;
"What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the grave?
Can dust praise you, or tell of your
faithfulness?"

All: Glory to you, Source of All Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit

Introduction to the Reading:

Leader:

Dionysia stands in a long lineage of women whose experience of sudden reversal leads to creative partnership with God and ever deepening discipleship and service to their community. We recall specifically our matriarchs, Sarah and Hannah and our first disciples, Elizabeth and Mary. Today, we listen to Elizabeth Johnson's study of Mary and Elizabeth's meeting in the Gospel of Luke in her book *Dangerous Memories*.

Reading:

...Elizabeth's exuberant praise shouted with unrestrained joy joins Mary to solidarity with a long heritage of women whose creative action, undertaken in the power of the Spirit, brings liberation in God's name. Moreover, this blessing weds her historic pregnancy to her faith, again depicting her as someone who hears the word of God and acts upon it even in her own body. A Spirit-filled woman, she exudes blessings on others. What emerges with undoubted clarity from their interaction is women's ability to interpret God's word for other women.

Mary's song is the prayer of a poor woman. She proclaims God's great news with her whole being because the Holy One of Israel, regarding her low estate, has done great things for her. The term for lowliness, *tapeinōsis* in Greek, describes misery, pain, persecution and oppression. The approach of the reign of God will disturb the order of the world run by the arrogant, the hard of heart, the oppressor. Through God's action, the social hierarchy of wealth and poverty, power and subjugation, is to be turned upside down. Jubilation breaks out as the proud are scattered and the mighty are pulled from their thrones while the lowly are exalted and mercy in the form of food fills the bellies of the hungry. All will be well and all manner of thing will be well, because God's mercy, pledged in covenant love, is faithful through every generation.

Reflection: *Questions for group reflection:*

What are your deepest yearnings for yourself, for your church, for our society and our world?

Have you experienced a sudden reversal in life? How did it impact your understanding of God and of your faith?

How are you called into service for the reign of God? How are we called as a people of God?

Canticle of Mary

Side 1: My Soul proclaims your greatness, O my God, and my spirit has rejoiced in you, My Savior,

Side 2: For your regard has blessed me,
poor, and a serving woman.

Side 1: From this day all generations
will call me blessed,

Side 2 For you who are mighty, have made me great. Most Holy be your Name.

Side 1: Your mercy is on those who fear you
throughout all generations.

Side 2: You have shown strength with your arm,
You have scattered the proud in their hearts' fantasy.

Side 1: You have put down the mighty from their seat, and have lifted up the powerless.

Side 2: You have filled the hungry with good things, and have sent the rich away empty.

Side 1: You, remembering your mercy,

have helped your people Israel,

Side 2: As you promised Abraham and Sarah.
Mercy to their children, forever.

All: Glory to you, Source of All Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.

Closing Prayer and Sprinkling Rite

Leader: God's love and mercy rains down like dew upon the grass! Go forth to love and serve the our God!

All: Thanks be to God!

Closing Song: Canticle of the Turning (*Rory Cooney, 1990, GIA Publications, Inc.*)

This prayer service was created by Karen Flotte. Like most women, Karen balances many roles including mother and wife, consultant, writer and theologian. Her passion for justice and for women's empowerment infuses her work. She holds a M.A. from Aquinas Institute of Theology and served as Executive Director of Mary's Pence for 7 years.

Psalm, Canticle of Mary, Antiphon and Glory Be from *Companion to the Breviary, The Liturgy of the Hours with Inclusive Language*, Carmelites of Indianapolis, 1999.

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WOMEN DEACONS: WHY NOT NOW?

A Project to Restore Women Deacons in the Catholic 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.¹ 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.

RADEGUND of Gaul



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

*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.²*

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, Radegund 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."³ 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.⁴

Reluctant Queen

In 538 Radegund 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 Radegund nor Guntheuc had children by Clothar though he later fathered seven sons and two daughters by three other wives.

Radegund 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, Radegund 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.

Radegund 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, Radegund did not submit to his tyranny.

Consecrated Deacon

Radegund 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, Radegund sought help from the bishop of Noyon, Medard, himself a close friend and advisor of Clothar. Medard tried to send Radegund 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.⁵

As a married woman Radegund 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.

Thunderstruck by that argument, he laid his hand on her and consecrated her a deaconess.⁵

Carolyn Osiek believes Radegund'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 6th century, women were still put in office."⁶

The role of a female deacon had close ties to religious orders. These women served female catechumens, the poor, sick, and imprisoned. Radegund'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."⁷ 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."⁸ 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 6th 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.¹⁰*

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."¹¹ 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."¹² She pushed herself to be better, to be an example of good works, and though "she was merciful to others, she judged herself."¹³ 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."¹⁴ Surely, God had come to dwell within her.

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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.

This essay was written by Elizabeth England, Program Coordinator at FutureChurch.
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The feast day for St. Radegund of Gaul is celebrated August 13. Consider using the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

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A Prayer Service Honoring Radegund

Celebrate Radegund on August 13th or at any other time.

Create an altar space with an unlit candle and crucifix or cross, if possible keep the light dim at first have an unlit taper at hand for each participant.

Welcome and Introduction:

Leader:

We gather today to remember Radegund's life, a life torn apart by violence, by war, by bondage. We begin in silent contemplation.

Radegund's Lament *(After 3-5 minutes of silence the lament is read.)*

Leader:

Oh, sad state of war, malevolent destiny
That fells proud kingdoms in a sudden slide!
The rooves that stood so long in happiness are broken
To lie fallen beneath the vast charred ruin.

I, the barbarian woman, seek not to count these tears,
Nor to keep afloat in the melancholy lake of all those drops.
Each one had her own tears: I alone have them all,
Anguish is private and public both to me.
Fate was kind to those whom the enemy has struck down.
I, the sole survivor, must weep for them all.

Lighting of the Christ Candle

All: The cross of Christ is the only source of light that is bright enough to illumine affliction.
(Simone Weil)

Reader: In Christ, Radegund found liberation, a deep call to ministry, and the courage to break the bond of oppression. From the ashes, Radegund crafted a life dedicated to participation in God's work of mercy and justice in the world. Together with women who also clung to life transforming hope, Radegund created an oasis of peace and healing in her time.

Song: How Can I Keep from Singing? *(Robert Lowry, 1957, Sanga Music, Inc.)*

Psalm of Praise: Psalm 118

Side 1: We give thanks to you, for you are good
and your steadfast love endures forever.
Let the descendants of Israel say:
"Your steadfast love endures forever."
Let the descendants of Aaron say:
"Your steadfast love endures forever."
Let those who fear you say: --
"Your steadfast love endures forever."

Side 2: In my distress, I called to you;
you answered me and set me free.
With you at my side I do not fear.
What can anyone do against me?
You are at my side to help me;
I shall withstand all evildoers.

Side 1: It is better to take refuge in you,
than to trust in people;
it is better to take refuge in you
than to trust in our leaders.

Side 2: All wickedness surrounded me;
in your name I crushed it.
It surrounded me, surrounded me on
every side;
in your name I cut it off.
It surrounded me like bees;
it blazed like a fire among thorns.
In your name I crushed it.

Side 1: Open to me the gates of justice,
that I may enter and give thanks.
This is your gate, O God'
the just shall enter through it.
I thank you for you have answered me;
you alone are my salvation.

Side 2: The stone which the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
This is your doing, O God,
it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day which you have made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Side 1: Save us, we beseech you, O God!
O God, grant us success.
Blessed are those who enter
in your holy name.
For you O God, are our God,
and you have given us light.

Side 2: Let us go forward in procession
with branches
up to your holy altar.
You are my God, I thank you.
You are my God, I praise you.
We give thanks to you for you are good;
and your steadfast love endures forever

All: Glory to you, Source of All Being.

Introduction to the Reading:

Reader:

Like Radegund, Catherine of Siena lived and sought to minister in a time of great turmoil, economic upheaval, war and plague. In her 2001 Madeleva Lecture entitled, *Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today*, Mary Catherine Hilbert explores the mystery of God's work in the world in the face of suffering humanity and our response to it.

Reading:

In those and other profiles in courage, women, men and children found they could no longer be silent in the face of events that violate human dignity and the integrity of creation. In those fundamental experiences of injustice or radical human suffering that Edward Schillebeeckx has called “negative contrast experiences,” one can only cry out in protest.¹

Sometimes the words of protest are the only words we can speak clearly in the race of complex forces of evil woven into the fabric of our lives and world. We cannot always see or name the way forward. Further, no liberation front or political or social program can be identified with the reign of God. But even the cry of protest is a word of grace that moves us to resistance and to searching for another way. The beginning of finding a new path is speaking the truth of what clearly is not God’s will for human life or for the church. But for experiences of negativity to be contrast, rather than mere confirmation of life’s absurdity and harshness, one must have had at least fragmentary moments of meaning, love, and joy. It is precisely the life and love we have known, the compassion of God we have tasted, that prompts us to say that life could be different, that peace is possible, that relationships can be mended. Likewise it is the experience and promise of a welcoming community, a shared table, and the unconditional forgiveness of God, that sustains our commitment to become more fully the body of Christ and to call the body as a whole to be more of a sacrament of salvation in our world. Our hopes are shaped by the stories and rituals that form the horizons of our imaginations.²

On the contrary, she operated out of what Schillebeeckx has called “grace-optimism” – the conviction that despite all the evidence to the contrary, God’s Spirit of mercy is at work in our world and in our lives, empowering us to be ministers of compassion and healing.³

Reflection: *Questions for group reflection:*

What realities in your life, our country, our church, our world, make you cry out in protest?

How do you find the path of “grace-optimism” opening even as you cry out?

What are the signs of God’s Spirit of mercy at work in our world?

How are you empowered to be a minister of compassion and healing?

How are we, as the People of God called to ministry?

Canticle of Zechariah

Side 1: Blessed are you, God of Israel
for you have visited and redeemed your people,
and have raised up horn of salvation for us
in the house of your servant.

Side 2: As you spoke through the mouths of
your holy prophets from of old,
that we should be saved from our
enemies, and from the hand of all who oppress us;

Side 1: to perform the mercy promised to our
ancestors, and to remember your holy covenant,

Side 2: the oath you swore to Abraham
and Sarah, to grant us deliverance from evil,
that we might serve you without fear, in holiness and righteousness
all the days of our lives.

Side 1: And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Holy One
to prepare God’s ways,

Side 2: to give knowledge of salvation to God’s people in the forgiveness of their sins,

Side 1: through the tender mercy of our God
when the day shall dawn upon us from
on high

Side 2: to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet in to the way of peace.

All: Glory to you, Source of All Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.
Closing Prayer and Receiving the Light of Christ (*as the light is passed to each*)

Leader: Receive the Light of Christ! Go forth to love and Serve our God!

All: Thanks be to God!

Closing Song: *We are Called* (David Haas, 1988, GIA Publications, Inc.)

This prayer service was created by Karen Flotte. Like most women, Karen Flotte balances many roles including mother and wife, consultant, writer and theologian. Her passion for justice and for women's empowerment infuses her work. She holds a M.A. from Aquinas Institute of Theology and served as Executive Director of Mary's Pence for 7 years.

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A woman at the altar?

The issue of women priests may be a settled matter, but that doesn't mean a woman can't serve the church as a deacon.

Celebrating the opening of the archives of her work on women in the diaconate at Loyola University Chicago's Gannon Center for Women and Leadership, scholar Phyllis Zagano minced no words about the topic that has been her life's project: "Women as deacons is not a concept for the future. Women as deacons is a concept for the present, for today."

With women's ordination being a sensitive topic in Catholic circles, Zagano carefully lays out her argument for restoring what for many centuries was an official role of women in the ancient church, rejecting a "slippery slope" argument that claims women deacons would mean eventual women priests. "We have this misunderstanding that the diaconate is only a step on the way to priesthood," she says. "The diaconate is a separate vocation, and one doesn't imply the other."

Despite her advocacy Zagano doesn't think every bishop needs to ordain women as deacons tomorrow, noting that some dioceses still don't ordain men to the permanent diaconate. "One bishop may feel he needs women deacons; another bishop may feel he doesn't," she says. "But if the archbishop of Chicago thought he needed women as deacons, why would he not be allowed to have them?"

If anything, Zagano says, women deacons are worth a try. "As I said to [New York] Cardinal John O'Connor 20 years ago, 'I'll give you my life as an experiment. Just see what happens.'"

*The editors interview
Phyllis Zagano*

What obstacles are there in current church teaching or law that would prevent the ordination of a woman as a deacon?

The principal obstacle is that women have not been ordained as deacons in the Western church for at least 800 years. In current canon law women cannot be ordained as anything. It's as simple as that.

There is a collision between the tradition of the church and the law of the church on this question. What is admitted by all sides—both those for and against it—is that it's an open question.

I'm confident in saying that because the most recent discussion coming from the Vatican about this topic is a 72-page study document by the International Theological Commission, which had one conclusion: It's up to the magisterium, the teaching authority of the church, to decide.

In New York in the late 1980s I was at a meeting with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and discussed the issue with him briefly. He said, "It's under study."

To my mind the study has just gone on too long. So I think the biggest obstacle is inertia, and perhaps a misunderstanding of the diaconate and how women in the diaconate could further the objective need for greater evangelization.



Meaghan Murphy-Gill

Phyllis Zagano

Senior Research Associate-in-Residence and Adjunct Professor of Religion, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York

Author, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, and Future* with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig (Paulist Press, 2012), and *Women & Catholicism: Gender, Communion, and Authority* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011)

Some say that if women can't be ordained priests, they can't be ordained deacons. What's the connection between those two?

What used to be called the “progression of orders”—deacon, priest, and bishop—developed late in the history of the church, and it isn't helpful today. It's better to understand the deacon as one of the arms of the bishop; the other arm is the priest. They are separate orders in the church.

One doesn't imply the other. When you ordain a man a permanent deacon today, there's no expectation that he would become a priest. A deacon is not a priest. The diaconate is a separate vocation, one that was lived by men and women in the ancient church, and is lived today by men.

But isn't there a fear that if you ordained a woman as a deacon, you could ordain her a priest, too?

I wrote a book called *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate* (Crossroad) at the request of my old boss, Cardinal John O'Connor of New York. I brought my outline to him, and I think I had six points.

He said, “Phyllis, if you've proved a woman can be ordained a deacon, you've proved she can be ordained a priest.” I said, “Eminence, I'm not allowed to talk about women priests. Why are you bringing that up?” He said, “Oh, that's very good. Make that point three.”

The cardinal was very clear in that discussion that the slippery slope was a fear of Rome. I simply say ordaining women as priests is just not the teaching of our church. But that doesn't mean a woman isn't ordainable.

To say that a woman is not ordainable and cannot serve *in persona Christi*—as a deacon, in the person of Christ the servant—is to argue against the incarnation.

The important thing is not that Christ became male. It's that Christ became human. If we say that a woman cannot live *in persona Christi*, I think we're making a terribly negative comment about the female gender.

That is the so-called iconic argument against women in the priesthood: You have to be male to represent Jesus. That argument is no longer used. The argument church teaching uses today is the argument from authority, which is that Christ called forth only men as apostles.

That is what Pope John Paul II said in 1994, that the church does not have the authority to ordain a woman as a priest, because Christ did not choose women for membership among the Twelve.

And that doesn't apply to women deacons?

The argument from authority doesn't hold for women deacons because in Acts

the first seven who are generally understood as the first deacons were called forth by the apostles, not by Christ. They were put forward by the people of the church and received a laying on of hands from the apostles. Further, the only person in all of scripture who has the job title “deacon” is Phoebe, a woman.

The argument from authority against ordaining women as priests is actually an argument for ordaining women as deacons. I don’t think you can accept one and not the other.

How do bishops respond when you suggest ordaining women as deacons?

When I ask them to ordain me, they always say they want to keep their jobs. That’s a change in the response. It used to be, “That can’t happen.”

I think it’s more important to look through the eyes of the bishop as he looks at the needs of the diocese and how they are being fulfilled by whatever cadre of ordained or other ministers he calls forth. That, to me, is the bottom line on the need for women to be ordained: the needs of the church.

We have in the United States 35,000 lay ecclesial ministers, of whom something like 80 or 85 percent are women. We have in the United States about 16,500 permanent deacons, most of whom are married men.

But of the women who minister in the church, none has the particular relationship between herself and her ministry and the bishop. So she’s not exactly an arm of the bishop. She’s literally at arm’s length from the bishop as a lay ecclesial minister.

Many dioceses have wonderful programs of certifying lay ecclesial ministers. But with the diaconate, there’s a specific progression of formation—the spiritual, the human, the intellectual, and the pastoral—that is under the control of the bishop. So if a woman is then trained by the bishop in his program and is formed spiritually, humanly, intellec-

tually, and pastorally, then in ordaining her the bishop is certifying, in a way, that he trusts her.

What are some more specific needs that a female deacon might meet?

A bishop may find that he needs women to provide for the charity of the church. A need of the church—and an ancient task of the woman deacon—was to be the intermediary between the women of the church and the bishop. She would bring the needs of the women to the bishop. Alternatively, she would bring the teachings of the bishop to women.

When a Syrian bishop was writing in the fourth century about needing women deacons, he used an interesting verb to explain why. He said it was unseemly for women to uncover, divulge, or disclose themselves before men.

You can take that to mean it’s unseemly for women to undress at baptism before men, and women deacons did assist in the baptism of women. But it could also mean that it’s unseemly for women to expose themselves personally to men in certain situations.

I think of women as spiritual directors and counselors, as well as in hospital and prison ministry. In those situations a woman deacon would bring the pastoral concern of the bishop directly to the women in need.

In addition, there are many women who are judges on marriage tribunals. If a layperson is a judge on a marriage tribunal, for example, that layperson can have a vote. But a layperson who writes an individual judgment in a church proceeding cannot sign it. She has to run down the hall and get a cleric to sign it. The same applies to diocesan chancellors. But if those women were deacons, they would be clerics, able to act on their own.

Can’t any layperson do most of this ministry?

A layperson can lead a communion service in a nursing home. But there is a distinction, and the reason we have

ordination is because the bishop is ordering the individual to stand in on his behalf.

I don’t think it’s a difference in the actual ministry. There’s a difference in the minister. And to my mind a great deal of it is in formation and training.

Think of rural areas. If you’re going to send somebody out in rural North Dakota, that person is going to go out with only the training he or she received. If the bishop were deciding whom to send, I think he’d rather send somebody he has trained and ordained, because he can remove that person’s faculties, too.

It’s also sacramental. In the parish you have people who are being prepared for marriage. It’s usually the priest who is going to preside at the wedding, but many times the marriage intake is done by a lay ecclesial minister who cannot be the church’s official witness at the wedding. But a deacon is an ordinary minister of the sacrament of marriage, and a female deacon could preside at the wedding.

How would a woman deacon change the Catholic experience of Sunday Mass?

An ordained person is a public minister of the church. When I go to my parish, there’s a huge rotation of lay ecclesial ministers and volunteers, altar servers, acolytes, lectors, ministers of the Eucharist. There’s no direct symbolism to that.

A deacon is vested in the dalmatic and is a stable personality in the parish. And so there’s the symbolic understanding or a symbolic representation of a woman up there on the altar as a recognized, trained, ordained minister. I think that there’s a real difference.

The deacon is also charged to live a life of prayer and, as a cleric, is required to celebrate morning and evening prayer, to make an annual retreat, to have a spiritual director, to have a confessor. There’s a whole different way that the personality is formed, and that’s the spiritual forma-

The principal issue this question circles on is simply: Is a woman made in the image and likeness of God?

tion. It's not just a function. It's an identity rooted in prayer.

I think there can be a qualitative distinction in the personality who is a public figure in the parish, is publicly available, has given her life to the people of God, and is approachable. I can't see myself approaching any of the lectors or lay ecclesial ministers I have with a question about God or the church.

But why not just continue to expand lay ministry?

I think we might be confusing status with office. There are people who have the office or the job of pastoral associate who are laypeople. Those laypeople work for the pastor. Typically they are trained and formed as lay ecclesial ministers. They cannot function ceremonially at the altar except as lectors and acolytes and leaders of music.

To my mind, it would be another step if the pastoral associate who's been running the soup kitchen all week long can wear the vestments of a deacon, proclaim the gospel, and preach about helping the poor. It connects the dots.

How might the ordination of a woman as a deacon happen?

All a bishop has to do is ask for derogation from the law, as recommended in a 1995 document of the Canon Law Society of America, which parsed how it could happen. You need derogation from the law to install a woman as an acolyte, derogation from the law to install a woman as a lector, and derogation from the law to ordain a woman as a deacon.

I think that bishops could ask for a regional permission in the United States or even a sub-regional permission—for certain dioceses or archdioceses—to train women and then ordain them as deacons.

I think we could experiment. We

could see how it works. If it works in your region, maybe other regions will adopt it. If it doesn't work in your region, maybe other regions won't adopt it.

Are there any more official developments on this issue?

There's a lot of discussion in the Orthodox churches in the United States and stretching to Constantinople. His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople has said he thinks that the Orthodox churches could return to this ancient tradition of ordaining women as deacons.

The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Orthodox Church of Greece can ordain women as deacons. And the Holy See recognizes the validity of the sacraments and orders of those churches.

In the United States there are discussions in dioceses where several women are in touch with their bishops and formation directors discussing this matter, asking to be considered as candidates even though they can't be officially considered. Some of them are mirroring the deacon formation programs by attending Catholic master of divinity programs. And two in particular I can think of are in touch with their bishops and the deacon formation people, and have spiritual directors from the deacon formation list, and they are going forward.

These are professional women between the ages of 35 and 50 with children, supportive husbands, some of them working in Catholic ministries or locations, and some of them volunteering in their churches, being put forth by their parishes in one case.

Would ordaining women as deacons make a statement about the equality of women?

I think the world outside the church is asking, "What exactly is your problem?"

In 1995 I was a guest of the Archdiocese of New York on what is called a shooters' platform for photographers in Central Park at the papal Mass. That made me the closest woman to the pope. All around was a sea of priests waiting to give out communion. I thought: This is ridiculous. What does this look like?

When you see a papal Mass on television, it supports, to my mind, a mentality that argues women shouldn't be seen or heard. In some countries that is true—the very countries where the gospel is most necessary, where the new evangelization could help raise women to a greater dignity. It is in those countries, when they see this picture of only men, that their concept of women is reinforced. I think it's a negative image, and it's one that has to change.

Do you think the current pope is at all open to the possibility of women deacons?

In March 2006, when Pope Benedict XVI was speaking to the priests of the diocese of Rome, a priest asked him about women in governance and ministry. The pope said it was proper to ask if the church could offer "more positions of responsibility" to women. And I believe he indicated he thought it would be a good thing to have more women in governance and ministry.

Governance and ministry, technically, can only be performed by the ordained. To me, he was clearly speaking about the possibility of women deacons.

The principal issue this question circles on is simply: Is a woman made in the image and likeness of God? Well, I'm here to tell you, this is what Jesus looks like. They need to understand that and they need to represent that on the altar.

Until a woman deacon is standing at the altar with the pope, proclaiming the gospel, it's not going to be heard. It's not so much that we need new evangelization; we need new evangelizers. The message is lost because of the messengers. **USC**

WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?



Phyllis Zagano, Ph.D., is Senior Research Associate-in-Residence and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Hofstra University. Dr. Zagano is the author or editor of seventeen books in religious studies, including *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church* (Crossroad, 2000), winner of Catholic Press Association and College Theology Society Annual Book Awards.

Italy's oldest periodicals and the only one whose text is approved by the Vatican's state department.¹ The papal interview, translated into several languages and printed in sixteen Jesuit journals, caught the attention of the major Spanish daily newspaper *El País*,² 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."³ He repeated that phrase when speaking before the Pontifical Council for Culture's February 2015 plenary assembly on women in the church.⁴ 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 roles⁵—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.

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

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



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.

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,⁶ 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.⁷

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."⁸ 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.

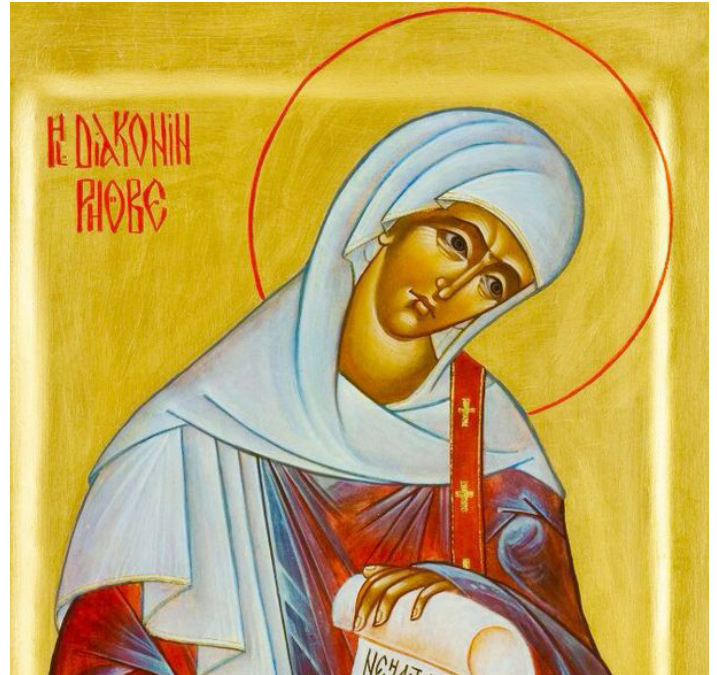
An interesting argument from the first document on women priests (*Inter Insigniores*) is not in the second: the so-called iconic argument, which states that a person must be male in order to represent Christ. Yet, if one holds that all people are made in the image and likeness of God and that Christ 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.⁹ 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 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.



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

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹²

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."¹³ But if priesthood is the problem barring women from a "more incisive presence in the Church," the diaconate is the solution.

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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.
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.
6. *Acta et odocumenta Concilio oecumenico Vaticano II apparando, series prima (anteprapparatoria)* (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.
9. Written and originally printed in French, then Italian and English, the document is now published in nine languages online, at 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.
13. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 104.


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WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?



Archbishop Paul-André Durocher (Gatineau, Quebec) delivered this intervention on October 6, 2015 at the Ordinary Synod on the Family in Rome. Durocher is also former president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Full Text of Archbishop Paul-André Durocher's Intervention at the 2015 Ordinary Synod on the Family¹

On the third day of the Synod, we listened to the interventions of members who wanted to talk about various points mentioned in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. I chose to talk about number 29, regarding the role of women. Since nearly the complete text has already appeared on the Internet (I do not know who leaked the content), I think it is good that I offer it to you its entirety. Here it is:

The latest statistics from the World Health Organization show this disturbing fact: even today, nearly a third of women worldwide are victims of domestic violence.

Yet in *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope St. John Paul II issued a strong appeal: "I ask that vigorous and incisive pastoral action be taken by all to overcome [offenses against the dignity of women] definitively."

Unfortunately, more than thirty years later, women continue to face discrimination and violence at the hands of men, including their spouses.

Faced with this sad and dramatic reality, I suggest that this Synod clearly states that a proper interpretation of Scripture can never justify male domination over women. In particular, this Synod should affirm that the passages where St. Paul speaks of the woman's submission to her husband do not justify male domination over women, much less violence towards her.

But we must go further. To clearly show the world the equal dignity of women and men in the Church, we should take up the suggestion of Pope Benedict XVI in his March 2006

address to the Roman clergy, when he said: "It is right to ask whether in ministerial service – despite the fact that here Sacrament and charism are the two ways in which the Church fulfills herself – it might be possible to make more room, to give more offices of responsibility to women."

I propose three other courses of action for this Synod.

That this Synod considers the possibility of granting to married men and women, well-trained and accompanied, permission to speak in homilies at Mass in order to show the link between the Word proclaimed and the lives of spouses and parents.

That in order to recognize the equal capacity of women to assume decision-making positions in the Church, the Synod recommends the appointment of women to positions they are able to occupy in the Roman Curia and in our diocesan curias.

Finally, concerning the permanent diaconate, that this Synod recommends the establishment of a process that could eventually open to women access to this order, which, as tradition says, is directed *non ad sacerdotium, sed ad ministerium* ["not to priesthood, but to ministry"].

¹ The full text -- in its original French -- is available on Archbishop Durocher's blog at <http://chanteetmarche.blogspot.it/2015/10/jour-3-synode.html>. Translated into English by Barry Hudock and retrieved from <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/canadian-archbishops-full-remarks-synod-women-deacons>



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WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?



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/archbishop-durocher-address-violence-against-women-empower-women-church>

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.

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,



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).

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.



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[Date]

The Most Reverend [Bishop's full name]
[Bishop's Office Street Address]
[Bishop's Office City, State, Zip]

Dear Arch/Bishop [Last Name],

I am writing today to express my hope that our local Church would one day be able to call forth both men and women to serve as ordained deacons in the ministries of liturgy, word and charity.

Jesus has entrusted the Church with the mission to embody and proclaim the Good News of the love and mercy of God to all nations. In this corner of the world, our local Church has both great missionary opportunities and formidable pastoral challenges. We need the gifts of every Catholic to serve this mission.

[Credential: Write about your Catholic identity and practice]

Over the years, I have grown in the conviction that we need to hear the voices of women and married couples from the pulpit. We need to recognize the gifts of women for sacramental ministry, like presiding at baptisms and marriages. If women could be ordained as deacons, it would create an opportunity (outside of religious life) for women to make a life commitment to the Church, and it would expand your resources for the mission of the local Church by allowing you to train, ordain and give faculties to women.

Some bishops are already raising the question. In October 2015, for example, Archbishop Paul-André Durocher of Gatineau, Quebec, the recent president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, encouraged the Synod of Bishops to establish a process "that could eventually open to women access to this order."

I encourage you to join his voice in supporting a serious discernment of this possibility. Please write to Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, or to members of the Administrative Committee, or the committees on doctrine, clergy or ecumenism, to request that this topic be discussed at a future meeting of the Conference. With this letter, I have attached two pages of what I consider essential information about the ordination of women as deacons.

The people are hungry. Let us give them something to eat.

I am grateful for your prayerful consideration of the possibility of women deacons. If I can be of any assistance to you, please let me know. Meanwhile I will continue to pray for you and your ministry as our shepherd.

In Christ,

[Signature]

[Your name]

[Your contact information]

For Discernment: The Ordination of Women as Deacons

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council recognized “there are men who actually carry out the functions of the deacon’s office” and thus “it is only right to strengthen them by the imposition of hands which has come down from the Apostles, and to bind them more closely to the altar, that they may carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate” (*Ad gentes*, 16). Today the same is true of many women in the Church who lead parishes and serve as catechists and chaplains and in other ministries.

In response to missionary opportunities and pastoral needs, the Church needs a full and open discernment – trusting in the Holy Spirit – about whether local Churches should be able to call forth both men and women as deacons for the *diaconia* of liturgy, word and charity.

The diaconate is not the priesthood. It is a proper and distinct ministry in the Church. In the one Sacrament of Holy Orders, there exists unity and distinction. The Catechism explains: “Bishops and priests receive the mission and faculty (‘the sacred power’) to act *in persona Christi Capitis* [in the person of Christ the Head]; deacons receive the strength to serve the People of God in the *diaconia* of liturgy, word and charity, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate.” (No. 875)

History

Scripture. The only person in Scripture with the title “deacon” is Phoebe (*Rm* 16:1), and the First Letter to Timothy lists characteristics of women who are deacons (3:8-11). A majority of Christian scholars for a thousand years believed women deacons were sanctioned by Scripture and had an apostolic foundation.

Tradition. Women deacons were ordained in the West until the 12th century, and still exist today in the East. Women deacons were sacramentally ordained by bishops in the sanctuary with an epiclesis and the laying on of hands. The Council of Chalcedon (451) required women deacons to be 40 and celibate. Pope Benedict VIII (1018) perpetually authorized a cardinal bishop to ordain women deacons. The Orthodox Church of Greece and the Armenian Apostolic Church, which have valid sacraments and orders, presently allow for the ordination of women as deacons.

Ministries. At various times in various places, women ordained as deacons assisted at the altar, administered finances, cared for sick and poor women, assisted women in baptism, proclaimed the Gospel, maintained order in the women’s part of the assembly, catechized children, and preached.

Recent developments. The Second Vatican Council suppressed the minor orders and major order of subdeacon, and revived the diaconate. For the first time in one thousand years, people are ordained solely and finally into a major order other than presbyterate.

Status in the Church

All papal and curial statements against the ordination of women specifically address the “ministerial priesthood” and “priestly ordination,” not the diaconate.

The International Theological Commission in 2002 concluded about the ordination of women as deacons: “It pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question.”

There is no church doctrine against ordaining women as deacons. It relates to church law.

Benefits for the Church

Our mission. Having women ordained as deacons would allow the Church to expand its ministries of liturgy, word and charity. These ministries are modeled on servanthood of Christ, embody the Servant Church, and help the Church fulfill its mission to proclaim the Gospel and baptize all nations.

Sacramental grace. Women already engaged in diaconal ministries like preaching, ministering the works of charity and leading a parish would be able to receive the grace of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, exercise ecclesiastical jurisdiction, serve in offices currently restricted to clerics, and be officially recognized by the Church in a lifetime commitment to its ministry.

Pastoral need. The early Church called forth deacons out of pastoral need. In many places today facing severe shortages of clergy, women ordained as deacons could assist in the sacramental ministries of baptism and marriage, preside at funerals and give homilies. Women deacons could also exercise ministry in places where it is difficult for men to serve, like the homes and hospital rooms of women, domestic violence shelters and in women's prisons.

Empower local Churches. The local Church should be allowed to call forth and ordain men and women who can effectively serve in this ministry. It would expand the resources of local bishops by allowing them to train, ordain and give faculties to women, and it would also expand the presence of ordained ministers in many spheres of life, connecting them with parishes, pastors and local bishops.

Some Questions and Answers

Will women deacons lead to women priests? *Response:* The Magisterium has already decided against the possibility of women priests. Pope Francis has confirmed this teaching. The ordination of women deacons does nothing to change it.

Is it against Canon 1024: "A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly" to ordain women deacons? *Response:* This canon was developed only after the permanent diaconate faded in the West, so it relates to priesthood, not the diaconate as a separate and permanent ministry. As regards ordaining women as deacons, it is an administrative law, not doctrine, and can be changed. In an interview in 2012, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago said that the topic of women deacons was an "open theological question" and "is being talked about very slowly."

Why ordain women deacons when the permanent diaconate isn't going well? *Response:* Many local Churches in the United State and other countries are served very well by permanent deacons. It is up to each local Church whether to ordain permanent deacons or not. It need not be universal practice.

Could we have women serve as non-ordained "deaconesses" as Cardinal Walter Kasper and others have suggested? *Response:* Women did not always belong to a separate order of "deaconesses." In fact, women deacons were ordained by a bishop in the sanctuary with an epiclesis and the laying on of hands. The argument that women cannot be ordained suggests that women are not ontologically equal to men and cannot image Christ, which contradicts the Catechism.

Why aren't more women asking to be ordained as deacons? *Response:* Many women are already leading parishes, preaching, teaching and serving in the ministries of charity, and some of these women have expressed a desire to be ordained as deacons. If the diaconate serves important pastoral needs in the Church today, then it should be open to men and women.

Shouldn't we wait for the pope to decide on the question of women deacons? *Response:* Pope Francis has asked bishops' conferences to state their needs and be "courageous" in making proposals to him.

Resources

Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (Paulist, 2012)

Emil A. Wcela, "Why Not Women? A bishop makes a case for expanding the diaconate," *America Magazine* (October 1, 2012), <http://americamagazine.org/issue/5152/article/why-not-women>

Phyllis Zagano, *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church* (Crossroad Publishing, 2000)

Phyllis Zagano, "It's Time: The Case for Women Deacons," *Commonweal* (December 10, 2012), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/it's-time>

Phyllis Zagano, editor, *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches: Essays by Cipriano Vagaggini* (Liturgical Press, 2013)

Zagano, Phyllis. "Ordain Catholic Women as Deacons." *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Vol. 43, Nos. 3&4, Summer/Autumn 2015.

WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?

Finding and Presenting Women Candidates for the Permanent Diaconate

This essay offers suggestions to women who experience a diaconal call and to their pastors and parish communities. The goal is to respectfully challenge and encourage our bishops to respond to this important summons from the Holy Spirit and begin the process of opening the permanent diaconate to women in the United States. Ideally a number of women could be identified by several pastors and parish communities and then presented to their bishop. In addition to educating about women deacons in church history, this project hopes to increase the number women deacon candidates being presented to diocesan officials across the United States. Once a critical mass is reached, US bishops, whether individually, regionally or nationally, can more easily petition Rome for the needed derogation from canon law to admit women to the permanent diaconate in the United States.

Introduction

In 1994, after Pope John Paul II issued the Apostolic Letter on the Non-ordination of Women to the Priesthood (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*), the Canon Law Society of America undertook a study: *The Canonical Implications of Ordaining Women to the Permanent Diaconate*.² The conclusions provide important direction for women and men committed to advancing women's leadership in the Catholic Church. This is because the Canon Law Society study ruled that first, it is within the competence of the Pope to permit women deacons; and second, it is not necessary for the entire church to adopt the ordination of women deacons at the same time. Rather, individual bishops and bishops' conferences could begin ordaining female deacons according to the needs of a local church by requesting a "derogation from canon 1024 which restricts all ordinations, including that to the permanent diaconate, to males."² [See next

page for all conclusions of Canon Law Society study]

What does this mean in the concrete for women who experience a diaconal call, and for pastors and parish communities who want to support them? According Dr. Phyllis Zagano:

All a bishop has to do is ask for derogation from the law, as recommended in a 1995 document of the Canon Law Society of America, which parsed how it could happen. You need derogation from the law to install a woman as an acolyte, derogation from the law to install a woman as a lector, and derogation from the law to ordain a woman as a deacon. I think that bishops could ask for a regional permission in the United States or even a sub-regional permission—for certain dioceses or archdioceses—to train women and then ordain them as deacons. I think we could experiment. We could see how it works. If it works in your region, maybe other regions will adopt it. If it doesn't work in your region, maybe other regions won't adopt it.³



Phoebe, the deacon, named by Paul in Romans 16.

THE CANONICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ORDAINING WOMEN TO THE PERMANENT DIACONATE

CONCLUSIONS OF 1995 CANON LAW SOCIETY OF AMERICA STUDY

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.

WHAT PARISHES SHOULD KNOW AS THEY FIND AND SUPPORT FEMALE CANDIDATES TO THE PERMANENT DIACONATE

Communal discernment

Permanent Deacons are called to a ministry of Charity and Justice, to the ministry of the Word as preachers, teachers and evangelizers, and to the ministry of Liturgy in assisting at Mass and some sacraments.⁴ Any discernment process conducted by the faith community will ideally involve recognition that some of these gifts are already at work in the woman/women under consideration. Does the woman have a heart for the poor and for justice? Is she involved in the parish social justice ministry? Is she teaching children or catechumens or in other parish programs? Does she have a gift for articulating the faith and explaining the scripture in a compelling and inspiring way? The presence of these gifts could indicate a call to the permanent diaconate.

The first discernment is always on a local level, generally at the parish level. The Pastor and Parish Community have an important role to play. Candidates are put forward by the people, called forth by the pastor, and eventually asked to enter into a further discernment at the diocesan level. The US bishops National Directory on Permanent Deacons has this to say about male candidates aspiring to the diaconate: *The inquirer who seeks consideration for ordination to the diaconate needs to enter into dialogue with his parish community. It is the pastor who initially presents [the candidate] for consideration into diaconal formation through a letter that confirms [the candidate] is a practicing Catholic of good repute and in good standing.*⁵

Women will need to meet the same prerequisites as men

While these can differ slightly from diocese to diocese, here are some common requirements:

- Be a Catholic who is fully initiated, that is having received the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation.
- Be a Roman Catholic for a minimum of eight (8) years
- Be a registered parishioner within the Diocese (some dioceses have minimum time requirements as well).
- Be a U.S. citizen or a legal, permanent resident at the time of admission with a working knowledge of the English language.
- Be at least thirty-two (32) years of age at the time of admission to the formation process.
- Be less than sixty-two (62) years of age at the time of ordination
- Enjoy good physical and mental health with no conditions that would impede diaconal ministry.
- Have successfully completed high school (or GED) and be able to handle graduate college-level course work. [Remember, these are requirements to ENTER the spiritual and educational formation process to become a permanent deacon].
- Possess financial security with a history of steady employment in a position that does not require frequent travel or reassignment.
- If married, be in a stable marriage relationship and have the support of spouse and family. Candidate must be in a valid Catholic marriage for at least five years.
- If unmarried, be prepared and able to make and live a commitment to celibacy as a deacon. [Note: a deacon whose spouse dies is also bound by celibacy and can only remarry with a dispensation from the Holy See.]
- Demonstrate potential to develop the ministerial skills of relating to people, speaking well, and being a spiritual leader.
- Be able to represent the Church with intelligence, Christian dignity and prayerful service.
- Be able to meet the demands of the aspirancy and deacon formation at the present time, especially in light of the ongoing family and work commitments and demands.

Many lay ecclesial ministers are well-trained for the diaconate

A number of dioceses have formation and education programs already in place for lay ecclesial ministers. Much of the basic education in scripture, theology, and catholic social teaching is similar whether one is a first or second-year seminarian, a deacon candidate or a lay ecclesial minister candidate. When one goes on to study for the diaconate, the priesthood or lay ecclesial ministry, the formation for the various ministries necessarily differs. Many lay ecclesial ministers already meet most of the requirements to become permanent deacons. To quote Phyllis Zagano:

There are people who have the office or the job of pastoral associate who are laypeople. Those laypeople work for the pastor. Typically they are trained and formed as lay ecclesial ministers. They cannot function ceremonially at the altar except as lectors and acolytes and leaders of music. To my mind, it would be another step if the pastoral associate who's been running the soup kitchen all week long can wear the vestments of a deacon, proclaim the gospel, and preach about helping the poor. It connects the dots.⁶

How to work with your bishop and diocese

Make sure your diocese has permanent deacons and visit the diocesan website for information on the formation process and requirements for candidacy. Check the US Bishops' Conference website at this link. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/diaconate/diaconate-diocesan-offices.cfm>

Be aware of what the US Bishops National Directory on Permanent Deacons says: *The [diocesan] director of formation, who coordinates the selection process, arranges an interview with the diocese's committee on admission and scrutinies. The purpose of the interview is to assess the applicant's level of awareness of a diaconal vocation, as well as to obtain information and background on his family life, employment stability, and general aptitude for diaconal ministry. The interview must include his wife, if he is married, and any children living at home.⁷*

Join with other parishes in the diocese and present female candidates to the bishop together. It will be more difficult for the bishop to dismiss your pastor and your parish community if there are several parishes in your diocese working to discern, support and present female candidates to the permanent diaconate to the bishop at the same time.

Give your bishop all the background information he will need to consider your request, including:

- A copy of *Women Deacons, Past, Present, Future* by Gary Macy, William Ditewig and Phyllis Zagano. (New York: Paulist Press, 2011).
- *The Canonical Implications of Ordaining Women to the Permanent Diaconate*, Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1995 Available at Amazon.com and online.
- A copy of Dr. Phyllis Zagano's article, "A Woman at the Altar?" *US Catholic*, January 2012.
- A copy of Dr. Phyllis Zagano's article, "Ordain Catholic Women as Deacons" *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Summer/Autumn 2015 (Vol. 43, NOS. 3 & 4)

A recent example

In one Midwestern parish, a man told the new pastor he wanted to study for the diaconate. The pastor asked the parish. The parish responded that it would welcome the man as deacon, but would also like to put forward women candidates. In responding to this parish request:

- The pastor formed a committee made up of the chairs of other parish committees to study and discuss the possibilities.
- The committee organized study sessions, invited speakers, sought advice from experts.
- Committee members also spoke quietly to women whom they thought would be good candidates.
- Eventually, a woman came forth, spoke with the pastor, and the committee, and proceeded.
- The pastor spoke with the bishop and the discernment is now at the diocesan level.

Visit the St. Nick's website for a parish position paper and other helpful information:

<http://www.nickchurch.org/women%2Ddiaconate/>

STEPS A FEMALE CANDIDATE TO THE PERMANENT DIACONATE WOULD BE WISE TO TAKE

Personal Discernment

- The call to the diaconate is a call to a life of prayer and service both of the Word and of the People. It is a distinct vocation. The following are some important considerations about discerning a vocation to the permanent diaconate.
- The discerning candidate meets the diocesan prerequisites as described above.
- The candidate seeks regular spiritual direction: Vocation comes from both without and within, and the individual who finds the prompting of God in her heart toward this ministry does well to seek expert assistance and advice. That means spiritual direction. Not drop-in-every-three-months spiritual direction, but regular spiritual direction from a competent director. The point of spiritual direction is to discover the work of the Spirit in one's life and heart. There are many women and men, including priests out there who practice as spiritual directors. Some have degrees and experience, some do not. A good director will support the action of the Spirit already at work in a person's life. Occasionally he or she may challenge the person to stretch in different ways. While this can be painful, the goal is always to learn what God wants here and now and to respond aware that God's love and support makes all things possible. Good spiritual directors encourage their clients to evaluate whether the director-directee relationship is helpful. A good director is comfortable with a directee to seeking another director if the relationship isn't working.
- The candidate cultivates a prayer life. One's prayer life encompasses everything—and the person thinking about the diaconate will be seeking a deeper life of prayer in whatever way he or she can. A life of prayer helps the diaconal candidate identify his or her life with Christ's, and enter into that self emptying love so necessary to uncovering the true self, the fullness of life, that began with baptism. Such love and growth are necessary in the diaconal vocation, indeed in all vocations whether lay or ordained. This is not to present today's diaconal vocations as cloistered calls. But there is a significant time commitment to a life of prayer that will develop and support vocation, ordination, and work as a deacon. The deacon is so imbued by the Gospel that he—and now one hopes she—lives it with every breath.
- Deacons and deacon candidates will probably be expected to: spend time in daily prayer and reflection on the Scriptures, attend Mass regularly where it is available, participate in the Church's social ministries: prayer leads to concrete service so the candidate will become familiar with Catholic social teaching and give concrete evidence of participation in the Church's social ministries.

ABOUT STUDY AND DIOCESAN TRAINING PROGRAMS

Even if the parish and the pastor, or the religious institute and the provincial, are willing to support the woman candidate for the diaconate, there is no guarantee she will be able to enter into the diocesan formation and training program. These are often but not always held at diocesan seminaries, apart from priestly formation and training. So the woman candidate, with the advice and assistance of her pastor and perhaps spiritual director, may need to find formation and training on her own. However in a number of dioceses, diaconal education is held in conjunction with academic programs for lay ecclesial ministers and others.

The rubric "SHIP" can help the candidate remember what she needs: Spiritual, Human, Intellectual, and Pastoral formation and training. Some women may have already undertaken formal theological and ministerial studies at a local diocesan seminary, a Catholic college, or a free standing non denominational seminary but these were not directed to the permanent diaconate. The candidate to the diaconate must make sure seminary courses would be accepted in her diocese's diaconate program.

Some easily-obtainable documents that can help organize formative process include:

- National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States (available at this link on the US Bishops' conference website:http://usccb.org/search.cfm?site=newusccb&proxystylesheet=newusccb_frontend&q=permanent+diaconate&lang=eng)
- Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons (the Vatican document available at this link:http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_31031998_directorium-diaconi_en.html)
- The Code of Canon Law; This gives the structure of the church and its activities, and can help a woman become familiar with how governance works in the church.
- The Catechism of the Catholic Church. This is a remarkable document, a compendium of Catholic belief that can serve as a source book for Catholic belief, prayer and study.

Conclusion This essay was written to support faithful Catholics working for responsible reform and renewal of the Catholic Church at the parish and diocesan level. At present we have conflicting teachings in the Church about women's leadership. One teaching affirms women's equality while another forbids them to exercise that equality. Only the ordained can govern and at present ordination is closed to women. Admitting women to the permanent diaconate would begin to change that. It would also end the silencing of Catholic women. Female deacons could preach at Mass, 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 an estimated 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 opening the permanent diaconate to women would go a long way to meeting many unmet ministerial needs in the Catholic Church.

1 *The Canonical Implications of Ordaining Women to the Permanent Diaconate*, Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1995 Available online at: <http://www.womenpriests.org/classic3/canonlawsoc.asp#IV>.

2 Ibid.

3 Phyllis Zagano, "A woman at the altar?" *US Catholic*, January, 2012.

4 *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*. Washington DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005, 18-21.

5 Ibid, 79.

6 Zagano, 21.

7 *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, 79.

WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?

Key Facts From CARA'S

"Research Review: Lay Ecclesial Ministers in the United States"

INTRODUCTION

In February of 2015 the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University (CARA), prepared a paper "Research Review: Lay Ecclesial Ministers in the United States"¹ which utilized and summarized all its existing data and resources to provide a current profile of lay ecclesial ministers in the United States. Unless otherwise indicated, the information presented below is compiled from that paper.

WHO ARE LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS (LEMS)?

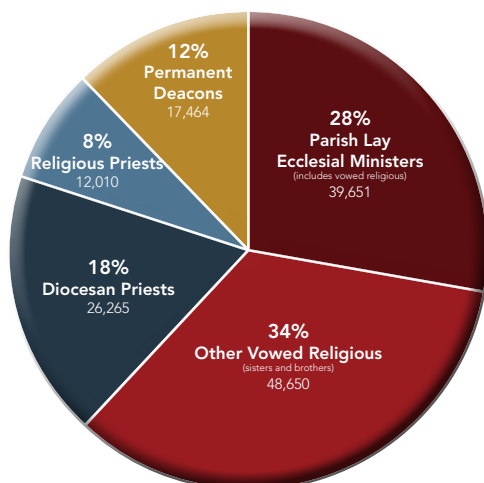
According to the US Bishops in *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (2005), LEMs are lay (not ordained) individuals – including vowed religious – who are adequately formed and prepared, authorized by the hierarchy to serve publicly in leadership for a particular area of ministry, and work in close collaboration with clergy.

In terms of the research presented below, most often this population has been defined as those professional and trained lay persons involved in paid parish ministry for at least 20 hours per week.

WHAT DO LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS DO?

- 89% of LEMs say they consider their ministry "a vocation, not just a job."
- The most common forms of LEM authorized by dioceses are: pastoral associates (51% of dioceses), religious education for children/youth (51% of dioceses), youth ministry (47% of dioceses), adult faith formation or RCIA (40% of dioceses); liturgy/music ministry (36% of dioceses), and young adult ministry (33% of dioceses).
- According to LEMs themselves they are primarily engaged in: religious education, sacramental preparation, and/or formation (44%); liturgical or music ministry (21%); or general parish administration (15%)

LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS IN THE WORKFORCE



The number of LEMs has grown by more than 16,000 (+76%) in the last two decades.

- As of 2015², there were approximately 39,651 LEMs working in the U.S. Catholic Church.
- In 2014 lay persons made up the majority (62%) of the professional workforce in the Catholic Church in the United States (38% are deacons, diocesan priests, and religious priests)

THE MAKE UP OF LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS

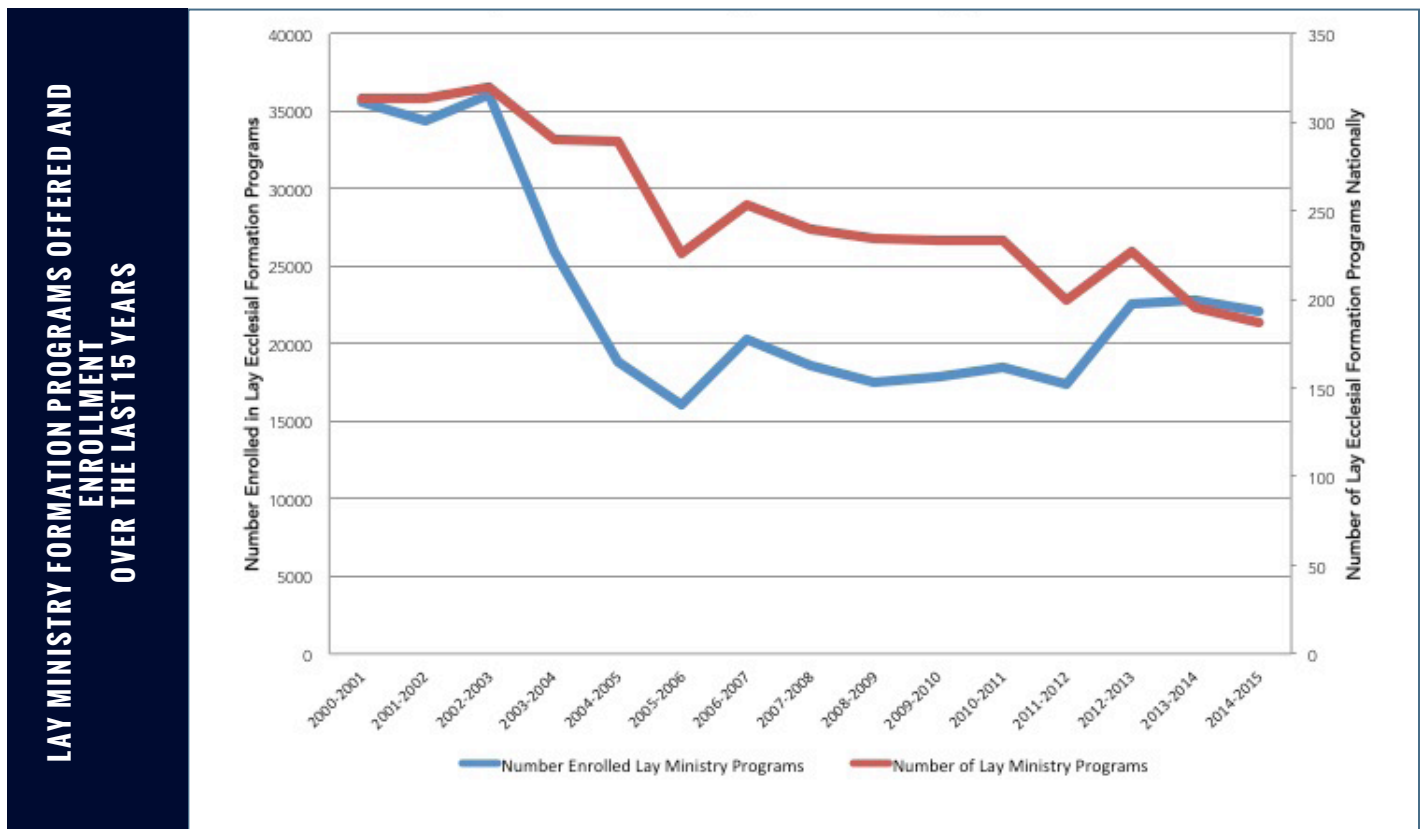
The gender make up of LEMs has been stable over time and most are women.

Those preparing for LEM are more racially and ethnically diverse than those serving now.

- **By Ecclesial Status:** 14% are vowed religious (sisters or brothers); 86% are other lay persons
- **By Gender:** 80% of all LEMs are female; 20% are male
- **By Age:** 5% are under 30 years old; 10% are 30 to 39; 56% are 40 to 60; 29% are 60 or older
- **By Race:** .2% are Native American; 1.7% are Asian/Pacific Islander; 1.6% are African American; 9% are Hispanic/Latina(o); 88% are Non-Hispanic White

EDUCATION OF LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS

- As of 2012, 46% of LEMs held graduate or professional degrees.
- The most common degree held by LEMs is a master's in ministry, religion, or theology. 27% have the degree and an additional 8% are enrolled in a program that will lead to that degree.
- 12% have a bachelor's degree in ministry, religion, or theology and an additional 5% are in a program that will lead to that degree.
- 28% have a ministry formation program certificate and an additional 9% are in process of earning a certificate.
- 57% of Millennial Generation LEMs have a master's degree in ministry, religion, or theology.
- 58% of those enrolled in LEM programs are women.
- Over the last 15 years, while there has been overall growth in the number of LEMs, there has been a drop in enrollment in LEM formation programs (31,168 enrolled in 2000 compared to 22,145 in 2015). Many theories have been proposed to explain the drop in numbers: perception of a surplus of LEMs; effects of the clergy sex abuse scandal; a decline in the number of LEMs being entrusted with the pastoral care of parishes where a priest is unavailable under Canon 517.2 (down to 431 in 2015 from a peak of 566 in 2004); parish and school closings; or expected salaries making it difficult to budget the costs of obtaining the education and formation required. But CARA research shows that the closing or suspending of diocesan programs (down from 314 in 2000 to 187 in 2015) is a key factor. ³



LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS AND THE PRIEST SHORTAGE

In 1965 there were 35,925 diocesan priests in the United States and 94% of them were engaged in active ministry. In 2015 the number of diocesan priests had dropped to 25,868 with only 66% engaged in active ministry⁴. LEMs play a vital role in the life of parishes throughout the country and will be increasingly necessary as the shortage of priests grows.

- In 2009, 81% of priests agreed that “parish life would be aided by an increase in full-time professional lay ecclesial ministers”; 77% agreed that “the Catholic Church needs to move faster in empowering lay persons in ministry.”
- A 2008 survey of Catholics showed that 60% of weekly churchgoers supported increasing the use of LEMs if their parish did not have a resident priest (the least favored option was merging with a nearby parish 50%).
- A majority of priests say that they “would be happy to attend primarily to the sacramental life and let the laity assume responsibility for most other functions”
- Parishes with at least one LEM are better able to provide ministries to parishioners than parishes without.

DOES THE PARISH PROVIDE OR OFFER THE FOLLOWING MINISTRIES, PROGRAMS OR SERVICES?

Percentage of Pastors or PLCs responding “Yes”

MINISTRY	AT LEAST ONE LEM ON STAFF	NO LEM ON STAFF
Sacramental Preparation	99%	87%
Religious education, faithformation, or catechesis for children	98	88
RCIA	93	76
Marriage Preparation	91	77
Religious education, faith formation, or catechesis for adolescents	90	75
Ministry to the infirm/homebound	89	75
Adult faith formation	87	71
Ministry to eledery or seniors	66	55
Social services to meet individual needs	66	47
Ministry to the bereaved	58	45
Evangelization	42	32
Social action to educate or effect change	39	25
Youth Ministry	33	27
Ministry to persons with disabilities	28	22
Ministry to the divorced or separated	18	13

U.S. CATHOLIC PRIESTS AGREEING “SOMEWHAT” OR “STRONGLY” WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS, by ordination cohort

Millenial: ordained after 1992

Post-Vatican II: ordained 1978-91

Vatican II: ordained 1964-77

Pre-Vatican II: ordained before 1964

Parish life would be aided by an increase in full-time professional Lay Ecclesial Ministers

Millenial 62%

Post-Vatican II 76%

Vatican II 90%

Pre-Vatican II 88%

The Catholic Church needs to move faster in empowering laypersons in ministry

Millenial 65%

Post-Vatican II 75%

Vatican II 86%

Pre-Vatican II 84%

I would be happy to attend primarily to the sacramental life and let the laity assume responsibility for most other functions

Millenial 55%

Post-Vatican II 61%

Vatican II 68%

Pre-Vatican II 66%

The Catholic Church should allow women greater participation in all lay ministries

Millenial 65%

Post-Vatican II 82%

Vatican II 89%

Pre-Vatican II 84%

LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS AND WOMEN DEACONS

Permanent deacons may preach, baptize, witness marriages and provide other vital ministries and services to the people of God. A 2008 survey of Catholics showed that 68% of weekly churchgoers supported increasing the use of deacons if their parish did not have a resident priest. If the Catholic Church were to restore the tradition of ordaining women to the permanent diaconate (a practice until the 12th century)⁵, female LEMs would provide a large pool of ministers who could immediately be available to meet the growing needs of the church.

- Worldwide there are an estimated 705,529⁶ women religious and approximately 3 million lay catechists, missionaries, and members of secular institutes (at least half of whom are likely to be women).
- In the United States 80% of the 39,600 currently active LEMs and 58% of the 22,145 lay persons currently enrolled in LEM formation programs are women.

WHAT WE CAN DO

- Provide personal support to LEMs by recognizing and affirming their ministries in your parish. Find out what you can do to support the participation of lay ministers in diocesan and parish decision making.
- Make sure that LEMs are justly compensated and provide financial support through your contributions to your parish/community so that just compensation is possible
- Find out if your diocese has a formation program for LEMs and, if so, what its status is. Explore with local diocesan officials what can be done to further educate and support lay ministers including: subsidizing tuition or costs; having an office or institution that represents and supports lay ministers; involving lay ministers in decision making; promoting personnel policies such as clear and accessible grievance procedures, guidelines for just compensation, position descriptions and clear procedures for hiring, evaluating, and terminating employees
- Make sure your diocese encourages personnel policies that allow competent women to serve in the diocesan and parishes. Find out how many women serve in senior administrative positions in your diocese and what positions they hold. Advocate that women be equally represented on all diocesan and parish boards, councils and committees.
- Discuss the permanent diaconate with female lay ecclesial ministers in your parish or diocese. Provide them with the resources in **Women Deacons: Why Not Now?**.
- Find out if your bishop appoints qualified lay persons to be Parish Life Coordinators or administrators of parishes in the absence of a priest-pastor as an alternative to closing or merging parishes. If not, why not?

Notes:

¹ available in full at <http://cara.georgetown.edu/lemsummit.pdf>

² The research presented in CARA's paper, "Research Review: Lay Ecclesial Ministers in the United States" used data available through the end of 2014. When available, numbers have been updated to reflect data available through the end of 2015 and accessed at <http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>

³ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. "Who Will Be Behind (Parish) Door Number One?" *Nineteen Sixty-four*. 10 Aug. 2011. Web. 26 Feb. 2016. <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2011/08/who-will-be-behind-parish-door-number.html>

⁴ <http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>

⁵ Macy, Gary. *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

⁶ <http://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>



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WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?



Martha & Mary. He Qi. Used with Permission.

Jesus and Women

Background

Scholars seeking to discover women's roles in late antiquity face formidable challenges. All history until the mid-20th century was written by men with preconceived notions about women. Philosophic treatises viewed females as created subordinate to males. Since women's primary roles were believed to belong to the household and to reproduction, they were often forbidden active roles in economic, cultural and religious life. In evaluating historical data, feminist biblical scholars and church historians now recognize the importance of differentiating between "gender ideology" and "the reality of women's lives." [Ute Eisen, p.3]

In seeking "the reality of women's lives," care must be taken to avoid portraying Jesus as liberating

women from a Judaism that restricted and subordinated them any more than was the lot of all women in late antiquity. Patriarchy restricted both Jewish and Gentile women, but the extent of that restriction depended more on a woman's socioeconomic status, cultural context and geography than her religious affiliation. Jesus was an observant Jew. His movement arose from faith that just as God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, so God would act to remove Roman oppression and bring about a new time of justice and right relationship among nations and among people. Jesus' inclusive practice should be viewed as emerging from his Judaism, not apart from it.

This brochure seeks to make available in an "at-a-glance" format materials that fill many books written by renowned scholars. You are encouraged to peruse these for a more comprehensive treatment of this fascinating topic.

Women in the Gentile World

All cultures of Jesus' time were patriarchal. Women were subordinated first to their fathers, then to their husbands. However, their socioeconomic status could vary markedly according to the degree of civil and inheritance rights each of their Mediterranean cultures permitted them.

Greece and Macedonia In 340 BCE, Demosthenes wrote: "Keep mistresses for the sake of pleasure, concubines for daily care of our person, wives to bear legitimate children and be faithful guardians of households." Only Greek wives were citizens with the right to vote. They had a limited right to own property apart from their dowry. Concubines and mistresses had no civil rights, though mistresses

were educated to be the pleasurable soul-companions of their lovers. As in Rome, unwanted daughters and sons could be left on the hillside to die. Macedonian women fared better. They built temples, founded cities, engaged armies, and held fortresses. They were regents and co-rulers. Men admired their wives and named cities after them. Thessalonika was such a city, and here women were given inheritable civic rights. A Macedonian businesswoman, Lydia, founded the church at Phillipi after her conversion by Paul.

Egypt and Rome Egyptian women were juridically equal to men. They were buyers, sellers, borrowers, and lenders. They paid taxes, could initiate a divorce, and petition the government for support. The eldest daughter was permitted to be a legitimate heir. In Rome, the authority of the father was paramount. A Roman girl was "sold" in name into the hands of her future husband. Both daughters and sons were educated, boys until the age of seventeen, girls until thirteen when their marriage was normally arranged by their parents. A Roman woman could not conduct business in her own name, but she could enlist the help of a male relative or friend to serve as her agent. Women had inheritance rights and the right to divorce though they were not permitted to vote or hold public office. Nevertheless, wealthy Roman matrons had considerable power and influence because they were the de facto heads of households and business managers while their spouses were off fighting Caesar's wars or otherwise engaged in matters of state.

Christianity did not flourish among Palestinian Jews. Instead, it expanded rapidly in the Hellenist cultures surrounding the Mediterranean. This was due in no small part to the influence of wealthy Gentile women. Women's roles in Hellenist cultures influenced women's roles in the early church. Generally speaking, women had greater socioeconomic status in cultures with strong female deities (Aphrodite in Corinth, Artemis in Ephesus and Isis in Egypt). In virtually all Gentile cultures both women and men exercised leadership in religious worship.

Women in Palestinian Judaism

Discovering the "realities of women's lives" in Palestine is fraught with complexity largely because until recently, much of the historical data about first century Judaism derived from later Rabbinic sources from the 2-4 century. However, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts and the Dead Sea Scrolls expanded our understanding of both early Christianity and first century Palestinian Judaism. The following summary portrait is derived from multiple sources.

Palestinian Hebrew women were among the poorest in the world in Jesus' day. This was due in no small part to Roman agricultural practices that divested the Israelites (particularly Galileans) of their ancestral lands and increasingly impoverished the population. Hebrew women were not allowed to divorce their husbands, but could be divorced for anything from burning the dinner (Hillel) to adultery (Shammai). In a culture in which women did not survive unless they were linked to the patriarchal household, it was disastrous to be divorced. Seen in this light, Jesus' proscription of divorce is markedly protective of women. The raising of the son of the widow of Nain is another example of Jesus' compassion for the poverty of a woman whose survival was threatened by the loss of her link to the patriarchal household. Most Hebrew women had minimal property rights. Theoretically women could inherit land, but in practice male heirs had precedence. Even if a woman did inherit property, her husband had the right to its use and its fruits.

A child was held to be Jewish only if the mother was Jewish. Most Jewish girls were betrothed by their fathers at a young age. Jewish women were ritually unclean while menstruating, a reality detailed at length in Leviticus. If she inadvertently touched a man while having her menses, he was obliged to undergo a purification ritual before worshipping at the temple. In Mark's gospel, the woman afflicted with a twelve-year hemorrhage could have been a social outcast, depending upon how strictly her co-religionists interpreted the purity laws. We see Jesus' lack of concern about ritual impurity in his healing of her after she courageously touched him despite the taboo.

(Mk:25)

Women and men were segregated for worship in the Jerusalem Temple, which was destroyed by Rome in 70 AD. While women attended synagogue, we have no evidence that first century Palestinian Jewish women led worship. Whether a woman should be educated in the Torah was hotly debated. As a rule, only the Rabbis' wives were so educated. Women were not normally accepted as witnesses in Jewish law. A woman's primary sphere was in the home where they led table prayers and festival candle lighting ceremonies.

There are exceptions to the restrictions experienced by women in antiquity. Ross S. Kraemer's study of epigraphic, papyrological and archaeological sources found that in the second century, both women and men in the Jewish Diaspora (Jews who had their homes outside of Israel) held synagogue office. Women were not segregated in Diaspora synagogues and some had economic and religious independence.

Women in the Gospels

Jesus' behavior toward women, even viewed through the androcentric lens of the Gospel texts, is remarkable. Jesus welcomed women into his closest discipleship: "After this he journeyed through towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve accompanied him, and also some women... Mary called the Magdalene... Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who were assisting them out of their means." (Lk 8:1-5). Women were not named in ancient texts unless they had social prominence. Scholars believe the implication in this text is that wealthy women underwrote the Galilean mission. Jesus welcomed female disciples into his entourage to learn the ways of God, along with the male disciples. This was unusual since Jewish men did not normally speak in public to women outside their kinship circle, much less travel around the countryside with them.

The story of Martha and Mary is illustrative. Luke shows us Mary at Jesus' feet. One interpretation is that Mary has taken the place traditionally

reserved for male rabbinical students. Martha, as often happens even today among women when the rules of patriarchy are challenged, protests. But Jesus praises Mary's thirst to learn more about God: "It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her." (Luke 10:38-42). Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus challenge deep seated patriarchal assumptions: that only women bear the burden of sexual sin; that Samaritan and Canaanite women are to be shunned and discounted; and that prodigal sons are to be disowned. Instead, men are challenged to own their complicity in adultery; the Samaritan woman becomes a missionary bringing her whole town to belief in Jesus; the Canaanite woman's fierce love for her daughter succeeds in broadening Jesus' own understanding of to whom the Good News is sent; and the wayward son is welcomed home with a huge party thrown by a prodigal father.

Women's equal call to discipleship with their brothers is most evident in the Resurrection accounts, for it is upon the testimony of women that the proclamation of the Resurrection depends. All four Gospels show Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the Mother of James and Joseph, Salome and the other women disciples accompanying Jesus to his death; anointing and burying his body; viewing the empty tomb; and experiencing his risen presence. That the message of the Resurrection was first given to women is regarded by biblical scholars as compelling evidence for the historicity of the Resurrection accounts. Had these texts been fabricated by overzealous male disciples, they would not have included the witness of women in a society that rejected their legal witness.

Women in the Earliest Churches

The early female disciples of Jesus assumed leadership in the earliest Christian Churches alongside their brothers. This is reflected in Paul's letters, the Acts of the Apostles, and other early Christian writings. In the last chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, ten of the 29 church leaders whose favor he seeks, are women. Phoebe, Paul's patroness at Cenchreae, and Prisca, (who, with her husband Aquila, was a prominent missionary)

head the list. Paul's letters (excepting Timothy and Titus which were not written by him) are the earliest Christian manuscripts we have, and constitute strong historical evidence for gender balanced leadership in the infant church. This equality is reflected in the Galatian baptismal hymn: "There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28).



Fractio Panis. Fresco. Early 2nd Century.
Catacombs of Priscilla.

The Book of Acts refers to "Phillip's prophetic daughters" (Acts 21:9-10). The early church historian Eusebius, attributes the apostolic origins of the provincial Asian churches to their ministry, thereby acknowledging that at least some women

were transmitters of apostolic tradition. What a pity that their names are lost to us! The Didache, an early worship manual, names prophets as the normal leaders of Eucharistic celebrations, which were often held in the homes of prominent women. The catacombs of Priscilla in Rome contain a second century fresco portraying such a Eucharist.

By the end of the first century the leadership of women was already meeting resistance: "A woman must learn in silence and be completely submissive. I do not permit a woman to act as teacher, or in any way to have authority over a man; she must be quiet.." (1:Tim). Nevertheless, archaeological, literary and epigraphical evidence confirm that female leaders flourished alongside male leaders well into the fourth century. By this time, Constantine had succeeded in using Christianity to unify the crumbling Roman empire. As Christianity became more mainstream, worship moved from the private space of house churches to public spaces. The leadership of women in public spheres violated honor-shame cultural customs of the Greco-Roman world. The inclusive, charismatic discipleship of equals which enhanced Christianity's rapid early growth slowly disappeared, only to re-emerge in the rise of religious communities which continued the prophetic tradition in Catholicism for over 2000 years. It is in this tradition that church reform organizations walk today.

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WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?

Women in Paul's Ministry

Introduction

In spite of the difficult passages about women in Paul's writings that can become real obstacles to a genuine appreciation of Paul, there is abundant evidence of the activity of women in various kinds of ministry in the Pauline churches. They collaborated with him and were his co-workers. Their leadership roles included hosting house churches, evangelizing, teaching, travel, and offering hospitality to visiting church members.

Women Leaders at Philippi

Euodia and Syntyche

The first that we encounter are two women with Greek names, Euodia ("good fragrance") and Syntyche ("good luck") in Phil. 4:2-3. They are not getting along with each other—or possibly, they are together in a disagreement with Paul. Paul has written three previous chapters on the theme of unity, urging the recipients of the letter to take the examples of Christ and of himself by being willing to surrender certain rights and privileges in order to be one in Christ. Now he solemnly entreats these two women to be united in their thinking, and he urges a third party, not called by name, to mediate their disagreement. By way of explanation, Paul says that Euodia and Syntyche have struggled and contended alongside Paul and someone else named Clement in the work of advancing the gospel. This means that they were engaged in the work of evangelization.

Episkopoi and Diakonoï

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 diakonoï. Certainly the Greek word episkopos, which ordinarily means overseer or manager, does not yet refer to what will later be a "bishop," though that is the word that eventually came to be used for this office. Proof that that is not yet its meaning is the fact that there are more than one in the same city; the word is in the plural. Rather, this 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. Since



Phoebe, the deacon, named by Paul in Romans 16.

Philippi was a Roman military colony, it seemsto have been the first of the Christian groups to begin using such a term for its leaders.

The other group addressed in Phil. 1:1 are the diakonoi. This word, adapted later to mean "deacon," was a general word for ministers, attendants, and agents or official representatives. Here it refers to a designated group of persons who provide some kind of assistance in the community. But where do Euodia and Syntyche fit into this schema and why does Paul single them out? If we follow the flow of Paul's argument about unity, we can see that his appeal to them comes at the very end and is the climax. It is not a miscellaneous comment. The disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche (more likely than their common disagreement with Paul) is a major problem, and perhaps the major problem that Paul is facing in the Philippian church. If this is so, then these two women are not insignificant members of the church. They are likely to be among the episkopoi, that is, the hosts of groups of believers who meet in their houses, and members of a local council of leaders. Thus they are major figures in the Philippian church, persons who lead and are responsible for the life of faith there.

Lydia

There is another woman character who appears in stories about Philippi, this time in Acts: Lydia. The narrative in Acts 16 describes Paul and Timothy going to the river just outside the city walls on the Sabbath, looking for a Jewish place of prayer. Instead of finding a mixed group, however, they encounter a group of women. One was a cloth merchant named Lydia who had her own household. "The Lord opened her heart" to believe. She and her household were baptized and she then provided hospitality to Paul and Timothy (Acts 16:13-15). Later, after a difficult experience in the city when they were about to leave, they went back first to the house of Lydia, where they encouraged the group that had formed there (Acts 16:40). This group was the nucleus of the Christian community in Philippi meeting in the house of Lydia, who was therefore the provider of hospitality and the natural presider at their common meals.

Women Prophets in Corinth

There were nameless women, too. Some of them are mentioned in 1 Cor. 11:2-15. They are the Corinthian women prophets whose social freedom was disturbing to Paul. They claimed charismatic authority to ignore traditional behavior with regard to head covering, still an issue today in some cultures. If we only focus on the head covering problem, however, we miss the importance of what they were really doing. This reference to women who pray and prophesy fits the pattern we see elsewhere in early Christian prophecy: that women were always found among the prophets. It is the Holy Spirit who decides who has the gift. Prophecy was a gift and a ministry in the first generations of the church. The memory of these women prophets means that both men and women engaged in this service to the community and that all other references to prophets, for example, 1 Corinthians 14, refer to both women and men.

Women Leaders in the Letter to the Romans

Phoebe

The most important place in the Pauline writings, however, to find information about women's ministry is Romans 16. Here are eight named and two unnamed women who are remembered by Paul as part of his ministry. The first and most important is Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2). These verses are a recommendation of her to the recipients of the letter. Paul calls her by two titles: diakonos of the church of Cenchrae (one of the seaports of Corinth) and prostatis of many, including Paul.

The title diakonos we have already seen in the opening lines of Paul's letter to the Philippians. It can be translated "minister" or "deacon," but the translation "deaconess" is not correct, since this refers to an order of diakonal women that arose in the third century. Paul uses the masculine term; the feminine had not yet evolved. The word connotes a minister, attendant, or envoy. In this case, it is the envoy function that seems dominant, because it is evident from the language that Paul uses that she is carrying his letter to Rome. She is unknown to the communities there, and Paul introduces her.

Another site in the Pauline letters that probably refers to women deacons is 1 Tim. 3:11. The majority of scholars hold that this letter is written by someone else after the time of Paul but in continuity with the Pauline legacy. Here, in the context of qualifications for diakonoi, "the women" are to be dignified, sober, and trustworthy. While it is possible that wives of male deacons are intended, the better interpretation is that women also filled this role in the church of Timothy.

The second title Paul uses for Phoebe in Romans 16 is prostatis. This reference has been much studied in recent years as we seek to understand better these women in Paul's life. It is the feminine form of the masculine prostatés. In both genders the word generally means patron or sponsor of some kind. In this patronage culture, calling someone a patron implies higher social status and power. There is an interesting parallel from Corinth at about the same time that Paul is writing his letter to the Romans from there. Another woman, Junia Theodora, was commemorated in several inscriptions by her fellow country people from Lycia (western Turkey) for her prostasia, which consisted of hospitality, patronage, and networking in Corinth for traveling Lycians. It is likely that Phoebe did the same for traveling Christians like Paul. This no doubt involved hosting a house church like Lydia, Euodia, and Syntyche in Philippi.

Prisca

The second woman named in Romans 16 is Prisca, sometimes also called Priscilla. According to Acts 18:2-3, with her husband Aquila she had come from Italy to Corinth. In 1 Cor 16:19, they are hosting a house church in Asia (western Turkey, probably at Ephesus). Now, this couple with Latin names are back in Rome, again hosting a house church. They too, like Paul, were leather workers and traveled a great deal. Here we see a husband and wife who work side by side in their trade and also together in the ministry of evangelization and ongoing instruction. Later in the same chapter, the two of them together take Apollos aside and instruct him more properly in the faith (Acts 18:26). Their names also occur in 2 Tim. 4:19.

Junia

Another missionary couple appears in Rom. 16:7. Andronicus and Junia, Paul's relatives or fellow country people, early converts and imprisoned at some time with Paul, are prominent among the apostles. Here again, much ink has been spilled over this reference, because it seems that both of them are called apostles. The wording suggests not that the apostles know them well, but that among the apostles, they are well known. This Junia has quite a textual history. Because the Latin name is in the accusative case in Greek, it would look the same whether a woman's or a man's name. However, there is no other known example of the male name, which would be Junias, while the female name Junia is common (some texts say Julia, which is just as common a Latin name). In early centuries, Junia was thought to be a woman. In fact, the late fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom remarks on what a wonderful woman she must have been that Paul called her an apostle. Later in the Middle Ages, it was decided that if this person was an apostle it must be a man, and Junia became Junias. Only within the last half of the twentieth century has the interpretation been reassessed and Junia once again recognized as a woman apostle. Her apostleship with her husband probably consisted in itinerant evangelization.

Other Women Leaders

Maria, Tryphaena, Tryphosa & Persis

Other women are mentioned by Paul in Romans 16, as he sends greetings to all those he knows at Rome. Maria in v. 6 has worked very hard; Paul uses the word he usually does for ministry. In v. 12, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and "dear Persis" are remembered, all of whom have labored in ministry. Finally, Julia is named among others in v. 15. There remain two unnamed women, the mother of Rufus in v. 13 and the sister of Nereus in v. 15. Of Rufus' mother, Paul says that she is a mother to him as well, which undoubtedly testifies to her gifts of hospitality.

Apphia

The letter to Philemon is really addressed to three people: Philemon "beloved brother and co-worker," Apphia "our sister," and Archippos "fellow soldier," as well as to the church in their house. Soon, however, the text becomes Paul's message to Philemon over the situation with Onesimus. Is Apphia Philemon's wife or sister, or does she have a similar relationship with Archippos, or are they all related somehow? Whatever is the relationship among the three, we know that Apphia is one of the three prominent leaders of this house church.

Nympha

There is one more name that should be mentioned here: Nympha in Col. 4:15. Though most scholars doubt that Colossians was written by Paul, still it stands within the Pauline circle of writings. Here the letter to the Colossians is to be sent also to Laodicea, a few miles away, where Nympha is named as host of a house church. Like Lydia and others at Philippi and elsewhere, she engaged in ministry that included hospitality, spiritual leadership, and other kinds of attention to the needs of the members.

Conclusion

The record of these women reveals the intimate involvement of women in the first years of the formation of the church. They were workers alongside their male counterparts and sharers in the ministry of communicating the gospel in whatever ways possible.

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WOMEN DEACONS

Why Not Now?



Image of page 51 of the *St. Albans Psalter*, depicting Mary of Magdala announcing the Resurrection to the Apostles. Produced in England, St. Albans Abbey, ca. 1119–23.

Mary of Magdala: Witness, Leader, Friend & Apostle to the Apostles

by Sister Christine Schenk, CSJ

Not a prostitute

Mary of Magdala is perhaps the most maligned and misunderstood figure in early Christianity.

In Christian art and hagiography, Mary has been romanticized, allegorized, and mythologized beyond recognition. Since the fourth century, she has been portrayed as a prostitute and public sinner who, after encountering Jesus, repented and spent the rest of her life in private prayer and penitence. Paintings, some little more than pious pornography, reinforce the mistaken belief that sexuality, especially female sexuality, is shameful, sinful, and worthy of repentance. Yet the actual biblical account of Mary of Magdala paints a far different portrait than that of the bare-breasted reformed harlot of Renaissance art.

First witness to the Resurrection

Nowhere in scripture is Mary of Magdala identified as a public sinner or a prostitute. Instead, scripture shows her as the primary witness to the most central events of Christian faith, named in exactly the same way (*Maria e Magdalena*) in each of four gospels written for diverse communities throughout the Mediterranean world. It was impossible to relate the story of the Resurrection without including “Mary, the one from Magdala.”

Luke 8,1-3 tells us that Mary traveled with Jesus in the Galilean discipleship and, with Joanna and Susanna, supported his mission from her own financial resources. In the synoptic gospels, Mary leads the group of women who witness Jesus’ death, burial, the empty tomb, and his Resurrection. The synoptics contrast Jesus’ abandonment by the male disciples with the faithful strength of the women disciples who, led by Mary, accompany him to his death. John’s gospel names Mary of Magdala as the first to discover the empty tomb and shows the Risen Christ sending her to announce the Good News of his Resurrection to the other disciples. This prompted early church Fathers to name her “the Apostle to the Apostles.”



St. Mary of Magdala Proclaiming the Resurrection. Margaret Beaudette, SC. 2014. Used with Permission.

That the message of the Resurrection was first entrusted to women is regarded by scripture scholars as strong proof for the historicity of the Resurrection accounts. Had accounts of Jesus' Resurrection been fabricated, women would never have been chosen as witnesses, since Jewish law did not acknowledge the testimony of women.

Early non-canonical Christian writings show faith communities growing up around Mary's ministry, where she is portrayed as understanding Jesus' message better than did Peter and the male disciples. Scholars tell us that these writings are not about the historical persons Mary and Peter but instead reflect tensions over women's roles in the early church. Prominent leaders such as Mary and Peter were evoked to justify opposing points of view. What is not disputed is the recognition of Mary of Magdala as an important woman leader in earliest Christianity.

What Happened?

Why are contemporary Christians uninformed about Mary's faithful discipleship and prominent leadership role in the infant church? One

explanation is a common misreading of Luke's gospel which tells us that "seven demons had gone out of her." (Luke 8,1-3) To first century ears, this meant only that Mary had been cured of serious illness, not that she was sinful. According to biblical scholars such as Sr. Mary Thompson, illness was commonly attributed to the work of evil spirits, although not necessarily associated with sinfulness. The number seven symbolized that her illness was either chronic or very severe.

Women Leaders Suppressed

In 312, when Constantine made Christianity the religion of the empire, the Christian community was caught in a cultural conflict as it moved from worship in house churches where women's leadership was accepted, to worship in public places where women's leadership violated Roman social codes of honor and shame. In the fourth century, male church leaders at the Council of Laodicea suppressed women leaders because of the belief that women were created subordinate to men. During this same time period, we see the memory of Mary of Magdala changing from that of a strong female disciple

and proclaimer of the Resurrection to a repentant prostitute and public sinner. Scholars such as Dr. Jane Schaberg believe this was done deliberately to discourage female leadership in the church. As knowledge of Jesus' many women disciples faded from historical memory, their stories merged and blurred. The tender anointing of Mary of Bethany prior to Jesus' passion was linked to the woman "known to be a sinner" whose tears washed and anointed Jesus' feet at Simon's house. The anointing texts combined all of these women into one generic public sinner, "Magdalen." Misidentification of Mary as reformed public sinner achieved official standing with a powerful homily by Pope Gregory the Great (540-604).

Henceforth, Mary of Magdala became known in the west, not as the strong woman leader who accompanied Jesus through a tortuous death, first witnessed his Resurrection, and proclaimed the Risen Savior to the early church, but as a wanton woman in need of repentance and a life of hidden (and hopefully silent) penitence. Interestingly, the eastern church never identified her as a prostitute, but honored her throughout history as "the Apostle to the Apostles."

Prominent Female Leader, Not Jesus' Wife

The 2002 publication of *The Da Vinci Code* ignited widespread controversy about the true role of Mary of Magdala. Unfortunately, Dan Brown's book, while an engaging fictional narrative, has done a disservice to the historical Mary of Magdala and other early women church leaders. Though *The Da Vinci Code* conveys a beautiful ideal of the essential unity of male and female, it is ultimately subversive to women's full and equal leadership in the church because it focuses on the fiction of Mary's marital status rather than the fact of her leadership in proclaiming Jesus' Resurrection.

There is no historical or biblical data to support speculation that Mary of Magdala was married to Jesus. The contention that ancient writers didn't mention their marriage and offspring for fear of

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In 1997, FutureChurch began a special celebration of the July 22nd feast of Mary of Magdala. The event was designed to promote contemporary scholarship about Jesus' inclusive practice and to provide a place for women to serve in visible liturgical roles. The popularity of the celebrations grew rapidly from 23 in 1997 to several hundred each succeeding year. They are held in Catholic parishes, Protestant churches, retreat houses, schools, convent chapels, private homes, and include special celebrations during Lent and Holy Week.

For copies of a liturgical celebration, visit the FutureChurch website:
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Jewish persecution doesn't hold up because John's gospel and most of the apocryphal literature were written after the fall of Jerusalem, when there would have been nothing to fear from Jewish authorities. If Mary of Magdala were Jesus' wife and the mother of his child, it is highly unlikely that these texts would have omitted these important facts, especially since she is prominently portrayed in both as the primary witness to the Resurrection and a female leader who, in many ways, understood Jesus' mission better than did the male disciples.

If Jesus were married, it wasn't to Mary of Magdala, because then she would have been known as "Mary the wife of Jesus," not Mary of Magdala. Literary and social conventions

in antiquity dictated that if women were mentioned (a very rare occurrence) they were nearly always named by their relationship to the patriarchal household, for example: "Joanna the wife of Herod's steward Chusa" (Luke 8,1-3). Atypically, Mary of Magdala was named according to the town she was from, not by her relationship to a man. Biblical scholars believe this indicates that she was probably a wealthy independent woman not bound to the patriarchal household.

Contemporary scholarship has rightfully restored our understanding of Mary of Magdala as an important early Christian leader. Now she becomes the same inspiring role model for twenty-first century disciples that she was for first century Christians.

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