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## **ORDINATION OF WOMEN DEACONS**

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### **Abstract**

Pope Francis reopened the issue of women deacons in the Catholic church in his remarks to the meeting of heads of religious orders of women which was held in the Vatican in May this year 2016. Following this initiative, on 2 August he appointed Archbishop Luis Ladaria to head a commission of six men and six women to examine the topic "especially in the early church" and to report back to him. This short article seeks to contribute to the discussion by outlining the history of women deacons in the early church, highlighting their ordination described in canon 15 of the council of Chalcedon in 451, and looking at the historical developments following the schism between the Orthodox and Catholic churches in 1054, through the Middle Ages and down to today. The conclusion is that the Catholic

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church has been careful not to exclude women from one of the three grades of the sacrament of Orders, namely the diaconate.

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The earliest clear evidence for the ordination of women as deacons comes in canon 15 of the council of Chalcedon in 451. The canon, in English translation from the Greek original, reads thus: “No woman under forty years of age is to be ordained a deacon, and then only after close scrutiny. If, after receiving ordination and spending some time in the ministry, she despises God’s grace and gets married, such a person is to be anathematized along with her husband.”<sup>1</sup>

The canon is very restrictive: the woman must be at least forty years of age, she must be scrutinized closely, and she may not marry. Nevertheless the key phrase “to be ordained” (*cheirotoneisthai* in the Greek original, literally “to have hands laid on”) is clear. She is described as a deacon (*diakonos*) not a deaconess.

There are earlier references to women as deacons or deaconesses, but none with such a clear reference to ordination. Thus, Phoebe is described as a deaconess in Paul’s letter to the Romans 16:1: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church of Cenchreae”; 1 Timothy 3:11 may also be referring to women deacons. Canon 19 of the first council of Nicea in 325 refers to women as deaconesses (Greek *diaconissae*) but states explicitly that these women — converts from the Paulinist sect — do not receive any “imposition of hands” and are to be “numbered among the laity”:

“Concerning the former Paulinists who seek refuge in the Catholic church, it is determined that they must be rebaptised unconditionally. Those who in the past have been enrolled among the clergy, if they appear to be blameless and irreproachable, are to be rebaptised and ordained by the bishop of the Catholic church. But if on inquiry they are shown to be unsuitable, it is right that they should be deposed. Similarly with regard to deaconesses and all in

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<sup>1</sup>Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London and New York: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990, 94; hereafter, *Decrees*. The pagination is continuous through the two volumes of the work, so the volume number (1 or 2) is omitted.

Quotations are given in English translation, with an indication of the original language as appropriate.

general whose names have been included in the roll, the same form shall be observed. We refer to deaconesses who have been granted this status, for they do not receive any imposition of hands, so that they are in all respects to be numbered among the laity.”<sup>2</sup>

The word deacon (*diakonos*) meant, in the Greek-speaking world before the coming of Christ, someone who serves. The word was adopted by Paul and the early Church to describe women holding an office with some stability. Women continued as deacons throughout the first millennium of the Church’s history. However, with the demise of adult baptism through full immersion in the baptismal font, one of their key functions — attending to adult women being baptized with little or no clothing on — disappeared.

After the beginning of the schism in 1054 between the eastern and western churches — subsequently called Orthodox and Catholic — women deacons continued in the Orthodox church but soon disappeared from the Catholic church. In the latter, the Gregorian Reform, named after Pope Gregory VII (1073-85), emphasized the roles of male clergy and gave little room for women clergy. Perhaps too — an important consideration, though rather my own thought and difficult to document — very few women wanted to be deacons. That is to say, there was plenty of space for the creativity and diversity of women in the medieval Catholic church, which was more “feminine” than this church had been previously and would be during the Counter-Reformation — as witnessed, among many indications, by the large number and variety of medieval women who have been canonized as saints — so that there may have been little desire to push for the seemingly outdated and rather masculine role of deacon.

The list of seven sacraments, including ordination, was first defined for the western church by the second council of Lyons in 1274, in the decree of reunion offered to the emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus as representative of the Orthodox church: “The same Holy Roman Church also holds and teaches that there are seven sacraments of the Church: one is baptism... another is confirmation... then penance, the Eucharist, the sacrament of order, matrimony and extreme unction.”<sup>3</sup>

The list was repeated in greater detail, with explicit mention of the diaconate as part of the sacrament of orders, in the council of

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<sup>2</sup>*Decrees*, 14

<sup>3</sup>J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2004, no. 28/860.

Florence's decree of reunion with the Armenians in 1439: "The sixth (of the seven sacraments) is the sacrament of orders... So the priesthood is bestowed by the handing over of a chalice with wine and a paten with bread; the diaconate by the giving of the book of the gospels..."<sup>4</sup>

The wording of the two medieval councils — Lyons II in 1274 and Florence in 1439 — implies that the sacramentality of ordination did not begin in 1274 but had always been present. If the ordination of men to the diaconate was declared part of the sacrament of orders, then — it may be argued — the ordination of women to the diaconate had likewise always been sacramental.

The tradition of women deacons remained in the Orthodox church after the schism of 1054, as mentioned, and it continues today. This church has never defined the number of sacraments with the precision shown by the Catholic church from the second council of Lyons onwards. Nevertheless the Orthodox church fully adheres to the teaching of the first seven ecumenical councils, from Nicea I in 325 to Nicea II in 787.<sup>5</sup> So what has been said about the ordination of women as deacons in canon 15 of the council of Chalcedon, is fully part of Orthodox tradition too.

As a result, the *Magisterium* of the Catholic church has been careful not to exclude the possibility of the ordination of women to one of the three grades of the sacrament of Orders, namely the diaconate.

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<sup>4</sup>*Decrees*, 549.

<sup>5</sup>Regarding councils after Nicea II in 787, none is regarded as "ecumenical" by the Orthodox church (the word "ecumenical" stems from the Greek word *oikos* meaning "house" and by derivation means "where there are houses"/"the inhabited world"/"the whole world": thus "ecumenical" councils are considered councils of the whole Church and therefore binding in authority). Fourteen councils after 787 came to be included in the Roman Catholic church's list of ecumenical councils: the disputed Constantinople IV in 869-70; ten medieval councils after the beginning of the schism with the Orthodox church in 1054, from Lateran I in 1123 to Lateran V in 1512-17, including therefore Lyons II and Florence; and three councils of the modern era: Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II. The ecumenical nature of these medieval councils and Trent, as well as the early councils, was confirmed by their inclusion in the so-called "Roman Edition" of the councils, which was approved by Pope Paul V and published in four volumes between 1608 and 1612. However, the status of the medieval and later councils was reopened by Pope Paul VI in 1974 when he referred to the medieval councils as "general synods in the western world" (*generales synodos in occidentali orbe*) rather than as ecumenical councils (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 66 (1974) 620). For a fuller account of these factors, see N. Tanner, *The Councils of the Church: A Short History*, New York: Herder and Crossroad, 2001, 7-8 and 49-50.