

THE VATICAN AND WOMEN DEACONS

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INTRODUCTION

The question of women in ministry is part of an ongoing discussion throughout the Catholic Church, brought more forcefully to the fore with the 2024 publication of the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality's second session, which Pope Francis accepted and made part of the Magisterium. That report states that the question of restoring women to the ordained diaconate remains open.¹ Pope Francis said the same in his recent autobiography.²

During a synod press conference on October 25, 2023, then-Cardinal Robert Prevost responded to a question about women in governance, women priests, and women deacons. He agreed that women could and should be appointed to more positions of responsibility; he said the Church had definitively ruled against women priests; he said the question of the ordination of women deacons was under discussion.³

That women functioned as deacons in the Early Church is an incontrovertible fact. What were they called? Were they

1. Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission, Final Document," (November 24, 2024), para. 60.

2. Pope Francis, with Carlo Musso, *Hope: The Autobiography*, trans. Richard Dixon (Random House, 2025), 177–78.

3. "October 25, 2023, Briefing—XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQxkzHM14Xc>, at 57:07.

considered clergy? Were they ordained? These questions continue to swirl in contemporary debate.

In 1961, Jesuit Jean Daniélou set the stage for the modern discussion. His study in *La Maison-Dieu* concludes, "We have thus three possible ways of ordering the ministry of women: lay, clerical, religious. It can be said that all three are equally traditional."⁴ Before and since then, the discussion about women deacons waxed and waned. There is significant historical documentation about all three possibilities for ordering the ministry of women going forward, and each has its proponents, some of whom are in opposition to each other.

Today, lay ministry for women is a well-developed, even robust contribution to the Church's evangelical mission. Relatively recent developments now include women formally installed to the previously restricted lay ministries of lector, acolyte, and the new ministry of catechist.

Similarly, religious life for women, at least in parts of the world, is a continuing possibility for ministry by women, albeit also, technically, "lay ministry." The distinctions and similarities between installed lay ministry and religious life become apparent when the term "ministry" is expanded to include activities not necessarily tied to altar service or parish life. That is, the ministries of women religious are most often tied to the declared charisms of their institutes and orders. There are women religious who focus on teaching, or health care, or social services to the poor and disabled, or assisting immigrants. In many institutes, women religious perform one or all these ministries. Some perform parish work or serve as parish life coordinators (c. 517, §2) managing entire parishes, even while not formally installed as lector, acolyte, and/or catechist.

4. Jean Daniélou, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. Glyn Simon, (The Faith Press, 1974), 31; *La Maison-Dieu* 61 (1960).

Yet clerical life for women disappeared along with the gradual and eventual evaporation of the diaconate as a distinct and permanent vocation. Although papal approval for the ordination of women as deacons is known during the eleventh century, the twelfth century demonstrates the last evidence of women in the Latin Church being ordained to the diaconate.⁵

As Daniélou wrote, lay, clerical, and religious life as service to the Church are equally traditional. One does not rule out the other, in the sense that a non-ordained religious is a lay person, whereas an ordained religious is a cleric. Further, the distinction between religious and secular persons can be applied to women. That is, a woman religious ordained to the diaconate would be a cleric, just as a secular woman ordained to the diaconate would be a cleric.

History documents the ordination of women as deacons, who indeed were considered clergy. The confusion arising from the use of the term “deaconess” to mean both the wife of a deacon and an ordained woman deacon, and its continued preferential use in the Churches of Orthodoxy for women ordained to the diaconate, lends itself to ahistorical denials of documentary evidence of ordained women deacons in the East and the West.

Today, many cultures can accept women clergy, and in fact, many Christian communions have women deacons, priests, and bishops. The people (although not necessarily the clergy) of Latin Catholic Churches in most Western countries would have no problem accepting women restored to the ordained diaconate, although some African and Asian countries might foster

5. 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.

more resistance. As Tomáš Halík has said, “Evangelization without inculturation is merely superficial indoctrination.”⁶

Therefore, the principle of subsidiarity must be joined to the practice of synodality to allow the Church to enjoy deeper and wider evangelization. As the Synod on Synodality’s Final Report states, a “sound decentralization” joined with accommodations of culture, is both possible and necessary:

To realise a “sound ‘decentralization’” (EG 16) and an effective inculturation of faith, it is necessary not only to recognise the role of Episcopal Conferences, but also to rediscover the institution of particular councils, both provincial and plenary. The periodic celebration of these councils was an obligation for much of the Church’s history and is currently provided for in the canon law of the Latin Church (cf. CIC can. 439–446). They should be convened periodically. The procedure for the recognition of the conclusions of particular councils by the Holy See (*recognitio*) should be reformed to encourage their timely publication by specifying precise deadlines or, in cases of purely pastoral or disciplinary matters (not directly concerning issues of faith, morals, or sacramental discipline), by introducing a legal presumption equivalent to tacit consent.⁷

Local councils in Europe outlawed the practice of ordaining women to the diaconate in successive centuries, all supporting the facts of the historical ordinations of women and the abilities of local councils, even individual bishops, to make

6. Zachariah Mickle, “Toward a More Catholic Church: An Interview with Tomáš Halík,” *Commonweal* (January 10, 2025): 50–53.

7. Francis, “Final Document,” para. 129.

decisions affecting their local churches.⁸ Today, given that there is no doctrine against restoring women to the ordained diaconate, and applying the principle of subsidiarity, the same could be true.

The point of local applications and practices is well supported in contemporary practice, as it is known historically. Some dioceses, as the synod's Final Document points out, have not yet accepted the diaconate as a permanent vocation for men.

The ministry of Deacons remains unknown to many Christians, in part because, although it was restored by Vatican II in the Latin Church as a distinct and permanent grade (cf. *LG* 29), it has not been welcomed in every part of the world.⁹

While the synod urges the dioceses that have not implemented the diaconate as a permanent vocation (for men) to do so, it simultaneously affirms their ability not to do so. Even so, the recognition of different inculturation of accepted Church praxis in this synod document and elsewhere underscores the abilities of episcopal conferences and individual bishops to discern what is best for the evangelizing needs of their local jurisdictions.

So, the argument to restore women to the diaconate as a matter of justice can only work where it is seen as meaning justice for the People of God who (hopefully) can assist their diocesan bishops in understanding the need for the ordained ministry of women. Unfortunately, in too many dioceses in too many countries, the practice of synodality is fading or has

8. Local councils in the West, for example Nîmes (396), Orange (441), Epaone (517), and Orléans (533) argue against what seems to have been the practice.

9. Francis, "Final Document," para. 73.

never been implemented, perhaps in the hope that a new pontificate will restore what some bishops and others consider “order” in the Church. The avoidance of synodal participation was brutally obvious in the United States, and the results of the consultations were too often modified to reflect less of the actual interest reported by those dioceses that participated, as the results were combined and consolidated into regional, then conference, and then continental results. That the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate arose as a recommendation at all in some continental reports and, later at two sessions of the synod, can only be credited to the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

As the synod wrote, and Pope Francis agreed: “That which comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. The question of access by women to diaconal ministry, with regard to which it is necessary to act with discernment, remains open to study.”¹¹

10. Phyllis Zagano, “United States Synod Participation and Questions of Women in the Church,” *Journal of Catholic Social Teaching* 21, no.1 (2024): 23–57.

11. Francis, *Hope*, 178.