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Your Holiness, it is time for women deacons

Phyllis Zagano | Apr. 27, 2011 Just Catholic

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI
00120 Vatican City State, Europe

Your Holiness:

Forgive my presumption in addressing you directly, but the matter I bring is both urgent and pressing. Women are no longer walking away from the church. They are running away. They are running toward churches that make it clear women are made in the image and likeness of God.

I am not writing to argue for woman priests. But you told me many years ago in New York women deacons were ?under study.? From 1992-2002, the International Theological Commission worked on that question, producing a report essentially repeating what you said: the Magisterium must decide.

When you met with the priests of Rome in 2006, you wondered aloud: could the church open more positions of responsibility to women? Were you then signaling the recovery of the tradition of women deacons?

In 2009, you changed Canon Law to echo the Catechism. Priests are ordained to act in the person of Christ, the head of the church; deacons are ordained to serve the people of God in and through the Word, the liturgy and charity. Since doctrinal statements only forbid women priests, and deacons are not priests, it seems you removed another hurdle.

You know it is not just me asking. Thousands of people sent Cardinal William Levada, your successor at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, e-mails and postcards about women deacons in a campaign organized by the US-based group FutureChurch. Several other organizations including the Canada-based Femmes et Ministères have claimed April 29, the feast of St. Catherine of Siena, as an international day of prayer for women deacons.

It is a new-old question. The only person in scripture with the formal job title ?deacon? is Phoebe, deacon of the church at Cenchrae (Rom 16:1). Some see the start of the diaconate in Jesus? washing the apostles? feet at the Last Supper, but most see it really beginning with the apostles calling the seven to a more formal ministry (Acts 6: 1-6). There were many women deacons in the early church.

The bishops of the world were talking about women deacons at the Second Vatican Council. They are still at it. Most recently, the Swiss Bishop of St. Gall, Markus B?chel, said women deacons were a good idea. Others before him -- even Cardinal Carlo Martini when he was archbishop of Milan -- wanted to restore women to the diaconate. Bishops from Australia to Ireland say more women in power would have stemmed the priest sex mess. I think they are correct.

I am told your curia knows women can be ordained as deacons, but does not want women in the clerical structure of the church. That cuts both ways, Holy Father. A lot of women do not want anything to do with

clericalism. Some want the whole system to collapse. More say it has collapsed already.

Where is the church without women? I know you are concerned about the fading influence of Christianity in Europe. I write from the United States. Things are pretty bad over here, too. The country is over three-quarters Christian (with 68 million Catholics) but newspapers like *The New York Times* had no front page Easter story this year. Their ink is used on scandal.

The Christian message is lost in the daily drama of the sex abuse crisis. I fear, Most Holy Father, that bad priests and worse bishops will be your legacy. You will be remembered as the pope who belatedly started a laboring sludge pump to clear the swamp.

I know you love what God loves and hate what God hates, but I also know how bureaucracy can stymie even (maybe especially) the most brilliant person. Is the bureaucracy keeping you from doing the right thing? That goes for the crisis as well as women deacons.

Let me come to the point. The Catholic Church in developed nations is dying out. I am convinced it is dying because of the way it relates to women. Surely you see the numbers -- declining membership and eroding donations -- but do you have any idea how angry women are? And every woman you alienate extends her influence to several others -- to her husband, her children, her friends, her neighbors -- until the last person out the parish door closes the lights.

If I may, I think it is time for you to make a decision about women deacons.

It is an opportunity for you to state the Christian message in a way that can be heard. Yes, God is love and all persons are made in the image and likeness of God. But the world will not and cannot hear that until you have a woman deacon standing beside you and proclaiming the Gospel in St. Peter?s.

Again, pardon my presumption, but perhaps no one else will tell you.

Correction: *An earlier version of this column gave an incorrect scripture citation for Phoebe, deacon of the church at Cenchrae. The correct citation is Romans 16:1.*

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