

## Review of Diaconal Publications

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### **Phyllis Zagano, ed., *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers***

(Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016)

Senior research associate-in-residence and adjunct professor of religion at Hofstra University in New York, Dr. Zagano is a leading authority on the question of the ordination of women in the Catholic Church; her expertise extends to the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Anglican Communion too. Her landmark book *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000) placed the question in the forefront of discussions on ministry in the Roman Catholic Church. *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012) is a short, accessible book which summarizes the discussions on women and the diaconate since Vatican II and points out interesting precedents in the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and Old Catholic (Utrecht) Churches.

*Women Deacons? Essays with Answers* is a collection of twelve scholarly essays by ten authors, going back to 1969. Most have been translated from the original texts in Italian and French, some for the first time. The general reader should be forewarned that this volume is, well, scholarly, and the more erudite contributions are not for the faint of heart! Fortunately, the editor's Introduction gives a good, readable summary. "The essays in this volume," says Dr. Zagano, "continue the conversation begun at Vatican II about restoring women to the ordained diaconate." They deal with both the history and the potential revival of the female diaconate. In sum, research confirms the existence of female deacons in the early Church. While there is not as much discussion of the second question, the overall conclusion is that yes, based on these historical precedents, women could again be ordained deacons in the Catholic Church.

Phyllis Zagano had already presented translations of two important essays by Benedictine Father Cipriano Vagaggini, in *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013). They appear again here. The first, "The Ordination of Deaconesses in the Greek and Byzantine Tradition," written in 1974 for the International Theological Commission at the Vatican, carefully examines the historical and archeological evidence and concludes that in the Eastern churches deaconesses were not in "minor" orders like sub-deacons but were indeed sacramentally ordained as deacons, and were considered part of the clergy. The second, "The Deaconess in the Byzantine Tradition," an intervention by Father Vagaggini at the 1987 Synod of Bishops on the Laity, is, as Dr. Zagano says, "an informal summary of his entire discussion" in the complex 1974 article, with a rebuttal of the contrary arguments of A.G. Martimort published in 1982. Vagaggini states clearly here that the church "can admit women to the sacrament of order in the diaconate."

Philippe Delhay, a professor at Louvain in Belgium, wrote one of the earliest essays in this collection in 1972: “A View of the Past and Future of Feminine Ministries in the Church.” His context was the discussion of women’s ministries at the 1971 Synod of Bishops and a key study published the same year by French scholar Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Gryson was among the first to assert that historically there had been women deacons). By the third and fourth centuries, Delhay says, “deaconesses appear to be members of the clergy who receive an authentic ordination” and exercise an “extensive” ministry with women. He believes that, while the presbyterate and episcopate were historically reserved to men, the female diaconate could be restored – but as contemporary ministry of service, not an “archeological” revival of ancient practice.

“The ‘Diaconate’ of Phoebe (Rom 16: 1-2) According to Modern Exegesis” by Jesuit professor Corrado Marucci (2010) and “Women Deacons in 1 Timothy” by Episcopal deacon Jennifer H. Stiefel (1995) look at possible New Testament precedents for the female diaconate; both essays are technical, even arcane, and in the end – at least in the opinion of this reader – inconclusive. Marucci’s other contribution, “History and Value of the Feminine Diaconate in the Ancient Church” (1997), is more reader-friendly. The first part examines the history of female deacons in the East up until the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries; their role is different from that of their male counterparts but definitely ministerial in nature. The second part concludes that “after three decades of studies and debates [...] it is highly probable that deaconesses in the ancient and medieval Church received a sacramental ordination analogous to that of deacons.” Marucci thus draws similar conclusions to those of Philippe Delhay.

“The Diaconate and Other Liturgical Ministries of Women” by Franciscan professor Pietro Sorci (1992) delves into the historical evidence of female ministries in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century Church and later in Eastern Syria, Chaldea and Persia, Western Syria, Egypt, the Armenian and Maronite Churches, and, to a much more limited extent, in the West – Italy and Gaul. Sorci’s view is that the female diaconate has New Testament roots, had “rather far-reaching functions,” and involved ordination with a liturgical rite. It declined after the first millennium – “died out without having been suppressed” – although not entirely, as some vestiges remained in monasteries. These vestiges are examined more closely in Phyllis Zagano’s own contribution, “Remembering Tradition: Women’s Monastic Rituals and the Diaconate” (2011), showing that the monastic female diaconate was much more prevalent in the East than in the West and survives in Orthodoxy to this day. The very brief and erudite contribution of Ugo Zanetti, a Byzantine-rite priest, “Were There Deaconesses in Egypt?” (1990) answers the question with ‘perhaps.’ A longer but equally erudite 2005 article by Greek Orthodox scholar Valerie A. Karras, “The Liturgical Functions of Consecrated Women in the Byzantine Church,” shows how certain liturgical roles in the Byzantine Empire were designated for women, such as deaconesses.

The final two chapters of *Women Deacons?* are more general in nature than the others. “Varieties of Ministries and Diaconal Renewal,” the earliest piece in the collection (1969), is by Yves Congar, who was one of the experts at the Second Vatican Council. It is a brief discussion of the pros and cons of the permanent diaconate, then in its initial stages. While Father Congar remained opposed to the “feminine priesthood,” he would “not have the same objections for the diaconate.” In 1975, German theological professor Peter Hünemann went beyond this in

“Conclusions Regarding the Female Diaconate.” As Delhaye and Vagaggini had already done, and as Marucci would two decades later, he asserted, based on the practices of the early Church and the writings of Church Fathers, that “exactly as the deacons, the deaconesses were chosen and ordained by the bishop” for a ministry both liturgical and non-liturgical, especially for women. He concluded that, while historically in East and West the episcopate and priesthood have been reserved for men, there is ample precedent in both traditions for female deacons.

This Anglican observer, with apologies to Phyllis Zagano, will now attempt to summarize, and no doubt over-simplify, the very complex issue of the female diaconate in the Catholic Church:

- Scriptural evidence for the diaconate *as later constituted*, male as well as female, is slim. What little there is, as in *Romans* (the reference to Phoebe) and *I Timothy*, could, however, be considered as describing prototypes for the diaconal order which gradually emerged and was open to women. Certainly, female ministry in various forms was important in Our Lord’s time and, as shown in *Acts*, in the Apostolic period.
- Evidence of the diaconate is sketchy in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries, but based on *I Timothy* (c. 150 or earlier) and other sources, such as Ignatius and Polycarp in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, scholars believe it was taking shape for both men and women. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, the male and female diaconate was well established, as shown in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Syria, 3<sup>rd</sup> century), the *Apostolic Constitutions* (late 4<sup>th</sup> century), and in comments by Clement of Alexandria and Origen in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and St. John Chrysostom in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.
- Female deacons, or deaconesses, were sacramentally ordained by the bishop with the laying on of hands in the sanctuary of the church and with the imposition of the *orarion*, or diaconal stole. There were minimal differences between their ordination rite and that for male deacons.
- The ministry of women deacons was not the same as for men. Deaconesses ministered mainly (although not entirely) to other women, notably in assisting, for reasons of modesty, with baptismal anointing, ministering to the sick, and teaching. Their liturgical functions were more limited than those of men, as they did not normally assist at the altar, administer communion, preach or baptize.
- The female diaconate was widespread in the Byzantine Church, notably in Syria and Constantinople, but much less so in Egypt and in the Latin West (Italy and Gaul), until the end of the first millennium. By then, adult baptism had given way to infant baptism and thus one of the major functions of the woman deacon disappeared. The number of deaconesses dwindled sharply, until by the 12<sup>th</sup> century they were virtually non-existent.
- Vestiges of the female diaconate, however, did survive in the East, especially in monasteries. The Armenian Apostolic Church continued ordaining women as deacons, and some deaconesses have been recently ordained in the Greek Orthodox Church; the orders of both Churches are recognized by Rome as valid.

- In its theology of orders, Rome distinguishes between the sacerdotal orders of presbyterate and episcopate, which, as in Orthodoxy, are restricted to men, and the ministerial order of deacons. The Vatican has never ruled out the possible ordination of women as deacons, although it has downplayed the idea and been reluctant to discuss it.
- The International Theological Commission (ITC) in 1972, 1997, and again in 2002 chose not to pursue the issue of women deacons, despite the scholarship of Vagaggini and others recorded in Phyllis Zagano's book. It gave weight instead to the writings of Martimort (1982) and Bishop Gerhard Müller (2000), both sceptical of the female diaconate. Yet, as Dr. Zagano points out in her Introduction, "at this point in time, there are no scholars writing against the inclusion of women in the renewed diaconate."
- The musings of Pope Francis about deaconesses in 2016 have reopened the issue – although Cardinal Müller is now president of the ITC. The ball is, so to speak, in the papal court. And on August 2, Pope Francis announced a commission to study the question of women deacons – with Phyllis Zagano as one of its members

What is the interest in all of this for Anglicans/Episcopalians? After all, there have been women deacons in the Anglican Communion for half a century (and now, of course, women priests and bishops too). I suggest that a female diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church would be a major step forward for the diaconate around the world, as well as a wonderful opportunity to enhance the ministry of women in that Church. Having women deacons in the Anglican, Orthodox, Oriental, and Roman Catholic Churches would provide a unique ecumenical opportunity in this Christian ministry of service. Let's pray that it becomes a reality.