

The Diaconate for Women: the time has come



The permanent diaconate is a sacred order wherein a baptized person is strengthened by the grace of the Sacrament of Orders. It was reactivated by Vatican II as “a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy” ([Lumen Gentium, 29](#)) with functions in [the ministry of the word, divine worship, pastoral governance, and the service of charity](#). Permanent deacons have a unique relationship with their bishop.

Women deacons in the early Church

Although Stephen and his companions were not called ‘deacons’, their mandate defined their ministry. They were chosen by ‘all the disciples’ who presented them to the Twelve who prayed and laid hands on them (Acts 6: 1-6).

By the time Paul began his mission, there were women deacons serving their local communities. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul writes: “I commend to you my sister, Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of my myself as well” (Rom 16:1-2).

The evidence is strong that for many centuries women were ordained as deacons in both the Eastern and Western churches and that some (deaconesses) carried out certain ministries specifically on behalf of [other women](#).

However, by the 12th century this had ceased, with Gratian’s Decretum stating explicitly that women cannot advance to the priesthood or the diaconate. Henceforth, all women would have to forever remain laity and non-ordainable.

Vatican II authorizes permanent diaconate for mature-aged men

Vatican II authorized the ordination of mature-aged – including married -men, actively engaged in diaconal functions, to the permanent diaconate. It wanted them strengthened in the exercise of their ministry by the sacramental grace of the diaconate ([Ad gentes, 16](#)).

However, though women were actively carrying out similar diaconal ministries, the Council did not authorize their ordination, and the law (c. 1024) forbidding the ordination of all women to any sacred order remained unchanged.

Post-Vatican II

Following Vatican II, the ordination of women – to diaconate and priesthood – became a serious issue for many women. But despite Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI closing down all discussion on women’s ordination to the priesthood, women’s ordination to the permanent diaconate has remained alive.

The [2002 International Theological Commission](#) questioned some of the historical evidence for women deacons, but it did not question the magisterium's competence to make a final decision on the issue and a 1995 [study by the Canon Law Society of America](#) concluded that the magisterium could decide to ordain women to the permanent diaconate with few canonical adjustments required.

In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI made it clear that the permanent diaconate is a 'proper and stable' order and a 'ministry of service'. It is not simply a step on the way to the priesthood or a way to receive a portion of the priesthood. It is theologically distinct from the orders of bishop and presbyter and by ordination permanent deacons are configured to Christ the Servant. ([Omnium in mentem](#)). Indeed, Benedict may have removed the barrier to women being admitted to the diaconate because it effectively broke the presumed automatic pathway into the priesthood and established the diaconate as a distinct ministry.

In recent years Pope Francis has initiated two commissions to study the diaconate for women: the first in 2016 to examine the [historical perspective](#), which was not published; and the second in 2020 with different members and yet to report. In the interests of ecclesial transparency and trust, when presented it should be released immediately.

Synodal proposals

[Decree 4 of the 5th Plenary Council of Australia](#) affirmed that "God's word speaks clearly of the equal dignity of women and men" and identified four extraordinary Australian Catholic women - Caroline Chisholm, Mary MacKillop, Eileen O'Connor, and Mary Glowrey – who had clearly exercised 'diaconal' ministries.

In the contemporary church in Australia religious and lay women are the mainstay of Catholic communities and actively engaged in diaconal ministries of many kinds. Without their dedication and commitment, the church would fail to function.

While it was a relief that the Council decreed "that, should the universal law of the Church be modified to authorize the diaconate for women, the Council recommends that the Australian Bishops examine how best to implement it in the context of the Church in Australia" (Decree 4, Article 4), the fact remains that the universal law (c. 1024) is still in place.

When the Synod on Synodality opened on 4 October 2023, the ordination of women to the diaconate will be an [agenda item](#) that must be addressed, for it was raised by several Continental Assemblies and Episcopal Conferences.

Catholics for Renewal strongly supports the [recommendation of the Brisbane Archdiocese](#) that "the Church prioritise the question of the diaconate for women to settle the issue, [for the] ordination to the order of deacon configures the person ordained to the person of Christ as servant, not priest".

The principal reasons why the Church should restore women to ordained deaconate are a renewed understanding of the Baptismal equality of all, the signs of the times and the current ministerial needs of the Church.