



DISCERNING DEACONS

A primer on the Catholic Church's discernment of women and the diaconate

Introduction

- Pope Francis has consistently encouraged a listening and participatory Church.
- In 2016, Catholic sisters asked Pope Francis to establish a commission to study whether women could again be ordained as deacons. He agreed. The report was never made public.
- The question has emerged at recent Synods of Bishops in Rome. In response to a formal request from the Amazon Synod, the pope established a new commission in April 2020 to study the topic. The commission will begin meeting this fall.
- While every member of the Church is called to serve others, deacons are ordained as sacramental witnesses to this vocation “in the *diaconia* [ministry] of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God” (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, 29).
- Deacons are authorized to preside at baptisms and marriages and to preach at Mass.
- The liturgical roles of deacons may be the most visible, but their ministry must extend beyond the church building. Deacon William T. Ditewig, Ph.D., the former director of the deacons’ office for the U.S. bishops, explains, “The deacon is to be the conscience of the Church -- dragging the ambo to the streets and the streets to the ambo.”



Pope Francis and Sr. Carmen Sammut greet each other at the meeting where Catholic sisters asked the pope to establish a commission to study women deacons, May 12, 2016, Paul VI Assembly Hall, Vatican. (AP photo)

Deacons in History

- The diaconate arose as a response to a pastoral need and involved a work of charity and justice. As the number of disciples grew, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians in Jerusalem complained that “their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution” of food to the neediest members of the community (Acts 6:1), so they appointed seven to this task.



- In the *Letter to the Romans*, St. Paul commends Phoebe and introduces her as “our sister,” a benefactor and a deacon (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae (16:1-2). [St. Phoebe, 2018 © Laura James, Used with Permission, laurajamesart.com]
- In *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future*, Gary Macy describes the presence and ministry of women who were called *deacons* as they exercised a wide range of ministries related to liturgy, Word and charity. From the earliest Christian communities until the 12th century, these women baptized and anointed women, proclaimed the Gospel, preached, taught catechism to children, assisted at the altar, administered finances, assisted in marriage annulment investigations and cared for women on the margins, especially those who were sick, poor or imprisoned.
- The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) decreed, “No woman under forty years of age is to be ordained a deacon, and then only after close scrutiny.”
- Ancient and medieval ordination rites show that bishops ordained women as deacons through the imposition of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit.
- Three consecutive popes in the 11th century (Benedict VIII, John XIX and Benedict IX) authorized bishops to ordain women as deacons.
- Over the centuries, bishops and priests took on the distinct roles of deacons. By the 12th century, the diaconate became solely a *transitional* step toward priesthood. Since women could not become priests, they could no longer be ordained as transitional deacons.

Restoration of a Ministry

- In *The Emerging Diaconate*, William T. Ditewig writes that in the early 20th century an idea spread in the German Caritas movement that the diaconate as a *permanent* vocation could be restored and opened to married men.
- Toward the end of World War II, Catholics saw the ministry of deacons as a necessary component of a renewed church that would help prevent future atrocities and serve the world’s great needs.

- About 30 “Diaconate Circles” emerged in Western Europe. Members engaged in charitable activities and explored a renewed diaconate. During Vatican II, members moved to Rome to serve as a resource for bishops and to advocate for the restoration of this ministry.
- Vatican II decreed the diaconate should be restored as a permanent state of life. The reason: “There are men who actually carry out the functions of the deacon’s office,” and therefore, “it is only right to strengthen them by the...sacramental grace of the diaconate.”
- Since Diaconate Circles had already laid the groundwork, the first ordinations of married men as deacons took place in Germany within a year of Pope Paul VI’s official approval.
- Ditlewicz writes, “As the church-as-servant continues to find creative ways to meet the needs of an increasingly complex world, it will need all of its resources, and the diaconate is one of those instruments of renewal.”

Imagining Women as Deacons

- Since Vatican II, a question that has repeatedly emerged is whether the restoration and renewal of this ministry might also involve recognizing the diaconal work that women are already doing and ordaining them to this ministry.
- Today, we know that in every part of the world, Catholic women are preaching the Word as catechists, distributing communion, serving as chaplains in hospitals and prisons, leading parishes and social service organizations and engaging in a variety of works of charity and justice. In some places, like the Pan-Amazonian region, it is common for bishops to delegate women to preside at baptisms and marriages.
- Ordaining women to the diaconate would enliven the mission of the Church, address pastoral needs, empower local churches, confer sacramental grace, help Catholics see the image of Christ in women and more fully embody the sacramentality of the Church.



Amazonian church leaders gather near the Vatican during the Synod of Bishops on the Amazon, October 2019

The Trajectory of Change

- *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. The Spirit is always reforming and renewing the Church.
- In our lifetimes, one significant place where a holy revolution has already taken place is the presence of women in the Church. Centuries-old assumptions, beliefs, practices have been challenged -- and in some cases -- completely overturned, like the exclusion of women from church sanctuaries and from most recognized church ministries.
- In the particular area of liturgical and sacramental leadership, there have been significant changes, even if slowly and incrementally. Today it is common for Catholic women to serve as lectors, acolytes (altar servers), music ministers, Eucharistic ministers and in other roles. In January 2021, Pope Francis even amended canon law so that, for the first time, women can be formally installed as lectors and acolytes.
- The diaconate appears to be the next frontier in this ongoing struggle to officially recognize the ministries in which women are already serving.
- In 2019, participants at the Amazon Synod repeatedly affirmed that women are already doing the work of deacons in the region, and a majority of bishops were in favor of ordaining women to the diaconate. The Synod formally requested to share their “experiences and reflections” with a papal commission on women and the diaconate.
- Pope Francis immediately responded, “I will take on the request to reconvene the commission, perhaps with new members.... I pick up the challenge. There’s a glove somewhere that’s been thrown down. The women have put up a sign and said, ‘Please listen to us. May we be heard.’ And I pick up that gauntlet.”



Pope Francis leads prayer during a session of the Synod of Bishops on the Amazon, October 2019