

Survey of Vatican Studies on the Diaconate of Women

Theological Studies
2024, Vol. 85(3) 490–516
© Theological Studies, Inc. 2024
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00405639241270698
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj



Phyllis Zagano 
Hofstra University, USA

Abstract

The question of women in the ordained diaconate arose in the early 1970s at a Synod of Bishops; it was then considered by three iterations of the International Theological Commission and two pontifical commissions. More recently, the worldwide Synod on Synodality has taken up the question and asked for a review of the research. This article assesses the various studies and synod discussions, concluding with Pope Francis's stunning “no” in a televised interview.

Keywords

diaconate, Synod on Synodality, women deacons

The Diaconate since the Second Vatican Council

The Vatican has studied, and restudied, the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate, which was recovered as a permanent vocation after the Second Vatican Council.¹ Today, the Roman Catholic Church has more than 50,000 men ordained as “permanent deacons.”² The 2021–24 Synod on Synodality has discussed the question of women

-
1. Two bishops recommended including women in the diaconate at the Council. *Acta et documenta concilio oecumenico vaticano II apparando; Series prima (antepreparatoria)* (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1960-610 (ADA), 11/11, 121.
 2. *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* (Statistical Yearbook of the Church) (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticanus, 2022), 86.

Corresponding author:

Phyllis Zagano, Hofstra University, 115 Hofstra University, 104b Heger Hall, Hempstead, NY 11549, USA
Email: phyllis.zagano@hofstra.edu

deacons, and its 2023 Synod Report requested more information. On May 2, 2024, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Zimbabwe and Southern Africa ordained a woman to the diaconate in Harare, Zimbabwe.³ The day after Pentecost in 2024, Pope Francis said in a televised interview that women could not be ordained as deacons due to a lack of historical precedent.⁴

Proposals to restore women to the ordained diaconate usually present liturgical, epigraphical, and literary evidence for their ordinations and ministries. Opposing arguments present the notion that the tasks and duties women deacons once performed are no longer necessary, that women cannot image Christ, and that women are barred from the diaconate because they were never priests, using the theory of “unicity of orders.”⁵

To be clear, the diaconate is not part of the priesthood. *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* (1967) states that the deacon is charged with the following tasks and duties: (1) to administer baptism solemnly; (2) to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist; (3) to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church; (4) to bring Viaticum to the dying; (5) to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful; (6) to instruct and exhort the people (preaching); (7) to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful; (8) to administer sacramentals; and (9) to officiate at funeral and burial services.⁶

In addition, deacons are clerics and as such can be the sole signers of canonical judgments and preach homilies at masses in which they participate.

Deacons in the Early Church

The only person in Scripture specifically named “deacon” is Saint Phoebe (Rom 16:1–2), but Scripture attests to both male and female deacons (1 Tm 3:11).⁷ As the hierarchy developed, the diaconate became known as a major order, and some listings

3. The archdiocese is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria.

4. “Pope Francis Interview with Norah O’Donnell,” Columbia Broadcasting Network (May 20, 2024) at 23:15, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/pope-francis-interview-with-norah-odonnell>.

5. There is liturgical evidence that women deacons proclaimed the Gospel, baptismal equality is a given, and the “unicity of orders” argument has been disproven. See Jakob Karl Rinderknecht, “Female Deacons and the Unity of the Sacrament of Order: Responding to the German Skeptics,” *Theological Studies* 82, no. 2 (2021): 351–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639211013574>.

6. “*Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*: The General Norms for Restoring the Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church” (June 18, 1967), then the feast of St. Ephrem, deacon and doctor of the church.

7. Jennifer H. Stiefel, “Women Deacons in 1 Timothy: A Linguistic and Literary Look at ‘Women Likewise . . .’ (1 Tim 3.11),” *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 442–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500021585>.

included women deacons or deaconesses as clerics in major orders between subdeacon and deacon.⁸

Various arguments have been adduced against the historical ordinations of women as deacons, including evaluations of Canon 19 of the Council of Nicaea (325), which argues that the women deacons of the heretical Paulinist sect were not to be reordained because they “do not receive any imposition of hands, so that they are in all respects to be numbered among the laity.”⁹ As Jerome Cotsonis points out, deaconesses received the imposition of hands at the time, but not all Paulinist deaconesses did. Therefore, there would be no reason to introduce them to the clergy.¹⁰

Several early and medieval ordination liturgies used to ordain women as deacons are extant, including five in the Vatican Library.¹¹ While deacons (female and male) were assigned various tasks and duties at different times and places, it has always been clear that they were ordained “not unto the priesthood but unto a ministry of service.”¹²

The varied tasks and duties of women deacons included their mediating between women and the bishop. As the diaconate became more ceremonial, fewer women deacons were “social service” deacons, and ordained women deacons remained in monasteries, often as abbesses. Often, additional women monastics were ordained to provide

-
8. For example, in 1018, Benedict VIII conferred on the Cardinal Bishop of Porto the right to ordain bishops, priests, deacons, deaconesses, subdeacons, churches, and altars. Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2007), 35, 172–73n78, citing (Benedict VIII, *Quotiens illa* [1018 August 1], Jaffe, 4024, *PL* 139:162rB).
 9. Council of Nicaea c. 19, Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, Nicaea I–Lateran V (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 15.
 10. “In the times of the First Ecumenical Council, the view prevailed in the Church, that deaconesses did belong to the clergy and if at the same time nothing exceptional had happened in regard to some of the Paulinist deaconesses there would have been no reason to make a special mention of them in the Canon. In other words, if deaconesses in the Church received no ordination in those times, no mention could have been made of them as no such mention is made of clergymen of the lower ranks, who receive only the bishop’s blessing, ‘laying of hands’ (cheirothesia). The fact, however, that the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council found it necessary to provide for the Paulinist deaconesses who wished to return to the Church, indicates that not only did deaconesses of the Church receive ordination like other members of the clergy, but also they were required to have undergone tonsure prior to it. And the unusual thing with the Paulinist deaconesses was that among them there were some who had been advanced to that rank, without their having undergone tonsure and received the relevant laying of hands (cheirothesia). For this reason they were undoubtedly classed among the Laity.” Jerome Cotsonis, “A Contribution to the Interpretation of the 19th Canon of the First Ecumenical Council,” *Revue des études byzantines* 19 (1961): 197, https://www.persee.fr/doc/rebyz_0766-5598_1961_num_19_1_1253.
 11. Eastern: Barberini gr. 336 (780), Vatican Manuscript gr. 1872 (1100), *Codex Syriacus Vaticanus* No. 19 (1550), and Western: Vatican Reginae lat. 337 (850), *Ottobonianus* lat. 313, Paris (850).
 12. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), §29, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

for the liturgy. Meanwhile, “it was most frequently the deacon who would become the bishop’s successor upon his death,”¹³ and thirty-six deacons were elected and consecrated as bishop of Rome without being ordained as priest.¹⁴ By the twelfth century, the *cursus honorum* (course of honor) was codified. Hence, no one was ordained deacon unless he was on the path to priesthood. While at least a few women in the West were ordained in some territories in the West up until the mid-twelfth century, in other territories earlier local synods outlawed their ordinations.¹⁵

The important historical fact is that many extant ordination rites are linguistically and structurally identical for women deacons as for men.

Council of Trent (1545–63)

As the Congregations for the Clergy and Education wrote, when promulgating the “Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons” in 1998, “The Council of Trent disposed that the permanent Diaconate, as it existed in ancient times, should be restored, in accord with its proper nature, to its original function in the Church. This prescription, however, was not carried into effect.”¹⁶ The document recognizes that the diaconate as a permanent order was widespread in the Western church “up to the fifth century.” It does not consider its continued existence in the East, or the continued existence of women deacons in both the East and West until, and even through, the twelfth century.

Trent decreed that the order of deacon is “truly and properly” a sacrament:

For the sacred Scriptures make open mention not only of priests, but also of deacons That Order is truly and properly a Sacrament. Whereas, by the testimony of Scripture, by Apostolic tradition, and the unanimous consent of the Fathers, it is clear that grace is conferred by sacred ordination, which is performed by words and outward signs, no one ought to doubt that Order is truly and properly one of the seven sacraments of holy Church. For the apostle says; I admonish thee that thou stir up the grace of God, which is in thee by the imposition of my hands. For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love of sobriety.¹⁷

-
13. William T. Ditewig, *Courageous Humility: Reflections on the Church, Diakonia, and Deacons* (New York: Paulist, 2022), 80.
 14. “The Roman rite did not then [432–678] require a deacon advanced to the episcopate to receive priestly ordination first. Hildebrand was probably the first to do so, in 1073.” Peter Llewellyn, “The Popes and the Constitution in the Eight Century,” *English Historical Review* 101, no. 398 (January 1986): 42n2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/571321>.
 15. Women deacons existed in Lucca, Italy under Ottone, bishop there from 1139 to 1146. Successive popes had approved the ordination of women as deacons in 1018, 1025, 1026, 1037, and 1049. Macy, *Hidden History*, 35, 93–96.
 16. Congregation for Catholic Education and Congregation for the Clergy, “Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacon,” “Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons” (1998), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_31031998_directorium-diaconi_en.html. Cf. Council of Trent, Session XXIII, *Decreta de Reformatione*, canon 17.
 17. Council of Trent, Session XXIII, *Doctrine and Canons*, chaps. 2–3, <http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch23.htm>.

Despite the calls for the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent vocation at Trent, in the West it remained a step or stage within the *cursus honorum*, such that virtually no man was ordained as deacon unless he was destined for priesthood. Meanwhile, the diaconate of women died out in the West.

Post-Tridentine Commentary

Jean Morin (1591–1659)

In 1655, French Oratorian priest Jean Morin published his study of the then-existing Greek, Latin, and Syriac liturgies for ordaining women as deacons, concluding that they met the criteria for sacramental ordination established by the Council of Trent. He found that the oldest Greek manuscripts are nearly identical for male and female deacons, each including the invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*).¹⁸

National Synod of Mount Lebanon (1736)

The Maronite Church, an ancient Eastern tradition that never separated from the jurisdiction of Rome,¹⁹ held a synod in 1736 that formalized (and Latinized) some of its practices. Among the traditions maintained by the National Synod of Mount Lebanon is the ordination of women as deacons. The canons permitting the ordinations and describing the duties of women deacons were approved *in forma specifica* by Pope Benedict XIV in 1741.

The tasks and duties for women deacons were well known: (1) acting as portress at the women's entries to the assembly; (2) assisting women at baptism; (3) anointing women at baptism, chrismation (confirmation), and extreme unction; (4) catechizing women; (5) validating consecrated virgins; and (6) overseeing women's monasteries on behalf of the bishop.

Jean Pien (1671–1749)

In 1746, shortly after Pope Benedict XIV approved the National Synod of Mount Lebanon's Latinized canons, Belgian Bollandist Jesuit Jean Pien published an argument against the sacramentality of the documented ordinations of women as deacons. He made this assertion even though liturgical ceremonies documented the laying on of hands and the *epiclesis*. His tract seems particularly aimed at discrediting the analysis of Jean Morin, although he does mention other exegetes. He reviews the various historical accounts of women ordained as deacons but distinguishes them from male

18. Jean Morin, *Commentarius de sacris ecclesiae ordinationibus secundum antiquos et recentiores Latinos, Graecos, Syros et Babylonios in tres partes distinctus* (1665, 1695; repr., Farnborough: Gregg International, 1969).

19. The Maronites of Cyprus were governed by Orthodox bishops, under duress, until 1840. George A. Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 382.

deacons principally due to their tasks and duties, which diverged from each other as the church grew.²⁰

Second Vatican Council (1962–65)

The diaconate as a permanent vocation remained moribund until revived by the Second Vatican Council. On October 30, 1963, the proposal to restore the diaconate as a distinct and permanent grade of the ministry passed by a vote of *placet* 1,588, *non placet* 525.²¹

The Council decree *Ad Gentes* specified the terms:

Where episcopal conferences deem it opportune, the order of the diaconate should be restored as a permanent state of life according to the norms of the Constitution “De Ecclesia.” For there are men who actually carry out the functions of the deacon’s office, either preaching the word of God as catechists, or presiding over scattered Christian communities in the name of the pastor and the bishop, or practicing charity in social or relief work. It is only right to strengthen them by the imposition of hands which has come down from the Apostles, and to bind them more closely to the altar, that they may carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate.²²

As noted above, *Lumen Gentium*, the council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, defined the diaconate as an ordained ministry separate from the priesthood. It also detailed the tasks and duties of a deacon.²³

Synod of Bishops (1971)

The 1971 Synod of Bishops marked the second time the world’s episcopal conferences sent bishops to meet in Rome. For this synod, 210 bishops met for five weeks between September 30 and November 6 of that year, the longest synod up to that time. There were two agenda items: the “Ministerial Priesthood”²⁴ and “Justice in the World.”²⁵

20. Jean Pien, “*Tractatus Praeliminaris De Ecclesiae Diaconissis*,” in *Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Joannes Bollandus et al., September, I, i–xxviii (Antwerp: Bernard Albert Vander Plassch, 1746).

21. Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 293.

22. *Ad Gentes*, §16, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html. Citing Matthew 24:31; Didache, 10, 5 (Funk I, 32).

23. *Lumen Gentium*, §29.

24. The original theme of the Synod, “Priestly Ministry,” was changed to “Ministerial Priesthood” at the urging of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who reportedly wanted to preserve the distinction between priesthood and other ministries. See Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI*, 710n30.

25. General Secretariat of the Synod, “Second Ordinary General Assembly: The Ministerial Priesthood and Justice in the World” (September 30–November 6, 1971), http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod/en/synodal_assemblies/1971-second-ordinary-general-assembly-the-ministerial-priesthood.html.

Canadian Cardinal George Bernard Flahiff, Archbishop of Winnipeg, delivered a striking intervention on October 11, 1971, not incidentally the ninth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Flahiff began:

We have spoken of the ministry of the whole Church. Several speakers have dealt with the increasing diversification of the priestly ministry and also with the new ministries that may be proper to the laity. But no one has raised the question of the possibility of a *ministry of women* in the Church. And the question is: are new or changing ministries to be limited to men?²⁶

Flahiff continued, posing two questions: first, “Should we not raise the question whether women too are to have a place in the sacred ministries of the Church as they now exist or are developing,” and second, “can we foresee or at least allow for ministries for women . . . of which *Gaudium et Spes* spoke so eloquently?”²⁷

Despite significant activity by outside groups,²⁸ the outcome of discussions on the first topic was a reaffirmation of the requirement for priestly celibacy and a ban on ordaining women as priests. However, the topic of women in the diaconate did not fade away, even as it was sometimes joined by the question of sacerdotal ordination of women and more general questions about priestly ministry in the reports of nearly every synod language group.²⁹ As the question was debated, Scandinavian Bishop John Gran suggested that the International Theological Commission (ITC) undertake a serious study of women’s ordination,³⁰ while other bishops asserted that the ordination of women as priests was contrary to Scripture and tradition, although without mention of the diaconate.³¹

The synod focused on questions regarding the ministerial priesthood of men, including the ordination of married men. Even so, external discussion and widespread calls for women priests outside the synod halls supported the synod’s consideration of ordaining women as priests. As synod bishops pushed for or against the notion of women priests, it appears that the ITC was already discussing women’s ordination,

26. Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal George B. Flahiff, Archbishop of Winnipeg on Ministries of Women in the Church, October 1, 1971 (emphasis his). Archives of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

27. Intervention of His Eminence Cardinal George B. Flahiff.

28. During the Synod, the St. Joan’s International Alliance, the National Organization for Women, the National Association for the Laity, and others lobbied the bishops for change.

29. Giovanni Caprile, *Il Sinodo Dei Vescovi: Secondua Assemblea Generale (30 settembre – 6 novembre 1971)* (Rome: La Civiltà Cattolica, 1972).

30. “*La donne nella chiesa*. Preferibilmente da parte della Commissione Teologica Internazionale si intraprenda uno studio serio sulla possibilità del loro accesso al sacerdozio. Se risultasse teologicamente accettabile, si ritiene che la Chiesa dovrebbe permetterlo, per quei paesi che lo desiderassero. Così almeno alcuni paesi non conoscerebbero la scarsezza di preti.” Caprile, *Il Sinodo Dei Vescovi*, vol. 1, 394. Gran (1920–2008) was bishop of Oslo from 1963 to 1983.

31. Particularly Ukrainian Bishop Josyf Slipyi. Caprile, *Il Sinodo Dei Vescovi*, vol. 1, 460, 505.

focusing on ordination to the priesthood. Meanwhile, other topics regarding women in ministry were brought to the synod assembly, especially “new forms of ministry,” including lay ministry.

The synod generally accepted the idea of an outside commission to study women’s roles in the church and the world, and the French-language group “B” presented the recommendation that such a commission on the rights of women should not exclude the question of women’s ministry.³²

While there were proposals to reconsider the place of women at a future synod, the 1971 synod agreed to the proposal that women should share participation and responsibility in the church and society.³³ The synod document entitled “Justice in the World” proposed two important topics regarding women:

42. We also urge that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church.

43. We propose that this matter be subjected to a serious study employing adequate means: for instance, a mixed commission of men and women, religious and lay people, of differing situations and competence.³⁴

On November 30, 1971, Pope Paul VI’s response to the synod’s conclusions on ministerial priesthood appeared as “Il sacerdozio ministeriale: Messaggio al Popolo di Dio,” which supported the Latin discipline of priestly celibacy while acknowledging Eastern tradition but did not address women’s admission to priesthood or the diaconate.³⁵

In 1971, at the request of the United States Bishops’ Committee on the Permanent Diaconate, the Catholic Theological Society of America prepared an extensive report that called for women to be ordained as deacons.³⁶ Soon, the newly formed ITC would

32. Caprile, *Il Sinodo Dei Vescovi*, vol. 2, 911.

33. Caprile, vol. 2, 804, 901, 934, 1061, 1063, 1064, 1129.

34. Caprile, vol. 2, 1157–68. Officially available online only in Portuguese at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_19711130_giustizia_po.html.

35. Paul VI, “Il sacerdozio ministeriale, Messaggio al Popolo di Dio,” November 30, 1971, <https://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/1998-11/28-2/Ultimtem.rtf.html>.

36. Sue Cribari, “Theologians’ Recommendation: ‘Be Open to Women Deacons,’” *National Catholic Reporter* (March 5, 1971), 1, 14. The CTSA document also recommended granting deacons authority to hear confessions in conjunction with their ministry to the sick and dying. The document was published as “Restoration of the Office of Deacons as a Lifetime State: A Report to the U.S. Bishops,” *Worship* 45 (April 1971): 186–98. Charleston, South Carolina Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler chaired the Bishops’ Committee; the writing committee chair was Edward P. Echlin (1930–2019), then a Jesuit priest, professor at John Carroll University, and author of *The Deacon in the Church: Past and Future* (New York: Alba House, 1971). In addition to Unterkoefler, the committee members included Bishop Harry Clinch (Monterey), Bishop Maurice Dingman (Des Moines), Archbishop Francis J. Furey (San Antonio), Auxiliary Bishop F. Joseph Gossman (Baltimore), Auxiliary Bishop Walter J. Schoenherr (Detroit), and Auxiliary Bishop John S. Spence (Washington, DC).

study the question. As a response to the 1971 synod, a Commission on the Role of Women in Church and in Society would begin to meet in 1973.

Commission on the Role of Women in Church and in Society (1973–75)

On April 3, 1973, Pope Paul VI formally established the Commission on the Role of Women in Church and in Society,³⁷ an apparent response to the questions regarding women's ordination asked both inside and outside the 1971 synod but left untouched in its report, which was restricted to matters of justice and peace, while the synod document on priesthood suggested priestly ordination of mature married men in particular cases and for pastoral needs. An unofficial English translation soon appeared.³⁸

On May 3, 1973, Pope Paul VI named Bishop Enrico Bartoletti (1916–76) of Lucca, Italy, president of the Commission on the Role of Women. Bartoletti was also president of the Italian Bishops' Conference and would soon be named a member of the curial offices for Christian Unity and for Clergy.³⁹ As reported in *The New York Times*, the task of the "mixed commission of men and women, religious and lay people" was to study the specific role of women in society, as well as the "true promotion of women in the various spheres of the church's life and mission."⁴⁰ *The Times of London* was more specific: "The Vatican today set up a commission to examine the role of women in the Roman Catholic Church. At present, such a role is virtually non-existent."⁴¹ Fourteen women were among the commissioners.⁴²

Bartoletti's diary records that he met with Australian Rosemarie Goldie (1916–2010), undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, on May 28 and June 1, 1973, presumably about the commission.⁴³ On June 5, Bartoletti met with commission member then-Monsignor Virgilio Noè (1922–2011), a historian and liturgist who was at the time the papal master of ceremonies.⁴⁴ Overall, Bartoletti's diary records that he

37. "La Commissione di studio sulla funzione della donna nella società e nella Chiesa," *L'Osservatore Romano* (4 Maggio 1973): 1.

38. "Synod '71: The Priesthood," *Origins: NC Documentary Service* 1, no. 22 (November 18, 1971): 1, 367–81.

39. Bartoletti was named consiglio generale of the Synod of Bishops in 1974 and secretary general of the International Theological Commission on December 13, 1975. Enrico Bartoletti, *In Nomine Domini: Le Carte Romane (1972–1976)*, ed. Marcello Brunini (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2016), 29–30.

40. Paul Hofmann, "Pope Orders a Study of the Role of Women in Church and Society," *The New York Times*, May 4, 1973, 6, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/05/04/archives/pope-orders-a-study-of-the-role-of-women-in-church-and-society-one.html>.

41. "Women's Role to Be Studied by Vatican Commission," *The Times of London*, May 4, 1973, 8.

42. Hofmann, "Pope Orders a Study."

43. Bartoletti, *In Nomine Domini*, 106–7.

44. Bartoletti, 108.

paid a lot of attention to the commission and perhaps to the diaconate for women. He recorded “Commissione Donna” many times in the months the commission met and documented forty-nine meetings with Goldie.⁴⁵

Despite the presence of women on the commission, Bartoletti immediately closed any discussion of the priesthood, the result of a secret memorandum to curial prefects and apostolic nuncios stating that the topic was forbidden.⁴⁶ One member, Dulcinea (Joy) Mericia de Correa Rodrigues (1922–2024), then the national president of the Council of Catholic Women of India, raised the question of women deacons at the first meeting, in November 1973. Bartoletti rejected the topic with a claim that the diaconate was a stepping stone to the priesthood.⁴⁷ The commission—which was extended into 1975, designated as International Women’s Year by the United Nations—met in Rome three times.⁴⁸ The final plenary session occurred April 14–19, 1975.⁴⁹

According to Peter Hebblethwaite, the commission’s final two-page report, “Problèmes ouverts et questions posées,” was augmented by Bartoletti’s seven-page memorandum, “La Question des Femme et des Ministères Ordonnés,” which he gave to Paul VI at Castel Gandolfo in August 1975.⁵⁰ Bartoletti advised a theological/ecclesiological argument against women priests, well beyond a legal restriction; he found a better case for women deacons.⁵¹

International Theological Commission (1969–76)

Prior to the meeting of the 1971 Synod of Bishops, on April 8, 1969, the ITC was established, and thirty priests were named as members. The list included several theological luminaries, including Louis Boyer, Yves Congar, Bernard Lonergan, Henri de Lubac, and Karl Rahner, among others, and one future pope: Joseph Ratzinger.

In its first meeting, the ITC determined its plan of study and named five topics that were added at the request of various offices of the Curia. Women in the priesthood was

45. For example, before the commission met, he reviewed books on the topic on June 2 and met with Goldie on June 9, 21, and 23. Bartoletti, 108–10.

46. Dirkje Donders, “A Papal Commission on Women: Hopeful Promise of Consolation Prize?,” in “The Tenacious Voice of Women. Rie Vendrik and the Pontifical Commission On Women in Society and in the Church” (2002), 27, unpublished translation of “Natúúrlijk Is de Vrouw Gelijk Aan de Man . . . Rie Vendrik En de Pauselijke Commissie over de Vrouw” (Phd dissertation, Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1997), <https://womenpriests.org/wp-content/uploads/asp/teaching/donders3.pdf>.

47. Deborah Schellman Seymour, personal correspondence, February 27, 2024.

48. Bartoletti’s October 23, 1974, report to the Synod of Bishops notes the commission met three times: November 15–18, 1973; February 26–March 3, 1974; and June 20–24, 1974. Bartoletti, *In Nomine Domini*, 425.

49. Bartoletti, *In Nomine Domini*, 297.

50. Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI*, 719n11; Bartoletti, *In Nomine Domini*, 335–36.

51. Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI*, 549. Bartoletti’s diary records that his August 5 meeting with Paul VI included the necessity of magisterial intervention when ordaining women. Bartoletti, *In Nomine Domini*, 335.

52. Emanuele Avallone, *La Commissione Teologica Internazionale: Storia e prospettive* (Venice: Marcianum, 2016), 140. Also reported in *Crux* on August 4, 1972.

an agenda item, and soon the female diaconate was a specific addition.⁵² During its first two years, an ITC subcommittee led by French Dominican Marie-Joseph Le Guillou (1920–90), who was an official theologian for the 1971 synod, prepared a report entitled “The Priestly Ministry” that stressed the ecclesial essentiality of an ordained priesthood.⁵³ The committee included Hans Urs von Balthasar and Carlo Colombo.

On February 13, 1973, Le Guillou, then a professor at L’Institut Catholique de Paris who would also be named to the Commission on the Role of Women, sent a letter to ITC members Cipriano Vagaggini, OSB (1909–99), Yves Congar (1904–95), and Olegario González de Cardedal (1934–) about their membership on a subcommittee on women in the diaconate. At the time, Vagaggini was rector of the Collegio Sant’Anselmo in Rome, Congar was working with Le Guillou at Istina, the Centre d’études oecuméniques in Paris, and González was professor of theology at the Pontifical University of Salamanca. Le Guillou wrote:

Following a recommendation of His Eminence Cardinal Seper and after consultation with Msgr Delhaye,⁵⁴ it has been decided that a small sub-group, composed of Fathers Congar, Olegario González, Vagaggini and myself will be responsible for working more specially on the questions of feminine ministries and the female diaconate.⁵⁵

Le Guillou provided them with a list of documents and articles grouped as “Dogmatic Perspectives,” “Historical Studies,” and what he termed “Information.”

Under “Dogmatic Perspectives,” Le Guillou listed historical articles by Paul-Laurent Carle, OP,⁵⁶ an essay by Jean Bodson, SJ on women and priesthood,⁵⁷ an essay by Anglican priest and Oxford professor V. A. Demant, and his own study titled “Ecclesiologie et ministères féminins.” Le Guillou also promised a study by Congar.⁵⁸ Under “Historical Studies,” Le Guillou said Vagaggini would deal with, as he put it “the ordination” of deaconesses in the ancient and medieval church and noted Philippe Delhaye’s “Rétrospective et prospective des ministères féminins

53. Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI*, 497.

54. Croatian Cardinal Franjo Šeper (1905–1981) was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Philippe Delhaye of Belgium (1912–1990) was secretary of the ITC.

55. Letter from Marie-Joseph Le Guillou to Cipriano Vagaggini, February 13, 1973, Cass 93, Ins. 5, “Le Guillou,” in Archivio storico di Camaldoli (ASC), Fondo Vagaggini.

56. Paul-Laurent Carle, “La femme et les ministères pastoraux selon l’Écriture (I),” *Nova & Vetera* 47, no. 3 (1972): 161–87; Paul-Laurent Carle, “La femme et les ministères pastoraux (III). Étude théologique,” *Nova & Vetera* 48, no. 1 (1973): 17–36.

57. Jean Bodson, “Tribune libre: La femme et le sacerdoce,” *Vie consacrée* 44, no. 6 (November 1972): 342–67, <https://vies-consacrees.be/sommaires/tome-44-annee-1972/volume-6/articles/tribune-libre-la-femme-et-le-sacerdoce.html>.

58. Possibly referring to Yves Congar and Marie-Claire Bourriaud, “La femme et le sacerdoce,” *Vie consacrée* 44, no. 5 (September 1972): 299–314 at 310–14, <https://vies-consacrees.be/sommaires/tome-44-annee-1972/volume-5/articles/tribune-libre-la-femme-et-le-sacerdoce.html>, located in Vagaggini’s archives.

dans l’Eglise,” a reflection on Roger Gryson’s then-recent book, *Le ministère des femmes dans l’église ancienne*.⁵⁹ Le Guillou’s final “Information” file included sociological reports (presumably about women in the church) presented by Rosemary Goldie and the World Council of Churches file on “Ordination of women.”⁶⁰ He suggested that liturgist Amié-Georges Martimort,⁶¹ theologian Henri Denis,⁶² and Eastern scholar Jean Dauvillier might have something to add, noting that Denis would undoubtedly deal with the jurisdiction of women.⁶³ Le Guillou concluded by inviting the members to indicate and undertake one or another study they deemed important.⁶⁴

Congar’s presentation to the subcommittee was concise and precise. He stated that the theology of ministries makes possible the recognition of a public ecclesial status for the immense *diaconia* that women carry out and that he “would even admit diaconal ordination for women,” which he had already supported in the journal *Diacres aujourd’hui*.⁶⁵ As it happened, while the subcommission met and apparently reviewed the materials Le Guillou supplied, there was no consensus on women deacons. This even though, according to Delhaye, subcommittee member Vagaggini and another ITC member, Hungarian Jesuit Peter Nemeshegyi, wanted a resolution in favor of the female diaconate. With the question of ordaining women as deacons put aside, the discussion on priesthood progressed.⁶⁶

-
59. Philippe Delhaye, “Retrospective et prospective des ministères féminins dans l’Église,” *Revue théologique de Louvain* 3, no. 1 (1972): 55–75, https://www.persee.fr/doc/thlou_0080-2654_1972_num_3_1_1151. Delhaye commented positively on Roger Gryson’s *Le ministère des femmes dans l’église ancienne* (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1972), affirming that women deacons had been ordained. Gryson’s work was subsequently published in Italian as *Il ministero della donna* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1974) and in English as *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976). Some months later, the ITC presented its opinion on the question of women priests in “*Inter Insigniores*” (October 15, 1976).
60. Quite probably “Faith and Order Paper No. 59,” which forthrightly discusses women’s ordination. World Council of Churches, “Faith and Order: Louvain 1971,” Study Reports and Documents (Geneva, 1971), 93.
61. Martimort quarreled with Gryson, publishing “A propos des ministères féminins dans l’Eglise,” *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 74 (1973): 103–8 and, much later, *Les Diaconesses: Essai historique* (Rome: Edizione Liturgiche, 1982). Martimort’s book, which ultimately concludes that ordaining women is an open question, is often used to present the topic in seminaries.
62. French theologian Henri Denis (1921–2015) wrote on the innovations of the Second Vatican Council.
63. French canonist Jean Dauvillier (1908–1983) wrote on Armenian and Chaldean church history.
64. Cass 93, Ins. 5, “Le Guillou,” in Archivio storico di Camaldoli (ASC), Fondo Vagaggini.
65. Yves Congar, presumably to Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, May 14, 1970, in the Congar Archives at Le Saulchoir, Paris, V-832-45-1969, “Document 8.” Yves Congar, “Variétés des ministères et renouveau diaconal,” *Diacres aujourd’hui* (1969): 2–3.
66. “La questione dei ministeri femminili fu resa difficile in ragione dei problemi emersi da Vagaggini e da Nemeshegyi che volevano far votare una risoluzione, poi bocciata,

However, Vagaggini produced a long study on women deacons, and Le Guillou affirmed that it was exactly what the subcommission asked for, especially regarding the exact nature of “the ordination” of deaconesses in the ancient and medieval church.⁶⁷ Vagaggini’s study did not become an ITC document but rather appeared in *Orientalia christiana periodica* in 1974.⁶⁸

Years later, Vagaggini presented his findings to the 1987 Synod of Bishops. Having been asked if it was possible “to confer on women the sacrament of order in the diaconal grade,” he reaffirmed his positive opinion.⁶⁹

The study of women in the diaconate, however, had stalled and effectively stopped. The ITC eventually published its Declaration “*Inter Insigniores: On the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*” (1976), which seems to defend against the ordinations of women by other Christian denominations and communions. The ITC’s official commentary on “*Inter Insigniores*” demonstrates the problem:

In some writers of the Middle Ages however there was a certain hesitancy, reported by St Bonaventure without adopting it himself and noted also by Joannes Teutonicus in his gloss on *Caus. 27, q. 1, c. 23*. This hesitancy stemmed from the knowledge that in the past there had been deaconesses: had they received true sacramental ordination? This problem has been brought up again very recently.

a favore del diaconato femminile, facendo pressione sulla bocciata, a favore del diaconato femminile, facendo pressione sulla CTI anche attraverso la stampa. Il dibattito sul sacerdozio comune andò avanti con relativa tranquillità.” Philippe Delhaye, “Bilancio della sessione plenaria,” October 5–11, 1973, 1–4, in Archives du monde catholique (ARCA) 36/2065, as related in Avallone, *La Commissione Theological Internazionale*, 135.

67. Letter from Marie-Joseph Le Guillou to Cipriano Vagaggini, February 13, 1973, Cass 93, Ins. 3, “Le Guillou,” in Archivio storico di Camaldoli (ASC), Fondo Vagaggini. Le Guillou notes in this letter that Vagaggini knows the work of Gryson, which will be evaluated *critically* (Le Guillou’s emphasis).
68. Cipriano Vagaggini, “L’ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974): 146–89. Translated as “The Ordination of Deaconesses in the Greek and Byzantine Tradition,” in *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers*, ed. Phyllis Zagano (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 100–43.
69. Cipriano Vagaggini, “La diaconessa nella tradizione greca e bizantina,” *Il Regno* 32 (1987): 672–73. Translated as “The Deaconess in the Byzantine Tradition,” in Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons?*, 96–99. The Seventh Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, centered on “The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World,” met during the papacy of John Paul II from October 1 to October 30, 1987. *Christifideles Laici*, his post-synodal apostolic exhortation presents the now-familiar comments about recognizing the talents of women and their ability to witness the church’s mission, affirming that “the synod Fathers gave special attention to the status and role of women.” See John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (December 12, 1988), §49, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html.

It was by no means unknown to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theologians, who had an excellent knowledge of the history of literature. In any case, it is a question that must be taken up fully by direct study of the texts, without preconceived ideas; hence the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has judged that it should be kept for the future and not touched upon in the present document.⁷⁰

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theologians the commentary refers to no doubt include the well-known works by Jean Morin and Jean Pien. There has never been any contradiction to the fact that women were called deacons (or deaconesses) or that they were ceremonially appointed to their offices. The question was whether they received a sacramental ordination. As mentioned earlier, Morin stated that the liturgical ceremonies used met the criteria established by the Council of Trent for sacramental ordination. Some extant liturgies are known to have been used for both male and female candidates.

The finding that the question of women deacons must be “kept for the future” essentially postponed it, at least for fifteen years.

Continued Academic Debate (1971–82)

The academic and popular debate about women’s inclusion in the clergy, as deacons or priests, continued and grew after the Second Vatican Council and following the 1976 publication of “*Inter Insigniores*.” Although “*Inter Insigniores*” affirmed that “the Catholic Church has never felt that priestly or episcopal ordination can be validly conferred on women,”⁷¹ no statement about the diaconate for women appeared.

On the singular question of women deacons, the beginnings of the academic debate between Belgian theologian Roger Gryson and French liturgist Aimé-Georges Martimort⁷² was known to the 1969–76 ITC that produced “*Inter Insigniores*” and which had a competent subcommission studying the inclusion of women in the growing diaconate, now recognized as a permanent vocation.⁷³

70. “Commentary by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Declaration, *Inter Insigniores*,” in *L’Osservatore Romano* (January 27, 1977), and *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 69 (1977): 98–116.

71. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration, “*Inter Insigniores*: On the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood” (October 15, 1976), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html.

72. Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. Jean Laporte and Mary Louise Hall (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976); Aimé-Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, trans. K. D. Whitehead (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986).

73. Globally, the diaconate as a permanent vocation grew from 2,686 in 1975 to 7,654 in 1980. *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticanus, 1980), 80. The Vatican reported 50,150 “permanent” deacons in 2022. *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticanus, 2022), 86.

Gryson's study *Le ministère des femmes dans L'Église ancienne* appeared in 1971. Martimort responded in the *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique*,⁷⁴ to which Gryson responded in later editions of his book. Martimort, reportedly at the urging of opponents to the concept of women deacons, then published *Les Diaconesses: Essai historique*. While their debate centered on the interpretation of then-known facts of history, at the end of his book Martimort agrees that history alone cannot decide the question.⁷⁵

The question was whether the women deacons of history were sacramentally ordained. Opponents to that possibility retain that singular objection, adducing over-lapping reasons to support their claims. Typically, the objections include:

- a. Women deacons were blessed but not "ordained."
- b. "Deaconess" always means the wife of a deacon.
- c. Male and female deacons had different functions.
- d. The unicity of orders limits ordination to men (*cursus honorum*).
- e. Women cannot image Christ (iconic argument).
- f. Women are not valid subjects for ordination.
- g. Women are "unclean" and restricted from the sanctuary.

Soon after the publication of Martimort's book in English, the 1983 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defined the diaconate:

The divinely instituted ecclesiastical ministry is exercised in different degrees by those who even from ancient times have been called bishops, priests, and deacons. Catholic doctrine, expressed in the liturgy, the Magisterium, and the constant practice of the Church, recognizes that there are two degrees of ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ: the episcopacy and the presbyterate. The diaconate is intended to help and serve them. For this reason, the term *sacerdos* in current usage denotes bishops and priests but not deacons. Yet Catholic doctrine teaches that the degrees of priestly participation (episcopate and presbyterate) and the degree of service (diaconate) are all three conferred by a sacramental act called "ordination," that is, by the sacrament of Holy Orders.⁷⁶

Hence, the problem. Magisterial teaching both affirms the sacramental ordination of deacons and distinguishes the diaconate from the priesthood and episcopate. Does the unicity of orders forbid the ordination of women as deacons? Since women are legally restricted from priestly ordination, from "ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ," why are they restricted from the diaconate?

The other objections to the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate are overcome by respected scholarship. The historical record includes liturgies demonstrating

74. Aimé-Georges. Martimort, "A propos des ministères féminins dans l'Église," *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 74 (1973): 103–8.

75. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 249–50.

76. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1554, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

the equivalent ceremonies for male and female deacons.⁷⁷ The term “deaconess” was used in the West as language developed, but it was and is maintained in the East, particularly in the Orthodox Churches. Scripture records that Paul introduced Phoebe as “deacon” using a feminine article before *diakonos*.

While male and female deacons had different functions, women deacons ministered to women and children, but not exclusively, and they are known to have administered sacraments.⁷⁸ If the unicity of orders argument is to be maintained, and women have been sacramentally ordained, then restrictions against women priests must be examined. The statement that women cannot image Christ, the iconic argument that was not included in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, bespeaks a naïve physicalism that limits the Risen Christ. The suggestion that women are not “valid subjects” for the sacrament confuses the question, as the “subject” is often misunderstood as the “matter,” as in the 1947 determination of Pope Pius XII.⁷⁹ The concept of the “uncleanness” of women, culturally accepted in many parts of the world, still has its remnants in Vatican documents,⁸⁰ despite the 2021 change to canon 230, §1 of the Code of Canon Law allowing women to be formally installed in the lay ministries of lector and acolyte.⁸¹

Diaconal ordination liturgies used for women and men demonstrate that they were ordained within the sanctuary by the bishop during Mass in the presence of clergy through the imposition of hands by invocation of the Holy Spirit, that they self-communicated from the chalice, and that the bishop placed a stole around their necks and called them deacons.⁸²

77. Gary Macy, *Hidden History*, 35, 175n94, citing “Ad ordinandum diaconum,” *The Pontifical of Egbert, Archbishop of York, A.D. 732–766*, ed. William Greenwell (London: T. & W. Boone, 1853), 19.

78. See chaps. 4 and 5 in Phyllis Zagano, *Women: Icons of Christ* (New York: Paulist, 2020).

79. Proposed by Sara Butler in *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2007). Pius XII: “Wherefore, after invoking the divine light, We of Our Apostolic Authority and from certain knowledge declare, and as far as may be necessary decree and provide: that the matter, and the only matter, of the Sacred Orders of the Diaconate, the Priesthood, and the Episcopacy is the imposition of hands; and that the form, and the only form, is the words which determine the application of this matter, which univocally signify the sacramental effects—namely the power of Order and the grace of the Holy Spirit” (*Sacramentum Ordinis*, 1947).

80. “Whenever the choir also includes women, it should be placed outside the sanctuary.” Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Musica Sacram* (March 5, 1967), §23, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_instr_19670305_musica-sacram_en.html.

81. Francis, *Spiritus Domini* (January 15, 2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html.

82. See, for example, liturgies from the East, including the Bessarion Manuscript (1020) at the monastery at Grotta Ferrata; the Coislin gr. 213 (1050) at the National Library in Paris; Barberini gr. 336 (780); Vatican Manuscript gr. 1872 (1100); and the *Codex Syriacus Vaticanus* No. 19 in the Vatican Apostolic Library. Notable examples from the West include the Cambrai Manuscript 164 at the Cambrai Municipal Library (811); the Leofric Missal of Exeter at the Bodleian Library, Oxford (1050); the *Ordo Romanus* of Hittorp, Cologne

International Theological Commission (1992–97)

The Joint Synod of the Dioceses of the Federal Republic of Germany, which asked Paul VI to examine whether women could be ordained as deacons, repeated its request in 1981 and 1987. By 1993, the National Association of Diaconate Directors (then the National Association of Permanent Diaconate Directors) asked the US Catholic bishops to again ask Rome to investigate the possibility of women deacons.⁸³

On May 22, 1994, which that year was the solemnity of Pentecost, Pope John Paul II presented *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, which affirmed the 1976 teaching on women priests, again not mentioning women deacons. The document also dropped the iconic argument present in the 1976 document.⁸⁴ On October 28, 1995, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published “*Responsum ad Propositum Dubium* concerning the Teaching Contained in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,” which states that the teaching is to be held “definitively” as “belonging to the deposit of faith.”⁸⁵

Meeting between 1992 and 1997, a new subcommittee of the ITC undertook a study of the diaconate itself, only tangentially considering women in it. None of the original ITC subcommittee members belonged to this group, which came together after the considerable debate and scholarship already published on the diaconate and especially on women deacons.⁸⁶

The subcommission members were Charles Acton (United Kingdom, 1943–2016), Giuseppe Colombo (Italy, 1923–2005), Joseph Doré (France, 1936–), Stanisław Nagy (Poland, 1921–2013), Henrique de Noronha Galvão (Portugal, 1937–), Joseph Osei-Bonsu (Ghana, 1948–), Christoph Schönborn (Austria, 1945–),⁸⁷ and Gösta Hallonsten (Sweden, 1949–). The subcommission was chaired by Max Thurian (France, 1921–96) and worked under the ITC presidency of Joseph Ratzinger, then the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The subcommission’s work included a discussion of papers presented by its members, particularly “*La diaconesse dans l’antiquité chrétienne*” by Stanisław Nagy.⁸⁸ The topics already under discussion were “The Diaconate,” “Ecumenical Problems,” and “Spiritual Dimension of Ecumenism.”

(850); the Pontificals of St. Alban Abbey, Mainz (1030), the Abbey of Monte Cassino (1035), Vallicella D5, Rome (1050); Vatican Reginae lat. 337 (850); and the *Ottobonianus* lat. 313, Paris (850) in the Vatican Apostolic Library.

83. Resolution of the National Association of Permanent Diaconate Directors of America, Orlando, FL, April 23, 1993.

84. John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (May 22, 1994), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html.

85. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Responsum ad Propositum Dubium* concerning the Teaching Contained in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*” (October 28, 1995), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19951028_dubium-ordinatio-sac_en.html.

86. None belonged to the ITC’s Fifth Quinquennium.

87. Schönborn left the ITC when appointed coadjutor archbishop of Vienna in 1995.

88. See the letter from Dominic Margiotta of the CDF to subcommission members on behalf of Max Thurian, who was ill at the time, August 23, 1996, Fondo Giuseppe Colombo 463F3.

For “The Diaconate,” the subgroups examined the diaconate in the time of the Church Fathers (the second to fourth centuries) (Nagy), the permanent diaconate of the Second Vatican Council (Colombo), and the doctrine of the diaconate (Doré and de Noronha Galvão). For “Ecumenical Problems,” the subgroups considered models of church unity (Nagy) and ecumenism of truth and the hierarchy of truths (Colombo). For “Spiritual Dimension of Ecumenism,” the writers were Osei-Bonsu (Africa), Acton (England), and Hallonsten (Scandinavia).⁸⁹ The final discussion, writing, and editing of the document on the diaconate, reportedly seventeen pages, was completed in 1996 and 1997. The document primarily discussed the diaconate but included a section on women deacons. That section, a historical brief, noted that the church had merely discontinued the practice of ordaining women as deacons. Therefore, what the church had done before, the church could do again.

In October 1997, Archbishop Crescenzo Sepe, then-secretary of the Congregation for Clergy, told a gathering of international diaconate directors in Brescia, Italy, that the Vatican would “soon” issue a response to the question of women deacons, but no document appeared.⁹⁰ At the same meeting, Rotterdam Bishop Walter Kasper suggested “a deacon in every parish,” but not necessarily as paid staff.⁹¹

One member of the ITC’s Fifth Quinquennium (1992–97) recalls that the final document was printed, numbered, and voted on, but the prefect at the time, Cardinal Ratzinger, refused to promulgate it.⁹² So the document went to the next quinquennium unapproved.

International Theological Commission (1997–2002)

The “unfinished” document, and the contentious question about restoring women to the ordained diaconate, went to a new ITC subcommission that included Santiago del Cura Elena (Spain, 1948–2022), Pierre Gaudette (Canada, 1938–), Henrique de Noronha Galvão (Portugal, 1937–2017), Roland Minnerath (France, 1946–), Gerhard L. Müller (Germany, 1947–), Luis Tagle (Philippines, 1957–), and László Vanyó (Hungary, 1942–2003). Strasbourg theology professor Minnerath may have acceded to the point of women deacons, at least historically; Munich theology professor Müller was opposed.⁹³ Although Charles Acton and Gösta Hallonsten remained on the ITC,

89. Fondo Giuseppe Colombo 1951A.

90. Sepe’s comments are not in his formal talk, given in Italian at the Centro Internazionale del Diaconato on October 10, 1997, in Bressanone, a German-language city in the Dolomites.

91. Walter Kasper, “The Deacon Offers an Ecclesiological View of the Present-Day Challenges in the Church and Society” (presentation, IDC Study-Conference, Brixen, Italy, October 1997). Kasper headed the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity from 1999 to 2010.

92. Private correspondence, December 19, 2012.

93. Minnerath was the archbishop of Dijon from 2004 to 2022; Müller was the bishop of Regensburg from 2002 to 2012 and succeeded William Levada as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a position Levada held from 2012 to 2017.

the only prior subcommissioner to work on the document was Henrique de Noronha Galvão, a former student of Ratzinger who wrote on Augustine.⁹⁴

The selection of this subcommittee demonstrates a departure from the prior two, if only in terms of language preferences. The first subcommittee wrote and communicated primarily in French. The second also wrote and communicated in French, with some Italian, but the third had only two native French speakers: Minnerath and Gaudette. The archives of the first ITC subcommission (1973) demonstrate considerable use of French. The second ITC document (1997) may have been drafted in French. The original language of the third ITC document (2002–2003) is French.⁹⁵

Stanisław Nagy, a member of the 1992–97 subcommission, had presented a paper to the earlier subcommission entitled “La diaconesse dans l’antiquité chrétienne,” which reviews the history of women deacons in the early church, depending greatly on Forget’s *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*.⁹⁶ The paper asserts that the laying on of hands (*chirotonie*) may place women within the clergy but not incorporate them into the hierarchy. Nagy cites Forget’s dictionary entry but finds that ordination, depending on further sources, may not be so definite.⁹⁷ He concludes this despite referencing Alexandre Faivre, who affirms the laying on of hands of women as deacons.⁹⁸

The format and language of the section on women deacons in the third document generally follow what can be assumed of the second document. However, a comparison of the Nagy intervention with the third document reveals some important differences. For example, the style of this section is markedly different from that of the others, so much so that it does not appear to have been written in French. Further, several post-1997 footnotes in the third document are from German sources. Finally, a computer analysis of the section on women deacons demonstrates that eighteen passages are either taken directly from or paraphrase sentences in a book by the German-speaking subcommissioner Müller.⁹⁹

94. A Portuguese national, de Noronha Galvão wrote in German.

95. The text was approved *in forma specifica* by the entire ITC on September 30, 2002. English, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, and Spanish texts are dated 2002. Corrected French, German, Italian, and Russian texts are dated 2003. See International Theological Commission, “From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles” (2002), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_en.html.

96. Fondo Giuseppe Colombo 425A. “Diaconesses,” J. Forget, *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (1911), cols. 686–703.

97. Nagy cites Forget, col. 693, which is more detailed and positive about diaconesses’ status.

98. “Le fait le plus marquant dans le déroulement de cette ordination est certainement l’imposition des mains reçue par la diaconesse, rite réservé jusqu’alors aux ordres d’évêque, de presbytre et de diacre.” Alexandre Faivre, *Naissance d’une Hiérarchie* (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1977), 87. At 135, Faivre finds that the Didascalia uses the term *diaconesse* for the first time and that the *Constitutions of the Apostles* prescribed the imposition of hands for them, citing *CA VIII*, 19 and 20, referring to his pages 86 and 87.

99. In the following table, compare some nn. in *From the Diakonia of Christ* with corresponding nn. in *Priesthood and Diaconate*, where some citations and footnotes are identical:

The findings of the 2002 ITC document as published in English are as follows:

With regard to the ordination of women to the diaconate, it should be noted that two important indications emerge from what has been said up to this point:

1. The deaconesses mentioned in the tradition of the ancient Church—as evidenced by the rite of institution and the functions they exercised—were not purely and simply equivalent to the deacons;
2. The unity of the sacrament of Holy Orders, in the clear distinction between the ministries of the bishop and the priests on the one hand and the diaconal ministry on the other, is strongly underlined by ecclesial tradition, especially in the teaching of the Magisterium.

In the light of these elements which have been set out in the present historico-theological research document, it pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question.¹⁰⁰

Aside from the questionable nature of the section on women deacons, it is important to note that the English translation, as reproduced here, eliminates one crucial part of the discussion. The original French emphasized that the Second Vatican Council recognized the “clear distinction” between the diaconate and the priesthood.¹⁰¹

Nn. in <i>From the Diakonia of Christ</i>	Corresponding nn. in <i>Priesthood and Diaconate</i>
3	183, 185–86
4	184, 186–67
5	190–91
6	187
19	216
20	216–17, 204
22	218
23	217

See Gerhard L. Müller, *Priesthood and Diaconate: The Recipient of the Sacrament of Holy Orders from the Perspective of Creation Theology and Christology*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002); German original, *Priestertum und Diakoniat: Der Empfänger des Weihsakramentes in schöpfungstheologischer und christologischer Prespecti* (Einsiedeln: Johannes 2000), and International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* (2002), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_en.html.

100. International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ*.

101. International Theological Commission, “Le diaconat: Évolution et perspectives,” “Deuxièmement, la tradition ecclésiale, surtout dans la doctrine du concile Vatican II et dans l’enseignement du Magistère postconciliaire, souligne fortement l’unité du sacrement de l’Ordre, dans la claire distinction entre les ministères de l’évêque et des presbytres d’une part et le ministère diaconal d’autre part.” The English translation, titled “From the

Discussion continued, and the question of women as deacons was increasingly separated from the discussion of women as priests, although some advocates continued to connect the two, arguing that because women were sacramentally ordained as deacons, they could be sacramentally ordained as priests.¹⁰²

Pope Benedict XVI clarified the magisterial distinction with his apostolic letter *Omnium in mentem* (October 26, 2009), which added a third paragraph to canon 1009 of the Code of Canon Law: “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.”¹⁰³

First Papal Commission (2016–18)

The topic of women deacons came to the fore at the May 2016 meeting of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), the membership organization of superiors of apostolic women’s religious institutes. Pope Francis accepted their dialogue request and received six questions before the meeting. The Holy See Press Office daily bulletin reported, “The Pope meets with Superiors General: service not servitude, participation in decision-making and study of the female diaconate.”¹⁰⁴

In answer to the first question, Francis distinguished the tasks and duties of laypeople and clergy, especially priests. Only priests can preach, he said, but “in leadership, instead there is no problem: in that respect we must go forward, with prudence, but seeking solutions.”¹⁰⁵ The second question was more directly about the ordination of women:

In the Church there is the office of the permanent diaconate, but it is open only to men, married or not. What prevents the Church from including women among permanent deacons, as was the case in the primitive Church? Why not constitute an official commission to study the matter?¹⁰⁶

Diaconia of Christ to the Diaconia of the Apostles,” was credited to the London Truth Society and remains uncorrected on the website of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

102. Among the proponents of this theory is the England-based Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research.
103. October 26 is the Catholic feast day of Saint Tabitha, an early disciple of Jesus who was raised from the dead by Saint Peter at the behest of other widows (Acts 9:36–43), as well as the feast of Our Lady of Victories, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20091026_codex-iuris-canonici.html.
104. “The Pope meets with Superiors General: Service not servitude, participation in decision-making and study of the female diaconate” (May 12, 2016), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/05/13/160513c.html>.
105. “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the International Union of Superiors General” (May 12, 2016), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco_20160512_uisg.html.
106. “Address of His Holiness.”

In approximately 340 words, Francis answered. He noted that he knew of “deaconesses” in the early church, that he found the Council of Chalcedon’s mention rather obscure, and that he would “like to constitute an official commission to study the question: I think it will be good for the Church to clarify this point.”¹⁰⁷ Canon 21 of the Council of Chalcedon states that a woman shall receive the imposition of hands as a deaconess after age forty.¹⁰⁸

Francis asked the UISG to nominate eight members for the proposed commission and to hand-deliver the names to his residence at Domus Santa Marta. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) also nominated individuals. Three UISG nominees joined the twelve-member commission’s first meeting at the CDF offices in late November 2016. The commission held three additional meetings, completing its work in June 2018.¹⁰⁹ Francis acknowledged receipt of commission work with a July letter to Cardinal Luis Ladaria, who was charged with leading the commission, but the commissioners did not receive copies of his transmittal letter, or the work provided in their names.¹¹⁰

At the UISG’s next triennial meeting in May 2019, Francis gave the organization’s leadership “the little they [the commission] agreed on” and said the commissioners were like “toads jumping from different pots.” He also said they were welcome to the

107. “Address of His Holiness.”

108. “Diaconissam non esse mulierern ordinandam ante anum quadragesimum.” Mansi VII, 363, replaces the Greek “imposition of hands” with “ordination.” The canon was later incorporated in Gratian’s *Decretum*, *Corpus Juris Canonici*, Pars II., Causa XXVII, Quaest. 1, c. xxiii.

109. Núria Calduch-Benages, professor of biblical studies and member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission; Francesca Cochini, faculty member at La Sapienza University (Rome) and the Patristic Institute Augustinianum; Piero Coda, president of Sophia University Institute (Rome) and member of the International Theological Commission; Robert Dodaro, OSA, president of the Patristic Institute Augustinianum; Santiago Madrigal, SJ, ecclesiologist at the Pontifical University Comillas (Madrid); Mary Melone, SFA, president of the Pontifical University Antonianum (Rome); Karl-Heinz Menke, emeritus professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Bonn and member of the International Theological Commission; Aimable Musoni, SDB, ecclesiologist at Salesian Pontifical University (Rome); Bernard Pottier, SJ, faculty member at Institute D’études Théologiques (Brussels) and member of the International Theological Commission; Marianne Schlosser, theologian at the University of Vienna and member of the International Theological Commission; Michelina Tenace, theologian at the Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome); Phyllis Zagano, senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University (New York). Madrigal declined the appointment and did not meet with the commission. Dodaro was reassigned from Rome and did not attend the final commission meeting.

110. Bernard Pottier, “Experiences as a Member of the Pontifical Commission: The Work Executed by the Commission,” in *Unlocking the Future: Women and the Diaconate*, ed. Hildegard Warnik (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2020), 79–89. Ladaria was CDF secretary until 2017, when he replaced Müller as prefect. He was elevated to cardinal June 28, 2018.

additional materials he had received. In a January 2020 interview, UISG president Jolanta Kafka said they received a paper about the history of women deacons.¹¹¹ In May 2022, the UISG president who received the document said it was a simple type-script, not a formal report.¹¹²

Meanwhile, from October 6–17, 2019, the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region met in Rome, and as many as nine of the twelve working groups organized by common language requested women deacons. The synod requested that the commission on women deacons be recalled and that women be installed as lectors and acolytes. In response, Pope Francis said he would “pick up the gauntlet,” and at first, it appeared the commission would be recalled with as many as three new members.¹¹³

Second Papal Commission (2020–22)

There was no recall of the commission. On April 8, 2020, Francis named an entirely new commission, this one headed not by a CDF official but by a nearby archbishop, Aquila Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi.¹¹⁴ Perhaps because of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent travel restrictions, the newly appointed commissioners did not convene until September 2021, when they met for one week outside the Vatican. They met a second time, again for one week, in July 2022.

111. “UISG, LCWR Leaders Discuss Connections in Pandemic, Women in Diaconate, Vocations in Africa,” *Global Sisters Report*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/coronavirus/uisg-lcwr-leaders-discuss-connections-pandemic-women-diaconate-vocations-africa>.

112. Personal conversation with Carmen Sammut, MSOLA, May 4, 2022.

113. Hannah Brockhaus “Pope asks for focus on ‘diagnosis’ of amazon synod report; warns against ‘elite’ Christians focusing on the ‘little things,’” Catholic News Agency, October 26, 2019, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/42645/pope-asks-for-focus-on-diagnosis-of-amazon-synod-report;-warns-against-elite-christians-focusing-on-the-little-things>. The Vatican translation is “take up the challenge.” Francis, “Words of His Holiness Pope Francis,” October 26, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/october/documents/papa-francesco_20191026_chiusura-sinodo.html.

114. Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, president and archbishop of L’Aquila (Italy); Denis Dupont-Fauville, secretary and official of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (France); Catherine Brown Tkacz, visiting professor of theology at Ukrainian Catholic University (USA); Dominic Cerrato, director of the Office of the Diaconate in Joliet, Illinois (USA); Santiago del Cura Elena, professor of theology (Spain); Caroline Farey, diocesan mission catechist (England); Barbara Hallensleben, professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland); Manfred Hauke, professor of patristics and dogmatic theology from Lugano (Switzerland); James Keating, professor of spiritual theology at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri (USA); Angelo Lameri, professor of liturgy and sacraments at Lateran University (Rome); Rosalba Manes, professor of biblical theology at Gregorian University (Rome); Ann-Marie Pelletier, professor of biblical exegesis at Notre Dame Seminary, Paris (France). Both del Cura Elena and Pelletier missed the second meeting due to illness.

The new commission seemed more able to answer what duties the deacon performs today than to examine the historical, theological, and anthropological questions that ordinarily arise when considering the question. As with the first commission, their deliberations remain a pontifical secret. However, Dominic Cerrato, one of two deacon members from the United States, wrote that “unlike the first, the second commission was specifically tasked with making recommendations,” and the commissioners had been “cleared by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith to express their own theological opinions.”¹¹⁵ In presenting what he termed his “personal opinion,” Cerrato cited Martimort and US-based theologian Sara Butler, as well as fellow commissioners Catherine Brown Tkacz and Manfred Hauke, in stating that the question of women deacons was one of doctrine, not discipline, and presented incorrect historical information about the tasks and duties of women deacons. He argues that because women deacons were never on the path to priesthood, they were never sacramentally ordained.

Other commission members have been more circumspect.

Synod on Synodality (2021–24)

The Synod on Synodality is the fruit of the ITC document, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” (2018),¹¹⁶ which opens with Francis’s statement at the ceremony commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops in 2015: “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the third millennium.” The pope stressed that synodality “is an essential dimension of the Church.”¹¹⁷

The Synod on Synodality began in October 2021. Initially scheduled as a two-year event intended to end in October 2023, the synod was extended through at least the October 2024 meeting, and ten study groups were tasked with providing the pope with reports on the synod’s findings and recommendations “at least by” 2025. Bishops worldwide were asked to oversee “conversations in the Spirit” at parishes and other

115. Dominic Cerrato published articles in the *National Catholic Register* and *The Deacon*, which he edits. See Dominic Cerrato, “Women in the Diaconate: A Theological Perspective,” *The Deacon*, December 15, 2023, <https://www.the-deacon.com/2023/12/15/women-and-the-diaconate-a-theological-perspective/>.

116. The ITC subcommittee members were Mario Ángel Flores Ramos, president; Prudence Allen RSM, Alenka Arko of the Loyola Community; Antonio Luiz Catelan Ferreira; Piero Coda; Carlos María Galli; Gaby Alfred Hachem; Héctor Gustavo Sánchez Rojas; Nicholaus Segeja M’hela; and Gerard Francisco Timoner III. It is thought that Piero Coda, now secretary general of the International Theological Commission and a member of the Synod Theological Commission, was instrumental in writing the document.

117. International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” (March 2, 2018), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html, citing Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (October 17, 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

diocesan organizations, and national episcopal conferences collated the results of these and other entries from affiliate groups. By August 2022, 112 (of 114) conferences provided national reports, which were the basis of the “Document for the Continental Stage” (October 2022). There were seven continental meetings between January and March 2023, which led to the creation of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the October 2023 meeting in Rome, which gathered 365 voting members and various experts.

Numerous national and continental meetings requested women’s inclusion in the diaconate, many of which specified ordination as the means for inclusion.¹¹⁸ Eastern Catholic Churches, tiny in comparison with the Latin or Roman Catholic Church, recalled their well-defined history of ordained women deacons. During the Continental Stage of the synod, the Middle East Assembly, meeting in Harissa, Lebanon, reported the need for “prophetic courage,” and stated:

Our respective Churches should begin to reflect seriously on the re-establishment of the diaconate for women. The Conclusions of the Synod for Women, initiated and implemented by the Maronite Church, are eagerly awaited, with the objective of enabling women to be more active and present in the life of the Eastern Catholic Churches.¹¹⁹

During the 2023 synod meetings, held at round tables in the Paul VI Hall, participants grouped by language preference considered topics defined in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. Each session began with prayer and, often, a brief presentation by a synod official or theologian. Jesuit Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, Archbishop of Luxembourg and general rapporteur of the synod, spoke on the baptismal equality of all persons, saying, “The baptism of women is not inferior to the baptism of men. . . . Do we feel enriched or threatened when we share our common mission and when

118. For example, the respondents in 57 of the 163 US dioceses that published their reports or summaries asked for women deacons. While the North American response to the “Document for the Continental Stage” does not directly address the point, Latin America, Oceania, Europe, and Middle East delegates directly mentioned women deacons; Africa and Asia were more indirect in their requests. See Phyllis Zagano and Fernando Garcia, “United States Synod Participation and Questions of Women in the Church,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 21, no. 1 (2024): 23–57, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jcath-soc20242113>. The continental responses are published online and in *The People of God Have Spoken: Continental Ecclesial Assemblies within the Synod on Synodality*, ed. Myriam Wijlens and Vimal Tirimanna (Dublin: Columba Books, 2023).

119. “Final Document of the Continental Stage in the Middle East,” Section V, §48(h), https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/en-newdoc/Middle-East-EN.pdf. The Office for the Pastoral Care of Women in the Maronite Church had suggested the “Synod for Women,” which had not yet published its findings. See ““And the Word Became Flesh and Pitched His Tent among Us’ (Jn 1:14): The Continental Synodal Assembly in the Middle East,” and “The Report of the Middle East,” in *The People of God Have Spoken*, 238–77.

women are co-responsible in the mission of the Church, on the basis of the grace of our common Baptism?"¹²⁰

The October 2023 meeting provided a synthesis report that was voted on by the entire assembly. The section entitled "Women in the Life and Mission of the Church" acknowledged several key points: (1) that women's contributions must be recognized and valued, (2) that their pastoral leadership should be increased, (3) that the church worldwide asked for women to be included in the diaconate, (4) that there are conflicting opinions regarding the history of women in the diaconate, and (5) that the concept of women deacons would bring new energy to the church or "speaks of a worrying anthropological confusion."¹²¹ The synod proposed that:

Theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate should be continued, benefiting from consideration of the results of the commissions specially established by the Holy Father, and from the theological, historical and exegetical research already undertaken. If possible, the results of this research should be presented to the next Session of the Assembly.¹²²

The section entitled "Deacons and Priests in a Synodal Church" concluded that "deeper study will shed light on the question of access of women to the diaconate."¹²³

Ten study groups were appointed, but the names of Group 5, charged with reporting on "some theological and canonical issues around specific ministerial forms (summary report 8 and 9)," were not listed. Instead, the study was to be overseen by the Doctrine Section of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Conclusions

The modern debate about women in the diaconate has not ended. The suggestions of the 1971 Synod of Bishops were deflected in two directions: first, to the 1973 Commission on Women, and second, to the first quinquennium of the ITC. Conversation on women deacons was excluded from the Commission on the Role of Women, and the ITC subcommission on women deacons did not produce official results. However, Cipriano Vagaggini published his favorable findings on the historicity of the diaconal ordinations of women in the East.

In 1976, the ITC produced its opinion on women priests, "*Inter Insigniores*," but the official commentary stated that its findings did not apply to the diaconate.

120. Jean-Claude Hollerich, "Synod: Cardinal Hollerich's Introduction to Module B2," *Vatican News*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2023-10/synod-eight-general-congregation-module-b2-cardinal-hollerich.html>.

121. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report* (Vatican City: October 4–29, 2023), 9(j), https://www.usccb.org/resources/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report_IMP.pdf.

122. Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission*, 9(n).

123. Synod of Bishops, 11(i).

Meanwhile, the academic debate continued with publications by Roger Gryson, whose research supported the historical ordinations of women as deacons, and Aimé-Georges Martimort, whose negative findings concluded that history alone could not decide the question. The ITC took up the question again in 1997, preparing a positive report that was printed, numbered, and voted upon, but never promulgated. In 2002, the ITC prepared an inconclusive report that noted male and female deacons performed different duties and affirmed the conciliar determination that the diaconate and presbyterate/episcopacy were distinct orders within the one sacrament. In 2016, the UISG asked for a commission, which prepared reports. It is not known what research was given to Pope Francis, but he gave a typescript of historical findings to the UISG president, which he attributed to the commission.

As discussion continued, the majority of language groups within the 2019 Amazon synod asked for women deacons and for the 2016 commission to be recalled. Between 2020 and 2022, a second commission was formed and met twice. No findings are known. In May 2024, the US-based Columbia Broadcasting Network (CBS) aired a one-hour edited interview with Pope Francis conducted at Domus Santa Marta in Vatican City. In that interview, he responded “no” to the question of women deacons in the future, as follows:

Norah O’Donnell (23:05): I understand you have said no women as priests, but you are studying the idea of women as deacons. Is that something you are open to?

Translator (23:15): No. If it is deacons with holy orders, no. But women have always had, I would say the function of deaconesses without being deacons, right? Women are of great service as women, not as ministers. As ministers in this regard. Within the Holy Orders.¹²⁴

The synod was expected to consider whether women can serve in ordained diaconal ministry, undertaking the tasks and duties of the word, the liturgy, and charity, in October 2024.

ORCID iD

Phyllis Zagano  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7859-4687>

Author Biography

Phyllis Zagano, PhD, Senior Research Associate-in-Residence, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York belonged to the 2016–18 Papal Commission for the Study of the Diaconate of Women. Her recent books include *Just Church: Catholic Social Teaching, Synodality, and Women* (Paulist, 2022) and *Women: Icons of Christ* (Paulist, 2020).

124. “Pope Francis Interview with Norah O’Donnell.”