In a letter sent to the members of the International Theological Commission (ITC) who had gathered in Rome in late November 2019 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ITC’s founding, Benedict XVI included an interesting footnote regarding the ITC’s work on women deacons. Commenting on the published 2002/2003 ITC document on the diaconate, Benedict wrote that, in his words: the “extensive study concluded with the assertion that the purely historical perspective did not allow for any definitive certainty to be reached. In the final analysis, the question [of women deacons] had to be decided on the doctrinal level.”

We must make two immediate observations. First, the study was not at all “extensive” regarding the history of women ordained as deacons, thereby obviating any opportunity for “definitive certainty to be reached.” Second, the assertion that the question of women deacons had to be resolved on the doctrinal level seems to argue that the documented history of ordained women deacons is not material in the discussion. Of course, the doctrinal level is required, but not insofar as it discards history.

Benedict was commenting on the 2002/2003 ITC document on the diaconate that included a short section on women deacons. However, we must recall that in 1997, the ITC prepared a much shorter, 17-page positive document on women deacons, which was voted on, printed, and numbered. The ITC president and prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the time, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, refused to sign that short, positive document.

Instead, Cardinal Ratzinger named a new ITC subcommittee and appointed one of his former graduate students as its chair. The 2002/2003 ITC document resulting from the ensuing five years' work devoted less than ten percent of its 30,000 words to the history of women deacons.

In addition, the 2002/2003 ITC document included eighteen sentences or sections copied or paraphrased from a work by a member of the new sub-committee, Gerhard L. Müller, then a professor of dogmatic theology at the Ludwig Maximillian University of Munich.

Unlike the refereed scholarship available at the time, significant portions of this second ITC document attempt to connect the diaconate with priesthood. The second ITC document appeals in part to the "iconic argument," first used to disqualify women priests in Inter Insigniores, a 1976 declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Note, however, that the iconic argument does not appear in Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, the 1994 Apostolic Letter of John Paul II, also on priesthood. Yet both Inter Insigniores, with the iconic argument and Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, without the iconic argument, appeared before the completion of either the 1997 or the 2002 ITC documents. The conundrum is apparent: if the iconic argument is so important regarding women deacons, why was it not in the first ITC document on women deacons and only added to the...
The end, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, is where they started from, and the end appears to have been to leave the question open.

So, we must ask: How can the Church pronounce authoritatively on the question of women deacons? I posit two main avenues of discussion: I. History as predictor of doctrine; II. The ministry of women today.

I. HISTORY AS PREDICTOR OF DOCTRINE

We can understand the value Jesus placed on the ministry of women through New Testament evidence: witness Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna (Luke 8:1-3). When we examine the writings of Paul, we learn that only minister called "deacon" is Phoebe, who is said carried Paul’s Letter to the Romans. (Rom. 16:1). In Paul’s list of the overall qualities for deacons in his First Letter to Timothy many, if not most, scholars agree that he includes the qualities of women deacons (1 Tim. 3:11). The existence of women deacons is an undisputed fact of the early Church, East and West and today some, like Tryphena, Macrina, Rade-gand, and Phoebe, are revered as saints.

Even so, the meaning of the history of women in the diaconate has been debated for centuries. There are two essential questions in the historical debate. First: what liturgical rituals were used for the ordinations of women deacons? Second: what were the tasks and duties of these women deacons?

1. What is the nature of the liturgical rituals used to create women deacons?

We have records of ordination prayers from the Church’s earliest days, for example, in the Apostolic Constitutions' 8.19-20:

19.1. But now, concerning a deaconess, I Bartholomew make this teaching.

19.2. O bishop, you will lay your hands on her in the presence of the presbyters and of the deacons and deaconesses, and you will say:

1 T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets, Little Gidding. "What we call the beginning is often the end/And to make an end is to make a beginning./The end is where we start from. And every phrase/And sentence that is right (where every word is at home, Taking its place to support the others)."


8:20. “O Eternal God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of man and woman, who filled with the Spirit Miriam and Deborah and Anna and Holdah, who did not disdain that your only begotten son should be born of a woman, who also in the tabernacle of testimony and in the Temple appointed the guardians of your holy gates (Ex 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22).

20.2. now also, look upon your servant who is to be appointed to the diaconate and give to her the holy Spirit and cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit that she may worthily perform the work which is entrusted to your glory and the praise of your Christ, through whom glory and worship be to you and to the holy Spirit forever. Amen.”

In addition to the earliest documents, there are significant manuscripts of liturgical rituals for creating women deacons deposited in various libraries, including five in the Vatican Apostolic Library: three from the East: Barberini gr. 336 (780), Vatican Manuscript gr. 1872 (1100), and the Codex Syriacus Vaticanus No. 19 (1550), and two from the West: Vatican Regiaque lat. 337 (850) and the Ottonianus lat. 313, Paris (850). Other manuscripts and sacramentaries, with the “Ord ad diaconam faciendam,” are held in Austria, England, France, and Germany, and elsewhere in Italy.

We can assume these preserved liturgies were used to ordain women as deacons. In general, they include the following: women were ordained by their bishops within the sanctuary, in the presence of the clergy, through the imposition of hands by the invocation of the Holy Spirit; the bishop placed a stole around their necks, they took the chalice into their own hands and drank from it. Most importantly, the bishop called them deacons.

Even so, the determinations of the meaning of these manuscripts and sacramentaries remain part of the discussion. When and where were these liturgies performed? Did the bishops who used them intend to “ordain” women as we understand the term today?


90 For example, from the East, the Bessarion Manuscript (1020) at the monastery of Grotta Ferrata; the Coslin gr. 213 (1050) at the National Library in Paris. From the West, notably the Cambrai Manuscript 164 at the Cambrai Municipal Library (811); the Leofric Missal of Exeter at the Bodleian Library, Oxford (1050); and the Ordo Romanus of Hith-torp, Cologne (850) and the Pontificale of St Alban Abbey, Mainz (1030), the Abbey of Monte Cassino (1035), and Vallicella SS, Rome, 1050), among others.
We have some evidence from the Church’s early centuries of the names of the bishops and the women they ordained as deacons. The *Life of Olympias* recounts her ordination by Nectarius, Archbishop of Constantinople during the late fourth century, while she was in her thirties and despite the canons restricting such ordination to women of sixty. Because Olympias was a monastic superior, some scholars posit that her position as such may have led to the confusion between monastic superiors and women deacons. However, we know that three other members of Olympias’s monastery (Elisantia, Martyria and Palladia) were subsequently ordained by John Chrysostom12. In Armenia, also in the final years of the fourth century, Bishop Otreius ordained Dionysia13. In sixth-century Gaul, despite various prohibitions against women deacons, Médard, Bishop of Noyons and Tournai consecrated Radegunda as deacon14.

Were there others? Surely the extant lists of women deacons evidence that they were ceremonially acknowledged as members of the clergy by the very fact of the surviving liturgies. And we know that Ottone, bishop of Lucca, Italy, ordained women deacons during the twelfth century15.

In the seventeenth century, John Morin evaluated the then-extant liturgies for ordaining women as deacons and found they met the Council of Trent’s criteria for sacramental ordination16. Nearly one hundred years later, his opinion was countered by Jean Pien17. The disagreements have continued to this day.

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The determination that the extant liturgies document sacramental ordinations include analysis of their structure and the assumption of the ordaining bishops’ intents18. The counter arguments reduce to an assertion that women – then or now – are unable to receive the sacrament of orders combined with the assertion that the ordaining bishops did not or could not intend to perform a sacrament.

Why would women be unable to receive sacramental ordination? Because they cannot image Christ. Did the ordaining bishops intend to perform a sacrament? It would be scandalous to perform a liturgy and not intend its full effect.

Of course, the liturgical-historical argument becomes more convoluted as the Church’s definition of sacrament as it evolved over the centuries is considered.

How else can history enlighten the question?

2. What were the tasks and duties of these women deacons?

The scholarly “conversation” between Roger Gryson and Aimé George Martimort in the 1970s and 1980s repeats the liturgical disagreements and adds considerations of the tasks and duties of the Church’s women deacons. Gryson found in favor of women deacons; Martimort essentially found against, although he concludes his book-length deliberations by stating the history alone is not dispositive19. Martimort writes:

...the conclusion that must impose itself at the termination of a historical study such as ours, conducted in accordance with the requirements of modern scholarship, is that theologians must strictly guard against trying to prove hypothesis dependent upon only a part of the documentation available, a part taken out of context at that. The complexity of the facts about deaconesses and the proper context of these facts prove to be quite extraordinary. There exists a significant danger of distorting both the facts and the texts whenever one is dealing with them secondhand.20.

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In fact, the information available to both Gryson and Martimort in the 1970s and 1980s was, and remains, only a part of the documentation. Both sides of the discussion can and will continue to mine what can be found to each's advantage.

Even so, it is realistic to assume that all can agree that the women deacons of history met the ministerial needs—including the sacramental needs—of their times and places. There is implicit and explicit documentation that women deacons served in ways supportive of their historical sacramental ordination: they anointed baptismata in baptism, they anointed and brought Eucharist to ill women and, at least within their monasteries, they preached. They deny such evidence stress the non-sacramental duties of women deacons: guarding the entryways and maintaining order in the women's portions of the assembly, catechizing and providing general ministry to women and children. The negative voices often dismiss the women deacons' roles in baptism as anachronistic, and completely ignore their anointing and carrying Eucharist to ill women.

The predominate negative voices, those of Manfred Haucke and Gerhard L. Müller21, are joined by a few others22, and Martimort's work is the most generally cited by them as well as by more popular writers. However, in summarizing the contemporary discussion Pietro Sorci points out that Martimort, to whom the deniers most often aver, used the seventh century Ordo Romanus to establish criteria for the diaconate—male and female—of the ancient world23.

II. The ministry of women today

The ministries of women deacons outlined above, whether considered as necessarily ordained ministry or not, met the needs of their precise places in history, in various times and places across the centuries and around the globe.

Should the tasks and duties of women deacons from ancient times determine what ordained women deacons would do today? Is the functional history of women deacons, of their historically documented tasks and duties, liable to fall into the trap of "functionality" without any recognition of the current needs of the Church and how those needs are being met can be met? Is the problem with ordained women deacons a question of symbolism?

Three areas of discussion present themselves: First, the roles of women in the Church today; Second, the question of "Functionality" and the diaconate of women; Third, the problem of symbolism: women at the altar?

1. The roles of women in the Church today

Pope Francis often says the role of women should be more than pure functionality. In his closing remarks to the 2019 Synod for the Pan-Amazon, the pope implicitly criticized the section on women in the Final Document, calling it a bit short. He said, "I would like to underline this: we still have not realized what women mean in the Church...The role of women in the Church goes far beyond mere functionality."

What, exactly, was the pope reacting to? The operative paragraph regarding women deacons in the Final Synod Document, states:

103. In the many consultations carried out in the Amazon, the fundamental role of religious and lay women in the Church of the Amazon and its communities was recognized and emphasized, given the wealth of services they provide. In a large number of these consultations, the permanent diaconate for women was requested. This made an important theme during the Synod. The Study Commission on the Diaconate of Women which Pope Francis created in 2016 has already arrived as a Commission at partial findings regarding the reality of the diaconate of women in the early centuries of the Church and its implications for today. We would therefore like to

23 Pietro Sorci presents a salient footnote regarding A.G. Martimort, Let diaconesses. Essai historique, Rome 1982: "Martimort's conclusions, especially pp. 150-155; 246-251. To prove his thesis he chooses as a criterion the figure of the male deacon that emerges from the Ordo Romanus I of the seventh century to verify the presence or absence of a female deaconate, as if throughout the centuries the deacon did not undergo deep transformations, such as indeed occurred with the bishop and the presbyter; Martimort minimizes all the similarities and maximizes all the differences found in the ordination rites and in the functions of the deacon and the deaconess, taking for granted that the [ordained] ministry of a man and of a woman must be identical." Pietro Sorci, "The Diaconate and Other Liturgical Ministries of Women" in Phyllis Zagano, ed., Women Deacons? Essays with Answers. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2016, p. 58n6. Pietro Sorci, "Diaconato e altri ministeri liturgici della donna," in La Donna nel pensiero Cristiano antico, ed. Umberto Mattioli (Genova: Marietti Edizione, 1992), 531-64.
share our experiences and reflections with the Commission and we await its results.  

The important sentence, of course, is “In a large number of these consultations, the permanent diaconate for women was requested.” The fact that the question was referred back to a Commission that may have been charged only with historical observations can force the question into an
unending loop

In the broader comments in the Synod’s Final Document, those regarding the role of women in the Church, we find several mentions of what women can do. But we do not find indications of how they can image the risen Lord or how they can minister in the name of the Church. We do not find indications of how they can be and serve in persona Christi servi, or in nomine ecclesiae. The missing commentary seems to demonstrate what the pope means by “functionality.” It seems that, for the most part, women appear in the Final Synod Document only asfar as they are suited for and serve a purpose, not for their intrinsic nature.

Note that the prior paragraphs in the Final Synod Document to the unusual paragraph on women deacons seem hopeful. Individually, they 1) cite Francis’s intent to have a “more incisive female presence in the Church” (99); 2) point out the post-Conciliar magisterial effort to highlight “the central place that women occupy within the Church” (100); 3) state that women “should be consulted and participate in decision-making” (101); and 4) ask that the “Motu Proprio of St. Paul VI, Ministeria quaedam (1972) be revised, so that women who have been properly trained and prepared can receive the ministries of Lector and Acolyte, among others to be developed.” (102)

http://www.sinodoamazonico.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html. The original Spanish: “103. En las múltiples consultas realizadas en el espacio amazónico, se reconoció y se recálco el papel fundamental de las mujeres religiosas y laicas en la Iglesia de la Amazonía y sus comunidades, dada la multitud de servicios que ellas brindan. En un alto número de dichas consultas, se solicitó el diaconado permanente para la mujer. Por esta razón el tema estuvo también muy presente en el Sinodo. Ya en 2016, el Papa Francisco había creado una Comisión de Estudio sobre el Diaconado de las Mujeres que, como comisión, llegó a un resultado parcial sobre cómo era la realidad del diaconado de las mujeres en los primeros siglos de la Iglesia y sus implicaciones hoy. Por lo tanto, nos gustaría compartir nuestras experiencias y reflexiones con la Comisión y esperamos sus resultados.”

WOMEN AND THE DIACONATE: ORDINATING CATHOLIC WOMEN FOR MINISTRY

2. “Functionality” and the diaconate of women

However, do these Synodal suggestions point merely to “functionality” as the pope understands it? None formally requires sacramental ordination. Again, the question arises: What does the Pope mean by “functionality”? To find an answer, it is helpful to look back to the 2002/2003

ITC document on the diaconate, in which the writers concluded:

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 Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar] 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.

Please note that the French text, as corrected in 2003, is much stronger on the Magisterial teaching that the diaconate and the priesthood, part of the one holy order, are still separate and distinct offices. The French refers to “la doctrine du concile Vatican II et dans l’enseignement du Magistère postconciliaire” – the “doctrine of the Second Vatican Council” and “the post-conciliar teaching of the Magisterium.”

This finding of the International Theological Commission, that both Vatican II and post-conciliar Magisterial teaching affirm the distinction between the diaconate and the priesthood as well as the one sacrament

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ordinals/documents/documento-final-de-la-asamblea-especial-del-sinodo-de-los-obispo.html


26 The complete French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish ITC documents appear on the Vatican’s website, each with the proper wording regarding Vatican Two and the Magisterium; the Hungarian, Polish and Russian are incomplete, with a 2003 note to the Russian that the complex document would be published “shortly.”
of order, echoes the teaching contained in the 1983 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Following *Ad gentes* (1965)\(^{23}\), the 1983 *Catechism* clearly distinguishes the orders, stating in Nos.1562-1568 that priests are “bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood” that does not include the diaconate, while deacons are ordained “to serve.” Further, the *Catechism* states “The sacrament of Holy Orders marks them [deacons] with an imprint ("character") which cannot be removed, and which configures them to Christ, who made himself the ‘deacon’ or servant of all.”\(^{29}\)

The teaching of the *Catechism*, as affirmed by the ITC, was codified by Benedict XVI with *Omnium in Mentem* (2009) modifying Canons 1008 and 1009. Canon 1008 now reads: “They [those ordained] are thus consecrated and deputed so that, each according to his own grade, they may serve the People of God....” With *Omnium in Mentem* Canon 1009 gained a new, third paragraph: “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.”

The Magisterium is clear: the diaconate is not the priesthood. The confusion created by the medieval codification of the *cursus honorum* (course of honor), which stipulated that no one was to be ordained deacon unless he was to be ordained a priest, rendered the diaconate a mere stage on the way to priesthood. That is why women were no longer ordained as deacons. The diaconate had withered from a ministry of service to a purely ceremonial office and eventually, with a few exceptions, it died out in the West.

Even after the *cursus honorum* became law, women were still ordained as deacons in the West, primarily as monastic deacons\(^{30}\). But something else happened: women picked up diaconal ministry outside the cloister. In successive centuries and in various localities, they ministered to the sick, they buried the dead, they catechized children, they provided for the poor.

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\(^{30}\) Successive popes conferred the privilege of ordaining women deacons in 1018, 1025, 1026, 1037, and 1049, and there is evidence that women deacons existed in Lucca, Italy under Onoene, bishop there from 1139 to 1146. Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 35, 93-96; Nicolas, *I Vescovi di Lucca*.

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WOMEN AND THE DIACONATE: ORDAINING CATHOLIC WOMEN FOR MINISTRY

We know how Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) ministered outside the cloister. We know of the efforts of Mary Ward (1585-1645) and Louise de Marillac (1591-1660) to create a non-cloistered way for women to live and minister. We know of the hundreds of thousands, even millions of women throughout the succeeding centuries who lived what we now call apostolic religious life, ministering worldwide.

While in the global North the response to a shrinking cadre of ordained ministers has often been to collapse and combine parishes, the Church in the global South recognizes the necessity for and vibrancy of local communities, especially in the Pan-Amazon region. The Pan-Amazon Synod pointed out that nearly two-thirds of those local parish communities are headed by women, mainly by apostolic women religious, who provide catechetical instruction to all, who minister to the sick and dying, and who bury the dead. In some regions, bishops have given these women parish leaders permission to solemnly baptize and to witness marriages, but these permissions are mere recognitions of the functions they perform. That is why the Synod for the Pan-Amazon implicitly asked for women deacons. That is why the Second Vatican Council restored the diaconate as a permanent office.

In his Motu Proprio *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, General Norms for Restoring the Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church (1967), Paul VI wrote:

> Although some functions of the deacons, especially in missionary countries, are in fact accustomed to be entrusted to lay men it is nevertheless “beneficial that those who perform a truly diaconal ministry be strengthened by the imposition of hands, a tradition going back to the Apostles, and be more closely joined to the altar so that they may more effectively carry out their ministry through the sacramental grace of the diaconate.” Certainly, in this way the special nature of this order will be shown most clearly. It is not to be considered as a mere step towards the priesthood, but it is so adorned with its own indelible character and its own special grace so that those who are called to it “can permanently serve the mysteries of Christ and the Church.”\(^{31}\)

Should the same logic not apply to the women who do the diaconal work of the Church? In *Lumen gentium* 29, the Council recognized the fact that deacons are ordained “not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service.

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3. The problem of symbolism: women at the altar

Women can perform all the “functions” of the deacon insofar as they are authorized by their local ordinary: they can administer baptism; they can reserve the Eucharist, distribute it, bring it as Viaticum: they can provide benediction with the Blessed Sacrament; they can witness and bless marriages; they can administer sacramentals, officiate at funerals and burials; they can preach and preside at worship and the liturgy of the Word in the absence of a priest; they can carry out the works of charity, administration, and social assistance in the name of the Church; they can promote the apostolic activities of the laity. Not only “can” women perform these functions, they do, every day in every territory.

Except. The tasks and duties of deacons, well-delineated by official documents, are and can be symbolized by their preaching during the celebration of the Mass. Only a cleric who is participating in a given Mass may preach the homily during it. The deacon can and often is the more appropriate preacher to examine and explain the Word of God from the standpoint of diaconal works. The deacon, ordained to the Word, the liturgy, and charity, can properly explain the relationship between the Word and charity formally during the liturgy.

Which brings us back to the original, rather neuralgic problem. The woman ordained as deacon, thereby admittedly able to represent Christ, the risen Lord, would participate in formal liturgies. The woman deacon would be vested. The woman deacon would properly proclaim the Gospel. The woman deacon might preach. The woman deacon would serve diaconal functions at the altar. She would touch sacred vessels. She would assist in the distribution of Communion. She would speak directly to the assembly, and even dismiss it.

The Church suffers a long history of misogyny. Can the Church of the twenty-first century accept a woman at the altar?

CONCLUSIONS

The end is where we stared from. The problem, both implicit and explicit, both historical and doctrinal, is whether a woman can be the icon of Christ, the risen Lord.

Can the Church accept an ordained woman deacon? If history is the predictor, the answer is yes. If the present is the predictor, the answer is also yes. There is no need for the ministry of women to be restricted by misogyny; there is no reason that women cannot be icons of Christ.

EXPERIENCES AS A MEMBER OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION
THE WORK EXECUTED BY THE COMMISSION

BERNARD POTIER SJ

1. The nominations

In August 2016, a Jesuit companion said to me at table: “So, you’ve been nominated again to a new pontifical commission?” I was surprised, I asked him where he’d got this information. He had read it on the Internet.

So, I went to look for myself on the Internet, and indeed, I saw that the pope, “dopo intensa preghiera e matura riflessione”, had decided to appoint a commission to study the historical facts concerning women deacons in the Church during the first millennium. The commission is made up of six men and six women, whose names are listed on the website. Mine is there, and I know a few other people who have been named. Shortly, I’ll tell you why.

It was indeed a second nomination, since I had already been a member of the International Theological Commission (= ITC) since 2014. Nevertheless, I was surprised.

I later received a letter signed on August 2, 2016 by his Eminence Mgr Parolin, Secretary of State, and enclosed a letter dated September 5, 2016 from the Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (= CDF), Mgr Ladaria.

Throughout this presentation, I will not cite any names of people from the committee, because we were required during our work to maintain absolute discretion, and I assume that such discretion remains to some extent, now that our report has been delivered. Because there were challenging developments that affect the future. There is, however, one name that I will sometimes mention, that of Ms Phyllis Zagano, here present, Research Professor at Hofstra University in New York. Because not only did she and I work a lot together, during the two years of the commission, that is until June 2018, but then we continued to collaborate for conferences carried out together in the United States (January 2019, Fordham