



Keep the Faith, Change the Church

Women Deacons: How Long Will It Take the Catholic Church to Open This Door?

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One of the best kept secrets of the Catholic Church is that for the first half of its history, that is, for more than 11 centuries, women were ordained to the diaconate by bishops, within the sanctuary, with the laying on of hands.¹

Since then, the church has never quite dismissed nor promoted the notion of women deacons. Numerous bishops have brought it up to many different popes over the years. Yet, since the close of the Second Vatican Council, the Vatican has not moved to restore the female diaconate in the Catholic Church, even though other recognized churches such as the Armenian Apostolic and the Orthodox Church of Greece have retained or restored their tradition of women deacons. Independent of the discussion concerning women *priests*, the church today has both the authority and the power to ordain women *deacons*.²

Despite the Vatican's silence, a number of academics have actively pursued the issue of ordaining women as permanent deacons, including Drs. Phyllis Zagano, Gary Macy, and William Ditewig. Phyllis Zagano reminds us that:

While the original study on women deacons, requested by Pope Paul VI, was suppressed, the International Theological Commission (ITC) [consisting of up to 30 theologians appointed by the Pope] sat with the question of women deacons for at least 20 years. An article published in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* in 1974 by then-commission member Cipriano Vagaggini concluded that the ordination of women deacons in the early church was sacramental. What the church had done in the past, he suggested, the church may do again. Other scholars, before and after Vagaggini, have reached similar conclusions, but the current document only refers to the debate and strenuously avoids concluding that women ever received the sacrament of holy orders.³

The key points in the conversation over the years were: 1) What did women deacons do? 2) Were women deacons ever sacramentally ordained? 3) Does the ordained diaconate share in the sacrament of order? 4) Does the ordained diaconate share in the sacrament of order in such a way that it is part of the sacerdotal priesthood?

Since the 1970s, as women increasingly elevated the question about equality in their church and world, the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy has reiterated that women cannot be ordained to the *priesthood*. But the permanent diaconate remains on the table.

¹ Macy, G., Ditewig, W. Zagano, P. (2011). *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, p. 3

² *ibid*

³ Zagano, P. (2003) "Catholic Women Deacons." *America*. Retrieved on August 9, 2012 from: http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=2778

Pope Benedict XVI seems to be ambivalent about the female diaconate. On the one hand, he has called for the inclusion of women in Church governance and ministry. Yet on the other, he repeats that only clerics, including deacons, may exercise governance and ministry. Perhaps the pope *is* open to restoring women deacons, but his actions suggest otherwise, for he suggests no timeline.

“The church owes a great debt of thanks to women,” the pope has said. “Women not only have exercised a charismatic function in the church, being prompted by the Holy Spirit to found religious orders, expand charitable projects and develop new forms of piety,” but have had “a real and profound participation in the governance of the church.”

“How could one imagine the governance of the church without this contribution, which sometimes has been quite visible, like when St. Hildegard criticized the bishops or when St. Brigid and St. Catherine of Siena admonished and obtained the return of the popes to Rome” from Avignon, France, the pope continued.

Unfortunately, despite Pope Benedict’s statement that the contribution of women “always has been a determining factor without which the church could not live,”⁴ the actions of the Church hierarchy continue to stand in counterpoint to their words.

So where can we turn for both authoritative words *and* deeds about the role of women?

The Bible. Christ clearly had female helpers who were not named among the twelve. Also, it is clear that the community of believers called forth those now considered the first deacons, who then received the laying on of hands from the apostles (Acts 6:1-6). Among them were women:

- ❑ Romans 16:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:11 both testify to the fact of women in the earliest stages of the diaconate.
- ❑ Scripture names Phoebe deacon and patron of the church at Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1-2).
- ❑ Other female coworkers of Paul are named: Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Rom 16:12); Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2-3); Mary (Rom 16:6); and Junia, “a notable apostle” (Rom 16:7).⁵

⁴ In March, 2006, while insisting women cannot be ordained priests, Pope Benedict XVI said it is right to discuss how women can be more involved in church decision-making. Pope Benedict spent two hours listening to the concerns of the priests in Rome, and responding to the questions posed by 15 of them. The following day, the Vatican released a summary of the priests' questions and a transcript of the pope's remarks covering women in the church, youth, family life and a variety of other topics. Retrieved on August 5, 2012 from: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060302_roman-clergy_en.html

⁵ *ibid*, p. 55

In short, the choice of deacons is up to the Church, to be confirmed by the successors to the apostles.⁶ The historical record makes it clear that ordained ministry was complex and varied in the ancient church, and that women were there in the middle of things, even from the time of Christ.

Despite this biblical record, in his ambivalent treatment toward women Benedict XVI is following a well-worn path. After 11 centuries in which women served as deacons, in the 12th century Huguccio of Bologna, the most influential Canon lawyer of his age, insisted, “a woman is not able to receive orders. The law of the church made on account of sex [impedes it]. If therefore a female is ordained, she does not receive orders, and hence is forbidden to exercise the office of orders.” In other words, Huguccio wrote that even if a woman were to be ordained, it would not “take.” This final position is what canon lawyers and theologians would teach for the rest of the Middle Ages. Thus, after more than 1,000 years of serving as ordained deacons, within roughly 100 years, women lost all standing as ordained deacons⁷ as well as any chance of being considered for priestly-type status.

The meaning of ordination has also shifted over time. Though the diaconate never completely disappeared, it was transformed and redefined into the presbyterate,⁸ that is, a body of priests. Laypersons, both men and women, from the Middle Ages on are described as non-ordained, and the diaconate did not stand alone as a ministry as it had for 12 centuries. Instead, the diaconate now referred exclusively to men on the way to priesthood.

The Second Vatican Council revived the ministry of permanent deacons—but only for men who do not intend to be ordained priests. So in spite of the history of women deacons, the post-Vatican II manifestation of the permanent diaconate still excludes women. Since the permanent diaconate was restored at Vatican II, many men, not a few of them married, have been trained and ordained. Ironically, it is often female professors who train these men, with candidates’ wives often taking classes alongside them—for no credit.

Why Should We Restore Females to the Diaconate?

As the church struggles with revelation upon revelation of clerical abuse of minors and the long-standing cover-up of these cases by pastoral officials, Catholic voices from all over the globe are suggesting that we would not be experiencing such an abuse crisis if women had more power in our church. Certainly that would be one reason to consider the restoration. Restoration also could

⁶ *ibid*, p. 55

⁷ Macy, Ditewig and Zagano, 2011, p. 36

⁸ *ibid*, p. 41

mitigate the persistent devaluing of women's opinions and participation in church leadership, among other beneficial effects.

Much scientific research suggests that adult males are far more frequently involved in sexual abuse of children than females are. Institutions that grant women, or parents and grandparents, effective power potentially create a check against this particular kind of ugly abuse and its cover-up.⁹ Indeed, the entire Catholic community is paying a high price for excluding women from the highest levels of church governance, including exclusion from the priesthood. Eugene Kennedy, author of more than 50 books on religion, the psychology of religion, and the Catholic Church, has said:

Women priests would not have allowed this tragic feasting on children to go on for an hour without taking action to end it. Healthy women do not put up with unhealthy men and this crisis would have been averted had the priesthood had enough healthy women in it to make the unhealthy men either grow up or get out.” (Kennedy, 2010)¹⁰

The cost to the community is not simply an absence of a layer of protection against the abuse of children. Many Catholics have left the Church in the past 10 years, and 38% of the former Catholics surveyed say their reason for leaving the church included unhappiness with the church's treatment of women.¹¹

Maryknoll priest Reverend Roy Bourgeois, a global peace activist, spoke his conscience about women's equality in the church (and has paid a steep price for doing so). His focus is Christian moral witness, and he has courageously spoken about both women's ordination and the lack of authority for women in the church. Diminished authority, he notes, de-values women. Speaking specifically about women and the priesthood, Fr. Bourgeois also compared the hierarchy's response to sex abuse with its response to women who seek ordination:

Having an all-male clergy implies that men are worthy to be Catholic priests, but women are not. According to *USA Today* (February 28, 2008), in the United States alone, nearly 5,000 Catholic priests have sexually abused more than 12,000 children. Many bishops, aware of the abuse, remained silent. These priests and bishops were not excommunicated. Yet the women in our Church who are called by God and are ordained to serve God's people, and the priests and bishops who support them, are excommunicated.¹²

⁹ Lindsay, W. 2010. Contribution to the Women's Initiative White Papers.

¹⁰ Kennedy, E. C. (2010) "If the Church Ordained Women, There Would Be No Sex Abuse Crisis," *National Catholic Reporter* (May 21, 2010).

¹¹ Dugan and Owens, (2010). *From the Pews in the Back*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, at page xv. "Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S. – Leaving Catholicism," Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (April 27, 2009).

¹² Letter of Rev. Roy Bourgeois, MM, to Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, November 7, 2008, as reproduced in *Ekklesia*, <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/8005>

Building Fences to Keep Out Women?

The following timeline presented by Gary Macy¹³ shows a curious sequence of events.

- ❑ In 1992, the Catechism of the Catholic Church was released in French, with several notes about deacons.
- ❑ Cardinal Ratzinger assigned the topic of the diaconate to the International Theological Commission (ITC) as part of its 1992 to 1997 agenda.
- ❑ In 1994, John Paul II promulgated *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* on restricting presbyteral ordination to men alone. He wrote: “At the present time in some places it is still considered open to debate . . . I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”¹⁴
- ❑ In 1995 a *dubium* (a doctrinal question) was submitted to Cardinal Ratzinger at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, asking if *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is to be held definitively, since the word “infallible” was not used. Ratzinger responded, “It has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 25).¹⁵ Theologians are still arguing about this particular use of the word “infallible,” which stretched the infallibility claim beyond any previous applications. And the Vatican is increasingly censoring and silencing theologians who pursue the tradition of Catholic intellectual inquiry.
- ❑ In 1995 a plenary was held in Rome to review drafts of the documents on the diaconate. Reportedly the question of the possibility of ordaining women as deacons was raised but not resolved, presumably because the International Theological Commission (ITC) had yet to finish its work on the diaconate. The ITC ended up getting a five-year extension to explore this question.
- ❑ In 1997, the pope promulgated the Latin edition typical of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which included over one hundred significant changes to the text. One directly affected the diaconate. The French version says that all the ordained—bishops, deacons and priests—receive from Christ “the mission and faculty (sacred power) to act in the person of Christ the Head.” But the subsequent Latin version introduces a distinction, saying instead: “For Him [Christ] bishops and priests receive the mission and faculty (sacred power) to act in the person of Christ the Head, while deacons receive the strength

¹³ Macy, Ditewig and Zagano, 2011, pp. 43-47

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, May 22, 1994, #4

¹⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Concerning the Teaching Contained in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis Responsum ad Dubium*,” October 28, 1995

to serve the people of God through the ministry of Worship, Word and Charity in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate.”

- ❑ In 2002, the ITC completed its 10-year study of the diaconate and presented its report to Cardinal Ratzinger, who authorized its publication.
- ❑ In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI released *motu proprio* (that is, a document issued by the Pope on his own initiative) the apostolic letter *Omnium in mentem*, “On several amendments to the Code of Canon Law.” One of these amendments contained a clarification on the canonical standing of the deacon.
- ❑ In 2010, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith promulgated “Norms on *Graviora Delicta*,” noting among them that “attempted ordination of women is included as a more serious delict.”¹⁶

While this timeline can be interpreted in several ways, I will mention two questions that arise. Are these changes in Canon Law to ensure that women do not ever have access to priestly “orders”? Or is Benedict XVI’s intention to open the door for women deacons, but never for married or female priests? He does draw a clear boundary, returning to the ancient church’s distinction between clergy, bishops, and deacons.

Dr. Phyllis Zagano explains that the underlying argument against the restoration of female deacons in the Catholic Church is premised on the extrapolation: “If you can ordain a woman a deacon, you can ordain her a priest.”

Even though there is nothing about the diaconate that implies or requires priesthood, the nearly irrational fear that the one is a natural step towards the other has paralyzed the Church ever since Paul VI reportedly asked the obvious question when he approached the restoration of the permanent diaconate: What about women deacons?¹⁷

Since the promulgation of “Norms on *Graviora Delicta*” in 2010, the question seems to have revolved around the problem of restoring women to the diaconate while simultaneously barring them from the priesthood.

Another inconsistency emerged with the appearance of altar girls in the 1970s. Later, some bishops banned altar girls—arguing that women could not become priests and therefore girls could not serve at altar. But then altar girls reappeared—except where, as happened in Arlington, Virginia as recently as 2011, some parish priest unilaterally bans girls from the altar again. The ambivalence is dizzying. Such inconsistency only serves to confuse girls about how they might serve in their church.

¹⁶ Macy, Ditewig and Zagano, 2011

¹⁷ Zagano, P. (2010). “Inching toward a “Yes.” UK: *The Tablet*.

The Male-Only Argument Hobbles the Church

As noted previously, the Bible includes a number of references to females who assisted Jesus and who were “ordained” as deacons. Hierarchs sidestep this evidence by saying the Church has no authority to ordain women because Jesus only chose men as apostles. A companion premise is that only a male can represent Christ because Christ was male. The counter argument to such ecclesiology—that the Christ, as an exemplar of all humanity, presents men and women as ontologically equal—is rarely mentioned.¹⁸

For the hierarchy, even with changes in Canon Law, both of the “male-only” arguments regarding priesthood remain in place¹⁹ and contribute to their resistance on women deacons. The presence of female deacons would present an inconvenient counterbalance to this claim, which perhaps has contributed to lengthy delays in its study. Thus, although the International Theological Commission (ITC) worked on the question of women deacons from 1992-2002, they produced a report essentially repeating what the Pope had said a decade earlier: “The Magisterium [the teaching authority in the Church] must decide.”

For many, such continued equivocation will not do. In 2011, Zagano addressed Pope Benedict XVI in an open letter in the *National Catholic Reporter (NRC)*: “Forgive my presumption in addressing you directly, but the matter I bring is both urgent and pressing. Women are no longer walking away from the church. They are running away. They are running toward churches that make it clear women are made in the image and likeness of God.”

Zagano continues in her emphatic plea to the Pope:

When you met with the priests of Rome in 2006, you wondered aloud: could the church open more positions of responsibility to women?²⁰ Were you then signaling the recovery of the tradition of women deacons? In 2009, you changed Canon Law to echo the Catechism. Priests are ordained to act in the person of Christ, the head of the church; deacons are ordained to serve the people of God in and through the

¹⁸ Zagano P. (2000). *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church*. Crossroad, New York

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ “However, you rightly say: we also want to see women more visibly in the government of the Church. We can say that the issue is this: the priestly ministry of the Lord, as we know, is reserved to men, since the priestly ministry is government in the deep sense, which, in short, means it is the Sacrament [of Orders] that governs the Church. This is the crucial point. It is not the man who does something, but the priest governs, faithful to his mission, in the sense that it is the Sacrament, that is, through the Sacrament it is Christ himself who governs, both through the Eucharist and in the other Sacraments, and thus Christ always presides. □ However, it is right to ask whether in ministerial service—despite the fact that here Sacrament and charism are the two ways in which the Church fulfills herself—it might be possible to make more room, to give more offices of responsibility to women.” Retrieved on August 5, 2012, from: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060302_roman-clergy_en.html

Word, the liturgy and charity. Since doctrinal statements only forbid women priests, and deacons are not priests, it seems you removed another hurdle.

Zagano notes that thousands of people sent Cardinal William Levada (Cardinal Ratzinger's successor at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) e-mails and postcards about women deacons in a campaign organized by the U.S.-based group FutureChurch. Several other organizations, including the Canada-based Femmes et Ministères, have claimed April 29, the feast of St. Catherine of Siena, as an international day of prayer for women deacons.

Zagano summarizes the push to restore the female diaconate in her open letter:

This is not a new question. The bishops of the world were talking about women deacons at the Second Vatican Council. They are still at it. Most recently, the Swiss Bishop of St. Gall, Markus Büchel, said women deacons were a good idea. Others before him—even Cardinal Carlo Martini when he was archbishop of Milan—wanted to restore women to the diaconate. Bishops from Australia to Ireland say more women in power would have stemmed the priest sex mess. I am told your Curia knows women can be ordained as deacons, but does not want women in the clerical structure of the church. That cuts both ways, Holy Father. A lot of women do not want anything to do with clericalism. Some want the whole system to collapse. More say it has collapsed already.

Where is the church without women? I know you are concerned about the fading influence of Christianity in Europe. I write from the United States. Things are pretty bad over here, too. The country is over three-quarters Christian (with 68 million Catholics) but newspapers like *The New York Times* had no front page Easter story this year. Their ink is used on scandal. The Christian message is lost in the daily drama of the sex abuse crisis. I fear, Most Holy Father, that bad priests and worse bishops will be your legacy.

The Catholic Church in developed nations is dying out. I am convinced it is dying because of the way it relates to women. Surely you see the numbers—declining membership and eroding donations—but do you have any idea how angry women are? And every woman you alienate extends her influence to several others—to her husband, her children, her friends, her neighbors—until the last person out the parish door turns off the lights. If I may, I think it is time for you to make a decision about women deacons. It is an opportunity for you to state the Christian message in a way that can be heard. Yes, God is love and all persons are made in the image and likeness of God. But the world will not and cannot hear that until you have a woman deacon standing beside you and proclaiming the Gospel in St. Peter's. Again, pardon my presumption, but perhaps no one else will tell you.²¹

²¹ Zagano, P. (2011) "Your Holiness, it is time for women deacons." *National Catholic Reporter*. April 27, 2011.

What has been the official response to issues such as those raised by Zagano (and others)? It's a reiteration of the male-only claim, despite Biblical evidence that Jesus did, indeed, have female helpers as well as male. In 2006, Benedict XVI repeated that women cannot be priests because Christ only chose male apostles, but he proposed a sort of compensation, saying that Canon Law might change to allow women more *spiritual* (rather than hierarchical) power: "According to Canon Law, the power to take legally binding decisions is limited to Sacred Orders. So there are limitations from this point of view [but women] with their energy and strength, with their superiority, with what I'd call their 'spiritual power,' will know how to make their own space. And we will have to try and listen to God so as not to stand in their way."²²

Unfortunately, there seems little opportunity to "make space" since women remain virtually invisible even when they do serve. For example, the website for the Diocese of Rome notes the numbers of secular and religious priests, the cardinals and bishops and deacons. But it fails to include data on how many religious or secular women serve the diocese.²³ This is true of many diocesan websites.

What is particularly grievous about this omission is that although women do not hold positions of highest authority, women do comprise 64% of those in leadership positions in the Catholic Church. As of 2005, there were 30,632 lay ministers working in paid positions of at least 20 hours per week in the U.S. Catholic Church. Women comprised 80% of the total, men 20%. Fourteen percent of ministry staff are deacons.²⁴

So although women have yet to be ordained in the Catholic Church, they have moved well beyond the pew since the Second Vatican Council to take on many diocesan leadership positions. These positions, once held exclusively by ordained and vowed persons, include diocesan chancellor, executive director of health care systems and of Catholic Charities, superintendents of schools and directors of family life, religious educators, auditors, assessors, defenders of the marriage bond, promoters of justice, judges on diocesan courts, members of diocesan synods and financial pastoral councils, teachers of adult formation, seminary professors, and so on (Pasadino, 1993; Wallace, 2008, p. 6).

A significant shift has taken place. As of 1998, women held 25.5 % of all top diocesan administrative positions.²⁵

Women of course are quite conscious of the contradiction between the freedoms and authority they have in the secular world compared with the discrimination they encounter in the church.

²² *ibid*, p. 56

²³ Viewed at <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/droma.html>

²⁴ *ibid*, Lay Parish Minister David DeLambo of the National Pastoral Life Center.

²⁵ 1995-1998 National Association of Church Personnel Administrators study of 100 participating dioceses. Retrieved on August 9 from: <http://www.futurechurch.org/wicl/ministers.htm>

So from where do they find the courage to keep facing the wind?

It seems to be the “vision of Jesus” that women have learned and fostered in their spiritual lives sustains them and keeps them in the Catholic Church as members and as leaders, and gives them integrity as women. The vision of Jesus also moves them to seek justice, agency, and a voice in their church.

As a result of clergy shortages, the Second Vatican Council, and social upheavals of the second half of the twentieth century, women in all states and stages of life not only administer parishes but also find other ways to seek justice, agency, and a voice in their church today. Ruth Wallace likens the increase in diocesan leaders to the subject of the song “Rosie the Riveter” of World War II: in a period of shortage of manpower, women are being recruited to help out the rapidly decreasing number of priests and to meet all kinds of diocesan needs.²⁶

Pope John XXIII opened the window of opportunity for women to take up these roles when he made revisions to Canon Law in 1959, which took hold in 1983, particularly Code 517.2, which permits persons who are not priests to take up roles as administrators of parishes, along with other roles.

More recently, there has been a huge increase in women ministerial candidates who are educated in theology and religious education. At the same time, there has been a rapid fall-off in number of men in such training.²⁷ In the “Profile of Lay Ecclesial Ministry Program Participants” section of the CARA study on Catholic ministry formation enrollment, excluding any priests and deacons from the data on number and gender of program participants, directors of ministry formation programs reported more than three in five lay program participants, or 61 percent, are women. Obviously, training in theology enhances women’s chances of being appointed to positions formerly reserved for clergy.²⁸

Yet while women have indeed become much more involved in the liturgical life of parishes, they continue to face obstacles to ordination as deacons or priests or to serving as homilists and preachers and in other ministries that the Church hierarchy has deemed to be male-only ministries.

Some wonder why the church is taking so long to consider alternatives to a shrinking and troubled all-male celibate leadership that is clearly no longer able to sustain itself and the church it serves. One practicing Catholic woman expressed her experience:

²⁶ Wallace, 2008, p. 9.

²⁷ Retrieved on July 1 from: <http://www.futurechurch.org/wicl/ministers.htm>

²⁸ From the Survey *Catholic Ministry Formation Enrollment: Statistical Overview for 2011-2012*, Mary L. Gauthier, Ph.D., April 2012. Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University URL: <http://cara.georgetown.edu/Publications/Overview2011-12-FINAL.pdf>

I'm really tired of hearing all these gentlemen say that we need to pray for vocations. I pray that you will recognize the vocations that are right in front of you.²⁹

Jamie Manson, *NCR* columnist, offers a global perspective, urging Catholics not to run away, but to continue to work for change in our own church. Roman Catholics in the U.S. and Europe make up only about a third of global Catholic population, she notes. The rest, who live mostly in the global south, are not as free to walk away from their religion. Even those who have left Catholicism for Evangelical or Pentecostal churches, she continues, still live in countries where the Vatican continues to wield significant political influence.³⁰

In some of these countries, the Roman Catholic Church's power has been downright destructive. In the Philippines, for example, overpopulation has put an extreme strain on the nation's food supply. Countless starving children are born into slums with little hope of getting out. The overfishing from the demand of so many hungry people is destroying coral reefs. One effort to offset this mounting crisis is state-sponsored contraception programs. But more than 80 percent of the Philippine population is Roman Catholic. The hierarchy has threatened to excommunicate the president and other government officials who support making birth control accessible and affordable.³¹

Throughout the global south, women suffer disproportionately from little access to health services, discrimination, gender inequality, and victimization by harmful religious and cultural traditions. While in most cases the Roman Catholic Church did not *create* the hardships of women, the hierarchy's position on women does help *reinforce* these social ills.

Jesus asks us, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" (John 6:67)³² It's an important question. Those of us in the U.S. and Europe can roll our eyes and shop around for healthier alternatives, if we no longer wish to accept second-class status, but in many parts of our world these choices have life-or-death consequences.

Regardless of how we personally feel about the Roman Catholic hierarchy, Manson suggests that it is important to remain in solidarity with Catholics worldwide *and* to continue to dedicate our activism to reforming the church's teaching.³³

²⁹ Wickel, 2006, p. 9.

³⁰ Manson, J. (2012) *National Catholic Reporter*. "Leaving the church is a luxury the world cannot afford." Jun. 27, 2012

³¹ *ibid*

³² Jesus asked the 12 apostles this question in John 6:67. New International Version (©1984)

³³ Manson, J. (2012)

Conclusion

So I ask: How long will we allow women to be excluded from all seven sacraments? From the grace and charism that come with ordination to the permanent diaconate? What do you, who would be deacons yourselves, or parents or grandparents of deacons, see as the direction to take if these are our directional signals?

Surely, the Catholic Church itself must take some responsibility for the steadily enlarging rift between the institution and the faithful. Indeed the *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4 from the Second Vatican Council states, "... wherever necessary, undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform."

What do we gain from bringing women back into the diaconate?

Well just imagine a Catholic Church where women counsel couples preparing for marriage and then officiate at the marriage; a church where women prepare families for baptism, and then baptize, for funerals, and then celebrate the funeral. Imagine hearing a woman's perspective on the Gospel on Sundays. What if women deacons were authorized to do these things and had the blessing and charism of ordination by the church community?

I will echo Dr. Zagano's message to Pope Benedict XVI, and to us, "The ministry of discernment that the Lord has left to the church is what must be employed in making a decision about restoring women to the diaconate." (Zagano, 2012)

In The Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII sought to open the windows to let in fresh air. Perhaps Benedict XVI will, with ambivalence or with faith and courage, open a door and let in a fresh wind of change ... and let's hope it "takes" this time. In the meantime, let's heed the words of Jesus, the Christ, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Luke 11:9, Matthew 7:7)³⁴

³⁴ International Revised Version, 1984

References/Further Reading

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Also available: A packet on women deacons in the Church from FutureChurch, at <http://www.futurechurch.org/womendeacons/>

About the Author

Carolyn Johnson, Ed.D., the first recipient of a grant from VOTF's Emily and Rosemary Fund, is a religious educator, researcher, writer, and mother of two girls in the Catholic Church. She earned a Master of Arts in Religious Education at Fordham University, and a Doctorate in Education and Religion in 2009 at Columbia University. She has widely shared her expertise in research methods in lived religion.

Her dissertation was entitled, "Navigating the Impasse: Catholic Women Lead the Way in Their Church." Her research findings form the core of a manuscript entitled *Courage to Keep Facing the Wind: Raising Women Leaders for the Catholic Church*, which she is working to publish in the near future. Her research affirms and preserves a discourse about women in the Catholic Church that for the most part has been entirely underground. This book showcases the stories of women leaders in the Catholic Church, stories that show the roots of their courage and persistence as being in their love of Jesus. Johnson is also writing a book on women's spirituality for a Catholic publisher.

Johnson has more than 20 years of teaching experience at every level: from grammar school, to high school, undergraduate, seminary, and graduate schools. Johnson also developed and taught a course entitled, "God the Redeemer and the Mother of God" for the permanent diaconate in the Diocese of Brooklyn. She is an adjunct professor at Felician College in New Jersey.