

## What is the current discussion in our Church regarding women deacons?

Since the Vatican II decision to restore the permanent diaconate, there has been much discussion about women deacons.

In 1995, the Canon Law Society of America released a study that allows for the ordination of women deacons. More recently, a study by the International Theological Commission left open the ordination of women deacons and concluded “it pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question.”

Some within the Church argue that the historical ordination of women deacons was not the *sacrament* of Holy Orders. They emphasize a need for outward unity (maleness) within the Sacrament. On the other hand, church historian Roger Gryson argued in the 1970s that we cannot use current perspectives to judge the historical ordination of women deacons by bishops.

Pope John Paul II, in “Deacons Serve the Kingdom of God,” states: “Although the question of a sacramental ordination of deacons is not clear from the text (Acts 6), a long tradition has interpreted the episode as the first evidence of the institution of deacons. Clearly, the Holy Spirit, who has the leading role in the Church's life, was mysteriously working.”

The Spirit still moves within the Church and has produced a permanent diaconate whose work corresponds to current needs of the Body of Christ. This offers hope that the Spirit will move the Church toward the ordination of women deacons in our times.

## What has happened since we met with the Cardinal?

In January 2011, the steering committee, pastor and our female inquirer met with Bishop Francis Kane, Vicariate II Vicar. The committee then prepared a written document and submitted it to Cardinal Francis George. On September 16, 2011, the same group had a very positive and productive meeting with Cardinal George.

The Cardinal was open-minded on the issue of the ordination of women to the diaconate. He affirmed the strength of several points in our position paper, which we had sent to him ahead of time. He also raised some theological issues that he feels have not yet been resolved. Cardinal George agreed that there would be benefits to having women deacons in the Archdiocese of Chicago and that it would be helpful for Rome to make a final decision on this issue one way or the other. He said he would take this issue to Rome – to both the International Theological Commission (which has studied it in the past) and to Pope Benedict during his February 2012 visit.

In December 2011 our parish inquirer met privately with the Cardinal at his request. She reports that it was a very positive meeting. In the spring of 2012 Cardinal George mentioned the Church's conversation about women in the diaconate at a press conference. In August 2012 the Chicago Tribune ran an article about this open question in our Church, highlighting our conversation here at St. Nicholas. Unsolicited feedback to our pastor and female inquirer has been overwhelmingly supportive.

Saint Nicholas Parish  
Evanston, Illinois

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# *Women Deacons in the Catholic Church: An Open Question*

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*This pamphlet is the second education piece being provided to the parishioners of St. Nicholas by the parish Steering Committee for the Ongoing Conversation on Women and the Diaconate .*

# Women and the Diaconate

## What Was The Ministry of Women in the Early Church?

Following Christ's resurrection, the early church centered on spreading the Gospel, celebrating Eucharist at shared meals, praying, and taking care of those in need. Women are almost always mentioned among those who gathered with the apostles and other faithful.

Since gatherings were often held in homes, women who opened their homes greatly contributed to the life of the early church. In his epistle to the Romans, St. Paul mentions "Phoebe, a 'diakonos' (minister) of the church at Cenchrae." Cenchrae was a harbor city tied to Corinth. By opening her home to church meetings and providing material support to its work and to the poor Phoebe would have had influence in the region.

Paul also mentions Priscilla. Along with her husband Aquilina, she was instrumental in the conversion of Apollo, who went on to become a leading figure in the church at Corinth. John Chrysostom praises Priscilla for having instructed Apollo correctly in Christian doctrine (*Homily 40 on Acts*).

Paul mentions many other women who "worked hard" in the Lord. He used the word "kopian" to refer to the work of evangelization he shared with them.

## Were There Women Deacons in the Early Church ?

Given the constraints of the time, women were effective in bringing the Gospel into the households of women and reaching the

servants and slaves as well. Clement of Alexandria emphasized this, saying, "It was through them that the Lord's teaching penetrated also the women's quarters without any scandal being aroused. We also know the directions about women deacons given by noble Paul." (*Stromata 3,6,53,3-4*)

Women clearly played a role in the life of the early church. As the ecclesial organization of the Church developed, their role was formalized. When the author of 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to deacons, he states, "The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things." Roger Gryson asserts that this refers "to a new category of ministers, who are feminine this time.....the fact that these women are mentioned along with deacons strongly suggests that their service was analogous to that of deacons" (p.8 *"The Ministry of Women in the Early Church"*).

The "*Didascalia Apostolorum*", a Syrian document written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, makes specific reference to women deacons with particular duties, such as attending to women during baptism and in instruction afterwards, and home visits to attend to women who were ill. This ecclesial role was distinct from that of widows, who were more focused on prayer. The "*Apostolic Constitutions*", also of Eastern origin but from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, expand on the duties of these women to include being intermediaries between female and male members of the hierarchy; serving as messengers for the bishop; welcoming women to liturgical assemblies; and assisting in the distribution of the surplus unconsecrated bread offered by the faithful for the Eucharist. (Gryson p.62)

Most importantly, like other clerics, the ordination of women deacons was conferred by the imposition of hands and the prayer of the bishop, in the presence of the presbyters, deacons and deaconesses. The blessing in part says "do Thou also look down upon this Thy servant who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Thy glory, and the praise of Thy Christ...." (Apost. Const. 8, 20, 1-2 (Funk, 524, 13-24) tr. ANF, VII, p. 492).

## Why Are There No Women Deacons Now?

There *are* women deacons in the *Eastern* Church. In the Roman Catholic Church the possibility of women deacons remains an open question. The original function of deacon as distinct from presbyter (priest) essentially disappeared over the years. The diaconate became "a step to the priesthood." A recent statement by Pope Benedict clearly distinguishes between the sacramental ordination of the restored diaconate and that of the bishop and priest.

The historical factors that contributed to the end of the ordination of women deacons in the Roman Catholic Church are complex. Gary Macy, professor of Theology at Santa Clara University, suggests that "the gradual introduction of purity laws from the Hebrew Scriptures" (connected to menstruation for women) was a chief reason. Developments in sacramental theology in the Middle Ages resulted in laws that called for an end to the ordination of women deacons.