

Women and the Diaconate: A Philippine Perspective

Good day. Thank you to the organizers for the invitation to engage in this conversation on Women's Sacramental Ministries. Last February, interested members of the Catholic Theological Society of the Philippines were invited to participate in "An In-depth Synodal Discussion and Discernment on Key Controversial Issues" organized by the National Team on Synodality of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines. The issues they listed were based on paragraph 15g of the Synthesis Report of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, namely, identity and sexuality (lgbtq), end of life, complicated marital situations, and artificial intelligence. This did not include the issue of the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate. I raised this matter and was supported by other members of our theological society; it was eventually included in the list of topics for discernment and thus the Women's Diaconate group was formed, of which I became chair and moderator. The group is composed of professional theologians and pastoral leaders. What I will share with you is the fruit of our research and discernment.

My presentation is divided into 3 main parts. The first part will focus on our theological research, the 2nd part on our pastoral research, in particular, on the initial results of our ongoing nationwide survey of pastoral animators/leaders' views on women's diaconate, and lastly, the position paper we submitted to the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines.

Main Issue

As you may know, the *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document) of the Synod on Synodality notes that: "Most of the Continental Assemblies and the syntheses of several Episcopal Conferences call for the question of women's inclusion in the diaconate to be considered." (General Secretariat of the Synod)¹

Our group which was tasked to reflect on the issue of women in the diaconate decided to focus on the specific question: Should the church allow women to be ordained as permanent deacons?

The permanent diaconate which permits married men to be ordained as deacon was restored in the Catholic Church in 1965 at the Second Vatican Council. The deacons' priestly role includes baptizing, distributing the Eucharist, blessing marriages, bringing the viaticum to the dying, conducting liturgies without priests, officiating at funerals and burial services (Lumen Gentium 29), reading the Gospel, and delivering homily. Their prophetic ministry involves evangelizing, catechizing, and denouncing injustice. Their kingly/servant ministry consists of works of charity or integral development/social action and administration of parishes in case of a

¹ Thus the Synthesis Report no. 9n recommends that "theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate should be continued."

shortage of priests or small Christian communities (e.g. BECs/Mission stations) in large parishes. (Picardal)

In the Philippines, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines petitioned the Vatican for the ordination of permanent deacons only in July 2023, more than 50 years after its restoration, and it received the Vatican approval on August 17, 2023. While other episcopal conferences have now been discussing the question of women's inclusion in the diaconate, the 2023 National Synthesis report of the synodal consultations held in the Philippines, did not mention the issue of women deacons and instead focused on the lack of participation of men in the church (CBCP 2023). Its main reason in the past for refusing to ordain permanent deacons is the fear of the clericalization of the laity.

Part I: Theological Research

Are there women deacons in the Bible?

St. Phoebe, a woman, is the only disciple explicitly referred to as deacon in the Bible. Romans 16:1 refers to her as “deacon of the church in Cenchreae” Phyllis Zagano, member of the 1st Commission formed by Pope Francis to study women deacons in history further notes that “While no one claims Phoebe was sacramentally ordained, she is understood to have served in an equivalent ministry to that of the seven with masculine names called by the Apostles in Acts, none of whom is called “deacon” (Acts 6:1-7) (Zagano 2023; see also Marucci 2016).

Another reference to women deacons is found in 1 Tim. 3:8–13 which lists the qualifications of deacons. 1 Tim. 3:11, in particular states: “Women[f] likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.” The term “likewise” means that the women functioned as deacons in the same way as the men. (cf. Stiefel 1995; Sorci 2016)

What happened to women deacons in church history?

Historical records point to the ordination of women deacons in both the Eastern and Western church (though to a lesser degree) up to the 12th century.² Majority of scholars maintain the sacramentality of ordination of women and its substantial equality to the male diaconate in the undivided church (Marucci 2016; Sorci 2016; Vagaggini 2016). Zagano claims the existence of at least one extant liturgical ceremony for ordaining both men and women deacons.

What led to the decline of women's deaconate? As adult baptism waned due to the rise of infant baptism, the primary task of the female diaconate to anoint women's bodies in baptism by immersion waned and led to women deacons' decline (Sorci 2016).

In addition, Zagano's analysis of papal edicts as well as local episcopal, synodal/conciliar, and canonical restrictions against women's participation in the liturgy, demonstrates that the liturgical tasks of women ordained as deacons were eventually forbidden

² During the Byzantine era (330-1453) in the Eastern church, women deacons continued to be ordained and this has never been banned by any church law.

all women, whose “impure” state [due to menstruation] required that they be kept distant from the sacred. (Zagano 2018).³

How can the ordination of women deacons today impact women’s ministry in general?

Women will not only be able to sanctify (baptize, witness marriages), teach (preach the homily during Mass) but also assume governing functions in the Church. Canon 129 restricts governing functions in the church to the ordained though it did not specify that this is limited to priestly ordination. Women deacons, following revisions in Canon law, can also be appointed to positions currently restricted to clerics such as chancellor, judge, and cardinal deacons (Zagano 2016b, 52)

Are there doctrinal reasons against the ordination of women as permanent deacons?

There are no doctrinal reasons against the ordination of women as permanent deacons. In 1997 the International Theological Commission concluded their study affirming that the Church can restore the female diaconate.

However, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Card. Joseph Ratzinger, refused to sign it, and instead created a new committee led by his former graduate student, and these are the commissions’ conclusions: “1) the women ordained as deaconesses were not “equivalent” to the men ordained as deacons; 2) the sacrament of Holy Orders the priesthood and episcopate are clearly distinct from the diaconate; and 3) therefore “it pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his church to pronounce authoritatively on this question” (From the *Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, V).”

There are two implicit arguments in this document that would preclude women’s ordination to the diaconate: 1) the iconic argument, that is, that women cannot represent Christ; 2) the unicity of orders, which means that there is only one sacrament of Holy Orders. Since women cannot be ordained as priests or bishops, consequently, they cannot be ordained as deacons. (Zagano, 2024) Most scholars would object to the above arguments as well as “the fact that the Commission *ignored or relegated to footnotes serious scholarship about women deacons* by major scholars,⁴

Yves Congar, regarded as the single most formative influence on Vatican II, while opposed to the ordination of women to the priesthood finds no theological objection to restoring women to the diaconate. (Congar 2016)

³ The First Commission formed by Pope Francis to study women deacons in 2016 agreed on the existence of women deacons in church history but not on their role.

⁴ This includes Philippe Delhaye, Roger Gryson, Corrado Marucci, Pietro Sorci and Cipriano Vagaggini, all well-known and well-published at the time.” (Zagano 2016b, 53).

How can one describe the theology of the diaconate?

While the theology of the diaconate is not fully developed because it has just been recently restored in the Catholic Church, its biblical roots (Cerrato, 2024) point to the deacons as witness, reflection or embodiment of Christ as Servant, in their disposition and the service they render to the Christian community, especially to the marginalized/excluded. The deacon will be “leader in service”. (Congar 2016)

Pastoral Research

The group has been conducting a survey (in 4 languages – English, Filipino, Cebuano, and Hiligaynon) which commenced on February 25, 2024 and will close on May 31, 2024. The target respondents are pastoral animators/leaders who work/worked in dioceses/parishes with Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC)/Mission Stations. This limits the interviewees to those who are grounded in pastoral life and the church’s outreach to the poor, which is one of the main concerns of a deacon.

Aside from this, we had consultations with various groups. What I will be sharing with you is the result of our nationwide survey, particularly from the English respondents.

The survey has 3 parts – the Demographic profile, Part I inquires into their current knowledge of the permanent diaconate and women. This is supposed to serve as a warm-up to the issue. After a brief introduction to the roles of a permanent deacon, Part III asks the respondents to rate their views about women’s ordination to the permanent diaconate. The survey is primarily conducted using a Google form shared on various Facebook pages or sent by email through a convenience sampling strategy (snowballing), and in particular cases for those with difficulty accessing the internet, on a face-to-face basis. As of March 21, 2024 we had a total of 246 respondents in the English survey.

Demographic Profile

1. Age: almost 75% are from 41-74 years of age
2. Gender: almost 75% are women
3. State of Life: Religious 41.1 %
Lay (married) 30.1 %
Lay (single) 23.6 %
Priest 4.9 %
4. Educational Attainment: MA/PhD 67.2%
College 30.7%
5. Location of BEC/Mission Station: Urban 64.7%
Rural 35.3%

6. Location of Diocese/Parish: National Capital Region	36.1%
Other parts of Luzon	20.3%
Visayas	16.6%
Mindanao	18.3%
7. Focus of BEC/Mission station: Liturgical	24.9%
Developmental	12.4%
All of the above	58.1%

I will focus on Part II which is on the respondents' view about ordination of women to the permanent diaconate.

7. The Church should allow women deacons in recognition of women and men's equal reception "of the variety of gifts of the Spirit" in baptism.

SA/ A= 80.9%

8. The Church should allow women deacons since women religious are already doing the tasks of a deacon in far-flung areas.

SA/A- 79.3%

9. The Church should establish the ministry of women deacons but should not ordain them because only men can be ordained.

SA/A – 34.5%

NAD – 19.9%

SD/D – 45.6

10. It is important to be absolutely certain that a woman had been ordained as deacon in the history of the church before it allows the ordination of women as permanent deacons.

SA/A – 49.8%

NAD – 19.5%

SD/D – 30.7%

11. We should oppose ordaining women to the diaconate because the next time, women will be advocating ordination of women to the priesthood.

NAD – 19%

SD/D – 62.4%

12. Allowing women to become deacons will discourage men from engaging in the ministry and the more we shall lose the men in the church.

SA/A - 19%

NAD – 21.1%

SD/D 59.9%

13. The core problem in the refusal to grant women official leadership positions in the church is machismo or the belief in the superiority of men over women.

SA/A 62.4%

NAD 16.1%

SD/D 21.5%

14. Ordaining women as deacons will only reinforce church's clericalization.

SA/A – 16.8%

NAD – 28.1%

SD/D 48.7%

15. Women with the proper formation should be allowed to preach in Mass.

SA/A – 79.7%

16. In being diaconally ordained, women can have the power of governance which can help in declericalizing church structures.

SA/A -68.6%

NAD 19.4

III. Our Position Paper

CONVERGENCES

- a) In discerning the issue of whether women should be ordained to the permanent diaconate, we were guided by the following. First, the scholarship of experts in history and theology

is crucial but so are the experiences, reflections, and discernment of pastoral animators and leaders who live close to the needs of the world and the Church. [This is to counter those who would want to simply wait for what the Vatican would say.] Second, while there is evidence of the ordination of women as deacons (Zagano 2018, Vagaggini 2016a&b), a precedent is not important. The Holy Spirit was not working only in the past but continues to work in the present as we discern the signs of the times. If one looks at the Council of Jerusalem, the decision not to require circumcision from Gentile Christians did not have an explicit basis in past practice though it is implied in Jesus' inclusive teaching and practice.

Third, a renewed theological anthropology undergirds this discernment: 1) Women and men are made in the likeness of God, and thus both can represent Christ [this is to counter the iconic argument against women ordination]; 2) Women and men equally received the gifts of the Holy Spirit (I Cor 12: 1-11) in Baptism; 3) Women and men are called to be co-responsible in the life and mission of the Church; 4) The principle of communion and inclusivity where each one's charism or gifts are recognized should guide how we discern women and men's roles in the Church.

- b) Machismo or the belief in the superiority of men over women based on certain stereotypes and prejudices remains pervasive and needs to be challenged.
- c) Some would say that the permanent diaconate for women will inhibit men from engaging in church ministries or diminish their active participation. [This has been a recurring argument in the Philippines against girls/women's participation in liturgical ministries such as that of altar servers, lectorship, serving as commentators. A major concern is that girls/women assuming these roles would discourage men from engaging in the ministry, as what happened when women were allowed to become lectors and commentators. There is no deeper analysis of why this happened (e.g. men's machismo attitude). Instead, the response is to uphold equal but complementary theological anthropology, with some roles relegated to women and others to men. Underlying this is a narrative of competition instead of a narrative of communion where each individual's charism or gift is recognized.] On the contrary, the ordination of women to the diaconate might even motivate men to be more responsible for the mission of the church. Both women and men need to be open to the direction and guidance of the Spirit toward communion in mission [This should not be a competition!].
- d) Ordination of women to the permanent diaconate will allow women to share in the governing (Canon 129), teaching, and sanctifying roles in the Church.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION [THIS ALSO CONTAINS POINT OF DIVERGENCE]

- e) The ordination of women as permanent deacons carries the risk of further reinforcing a hierarchical clerical church. Measures should be taken to prevent this.

- f) On the one hand, the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate can be used as a way of specifying the limits of the service of women in the church. On the other hand, it can be a way to open up a path to women's priesthood.

PROPOSALS

- g) In light of a renewed theological anthropology, we recommend that the Church consider ordaining women to the permanent diaconate. The service of women who are already effectively engaged in the diaconal ministry and feel called to become permanent deacons can be further strengthened/magnified by the formal recognition of their leadership by the Church. (cf. Ad Gentes 16) [We are referring here to the same argument given in the Second Vatican council for restoring the permanent diaconate for men]
- h) Women's ordination as permanent deacons, however, has to be seen as part of the "synodalization" of the church; the journey toward a more inclusive and participatory church. [Otherwise, this can only lead to the clericalization of the church.] "New wine must be put into fresh wineskins" (Lk 5:38). Consequently, care should be taken that the formation of deacons is aligned with the vision of a synodal church.
- i) The Church's acceptance of women to the permanent diaconate necessarily implies that the Church will provide them the opportunity to exercise the ministry. [It might be allowed by the Vatican but the local churches might refuse to implement this as has happened in the past.]
- j) Included in the ministry of deacons, which must also be accessible to qualified laywomen are the administration of a parish (Canon 517.2) and the ministry of preaching in eucharistic celebrations. [qualified lay people should also be given access to these ministries]
- k) To address the machismo culture in the church and the bigger society, education on gender equality and justice is needed in seminaries, parishes, and dioceses.
- l) In addition, awareness-raising and continuing education about permanent women deacons should be conducted. We recommend that our survey on women deacons be shared with the Bishops in dioceses/parishes with BECs/Mission stations, to be circulated among their pastoral leaders on or before May 31, 2024.
- m) The ordination of women to the permanent diaconate has to be accompanied by a renewed theology of ministry that goes beyond lay-clergy distinction, and instead focuses on the variety of charisms and ministries in the church (Gallardietz 2003). [This is also a means to further de-clericalize the church.]

