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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Christians Must Reach Out to the Oppressed

By Robert F. Stamps

Abstract: This paper recommends that the Catholic Church reflect on its past and current exclusion of women from the diaconate and exclusion of those who identify as LGBTQI from full participation in the Church. This paper argues the early Catholic church was enriched and broadened by women who served in many roles including as leaders of the church in their communities. In the two millennium since then women, individually and collectively, have continued to enrich the church both theologically and as exemplars of Jesus' message to serve the poor. This paper also argues that Saint Paul did not condemn same-sex attraction in his letters. Instead, he was condemning pedophiles. Later, the church became virulently homophobic, with church leaders wrongly citing Paul's condemnation of pedophiles as the basis for its rejection of people with same-sex attraction. The church later expanded its exclusionary practices to encompass all LGBTQI people, which is inconsistent with Jesus' message to reach out to the oppressed. This paper recommends that the church welcome women as eligible for the diaconate and that it gather the LGBTQI community within its loving embrace without prejudice.

Keywords: Diaconate, Women, Same-Sex, LGBTQI

I. Introduction

Recently, a colleague posed the following question to a group of theology students: If you could have thirty minutes with Pope Francis, what would you talk about?

After a few minutes of thought I replied that Jesus was a champion for the oppressed. Without prioritizing one over the other, I said that two of the most oppressed communities within, or seeking access to, the Catholic Church are women and the LGBTQI community.¹ Half of the allotted time would

¹ This acronym describes the oppressed lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, and intersex people (the rounding out of the common shorthand "LGBTQI").



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be used to urge that women be allowed into the diaconate;² and the other half of the time to urge the LGBTQI community be welcomed into full participation within the church. Since it is unlikely that I will have the opportunity to address these issues to the Pope, I will explain them here.

II. Historical Basis for Welcoming Women into the Diaconate

The New Testament details the life, message, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and the actions and letters of the Apostles. The New Testament opens by describing the genealogy of Jesus and includes in Jesus' genealogy three outstanding, loyal, and clever women from the Old Testament.³ The *Gospel According to Matthew*, the first book in the New Testament lists these women. The first of these women is Tamar, whose story of how she outfoxed her father-in-law and became mother to the tribe of Judah is told in Genesis.⁴ The second is Rahab, who helped Joshua capture the city of Jericho and was an ancestor of King David.⁵ The third woman is Ruth, whose story of great loyalty to her mother-in-law is told in the Old Testament book that bears her name.⁶ Ruth was the great-grandmother of King David.⁷ A fourth woman in the genealogy of Jesus is Mary, who was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus.⁸

There were other notable women memorialized in the Old Testament who contributed richly to the faith and traditions of the Catholic church. Deborah, a prophet, was judging Israel during the time

² See, e.g., *Lumen Gentium, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964. At paragraph 29, *Lumen Gentium* explains that "... deacons ... (are in) a ministry of service." People in the diaconate may "... serve in the ... liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God. It is the duty of the deacon ... to administer baptism solemnly, to be custodian and dispenser of the Eucharist, to assist at and bless marriages in the name of the Church, to bring Viaticum to the dying, to read the Sacred Scripture to the faithful, to instruct and exhort the people, to preside over the worship and prayer of the faithful, to administer sacramentals, to officiate at funeral and burial services." Available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html#.

³ Matthew 1:3-5.

⁴ Genesis 38:6-26.

⁵ Joshua 2:1-16; 6:17-25.

⁶ The Book of Ruth.

⁷ Ruth 4:17.

⁸ Matthew 1:16; 18-25.

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the Lord “sold (Israel) . . . into the power of the Canaanite king . . .”⁹ the Israeli army sought Deborah’s guidance, and she advised the army on a strategy for defeating the Canaanite forces. The Israeli commander, however, refused to proceed unless Deborah came with the army. Deborah replied that “certainly . . . (I will) go with you . . . but you will not gain glory for the expedition . . . for it is into a woman’s power that the Lord (will defeat Canaan).”¹⁰ In the famous “Song of Deborah” Deborah recited that she “arose, a mother in Israel”¹¹ and, with the princes¹² defeated the Canaanites; and the Canaanite leader was killed by the woman, Jael, who was “blessed among tent-dwelling women.”¹³ Although Deborah is the only woman specifically identified as a judge of Israel, there may have been other women who judged Israel.

Women also identified as prophets in early Israel include “Huldah the prophetess.”¹⁴ Judah’s King Josiah sought Huldah’s guidance. Josiah sent a priest to Huldah so she could “consult the Lord” about the book of the law that had recently been found in the temple.¹⁵ For the King to seek the guidance of a woman to convey the words of the Lord indicates that women were held in high esteem and maintained equal status with men in the religion.

Other women whose prominent positions are portrayed in the Old Testament in separate books bearing their names are Judith and Esther. Like Jael, who killed the Canaanite, Judith killed an enemy general.¹⁶ Judith, like Deborah, may also be considered to have “judged” or led Israel during a time of war for she provided the guidance that gave courage to the elders of Israel.¹⁷ Esther, unlike Judith who

⁹ Judges 4:2-4.

¹⁰ Judges 4:9.

¹¹ Judges 5:7.

¹² Judges 5:15.

¹³ Judges 5:24-27. See, also, in addition to the Song of Deborah, the courage of Jael is told in Judges 4:17-22.

¹⁴ 2 Kings 22:14.

¹⁵ Many scholars believe that the “book of the law” that was found in the temple and brought to King Josiah is the book of Deuteronomy. See, e.g., John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 166.

¹⁶ Judith 13:8.

¹⁷ Judith 8:9-27. The first-century Pope, St. Clement, in the “First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians,” writes in 1 Clem. 55:3-5 that “many women being strengthened through the grace of God have performed many manly deeds. The blessed Judith . . . asked of the elders that she might be suffered to go forth” and expose herself to peril so that “the Lord delivered . . . (the enemy) into the hands of a woman.”



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used a weapon to save Israel, adopted intelligence, courage, and cunning to persuade the King of Persia to save the people of Israel.¹⁸

In Jesus' final days, after the authorities took Jesus into custody his male disciples abandoned him and hid. It was only his female disciples who had the courage to remain and attend the crucifixion of Jesus.¹⁹ Mary the mother of Jesus, as detailed in the *Gospel According to John*, was at his crucifixion, along with her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.²⁰ Even after the tomb was closed with a huge rock, Mary Magdalene and another woman remained at the tomb.²¹ Mary the mother of Jesus is widely revered within the church and is celebrated for the *Canticle of Mary*.²² Mary's continuing presence in the lives of Christian worshipers is also celebrated in many places including in Europe at Lourdes²³ and in the Americas in Mexico City.²⁴ The women who followed Jesus did not run and hide like the male disciples, but instead continued bravely to serve Jesus even after they thought he had died. Mary Magdalene and another woman were at Jesus' tomb when Joseph of Arimathea had Jesus' body wrapped in clean linen and laid in the tomb.²⁵

¹⁸ Esther 7:1-6. Pope Clement, in the "First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians," writes in 1 Clem. 55:6 that Esther exposed herself to peril and "was perfect in faith . . . that she might deliver the twelve tribes of Israel, when they were on the point to perish." And God, "seeing the humility of her soul, delivered the people for whose sake she encountered the peril."

¹⁹ Matthew 27:55 recounts "there were many women there, looking on from a distance."

²⁰ John 19:25. The *Gospel According to Matthew*, at 27:56 states the women at Jesus' crucifixion included Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph. The *Gospel According to Mark*, at 15:40 describes the women as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. The *Gospel According to Luke* does not identify the women at the crucifixion, but at 23:49 refers to them as "the women who had followed him from Galilee." Please note that Mary Magdalene's reputation was sullied by Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century when he wrongly and mistakenly associated her with adultery and sin. See, e.g., Tully, T.M., *Collusion or Critique? Reading the Exorcism of Mary Magdalene through a Postcolonial Optic*, *Bulletin of the Study of Religion*, 48, Nos 3-4, (2019), 26-40, 27. The differences in the identities of the women at the crucifixion does not negate that all the women described in the various gospels were present. The authors of the gospels chose which women to include in their narratives. The important fact is that Jesus was abandoned by his male disciples, but the female disciples remained with him at the crucifixion.

²¹ Matthew 27:61 identifies the second woman as "the other Mary." Mark 15:47 identifies the second woman as "Mary the mother of Joses."

²² Luke 1:46-55. The *Canticle* is also known as the *Magnificat*, from the first word of the *Canticle* in Latin. It is incorporated into the Catholic Liturgy.

²³ Our Lady of Lourdes.

²⁴ Our Lady of Guadalupe, also known as the Virgin of Guadalupe.

²⁵ Matthew 27:57-61. Matthew identified the second woman as "the other Mary."

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Following the sabbath, women were the first people to visit Jesus' tomb after His resurrection.²⁶ First was Mary Magdalene, a devoted follower of Jesus.²⁷ Then came the other women who followed Jesus.²⁸ Mary Magdalene and another woman returned to the tomb where an angel told them to find Jesus' disciples and let them know Jesus was "raised from the dead, and . . . is going before you to Galilee (and) there you will see him."²⁹ In the *Gospel According to Mark*, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene.³⁰ However, the disciples doubted the women's stories until Jesus appeared to the disciples and rebuked them for their disbelief.³¹

Another telling event about the importance of women in the early Catholic church occurred when Saint Peter raised a woman who had died and restored her to life. The woman was a *disciple* named Tabitha, who occupied herself with good deeds and almsgiving.³² The idea of a woman as a disciple is consistent with the key roles that women occupied during the formative years of Christianity. In the *Gospel According to Luke* we are reminded that Jesus appointed more than seventy people to go forth spreading the news that the kingdom of God is here.³³ The seventy may have included women such as Tabitha, because Jewish women during the first century had the opportunity to obtain education, engage in society, economics, and religion, and own homes, etc.³⁴ Since women could engage in these

²⁶ Matthew 28:1 identifies the women who visited Jesus' tomb as "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary." Mark 16:1 identifies the women as "Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome." Luke 24:10 identifies them as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. As with the gospels' identification of the women who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion, the differences in the gospels' identification does not detract from the narrative; instead, the gospels reinforce the narrative that Jesus' female disciples remained loyal and accepted the risk of remaining faithful.

²⁷ Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; John 20:1.

²⁸ John 20:14-16; Mathew 28:9.

²⁹ Matthew 28:1-7. Matthew identifies the second woman as "the other Mary." See, also, Mark 16:1 which relates that "when the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they might go and anoint him."

³⁰ Mark 16:9-11.

³¹ Mark 16:14. It is interesting to speculate whether Jesus would also rebuke the church for failing to recognize women as appropriate candidates for the diaconate.

³² Acts 9:36-41. Acts 9:36 reads: "Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha . . ."

³³ Luke 10:1-12.

³⁴ See, e.g., Amy-Jill Levine, "Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made About Early Judaism," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed., ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 759-763.



educational and economic activities it is conceivable that many of the seventy could have been women; and may be the reason why Tabitha is identified in the text as a disciple.

When Paul visited Corinth, he stayed with a married couple, Aquila and Priscilla.³⁵ Later, when Paul traveled to Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla accompanied him. In Ephesus, a man from Alexandria named Apollos spoke and taught about Jesus but did not know Jesus' complete message.³⁶ When Apollos began to speak in the synagogue, Priscilla and Aquila "took him aside and explained to him" the teachings of Jesus.³⁷ Priscilla was the equal of Aquila in this endeavor and is even listed first in the text describing it. This is more evidence that in the early Christian church woman had a coequal role with men in proselytizing the teachings of Jesus.

Saint Paul occupies a unique position in the Christian church as a key Apostle who never met the historical Jesus. Instead, he met the post-resurrection living Jesus and had a dramatic conversion.³⁸ Paul was transformed from persecuting Christians to evangelizing Jesus' message of love, forgiveness, and redemption.³⁹ As feminist liberation theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether notes, ". . . the greatest prophets and Apostles of Scripture, such as Paul, could be true vessels of God's word only to the extent they acknowledged and made themselves 'nothing,' so God could be all in all in and through them."⁴⁰ This passage from Ruether refers to her analysis of medieval nun, gifted mystic and theologian Hildegard of Bingen. According to Ruether Hildegard believed that "humans, male or female, cannot expect to speak truth or live in a holy manner unless they empty themselves and allow God to use them as a vehicle of grace."⁴¹ This reflects Paul's description of Jesus as one who "emptied himself" and was exalted by God.⁴²

Paul helped grow the religion of Christianity through his unceasing efforts to share the message in Jesus' teachings and the promise of the resurrection for all. Paul, sustained by the Holy Spirit, suffered beatings, imprisonment and ultimately death for sharing the message of eternal life promised by

³⁵ Acts 18:1-2.

³⁶ Acts 18:24-25.

³⁷ Acts 18:26.

³⁸ Acts 9:3-6.

³⁹ See, e.g., Acts Chapters 9 through 28.

⁴⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women – Three Medieval Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 12-13.

⁴¹ Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 12.

⁴² Philippians 2:7-9.



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Jesus. Paul, while supporting women's equality and the role of women as leaders in the church, also unfortunately appeared at times to be less supportive; and his less supportive words have been given precedence by the church for too long.

The appropriate course of action is to embrace Paul's words supporting women's key role in the church. Perhaps the strongest indication of Paul's support for women in the church is in his *Letter to the Romans*. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome: "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a minister to the church at Cenchreae."⁴³ Paul explains to the Christians in Rome that Phoebe is to be treated in a manner worthy of the "holy ones."⁴⁴ He also refers to "Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus."⁴⁵ Paul is probably using the nickname "Prisca" to refer to Priscilla, who with her husband Aquila, traveled with Paul from Corinth to Ephesus and helped Apollos learn about Jesus. Paul also sends greetings to many others, including several women.⁴⁶ Paul was clear that "through faith we are all children of God in Jesus Christ."⁴⁷ More explicitly, Paul declared "there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁴⁸

As the Christian faith grew it was often persecuted. Two of the most revered women of the early church are Saints Perpetua and Felicity, who in the year 203, converted to Christianity and were martyred.⁴⁹ St. Perpetua's diary has inspired Christians for almost two thousand years. As the Christian church evolved and matured it unfortunately adopted an androcentric culture that did not heed the welcoming grace and love that Jesus shared for the oppressed, including women. However, there were multiple outstanding women whose lives and works have served as encouragement and revelation to generations of Christians. Among these are Christian mystic, writer and preacher Hildegard of Bingen (1099-1179); Christian mystic and writer Mechthild of Magdeburg (1212-1277); Christian anchoress,

⁴³ Romans 16:1

⁴⁴ Romans 16:2.

⁴⁵ Romans 16:3-4.

⁴⁶ Romans 16:6-15.

⁴⁷ Galatians 3:26.

⁴⁸ Galatians 3:28. The complete text of this passage is that in Christianity "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ." Extending this quote to its logical conclusion one can confidently assert that if as Paul writes gender is discounted, the Christian church must not create an artificial distinction based on gender preference, or between gay and straight, because all are one in Jesus Christ.

⁴⁹ *The Passion of St. Perpetua, St. Felicitas, and Their Companions.*

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mystic and writer Julian of Norwich (1343-1416); lay member of the Dominican Order, mystic and writer Catherine of Siena (1347-1380); mystic, writer and worker among the poor Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510); Carmelite nun, mystic, theologian and author Teresa of Avila (1515-1582); Catholic political activist and writer Dorothy Day (1897-1980); and Catholic nun and missionary Mother Teresa (1910-1997).⁵⁰

The contributions of these women to Christian theology, literature and teaching how to love as Jesus did are too voluminous for this paper, however it is pertinent to focus on Hildegard of Bingen and Mother Teresa as exemplars of Christian piety, perseverance, and service. Hildegard recognized her devotion to Christianity at an early age and embarked on a cloistered life at the age of eight. However, the confines of the cloister did not stop Hildegard from becoming a major theological force, authoring books on theology and medicine, writing plays, composing music, and engaging in exceptional correspondence with political leaders, priests, bishops, archbishops and even Pope Eugene III. In addition, Hildegard was known for preaching and traveled within Germany preaching to great acclaim.⁵¹

Mother Teresa was a religious visionary and dedicated missionary to the poor in Calcutta (now Kolkata), India.⁵² Mother Teresa recognized the “intimate union with Jesus and the work for the poor” as she set out to win souls for Jesus.⁵³ She founded the Missionaries of Charity, a Catholic religious congregation active worldwide whose members take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience and work with the poorest of the poor: the “sick, the dying, the beggars and the little street children.”⁵⁴ Both Hildegard and Mother Teresa were celebrities in their eras, which stoked the anger and resentment of androcentric elements of the Christian establishment.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Abba Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1999); Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women – Three Medieval Mystics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and G.I. Alpion, “The Emergence of Mother Teresa as a Religious Visionary and the Initial Resistance to her Charism/a,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 8, no. 1 (2014): 25-50.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Silvas, *Jutta & Hildegard*; Ruether, *Visionary Women*.

⁵² Id, Alpion, “The Emergence of Mother Teresa as a Religious Visionary and the Initial Resistance to her Charism/a.”

⁵³ Id, Alpion, “The Emergence of Mother Teresa as a Religious Visionary and the Initial Resistance to her Charism/a,” 30.

⁵⁴ V.M. Parachin, “Mother Teresa: Love in Action,” *The Priest*, 72, no. 9 (2016): 21-24, 22).

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 28-29; and Alpion, “The Emergence of Mother Teresa as a Religious Visionary and the Initial Resistance to her Charism/a,” 32.

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More recently, the career of African-American Sr. Thea Bowman demonstrates the awesome gifts for education, oratory, song, loving kindness, and witness that women bring to the Catholic church. With roots in mid-twentieth century racially segregated Mississippi, Sr. Thea converted to Catholicism at the age of ten and at fifteen traveled to La Crosse, Wisconsin to study with and join the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.⁵⁶ Earning her Doctorate, Sr. Thea instructed at all levels of academia and “taught the first Black Studies course at the Catholic University of America . . .”⁵⁷ Sr. Thea was also notable for bringing African-American spiritual music to the liturgy.⁵⁸ Her career as a “musician, song leader, scholar, educator, and cultural advocate” was powerful in promoting “justice and . . . the well-being of the Black Catholic community.”⁵⁹ In 1989, shortly before her untimely death from cancer, Sr. Thea addressed the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Her presentation to the Bishops began with an emotional rendition of the traditional African-American spiritual “Sometimes I feel Like a Motherless Child.”⁶⁰ Sr. Thea explained to the Bishops “there was no ‘home’ for Black Catholics in a church that devalued Black leaders, community, and consultation.”⁶¹ The Catholic church has since made efforts to be more inclusive of the Black community; however, Sr. Thea’s words could equally argue that women feel like a Motherless Child and they cannot find a true “home” in a church that does not value their leaders and community.

In 2005, a distinguished group of Catholic women commentators were asked to write an open letter to Pope Benedict XVI shortly after he was elected to head the Catholic Church.⁶² The messages from these Catholic women are as forceful and relevant today as when written two decades ago. For example, Diana Hayes (Theologian, Author) recommended the Church adopt openness, regardless of

⁵⁶ Kim Harris, “Sister Thea Bowman: Liturgical Justice Through Black Sacred Song,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 35, no. 1 (2017): 99-124, 102-104.

⁵⁷ Harris, “Sister Thea Bowman,” 116.

⁵⁸ Harris, “Sister Thea Bowman,” 124.

⁵⁹ Harris, “Sister Thea Bowman,” 124.

⁶⁰ Harris, “Sister Thea Bowman,” 100. Sr. Thea also recorded the song on her 1988 stereo-cassette “Songs of My People.” Her speech to the Conference of Catholic Bishops is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOV0nQkjuoA>.

⁶¹ Harris, “Sister Thea Bowman,” 101.

⁶² Joan Chittister, “Dear Pope Benedict . . .,” *U.S. Catholic*, 70, no. 6 (Jun 2005), 35-38. The contributors are Diana Hayes; Dolores Curran; Jeanette Rodriguez-Holguin; Donna Hanson; Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza; Sr. Elizabeth Johnson; Rosemary Radford Ruether; Sr. Christine Vladimiroff; Patricia Livingston; Sr. Theresa Kane, Sr. Agnes Cunningham, and Margaret Farley.

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gender and to “be open to the reality of women and their gifts . . .”⁶³ Dolores Curran (Author) succinctly observed that “today’s women find the world open to them and the church closed.”⁶⁴ Sister Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J. (Theologian, Author) reminded Pope Benedict XVI that “when John Paul II visited . . . (the United States) in 1979” he was asked to “listen to the cries of women for full participation in the ministries of the church” because the “subliminal message sent to women . . . (is) they are not worthy to represent Christ.”⁶⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether (Theologian, Author) noted the “lingering bias” of “patriarchal domination” within the Catholic leadership and suggested that “the arguments against the ordination of women ring hollow when most churches have rethought these views.”⁶⁶

The need for the Catholic church to recognize, as the authors argued, the talents of women has only become stronger, and the disparity between the church’s treatment of men and women more glaring. The contribution that the authors of the open letter could have made to the Diaconate is limitless. Their knowledge, wisdom and evangelical fervor as serving Deacons could have energized many parishes and brought numerous converts to Catholicism.

Change is, however, coming to the Christian community. Many Protestant denominations now ordain women. One of, if not the first, ordained women in the modern era was suffragette and abolitionist Antoinette Brown Blackwell who was ordained in the Congregational Church in 1853.⁶⁷ Within the Catholic Church many recognize the failed androcentric model of the past and are saddened that women are not allowed full participation in the Body of Christ.⁶⁸ A significant resource reviewing whether the Catholic Church should open the diaconate to women is *Discerning Deacons*.⁶⁹ For Catholic women who are called to the ministry by the Holy Spirit the agony of their dilemma is real: affiliate with

⁶³ Chittister, “Dear Pope Benedict . . .,” 35.

⁶⁴ Chittister, “Dear Pope Benedict . . .,” 36.

⁶⁵ Chittister, “Dear Pope Benedict . . .,” 37.

⁶⁶ Chittister, “Dear Pope Benedict . . .”

⁶⁷ Nancy Sue Hutton, “I am going to do it”: The Complex Question of Action in Theology and Science in the Life of America’s First Women Minister, Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell (1825-1921), *Harvard Theological Review*, 108 n. 4 (2015), 634.

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Cindy Kozal, “The Body of Christ as Community: Does a Patriarchal Hierarchy Make Sense for the Body of Christ?,” *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies* 4, no. 1 (2021).

⁶⁹ <https://discerningdeacons.org/>.

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a Protestant denomination that ordains women and find fulfillment preaching Jesus' message of love, redemption and resurrection or remain within the Catholic Church and be relegated to meaningful, but secondary, roles that prohibit them from engaging to the full extent of their commitment, call and abilities. A positive, albeit incremental, step towards full equality for women in the Catholic Church was Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter issued "Motu Proprio" *Spiritus Domini* that provides access to women to the ministries of Lector and Acolyte.⁷⁰ However, bolder action is needed to provide full equality to women in the church.

The notable contributions of so many women to Christianity and its message to the poor and oppressed, beginning with those who knew Jesus and continuing to the present, argue forcefully for women to be included as eligible for the diaconate. Beginning in the first century with ministers like Phoebe, continuing into the Middle Ages with preachers like Hildegard of Bingen, and continuing to the present with ordained Protestants like Antoinette Brown Blackwell women have demonstrated the commitment, capability, and charism to be eligible for the diaconate in the Catholic church. To continue to deny women eligibility for the diaconate not only relegates women to an oppressed status, but it deprives the whole church communion of the talents of half of its world-wide congregation. Women must be eligible to serve in the diaconate.

III. Gather into the Church's Loving Embrace all LGBTQI People Without Prejudice

It is unfortunate that Paul's condemnation of pedophilia – the sexual abuse of children – has been wrongly expanded and interpreted as condemning same-sex attraction; and by implication the entire LGBTQI community. As with increasing the role of women in the Catholic Church Pope Francis is tiptoeing into the waters of reconciliation with LGBTQI Catholics by establishing a welcoming tone.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Apostolic Letter issued "Motu Proprio" *Spiritus Domini* by the Supreme Pontiff Francis Modifying Canon §1 of the Code of Canon Law Regarding Access of Women to the Ministries of Lector and Acolyte. January 10, 2021, available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html.

⁷¹ Joan Patricia Cavanagh, "Who Am I to Judge? Pastoral Practices Toward LGBT Students in American Jesuit Colleges," PhD diss., Fordham University, 2017, ProQuest (AAT 10280626), 1. This builds on the significant contribution of scholars advocating on behalf of the oppressed members of the LGBTQI community; see, e.g., Jeffrey Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

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Pope Francis said “(a) gay person who is seeking God, who is of good will – well, who am I to judge him? The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this very well. It says one must not marginalize these persons; they must be integrated into society. The problem isn't this (homosexual) orientation – we must be like brothers and sisters.”⁷² Pope Francis, in reaching out to the LGBTQI community is “carving out a much-needed space” for the LGBTQI community in the Catholic Church.⁷³ This is a helpful step forward, but there is much more to be accomplished to fully welcome the LGBTQI community into the Body of Christ. A significant step forward would be a formal acknowledgement by the church that the translators of his letters have consistently misquoted Paul.

Paul's role was critical to forming the early Christian church and he welcomed all oppressed peoples who sought to know Jesus and learn His teachings.⁷⁴ The misperception that Paul condemned same-sex attraction is derived from the mistranslation of the original Greek rendition of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 that reads: “Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor boy prostitutes nor sodomites⁷⁵ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.” The mistranslation reflects an instinctive and unsupported inculcation of the androcentric nature of the Greco-Roman, and medieval, cultures and the various prejudices of the people who translated this passage. In the phrase “boy prostitutes nor sodomites,” Paul was condemning the rape of young boys by adult male catamites.

Beyond the misinterpretation of Paul's opposition to catamites there is no prejudice against gay individuals in the New Testament. Prejudice against gay people arose within the western Christian

⁷² Pope Francis, as quoted by Cavanagh, “Who Am I to Judge?,” 1.

⁷³ James Martin, S.J., “Pope Francis is Making Space for LGBT People in the Church – with Limits. And it's a Huge Step Forward,” *America*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/09/23/james-martin-pope-francis-lgbt-241483>.

⁷⁴ See, e.g., Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).

⁷⁵ The term “sodomites” has been commonly interpreted by the Christian church to prohibit gay or same-sex relationships. As pointed out by John Skalko “Is Sodomy Against Nature? A Thomistic Appraisal,” *The Heythrop Journal* HeyJ LVI (2015): 759-768, at 763; the term “sodomy” is not the same as “homosexuality.” Skalko writes that “sodomy is an action, while homosexuality is a condition, an attraction towards members of the same sex. Not all those who engage in sodomy are necessarily homosexual, nor do all homosexuals engage in sodomy.”

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church as the Roman Empire began to collapse.⁷⁶ The prejudice in the church against gay people increased after the fall of the Roman Empire and in the millennium and a half that followed. Fourth century Archbishop of Constantinople Saint John Chrysostom believed same-sex attraction was contrary to both law and nature.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, one of Chrysostom's motivations was his misinterpretation of Saint Paul's condemnation of pedophilia. So, too, Saint Augustine, the fifth century Bishop of Hippo, from his earliest writings condemned same-sex attraction. In his *Confessions*, he wrote "(b) by the same token, vices contrary to nature⁷⁸ are everywhere and always to be detested and punished."⁷⁹ Justinian, the 6th century Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, linked homosexuality as a cause of natural disasters and enacted legislation proscribing homosexuality.⁸⁰ Although some writers believe it is "plausible that homosexuality was common and accepted in the early and high Middle Ages among knights and nobility in Europe and England," they acknowledge that "ecclesiastical denunciations of homosexuality began to reappear in the 11th century, with homosexuality among the clergy becoming a target of persistent criticism."⁸¹ By the 12th century the Council of Nablus specified that homosexuals be burned at the stake.⁸² The prejudice against homosexuals existed for centuries and as late at the mid-twentieth century the Nazi government sent homosexuals to concentration camps.⁸³

⁷⁶ See, e.g., Chris L. de Wet, "John Chrysostom on Homoeroticism," *Neotestamentica* 48, no. 1 (2014): 187-218, 195-199, describing Saint John Chrysostom's condemnation of same-sex attractions.

⁷⁷ De Wet, "John Chrysostom on Homoeroticism," 196.

⁷⁸ When Augustine refers to "vices contrary to nature" he is referring to same-sex attraction.

⁷⁹ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), Kindle Edition. See, also, Catholic Answers; "What the Early Church Believed: Homosexuality," Catholic Answers, <https://www.catholic.com/tract/early-teachings-on-homosexuality>.

⁸⁰ David F. Greenberg and Marcia H. Bystry, "Christian Intolerance of Homosexuality," *American Journal of Sociology* 88, no. 3 (1982): 515-548, 530.

⁸¹ Greenberg and Bystry, "Christian Intolerance of Homosexuality," 532-533.

⁸² Greenberg and Bystry, "Christian Intolerance of Homosexuality," 533. Oddly, Greenberg and Bystry speculate that as the church favored celibacy and "suppressed priestly marriage . . . the stronger was the homosexual drive it must have aroused within its ranks (538)."

⁸³ Erik N. Jensen, "The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness: Gays, Lesbians, and the Memory of Nazi Persecution," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1/2, Special Issue: Sexuality and German Fascism (Jan. - Apr. 2002): 319-349, 320. See, also, Sarah Emanuel, "Letting Judges Breathe: Queer Survivance in the Book of Judges and Gad Beck's *An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin*," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44, no. 3 (2020): 394-419.



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As noted above, Paul's condemnation against catamites was misinterpreted for centuries as applying to all same-sex relations. Despite the length of time in which the prejudice against gay individuals has existed in the Christian church it must be recognized that the prejudice against gay people is not consistent with the teachings of Jesus (or Paul) and must be abandoned. Gay individuals have been oppressed and suffered long enough and must be welcomed into the full fellowship of the Catholic Church.

New Testament scholar, professor and writer Victor Paul Furnish has written that "(s)trictly speaking . . . there is nothing in the Bible, including the letters of Paul, about homosexuality."⁸⁴ Furnish writes that the concept of homosexuality did not emerge until the second half of the nineteenth century, and the coining of a term for people who are erotically oriented towards their own sex originated around that time in Germany.⁸⁵

The verses in the New Testament that have been interpreted as prohibiting same-sex relations are in Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians* (quoted above), Paul's *First Letter to Timothy*⁸⁶ and Paul's *Letter to the Romans*.⁸⁷ Despite Paul's real purpose in condemning catamites, the translations mistakenly used the term "sodomites." The *Saint Joseph Pocket Edition of The New Testament in the New Catholic Bible*⁸⁸ in the "Notes" section examines the translation of the word "sodomites" in both 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10 and explains that the translations of the Greek into the English word "sodomites" is in error; and that a more accurate word is "catamites" because Paul was condemning "adult males who have relations with boy prostitutes".⁸⁹

Supporting the argument that Paul's intention was to limit his criticism to the practices of the catamites – and that the word "sodomites" is too broad – is the closeness in proximity in the text of the

⁸⁴ Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, 3rd Edition, Kindle Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 56. (Note: for Furnish, page numbers are to the Kindle edition as read on an iPhone.)

⁸⁵ Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, 56.

⁸⁶ Timothy 1:8-10 reads: "We know that the law is good . . . (and applies to) the lawless and unruly, the godless and sinful, the unholy and profane, those who kill their fathers or mothers, murderers, the unchaste, sodomites . . ."

⁸⁷ Romans 1:26-27 reads: "Therefore, God handed them over to degrading passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and burned with lust for one another. Males did shameful things with males and thus received in their own persons the due penalty for their perversity."

⁸⁸ *The Saint Joseph Pocket Edition of The New Testament in the New Catholic Bible* (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Group, 2016).

⁸⁹ *Saint Joseph Pocket Edition of the New Testament*, 850.

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terms “boy prostitutes” and “sodomites.”⁹⁰ The term “sodomites” follows immediately after the term “boy prostitutes.” Given that catamites were the boy prostitute’s customers (or, if the boys were slaves the catamites were their owners or their owners’ designee) Paul was referring to catamites – not same-sex relationships – in his condemnation. Paul’s intent was to condemn “boy prostitutes” and the adults who abused them.

Paul was sophisticated, well read and highly educated. His choice of words in general were both specific and nuanced. Paul was nuanced and specific in the words of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. However, the translators were not nuanced and instead adopted a broad pejorative definition (e.g., “sodomites”) for Paul’s words. This is contra to the nuanced translations of the adjoining terms “fornicators” and “drunkards.”⁹¹ The term “fornicate,” from which the noun “fornicator” is derived, means to “have sex with someone that you are not married to.”⁹² And the word “drunkards” is the plural of “drunkard,” which is defined as “a person who often drinks large amounts of alcohol.”⁹³ Rather than just condemning catamites, the inclusion of all same-sex relations in the word “sodomites” in the translation of the Greek text into the English is broad and unfocused. This translation is unlike the nuanced and focused adoption of the words “fornicators” and “drunkards.” The word “fornicators” is specific to non-marital sexual relations – not to all sexual relations,⁹⁴ and the word “drunkards” excludes social drinking. That Paul was not opposed to social drinking is clear from the letter Paul wrote to Timothy advising him to “(s)top drinking only water, but have a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.”⁹⁵

⁹⁰ I Corinthians 6:9 reads: “Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers *nor boy prostitutes nor sodomites . . .*” (Italics mine).

⁹¹ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

⁹² Cambridge Dictionary, “Fornicator,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fornicator>.

⁹³ Cambridge Dictionary, “Drunkard,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/drunkard>.

⁹⁴ The prohibition on fornicators is arguably applicable to females, unlike the prohibition on sodomites. In this regard, *see*, Ken Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19: Subject-Honor, Object-Shame?,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 67 (1995): 98, notes that “(i)t is important to stress that female homosexual contact is not mentioned at all in the Hebrew Bible.” As Paul’s moral code was derived from the Hebrew Bible his failure to denounce female same-sex relations supports the inference that he was not denouncing male same-sex relations; but was instead limiting his condemnation to catamites.

⁹⁵ 1 Timothy 5:23.

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When Paul arrived in Corinth around 51 CE⁹⁶ it was a prosperous bustling boom town,⁹⁷ although, as is common with seaports of the time it was known for its moral depravity.⁹⁸ When Paul wrote the scathing words in Romans 1:26-27 quoted above he was in Corinth,⁹⁹ where he also condemned the practice of catamites' relations with boy prostitutes.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, his condemnation in this passage from Romans was likely addressed to the same catamite-boy prostitute relationship that he found so abhorrent in his letters to the Corinthians and to Timothy.

Paul's significant contribution to Christianity is what he says about the gospel he was called to proclaim.¹⁰¹ Paul brought to the Greco-Roman world and the Gentiles the news of a "just, loving and faithful God . . . and that humankind . . . is . . . redeemed, renewed and restored by God's unconditional love".¹⁰² The Christian message, exemplified by Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount,¹⁰³ reaches out to the oppressed, the outcasts, and the poor; and pleads for people to be merciful. Paul preached Jesus' message that urged all people to love, and to refrain from being judgmental. In *The Gospel According to Luke*, Jesus said: ". . . love your enemies and do good to them . . . then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as [also] your Father is merciful. Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned."¹⁰⁴ Jesus' message of love and forgiveness does not contain boundaries; and it does not exclude any people. It is universal and unrestricted. And Jesus wants his followers to be proactive in their outreach and love. Clearly Jesus does not want his followers to condemn anyone, because of the boomerang effect that results: that the person who condemns will also be condemned. Jesus wants his followers to reach out to the oppressed and let them know they are loved; that they are loved by God, by Jesus and by his followers: the Christian church. The Christian

⁹⁶ Introduction to "The First Letter to The Corinthians," in *The New American Bible* (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., Revised Ed., 2011), 242. See, also, William A. McDonald, "Archaeology and St. Paul's Journeys in Greek Lands III – Corinth," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 5, no. 3 (Sep 1942): 36-48, 36.

⁹⁷ McDonald, "Archaeology and St. Paul's Journeys in Greek Lands III – Corinth," 36-48.

⁹⁸ *The New American Bible*, 242.

⁹⁹ McDonald, "Archaeology and St. Paul's Journeys in Greek Lands III – Corinth," 47.

¹⁰⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

¹⁰¹ Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, 91.

¹⁰² Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, 90-91.

¹⁰³ Matthew 5:1-12.

¹⁰⁴ Luke 6:35-37.



church must emulate Jesus and extend its love to everyone, regardless of the individual's sexual or gender preference.

The gospel of love that Jesus taught also included the promise that he is “the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”¹⁰⁵ Jesus does not exclude anyone from this promise; he opens his grace to whoever believes in him. This promise surely includes LGBTQI individuals who embrace Christianity. And the early church leaders, when welcoming Gentiles into Christianity, wrote in their letter to the church in Antioch that “it is the decision of the Holy Spirit and also our decision not to lay any further burden upon you beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from food that has been sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of animals that have been strangled, and from unchastity. If you avoid these, you will be doing what is right.”¹⁰⁶ That the church council delivering this message included the Holy Spirit as part of the decision-making process is profound. As part of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit has great authority.

Neither Jesus, the Apostles, nor Paul criticized people with same-sex attraction. The prejudice against same-sex attraction evolved in the church in the centuries following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. There were several factors influencing the growing prejudice within the church about same-sex relations. These factors included a gradual rejection of Hellenistic practices, the growing importance of the Jewish Old Testament within the church and the extreme homophobic attitudes of the invading tribes that destroyed the Roman Empire.

Sadly, even when Paul's words are translated properly, those opposed to the LGBTQI community being accepted into the Body of Christ retreat into the Old Testament for support. They most often quote Leviticus 18:22 that reads “you shall not lie with a male as with a woman;” and the resulting punishment in Leviticus 20:13 that states “if a man lies with a male as with a woman . . . they shall be put to death.” Even though the people opposed to the LGBTQI community fixate on these words from Leviticus they ignore many of the other prohibitions in Leviticus. Their reliance on Leviticus is just a mask to conceal their homophobia. The law of Moses contained many rules for the people of ancient Israel. These included kosher dietary laws,¹⁰⁷ prohibitions on breeding domestic animals with a different

¹⁰⁵ John 11:25-26.

¹⁰⁶ Acts 15:28-29, *Saint Joseph Pocket Edition*.

¹⁰⁷ Leviticus 11:1-47; Deuteronomy 14:3-21.



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species and wearing garments woven of two different threads,¹⁰⁸ and it prohibits men from spoiling the edges of their beards.¹⁰⁹ The Christians who point to Leviticus to condemn same-sex relations do not maintain Kosher, do not condemn the breeding of mules by breeding a donkey with a horse, actively wear cloths made from blends of different fibers, and often have trimmed facial hair such as mustaches, goatees, or mutton chop sideburns. Leviticus also prohibits tattoos,¹¹⁰ though many Christians practice body art without comment from those who oppose the LGBTQI community.

Jesus replaced the law with faith.¹¹¹ Ignoring the totality of Leviticus, while quoting isolated passages of Leviticus to support prejudice, is wrong. Christians should not cite Leviticus as authority to exclude LGBTQI people from full membership in the church. To do so is intensely hypocritical. To do so treats the law of Moses as an ethical smorgasbord from which false morality can be chosen like a dish of herring or a bowl of salad at a lunch bar, while other dishes are left untouched.

IV. Conclusion

The opportunity to speak with the Pope and prayerfully request the church welcome women into eligibility for the diaconate and lovingly embrace the LGBTQI community without prejudice may not be possible. As Jesus rebuked the disciples for disbelieving Mary Magdalene's and the other women's message of his resurrection so the church must place more faith in women and welcome them to the diaconate.

Surely, the Pope knows that many LGBTQI people were raised as, or became, Christians and were baptized and confirmed into the Church. Many LGBTQI members were active in the church before they recognized their sexual orientation or true gender identity. The reality is that these LGBTQI parishioners did not leave the Church; instead, the Church left them. The Church needs to reach out and welcome them back. The Church should also evangelize and welcome LGBTQI people who were not raised in the Church. The Church must strive to welcome and support the poor, the oppressed and the

¹⁰⁸ Leviticus 19:19.

¹⁰⁹ Leviticus 19:27.

¹¹⁰ Leviticus, 19:28

¹¹¹ Galatians 3:23-25.

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societal outcasts it has ignored or condemned so they can fully appreciate and participate in the Sacraments that are the heart of the Christian Church.

I may never be able to personally deliver this message to the Pope. However, if enough voices are heard crying in the wilderness about the oppression of women and LGBTQI people there may be a slow accretion of opinion that grows into a thunderclap of indignation.¹¹² Our voices must be raised to persuade the church's leadership to reaffirm Jesus' message of love and inclusivity and abandon its message of rejection. Women ought to be eligible for the diaconate and LGBTQI people must be welcomed into the church.

¹¹² As noted previously, an open letter was written to Pope Benedict XVI when he was elected to head the Catholic church. The full quote of theologian and author Diana Hayes, noted above, was broader than to just recommend the church adopt openness regardless of gender. She wrote the church should adopt openness, regardless of "race or ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, class or language."

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