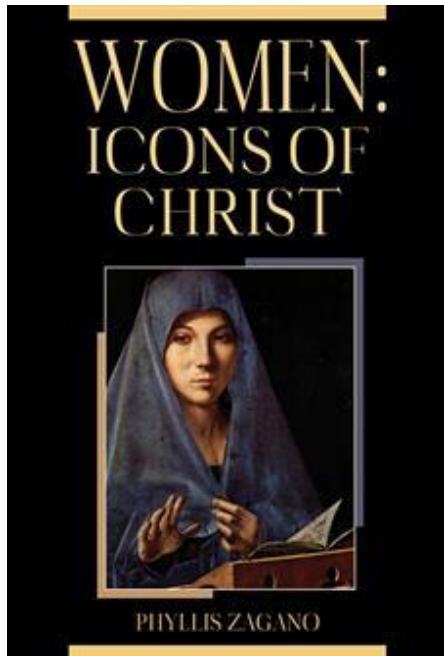


Phyllis Zagano. *Women: Icons of Christ*. New York: Paulist Press, 2020



Phyllis Zagano is the acknowledged expert on the subject of women in the diaconate. For two decades she has asserted in her books, articles, blogs and media appearances that women were ordained as deacons in the early Church and well beyond – and that the Roman Catholic Church can, and now should, restore the female diaconate. She has backed her case with scrupulous, indeed redoubtable, scholarship, alongside an energetic personal commitment to a change she believes would immeasurably enrich the Church.

Dr. Zagano was a member of the first papal commission appointed in 2016 by Pope Francis to inquire into the issue of women deacons. The commission disbanded in 2019 after failing to come to an agreement on the question of whether women were actually and validly ordained as deacons in the early Church. This must have been an exercise in frustration and disappointment for Phyllis Zagano. It clearly provides the background and context for her latest book, *Women: Icons of Christ*.

Reader of her previous books will find this one very different, even disconcerting, in its form and style. While buttressed by the author’s customary theological and historical research, *Women: Icons of Christ* is a passionate *cri de coeur* for the rightful place of women, not only in the Christian Church but in the world at large. In her Introduction, Dr. Zagano decries the dismal fate of women in many societies who are “denied their full humanity by customs and traditions stuck in medieval mores or worse” (xiii). What then of a Church where half of the members are female but cannot be ordained as ministers? This, she says, is a scandal, “a disfigurement of the entire Body of Christ” (xii). The book sets out to show why.

Rather than following a pattern of linear argument, it tends to shift frequently from one topic to another and to discuss issues such as the unity of orders several times in different chapters. This is because the book adopts a thematic approach based on five ministerial functions that women deacons originally filled: baptism, catechesis, altar service, reconciliation, and anointing. Each is illustrated and supported by detailed historical and theological references. That women were ordained deacons is a given for Dr. Zagano; so is the sad story of how they were eventually deprived of their ministerial functions by a misogynist society, on the grounds that women could not image Christ. Hence the title *Women: Icons of Christ*.

*Baptism*, the first of these ministerial functions, is also the most striking. Theologically, says the author, baptism “configures the person to Christ” regardless of gender – “all persons are made in the likeness and image of God” (2). In the elliptic style characteristic of the book, the author quickly transitions into the debate over women’s ordination: if all people image God, why the objection to women deacons? She describes the development of the *cursus honorum*, which relegated the diaconate to a stage on the way to the priesthood and was later compounded by the

doctrine of the “unicity of orders”: the three orders of ministry are subsumed into one, so that the deacon is an embryo priest. *Ergo*, because women are barred from the priesthood they cannot be ordained deacons. But Phyllis Zagano reiterates that in the early Church, where the diaconate was seen as a separate, equal order, there *were* women deacons; they ministered particularly to women in baptism but performed other liturgical and pastoral functions as well. She backs up her stance with biblical references such as that to the deacon Phoebe in Romans 16, quotations from the Church Fathers, and abundant historical evidence.

The other chapters in *Women: Icons of Christ* follow a similar pattern: the ministerial function is a departure point for examining the theological and historical cases for and against women deacons. Thus, *catechesis* prompts a discussion of women teaching and preaching in the early Church and of catechisms as they relate to women and ordination. There is a digression here, as there was in the preceding chapter on baptism, about the commissioning of the “Seven” by the apostles in Acts. Popes Benedict XVI and Francis see this as the beginning of the diaconate as an ordained ministry of charity, although neither links it to women’s ministry. Dr. Zagano’s point is that whereas Jesus chose the apostles, the early Church created the diaconate; hence the doctrine that only men can be bishops or priests does not – and did not – apply to the diaconate. This reasoning seems tenuous, especially as biblical scholarship casts considerable doubt on the assertion that the Seven of Acts were the first deacons; indeed, several scholars reject this view.<sup>1</sup>

*Altar service* provides an opportunity to delve into the long and painful history of misogyny in the Church. While there is evidence that female deacons served at the altar, objections were raised to this as early as the fourth century and accelerated in the following five hundred years until women were banned from the sanctuary on the grounds that they were unclean because of their menstrual cycles. The ban continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is still found in conservative circles where girls and women are not even allowed to be acolytes. Dr. Zagano sees mandatory clerical celibacy and its persistence in the Latin (though not the Eastern) rite as another form of ecclesiastical misogyny.

The chapter on *spiritual direction & confession* traces the role of women as “confessors and spiritual companions”. Deacons, including women, could hear confessions until the early Middle Ages, when the practice stopped. Spiritual direction, however, is a different matter. Numerous religious and secular women have been, and are very much today, sought-after spiritual directors. Here Phyllis Zagano makes an intriguing and convincing point: the need for *ministry to women by women*. This was a prime role of female deacons in the early Church. Dr. Zagano sees a modern equivalent, making use of women’s skills and talents (often paid lip service by male church leaders, including popes), so that women’s stories can be better heard.

In the *anointing of the sick*, as in baptism, the early female deacons fulfilled an important ministry to women. Arguably this should be the case today, for example for women chaplains in institutions. This chapter is predominantly a discussion of Roman Catholic practices in anointing and in confession (also dealt with in the previous chapter). Originally permitted for deacons and lay ministers, unction – anointing with holy oil – became the sole preserve of priests as clericalism tightened its grip.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, J.M. Barnett in *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (1995), John N. Collins in *Deacons and the Church* (2002), Paul Avis in “The Diaconate: a flagship ministry?” (2013).

## Conclusions

Phyllis Zagano's "Conclusions" to *Women: Icons of Christ* are succinct and characteristically frank. Women were ordained deacons in the early Church and should be again. The objection that women cannot "image" Christ is, says Dr. Zagano, a "naive physicalism" (119) which contradicts the baptismal reality that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. The other objection, that women cannot approach the sacred, is an "ancient taboo" (120), compounded by clerical celibacy for men, and is well past its due date. Both objections deny the full humanity of women. The Catholic Church, trenchantly argues Phyllis Zagano, should restore the female diaconate – both for its own integrity and for the general well-being of women in the world. The issue is a legal, not a doctrinal, one and it can be resolved by a simple change in canon law, stating that both men and women are admitted to the ministerial order of deacons.

## Discussion

- Those who experience the diaconate in non-Roman Catholic churches such as my own Anglican Communion may view the questions raised by Phyllis Zagano as of peripheral interest – after all, Anglicans have ordained women deacons since the 1960s/70s (and subsequently women priests and later bishops). This view should be challenged, however, on two counts:
  - Prior to the 1960s, Anglicans generally shared the same assumptions about women, especially ordained women, as our Roman Catholic counterparts (when I was ordained deacon in 1977 my parish still did not allow girls to be servers, a practice I promptly changed!).
  - As by far the largest ecclesial communion, Roman Catholicism has an immense influence on how Christianity is practised and perceived, with a corollary: on how *women* are perceived and treated in the world at large, a crucial issue graphically described by Dr. Zagano. What Rome decides about women deacons affects us all.
- "Unicity of orders" (also known as unity of orders) – the doctrine that the priesthood incorporates the diaconate – is a theological rationalization of the historical *cursum honorum* and is used as an argument to deny the possibility of ordaining women deacons. But, says Dr. Zagano, "the Catholic Churches most assuredly have ordained women as deacons" (xiv). Thus the unicity of orders argument can be turned on its head: since women *were* deacons, they could also be priests!
- *Women: Icons of Christ* will displease two groups.
  - Those in movements such as Women's Ordination Worldwide will be disappointed that Dr. Zagano does not support the ordination of women to the priesthood. She makes it clear that this has not occurred in the Catholic and Eastern Churches and likely never will (she has commented that if women deacons had been allowed, this might have taken some of the steam out of the women priests' movement).
  - At the conservative end of the spectrum, those opposed to ordination of women at all will take issue with the very notion of female deacons: simply put, women should not, cannot, be ordained to any order of sacred ministry (Deacon Gill Kimber encountered the same objection in the Church of England).

Both ends of the spectrum treat the diaconate as a secondary form of ministry: the one as a poor second-best to the priesthood; the other merely as a stage towards it. This reviewer joins with Phyllis Zagano in rejecting both points of view: the diaconate is a full order of ministry with its own integrity. Although the Anglican Communion has come to a different conclusion, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Churches restrict the presbyterate and episcopate to men, based on their own historical and theological rationales; that is their reality. But *Women: Icons of Christ* makes a very compelling case for their re-opening of the order of *deacons* to women.

- Arguably, the opposition to female deacons in the Roman Catholic Church primarily reflects cultural and historical traditions, even though theological rationales have been devised to justify it. It is, understandably, very difficult indeed to change a mindset based on more than a millennium of church practice and teaching: that females are not fully equal to males in the Church; that they cannot be ordained to ministerial office; and that, in the Latin rite, clerical celibacy is mandatory. There is also the fear that if women were ordained to the diaconate, this might be the thin edge of the wedge for women priests. Once again, the doctrine of the unity of orders and the regrettable (in my view) persistence of the transitional diaconate cloud and hamper the open consideration of women deacons.
- Finally, *Women: Icons of Christ* challenges the very notion that women *cannot* be icons of Christ, that they “cannot serve and be *in persona Christi servi*, in the person of Christ the servant,” as deacons are called to be. This is key to the traditionalist resistance to the female diaconate, widespread in the world-wide Roman Catholic Church despite calls from many, including bishops, that the matter be considered. Phyllis Zagano calls for the historic and deep-rooted misogyny in the Church to be addressed. The female diaconate would be a valuable step in that direction.
- Which brings us back to the second papal commission appointed by Pope Francis in 2020. As noted in the previous review, two American deacons are members of the commission, James Keating and Dominic Cerrato. Dr. Cerrato’s book, *In the Person of Christ the Servant: A Theology of the Diaconate Based on the Personalist Thought of Pope John Paul II*, is in counterpoint to Dr. Zagano’s *Women: Icons of Christ*. The author subscribes to the unicity of orders and the idea that the (male) deacon images Christ: “by virtue of the fact that the deacon has been ontologically configured to Christ the Servant, he acts *in persona Christi sacri*.” As for Dr. Keating, whom Deacon Cerrato quotes extensively, this reviewer has not found any references to the female diaconate in his work. Both authors appear, implicitly at least, not to be in favour of women deacons. It would have been preferable (in my opinion as an outsider) to have representation on the commission of those who have expressed positive views on the subject, such as Deacon William Ditewig and Father Kenan B. Osborne.

Evidently the theory of the unity of orders and the practice of the transitional diaconate are the crux of the matter, and to these we now turn.

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## ***The Vocational Diaconate: Book Review and Discussion***

by ***Deacon Canon D. Michael Jackson***

*Diocese of Qu'Appelle, Anglican Church of Canada*

The ministerial order of deacons is the subject of discussion and debate, conferences and research, development and experimentation in a number of Christian churches – among them Roman Catholic and Eastern, Anglican/Episcopal, Lutheran and Methodist. Diaconal ministry in these traditions was assessed by the contributors to a book I edited for Sacristy Press in Durham, UK, in 2019, ***The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective: Ecclesiology, Liturgy and Practice***. Continued interest in the diaconate is evidenced by some other recent publications.



*Michael Jackson*

*Regina, Canada*

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[diaconate2018@sasktel.net](mailto:diaconate2018@sasktel.net)