

Presentation on Women in the Diaconate to Cardinal Francis George

**By
Women in the Diaconate Steering Committee
St. Nicholas Church, Evanston
April 11, 2011**

I. Introduction and Background.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet and to share with you our thoughts and requests concerning women and the diaconate. At Saint Nicholas Parish a process of discussion and discernment concerning women in the diaconate began last year in the context of the parish's discernment around supporting a male parishioner in the Diaconate Formation Program. As we posed the question about whether women could also be so supported, we were delighted and encouraged when we learned that this is an open question in our Church. We have come to believe that this is a question that should be taken up by Catholics in respectful and earnest dialogue.

We wish to share with you, our Bishop, what we have found as we looked at this question and how we feel the Spirit calls us and our Church to act at this moment in our history. We respectfully request you to consider raising this question with your fellow bishops in the United States and with the appropriate authorities in Rome. We hope that a dedicated conversation among the bishops will open the renewed permanent diaconate to women as it has been opened to men. We are confident that both the conversation and the action will renew and strengthen our Church in its mission to bring the message of Christ to the world. We believe that the renewal of our Church in its mission begins with us and you, our diocesan Bishop. We believe our Church will benefit beyond expectation if women are able to serve you and your successors as deacons in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

What follows is a summary of some of what we have learned that has led us to seek a Church discussion on the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate.

II. An Open Question.

In 1964, through article 29 of *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II asked Pope Paul VI to restore the permanent diaconate to the Roman Church. In 1967 an apostolic letter permitted Episcopal conferences to request the Holy See to admit celibate and married men to the permanent diaconate within their jurisdiction. It was at this time that Paul VI asked, "What about women deacons?"

Since that question was asked, there have been many requests to explore the issue,¹ and there has been extensive study and discussion within our Church on the question.² A 1995 report by an ad hoc Committee of the Canon Law Society of America (CLSA) found that women had been ordained deacons in the past and that canonical obstacles to reinstating this position were limited. The CSLA committee found it was within the authority of the Apostolic See to make those derogations.

In 2002, the International Theological Commission (ITC) of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a study later entitled in English “From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles.” In part, the ITC looked at the historical ministry of women. Members of the Commission said at the time that it did not rule out the possibility of women deacons, but that “the Magisterium must give the authoritative judgment.”

Significantly, on October 26th, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI, by the apostolic letter *Omnium In Mentem*, sharpened the canonical distinction between bishops and priests on one hand, and deacons on the other, reflecting the wording in the Catechism. Article 2, canon 1009 paragraph 3 now states, “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”.

III. How Women in the Diaconate would benefit the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Deacons serve the people of God in the ministry of the Word, of the liturgy and of charity (*Lumen Gentium*, 29) according to the gifts of the deacon and the needs of the bishop. With women serving in such manner, the *scope* of such service would be expanded without changing its *nature*. We humbly submit that women who have committed themselves to formation as deacons and who have submitted themselves to you will expand the scope of the bishop’s ability to serve God’s people in accordance with the Church’s teachings.

What was envisioned by the establishment of the permanent diaconate in the Church and the adoption of it in our archdiocese is equally true for women as deacons. Women, both past and present, provide great service to our Church. Since the Reformation, the need for diaconal service, especially charitable diaconal service within a diocese, was met largely by bishops calling forth women religious. The needs have not changed but the means by which the needs are being met is changing. Currently, and increasingly, the Church relies on lay ecclesial ministers, 85% of those in training being women. The contributions these women make to our Church will continue. Yet women

¹ As early as 1975 the Joint Synod of the Diocese of the Federal Republic of Germany requested Paul VI to examine women in the diaconate. In 1988 and 1990 a committee of the National Council of Bishops, in its first two drafts of a pastoral letter on women’s concerns, strongly urged that the issue “be undertaken and brought to completion soon.” Since 1990 the National Association of Permanent Diaconate Directors has urged the same.

² It is reported that over 800 studies, books and articles have been written on this question since it was first posed.

deacons will bring their gifts in a particular way, “for service to the Bishop, to do as he commands” (Pope John Paul II quoting St. Hippolytus in “Deacons Serve the Kingdom of God,” Audience October 5, 1993). Women deacons would be a living and consistent resource for the Bishop’s apostolic oversight of his diocese, working in collaboration with him for the greater good of the entire Church community. Their particular insights and relationships with men and women in the diocese would be placed at this service, deepening his understanding of the need of those under his ministry. This fuller understanding promises to bear fruit in the guidance the bishop would give to both male and female deacons in their ministries in the Word, in the liturgy, and in charity, which in turn promises to strengthen the spiritual life and communion of all believers.

Word. The identity of a deacon and diaconal service is in equal parts to the ministry of the Word, of the liturgy and of charity. With respect to the ministry of the Word, there is always more than one sound lesson that can be taught or learned from the selected readings and the Gospel. There is no denying that in the United States and here in Chicago, men and women have the same or essentially similar educational, professional and other opportunities. It is also true that even though many of their experiences are the same or essentially similar, women’s experiences are distinct from and affected by, both positively and negatively, their gender. Gender is one of the factors that has a significant impact on the lessons that may be drawn from the Word, regardless of the gender of the deacon or the listener. A male deacon bridges the world in which he lives and works and the clerical world when he preaches the Word. A woman deacon could do the same from the perspectives of female believers in a way that reflects her distinct experiences.

Liturgy. Once the permanent diaconate was restored, married, ordained men were preaching and performing weddings and baptisms. It has become clear that the permanent diaconate has a valued place in our Church that is distinct from the role of the transitional deacon who is preparing for priesthood. The formation process can be arduous. Many women, just like many men, may not be called or have the necessary qualities to be ordained a deacon. But undoubtedly, there are women and men, who have the requisite qualities; the service of both to the People of God should be placed at your service. Similar to the ministry of the Word, the ministry of women deacons in the liturgy will place at your service and that of the larger Church the symbolic, sacramental witness of women at Eucharist, baptisms, weddings, and funerals, and in bringing communion to the sick.

Charity. Ministry in charity does not come with one, uniform response to the many challenges faced by the body of believers and individual believers. When engaging one on one there are many possible pastoral responses that are consistent with Church teaching. Yet there can be impediments to receiving a given response as pastoral, and there are factors that can enhance the opportunity for conveying a pastoral response. Gender is one of the factors that can be either an impediment or an enhancement, regardless of the gender of the deacon or the person in need. For example, a homebound and vulnerable woman may desperately seek the comfort of an ordained minister (deacon

or priest) but would find it an impediment she cannot overcome to have a man visit her in her home. Similarly, a woman and man who are preparing to marry would benefit from the perspectives of a married deacon; yet at present they would receive only the perspective of an ordained male deacon, which may be of limited benefit to both the woman and the man in some engaged couples. Having both male and female ordained ministers bring the teaching of the Church to engaged couples and to the hopeful reconciliation of struggling married couples would provide a significant contribution to this ministry and to a couple seeking the help of the Church and her ministers.

Some believe that women are already doing what they would be able to do if they were ordained as deacons. If this were true to Church teaching, then there would have been no need to restore the permanent diaconate for men. Clearly the Church believes that the permanent diaconate brings something significant to the life of the Church that is not found within the role of the laity. The deacon's sacramental bond to the apostolic oversight of the Bishop creates a distinct role for the deacon within the hierarchical communion that is our Church.

IV. Church Tradition Supports Opening the Diaconate to Women.

The words, “deacons are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the Word and charity” provide a fitting transition to what we have also been discerning from our exploration of the early Church. It is well beyond the scope of our admittedly limited expertise and of this presentation to provide a comprehensive survey of the scholarly analysis of the history of women deacons that permeates the Tradition of our Church. As noted above, much has been studied and written on this subject ever since Paul VI raised the question. Nonetheless, we would like to share with you some of what we have learned and come to understand.

As a starting point, we understand that the reinstatement of the permanent diaconate by Vatican II stemmed from a sense of Tradition within our Church that would, if renewed, bring spiritual revitalization to the Church's mission in today's world. Pope John Paul II stated this clearly in his statement “Deacons Serve the Kingdom of God,” issued October 5th, 1993: “Clearly, the Holy Spirit, who has the leading role in the Church's life, was mysteriously working through these reasons connected with historical circumstances and pastoral perspectives, bringing about a new realization of the complete picture of the hierarchy, traditionally composed of Bishops, priests and deacons. Thus a new revitalization of Christian communities was fostered making them more like those founded by the Apostles and flourishing in the early centuries, always under the influence of the Paraclete, as the Acts of the Apostles attest.”

Our Tradition rests in great part on the character of the early Church – the Eucharistic celebration, prayer, and taking care of the needy (Acts 2:42), “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” It should be noted that deacons were not established during the earthly ministry of Jesus (Jesus having selected his Apostles and entrusted them with his mission), but

were called and established by the Apostles in furtherance of the mission under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture recounts the Apostles' mission and that of those whom they called into service and ministry. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, refers to Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, being a deacon of the church in Cenchreae, in order that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints and come to her aid in whatever she may need from you for she has been a benefactor of many and of me also." Even within historical debates, it seems clear that women served as deacons. Origen noted in the third century that "This passage teaches by apostolic authority that women are likewise appointed to the ministry of the Church" (*Fathers of the Church – Origen Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 6-10*, translated by Thomas P. Scheck, page 290). This third century observation suggests that the place of the woman deacon, at least in some church communities, already was well established as a rank in the ministerial hierarchy.

The "Apostolic Constitutions" is the largest canonical and liturgical collection of antiquity, originating in Syria towards the end of the 4th century. It incorporated the "Didascalia," the "Didache" and the "Traditio Apostolica." They had a lasting influence on the discipline governing ordination in the East (ITC). Of most significance for this summary is that in the diaconate ordination ritual, there is a laying on of hands by the bishop over both men and women in the gathered presence of presbyters and deacons.

An examination of the early rites for the ordination of deacons reveals that there were two forms of prayer for the ordination of a deacon (one for men and one for women) and that the two prayers are the same in the essential element of the laying on of the hands by the bishop in the gathered presence of presbyters and deacons and the calling forth of the Holy Spirit.³ That examination also reveals that the two prayers differ

³ **CONCERNING THE ORDINATION OF DEACONS--THE CONSTITUTION OF PHILIP XVII.** Concerning the ordination of deacons, I Philip (3) make this constitution: Thou shall ordain a deacon, O bishop, by laying thy hands upon him in the presence of the whole presbytery, and of the deacons, and shall pray, and say: **(THE FORM OF PRAYER FOR THE ORDINATION OF A DEACON)**

XVIII. O God Almighty, the true and faithful God, who art rich unto all that call upon Thee in truth, who art fearful in counsels, and wise in understanding, who art powerful and great, hear our prayer, O Lord, and let Thy ears receive our supplication, and "cause the light of Thy countenance to shine upon this Thy servant," who is to be ordained for Thee to the office of a deacon; and replenish him with Thy Holy Spirit, and with power, as Thou didst replenish Stephen, who was Thy martyr, and follower of the sufferings of Thy Christ. (4) Do Thou render him worthy to discharge acceptably the ministration of a deacon, steadily, without blame, and without reproof, that thereby he may attain a higher degree, through the mediation of Thy only begotten Son, with whom glory, honor, and worship be to Thee and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

CONCERNING THE DEACONESS--THE CONSTITUTION OF BARTHOLOMEW XIX. Concerning a deaconess, I Bartholomew (5) make this constitution: O bishop, thou shall lay thy hands upon her in the presence of the presbytery, and of the deacons and deaconesses, and shall say: **(THE FORM OF PRAYER FOR THE ORDINATION OF A DEACONESS)**

XX. O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; (6) who didst not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of Thy holy gates,--do Thou now 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, with whom glory and adoration be to Thee and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen."

only in the person for whom support is asked. These prayers support the understanding that if men deacons were part of the ordained clergy then so were women deacons.

The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), Canon 15, stipulates: “A woman shall not receive the laying on of hands (cheirotoneisthai) as a deaconess under forty years of age, and then only after searching examination. And if after she has had hands laid on her (cheirotonein, var. cheirotonian) and has continued for a time to minister, she shall despise the grace of God and give herself in marriage, she shall be anathematized and the man united to her.” The use of the verb “cheirotonein” and of the substantive “cheirotonia” further supports the position that ordination through the imposition of hands took place⁴.

Both male and female deacons were to serve under the jurisdiction of the bishop in his oversight of the community. It is our understanding that because of the mores of the time the deacons would have been limited in certain aspects of their service, specifically, certain elements of the service to persons of the opposite gender. Female deacons had specific responsibility for service to women.

The role of the deacon has developed over time. Deacons now bless and baptize. This was not always the case in our Tradition.⁵ This supports the understanding that the role of the female deacon also can develop to reflect the role of the permanent diaconate as restored by Pope Paul VI.

The later prohibitions against women deacons can be read as evidence that they did exist in the early Church. A very early attempt to prohibit women deacons, The First Council of Orange (441 AD), stated “Women deacons are by no means to be ordained. If there are any who have already been ordained, let them submit their heads to the benediction that is granted to the people.” The reason this is described as an early attempt to abolish women deacons is that the historical record (in Council deliberations, in wills, in ordination rites and rituals, in letters and other documents) is replete with references to women deacons for many centuries thereafter,⁶ not to mention the Council of Chalcedon’s rites discussed above only ten years later in 451. It is clear that this

⁴ See Cipriano Vagaggini “L’ordinazione della diaconese nella tradizione greca e bizantina,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974), 141 cited by Phyllis Zagano in “*Holy Saturday*” (2000) p. 164.

⁵ XXVIII. Concerning (12) the canons I the same make a constitution. A bishop blesses, but does not receive the blessing. He lays on hands, ordains, offers, receives the blessing from bishops, but by no means from presbyters. A bishop deprives any clergyman who deserves deprivation, excepting a bishop; for of himself he has not power to do that. A presbyter blesses, but does not receive the blessing; yet does he receive the blessing from the bishop or a fellow-presbyter. In like manner does he give it to a fellow-presbyter. He lays on hands, but does not ordain; he does not deprive, yet does he separate those that are under him, if they be liable to such a punishment. A deacon does not bless, does not give the blessing, but receives it from the bishop and presbyter: he does not baptize, he does not offer; but when a bishop or presbyter has offered, he distributes to the people, not as a priest, but as one that ministers to the priests. But it is not lawful for any one of the other clergy to do the work of a deacon.

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this presentation to list all the references, but a fairly recent (2008) and comprehensive set of references on the question of woman as ordained deacons is found in *The Hidden History of Women’s Ordination – Female Clergy in the Medieval West*, by Gary Macy.

question has been with the Church for a very long time and was not quieted until the permanent diaconate was suppressed in the middle ages.

We acknowledge that the position that women were sacramentally ordained to the diaconate, while widely supported by church theologians and historians, has been contested. Attempts to exclude women from public ministry have had a long history and were prominent when, in the eleventh century, the meaning of orders began to have the sacramental understanding that would be held in the second millennia of the Church. If the Tradition of our Church is bound by her practices during a specific period in history, then it is possible that the Tradition would deny women ordination to the diaconate. But our Tradition is not so bound. The Church looks to the very early Church, to her Tradition over her entire existence, to the Eastern Church⁷, and of course to Scripture.

V. Why Women in the Diaconate has Remained a Question of our Time.

In our humble view, we believe that the Holy Spirit is persisting in raising this question until it is answered. We also believe that the Spirit is encouraging an affirmative answer. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are myriad and mysterious and can extend to the ordination of women as deacons. The Church in our time suffers from many trials, great and small; it is our belief that women deacons would be a remarkable asset in restoring and revitalizing the faith of many who have lost their faith or who struggle with that faith in our time.

VI. Conclusion.

In conclusion, we believe that expanding the permanent diaconate to women is possible within the current teaching of the Church, is consistent with our Tradition and is supported by the historical record and most importantly, our Scripture. We ask that you bring this possibility to your fellow bishops with the intention of expanding the diaconate here in this, your and our, diocese. Women deacons will faithfully fulfill their service to the people of God in the ministry of the Word, of the liturgy and of charity according to their gifts and the needs of our diocese. We have committed our time and our talent to this question because we believe that it will benefit the Church. As we have looked into this open question and have prayed over what it is we are asking of our Church, we have come to understand that we are not alone. The Spirit appears to be moving among many of the faithful around the world in the same organic way. We make this request from our prayerful hearts out of our love for our Church and for the glory of God.

Respectfully yours,

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Karen Allen, Jacquie Axe, Damian Barta, Sheila Hebein, and Mary Signatur

Copy to: Most Reverend Francis J. Kane, Vicariate II

⁷ The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece restored the female diaconate on October 8, 2004.