



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations

---

5-6-2021

## Women in Diaconate Formation in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles

Federico Guillermo Rodriguez Hernandez  
*Loyola Marymount University*, [deaconmemo@stpascal.org](mailto:deaconmemo@stpascal.org)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rodriguez Hernandez, Federico Guillermo, "Women in Diaconate Formation in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles" (2021). *LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations*. 959.  
<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/959>

This Research Projects is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

Women in Diaconate Formation in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles

A Pastoral Synthesis Project

by

Federico Guillermo Rodriguez Hernandez

Presented to

the Faculty

of Loyola Marymount University

Department of Theological Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts in Pastoral Theology

Los Angeles, California

April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Director Signature:



Director  
Cecilia González-  
Andrieu

5/7/2021  
May 7, 2021

# **WOMEN IN DIACONATE FORMATION IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES**

## **INITIAL ARTICULATION OF THE PROBLEM**

In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the wives of married applicants to Permanent Diaconate Formation are required to attend classes and other events and to at least read all the materials their husbands are required to read, reflect upon, and write about. For many of these women, their participation in this program represents an opportunity to grow, but for some, it is too much, and for others, it is too little. How can Diaconate Formation be made more meaningful and fruitful for the women who participate in it?

## **DESCRIPTIVE NARRATIVE OF THE PROBLEM**

The formation of permanent deacons calls for the candidates to develop their skills and grow as intentional disciples of Christ in four main dimensions: intellectual, spiritual, pastoral, and human development. If a candidate is married, he does not only need the express permission of his wife to be admitted into the program, but his wife needs to agree to be involved, to a certain degree in the formation program.

Different dioceses and archdioceses implement this broad requirement in different ways. Currently, in the archdiocese of Los Angeles, the wives go through the admission process with their husbands and if admitted, they attend class and are required to read the same materials their husbands read as home assignments, they are also strongly encouraged to complete the written assignments. The wives collaborate with and support their husbands for the practical aspects of the program (practica for baptisms, funeral vigils, weddings, etc.) and engage in the various pastoral projects required of their husbands at various times during the program.

The women go through the formation program for permanent deacons, but at this point, they will not become permanent deacons. The rationale is that by receiving the same formation,

the wives will be able to communicate with their husbands better about their ministry and support them better when they minister as a “deacon couple” (perhaps not the most apt term to describe the reality of a couple in which one member is a deacon and the other one is not.)

This practice gives women an opportunity to grow in the four areas of formation together with their husbands. This is the intention of the practice and the intention is realized for many of the women that go through the program. However, it also presents some challenges. For some women, the time and workload requirements are simply too steep. While the program requires applicants to have a High School diploma, a GED or equivalent, there are no academic requirements for the wives and some of the wives have not had an opportunity to receive formal education since much earlier than the end of High School. This is an opportunity for Diaconate Formation to minister to these women. Is it possible to dedicate attention and resources to the educational need of these women? It would certainly be right and just. On the other hand, some wives have a strong academic background, sometimes in the very areas covered by the intellectual dimension of the formation program. For them, the academic content of the program is redundant and does not represent an opportunity for growth at all.

Some women come with extensive ministerial experience, for which they have also received an equally comprehensive formation. For a few of them, being told they must attend class and ready the materials but are not required to do the writing comes across as a backhanded insult, conveying the message that their efforts, not being required, are also not valuable or appreciated. Conversely, for some others even the attendance and reading requirements force them to choose between supporting their husband’s formation and other important family commitments.

While no formation program can be all things to all people, I believe it is possible to find reasonable adjustments to the formation curriculum to make the involvement of the women more

fruitful for them and for the formation community at large. I have been a facilitator for diaconate formation for over eight years and most of the candidates that have had me as their facilitators have been married. I believe we can imagine ways to do much more for this group of people who represent almost half of our formation classes.

It is worth mentioning should ordination to the permanent diaconate be opened for women, this problem would become much more complex. In addition to wives who are in the program to support their husbands who are candidates, we would have wives who are in the program as candidates themselves. We will also have husbands who would be there as candidates, like we have today, but we would also have husbands who will be there supporting their wives who are the candidates. The theological reflection of this work will remain mindful of these considerations, but the practical proposals will attempt to address only the challenges we currently have.

### **CASE STUDIES**

To protect the confidentiality of those involved, the names of people and institutions mentioned in this section have been changed. This is the story of four women: Laura, Monique, Daisy and Heather. All four women went through the diaconate formation program. All four of their husbands were ordained as permanent deacons and are active in ministry and in good standing with the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Laura comes from Latin America. She immigrated quite some time ago and has made Los Angeles home, for her and for her family. All her children are adults now, the youngest lives with her mom and dad, but the rest have moved on to start families of their own. Laura is highly active in ministry at her parish. She coordinates the Hispanic ministry at her parish, she is a Master Catechist and has been receiving ministerial formation for many years. When she and her husband joined the program, she was enthusiastic about this new formation opportunity for herself.

While she was in the year I was facilitating at the time, the policy about the requirements for women was clarified in the sense that, while reading the materials was required, writing about the readings was optional for women. She came to me in tears to express her disappointment and frustration. She felt insulted. She felt the program was telling her that her writing was not important and while the program cared about her formation, it did not care nearly as much as it did for her husband's formation.

Monique is a highly educated professional, who has had the talents and dedication needed to combine a successful career with building up a beautiful family. When she and her husband entered the formation program, she was excited to engage with a new challenge in her personal, professional, and ministerial development. Very soon reality hit: the formation program included an academic component, but it was not an academic program in its essence and while she welcomed the spiritual and human formation she was receiving, the program did not satisfy her hunger for knowledge.

By the time she went through the year I was facilitating, she had already enrolled in a post-graduate program at Ignatius Grotto University, a renowned Catholic university. She was doing well with her studies and she still managed to be my top student, including the men.

Daisy immigrated to the United States with her husband and children a few years ago. They come from Southeast Asia. Her command of the English language is good. She and her husband are very articulate, but they struggle with a rather heavy accent. Daisy has a double handicap: in her country, women do not have an easy access to higher education and because of that, there is a certain taboo about women expressing their thoughts and opinions in the presence of men.

While I never had the opportunity to be their facilitator, we met and developed a nice relationship during snack and lunch breaks. During one of those occasions, Daisy shared with my wife the struggle she was going through, not only because the academic workload was a little too heavy on her, but because she was regularly asked to participate in class and while she understood well that here in the United States she was not only allowed, but encouraged to use her voice, the taboos from her culture ran deep enough to still make the experience uncomfortable and her self-consciousness about her accent didn't make things any easier.

Heather loves her husband. She is ready to go to the end of the world and back, should he but ask her. He would do the same for her. They are a beautiful couple. Heather, however, is not interested in active ministry at this time. She goes to Mass (almost) every Sunday, has made sure her children received the sacraments at the appropriate times and with the appropriate catechetical preparation, but that is about the extent of her interest in church life. Her husband is much more involved in ministry and truly feels he is being called to diaconal service. When Heather learned she had to participate in the program, if her husband were to be admitted, she did not think it twice: of course, she would do that so her husband could pursue his goal.

A few years into the program, she was not as enthusiastic. She has missed several occasions with her children, such as soccer matches and dancing recitals that happened on a class Saturday and even a wedding in her extended family. She is now questioning whether this formation program was worth all of that. She found the reading materials uninteresting and class discussions unengaging. Her classmates were nice and that made class days bearable, but barely.

Now our problem has names and faces. What can be done to make the diaconate formation program more meaningful and fruitful for Laura, Monique, Daisy and Heather, who go through the program without finding quite what they were looking for.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

The current situation of women in diaconate formation has become a concern, because more and more stories like the ones told before are becoming less and less an exception. Our Church has had a difficult history of valuing the dignity and the ministry of women. Having these formation opportunities for women is a step in the right direction. However, when these opportunities implicitly or explicitly, intentionally, or otherwise, reduce the formation of women to an adjunct to the formation of men, we run the risk of this opportunity becoming only a half-step in the right direction, a full step in the opposite direction and a misstep altogether.

We will reflect on the two characteristics of all Christian ministry: Christian ministry is *apostolic*, that is, it is the result of being sent by Christ to minister in his name. Christian ministry is also *diaconal*, that is, it is performed as a service. Focusing on the second characteristic, we will see how all ministerial formation needs to be diaconal and therefore, diaconal formation is not intended only for those who are seeking to be ordained deacons. Considering this, women can and should also be intended primary recipients of diaconal formation.

We will explore the lives and gifts of women in our history of salvation: women from the Hebrew Scriptures, like Ruth, Esther, Hannah, Deborah, and Rahab; women from the New Testament, like Mary of Nazareth, Mary of Magdala, Martha and Mary of Bethany, Phoebe, Junia, and Photina; women saints, like St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Kateri Tekakwitha, St. Teresa of Calcutta, and many others.

We want to show how these women have been instruments of grace, made in the image and likeness of God, just as much as any man. Christ was incarnate as a human being. He took on our flesh, all our flesh. Women, just as much as men, have been perfectly capable of being icons



of Christ in this world. We will observe that being female was not a deterrent or an obstacle for women to share their gifts and talents with their community of faith.

We will also explore Church praxis in the formation of women disciples, from the New Testament to the most recent magisterium, including Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter "Motu Proprio" *Spiritus Domini* that allows women to be instituted to the ministries of lector and acolyte.

The diaconate formation program is a good program for both men and women, we just need to shift the perspective a little bit to make more explicit our understanding of women as ministers, and not just as supporters of the ministry of their husbands. We also need to make the formation curriculum better reflect that understanding. It is my hope that this work will show that these changes are possible and potentially life-giving to the Catholic community.

### **DIACONATE FORMATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

In the dioceses and archdioceses of the United States, the principles, theology, guidelines, and norms for Diaconate Formation are contained in the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*.<sup>1</sup> The Directory contemplates the presence of women in Diaconate formation only as the spouses of the men seeking ordination and never as one seeking ordination herself.

According to the Directory, even if ordained life and ministry is independent from family life, the wife of a married applicant to the formation program must give consent to her husband to apply. The Directory states: "In deciding to pursue a possible diaconal vocation, a married man must comply with the wishes of his wife, in a spirit of mutual commitment and love... The Church has determined that a married man cannot be considered for the diaconate without the consent of

---

<sup>1</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2005) (hereafter cited as Directory).

his wife.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Directory mandates some activities specifically oriented toward the wives of the men in the formation program: “To help the candidate’s wife to give an informed consent to her husband’s request for ordination, it is necessary to include specific resources and programming addressed to her.”<sup>3</sup>

The Directory establishes four dimensions for the diaconate formation program: Human, Spiritual, Intellectual, and Pastoral.<sup>4</sup> In discussing the Spiritual dimension, the Directory opens to the possibility for the program to be instrumental for the wives to grow as disciples of Christ for their own sake: “Although the fact that the wife of the married aspirant is not seeking ordination is clearly understood, nevertheless, their marriage and family are involved in the discernment of his diaconal vocation. The aspirant and his wife need to realistically assess how her own life, Church service, and family are affected and respected.”<sup>5</sup> This discernment is, however, independent from the call, or lack thereof, of the woman to the diaconate. The same discernment must happen for the men who are aspirants, and the same discernment would need to happen when it is the woman who is the aspirant to ordination.

The Directory’s main concern for the wife is for her to be fully informed and prepared to give her consent for her husband to petition ordination. It can be argued that the optimal level of readiness is achieved when husband and wife have a common understanding of the life and ministry of the permanent deacon and, since that is precisely one of major objectives of Diaconate Formation, it reasonable to conclude that providing the wives with the same formation provided

---

<sup>2</sup> Directory, 138.

<sup>3</sup> Directory, 139.

<sup>4</sup> Directory, 104ff.

<sup>5</sup> Directory, 192.

to their husbands is the best way to achieve that objective. This is the foundation for the approach taken by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles for Diaconate Formation.

### **DIACONATE FORMATION IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES**

In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Diaconate Formation is a 5-year program, the first year being called the year of “aspirancy” and the other four years are years of “candidacy.” My first contact with Diaconate Formation in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles was when I was admitted to it in 2006. At that time, the requirement for the wives was that they had to attend and participate in every class, read every assigned reading, turn in every written assignment, participate in every field education experience, and attend every rite and retreat their husbands were participating in. The only difference between men and women was in the practical aspects of formation. The men were required to participate in practica for their role as presiders in liturgical rites such as funeral vigils, baptisms, weddings; and for their role assisting the main celebrant at Mass, including the proclamation of the Gospel, and possibly preaching the homily. The women were encouraged (not required) to assist their husbands in the preparation and execution of these practica. This was presented to us as a long-standing practice regarding the involvement of women in the program.

After my ordination, when my wife and I were invited to join the formation team as facilitators, the practice initially remained unchanged. In 2015, this practice was significantly relaxed: wives were now only required full participation during the first year of formation and only encouraged for the remainder of the program. For many women in the formation program, this represented a relief, sometimes greatly needed, but for others, it came across as an insult, as a disregard for them as disciples and ministers. The practice was revised again in 2018 to reinstate the requirement for attendance, participation, and the timely completion of the reading requirements for women. The writing assignments were now to be officially required, but more

leniency was to be shown for women who were not able to turn them in in a timely fashion. At this time, it was also clarified that the participation of the wives in practical and field education activities had always been required, but each couple was to determine the mode and extent of that participation. This is the practice that remains in force in the present day.

No version of this policy and practice will ever fully satisfy the formation needs and aspirations of every one of the women in the program, but that is not the problem we have at hand. The question we are trying to address is how the program can be more conducive to inform, nourish and empower the women in the program to better discern the call God has for them and how better to respond to that call. If the program can do so for the men, why not for the women, whose baptism calls them to discipleship and apostolic ministry, the same it calls all the baptized?

### **LIFE AND MINISTRY IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES**

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse ecclesial jurisdictions in the world. By way of illustration, the archdiocesan website states that in the archdiocese, Mass is celebrated in 42 different languages, not to mention the 16 Eastern Rite Catholic Churches that have a presence in the territory of the archdiocese.<sup>6</sup>

This rich diversity manifests itself in every aspect of the life of the archdiocese and diaconate formation is no exception. Considering this, the Diaconate Formation program offers an English track and a Spanish track for formation. Every effort has been made to make the two tracks as consistent with each other as possible, but it is undeniable that resources of every kind are much more available in English than in Spanish.

---

<sup>6</sup> Archdiocese of Los Angeles, “Who We Are: LA Catholics,” LA Catholics | Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 18 December 2019, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://lacatholics.org/who-we-are/>.

Within both language tracks, cultural diversity is still rich. The Spanish track welcomes people who immigrated from all over Latin America, and even some second-generation Americans who are more comfortable praying and ministering in Spanish. The English track welcomes everyone else, including immigrants from every corner of the world, especially from Asia and the Pacific Islands.

One of the consequences of this cultural diversity is that the women who participate in the program come from cultures in which women have different accepted roles in society and the life and ministry of their faith communities. This presents a complex problem for Diaconate Formation, especially when trying to design and implement curriculum specific for women.

### **WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

In the Catholic Church, authority and decision-making power is called “power of governance” and strongly tied to ordination, as described in the Code of Canon Law: “Those who have received sacred orders are qualified, according to the norm of the prescripts of the law, for the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction.”<sup>7</sup> Since women are not eligible for ordination in the Catholic Church, they are also excluded from the exercise of the power of governance. This situation clashes with the contemporary efforts, especially in Western society, to ensure women have equal rights and are treated with equal respect and dignity to men. Pope Francis made a significant gesture along this line when, for the first time in history, he appointed a woman with the right to vote as undersecretary of the synod of bishops.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Catholic Church, *Code of Canon Law*, 1983, Vatican Website, Can. 129 §1, accessed 20 February 2021 (hereafter cited as CIC). [http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic\\_lib1-cann129-144\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib1-cann129-144_en.html).

<sup>8</sup> Gerard O’Connell, “For the First Time, Pope Francis Appoints a Woman with the Right to Vote as Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops,” *America Magazine*, 9 February 2021, accessed 24 February 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/02/06/pope-francis-women-synod-voting-nathalie-becquart-239941>.

From a more profound perspective, this practice assumes a theology in which God will never call women to positions of leadership in the Christian community and, even if historically God has again and again proven this assumption to be wrong, the practice remains.

The 2014 Religious Landscape Study from the Pew Research Center shows that, in the United States, 43% of women who identified themselves as Catholic attend religious services at least once a week, however, only 19% of them are members of prayer, scripture study or religious education groups in their churches with similar frequency.<sup>9</sup>

God bestows gifts of tenderness and nurturing on all humans, male or female. Rosemary Radford Ruether speaks of an egalitarian anthropology, which “identifies nature or order of creation of the original *imago dei* and affirms the equivalence of all human beings in this original creation.”<sup>10</sup> Women and men can reflect the tender, nurturing, life-giving love of a God who is revealed to us as Father, but who loves us with motherly love. Those who are devout to Our Lady of Guadalupe will find the most profound revelation of God in the apparitions at Tepeyac when Our Lady asks Juan Diego “*¿No estoy yo aquí, que soy tu madre?*” (the English translation “Am I not here, me that I'm your mother?” somehow does not quite convey the paradoxical force and tenderness expressed in Spanish) Particularly, in the Latinx community, women are an integral part of *la lucha* for justice and dignity for the immigrant community.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Pew Research Center, “Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics,” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, September 9, 2020, Accessed 20 February 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/catholic/gender-composition/women/>.

<sup>10</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), 102 (hereafter cited as Ruether).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 57.

“We can’t answer a call we have not received.”<sup>12</sup> Our experience in *lo cotidiano*, in *la realidad*, is that God indeed calls women to ministry and leadership in our communities. It is outside the scope of Diaconate Formation to change the theology and practice for the sacrament of Holy Orders in the Universal Church, but we are in a privileged position to contribute to making sure these women have the tools to perform the ministries God is constantly calling them to do and are formed into the ministers God is constantly calling them to be.

Deacons are called to be ministers of charity and justice, it is only fitting that Deacons and Diaconate Formation be at the frontline in the efforts of the Church to treat women more justly. There are reasons to be hopeful. Since 2016, Pope Francis has created two commissions to study the possibility to ordain women as Deacons and the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region has called for such ordination as an instrument to address the pastoral needs of the people in that region.<sup>13</sup> And even more recently, Pope Francis changed the Code of Canon Law to allow for any lay person (and not only men) to be instituted to the ministries of Lector and Acolyte.<sup>14</sup> This change can be a step in the direction of opening diaconal ordination for women.

## **A THEOLOGY FOR WOMEN IN DIACONATE FORMATION**

### **A NECESSARY DISCLAIMER**

Before we begin exploring the theological foundations and implications of the participation of women in the diaconate formation program, I need to make something clear. I am a man. I am

---

<sup>12</sup> Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, *WotC 2019 - #MineToo: Why Robust Women’s Voices are Indispensable to Church*, YouTube video, 28:52, 31 March 2020, accessed 23 February 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPeKEZ\\_n3-4&t=11s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPeKEZ_n3-4&t=11s).

<sup>13</sup> Catholic Church, “Final Document of the Amazon Synod,” Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, 103, 26 October 2019, accessed 20 February 2021, <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Francis, “Apostolic Letter issued ‘Motu Proprio’ Spiritus Domini,” The Vatican, 15 January 2021, accessed 20 February 2021, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110\\_spiritus-domini.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html).

not speaking on behalf of any woman or group of women. I am not claiming to be the “voice of those without a voice,” because I believe women are perfectly capable of finding and using their own voices. I cannot claim to have experienced myself the life experiences of women in the Church and in diaconate formation. What I can do, and in fact do, is to acknowledge women as my peers and my companions on this journey of faith, just as I hope I can be their companion. I offer my voice in dialogue and alliance. I pledge myself as fellow pilgrim to truth, justice and the fulfilment of the vocation God has for each one of us, men, and women alike.

### **THE FULL HUMANITY OF WOMEN**

Catherine Mowry LaCugna articulates fundamental theological questions about gender with blunt clarity as she writes: “Are women persons in the same way that men are persons? Is the personhood of women a full image of the triune God? Do the obvious biological differences between men and women amount to a qualitative difference in personhood? Has God eternally decreed that in the orders of creation and redemption woman be subordinate to man? If so, then who is God?”<sup>15</sup>

The answer we find in Divine Revelation is arguably just as clear: since the very beginning men and women are created as equals, in the image and likeness of God (*imago dei*). The Book of Genesis expresses this truth in the first account of Creation: “Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth. God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created *them*; male and female he created

---

<sup>15</sup> LaCugna, Catherine Mowry. “Catholic Women as Ministers and Theologians.” *America* 167, no. 10 (Oct 10, 1992): 238-248, accessed 26 January 2021 (hereafter cited as LaCugna). <http://electra.lmu.edu:2048/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.electra.lmu.edu/magazines/catholic-women-as-ministers-theologians/docview/209664019/se-2?accountid=7418>, 238.



them. [emphasis added]”<sup>16</sup> This passage from Scripture can be read in different ways: men and women are created in the full image and likeness of God separately and independently from each other; or men and women, when together and in harmony with each other, reflect the image and likeness of their Creator. Certainly, the passage cannot be twisted in any way so to exclude women from the same dignity that bearing the image and likeness bestows on men. In every respect, women are created as full human beings as men are.

The second account of Creation in the second chapter of Genesis presents a consistent, but less explicit case for gender equality. Women are presented as adequate helpers to men in a way no animal could aspire to be, but the man still exerts some sort of authority over the woman by naming her.<sup>17</sup>

Astonishingly, the clarity of the first account of Creation has not prevented patriarchal systems from trying to use the more nuanced second account, to relativize the meaning and implications of men and women both bearing the *imago dei*. Some of these attempts are made possible by what Rosemary Radford Ruether identifies as a dual structure in Christian anthropology, which distinguishes between essential (or ontological) humanity and existential humanity. Ruether writes:

Christian theological anthropology recognizes a dual structure in its understanding of humanity. This dual structure differentiates the essence from the existence of humanity. What humanity is potentially and authentically is not the same as what humanity has been historically. Historically, human nature is fallen, distorted, and sinful.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Gn 1:26-27, NABRE.

<sup>17</sup> Gn 2:20-23.

<sup>18</sup> Ruether, 93.

While this dual structure clarifies the contrast between what Scripture teaches about who we are and our own experience of hardships, limitations, and sinfulness, it also opens darker possibilities: is it possible that maleness reflects a state of humanity which is closer to humanity's full potential and original authenticity, while femaleness is closer to the historical fallen human nature?

LaCugna asserts that "an issue is theologically significant, and not just interesting from a cultural, sociological or political standpoint, if it prompts us to examine our deepest beliefs about God, about the divine-human relationship, about the nature of human personhood and human destiny."<sup>19</sup> The concern about the dignity and full humanity of women clearly fits into LaCugna's proposed category. Beyond the social justice dimension, the full dignity of woman, and in particular, women in ministry, is a theological concern and it deserves a theological response.

### **EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT ATTACKS AGAINST THE FULL HUMANITY OF WOMEN**

Ruether argues that, while the dominating patriarchal Christianity never went so far as to completely deny women's participation in the image of God, it has historically linked women more strongly to the sin-prone part of the self, stressing her "greater aptness" for sin, which therefore, can never as fully represent the image of God as man. This argument leads to affirming that the subordination of women under the domination of men is divinely ordained and would have been necessary even in "paradise", but even more so in the fallen, historical conditions of humanity after Original Sin. Women should be subjugated to men, not only because women are inferior to men, but ultimately, because that is the role God assigned to them since the beginning.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> LaCugna 239.

<sup>20</sup> Ruether 94-98.

Mary Daly likens this notion of a divinely ordained subordination of women to the domination of men to a “caste” system. Daly argues that this sexual caste system could not be perpetuated without the consent of its victims and to do that, the patriarchy has hidden or disguised the true exploitative and oppressive nature of the system in three ways:

It is masked, first of all, by sex role segregation, as in a ghetto, for it makes possible the delusion that women should be “equal but different.” Sexual caste is hidden also by the fact that women have various forms of derivative status as a consequence of relationships with men. That is, women have duality of status, and the derivative aspect of this status - for example, as daughters and wives—divides us against each other and encourages identification with patriarchal institutions which serve the interests of men at the expense of women. Finally sexual caste is hidden by ideologies that bestow false identities upon women and men. Patriarchal religion has served to perpetuate all of these dynamics of delusion, naming them “natural” and bestowing its supernatural blessings upon them. The system has been advertised as “according to the divine plan.”<sup>21</sup>

It is of vital importance that, in our efforts to discuss the equal dignity of women we remain vigilant, so we do not fall into the temptations of disguising subordination by resorting to the “equal but different” discourse or of presenting culturally sanctioned gender roles (frequently tainted by patriarchal ideologies) as divinely ordained and intrinsic to the nature of men and women.

As we move now to explore the nature of ministry among the disciples of Christ, we must keep this vigilance in the forefront of our considerations and with Phyllis Zagano keep in mind that:

Documents of the Second Vatican Council teach that all good people who are part of the Church, all good people caught within the net the world calls Christianity, all these good people relying on the exquisite promise of Christ’s resurrection are the

---

<sup>21</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy or Women’s Liberation*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 2-3.

Body of Christ. It would stand to reason, then, that “all good people” means precisely that. “All good people” means all good men...and women.<sup>22</sup>

## THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

Christ’s disciples are to understand “ministry” as a necessary outward manifestation of their very being. The second Vatican council teaches: “Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling in His name and power. But the laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world.”<sup>23</sup> James Monroe

Barnett asserts:

The apostolic ministry of the Church is rightly conceived in terms that comprehend and envision the totality of the widely varied forms of ministry found in the New Testament and, by extension, those that developed later which were in accord with the principles found in the New Testament. It is not then limited to the narrow confines of the three-fold ministry of bishops, presbyters, and deacons.<sup>24</sup>

Diaconal ministry, therefore, if it is going to be accepted as an expression of the ministry of Christ and his disciples, needs to demonstrate it possesses the characteristics that are fundamental to all forms of Christian ministry. Barnett, citing G. W. H. Lampe, summarizes these characteristics: “Two words sum up the basic characteristics of the ministry of both Jesus and those exercising the various ministries in the New Testament Church. They are ‘sent’ (apostellein) and

---

<sup>22</sup> Phyllis Zagano, *Women Icons of Christ*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2020), xi.

<sup>23</sup> Second Vatican Council, "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI," The Vatican, November 18, 1965, sec. 2, accessed March 10, 2019, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html).

<sup>24</sup> James Monroe. Barnett, *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order: A Comprehensive and Critical Study of the Origin, Development, and Decline of the Diaconate in the Context of the Church’s Total Ministry and the Renewal of the Diaconate Today with Reflections for the Twenty-first Century* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1995), 13 (hereafter cited as Barnett).

they ‘serve’ (diakonein).”<sup>25</sup> When the Lord sends his disciples, first the Twelve and then the Seventy, he bestows on them authority to be his agents in the mission he is entrusting them to.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, throughout the New Testament, all kinds of activities done in collaboration with the work of Jesus and of the Church are deemed as “service” using the same Greek root for Deacon.<sup>27</sup> In summary, all ministry is apostolic and not only that of the apostles; the bishops; their successors; and the presbyters their collaborators. In the same manner, all ministry is diaconal and not only that of the ordained deacons.

Considering this, the diaconate formation program has a responsibility to form the women in the program, regardless of whether the women could or would be ordained as deacons. God called them to be in the program and it is reasonable to assume God expects them to grow as ministers of the People of God while they are in the program. Creating curriculum aimed at the formation of women cannot be considered a secondary goal, much less a distraction. It must be considered a component of the main concern of the program and part of its reason to be.

### **THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

The New Testament mentions a fairly large number of women who were active participants in the nascent community of believers that eventually formed the Church. We will now explore the role of some of them as disciples who were called and sent to serve their brothers and sisters. In other words, they were called to ministry. The intention is not to casuistically exhaust the instances in which women are presented by the New Testament as ministers, but to illustrate the

---

<sup>25</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, *Some Aspects of the New Testament Ministry* (London: SPCK, 1949), 3 as cited in Barnett, 16.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Mk. 3: 14-15.

<sup>27</sup> For example, see Rom. 15:31; 2 Cor. 9:1; Mk. 15:41; Mt. 27:55; Lk. 10:40; Jn. 12:2; Lk. 8:3; Act. 19:22, etc.

various forms of Christian ministry that women, just like men, have performed since the very beginning of the Church.

We will start, naturally with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Regarding Mary, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “through Mary, the Holy Spirit begins to bring men into communion with Christ.”<sup>28</sup> And Pope St. Paul VI explicitly affirms of the Virgin Mary:

She is held up as an example to the faithful rather for the way in which, in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God (cf. Lk. 1:38), because she heard the word of God and acted on it, and because charity and a spirit of service were the driving force of her actions. She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and the most perfect of Christ's disciples. All of this has a permanent and universal exemplary value.<sup>29</sup>

Patriarchal Mariology focuses on events during which Mary assumes a passive and receptive role, for example, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word,”<sup>30</sup> and how she “kept all these things in her heart.”<sup>31</sup> In these passages, Mary conforms to the patriarchal vision of the feminine (human) as subject and submissive to the masculine (divine), however, Mary of Nazareth is also the young woman who decided to go visit her cousin Elizabeth,<sup>32</sup> and during that visit, she raises her voice to proclaim the greatness of the Lord, who “has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown

---

<sup>28</sup> Catholic Church, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2ed. 1983, 725, Vatican Website, accessed 26 January 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P23.HTM#H5](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P23.HTM#H5).

<sup>29</sup> Paul VI, “Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Paul VI *Marialis Cultus* for the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary,” The Vatican, 2 February 1974, 35, accessed 16 March 2021, [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19740202\\_marialis-cultus.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_marialis-cultus.html).

<sup>30</sup> Lk 1:38.

<sup>31</sup> Lk 2:51.

<sup>32</sup> Lk 1:39-56.

down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty.”<sup>33</sup> Mary finds her voice and it is the voice of a prophet.

It can be argued that Mary of Magdala has been one of the most misunderstood individuals in the Christian tradition. Deficient biblical exegesis and the patriarchal prejudice against the feminine render Mary Magdalene a prostitute whose greatest accomplishment was to be redeemed by Jesus. The canonical Gospels give truly little background about her. She was a woman from whom Jesus had exorcized seven demons,<sup>34</sup> which significantly reduces the probability that she was a public sinner of any kind, for in the religious imagination of that time and place, demons really preferred tormenting the just and leave sinners in the hands of divine retribution. The Gospel of Luke has an early appearance of Mary Magdalene to present her and a few other women as travel companions of Jesus in his itinerant preaching ministry, and who, remarkably, ministered to him.<sup>35</sup> The word used for ministry in this passage is *diēkonoun*, from the same Greek roots as the word for deacon. This ministry included financial support, possibly among other services, but it is clear the intention of the author of the Gospel of Luke to explicitly present Mary Magdalene and her woman companions as individuals who perform a ministry to Jesus and his disciples and that such ministry was diaconal in nature.

However, the most remarkable passages involving Mary Magdalene are those that tell the story of Easter Sunday.<sup>36</sup> The four canonical Gospels diverge in many different details about aspects of the life of Jesus. For example, there is no agreement among the four Gospels about the names of the twelve apostles. One of the few details all four canonical Gospels agree with each

---

<sup>33</sup> Lk 1:51-53.

<sup>34</sup> Mk 16:9; Lk 8:2.

<sup>35</sup> Lk 8:2.

<sup>36</sup> Mt 28:1-8; Mk 16:1-11; Lk 24:1-11; Jn 20:1-18.

other is that Mary Magdalene, by herself<sup>37</sup> or together with others<sup>38</sup>, is the first witness of the resurrection of Christ and the first to be sent (apostellein), by angels<sup>39</sup> or by the Lord Jesus himself,<sup>40</sup> to announce the Good News to the other disciples. In the handful of verses in which she appears, Mary of Magdalene is portrayed as a deacon to Jesus Christ and as the apostle to the apostles. Sandra Schneiders suggests a more patriarchal tradition that places Peter as the recipient of the first Christophany also circulated in the early Church, but it never received universal assent. She writes:

There are no scholarly grounds for questioning the authenticity of the tradition that the first Christophany was to Mary Magdalene. In fact, since this tradition clearly challenged the Petrine tradition, there would have been strong motivation for suppressing it if the evidence for it were at all weak. The fact that it has survived in two independent witnesses, John and Matthew, is excellent evidence that it was a primitive and authentic tradition.<sup>41</sup>

Jesus Christ was a forger of profound friendships. We see that portrayed in the Gospels, mostly with respect to the inner circle of the Twelve. However, there are a few other individuals with whom Jesus clearly shares an intimate friendship. Three of those individuals are siblings: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany. Lazarus, of course, is the one whom Jesus brought back from the dead.<sup>42</sup> The Gospel of John identifies Mary as the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus, shortly before the Passion, during a dinner at their home.<sup>43</sup> The synoptics do not name the anointing woman, set the event at a different location or in a different timeframe, and offer various

---

<sup>37</sup> Mk 16:9; Jn 20:14-16.

<sup>38</sup> Mt 28:1; Mk 16:1; Lk 24:10.

<sup>39</sup> Mt 28:7; Mk 16:7; Lk 24:4.

<sup>40</sup> Jn 20:17-18.

<sup>41</sup> Sandra Schneiders, "Encountering and Proclaiming the Risen Jesus," in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 3-4.

<sup>42</sup> Jn 11:1-54.

<sup>43</sup> Jn 12:1-3.



explanations about the motivations for the women's actions.<sup>44</sup> The most famous passage involving the two sisters is the episode that happened in their home, in which Martha was overburdened performing service (presumably hospitality for Jesus,) while Mary sat at the feet of Jesus to listen to him.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly enough, the terms used to name this service Martha was performing are again diakonian (as a noun) and diakonein (as a verb.) Upon Martha's complaint about Mary's apparent unwillingness to help, Jesus tells Martha that the part Mary had chosen (sitting at his feet) is "the better portion."

The words from Jesus could be interpreted as an invitation to women to prefer contemplative ministry over "active" ministry, however, that would be too simplistic an interpretation. Church tradition has seen in Martha and Mary a symbolic representation of the ministry of the entire Church, not just of women. Moreover, Jesus does not actually ask Martha to stop what she is doing and join Mary at his feet, for the work needs to be done and some are called to do it. Finally, ministry is ministry; Jesus points out the advantages of contemplation, but without disdain to the ministerial nature of active work. Moreover, Mary is listening at the Lord's feet. She is being instructed, just like the male disciples are instructed by Jesus. Jesus is teaching and she is not excluded from the room, on the contrary, she is welcomed and encouraged to take a place normally reserved for men.

Can a woman change Jesus' mind about his ministry? In addition to the well-known "first sign" of Jesus at the wedding at Cana, which appears to be orchestrated by his mother,<sup>46</sup> there is an additional incident with a foreign woman as told in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. In Mark's

---

<sup>44</sup> Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9; Lk 7:36-50.

<sup>45</sup> Lk 10:38-42.

<sup>46</sup> Jn 2:1-12.

version of the story,<sup>47</sup> the woman is Syrophenician, simply a stranger, who asks Jesus for the healing of her daughter. Jesus dismisses her because she is a stranger apparently using even a racial slur comparing her to a dog, but the woman insists and even leverages the insult to her advantage. This makes Jesus change his mind and he informs the woman her daughter is healed. Jesus also changes his mind about his ministry as a whole: after this incident and for the first time in Mark's narrative, Jesus moves his ministry to the region of Tyre and Sidon and the Decapolis, which are Gentile territories.

Matthew's version of the incident<sup>48</sup> changes the nationality of the woman, for in this version, the woman is a Canaanite. She is not only a foreigner, but a member of the ancestral enemies of the people of Israel. Matthew, has the disciples and then Jesus trying to dissuade the woman politely, before her insistence results in the same insult found in Mark (apparently Matthew does not want to present Jesus as someone with such an explosive temper.) After the woman humbles herself, Jesus not only grants her request, but highly praises her faith. In Matthew's version, this incident happens at a time when Jesus is the farthest away from Jerusalem. After his encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus turns to Jerusalem and begins the journey that will culminate with his passion, death, and resurrection. It is interesting to notice that Luke omits this passage altogether. The good, kind, and merciful Jesus of Luke's Gospel could not have called a woman a dog.

On the Third Sunday of Lent, when the first scrutiny is celebrated for the elect to be baptized on Easter, the Gospel reading is the richly symbolic passage of the Samaritan woman at the well from John's Gospel.<sup>49</sup> Jesus initiates a conversation with a Samaritan woman who went

---

<sup>47</sup> Mk 7:24-30.

<sup>48</sup> Mt 15, 21-28.

<sup>49</sup> Jn 4:4-42.

to the well to draw water. Jesus points out the woman's complicated marital situation, but once the woman overcomes the shock of a Jewish man speaking to her and convinced Jesus was a prophet, she engages him in a theological discussion about worship and finally Jesus identifies himself as the messiah. The woman left her water jar (very much the same way Simon Peter and his fellow fishermen left their nets and Levi left his tax collector's station) and went to announce Jesus to her fellow villages and to bring them to him. Eventually they start to believe in Jesus, not only because of her testimony, but because of their own encounter with him. Several details are noteworthy in this story. Jesus' interlocutor is not only a woman, but a Samaritan and one with "marriage issues" at that. None of that prevents Jesus from having an encounter and a conversation with the woman during which he reveals to her his identity. The result of this conversation is that the Samaritan woman becomes an evangelizer to her village and brings people to Jesus, so they can be transformed, just as she was. Isn't this the very core of what ministry is all about?

At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul introduces to his readers a woman name Phoebe and calls her a Deacon.<sup>50</sup> Some translations conveniently use the words "minister" or "servant" to translate the original "diakonon." While those translations are acceptable, they miss the point of Paul giving a woman a masculine title: he calls her a deacon, not a deaconess. It would be anachronistic to read into the usage of the term Deacon in the letter to the Romans, the full meaning it will eventually acquire as the title for the lower rank of ordained ministers in the Church, for the role of the Deacon was still developing by the time Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. Nevertheless, it is clear Paul intended to use the word Deacon as a title for Phoebe, who at the very

---

<sup>50</sup> Rm 16:1.

least, was a regular, institutional minister of the church, who had earned the full trust of the Apostle, and was considered a coworker in ministry and a sister in Christ.

One of the passages that provides the strongest support for the ministry of women in the Church can be found in chapter 3 of the first letter to Timothy. The chapter starts with a list of qualifications for those who aspire to be bishops in the Church, then it moves on to discuss the qualification for deacons. It is helpful to quote the entire passage to see what happens within it:

Deacons must be dignified, not deceitful, not addicted to drink, not greedy for sordid gain, holding fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Moreover, they should be tested first; then, if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

Women, similarly, should be dignified, not slanderers, but temperate and faithful in everything.

Deacons may be married only once and must manage their children and their households well. Thus those who serve well as deacons gain good standing and much confidence in their faith in Christ Jesus.<sup>51</sup>

Right in the middle of the list of qualifications for deacons, there is an explicit qualification for “women.” It is important to note that the word used in this passage is “women,” so the passage cannot be interpreted to refer to the wives of deacons, but to women in some sort of ministry on their own right. Moreover, because the qualification for the women is placed in the middle of a list of qualifications for deacons, the most natural interpretation for this passage is that these are qualification for women deacons (also called “deaconesses”,) and even Church Fathers, like St. John Chrysostom categorically concurs with this interpretation. In his eleventh homily on the first letter of Timothy, when addressing this specific passage, he says: “Some have thought that this is

---

<sup>51</sup> 1 Tim 3:8-13.

said of women generally, but it is not so, for why should he introduce anything about women to interfere with his subject? He is speaking of those who hold the rank of Deaconesses.”<sup>52</sup>

The examples of women in ministry in the New Testament are numerous and include a wide range of modalities for this ministry. However, some of these examples have been eclipsed by interpretations that lead to an affirmation of gender complementarity, the tenet that by virtue of gender alone, men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, and religious leadership, and therefore, to an affirmation of the permanent subordination of the feminine to the masculine.

Because of this, we must approach these interpretations through a hermeneutics of suspicion. “Hermeneutics of suspicion” Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes, “has the task of disentangling the ideological functions of kyriocentric text and commentary. It does not assume a kyriarchal conspiracy by the classics and their contemporary interpreters but insists that wo/men do not, in fact, know whether we are addressed by grammatically masculine generic texts. Hence, wo/men always have to think twice and to ask whether or not we are meant.”<sup>53</sup>

Based on the above, an argument can be made that what we are discussing when we discuss women in diaconate formation includes the restoration of women to the diaconate. I acknowledge this is a larger conversation happening across the entire Universal Church. This study also intends to present arguments and proposals for concrete actions that can be taken at the archdiocesan level to better recognize the dignity and value of the ministry of women and to make diaconate formation more fruitful for the women who are part of that journey.

---

<sup>52</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homily 11 on First Timothy,” CHURCH FATHERS: Homily 11 on First Timothy (Chrysostom) (New Advent), accessed 17 March 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230611.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 176.

## WOMEN'S MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH TODAY

After apostolic times, women have remained in ministry throughout the history of the Church. The contribution of women to the richness of Catholic ministry cannot be denied. From Saints Perpetua and Felicity to Saint Teresia Benedicta a Cruce (Edith Stein); from the Desert Mothers to the Poor Clares; from St. Catherine of Siena to Dorothy Day; from St. Teresa of Avila to St. Therese of Lisieux, to St. Teresa of Calcutta; from St. Kateri Tekakwitha to St. Rose of Lima, to St. Josephine Bakhita. Our history shines with the light of many women who have given their lives, their time, talent, and treasure to the People of God.

Alongside these illustrious witnesses of the Gospel, countless other women play a fundamental role in keeping the flame of faith alive in our parishes and institutions served by the Catholic Church. LaCugna writes: "In most regions of this country we routinely see women, especially laywomen, on the altar as lectors and Eucharistic ministers. So-called 'priestless' parishes increasingly rely on women or lay men to lead the community in prayer and worship. Women also serve as hospital and prison chaplains and minister to the poor and homeless."<sup>54</sup> "Both professional theology and professional ministry have been enriched and transformed by the presence of women."<sup>55</sup>

"On the other hand," LaCugna continues, "The many ministries performed by women are not officially recognized by the Roman Catholic Church in a sacramental way. Women cannot be consecrated bishops nor ordained priests not ordained deacons because, according to the Vatican, women do not bear a natural resemblance to Jesus Christ."<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> LaCugna, 238.

<sup>55</sup> LaCugna, 248.

<sup>56</sup> LaCugna, 239.

This is a scandal. How is it possible to claim to believe the first chapter of Genesis is inspired by God and at the same time claim that women cannot perform ordained ministry because they do not resemble Jesus Christ well enough? Ordained ministers serve from different races, ethnicities, and cultures than that of Jesus Christ. Ordained ministers have different heights, weights, complexion, and age than those of Jesus during his public ministry; married men may be ordained, but Jesus was not married. None of that seems to be an impediment for their ministry and yet, the same God who said “: Let us make human beings, male and female, in our image, after our likeness,” recognizes a natural resemblance to the male only and not the female? It seems... implausible.

Being ordained for ministry in the Church is not a right, it is a call, a vocation given to the person by the sovereign God, who calls us each by name. We cannot claim that women have the “right” to be ordained, but then again, we cannot claim that men have that right either. However, by excluding all women from ordained ministry of any kind, LaCugna writes, “Catholic women can receive only six of seven sacraments. If sacraments mediate grace, then women are not allowed to experience or to mediate to the Christian community what may be redemptive in the sacrament of ordination and in the exercise of its office.”<sup>57</sup>

Not only women are denied their full human dignity that comes from the *imago dei* they apparently do not fully possess but are also barred from the graces mediated by one of the seven sacraments and therefore, their ministry can only be a lay ministry and as such, a second-class ministry.

---

<sup>57</sup> LaCugna, 248.

When we reflect on our vocational crises, on our alarmingly dwindling active membership and the various scandals that have plagued our Church in recent history, we would do well to include in our examination of conscience the way we treat women. “Until the corporate life of the church is a true image of Christ, the church itself cannot be in persona Christi. By implication, then, no priest is in persona Christi until the priest can represent a Christian community that has itself become in persona Christi. This cannot happen until women as well as men are seen as full icons of the triune God.”<sup>58</sup>

### **WOMEN DEACONS**

Ordination to the priesthood and ordination to the diaconate are two distinct forms of the sacrament of Holy Orders. While the possibility, or lack thereof, of ordaining women to the priesthood is outside the scope of this study, I will briefly discuss the issue of ordination of women to the diaconate,

We have already mentioned the case of Phoebe, the Deacon and the much stronger passage listing the qualification for women in ministry, which St. John Chrysostom unequivocally interprets as referring to women deacons. Gary Macy points out that Clement of Alexandria, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Pelagius joined John in his interpretation, with Theodore adding that

Paul does not wish to say this in this passage because it is right for such [deacons] to have wives; but since it is fitting for women to be established to perform duties similar to those of deacons.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, eds. and trans., *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2011), 20, as cited in Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012, Kindle Edition), location 206 (hereafter cited as Macy, Ditewig & Zagano).



The Apostolic Constitutions offer an order for the ordination of a deaconess that is theologically and liturgically equivalent to that of a male deacon. It prescribes the laying on of hands, in the sanctuary, by the bishop, who then pronounces the prayer of ordination, which includes an epiclesis and parallels the rite of ordination of a male deacon immediately preceding it in the text.<sup>60</sup>

Most ordination rites for deaconesses are identical or equivalent to those for male deacons. The ministry of deaconesses, which flourished with more prominence in the East than in the West, declined throughout the Universal Church during the early middle ages. It disappeared in the East toward the end of the eleventh century and in the West in the eighth century, but with isolated instances of women ordained as deacons (some abbesses and noble women) until the thirteenth century.

Is it possible to reintroduce the diaconate of women in the Catholic Church? Five Papal commissions have studied the matter, and none have answered the question in the negative. So why don't we have women deacons?

Phyllis Zagano writes: "Within the current discussion about the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate arises the comment that there is nothing an ordained deacon can do that a woman cannot do—implying, it would seem, that ordination is a useless adjunct to diaconal service."<sup>61</sup> This seems to be an argument against diaconal ordination altogether, for both men and women. However, the Church recognizes the value and need of ordained Deacons. Just as the royal

---

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Alexander Cleveland Coxe, eds., *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles or The Apostolic Constitutions* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, Kindle Edition, 2013), 313-314.

<sup>61</sup> Macy, Ditewig & Zagano, Location 990.

priesthood of all the baptized does not negate the need for the ordained ministerial priesthood, the diaconal ministry of lay people does not negate the need for the ordained diaconate.

“So, if women once were deacons, and the diaconate is necessary to the contemporary Church,” Zagano continues, “what restricts women from reentering it?”<sup>62</sup> Prayer, reflection, dialogue, and the quest for a satisfying answer to that question continues. It continues, because in April of 2020, Pope Francis created a new commission of experts to study this very topic, which has yet to meet; it continues, because no such answer has been officially presented.

### **THE THEOLOGICAL GOOD OF EDUCATION**

In November of 1989, six men (all of them Jesuit priests), a woman, and her teenaged daughter were murdered by Salvadoran military. They were martyred because of the work they were doing at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) to use education as an instrument to bring about social change in El Salvador and the rest of Central America.

Reflecting upon their deaths, Cecilia González-Andrieu affirms that their lives, “dedicated to education on behalf of justice, reveal the truth of the power of education and its inherent goodness.”<sup>63</sup>

González-Andrieu affirms that as carrier of traditions, education allows us to understand who we are in complexity and difference, allows us to wrestle with what is unclear, ambiguous, and difficult and provides us with moments of *asombro*, wonderous insight at what is and what could be.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Macy, Ditewig & Zagano, Location 1004.

<sup>63</sup> Cecilia González-Andrieu, “A Latina Theological Reflection on Education, Faith, Love, and Beauty,” *Journal of Catholic Education* 19, no. 2 (2016): 6-17, accessed 18 March 2021, <https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.1902022016>, 15.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

What González-Andrieu affirms about education in general is decidedly true about diaconate formation. By inviting women to join the program in any capacity, we are inviting them to partake of the banquet of these goods, and by designing a curriculum that would make their journey through the program more fruitful and meaningful, the invitation would be for them personally and not just as the “plus one” of their husbands.

### **A VISION FOR WOMEN IN DIACONATE FORMATION**

The diaconate formation program in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles is a trend setter for diaconate formation nationwide. The way women are included in the program surpasses the requirements of the Directory and what most other dioceses and archdioceses are doing in this regard.

As I have shown in this study, the Church has had historical problems with the anthropology of women and their inclusion in Church ministry. Merely following Church praxis, cannot be considered satisfactory at face value. We need to go beyond that. Women enjoy the full dignity of human beings, bearing the image and likeness of God and against all odds, women have been full participants in the life and ministry of the Church. Ministry performed by women cannot be considered secondary or in any way “less than” the ministry performed by men.

Today, the possibility of reintroducing the diaconate of women in the Church remains open, but we do not have to wait until then to start forming women as diaconal ministers and therefore, women cannot, in any way, be considered “secondary” participants in diaconate formation. Diaconate formation curriculum must include content and activities designed specifically for the formation of women in all the areas: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. If diaconate formation represents a theological good, then it must also be made fully available for women. This

would not only facilitate the eventual restoration of the diaconate for women, but it will give women today, a way to grow as human beings, as children of God, as disciples of Christ, as ministers of the People of God, for women are fully all those things.

The full inclusion of women in ministry is not only morally good, but it would also create a space for women to respond to the call of the Holy Spirit more freely and as such, is a theological imperative. May the Holy Spirit guide our efforts and make this seed of truth and love bear much fruit of love and service to the holy people of God.

### **PROPOSED PLAN**

What follows is a proposed plan to adjust the diaconate formation program to make it more meaningful and fruitful for the women in the program. The goal is to enhance the women's experience assuming the current discipline of the Catholic Church of women not being ordained to the diaconate, but the proposed enhancements will not be in anyway detrimental of women pursuing ordination, should this discipline change.

I have outlined the challenges and opportunities deriving from the presence of women in the diaconate formation program. We have also presented the contextual framework and historical development of the involvement of women in formation. Finally, we have established a theological foundation for the formation of women in ministry. Based on those theological arguments, this proposed plan will:

- Uphold and defend the full human dignity of women in diaconate formation.
- Uphold the theological value of education and formation.
- Advance the formation of women as Christian ministers, regardless of whether they minister together with their husbands or otherwise.

- Draw inspiration from the numerous examples of women in ministry, throughout our Christian tradition.
- Be open to the possibility of the restoration of the ordained diaconal ministry for women, without being dependent on it.

The timeline proposed for this plan assumes a first implementation for the 2022-23 formation season.

## **PHASE I – ENVISIONING**

### **I.1. Formulate and communicate a new vision for women in diaconate formation among the formation team members.**

To move forward with this proposal, it is critical that every member of the formation team is aligned with one another, with respect to the principles, goals, and objectives of the plan. This vision also needs to be communicated to the appropriate archdiocesan authorities. It is recommended that women who are or have been in the program are consulted in the formulation of this vision.

**Responsible Party:** Director of Diaconate Formation.

**Completion timeframe:** no later than September 2021.

**Budgetary considerations:** facilities for meetings and workshops for the formation team.

**Personnel considerations:** formation team to spend time together developing this alignment. Probably one or two half-day workshop sessions.

## **I.2. Update program-wide policies and procedures that clearly regulate the diaconate formation program for women.**

The involvement of women in diaconate formation has shifted and morphed over the past few years. Based on the experience of the various modes of involvement recently tried, policies and procedures need to be defined to guide future efforts more reliably. It is recommended that women who are or have been in the program are consulted in the formulation of these policies and procedures.

**Responsible Party:** Director of Diaconate Formation.

**Completion timeframe:** no later than December 2021.

**Budgetary considerations:** none.

**Personnel considerations:** policies and procedures need to be officially communicated to the formation team.

## **I.3. Create and fill the position of Coordinator of Pastoral Formation.**

The National Directory calls for the creation of this position to supervise pastoral field education experiences for candidates.<sup>65</sup> This coordinator can also supervise such experiences for women.

**Responsible Party:** Director of Diaconate Formation.

**Completion timeframe:** no later than December 2021.

**Budgetary considerations:** Secure budget for new position.

---

<sup>65</sup> Directory, 275-276.

**Personnel considerations:** the position description was originally drafted by Diaconate Formation. I edited the original for the purposes of this project and as a proposal for the program. The proposed position description follows:

**Position Summary:**

To ensure that all pastoral field education experiences are tightly integrated with the human, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of formation, the coordinator of pastoral field education assists the director of formation in the apostolic formation of aspirants, candidates, and their wives. He or she systematically introduces the aspirants, candidates, and their wives into suitable pastoral experiences, equipping them with practical skills for pastoral and, eventually, for the candidates, diaconal ministry.

**Duties and Responsibilities:**

Because all Archdiocesan employees represent the Roman Catholic Church, they are expected to conduct themselves according to the mission and goals of the Church in performing their work.

The coordinator of pastoral formation contributes regularly to diaconal formation staff meetings and other events that plan and review ongoing formation and policy issues related to personnel, planning, evaluation, curriculum, admission of candidates, as well as provides leadership in matters of pastoral formation. The coordinator of pastoral formation must be dedicated to the Church's mission of service and particularly knowledgeable of the diaconate within the Church.

Since the pastoral service of the diocesan Church extends to all individuals and groups, including all social classes, with special concern for the poor and those alienated from society, the coordinator for pastoral formation should have knowledge of the needs and resources within the diocesan Church.

The coordinator of pastoral formation assists the director of formation in the apostolic formation of aspirants and candidates coordinating the entire pastoral formation program, giving it unity and direction. Essential tasks are as follows:

- Administers and coordinates the program of field education for the aspirant and candidate paths of formation.
- In consultation with the director of formation and others responsible for formation, he arranges for the pastoral field placement of each participant.
- Provides orientation and training of those who assist him in the field placement.
- Teaches, as needed, supervisory skills to those to whom a candidate is assigned.

- Ensures that the pastoral field experience remains systematically educative and formational.
- Provides written assessment of the participant's pastoral field education experience.
- Ensures that all pastoral field experiences are carefully coordinated with the other dimensions in formation participants.

**Minimum Qualifications:**

Education and Experience

Any combination of education and experience likely to provide the required knowledge, skills, and abilities, typically:

- Active member of a Roman Catholic faith community.
- MA or higher degree in a related field.
- Five years related experience at parish or diocesan levels.
- Dedicated to the Church's diakonia and particularly knowledgeable of the diaconate and its mission within the Church.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Knowledge of:

- Archdiocesan principles, practices, needs, and resources,
- The value and practice of theological reflection,
- Deacon placements within the diocese and their effectiveness in the local Church,
- Principles of pastoral education, supervision, counseling, and training,
- The multinational, multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural reality of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles

Skill in:

- Bilingual written and spoken English/Spanish.
- Facilitating and teaching religious diaconate studies.
- Short- and long-range organizational planning.
- Computer applications including word processing, spreadsheet, and database management.



Ability to:

- Encourage support for the Archdiocese and the Church.
- Communicate effectively in written and oral form.
- Develop and maintain effective working relationships.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Occasionally lift to 20 pounds.
- Sit for sustained periods of time daily.
- Perform tasks requiring intermittent bending, stooping, and walking.
- Sustain frequent movement of the fingers, wrists, hands, and arms.

#### **I.4. Develop program-wide curriculum for the formation of women.**

Formation specific for women will focus primarily on the spiritual and human areas of formation. Opportunities will also be created for women to develop pastoral leadership skills through field education experiences. It is probable that changes and additions to the academic curriculum will also be required.

**Responsible Party:** Coordinator of Spiritual and Human Formation, Coordinator of Pastoral Formation.

**Completion timeframe:** no later than December 2021.

**Budgetary considerations:** none.

**Personnel considerations:** Curriculum design needs to be officially communicated to the formation team.

### **PHASE II – PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

#### **II.1. Expand the Aspirancy period in diaconate formation from one year to two years.**

This change is already in progress for reasons unrelated to women in formation. However, it is still a necessary step in preparation for an augmented spiritual and human formation

curriculum, which are areas of greater focus for the aspirancy. The program will not be extended, instead, it will go from one year of Aspirancy and four years of Candidacy, to two years of Aspirancy and three years of Candidacy.

**Responsible Party:** Director of Diaconate Formation.

**Completion timeframe:** no later than May 2021.

**Budgetary considerations:** none.

**Personnel considerations:** the facilitators for Year 2 will need to significantly change the curriculum of what used to be the first year of Candidacy, so that it becomes the second year of Aspirancy. Facilitators for other years will probably have to make lesser adjustments as well.

## **II.2. Develop year-specific curriculum for the formation of women.**

Program-wide general curriculum will be made concrete in specific content, activities, rubrics, etc., aimed to the formation of women. These will include, but will be not limited to class discussion of women's issues, separate sessions for women to discuss delicate topics more freely, development of women's spirituality, formation of women as pastoral leaders, practica for specific ministerial activities (liturgical and otherwise), etc.

Curriculum design includes selection of content and supporting resources, scheduling activities for the formation year, recruiting and scheduling guest speakers, retreat directors and activity facilitators, adoption of evaluation devices, etc.

**Responsible Party:** Facilitators, Coordinator of Spiritual and Human Formation, Coordinator of Pastoral Formation.

**Completion timeframe:** no later than March 2022.

**Budgetary considerations:** none.

**Personnel considerations:** Curriculum designs need to be coordinated “vertically” (for continuity from one formation year to the next), “horizontally” (for consistency across language tracks,) and inclusively, to incorporate women in all facets of formation (leadership, facilitators, guest speakers, authors, etc.)

### **PHASE III – EXECUTION**

#### **III.1. Implement the curriculum designed for each formation year.**

Carry out the lectures, workshops, assignments, and other activities included in the updated curriculum for each formation year. This includes coordination with guest speakers/directors/facilitators and coordination with other diaconate formation facilitators, in case of joint sessions.

**Responsible Party:** Facilitators, Coordinator of Spiritual and Human Formation, Coordinator of Pastoral Formation.

**Completion timeframe:** Starting August 2022 and repeat every year.

**Budgetary considerations:** facilities for the formation sessions, stipends for guest speakers/directors/facilitators.

**Personnel considerations:** Constant communication among all members of the team will maximize the benefit of these activities and provide early feedback for on-the-fly fine tuning.

## **PHASE IV – EVALUATION**

### **IV.1. Evaluate the experiences of each formation year, providing feedback to the formation team for continuous improvement.**

Perform a formal evaluation specifically of this aspect of the formation program to learn from the experience and adjust for the following formation season. Possible modes of evaluation may include anonymous surveys, focus group interviews, alumni input, priest-pastor consultation, input from parish life personnel, etc.

**Responsible Party:** Director of Diaconate Formation, Facilitators, Coordinator of Spiritual and Human Formation, Coordinator of Pastoral Formation.

**Completion timeframe:** Starting July 2023 and repeat every year.

**Budgetary considerations:** none.

**Personnel considerations:** Evaluations can be a sensitive topic. It is important everybody involved understands that it is the process being evaluated, and not individual performances.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the New American Bible, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C.

Archdiocese of Los Angeles. “Who We Are: LA Catholics.” LA Catholics | Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 18 December 2019. Accessed 20 February 2021. <https://lacatholics.org/who-we-are/>.

Barnett, James Monroe. *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order: A Comprehensive and Critical Study of the Origin, Development, and Decline of the Diaconate in the Context of the Church’s Total Ministry and the Renewal of the Diaconate Today with Reflections for the Twenty-first Century*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1995.

Catholic Church. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2ed. 1983. Vatican Website. Accessed 26 January 2021. <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM>

Catholic Church. *Code of Canon Law*, 1983. Vatican Website. Accessed 20 February 2021. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic\\_index\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html).

Catholic Church. “Final Document of the Amazon Synod.” Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region. 26 October 2019. Accessed 20 February 2021. <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>.

Chrysostom, John. “Homily 11 on First Timothy.” CHURCH FATHERS: Homily 11 on First Timothy (Chrysostom). New Advent. Accessed 17 March 2021. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230611.htm>.

Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy or Women’s Liberation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.

Francis. “Apostolic Letter issued ‘Motu Proprio’ Spiritus Domini.” The Vatican. 15 January 2021. Accessed 20 February 2021. [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110\\_spiritus-domini.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html).

- González-Andrieu, Cecilia. "A Latina Theological Reflection on Education, Faith, Love, and Beauty." *Journal of Catholic Education* 19, no. 2 (2016): 6–17.  
<https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.1902022016>.
- Gonzalez-Andrieu, Cecilia. WotC 2019 - #MineToo: Why Robust Women's Voices are *Indispensable to Church*. YouTube video. 31 March 2020. Accessed 23 February 2021.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPeKEZ\\_n3-4&t=11s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPeKEZ_n3-4&t=11s).
- Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. *En la Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004.
- LaCugna, Catherine Mowry. "Catholic Women as Ministers and Theologians." *America* 167, no. 10 (Oct 10, 1992): 238-248. Accessed 26 January 2021.  
<http://electra.lmu.edu:2048/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.electra.lmu.edu/magazines/catholic-women-as-ministers-theologians/docview/209664019/se-2?accountid=7418>.
- Lampe, G. W. H. *Some Aspects of the New Testament Ministry*. London: SPCK, 1949.
- Macy, Gary, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano. *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future*. New York: Paulist Press, 2012.
- Madigan, Kevin, Carolyn Osiek, eds., and trans. *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2011.
- O'Connell, Gerard. "For the First Time, Pope Francis Appoints a Woman with the Right to Vote as Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops." *America Magazine*, 9 February 2021. Accessed 24 February 2021. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/02/06/pope-francis-women-synod-voting-nathalie-becquart-239941>.
- Paul VI. "Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Paul VI Marialis Cultus for the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary." The Vatican. 2 February 1974. Accessed 16 March 2021. [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19740202\\_marialis-cultus.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_marialis-cultus.html).
- Pew Research Center. "Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 9 September 2020. Accessed 20 February 2021. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/catholic/gender-composition/women/>.

- Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and Alexander Cleveland Coxe, eds. *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles or The Apostolic Constitutions*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. Kindle Edition. 2013.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk: toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998.
- Schneiders, Sandra. “Encountering and Proclaiming the Risen Jesus.” Essay. In *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women*, edited by Elizabeth A. Johnson, 3–16. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016.
- Second Vatican Council. “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI.” The Vatican. 18 November 1965. Accessed 26 January 2021.  
[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html).
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2005.
- Zagano, Phyllis. *Women Icons of Christ*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2020.