

Monsignor Armando Matteo, Secretary
Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith
Palazzo del Sant'Uffizio
00120 Città del Vaticano

August 13, 2024

Dear Monsignor Matteo,

Thank you for your leadership at the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and your efforts to build a synodal church. We are grateful for your generous, faithful contributions to this process.

As you know, the Synod Synthesis from the October 2023 gathering calls the entire Church to dialogue and discernment with a particular “urgent” focus on the role of women in the Church. The recently released *Instrumentum Laboris* for the upcoming October meeting of the Synod reiterates that urgency and unequivocally states, “God chose women as the first witnesses and herald of the Resurrection. By virtue of Baptism, they enjoy full equality, receive the same outpouring of gifts from the Spirit, and are called to the service of Christ’s mission” (Sec. 13).

Our request

As coordinator for Study Group Five we ask you and all the members of Group Five to:

1. Carefully consider all credible scholarship regarding the history and theology of women in the diaconate, especially the scholarship that has been previously overlooked or undervalued. World-renowned theologians and historians such as Roger Gryson; Yves Congar; Cipriano Vagaggini, OSB Cam; Gary Macy, SJ; Phyllis Zagano; Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ, and others have delved deeply into the theology and history of the diaconate and found an abundance of evidence indicating that women served as ordained deacons in the early church up through the twelfth century.
2. Evaluate the basis for past attitudes regarding women’s ordination to the diaconate. As was stated in the Synod Synthesis of 2023:

Many women expressed deep gratitude for the work of priests and bishops. They also spoke of a Church that wounds. Clericalism, a chauvinist mentality and inappropriate expressions of authority continue to scar the face of the Church and damage its communion. A profound spiritual conversion is needed as the foundation for any effective structural change (Sec. 9, f).

Our synodal path shows the need for relational renewal and structural changes. In this way we can better welcome the participation and contribution of all – with lay and consecrated women and men, deacons, priests, and bishops – as co-responsible disciples in the work of mission (Sec. 9, f).

We ask you to consider:

- Is it possible that past attitudes towards ordaining women to the diaconate are rooted in clericalism and a chauvinist mentality (Sec. 9,f)?
- Is it time for a profound spiritual conversion, a relational renewal, and structural changes (Sec. 9,f)?

A sampling of pertinent scholarship

Pope Paul VI asked liturgical scholar and member of the International Theological Commission (ITC), Cipriano Vagaggini, to conduct a study on the possibility of ordaining women as deacons. In a detailed essay, Vagaggini offered strong evidence that women were sacramentally ordained. But, the original study by the International Theological Commission was never officially published. Thus, the evidence that women deacons were indeed ordained – and understood to be identical to that of their male counterparts for more than a thousand years is abundant and incontrovertible. Although Vagaggini's essay was never published by the Vatican, it appeared in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, a publication of the Pontifical Biblical Institute at the Gregorian University, in 1974. More recently, his scholarship has gained renewed attention in the discussions on women deacons. After the close of the Second Vatican Council, Yves Congar wrote "Varietes des ministeres et renouveau diaconal" in *Diacres aujourd'hui* in which he finds no objective barrier to ordaining women to the diaconate. In 1972, ITC secretary Philippe Delhaye, presented an essay in *Revue theologique de Louvain* supporting the proposition that women could be ordained as deacons. In the same year, Roger Gryson wrote *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* demonstrating that women were ordained to and ministered within the order of deacons. In 1990 and 1992, Ugo Zanetti, OSB and Franciscan Pietro Sorci published essays that supported ordaining women deacons.ⁱ

The 1992-1997 quinquennium of the International Theological Commission (ITC), seems to have found no barriers to ordaining women as deacons.ⁱⁱ They reportedly wrote an 18-page paper supporting the position that women could be ordained as deacons. But that document was never signed by then-president of the ITC and prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. During the following quinquennium, the ITC published, "From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles" in 2002, which included a selective exploration of the history and theology of the diaconate flawed by the need to prove its unstated point: that women never were ordained and never can be ordained. According to Phyllis Zagano, "The study omits a large body of historical-theological evidence that women were sacramentally ordained. It also tries to argue that the diaconate's participation in the sacrament of holy orders eliminates women, latching on to language that implies that the deacon, like the priest, is so configured to Christ that women are eliminated."ⁱⁱⁱ

Gary Macy, outlines the historical evidence for women deacons in both the Eastern and Western traditions. His scholarship is both comprehensive and conclusive.^{iv}

Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ offer extensive research on women in the early Church in, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*^v, examining the abundance of literary and epigraphical evidence for women deacons in both the Eastern and Western traditions. Their research could be required reading for any group trying to determine the case for women deacons today.

Conclusion

While you and the members of Study Group Five will have access to the conclusions of two commissions appointed by Pope Francis to study the issue of women in the diaconate, we ask you to examine those documents with an eye to any pertinent scholarship that may have been excluded and undervalued. We also ask you to examine all the documents in light of the need to weed out clericalism and chauvinistic mentalities among those in authority that may obscure the gifts God is presenting to the Church today.

It is with hopeful hearts that we look forward to the results of your study on the imminent question of ordaining women to the diaconate and we thank you in advance for all your work.

In Christ,

FutureChurch

Russell Petrus
Executive Director
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Association of US Catholic Priests

Rev. Stephen P. Newton, CSC
Executive Director
<https://auscp.org>

Women's Ordination Conference

Kate McElwee
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<https://www.womensordination.org>

Enclosure: see footnotes on next page.

ⁱ Zagano, Phyllis, Ed. *Women Deacons: Essays with Answers*. Liturgical Press. Collegeville, Minnesota (2016).

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, xiv.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zagano, Phyllis. "The case for Catholic women deacons" in *America Magazine*. February 17, 2003 at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2003/02/17/phyllis-zagano-case-catholic-women-deacons>. Accessed July 10, 2023.

^{iv} Macy, Gary. "Women Deacons: History" in *Women Deacons: Past, Present, and Future* by Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano. Paulist Press. New York/Mahwah, NJ (2011).

^v Madigan, Kevin and Carolyn Osiek, eds. *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*. The John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, Maryland (2015).