

Women's Ministry in the Catholic Church

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The history of Christianity gives ample evidence of the ministry of women. Many women of scripture are ministers in the nascent Church, and are recognized as such. St. Paul calls one of these women, Phoebe, a deacon of the Church at Cenchrae (Romans 16:1-2). Her title and her legacy are the foundation of the ongoing discussion about the ministry of women, much of which centers on the ordination and certification of women ministers.

In the Catholic Church the history of women's ordination is clouded, except in some Eastern Churches. While many mistakenly think of the Catholic Church as only the Church of Rome — the Roman Catholic Church — there are 21 Eastern Churches with a deep history of sacramental ordination of women to ministry.

Ordination

Ordination is one of seven sacraments recognized by the universal Church. While in modern times ordination has been restricted to men, this has not always been the case. Women were ordained deacons up until the fifth century in the West and up to the 11th century in the East. Women have been ordained up to modern times, even to the present, in some of the Churches of Orthodoxy that separated from Rome in 1054, or in other Churches of the East that separated even earlier.

My research into the restoration of the ancient practice of ordaining women deacons began more than 20 years ago with a challenge. My former boss had accepted a position out of state, and we were sharing a farewell lunch in New York City near the office. "If you write a book about ordaining women deacons, and it is a good book, I will get it to the Pope." "Oh," I said, "you

don't know the Pope, Bishop O'Connor." Well, after he left the military ordinariate to become bishop of Scranton, my lunch partner came back to New York as archbishop. He knew the Pope.

I share this little story because it shaped my work for some time. Cardinal O'Connor advised quite strongly to leave the matter of women priests aside. The question, he counseled, was not the same. This led me to investigate the history of women in ministry, as well as the sacramental theology, ecclesiology, canon law, historical and ecumenical sources, and contemporary understandings of the permanent diaconate.

My work traces an older understanding of ordained ministry, and I argue for the diaconate as a permanent vocation. The schema is more a triangle than a direct relationship among bishop, priest and deacon. As the deacon related directly to the bishop of a territorial diocese in earlier church history, so does the deacon relate directly to the pastor — the "bishop" — of the territorial parish in the present. Hence, the diaconate is not solely a stage through which celibate candidates for priesthood pass. It is also a permanent vocation for married and celibate men, and, I contend, women.

The need for women deacons is present in the life of ministry in the Church. Women already serve in diaconal positions in the parish: visiting the homebound and hospitalized, catechizing the young, aiding the poor with programs that provide food and clothing, caring for the church building and arranging for liturgies. Their ministry continues in parish liturgies: women read the Scriptures at mass, distribute Communion as Eucharistic ministers, and are greeters, leaders of song, altar servers and gift bearers.

The aggregate of these roles both comprise and signify the diaconate. Other roles, however, such as preaching, are typically restricted to the ordained. Significantly, only ordained persons may preach during mass. If women were deacons, women could preach. They would also have what the Church understands as the charism of orders to support their diaconal work. They would join male deacons, who are called by the bishop to a life dedicated to the Word (Scripture), the liturgy and charity.

History and Ritual

My book *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church* (Crossroad/Herder, 2000) established the validity and legality of ordaining Catholic women deacons.

My current research, including historical analysis of Catholic rituals for women, points to earlier rituals certifying Church status now lost. Rituals for ordination (deacons), benediction (abbesses), enrollment (widows), consecration (virgins), and profession of vows (nuns and sisters) have faded or collapsed over the centuries. The question arises whether women, who clearly are continuing to serve, gradually adopted other ritual means of certifying their status once the diaconate died out. I theorize, for example, that rituals of the profession of vows and/or consecration of virgins have partly replaced the ritual of ordination of women to the diaconate.

There are virtually no comprehensive studies of Catholic rituals for women, aside from historical studies of individual religious institutes and orders. Ancient and medieval sources — beginning with the Apostolic Constitutions — reveal parallel developments of rituals to accept

and certify women's service, including formulae for the ordination of women deacons, the blessing or enrolling of widows, and the consecration of virgins. Matters are confused because some women sometimes participated in more than one of these ceremonies.

Over centuries and in different locales bishops accepted and certified women's ministry through various ceremonies, but eventually official recognition of women's ministry outside the monastery was repressed, and women who wished to dedicate their lives to God entered cloisters. As women's monasteries grew, so did formalized profession rites for the nuns and consecration (or benediction) rites for their abbesses. With power nearly equivalent to that of diocesan bishops, abbesses wielded juridical and often sacramental power over their abbey's territories. I theorize that male Church authority recognized and authorized abbesses' juridical and sacramental authority through ordination (sometimes called benediction) as deacon (or deaconess). Additionally, the abbess's overseeing role was recognized by consecration. Such apparently equates to the ordination of male deacons and the consecration of bishops.¹

Concurrently, the Catholic notion of sacrament, and especially of sacramental ordination, continued to evolve. Although a progression from minor orders (lector, porter, exorcist, subdeacon) to major orders (deacon, priest, bishop) was known regionally as early as the fourth century, it was firmly established by the 10th century. The Council of Trent (1545-63) defined seven sacraments, including Holy Orders, which concerned only the major orders of bishop-priest-deacon. Yet Catholic rituals for women were lost from the list of sacraments. One ceremony that has perished, the consecration of a virgin, is called a "sacramental." Further, as the notion of the diaconate as a permanent vocation faded, so did the notion of women deacons.

By the 12th and 13th centuries, most women who wished to serve the Church retreated to abbeys and monasteries, following one or another of the older rules (e.g., St. Benedict, Carmel) or some of the newer ones (St. Francis, St. Dominic). Women who wished to actively minister outside monasteries joined third orders. Secular communities of canonesses followed the Rule of St. Augustine well into the 17th century. Soon groups of women began to create non-cloistered forms of religious life, often following the Constitutions of Ignatius of Loyola.² These latter women's institutes of apostolic life took up historically diaconal works, especially catechesis and care of the sick, but members did not (do not) have individual juridical or sacramental authority, and so they were (are) not represented in Church governance or liturgy.

Even so, the role of deacon and, when viewed equivalently in abbesses, the role of bishop, continued to be filled by women and ritually acknowledged.³ That is, the meanings of "ordination," "consecration," "benediction," "enrollment," and "profession" historically and currently show that women's rituals represented and represent what the women believed about their status. Today the most usual terms for ceremonies for women are "profession" of a sister or nun (permanent status within an apostolic institute or cloistered order),⁴ "consecration" of a virgin (for either women religious or secular women), and "benediction" or "blessing" of abbess or prioress. Ordination is not permitted. Neither can the title "deacon" or "deaconess" be given to women. Men are "installed" to what remains of minor orders (lector and acolyte); women may serve, but may not be permanently installed as such.

Yet there are striking similarities between rites for profession of women religious and those for diaconal ordination, and between rites for consecration of abbess/prioress and for consecration of bishop. In some cases the actual ordination rite of the deaconess seems to have perished for centuries within

women's monasteries, the abbess/prioress receiving both the ordination to the diaconate and the consecration of abbess (often also receiving symbols of office: stole, ring, crozier, miter).

Women continue to serve the Church outside the monastery, and ritual ordinarily ratifies this service. But the collapse of the concepts of profession (permanent membership) and ordination (to diaconal service) in women's apostolic institutes obscures the distinctions between membership in a religious order and ordained service in the Church. Similarly, while superiors of communities of women religious have certain juridical authority over their members, women cannot attain juridical authority that requires clerical status. (Jurisdiction comes with office, and sacramental authority requires faculties granted by the local ordinary (bishop), and each typically requires clerical status.)⁵ Permission to preach at mass and to solemnly celebrate sacraments requires ordination.⁶

The role of women in individual societies is often controlled by the role of women in the dominant religion or religions in any given country. Christianity has played a dominant role in the history of Western civilization over the past 2,000 years, and Roman Catholicism is the largest single denomination in the United States. While Catholicism speaks to the equality of all persons, it specifically limits persons according to gender and refuses women clerical status, and the consequent ability to hold juridical authority and wield juridical power. I posit that this was not always the case, and argue this through the history of rituals. Such presents an analysis of the Church's denial of essential equality to women, a denial echoed in the unfortunate history of the status of women in Western civilization.

Formation and Training

Women may neither be ordained nor train in official diaconal (or priestly) training programs, but large numbers of

women are currently training for professional lay (non-ordained) ecclesial ministry in the United States and Canada. Their preparation is often equal to or higher than the preparation of the 26,000 Catholic deacons worldwide, approximately 13,000 of whom serve in North America. There is also a large cadre of Catholic men preparing for professional lay ministry, some of whom will inevitably shift their focus to ordained — most probably diaconal — ministry.

Through a summer 2003 project funded by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, I identified several problems surrounding the formation and training of Catholic lay ministers. My project research demonstrates that a large population of Catholic women and lay men in the highest levels of full-time ministry training (i.e., M.Div., D.Min.) are training under non-Catholic auspices. I estimate there are approximately 4,500 lay ministry candidates in non-Catholic institutions, based on statistics published by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). ATS does not track Catholic lay ministry candidates in non-Catholic institutions, but shows a total of 8,532 Catholics training in all member schools and 4,086 persons in member Catholic schools. Some in Catholic schools are lay ministry candidates; some are candidates for ordination. Since there are specific requirements for ordination, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of those in non-Catholic institutions are lay ministry candidates.

While the level of non-Catholic institutions is uniformly high, the lack of specifically Catholic formation and training puts these students at a disadvantage. Many courses necessary for Catholic ministry are simply not available. While some students at non-Catholic institutions in or near major metropolitan areas (Boston; Chicago; Washington, D.C.) can register for necessary courses through their institutions' consortia memberships, large areas of the United States have no Catholic

resources nearby. In fact, the entire southeast quadrant of the United States bounded by Washington, D.C.; Chicago; St. Louis and New Orleans has no Catholic seminary at all. Preliminary conversations with officials of the Vanderbilt Divinity School and with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops during my summer project indicated the need to measure the problem and provide pedagogical solutions to non-Catholic institutions. This is especially important in light of anticipated Catholic requirements for lay ecclesial ministry.

This work has been done because a need has evidenced itself, although the need has not yet been surveyed. Measuring the question will demonstrate the need. I theorize that increasing numbers of lay ecclesial ministry candidates implies increasing numbers of lay ecclesial ministry candidates in non-Catholic institutions, especially women lay ministry candidates.

Certification

Specifically Catholic preparation in non-Catholic institutions will be required with the implementation of the Common Competency Project in the United States. Three Catholic associations — The National Association of Lay Ministers, the National Conference of Catechetical Leaders, and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministers — created common certification standards, which have been approved by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Commission on Certification and Accreditation. These competencies require the lay minister to 1) demonstrate personal and spiritual maturity in ministry with the people of God; 2) identify the call to formal and public ministry as a vocation rooted in baptism; 3) integrate knowledge of Roman Catholic faith within ministry; 4) engage in pastoral activity that promotes evangelization, faith formation, community and pastoral care with sensitivity to diverse situations; and 5) provide effective leadership, administration and service in the spirit of collaboration.⁷

The common competencies are rooted in the recommendations of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*⁸, which lists four major areas of formation and training: 1) human formation; 2) spiritual formation; 3) intellectual formation; and 4) pastoral formation. The USCCB Lay Ministry Project will elucidate these four areas as they apply to certification of lay ministers.

Given the large numbers of lay ministry candidates in both Catholic and non-Catholic institutions, there is a need to specifically delineate these standards. My unexamined universe comprises the as-yet-uncounted Catholic students in non-Catholic settings. To assist my research, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) has separated its contemporary data to estimate that 1,300 women are M.Div. and non-M.Div. ministerial trainees in Catholic ATS member institutions (37,231 persons study in non-Catholic member institutions, and 4,086 persons in Catholic member institutions), but 8,532 Catholics training in all their member schools. Since at least 1,300 of those 4,086 appear to be women, one can assume approximately 2,700 in Catholic ATS member institutions. Since ATS does not break out its Catholics any further, male-female, ordination track/non-ordination track numbers are unknown.

My first response to the problem was to develop a prototype course for non-Catholic institutions. In addition to estimating the problem, my Wabash project included consultation on a prototype course for Union Theological Seminary, which appears in its 2003-2004 course book as "Cl 220 Roman Catholic Polity, Church and Sacraments: A survey of the governance, teachings, practices and sacramental theology of the Roman Catholic Church designed especially for persons preparing for ministry."

But a single course will not solve all the problems. While large non-Catholic institutions can provide resources for Catholic students (Catholic spiritual

directors, Catholic academic advisers, Catholic pastoral placements and supervisors), smaller institutions and those with fewer Catholic students cannot fully follow the current and emerging requirements for Catholic lay ministry. Yet Catholic students will still choose them for many reasons, including location, scholarships and academic standing.

Conclusion

My considerations of the history of women deacons and of current trends in lay ministry formation and training suggest some practical conclusions about the ministry of women in the Catholic Church.

First and foremost, it is up to the Church as a whole to determine how the ministry of women will be certified, recognized and received. Historically it has been certified through sacramental ordination, but it has also been certified through other means. The study of ritual, of what it has implied in the past and what it implies now, provides a key to the question of women's power and authority in the Church.

Second, since the Church is creating certification for lay ecclesial ministers, most of whom are women, it is important to study certification criteria and the means by which women prepare for that certification. Just as women were once forced into the monastery, where they no longer were ordained, so now women are moving (if only by default) to non-Catholic institutions for ministerial training and, as a result, may once again be ineligible for "certification" for ecclesial ministry.

Finally, given these two points, the further question arises: is it possible that the movement toward certification of lay ministers — the preponderance of whom are women — is the first step in the restoration of the female diaconate in the Catholic Church?

Endnotes

1. Questions relative to women priests cloud this discussion, and are therefore eliminated. The stronger tradition is the ordination of women deacons. Deacons act *in nomine Christi*, and priests *in personae Christi*; the bishop combines the two. Two Vatican arguments counter the concept of women priests: the iconic argument (women must physically resemble men) and the argument from authority (Jesus did not name women

apostles). Deacons can witness marriages and baptize, as well as bury the dead, preach at liturgy, and hold offices restricted to clerics; only priests (and bishops) may celebrate mass, absolve, and anoint; only bishops may ordain and confirm, although the latter may be delegated to priests.

2. Loyola wrote "Constitutions." A "rule" would have made the Society of Jesus a monastic community.
3. This is not to overlook the canonical arguments about abbesses' authority that took place from the Fourth Lateran Council to the Council of Trent.
4. "Apostolic institute" and "cloistered order" form the typical distinction between "active" and "contemplative" religious life.
5. Lay persons can be appointed to certain offices: finance officer, finance council, parish administrator, administrator of goods, judge, auditor, promoter of justice, defender of the bond.
6. Non-ordained persons may validly perform only baptism and marriage. Aside from the other sacraments, preaching at liturgy is the most restricted of all. Canon 767.1: "Among the forms of preaching the homily is preeminent; it is part of the liturgy itself and is reserved to the priest or deacon."
7. See Jeffrey Kaster, "Called, Gifted and Now Certified," *America* 189:2 (July 21-28, 2003), 17-19.
8. March 25, 1992. The title comes from the first three words of the document, which begins "I will give you shepherds after my own heart" (Jer. 3:15).



Phyllis Zagano's intense interest in the relationship between words and presence has led her to the formal study of literature, religion, communication, education, philosophy and theology. She holds a Ph.D. from Stony Brook University, where she compared the Catholic and Anglican understandings of Eucharist and presence through the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and R.S. Thomas; B.A. in English/education from Marymount College; M.S. in communication from Boston University; M.A. in English from Long Island University; and M.A. in theology from St. John's University. Dr. Zagano is a trained Ignatian spiritual director, and teaches, writes and works in interfaith spirituality. She is a member of the Synod Ecumenical and Interfaith Working Group for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre.

Her current research is centered on the history, certification and training of Catholic women for ministry. This work continues research published in her award-winning book *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church* (Crossroad/Herder, 2000), which demonstrates the Church's ability to restore its ancient practice of ordaining women deacons. An ongoing "Adopt-a-Bishop" campaign has provided a copy of *Holy Saturday* to every Catholic bishop in the United States.

Dr. Zagano has taught locally at Fordham University and St. Francis College, and served as a researcher for the archbishop of New York. For many years at Boston University (BU) she held concurrent appointments in BU's College of Communication, School of Theology and Program in International Relations. She was faculty-in-residence for the BU Honors Program, and for five years hosted a monthly talk show on National Public Radio affiliate WBUR-FM. She has lectured throughout the United States, Canada and Europe.

She is the author of several books, including *Twentieth-Century Apostles: Contemporary Spirituality in Action* (Liturgical Press), *Ita Ford: Missionary Martyr* (Paulist Press), *Woman to Woman: An Anthology of Women's Spiritualities* (Liturgical Press), *Dorothy Day: In My Own Words* (Liguori Publications) and her bestseller *On Prayer: A Letter for My Godchild* (Liguori). Her books have been variously translated into Czech, Indonesian, Italian and Spanish.

Dr. Zagano is a founder of the Roman Catholic Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion, the world's largest society of scholars of religion. She received a Catholic Press Association Book Award (First Place — Gender Studies) and the College Theology Society Annual Book Award for *Holy Saturday*. Her research has been supported by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning Theology and Religion, The Louisville Institute, United States Institute of Peace and the National Strategy Information Center. She was a Coolidge Fellow at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.