

Can Women be Restored to the Ordained Diaconate?

The question of whether women can be restored to the ordained diaconate, a ministerial role in which they served in various forms in the Church from the time of the earliest Christian communities through the 12th century, has been open for discussion at the highest levels of the institutional Church since the time of the Second Vatican Council. In 1997 the International Theological Commission (ITC) reportedly concluded that in light of historical precedent, women could be ordained deacons, although their work was not promulgated, and a second ITC subcommittee took up the study. Between 1997–2002 this second ITC subcommittee wrote a long document about the diaconate, concluding that the question of including women was up to “the ministry of discernment that the Lord has left his Church” to decide.

2009 – Distinct from the Priesthood – Benedict XVI’s modification of Canon Law The diaconate is not the priesthood. With his Apostolic letter *Omnium in Mentum* (2009), Pope Benedict XVI clarified the distinction between the diaconate and the priesthood and now Canon 1009 § 3 reads:

“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.”

The Church’s teaching with regard to women and the ordained priesthood is distinct from the discussion pertaining to women and the ordained diaconate.

September 2015 – Do Origins of the Diaconate Matter?

Pope Francis commented to seminarians at the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia that the apostles “created” the diaconate to tend to the most marginalized in the early Christian communities, a task they were not able to take on themselves. In other words, the diaconate is a ministry created by the Church and not by Christ himself. Not only does this distinguish deacons from priests or bishops, but also raises the question as to whether the language of Canon 1024 of the Code of Canon Law (“A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly”) applies to the diaconate in the same way it does for the priesthood and for the episcopacy.¹

August 2016 – The First Papal Commission

At the request of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), Pope Francis named a 12-member commission, six men and six women, under the direction of Cardinal Luis Ladaria to take up the question of women and diaconate. The Commission met four times and delivered a report to Pope Francis in June of 2018. While the Commission’s findings were not made public, Francis noted in an interview that their report “could serve as the launching point for going ahead and studying and giving a definitive response as to yes or

¹ Pope Francis, “U.S. Visit: Meeting with Bishops Attending the World Meeting of Families,” *Origins* 45, no. 19 (October 8, 2015): 341–44.

no, according to the characteristics of the era.”²

October 2019 – The Synod on the Amazon

While synods are an ancient practice of the Church to discern and deliberate pressing questions, Pope Francis has made them a hallmark of his papacy. Moreover, he has opened synodal processes to incorporate the prayerful deliberations of lay people along with those of the bishops. Women around the world have participated in recent synodal processes to ensure that the *sensus fidelium* – the practical wisdom of all the faithful people of God – informs ecclesial decisions. At the conclusion of the Amazon Synod in Rome, participants asked that the diaconal ministry of women in the region be formally recognized. Bishops voted in favor of the following paragraph:

103. In the many consultations carried out in the Amazon, the fundamental role of religious and lay women in the Church of the Amazon and its communities was recognized and emphasized, given the wealth of services they provide. In a large number of these consultations, the permanent diaconate for women was requested. This made it an important theme during the Synod. The Study Commission on the Diaconate of Women which Pope Francis created in 2016 has already arrived as a Commission at partial findings regarding the reality of the diaconate of women in the early centuries of the Church and its implications for today. We would therefore like to share our experiences and reflections with the Commission and we await its results. ([Final Document for the Amazon Synod](#))

April 2020 – Deepening the Exploration: The Second Papal Commission

In April 2020, Pope Francis named a new, ten-member commission, which appears to have met between September 2021 and July 2022. No report from either the first or second commission has been published.

October 2021 – Woman and a Synodal Church: The Global Synod

In convening the global Synod on Synodality, emphasizing Participation, Communion and Mission, Pope Francis asked his brother bishops, and all the people of God, to reflect on and share their obstacles and joys in journeying with the Church, as well as their visions for a Church in which all people truly belong. In other words, he was invoking the deliberative power of the *sensus fidelium* on the most pressing matters in the Church itself. It is here—in the context of the synodal process—that the call for and discernment about restoring women to the ordained diaconate is emerging. Consider the how space for the question of restoring women to the diaconate continues to open:

July 2022 – Australian Plenary Council:

Delegates to the Australian Plenary Council, a synodal process launched in advance of the

² Joshua J. McElwee, “Francis: Women deacons commission gave split report on their role in early church,” *National Catholic Reporter* (May 7, 2019), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-women-deacons-commission-gave-split-report-their-role-early-church>

global Synod, provided an example of how disagreement about women's leadership and ministerial roles in the Church could be prayerfully discerned by an ecclesial body of bishops, lay people, priests, deacons, and vowed religious. A prayerful protest of the deliberative vote of the bishops against the proposal about equality of men and women in the Church prompted further discernment, which then gave rise to a final resolution that was adopted by the entire Plenary Council. It reads, in part: "That, should the universal law of the Church be modified to authorize the diaconate for women, the Plenary Council recommends that the Australian Bishops examine how best to implement it in the context of the Church in Australia."³

September 2022 – It is Not Just a Matter of a Priest Shortage: U.S. Bishops' National Report

According to their National Report released in September of 2022, the U.S. bishops indicate that "there was a desire for stronger leadership, discernment, and decision-making roles for women – both lay and religious – in their parishes and communities." The U.S. bishops underscored this point, quoting a report from one of the country's 15 regions: "people mentioned a variety of ways in which women could exercise leadership, including preaching and ordination as deacon or priest. Ordination for women emerged not primarily as a solution to the problem of the priest shortage, but as a matter of justice."⁴

October 2022 – Enlarge the Space of Your Tent: Vatican Document for the Continental Stage of the Global Synod (DCS)

At the conclusion of the consultation phase of the global synod, the Vatican's 12-member drafting team, which included bishops, religious and lay men, and women, released a document capturing themes that emerged from reports from 112 of 114 Bishops' conferences around the world, as well as more than 1,000 reports submitted directly to the Vatican. Desires about women's ministry, leadership and decision-making roles reverberated around the planet. Paragraph #64 notes: "After careful listening many reports ask that the Church continue its discernment in relation to a range of specific questions: the active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings, and a female diaconate."⁵

April 2023 – North American Final Document for the Continental Stage

In December 2022 and January 2023 the North American Synod Team, composed of bishop and lay leadership from both the U.S. and Canadian bishops' conferences, convened 12 virtual Continental Assemblies to discern the local significance of findings of the global listening phase of the synod captured in the DCS. In paragraph #19 of their report on the discernments of the 931 delegates (appointed by bishops from Latin dioceses in the U.S. and Canada, including priests and deacons, religious women and lay people; half of whom were women) the North American Synod Team "named women as a marginalized group in the church" and

³ For the full text, see:

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-Decree-4-Witnessing-to-the-Equal-Dignity-of-Women-and-Men.pdf>

⁴ USCCB National Report, published in September of 2022,

<https://www.usccb.org/resources/US%20National%20Synthesis%202021-2023%20Synod.pdf>

⁵ Vatican Office of the Synod, "Expand the Space in Your Tent," #64;

<https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>

acknowledged that “there can be no true co-responsibility in the Church without fully honoring the inherent dignity of women.” Delegates affirmed the three areas for further examination around co-responsibility named in the DSC: “decision making roles, leadership, and ordination.” The North American Team also indicated that “central in the discernment of these questions is the faithful acknowledgment of women’s baptismal dignity.”

June 2023 – Instrumentum Laboris for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

Informed by the DCS and reports from the seven Continental Assemblies, the Secretariat of the Synod released the *Instrumentum Laboris* (“working document”) for the first of two General Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops in Rome 2023. This “practical aid” is intended both for delegates, who, for the first time in the history of the Synod of Bishops will include non-bishops and as many as 70 women, as well as “to encourage participation in the synodal dynamic at the local and regional levels, while waiting for the outcome of the October Assembly” (#10). The General Assembly will address a number of questions – literally – arising from three priorities that have surfaced through the listening phase of the global synod: how to cultivate a communion that radiates, how to foster co-responsibility in Mission, and what kinds of structures, procedures and institutions can foster participation in a missionary synodal Church. A series of five “worksheets” under each of these three priorities summarizes findings and offers detailed prompts for discernment from a variety of perspectives.

Women’s full participation in the Church remains a central focus area for continued discernment, particularly under the priority of co-responsibility in mission. Worksheet B2.3 asks “How can the Church of our time better fulfil its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?” and offers a set of five questions to identify “concrete steps can the Church take to renew and reform its procedures, institutional arrangements and structures to enable greater recognition and participation of women.” Question #4 asks specifically about the restoration of women to the diaconate: “Most of the Continental Assemblies and the syntheses of several Episcopal Conferences call for the question of women’s inclusion in the diaconate to be considered. Is it possible to envisage this, and in what way?”

The question of restoring women to the ordained diaconate continues to be an issue of study, deliberation, and discernment for the global Church as it considers how to listen to the needs of the People of God, discern the charisms being given for ministry, and be renewed for mission in the third millennium.