Deepening the Call: Reflections on the Diaconate

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Women and the Diaconate: A Theological Perspective

In 2020, I was one of ten international scholars selected by Pope Francis to serve on the Papal Commission on Women and the Diaconate. This was preceded by an earlier 2016 Commission on the same topic, though the focus was more historic while the new Commission would be more theological. Because that first Commission did not reach a consensus, the Holy Father, at the request of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region, initiated a second Commission. Unlike the first, the second Commission was specifically tasked with making recommendations. While the content of both Commissions remains confidential, the recent commission members have been cleared by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith to express their own theological opinion. What follows is a very brief summary of my own thoughts as a private theologian. Far from comprehensive, it represents what I believe are some of the more salient points.

Establishing the Framework Like any good line of inquiry, it is essential to situate the question of the admission of women to the diaconate within a broader contextual framework. Such an approach ensures that the response will closely correspond to the question itself, thereby maintaining a necessary coherence. Given the Christological, ecclesial and sacramental nature of admitting women to the diaconate, it is fundamental to recognize, as did Pope Francis, that the question is, at its core, theological. Speaking to the 21st Assembly of the International Union of Women Superiors in 2019 on this very subject, he said, "I can't do a decree of a sacramental nature without having a theological, historical foundation for it." He continues by saying, "In regard to the diaconate, we must see what was there in the beginning of revelation. If there was something, let it grow and it arrives, but if there was not, if the Lord did not want a sacramental ministry for women, it can't go forward." For Pope Francis, reflecting the long theological tradition, it is ultimately about the mind of God as expressed in divine revelation. As Vicar of Christ on Earth, he is the steward of this revelation, not its master.

A Question of Doctrine Not Discipline Where doctrine, properly understood, belongs to the Deposit of Faith and represents official Church teaching, discipline involves its pastoral and practical application as determined by the Church. While, as Saint Vincent of Lérins and later Saint John Henry Newman point out, doctrine may organically develop, that development represents a deepening of a truth already revealed, the authenticity of which is determined exclusively by the magisterium. In this respect, defined doctrine cannot change, though, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it may be understood in a more profound way over time. This is precisely what Pope Francis was referring to when he said, "If there was something, let it grow and it arrives." Insofar as it is derived from divine revelation, doctrine is received while

discipline is the Church's way of applying this received teaching to specific aspects of the Christian life within a particular historic context.

Unlike the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent order by the Second Vatican Council which was a change of ecclesial discipline, the admission of women to the diaconate is a doctrinal matter. It is not simply a question of restoring that which was, but instead bringing into being something new. As cogently argued by such scholars as Father Aimé George Martimort, Father Manfred Hauke, Professor Catherine Brown Tkacz, and Sister Sara Butler, deaconesses of the early Church were not the same as deacons. Their primary purpose was to assist the bishop in baptizing women for modesty sake and catechizing women. In this respect, it emerges in the West out of pastoral necessity. When this practice of baptism was revised, deaconesses were no longer needed, and the order declined. In the 2002 final report of the International Theological Commission, writing on deaconesses, they observe, "It seems clear that this ministry was not perceived as simply the feminine equivalent of the masculine diaconate. At the very least it was an ecclesial function, exercised by women." Some scholar suggest that deaconesses were eventually absorbed into religious orders or became abbesses, which continued, in some respects, their ancient ministry.

Any argument for the admission of women to the diaconate, because it represents a significant change in doctrine, must be cogent and compelling. It must correspond to the sources of revelation and integrated within the larger theology of Holy Orders in a systematic and organic manner. Here, as with all potential theological developments, the burden of proof lies with its proponents. Consequently, the question, properly framed, is not: "Why not women deacons?" but "Why?"

Historic Non-Equivalence Not everything that happened in the Church's past is part of her tradition. Indeed, the sheer existence of a thing is not proof of its legitimacy. If this were the case, Arianism, which was nearly ubiquitous in the third and fourth-centuries, would be part of the theological tradition leading to a denial of Christ's divinity. Likewise, historic references by those who advocate a theological basis for the ordination of women, require something more than their historic presence. To suggest otherwise is to fail to distinguish between a norm and an aberration. Indeed, beyond scholarly scrutiny, there needs to be multiple attestation across the whole of the tradition and throughout the history of the Church, as evidenced by the diaconate itself. Such attestation simply does not exist with reference to deaconesses. Even the term "deaconess" was used in different ways from church to church and from age to age, leading to significant ambiguity, an ambiguity not found in the diaconate. As Martimort concludes in his book *Deaconesses*, "The Christians of antiquity did not have a single, fixed idea of what deaconesses were supposed to be." In a similar manner, after an analysis of the historic development of deaconesses," As a result, to argue that deaconesses were the female equivalent of the male diaconate is to artificially conflate the two.

Essential Differences As was already observed, there is no question of the historic place of deaconesses in the early Church, with the remaining question being their equivalency to the male diaconate. An analysis of the historic record reveals that this was not the case in at least seven broad categories. By way of a brief summary, these are: (1) While the ordination rites demonstrate similarities, they were quite different. (2) Deaconesses did not serve in the liturgy after ordination as did deacons. (3) Deaconesses did not exercise the same sacramental role after ordination as did deacons. (4) Deaconesses did not minister in the community in the same way after ordination as did deacons. (5) Deaconesses did not relate to the bishop in the same way after ordination as did deacons. (6) Deaconesses were never given any grounds to believe that they might aspire to the priesthood as did deacons. (7) Where the diaconate as an order developed in the Church over time, the order of deaconess did not develop as such. Thus, when the question is asked by proponents of diaconal ordination for women: What restricts their reentry? The answer is that one cannot reenter what one has not first entered.

As Professor Catherine Brown Tkacz points out in her article entitled "Women and the Diaconate," the term "diaconate" was never applied to women in antiquity. Moreover, she observes that the claims that women were discriminated against simply do not correspond to the differences between the way women were treated in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Where Jewish women were not seen as the equivalent to Jewish men, particularly in Temple and synagogal worship, there were no such restrictions placed upon Christian women. They were given free access to all of the sacraments pertaining to salvation. This was revolutionary and countercultural. To charge that women were excluded from what would later be called Holy Orders because of paternalistic or misogynistic reasons requires specific concrete evidence directly linking the misogyny to the act, not mere assertion. To do otherwise boarders on a kind of sexism. In a similar way, it is not sufficient to argue that women were excluded simply because of ritual impurity due to menstruation. Here, one would need to demonstrate how such exclusions extended to Holy Orders and whether they were a norm or an aberrant.

Conclusion The above represents a concise summary of my thoughts as a private theologian. There is much more that can be said such as the unity of Holy Orders, the iconic argument, proper matter of the sacraments and the complementarity of the sexes with respect to the Petrine and Marian dimensions of the Church. These will have to wait for another time. Nonetheless, it is possible to hazard a few closing observations about where the Church may take the question of women's ordination in the future.

With both the 2016 and 2020 Commissions now concluded, and with neither report being released to the press as of the date of this publication, the matter rests where it has always rested, in the hands of the Holy Father. He may choose not to speak on the topic, or do so in an informal way, or even issue a formal teaching. Only he knows. Nonetheless, it may be possible to speculate from recent statements where his mind may be headed based on three factors. First, Pope Francis insists that any change must be grounded in divine revelation. As we have already demonstrated, with this lacking, he is unlikely to rule in favor of the ordination of women.

Second, the very recent additions in Book VI of the Code of Canon Law, additions approved by the Holy Father as Chief Legislator, now criminalizes the ordination of women. This section, promulgated June 1, 2021, deals with sanctions, offenses and penalties. Canon 1379 §3 states: "Both the one who tries to confer a sacred order on a woman and the woman who tries to receive it, incurs a penalty of excommunication "*latae sententiae*" reserved to the Holy See; the responsible cleric may also be punished by exclusion from the clerical state." It should be kept in mind that this addition was approved by Pope Francis during the 2020 Commission. Because of Canon 1379 §3, it seems quite unlikely that the Holy Father will rule in favor of the ordination of women to the diaconate.

Third, in a 2002 interview with *America* magazine discussing ordaining women to Holy Orders, Pope Francis asks the rhetorical question, "And why can a woman not enter ordained ministry? It is because the Petrine principle has no place for that." This seems to suggest that the limits of his Petrine office omit the possibility of ordaining women, mirroring the argument for priestly ordination found in *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*. Of course, all of this is speculation, but it does suggest that, if anything will be said, it is more likely that it will not be in favor of the ordination of women. It is for these reasons, along with the arguments advanced in this article and others that, in my capacity as a private theologian, I do not believe that it is possible to ordain women to the diaconate.

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