

Deaconate of women? From the commission to the Synod

The *Instrumentum Laboris* to the General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality reads as follows: “Most continental congregations and syntheses of numerous bishops' conferences call for a reconsideration of women's access to the diaconate” (B 2.3. Suggestions...). This is by no means a new issue as recently Pope Francis has appointed two committees to address the matter. But is this really an important issue for the life of the Catholic Church today, a sign of the times? Or is it rather a matter of making a foray into the priesthood, presbyterate and episcopate, of women, in the name of the ideology of "equality" and the fight against "discrimination"?

Commissions for the deaconate of women

On 12 May 2016, during a meeting with the participants of the Plenary Meeting of Superiors General of Female Congregations, Francis expressed his intention to “establish an official commission to address the matter” of the deaconate of women, “primarily in the perspective of the first centuries of the Church”. Such a commission was set up on August 2 that very year, headed by Archbishop Luis Ladaria, the then Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It concluded its work with a report submitted to the Pope in December 2018.

Cardinal Gerhard Müller, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, observed that the question of the deaconate had been made over a decade before. In 2002 the International Theological Commission published the document *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*. Among other things, it stated that deaconesses, who were in the early Church, performed functions that are not identical to those of deacons today. In general, the Theological Commission was not in favour of the introduction of the deaconate for women, but it did not conclude that it was definitely impossible. There does not seem to be any clear conclusions on the deaconate of women from historical research on the deaconate. Ultimately, the matter depends on the discernment and will of the Church's Magisterium. It is worth recalling here that a study of the deaconate was undertaken by the International Theological Commission as early as 1992-1997. At that time, the work was handled by a subcommittee tasked with exploring certain ecclesiological issues in greater depth. However, it was unable to complete its work in the form of a publication. Under the circumstances, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger appointed a new sub-commission which worked out a consensus when working on the document *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*.

Despite this complicated and tension-ridden history of discussion on the deaconate for women, many expected that Francis would not delay its introduction. These hopes, however, have not materialised. The 2018 report was not made public. No decisions were taken. An unclear situation was created in which conjecture prevailed. Among others, a statement by Fr. Bernard Pottier, a Jesuit from Brussels and a member of the commission established in 2016, was quoted. He stated that it was not clear whether deaconesses in the early Church received sacramental ordination or rather something similar to the blessing of an abbess. Nevertheless, Fr. Pottier himself advocated opening the path to the deaconate for women.

The proponents of the deaconate of women hoped that this topic would be taken up once again during the Synod on Amazonia. The deaconate of women was to go hand in hand with the discussion on the ordination of married men as priests (so-called *virī probati*). However, in the post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (2 February 2020), Francis included a statement which must have disappointed those in favour of deaconesses. The Pope warned against the reductionism of seeing the Church solely via functional structures and observed: “Such a reductionism would lead us to believe that women would be granted a greater *status* and participation in the Church only

if they were admitted to Holy Orders. But that approach would in fact narrow our vision; it would lead us to clericalize women, diminish the great value of what they have already accomplished, and subtly make their indispensable contribution less effective” (no. 100).

Supporters of the diaconate for women did not give up, of course. Leading the way was Cardinal Reinhard Marx, who argued that "the time has come to open up the diaconate ministry to both sexes". The German hierarch acknowledged that "much theological and practical work" was still needed to achieve this, but at the same time stressed that the diaconate for women would be a great gift to the Church. A different view was presented by the Italian Cardinal, Gianfranco Ravasi, who admitted that he accepts the consideration of the possibility of the diaconate for women, but nevertheless noted that the whole question is sometimes misplaced. "I think," Ravasi stated, "that focusing on the priesthood of women is clerical. Why don't we start talking about other very important functions of women in the Church? For example, about the leadership of the parish from the structural side, in catechesis, volunteering, finance, architectural planning, and design. Why not put this in the hands of women? In the Vatican, too, including in high positions, the presence of women could be greater".

Cardinal Ravasi's view seems to be close to the position of Pope Francis himself, who on 8 April 2020 established a second commission to consider the diaconate of women. Soon afterwards *L'Osservatore Romano* published an article by Professor Giorgia Salatiello from the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome, where she warned against focusing on the very contention between the followers and opponents of the diaconate of women. Indeed, it is vital to see the complexity and broad context of the problem. Firstly, the sense of introducing the diaconate of women is closely linked to the role of permanent deacons in the Church. In other words, if the importance of male deacons in the community of the faithful is unclear, it is difficult to argue that the introduction of the diaconate of women would be a "great gift". Secondly, the diaconate of women is part of a broader discussion about the specific role of women in the Church. In this discussion, one must be careful, as Francis warns against - as we have already noted - not to reduce the importance of being in the Church to a "function" resulting from the sacrament of Holy Orders. Salatiello stressed that the reflection on the diaconate for women must not be about some "demands of a claiming nature", but about building "a community of disciples united in the communion of the same baptism". Unfortunately, essentially nothing is known about the work of the second commission. We do not even know whether or how many times it has convened and whether it still exists. Such a situation leads one to conclude that the diaconate of women is not regarded as a burning issue in the Holy See.

Possible and necessary?

The question of the diaconate for women has two fundamental aspects: dogmatic and pastoral. Two questions must be asked: 1. Is the diaconate of women possible from a dogmatic point of view; 2. Would it be necessary and useful from a pastoral point of view?

The New Testament teaches us about the one priesthood of Christ and the universal priesthood of the faithful being part of it. However, Jesus, in calling the Twelve, also established an official, or hierarchical, ministerial priesthood, i.e. bishops and dependent presbyters. This priesthood, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, differs from universal priesthood "in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them (...) is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ" (LG, 10). One enters hierarchical priesthood through the sacrament of Holy Orders, which includes three levels. Apart from being a bishop and a presbyter, one can be a deacon, and this lower level of the hierarchy is "not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service" (LG, 29). The diaconate is, then, not hierarchical priesthood, whose members e.g. celebrate Mass and administer the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

It is worth quoting Canon 1009 of the Code of Canon Law, as it was amended by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009. In his *motu proprio Omnium in mentem*, the Holy Father wrote: “Ever since, Can. 1009 of the Code of Canon Law will have three paragraphs: the first and second will retain the text of the present canon, while the third one will contain a new text, so that Can. 1009 § 3 would be as follows: ‘Those who are constituted in the order of the episcopate or the presbyterate receive the mission and capacity to act in the person of Christ the Head, whereas deacons are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word and charity’”. The distinction between acting “in the person of Christ the Head” and serving the Church “through the diakonia of liturgy, word and charity” is theologically profound and structuring.

It would follow from all this that the diaconate of women, from a dogmatic point of view, is not impossible. This seems to be the position shared by most pastors and theologians today, including those who believe that, from a pastoral point of view, the diaconate of women would cause more confusion than any good. However, from a dogmatic perspective, women’s diaconate would not contradict what John Paul II, drawing on the two millennia of Tradition, wrote in the apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*: “I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful” (no. 4). This is because the diaconate is part of the sacrament of Holy Orders, but – let us repeat – “not unto the priesthood”, like the presbyterial and episcopal ministry, but “unto a ministry of service” (LG, 29).

Unfortunately, there is no shortage of circles that are pushing for the introduction of the diaconate for women, more or less concealing their intentions that women might also be ordained as presbyters and bishops in the future. For these circles, deaconesses would only be a stepping stone in the struggle for female priests and bishops. In such a perspective, it is not that the diaconate of women would be an adequate response to some specific need of the Church community, but to ideologically understood demands for “equality” and “non-discrimination”. Neo-Marxist, leftist-liberal ideologies which are, unfortunately, present today also in the Church, confuse equality with the obliteration of differences resulting from the nature of things, divine ordination, or rational traditions. In this situation, admitting women to the diaconate would only reinforce the voices that women are discriminated against because they cannot be priests, but only deaconesses, i.e. only the lowest degree of ordination is available to them. As a result, the diaconate for women would only cause confusion in the somewhat rickety boat of the Church.

We read in the *Lumen gentium* constitution: “It is the duty of the deacon, according as it shall have been assigned to him by competent authority, 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” (no. 29). Would there be any significant positive change in the Church if all these tasks could also be performed by women deaconesses? One can doubt it. What is more, the focus on having women wearing albs and dalmatics with a stole may mean that the figure of the Catholic mother who, together with her husband, passes on the faith to her children is increasingly weakened, if not ridiculed. This role of women is absolutely fundamental to the Church's mission. Women, wives and mothers, and then grandmothers, will not be replaced in this task by anyone, be it a bishop, priest, or deacon. The pressing problem of the Church today is not the lack of permanent deacons, including deaconesses, but the weakness of passing on the faith in families.

The Church in Germany is leading the way in making demands such as precisely the diaconate, if not simply the priesthood of women. However, German Catholic women do not wait until they become deaconesses. Serving on parish councils, they decide, for example, that they will be the ones to administer christenings or preside over funerals. Parish priests either agree or are afraid to object, knowing that the bishop would be unlikely to side with them. The more this kind of “progress” invades the German Church, the more Catholics leave it. The document *Catholic Church*

in Germany - Facts and Figures 2022, shows that in 2022, more than half a million people announced their departure from the Catholic Church. This beat the record of the previous year, when 359,000 people left the Catholic Church in Germany. Unfortunately, the leaders of the so-called synodal path in Germany seem to think that even more "progress" is needed in this situation, and that the Church should be more "open" in the ideological, leftist-liberal, and not necessarily Catholic, sense of the word. Still, there is no indication that this is the correct path for the renewal and reinvigoration of the Church.

Conclusion – what will the Synod do?

One hears boastful assertions that after the Synod the Church will no longer be the same as before. Personally, I would prefer to hear voices saying that it will be more Christ-like, more rooted in the apostolic tradition, and thus more missionary, zealously proclaiming the Gospel, i.e. salvation in Jesus Christ, to the whole world. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of those in the Church who, on the one hand, are fascinated by today's fashionable ideologies and, on the other, have an unfounded conviction that the new one they want to introduce is always better than the old one. There is, however, a lack of thinking from the depths of the Gospel, Tradition and the existing teaching of the Church's Magisterium.

Will the diaconate of women be discussed at length at the Synod, or merely mentioned, as a possibility calling for further consideration? We will see in October. It seems, however, that there are many more important topics that the Synod should take up. In any case, it is necessary to pray that an ideological and liberal approach will not prevail at the Synod, but instead a concern for fidelity to Christ and openness to the Spirit of Christ, who wants to show us adequate answers to the real, not imaginary, needs of the Church. Joseph Ratzinger once remarked that at Vatican II, from the very beginning, there appeared a self-proclaimed "spirit of the Council", which was essentially an "anti-spirit" posing as the Spirit of God. Doubtless there will also be a spirit at the Synod in Rome that will try to create confusion. All the more reason to pray that the Synod participants remain open to the true Spirit, the Holy Spirit, also on the issue of the diaconate of women.