

What Do We Know About Women Deacons?

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Abstract: Pope Francis's decision to establish a Commission for the Study of the Diaconate of Women in August 2016 reemphasizes the question: What do we know about women deacons? We know they existed. There is ample literary, epigraphical, and historical evidence that women deacons ministered in the West at least to the 12th century, and longer in the East. That they existed presents three questions: What do we know about the liturgical ceremonies bishops used to create women deacons? What do we know about their tasks and duties? What do we know about the theology of the diaconate that would admit or restrict women from diaconal ordination?

Keywords: Catholic Women • Deaconess • Diaconate • Women in Ministry

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Introduction

Pope Francis' decision to establish a Commission for the Study of the Diaconate of Women in August 2016 reemphasizes the question: What do we know about women deacons? We know they existed.

There is ample literary, epigraphical, and historical evidence that women deacons ministered in the West at least to the 12th century.¹ That they existed presents three questions: What do we know about the liturgical ceremonies bishops used to create women deacons? What do we know about their tasks and duties? What do we know about the theology of the diaconate that would admit or restrict women from diaconal ordination?

Liturgical Ceremonies

There are several ceremonies apparently used in the past by bishops for the creation of women as deacons, evidenced by manuscripts from the 4th through the 16th centuries. Some rituals include all the elements of sacramental ordinations, even according to the criteria established by the Council of Trent.

The earliest ritual for women deacons is found in *The Apostolic Constitutions* (380-400):²

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¹ Successive popes conferred the privilege of ordaining women deacons in 1018, 1025, 1026, 1037, and 1049. Women deacons existed in Lucca, Italy under Ottone, bishop there from 1139 to 1146. Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 35, 93-96.

² Which partly repeat some texts of the *Didascalia of the Apostles* (Eastern Syria, ± 230).

AC 8.19-20: ordination of the deaconess

- 19.1 But now concerning a deaconess, I Bartholomew make this teaching.
- 19.2 O bishop, you will lay your hands on her in the presence of the presbyters and the deacons and the deaconesses and you will say:
- 20.1 O Eternal God, the father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, Creator of man and woman, who filled with the Spirit Miriam and Deborah and Anna and Huldah, who did not disdain that your only begotten son should be born of a woman, who also in the tabernacle of testimony and in the Temple appointed the guardians of the holy gates (Ex 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22),
- 20.2 now also, look upon your servant who is to be appointed to the diaconate and give to her the holy Spirit and cleanse her from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit so that she may worthily perform the work which is entrusted to your glory and the praise of your Christ, with whom glory and worship be to you and to the holy Spirit forever. Amen.³

The ritual includes an imposition of hands and the *epiclesis*.

Other rituals for women deacons are found in several well-known manuscripts from both the East and the West. The Vatican Apostolic Library holds three from the East: Barberini gr. 336 (780), Vatican Manuscript gr. 1872 (1100), and the Codex Syriacus Vaticanus No. 19 (1550), and two from the West: Vatican Reginae lat. 337 (850) and the Ottobonianus lat. 313, Paris (850). Additional manuscripts and sacramentaries, with the “*Ordo ad diaconam faciendam*,” are deposited elsewhere in Italy, as well as in Austria, England, France, and Germany.⁴

³ *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, ed. and trans. Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 113-114; AC (Apostolic Constitutions) Book 8, §§ 19-20 (Funk I, 524, 13-24).

⁴ For example, from the East, the Bessarion Manuscript (1020) at the monastery at Grotta Ferrata; the Coislin gr. 213 (1050) at the National Library in Paris. From the West, notably the Cambrai

Imperial legislation speaks at least three times of deaconesses, they are mentioned in the *Novelle* 3 of March 16, 535, where the emperor Justinian limited the number of clergy of the Basilica of Santa Sofia at Constantinople: there were to be no more than 425 clerics and a maximum of 40 deaconesses. The minimum age of these was to be 40. The continence of major clerics was imposed on them; they were to be virgins or once-married widows. "In the legislation of Justinian, deaconesses are compared with clerics in many regards. Like other clerics, at the moment they assumed their function they received an ordination, designated by terms *cheirotónia*, *cheirotoneîn* (these terms appear at least eleven times in the *Novelle* 6.)"⁵

While the existence of women deacons is undoubted, opinions vary as to the nature of their ordinations. Some argue that the ceremonies are a simple benediction, and not a true ordination, even though in most cases the rituals are nearly identical for men and for women. A certain confusion arises from the fact that the terms *cheirotónia* and *cheirothesía* are used interchangeably,⁶

Manuscript 164 at the Cambrai Municipal Library (811); the Leofric Missal of Exeter at the Bodleian Library, Oxford (1050); and the *Ordo Romanus* of Hittorp, Cologne (850) and the Pontificals of St Alban Abbey, Mainz (1030), the Abbey of Monte Cassino (1035), and Vallicella D5, Rome (1050), among others.

⁵ Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. J. Laporte and M.L. Hall (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1976), pp. 72, 148; *Le ministère des femmes dans l'Église ancienne*, Gembloux, Duculot (coll. "Recherches et synthèses - Section d'Histoire," 4), 1972, 122-123.

⁶ According to the expert, Cyrille Vogel, « Chirotonie et chirothésie. Importance et relativité du geste de l'imposition des mains dans la collation des orders », *Irenikon*, 45 (1972) 7-21 and 207-238, the two terms are equivalent in ancient times. "If we are right, it is during the debates at the Second Council of Nicaea (787) about a long controversial passage of the First Council of Nicaea (325) c. 8, that for the first time we observe a token of

whereas the two terms are translated without distinction in Latin as *impositio manus* or *manuum*.

Retrospective contention over the nature of the historical ordinations of women as deacons seems to have begun in the 17th century, when John Morin determined that the ancient rituals met the requirements for sacramental ordination of the Council of Trent.⁷ Nearly one hundred years later, Jean Pien argued that even though the evidence demonstrated that women were ordained by the laying on of hands and included an *epiclesis*, the ordinations could not be considered sacramental.⁸

The debate continued more recently. In 1972, the Belgian professor Roger Gryson found positively: women deacons were truly ordained. Msgr. Philippe Delhay, Secretary of the International Theological Commission (ITC) from 1972-1989 agreed, as did Cipriano Vagaggini two years later. Soon, the French professor Aimé-Georges Martimort argued negatively, and published a counter study in 1982.⁹ The discussion was now held against the

diversification between *cheirotónia* and *cheirothesía*; it is in the intervention of Patriarch Tarasios: “Perhaps here (at Nicaea 325 c. 8) that *cheirothesía* is spoken of in the sense of a simple blessing (*eulogia*) and not a *cheirotónia*. After Zonaras and Valsamon, and despite some hesitation in these two great commentators themselves *cheirotónia* and *cheirothesía* become stabilized, the first term reserved for the laying on of hands for the ordination of a bishop, presbyter and deacon, the second term meaning the gesture of blessing for the establishment of subordinate functionaries” (10-11). For Vogel, the “mandate” given by the Church remains the essential point (p. 20).

⁷ Jean Morin, *Commentarius de sacris ecclesiae ordinationibus secundum antiquos et recentiores latinos, graecos, syros et babylonios in tres partes distinctus*, 1655, 1695; reprint (Farnborough: Gregg, 1969).

⁸ Jean Pien, *Tractatus Praeliminaris De Ecclesiae Diaconissis*. In *Acta Sanctorum*, ed., J. Bollandus et al. September, I, i-xxviii (Antwerp: Bernard Albert Vander Plassch, 1746).

⁹ Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*; Philippe Delhay, “Rétrospective et prospective des ministères

backdrop of calls for women to be ordained as priests. Perhaps because the Second Vatican Council affirmed the sacramental nature of diaconal ordination, even as it was distinct from presbyteral ordination, a few writers followed Martimort.¹⁰ Typically, they argued that diaconal ordination implied eventual priesthood.

More recently, two quinquennia of ITC undertook study of the matter. By all accounts, a 17-page document completed in 1997 found in favour of the Church's tradition of women deacons, but the ITC's president, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, refused to sign it, instead naming a new ITC sub-committee.¹¹ In 2002, the second committee produced a 78-page document, *Le Diaconat, évolution et perspectives*, which concluded:

1. The deaconesses mentioned in the tradition of the ancient Church – as evidenced by the rite of institution and the functions they exercised – were not purely and simply equivalent to the deacons;
2. The unity of the sacrament of Holy Orders, in the clear distinction between the ministries of the bishop and the priests on the one hand and the diaconal ministry on the other, is strongly underlined by ecclesial tradition, especially in the teaching of the Magisterium.

féminins dans l'Église," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 3 (1972) 55-75; Cipriano Vagaggini, "L'ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974) 146-89. A.-G. Martimort, "A propos des ministères féminins dans l'Église," *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 74 (1973) 103-8; *Les Diaconesses: Essai historique*. Rome: Edizione Liturgiche, 1982.

¹⁰ See, for example, Gerhard L. Müller, *Priestertum und Diakonat. Der Empfänger des Weihesakramentes in schöpfungstheologischer und christologischer Perspektive*, Sammlung Horizonte NF 33, (Freiburg: Johannes, 2000).

¹¹ Henrique de Noronha Galvão, chair, and Santiago del Cura Elena, Pierre Gaudette, Roland Minnerath, Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Luis Antonio G. Tagle, and Ladislaus Vanyo.

In the light of these elements which have been set out in the present historico-theological research document, it pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question.¹²

The operative points: while historically women deacons do not appear to have been precisely identical to men deacons, the Church also distinguishes between the sacerdotal and diaconal ministries. Therefore, the “ministry of discernment” should allow the Church to pronounce authoritatively on the question of women deacons. The ITC did not say “no.” But it did not say “yes.”

Nearly a generation of additional research, particularly into liturgical and historical evidence, has again brought the question to the fore.

¹² http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_en.html. The text was approved *in forma specifica* by the entire ITC on 30 September 2002. English, Hungarian, Polish, and Portuguese, and Spanish texts are dated 2002. Corrected French, German, Italian, and Russian texts are dated 2003. The French notes the Vatican Council’s emphatic separation of the diaconate and the priesthood: “Concernant l’ordination de femmes au diaconat, il faut observer deux éléments importants résultant de ce que nous avons exposé. Premièrement, les diaconesses dont il est fait mention dans la tradition de l’Église ancienne (selon ce que le rite d’institution et les fonctions exercées suggèrent) ne peuvent pas être assimilées purement et simplement aux diacres. Deuxièmement, la tradition ecclésiale, surtout dans la doctrine du concile Vatican II et dans l’enseignement du Magistère postconciliaire, souligne fortement l’unité du sacrement de l’Ordre, dans la claire distinction entre les ministères de l’évêque et des presbytres d’une part et le ministère diaconal d’autre part. À la lumière de ces éléments mis en relief par la présente recherche historico-théologique, il revient au ministère de discernement que le Seigneur a établi dans son Église de se prononcer avec autorité sur la question.”

Tasks and Duties of Women Deacons

What did women deacons do? One response restricts the tasks of women deacons to assisting in baptisms of women. Ancient mores kept men from touching women with whom they had no familial relationship. Hence, at baptism women deacons anointed female *baptizandae* on behalf of the bishop. However, there is also evidence that women deacons both anointed and carried Communion to ill women.¹³

In general, because women deacons ministered at least a millennium in the East, and to the 12th century in the West, their known tasks and duties vary over time and place. In accepting the request of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) to establish a Commission to study the diaconate of women, Pope Francis gave evidence of his own recollections of women deacons: anointing in baptism and assisting women who claimed their husbands beat them.¹⁴ But it is impossible to state generally what women deacons did or did not do precisely because of differing customs and practices across the Church over the centuries.

¹³ Jean Daniélou, citing Epiphanius, seems to include anointing the sick: *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Faith, 1974), 29; “Le ministère des femmes,” *Maison-Dieu* 61 (1960) 94; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 79, 3.

¹⁴ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents_papa-francesco_20160512_uisg.html

“It seems – I was told by this man, who is now dead but who was a good professor, wise and erudite – it seems that the role of the deaconesses was to help in the baptism of women, with their immersion; for the sake of decorum they baptized them; and also anointed the body of women, in baptism. And another curious fact: when there was a judgement on a marriage because a husband beat his wife and she went to the bishop to lay a complaint, deaconesses were responsible for inspecting the bruises left on the woman’s body from her husband’s blows, and for informing the bishop.”

The deacon is charged to a ministry of the Word, the liturgy, and charity, but over the centuries such tasks and duties for women gradually eroded. For example, the roles of the deacon at Mass are progressively refused to women. In the fifth century, Pope Gelasius I complained that women (presumably women deacons) were serving at the altar as did men: “With impatience, we have heard that divine things have undergone such contempt that women are encouraged to serve at the sacred altars, and that all tasks entrusted to the service of men are performed by a sex for which these [tasks] are not appropriate.”¹⁵

In the 829, the (sixth) Council of Paris decried the fact of women at the altar:

...in some provinces, in contradiction to the divine law and to canonical instruction, women betake themselves into the altar area and impudently take hold of the sacred vessels, hold out the priestly garments to the priest, and what is still worse, more indecent and unfitting that all this – they give the people the body and blood of the Lord and do other things which in themselves are indecent.¹⁶

¹⁵ “Nihilominus impatienter audivimus, tantum divinarum rerum subiisse despectum, ut feminae sacris altaribus ministrare ferantur, et cuncta quae non nisi virorum famulatui deputata sunt sexum, cui non competit, exhibere.” Pope Gelasius, *Epistolae et decreta*, 9-26, *PL* 59.55.

¹⁶ “Quidam nostrorum verorum virorum relatu, quidam etiam visu didicimus in quibusdam provintiis contra legem divinam canonicamque institutionem feminas sanctis altaribus se ultro ingerere sacrataque vasa inpudenter contingere et indumenta sacerdotalia praesbyteris administrare et, quod his maius, indecentius ineptiusque est, corpus et sanguinem Domini populis porrigere et alia quaeque, quae ipso dictu turpia sunt, exercere” (Council of Paris, 829, c. 45, in *Concilia aevi Karolini [742-84-2]*, ed. Albert Werminghoff, MGH, *Conclia* 2,1 [Hannover: Hahn, 1907], 639. In Macy, *The Hidden History of Women’s Ordination*, pp. 62 and 189.

The rejection of women touching sacred species or vessels hardened and spread, even and especially after women were no longer ordained as deacons. In Basque country, liturgical and charitable duties of deacons were performed by women called *sororas* or *freilas*, possibly to the seventeenth century.¹⁷ In 1698, a local Synod of Calahorra La Rioja, Spain complained: “Among other scandalous things... women mingle with priests in the sacristy, approach the altar to light the candles, and maintain the sacred vestments and vessels.”¹⁸

Throughout history, from the time of Pope Gelasius I to modern times, objections to women at the altar are rooted in misogynist views of women’s impurity, views still adhered to in parts of the world. For example, the 1953 *Dictionnaire de Droit canonique* points out:

Canon Law expresses some reservations toward woman [...] inspired either by the consideration of their *imbecillitas sexus*, or by the remembrance of the role played by the woman and original sin and the occasion of sin that she represents. So, Canon Law strikes the woman with a certain number of incapacities or inferiorities, and seeks to protect them. [...] Canon 968 § 1 [Canon 1024] following the constant tradition of the Law,¹⁹ by deciding that only men might be admitted to sacred orders, decrees the absolute exclusion of women.

¹⁷ M.J. Arana and M. Salas, *Mujeres Sacerdotes? Por Qué No...?: Reflexiones históricas, teológicas, y ecuménicas* (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1994), 53-55.

¹⁸ Pedro de Lepe, *Constituciones synodales antiguas y modernas del Obispado de Calahorra y la Calzada* (Madrid: Antonio Gonzales de Reyes, 1700), Vol. III, tit XII, folio 497.

¹⁹ It seems that Law, in the conception of the author, was born with Gratian’s Decree (c. 1140) and immediately aligns with Western Medieval sacramental theology. Canon 968 in the 1917 Code equates to Canon 1024 in the 1983 Code: “A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly.”

[...] Women were not allowed to serve at Mass in the true sense of the term (can. 813, § 2).²⁰

Even a document published following the Second Vatican Council includes remnants of misogyny. *Musicam sacram*: Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, (5 March 1967) bans choirs that include women from the sanctuary.²¹

The deacon is charged with preaching, but women forbidden from the sanctuary certainly cannot preach from it during the Mass. Whereas it seems that women ordained as deacons only formally preached where they also served as abbesses, their dedication to the Word is clear throughout history: they catechized women and children.

The deacon is also charged with charity. The charity of the church was once clearly parochial and episcopal ministry. However, if the church's charity is measured against the decline of the diaconate, especially in the West, we see it mainly in the works of women and men religious, to the present.

²⁰ *Dictionnaire de Droit canonique*, dir. R. Naz, t. V, Paris, Letouzé-Ané, 1953, art. "Femmes," col. 828. Canon 813.2 in the 1917 Code was dropped from Canon 906 in the 1983 Code. Can 813.1. Sacerdos Missam ne celebret sine ministro qui eidem inserviat et respondeat. 2. Minister Missae inserviens ne sit mulier, nisi, deficient viro, iusta de causa, eaque lege ut mulier ex longinquo respondeat nec ullo pacto ad altare accedat.

²¹ "23. Taking into account the layout of each church, the choir should be placed in such a way: (a) That its nature should be clearly apparent—namely, that it is a part of the whole congregation, and that it fulfills a special role....Whenever the choir also includes women, it should be placed outside the sanctuary (presbyterium)." Sacred Congregation for Worship, *Musicam sacram*: Instruction on Music in the Liturgy (5 March 1967) No. 23.c. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_instr_19670305_musicam-sacram_en.html

Theology of the Diaconate

The diaconate was affirmed and restored as a permanent, sacramentally ordained ministry following the Second Vatican Council. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, is clear: “At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed ‘not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service.’”²² The crucial fact: ordination to the diaconate is for ministry, not priesthood. Every diaconal task and duty is now or has been performed by women, either by women deacons of history or by modern women religious and lay ecclesial ministers. In fact, there is no activity named in *Lumen gentium* that a woman has not or cannot perform.²³

Following the close of the Council, Pope Paul VI promulgated the Apostolic letter *Sacrum diaconatus*

²² LG, 29, citing *Constitutiones Ecclesiae aegyptiacae*, III, 2: Funk, *Didascalia*, II, p. 103 – *Statuta Eccl. Ant.*: 37-41; Mansi 3, 954. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

²³ LG, 29: “For strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the bishop and his group of priests they serve in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God. It is the duty of the deacon, according as it shall have been assigned to him by competent authority, to administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, to officiate at funeral and burial services. Dedicated to duties of charity and of administration, let deacons be mindful of the admonition of Blessed Polycarp: “Be merciful, diligent, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all.” Cf. *Didache*, 15, 1: Funk I, p. 32, I, p. 530. — Saint Ignatius, Trall. 2, 3: Funk I, p. 242. — *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, 8, 28, 4: Funk, *Didascalia*, I, p. 530.

ordinem (June 18, 1967), detailing the duties of the deacon and opening the diaconate as a permanent office to men, including married men.²⁴ By a second Apostolic letter, *Ministeria quaedam* (August 15, 1972), Paul VI eliminated tonsure on entry to the clerical state, and suppressed the minor orders of porter, lector, exorcist, acolyte, and the major order of subdeacon.

Among the particular offices to be preserved and adapted to contemporary needs are those that are in a special way more closely connected with the ministries of the Word and of the altar and that in the Latin Church are called the offices of *reader* and *acolyte* and the subdiaconate. It is fitting to preserve and adapt these in such a way, that from this time on there will be two offices: that of reader and that of acolyte, which will include the functions of the subdiaconate.²⁵

Later, the 1983 Code of Canon Law affirmed that the ordinary means of entering the clerical state was by ordination to the diaconate.²⁶

Pope Paul VI's actions ended the practice of the *cursus honorum* codified by Gratian's twelfth century compilation of canon law, the *Decretum Gratiani*. The *cursus honorum* required that anyone ordained as deacon must be qualified and destined to become a presbyter. The practice remained in force even after the *Codex Iuris Canonici*, promulgated by Benedict XIV on May 27, 1917, took effect on Pentecost, 1918. The suppression of the minor orders and the elimination of the subdiaconate

²⁴ http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu_proprio_19670618_sacrum-diaconatus.html

²⁵ <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/p6minors.htm>

²⁶ Can. 266 §1. Through the reception of the diaconate, a person becomes a cleric and is incardinated in the particular church or personal prelature for whose service he has been advanced.

restored the earlier tradition, although it remains customary for presbyteral candidates first to be ordained as deacons.²⁷

Much later, Pope Benedict XVI further separated the diaconate and the presbyterate. In 2006, speaking to the priests of the Diocese of Rome and answering a question about women in ministry, Benedict XVI asked: “However, it is right to ask if also in the ministerial service – though on this question sacrament and charism make up the only path on which the Church can tread – it is possible to offer more space, more positions of responsibility to women.”²⁸

Again, in 2009, Benedict XVI codified that fact, amending Canon Law to reflect what had already been presented in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Art 2. Henceforth can. 1009 of the *Code of Canon Law* will have three paragraphs. In the first and the second of these, the text of the canon presently in force are to

²⁷ The pre-Constantinian church did not evidence sequential ordination. While three orders (bishop, priest, and deacon cf. Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, *Lettres. Martyre de Polycarpe* [coll. “Sources Chrétiennes”, 10] (Paris: Cerf, 1969), *Trall.* 3,1, p. 96-97, *Philad.* 4, p. 122-123 and *Smyrn.* 8,1, p. 138-139), are mentioned by Ignatius of Antioch, they are not mentioned in the same order and cannot support affirmation of a *cursus honorum*. John St. H. Gibaut, *The Cursus Honorum: A Study of the Origins of Sequential Ordination* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 28.

²⁸ “Discorso improvvisato da Benedetto XVI al Clero romano: I temi dell’incontro: vita, famiglia e formazione dei sacerdoti,” March 2, 2006: Tuttavia, è giusto chiedersi se anche nel servizio ministeriale — nonostante il fatto che qui Sacramento e carisma siano il binario unico nel quale si realizza la Chiesa — non si possa offrire più spazio, più posizioni di responsabilità alle donne. ZENIT on March 3, 2006. <https://it.zenit.org/articles/discorso-improvvisato-da-benedetto-xvi-al-clero-romano/> (accessed March 12, 2018). See Phyllis Zagano, “The Question of Governance and Ministry for Women,” *Theological Studies* 68, no. 2 (2007) 348-367.

be retained, whereas the new text of the third paragraph is to be worded so that can. 1009 § 3 will read: “Those who are constituted in the order of the episcopate or the presbyterate receive the mission and capacity to act in the person of Christ the Head, whereas deacons are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word and charity.”²⁹

The progressive recognition of the historical distinction between the diaconate and the presbyterate allows the Church to reclaim its own history more easily. The only remaining theological objection to restoring women to the ordained diaconate is the argument that women cannot image Christ, a notion so invidious as to be heretical. The deacon is and ministers *in persona Christi servi*, and does not participate in the presbyterate or its functions, which are *in persona Christi capitis ecclesiae*.

These new distinctions are in the 2002 ITC document, which also states that the deacon not only serves as Christ, but is Christ, thereby attempting to invoke the iconic argument. As in *Inter insigniores* (1976), Christ was and is a man; women cannot so represent or “image” him. But such restricts the Risen Lord to the human male Jesus of history, who lives on in the Resurrection beyond his own body and in all Christians, each made in the image and likeness of God. The iconic argument does not appear in the second contemporary document touching on the question of women as priests, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994).

²⁹http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20091026_codex-iuris-canonici.html

Conclusion

That women can and do image Christ, the Risen Lord, is a theological and anthropological fact that none can deny. That the Church has stated authoritatively that it does not have the authority to ordain women as priests assists the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate, a ministry of service.

The overwhelming amount of literary, epigraphical, and historical evidence regarding women deacons points to even more facts about them, either yet undiscovered or permanently lost. But we do know that they existed. We have definitive evidence that they were ordained by bishops and that they served these bishops in ministerial capacities. Today, it would seem that nothing restricts women from diaconal ordination.

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