



What Do U.S. Catholics Think About Women Deacons?

Erick Berrelleza¹ · Phyllis Zagano²

Received: 3 November 2018 / Accepted: 5 March 2019
© Religious Research Association, Inc. 2019

Abstract

What do U.S. Catholics think about women in the renewed diaconate? The Catholic Church's recovery of the concept of "synodality" encourages an answer to the question. This article examines the possible cultural acceptance of women deacons and the consequent organizational factors and concerns surrounding its implementation. It reviews three studies: a professional study conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) of the attitudes of Catholic women in the United States (commissioned by *America Media*); an unscientific online poll conducted by the magazine *U.S. Catholic*; and a second CARA study of the attitudes of the leaders of men's and women's religious institutes and orders in the United States. The examination concludes with a discussion on the diaconal tasks women already perform in the Catholic Church and the manner in which the restoration of women to the ordained office of deacon could occur in this global institution.

Keywords Catholic attitudes · Diaconate · Ordination · Women deacons

The Catholic Church does not consider itself a democratic institution, at least as far as determination of its doctrine is concerned. Yet, it has a long tradition of "synodality"—the process of discussing and determining specific applications of Church teaching and discipline. Following the Second Vatican Council, in 1965, Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops as a permanent institution to advise the pope on important questions of teaching and discipline. Diocesan synods, which include both laity and clerics in a given territory, are advisory to diocesan bishops. The Church-wide Synod of Bishops advises the pope.

In March 2018, the International Theological Commission, a body of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reexamined the concept of synodality. Its

✉ Erick Berrelleza
ebsj@bu.edu

Phyllis Zagano
phyllis.zagano@hofstra.edu

¹ Department of Sociology, Boston University, 100 Cummington Mall, Boston, MA 02215, USA

² Department of Religion, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11549, USA

resulting document presents “synodality” as a way by which all members of the Church may have their voices heard and emphasizes the need for broad consultation.¹ While there have always been omissions in practice, no collective voice has experienced exclusion from synodality like that of women.

The most recent meeting of the Synod of Bishops illustrates a particular sensitivity to the participation of women in the Church. During October 2018, 267 Synod members from around the world gathered in Rome, along with 72 non-voting auditors (including young people), for the Synod of Bishops, XV General Assembly, “Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment.”² Immediately, protests began against the fact that while the leadership group of men religious were invited to send ten voting members, the leadership group of women religious were given three auditor seats, and were told whom to send.³ Each of the ten men was the major superior of his order or institute, as was one of the women. However, two of the male major superiors were non-ordained lay brothers. The decision to allow the two lay brothers to vote and then to ignore, at the very least, the one woman who headed her institute is not easy to comprehend. In any event, voting members of a Synod of Bishops are, rightly and with the few exceptions noted, bishops.

Today, however, the Church seems to expand the notion of synodality to incorporate the thoughts of the people of God—the remaining 99% of the Church (Francis 2018a). In preparation for the Synod on Youth, diocesan bishops were asked to promulgate an online questionnaire, and a March 2018 pre-synod meeting of some three hundred young people prepared a document expressing their views and recommendations for the actual October 2018 synod. In due time, an *instrumentum laboris*, a working document, appeared (Francis 2018b). At least three paragraphs of the *instrumentum laboris* directly affected women, asking for: (1) recognition of the role of women in the Church and in society (n. 70); (2) renewed reflection on the vocation to ordained ministry (n. 102); and (3) promotion of the dignity of women (n. 158).

Both inside and outside the synod hall, there was significant discussion about women in the Church and in society. The final synod document stated:

148. A Church that seeks to live a synodal style cannot fail to reflect on the condition and role of women within itself, and consequently also in society.

¹ Entitled “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” the 20,000-word document describes the “synodal Church” as, “a Church of participation and co-responsibility” (International Theological Commission 2018: #67). Noting that “all the faithful are qualified to serve each other” the Commission further emphasized the “significance and value of consulting everyone in the Church,” not just the ordained (Ibid. #67 and #68).

² Code of Canon Law, C. 342. The synod of bishops is a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions of the world and meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and bishops, to assist the Roman Pontiff with their counsel in the preservation and growth of faith and morals in the observance and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline, and to consider questions pertaining to the activity of the Church in the world (Catholic Church and Canon Law Society of America 1983).

³ The men’s Union of Superiors General (USG) elected ten voting members; the women’s International Union of Superiors General (UISG) was directed to send as auditors either the president or vice-president of the organization, and two other named sisters, one from Kenya and another from Korea.

Young men and women are asking for this with great force. The reflections developed need to be implemented through a work of courageous cultural conversion and change in daily pastoral practice. An area of particular importance in this regard is the presence of women in ecclesial bodies at all levels, even in positions of responsibility, and the participation of women in ecclesial decision-making processes, respecting the role of the ordained ministry. This is a duty of justice, inspired as much by the way in which Jesus related to men and women of his time, as by the importance of the role of certain female figures in the Bible, in salvation history and in the life of the Church.⁴

How can this happen? How can the Catholic Church as a “duty of justice” include women in positions of responsibility, decision-making, even ordained ministry where it is required for their accessing certain positions?

One possibility, under discussion in the modern Catholic Church for at least 50 years, is the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate, part of the Church’s hierarchical structure. Through sacramental ordination as deacons, considered the ordinary means of entering the clerical state, women would become formally eligible for certain tasks and duties not available to lay persons. Ordained women deacons would be clerics, and thereby part of the hierarchical structure.

Given the expanded understanding of “synodality” in the current pontificate of Pope Francis, social scientific research has an increased role to play, at least in the discussion of discipline that does not touch doctrinal teachings of faith and morals. In what follows, the question of ordained women deacons is explored from the perspective of Catholics in the pews. Clearly, a more attuned discussion can result from a broader listening to Church membership as directly as possible. While the research discussed here focuses on responses from U.S. Catholics, it indicates broad growing support among the faithful that can be particularly valuable for the synodal Church.

Studies on Women Deacons in the Catholic Church

Recently, two social scientific studies and one non-scientific online poll examined one part of the question of women and Church: women in the diaconate. In January 2018, *America Media* published survey results from research conducted by the Georgetown University based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) of the attitudes of Catholic women regarding Catholic matters (Gray and Gautier 2018); in June 2018, the journal *U.S. Catholic* released the results of its online poll concerning women in the ordained diaconate (*U.S. Catholic* 2018); and, in August 2018, CARA published the results of a survey of the major superiors of men’s and women’s religious institutes in the United States on the same topic (Gaunt et al. 2018). In each, the majority of respondents indicated their support for the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate. The CARA survey of leaders

⁴ The paragraph reportedly received 201 ‘yes’ votes and 38 ‘against’.

of religious institutes, however, found only 45% of respondents thought the Church would do so.

The results can be viewed through three distinct lenses, albeit with overlapping views: those of culture, organizational structure, and authority. Cultural changes regarding women's place support their increased inclusion in Church and society. Developing organizational factors within the Church demonstrate the efficacy of the diaconate and its exponential growth. Even so, it is up to Church authority to legislate and accept women ordained to the office of deacon as a permanent vocation. Finally, it cannot be overlooked that although parts of the global Church receive the question of women deacons differently, the need for diaconal ministry by women is widely evidenced.

What, exactly, is the question? The history of women in the diaconate is widely-known and accepted, even as theological discussion remains regarding the sacramental nature of their documented ordinations. In varied times and places, women deacons ministered, primarily to children and other women. They assisted, and sometimes performed, ministerial actions then and now considered sacramental (baptism, anointing, distribution of Eucharist).⁵ However, during the Middle Ages, as the functions of male deacons became increasingly ceremonial and, with legislation of the clerical *cursus honorum*, nearly every person ordained to the diaconate was expected to be on the path to priesthood (Gibaut 2000).⁶ The diaconate as a permanent vocation effectively ended. Coincidentally, women ordained as deacons, by then only extant within monasteries, died out.

While the restoration of both women and men to the diaconate as a permanent vocation was discussed at Vatican II, later documents only restored men (including married men) to this ordained office.⁷ One of the principal Council documents, *Lumen gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,⁸ distinguished the diaconate from the priesthood and identified the deacon as one serving through the Word, the liturgy, and charity, naming specific tasks:

...to administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, to officiate at funeral and burial services (Paul VI 1964, #29).

Today, in many regions of the world, women catechists and lay ecclesial ministers perform these tasks and duties, without benefit of the charism of order. They may

⁵ Daniélou (1974), citing Epiphanius, seems to include anointing the sick.

⁶ The *cursus honorum* defined the clerical state. Men destined for priesthood received tonsure and then were ordained to the minor orders of porter, lector, exorcist, acolyte, and the major orders of subdeacon and deacon before being ordained priest.

⁷ Two Council fathers, one from Peru and one from Italy, requested restoration of the female diaconate (Second Vatican Council 1961).

⁸ Promulgated by Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964, the bishops assembled for the Council passed *Lumen gentium* by a vote of 2.151 to 5.

be Church employees, but they have no sacramental identity and have a significantly different relationship with the diocesan bishop. In this sense, their activities are ad hoc.

Cultural Acceptance of Women Deacons

The fundamental question today is less about history, but rather of the present: what do the people of God say about the possibility of women deacons? The three recent U.S. investigations (from *America Media*, *U.S. Catholic*, and CARA) shed light on this question.

America Media Survey of Catholic Women

The *America Media* national survey of Catholic women, conducted by CARA during August 2017 and published in January 2018, focused on respondents' shifting beliefs and practices in the Church. The study examined the responses from 1508 randomly selected English- and Spanish-speaking Catholic women in the United States.⁹ The respondents were asked broadly about religious beliefs, practices, and parish life, and in one question were asked directly whether women should be ordained as permanent deacons.¹⁰ Of the survey respondents, a majority (60%) support the possibility of women deacons, while others may support but want more information (21%).¹¹ A noteworthy finding is that support for the ordination of women deacons is found across generations. While there is some variation among the support findings by age group, over three-quarters in each cohort is supportive of ordained women deacons.¹² Notably, 77% of weekly Mass goers were positive regarding ordained women deacons and the more highly educated the respondent, the more supportive she was.

⁹ The sample (n = 1508) is considered representative of the estimated 28.8 million adult female Catholics in the United States. (The total population of U.S. Catholic females is estimated at 37.3 million.) CARA reported a margin of error, at a 95% confidence level, for the random probability-based sample as $\pm 2.5\%$.

¹⁰ Respondents were asked: "A permanent deacon is an ordained man, at least 35 years old who is either married or single, who may proclaim the Gospel, preach, and teach in the name of the Catholic Church, baptize, lead the faithful in prayer, witness marriages, and conduct wake and funeral services. Deacons are also leaders in identifying the needs of others, then marshalling the Church's resources to meet those needs. In 2016 Pope Francis announced a commission to study the possibility of women serving as permanent deacons. Do you feel the Catholic Church should allow women, ages 35 and older, to be ordained as permanent deacons?"

¹¹ Item responses were: fully support (60%); support with more information (21%); not sure (12%); opposed (7%).

¹² Item responses were: Pre-Vatican II (b. before 1943; 86%), Vatican II (b. 1943–1960; 86%), Post-Vatican II (b. 1961–1981; 80%), and Millennial (b. 1982 or later; 76%). (Millennial and Post-Vatican II cohort respondents are less likely than older Catholic women to attend Mass at least once a week. The *America Media* survey report notes the correlation between the frequency of Mass attendance with the degree of support for women deacons (Gray and Gautier 2018).

Moreover, the *America Media* women's study revealed that the more frequently a respondent attends Mass, the greater her perception that the parish priest "does a good job" of effectively including women in various church activities. However, fewer respondents overall felt strongly that their parish priest did a good job of including women in decision-making.

U.S. Catholic Online Opinion Poll

The *U.S. Catholic* online opinion poll, conducted in March 2018, was in response to an online article entitled "What's the Problem with Women Deacons?" later published in the journal along with the poll results (Zagano 2018). Although not a formally scientific study, some 4000 unidentified persons responded to the online poll, with 72% agreeing that women should be ordained as deacons; some 70% thought such would be in keeping with the Church's tradition.

CARA Survey of Major Superiors of U.S. Religious Institutes

The August 2018 CARA survey of U.S. major superiors, conducted between January and May of 2018, focused on the increased acceptance of women as ministers and, potentially, as ordained deacons. Those surveyed included members of the three canonically approved organizations of men's and women's religious superiors in the United States, as well as the superiors of women's contemplative units: Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), and Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR).¹³ Of the total 777 potential respondents, CARA received completed responses from the leaders of 385 religious institutes.¹⁴

The CARA survey reveals a similar pattern of support for the sacramental ordination of women as deacons. Overall, the majority of responding superiors (72%) believe the Church should authorize the sacramental ordination of women as deacons. The level of support is striking given the differences in responses from LCWR and CMSWR members. For instance, when asked "Do you think the ordination of women (religious or not) as deacons would be beneficial to the Catholic Church's mission?" an interesting pattern emerged. Among the women's leaders, 82% of LCWR respondents indicated such would be very important; while only 15% of

¹³ As of 2017 in the United States., CMSM represents over 11,000 religious priests and 4000 brothers in 236 units; LCWR represents over 36,000 sisters in 290 units (about 80% of the total U.S. sister population); CMSWR represents approximately 6000 sisters in 120 units (about 13% of the total U.S. sisters). NB: Population estimates for sisters are based on self-reported figures from LCWR and CMSWR annual reports. (Three women's units belonging to both CMSWR and LCWR were invited to respond only once.) In addition, CARA mailed surveys to 137 women's contemplative units (who belong to neither leadership member organization for women's religious institutes). Anecdotally, the two women's groups represent the U.S. Catholic Church's polarities.

¹⁴ The 50% response rate (n=385) of the total population of superiors of U.S. religious institutes (N=777) is considered noteworthy. Average response rate for surveys ranges between 30 and 40%. CARA reported the margin of sampling error, at a 95% confidence level, as $\pm 3.5\%$.

CMSWR respondents agreed. While strong support for women deacons among the leaders of religious institutes of men is reported at 54%, only 11% responded it was “not at all” beneficial to the Catholic Church’s mission.¹⁵

Support for women deacons among U.S. major superiors is clear, especially among those from larger institutes and orders. Simultaneously it was clear that superiors of women religious see the diaconal vocation as distinct from the call to religious life. A majority (61%) of women respondents, for example, did not think the ordination of women as deacons would bring more candidates to their institutes (only 4% thought yes).

Cumulative Findings of Acceptance

The three investigations present more than a speculative exercise. They demonstrate the support of ordinary people, as well as the opinions of Church professionals. Overall, the investigations quantify the fact that responses to the possibility of women ordained as deacons are trending upwards. Where lower positive numbers appear, they can be attributed to uncertainty about the place for the vocation of women deacons, as in the CARA study of religious major superiors and/or to the lack of clarity about the Church’s direction on the question.

Organizational Factors and Concerns

The role of the deacon in the Catholic Church today must be considered if the question of restoring women to the ordained diaconate is to be fully understood. Further, the role of the formally installed lay ecclesial minister must be clarified relative to that of the ordained deacon, because the two distinct vocations can be confused as interchangeable even though they are not. The principal distinction is that the deacon is an ordained cleric, thereby ordinarily eligible for tasks and duties not available to the non-ordained.

All permanent deacons are male and most lay ecclesial ministers are female (Zech et al. 2017: 37). Therefore, many diaconal tasks and duties available to non-clerics (e.g. catechesis, social service ministries) can be and are performed by women, whereas those specific to the clerical state remain formally restricted to men (e.g. preaching).

What would be the place of women in the diaconate? And, how would lay ecclesial ministry function in relation to the diaconate? Since many diaconal tasks and duties can be performed by lay persons, why would the Church need to restore women to the ordained diaconate? The question lies in access to the clerical state, and therefore to certain functions and even offices denied to lay persons.

¹⁵ According to the CARA survey of U.S. major superiors, 78% of CMSM leaders responded it would be at least “somewhat” beneficial to the Catholic Church’s mission to ordain women to the diaconate (11% responded “not at all”), 95% of LCWR leaders thought the same, as did 30% of CMSWR leaders (52% of CMSWR leaders responded “not at all”) (Gaunt et al. 2018).

However, part of the discussion is not about diaconal functions, but rather about how leadership structures can be opened to women, even as some exercise the pastoral care of parishes under the provisions of Canon 517.2.¹⁶ While some deacons have been appointed to this role, many diocesan bishops avoid appointing lay ecclesial ministers. *The Official Catholic Directory (2017)* reports that of the 17,156 U.S. parishes in 2017, 3552 (20%) were without a resident priest pastor. Although only 347 (2%) of parishes overall are Canon 517.2 parishes, the number of deacons entrusted with the pastoral care of a parish increasing as lay pastoral life coordinators in this position are decreasing.¹⁷ The sociologist Mary L. Gautier notes that the number of Canon 517.2 parishes in the United States peaked in 2004 and has since declined, as bishops respond to priest shortages by reorganizing parishes either by closing, clustering, or merging them (Gautier 2018: 40).

To be sure, women already assume practical authority through the roles they have undertaken in the Church—women hold on average 80% of lay ecclesial ministerial positions in the United States (Zech et al. 2017: 37).¹⁸ Simply put: deacons entrusted with Canon 517.2 parishes have ordinary faculties for baptisms and witnessing marriages, can function as single judges in canonical proceedings, and can preach at Masses in which they participate. Extraordinary circumstances can allow lay ministers to baptize, witness marriages, and preach,¹⁹ but generally speaking the bishop cannot delegate juridical authority to a non-cleric.

Who would be the woman deacon? Historically, virgins and widows were the primary, although not the only candidates. There is historical evidence of married women deacons. Today, the large number of female lay ecclesial ministers (religious, married, and unmarried) seem to provide a large population of potential deacons. Among these, at least in the United States, women religious are not necessarily the primary candidates. Responses to the CARA major superiors survey demonstrate that the vocation to the diaconate is distinct from the vocation to religious life, even as they recognize the possibility of a woman religious deacon. When asked to estimate how many of their own female members might be interested in becoming

¹⁶ Code of Canon Law, C. 517 § 2 If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care (Catholic Church and Canon Law Society of America 1983).

¹⁷ CARA reports that in the period between 2010 and 2015, the number of Canon 517.2 parishes entrusted to deacons increased from 132 to 154. This 16% increase in deacon parishes entrusted to deacons is surprising given that, in the same period, the number of parishes entrusted to lay people (both men and women) declined 32% (from 154 to 104). Additionally, in the same period, there were 25 religious brothers (a 16% decrease since 2005) and 76 religious sisters (a 66% decrease since 2005) entrusted with the pastoral care of Canon 517.2 parishes. The aging population of vowed religious in the United States likely contributes to this sharp decline in religious appointed to this role. (cf. note 20).

¹⁸ In 2017, CARA reports nearly 40,000 lay ecclesial ministers in the United States (Zech et al. 2017).

¹⁹ An exception is made for Masses for children (Congregation for Divine Worship 1973) and Code of Canon Law, C. 766 allows for preaching by non-ordained persons where necessary (Catholic Church and Canon Law Society of America 1983).

deacons (if such were to be authorized), the leaders of U.S. religious institutes most commonly responded none.²⁰

Authority: Can the People of God Accept Women Deacons?

In 2011, the American Catholic Laity study, a 30-year collaborative research project documenting changing attitudes and behaviors of approximately 1500 U.S. Catholics about their faith, found that 76% of women and 73% of men supported the possibility of women deacons (D'Antonio et al. 2013: 100). According to data gathered in 2017 for the 6th wave of the same study, support among the faithful for women deacons is on the rise (D'Antonio et al. 2017). When asked whether they felt "It would be a good thing if women were allowed to be ordained as permanent deacons," over 78% indicated they at least "somewhat agreed" (only 9% strongly disagreed).²¹ Although the question's format changed in the most recent wave of this study, growing support among the laity for women deacons is clear.

Acceptance and authority, as indicated by the survey results, are indeed related; but the degree to which a person is willing to grant authority to another is related to several individual factors, notably authenticity and likeability. The question regarding diaconal ministry immediately arises: Who already has practical authority in their enacting of service roles? That is, who are the "deacons" in any given situation today? The role reversal evident in many cultures within and outside the United States (where the most significant research has taken place) demonstrates the fact that women lay ecclesial ministers are already seen as "deacons," performing the tasks and duties connected to the deacon's charge to minister the Word, the liturgy, and charity.

Women minister the Word, both liturgically and as teachers and catechists. They already preach, sometimes by exception during the celebration of Eucharist, and often through various forms of media that reach outside church buildings into homes and offices. Women minister within the liturgy, as appointed (although not installed) lectors and acolytes, serving as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist as well as managers of liturgical celebrations. Women minister charity, both at the parochial and diocesan levels, and through the institutions founded by men and women religious. In short, when the tasks and duties of the deacon are parsed, women are already active in those not requiring ordination. The tasks and duties available only

²⁰ According to the 2018 CARA survey of U.S. major superiors, 64% of female leaders responded no members would be interested in being ordained deacons. Whereas LCWR superiors estimated that on average 3.2 of their members might be interested in being ordained a deacon, CMSWR superiors indicated less than one member from their institutes would be interested. The study reports that over 82% of U.S. sisters are over the age of 65 and only 3% of U.S. sisters are under the age of 44. Thus, one reason for low estimates regarding how many women religious might be interested in diaconal ordination (if such were to be authorized) is that most would be ineligible or uninterested due to their advanced age (Gaunt et al. 2018).

²¹ D'Antonio et al. (2017) indicate that 78.2% of responding women and 77.9% of responding men support the ordination of women to the diaconate.

to the deacon deny women juridical ministry and ceremonial acceptance of their diaconal work. By including only men in the renewed diaconate, the Church provides a negative comment on women's ministry and continues to contribute to the overall devaluation of women.

The Global Church and Women Deacons

The global Church counts some 46,000 male deacons today. Yet, 98% of the world's deacons are in the Americas and Europe, attesting to both a developed understanding in these regions and a greater need for the ministerial diaconate in other parts of the world.²²

When, following Vatican II, Pope Paul VI restored the diaconate as a permanent vocation for men, he specifically left it to individual episcopal conferences around the world to bring it to their territories, with the understanding that individual diocesan bishops would determine their own needs. Therefore, the global Church need not worry that something currently alien to their own cultures would be forced upon them. However, although the studies referenced here investigate the multicultural United States, they mirror the interests of Church members in other Western English-speaking nations, as well as in several francophone, German, Italian, and Spanish-speaking territories.²³

In some quarters, there is a tendency to dismiss the call to restore women to the diaconate as an American, or at least a European, issue. But viewed globally, the role of women in ministry is central. It was, after all, the membership of the women's International Union of Superiors General based in Rome that requested a papal commission to study women deacons. For Catholics hoping for a possible change to the ordained diaconate, it is not about access to power, but rather about recognizing and legitimizing the ministry and leadership women already perform.

The groundwork was laid for the restoration and reformation of the diaconate as a permanent rank of the hierarchy with the Council document *Lumen gentium*. Later, Pope Paul VI (1967) issued the Apostolic Letter *motu proprio, Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* (General Norms for Restoring the Diaconate in the Latin Church), directing territorial episcopal conferences to determine if the permanent diaconate would be needed in their territories, allowing diocesan bishops to make their own final decisions. Significantly, this document allowed married men over the age of 35 to be ordained as deacons. Five years later, Pope Paul VI (1972) promulgated a second

²² The Vatican's *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*, most recently published in 2018 with data compiled from 2016, reports 45,609 deacons worldwide. In 2017, according to CARA, there were 18,287 deacons in the United States and another 2670 deacon candidates. Globally, between 2010 and 2015 the number of deacons increased as follows: Africa 5%; Americas 16%; Asia 34%; Europe 10%; Oceania 14% (Gautier 2018: 30).

²³ The question of women deacons was raised by Gatineau, Quebec Abp. Paul-André Durocher in his intervention at the October 2015 Synod on the Family (Glatz 2015). Since then, the international academic and popular discussion has grown through books, articles, and conferences.

Apostolic Letter *motu proprio, Ad pascendum*, which stipulated prospective deacons' responsibilities and the procedures for candidacy and ordination.

In fact, the prescience of *Lumen gentium* 29, strengthened by the two later documents *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* and *Ad pascendum*, can be seen today as calling both women and men to the diaconate, specifically to provide for the ministries it names: administer baptism, care for and dispense the Eucharist (including Viaticum), witness marriages, read Scripture to and exhort the faithful, preside over worship and prayer, administer sacramentals, and officiate at funeral and burial services. These ministerial functions have been documented as tasks and duties of women deacons in various ways at various times in various places deep in the Church's history, from Phoebe, the earliest woman called deacon and the only person named deacon in Scripture,²⁴ through the many named women deacons East and West, even to the women deacons of 12th century Northern Italy (Nicolai 1966: 17), those mentioned in the canons of the 1736 Maronite National Synod of Mount Lebanon (Zagano 2016: 596–597), to the *sororas* or *freylas* of Basque Territory well into the eighteenth century (Scott 2016). *Lumen gentium* 29 restored the diaconate as a “proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy” because “these duties, so very necessary to the life of the Church, can be fulfilled only with difficulty in many regions in accordance with the discipline of the Latin Church as it exists today” (Paul VI 1964).

The survey statistics take the pulse of members of the Catholic Church, not on a matter of doctrine, but rather on a matter of discipline. They are contributions of the local Churches in the United States to synodality. The need exists, and social science demonstrates that the people of God are ready for women to be called to the ordained diaconate.

References

- Catholic Church, Canon Law Society of America. 1983. Code of canon law: Latin-English edition. Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America.
- D'Antonio, William V., Michelle Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier. 2013. *American Catholics in Transition*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- D'Antonio, William V., Michelle Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier. 2017. *American Catholic Laity Survey*. [Data file]. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America (used with permission).
- Daniélou, Jean. 1974. *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. London: Faith.
- Francis, Pope. 2018a. Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio: On the Structure of the Synod of Bishops*. Vatican Archives. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html. Accessed 27 Feb 2019.
- Francis, Pope. 2018b. *Instrumentum Laboris: Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment*. Synod of Bishops, XV General Assembly. Vatican Archives. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20180508_instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html. Accessed 27 Feb 2019.
- Gaunt, Thomas P., Mary L. Gautier, Mark M. Gray, Jonathon L. Wiggins, and Felice Goodwin. 2018. *Survey of Religious Institutes: The Sacramental Ordination of Women as Deacons*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.
- Gautier, Mary L. 2018. How is the Diaconate Changing? Trends in the Presence and Ministry of Deacons. In *Word, Liturgy, Charity*, ed. Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 29–44. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

²⁴ It is important to note that Paul uses the masculine *διακονος* (deacon) for Phoebe (See *Romans* 16:1).

- Gibaut, John St.H. 2000. *The Cursus Honorum: A Study of the Origins and Evolution of Sequential Ordination*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Glatz, Carol. 2015. Synod Should Reflect on Possibly Allowing Female Deacons, Says Archbishop. *America Magazine* Archive. <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/church-ready-women-deacons>. Accessed 27 Feb 2019.
- Gray, Mark M., and Mary L. Gautier. 2018. *Catholic Women in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.
- International Theological Commission. 2018. Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church. Vatican Archives. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html. Accessed 27 Feb 2019.
- Nicolai, Umberto. 1966. *I Vescovi di Luca*. Luca: Tipographia Bicchelli.
- Paul VI, Pope. 1964. *Lumen gentium: Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*. Vatican City: Second Vatican Council.
- Paul VI, Pope. 1967. Apostolic Letter Issued “*Motu Proprio*”, *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem: General Norms for Restoring the Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church*. Vatican Archive. http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19670618_sacrum-diaconatus.html. Accessed 27 Feb 2019.
- Paul VI, Pope. 1972. Apostolic Letter issued “*Motu Proprio*”, *Ad Pascendum: Containing Norms for the Order of the Diaconate*. Vatican Archive. http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19720815_ad-pascendum.html. Accessed 27 Feb 2019.
- Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship. 1973. *Pueros Baptizatos: Directory for Masses with Children*. Vatican City.
- Scott, Amanda. 2016. Serora and Local Religious Life in the Basque Country and Navarre, 1550–1769. *Church History* 85(1): 40–64.
- Second Vatican Council. 1961. *Acta et documenta Concilio oecumenico Vaticano II apparando.*, Series prima (antepreparatoria) Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis [1960–61 (ADA), II/II, 121]. *The Official Catholic Directory, 1950–2017*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: P.J. Kenedy & Sons.
- U.S. Catholic*. 2018. And the Survey Says... (Poll Results of 3,971 USCatholic.org Visitors Regarding Women Deacons). <https://www.uscatholic.org/womendeacons>. Accessed 27 Feb 2019.
- Zagano, Phyllis. 2016. Women Deacons in the Maronite Church. *Theological Studies* 77(3): 593–602.
- Zagano, Phyllis. 2018. What’s the Problem with Women Deacons? *U.S. Catholic* 83(6): 18–22.
- Zech, Charles E., Mary L. Gautier, Mark M. Gray, Jonathon L. Wiggins, and Thomas P. Gaunt. 2017. *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.