

**CATHOLIC WOMEN'S ORDINATION: THE  
ECUMENICAL IMPLICATIONS OF WOMEN DEACONS  
IN THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH, THE  
ORTHODOX CHURCH OF GREECE, AND THE UNION  
OF UTRECHT OLD CATHOLIC CHURCHES\***

**Phyllis Zagano**

**PRECIS**

**The ordination of women deacons in the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church of Greece, and certain Union of Utrecht Old Catholic Churches has widespread ecumenical implications. The Catholic Church recognizes the validity of sacraments and orders in these churches but has made no statement regarding their women deacons. A 2002 document from the Catholic International Theological Commission leans away from the restoration of women deacons, saying that the functions of women deacons of the ancient church are not the same as the functions of deacons today. Nonetheless, the document makes no clear statement about whether women were sacramentally ordained. Since these three churches have chosen to allow ordination of women deacons, if the Catholic Church accepts their orders as valid, it implies that what the church has done the church can do again. That is, in recognizing their return to tradition, the Catholic Church implicitly recognizes the possibility of its own.**

---

\*This essay, portions of which appear in *Church and Religious 'Other'* (Ecclesiological Investigations) ed. Gerard Mannion (London: T. & T. Clark, 2008), has been corrected to eliminate editing errors in the published *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*.

---

Phyllis Zagano (Catholic) is Senior Research Associate-in-Residence and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Hofstra University, where she has taught since 2002. In 2005 she was Visiting Professor of Catholic Studies at the Yale Divinity School and a consultant to the Templeton Positive Psychology Project "Spirituality and Living Well" at the University of Pennsylvania. She has taught at Fordham University (1980-1984) and was a researcher at the Catholic Archdiocese of New York (1984-86) At Boston University (1988-1999) she taught in the College of Communication, the School of Theology, and the Program of International Relations, and was Director of the Institute for Democratic Communication. She was a Coolidge Fellow at the Episcopal Divinity School (Cambridge, MA) in 1987 and has held numerous research grants, including from the U. S. Institute of Peace (1987-89), The Louisville Institute (1998) and The Wabash Center (2003). She holds a B.A. from Marymount College, Tarrytown, NY; an M.S. from Boston University; an M.A. from Long Island University; an M.A. from St. John's University, Queens, NY; and a Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Stony Brook (1979). Her books include *On Prayer* (Paulist, 1994, Liguori, 2001, and several translations); *Ita Ford: Missionary Martyr* (Paulist, 1996); *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church* (Crossroad/Herder, 2000). She edited or co-edited eight other books, including *The Exercise of the Primacy: Continuing the Dialogue* (Crossroad/Herder, 1998); *Dorothy Day* (Liguori, 2003); and *The Dominican Tradition* (Liturgical Press, 2006). Her two dozen articles have appeared in scholarly journals or books, and well over 100 review essays and reviews have appeared in academic and general publications. She did fifty hour-long discussions for National Public Radio, and serves as the Catholic columnist for the Religion News Service. She has lectured throughout the United States, as well as presenting papers at many professional meetings.

### *Introduction*

The vexed question of the ordination of women in the Catholic Church<sup>1</sup> has widespread and deep implications for ecumenical dialogue between and among churches that ordain women, either to the diaconate or to priesthood or to both. Three churches in dialogue with the Catholic Church—the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church of Greece, and certain Old Catholic Churches that are signers to the Union of Utrecht—are able to ordain women to the diaconate. While the Catholic Church recognizes the validity of sacraments and orders in these churches, it is unclear as to whether the validity of the ordination of women deacons in these churches would be equally recognized. There have been no Catholic statements regarding them.

The Armenian Apostolic Church has an unbroken tradition of ordaining monastic women deacons and today has women deacons in active ministries. The Orthodox Church of Greece is the most recent to join churches whose apostolic succession is recognized by the Catholic Church and that ordain women. At least four Union of Utrecht Old Catholic Churches ordain women deacons and priests: the Old Catholic Churches in Germany (1996),<sup>2</sup> Austria (1998), the Netherlands (1998), and Switzerland (2002).<sup>3</sup> The Old Catholic Church in the Czech Republic ordained a woman deacon in 2003.

All of these ordinations are licit according to the requirements of their respective churches. These facts raise the question: Does the Catholic Church also recognize these ordinations of women as valid? The restriction of orders at every level in the Catholic Church to males, rooted at the level of priesthood in the question of authority, is an ecclesial law not binding in these churches. Further, Catholic teaching does not necessarily hold that gender is a determinant of validity. Pius XII with the Apostolic Constitution *Sacramentum ordinis* (1947) determined that “the only matter . . . of the Sacred Orders of the Diaconate, the Priesthood, and the Episcopacy is the imposition of hands; and that the form, and the only form, is the words which determine the application of this matter.”<sup>4</sup> The gender of the ordinand is not part of the determination of matter or form. Assuming that the ordinations in these churches are carried out with proper matter and form, then, it would seem that the ordinations are sacramentally valid as well as ecclesially licit within their respective churches. Given the older tradition of women deacons throughout Christianity, there seems no barrier to Rome’s recognizing the validity of diaconal orders in these churches.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>As in formal ecumenical dialogue, here churches are referred to as they term themselves. The church headquartered at the Vatican refers to itself as the Catholic Church.

<sup>2</sup>On May 27, 1996, German Old Catholic Bishop Joachim Vobbe ordained Old Catholic Deacons Regina Pickel-Bossau and Angela Berlis to the priesthood. Vobbe issued a pastoral letter on women’s ordination, “Geh zu meinen Brüdern” in Bonn in February, 1996, which argued the case for the ordination of women. See [http://www.ecumenical-catholic-communion.org/html/pl\\_women.html](http://www.ecumenical-catholic-communion.org/html/pl_women.html).

<sup>3</sup>The Old Catholic Church of Switzerland first ordained women deacons in about 1991 and priests in 2002.

<sup>4</sup>Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Sacramentum ordinis* (1947), ¶ 4; available at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius12/P12SACRAO.HTM>.

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, tr. Jean Laporte and

To recognize the ecumenical implications of the ordination of women to the diaconate in these three churches in their relation to the Catholic Church, the question must necessarily be split. The ordination of women to the diaconate is separate and distinct from the ordination of women to the priesthood. A major (yet flawed) argument against the ordination of women deacons in the Catholic Church is that such ordination would thereby qualify women for ordination to priesthood—if you can ordain a woman deacon, then you can ordain a woman priest. However, there is nothing in custom or tradition to provide for the automatic entrance into priesthood of an ordained deacon, male or female. Further, the Catholic Church has reasserted its tradition of a permanent diaconate in modern times.<sup>6</sup>

The opposing argument to ordaining Catholic women deacons also states that, since the Catholic Church has definitively taught that a woman cannot be ordained a priest, so neither can she be ordained a deacon. Those who propose this argument overlook the fact that, if the argument holds, then the reverse is also true: if women were ordained to the diaconate in the past, then they can be ordained in the present. That is, if the nonordination of women deacons implies the impossibility of women priests, then the ordination of women deacons similarly implies the possibility of women priests. However, the Catholic Church has stated fairly clearly that it holds that women cannot be ordained priests. Hence, the ordination of women deacons in these three churches—or even in the Catholic Church—departs from neither custom nor tradition.

In addition, it seems obvious that conjoining the questions of women deacons and women priests serves neither side of the discussion. Those who ask for the restoration of the female diaconate are not necessarily asking for the ordination of women to priesthood. Moreover, those who ask for ordination of women priests are not necessarily asking for ordination of women to the diaconate as a separate permanent ministry. The opposition to the ordination of women is equally ill served by conjoining the two, as demonstrated above. Arguing against ordained women deacons—a historical fact and a present reality in churches with whom the Catholic Church has common agreements—by stating that ordination to the diaconate implies the ability to ordain to the priesthood lends unintended support to the arguments for women deacons *and* for women priests.

It is important to recognize that the two modern documents about the ordination of women by the Catholic Church speak only to the ordination of women to the priesthood. The first, the “Declaration of the Congregation for the Doc-

---

Mary Louise Hall (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976 [orig.: *Le ministère des femmes dans L'Église ancienne: Recherches et synthèses*, Section d'histoire 4 (Gembloux, Belgium: J. Duculot, 1972)]); Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, tr. K. D. Whitehead (San Francisco, MA: Ignatius Press, 1986 [orig.: *Les diaconesses: Essai historique* (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1982)]); Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, tr. Linda M. Maloney, A Michael Glazer Book (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000 [orig.: *Amsträgerinnen im frühen Christentum: Epigraphische und literarische Studien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996)]; and Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, eds. and trs., *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Ad pascendum* (August 15, 1972).

trine of the Faith,” *Inter insigniores* (1976), presents both the “iconic argument” (Jesus must be represented by a male) and the “argument from authority” (Jesus chose only male apostles).<sup>7</sup> The second, the Apostolic Letter of John Paul II *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994), presents only the “argument from authority.” It is addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church and, as an apostolic letter, is not legislative in nature.<sup>8</sup> Further, the 1995 *Responsum ad dubium*, which responds to questions surrounding the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, is an opinion rendered by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. While the opinion of infallibility rendered by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith might seem to have more weight, given the election of Benedict XVI, there is neither a *de jure divino* assertion of infallibility nor any clear papal statement relative to the infallibility of *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, which deals solely with priesthood and is based on the “argument from authority.” Canonically, nothing is infallible unless it is clearly defined as such.<sup>9</sup> In any case, this second document on the ordination of women as priests does not address the question of women deacons.

The question of women deacons was taken up by multiple quinquennia of the International Theological Commission of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under the presidency of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, which concluded that the ordination of women deacons would require a decision of the magisterium, the full teaching office of the church.<sup>10</sup> Early ecumenical councils allow for the ordination of women to the diaconate (councils agreed to by all four churches in the present discussion), but later local councils sought to curb the practice.<sup>11</sup> Even so, in the Catholic Church as late as the eleventh century, the right to ordain women deacons was explicitly confirmed to a bishop in the West.<sup>12</sup> So, there has been no modern ruling against the ordination of women

---

<sup>7</sup>The Catholic Church produces several levels of documents with varying levels of authority. The highest-level documents are those of ecumenical councils. Documents issued by curial offices are regulatory but not necessarily legislative and in no way approach the level of conciliar or even papal documents. A declaration is a curial pronouncement that “is an interpretation of existing law or facts, or a reply to a contested point of law or doctrine” (Francis G. Morrissey, *Papal and Curial Pronouncements: Their Canonical Significance in Light of the Code of Canon Law*, 2nd ed. [Ottawa: Faculty of Canon Law, Saint Paul University, 1995], p. 29).

<sup>8</sup>Apostolic epistles (letters) “contain social and pastoral teachings, but are not legislative texts” (*ibid.*, p. 13).

<sup>9</sup>Canon 749.3: “No doctrine is understood to as defined infallibly unless this is manifestly evident.” See <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/INDEX.HTM> (accessed 1 March 2008.)

<sup>10</sup>The International Theological Commission document has been published in French (“Le diaconat: Évolution et perspectives,” *La documentation catholique* 23 [January 19, 2003]: 58–107) and Italian (“Il Diaconato: Evoluzione e Prospettive,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, vol. 1 [2003], pp. 253–336). An unofficial English translation was published in London under the title “From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles” by The Catholic Truth Society in 2003. The official French-language document is posted on the Vatican Web site.

<sup>11</sup>Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451). Chalcedon lowered the minimum age for the ordination of women deacons from sixty to forty. See Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, pp. 121–123.

<sup>12</sup>From a letter of Pope Benedict VII to Benedict, bishop of Porto: “In the same way, we concede and confirm to you and your successors in perpetuity every episcopal ordination (*ordinationem episcopalem*), not only of presbyters but also of deacons or deaconesses (*diaconissis*) or subdeacons” (*ibid.*, p. 147).

deacons in the Catholic Church nor any ruling that overrides the conciliar documents or historic practice.<sup>13</sup>

Other documents of a higher order, specifically the Vatican II document *Unitatis redintegratio* (1964), speak directly to another point of this discussion. The Catholic Church recognizes several churches as having demonstrated apostolic succession, valid orders, and sacraments. The three churches named above—the Armenian Apostolic Church, which ordains women deacons, the Orthodox Church of Greece, which has voted to do so, and the Old Catholic Church of the Czech Republic, which has ordained a women deacon—along with the four European member-churches of the Union of Utrecht that ordain women deacons and women priests (the Old Catholic Churches in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Switzerland) have all demonstrated such apostolic succession and valid orders. Prescinding from the fact that there are women priests in the latter four churches, each ordains women to the diaconate as well, which is the topic of this discussion.

It will be worthwhile to examine below the current situation in the three churches that find that they can validly and licitly ordain women to the diaconate: the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church of Greece, and the Old Catholic Church of the Czech Republic.

### *The Armenian Apostolic Church*

The history of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which traces its heritage to Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew, is somewhat confusing due to the fifteenth century election of a catholicos in Echmiadzin, Armenia, the original seat of the church, while there was at the same time a catholicos in Cilicia (Lebanon), to which Armenians had fled in the tenth century. Since 1441, there have been two catholicosates in the Armenian Church with equal rights and privileges and having their own jurisdictions, although the primacy of honor of the catholicosate of Echmiadzin has always been recognized by the catholicosate of Cilicia. The See of Echmiadzin (Armenia) is led by His Holiness Karekin II, and the Armenian

---

<sup>13</sup>A joint notification issued by the prefects of the Catholic Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith, for Worship and Sacraments, and for the Clergy essentially reminded diocesan ordinaries that women were not to be trained as deacons, since they did not envision ordaining them. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was among the signers. A notification is not a legislative document. See Morrissey, *Papal and Curial Pronouncements*, p. 36. Original text: “*Notificazione delle Congregazioni per la Dottrina della Fede, per il Culto Divino e la Disciplina dei Sacramenti, per il Clero* 1. Da taluni Paesi sono pervenute ai nostri Dicasteri alcune segnalazioni di programmazione e di svolgimento di corsi, direttamente o indirettamente finalizzati all'ordinazione diaconale delle donne. Si vengono così a determinare aspettative carenti di solida fondatezza dottrinale e che possono generare, pertanto, disorientamento pastorale. 2. Poiché l'ordinamento ecclesiale non prevede la possibilità di una tale ordinazione, non è lecito porre in atto iniziative che, in qualche modo, mirino a preparare candidate all'Ordine diaconale. 3. L'autentica promozione della donna nella Chiesa, in conformità al costante Magistero ecclesiastico, con speciale riferimento a quello di Sua Santità Giovanni Paolo II, apre altre ampie prospettive di servizio e di collaborazione. 4. Le Congregazioni sottoscritte - nell'ambito delle proprie competenze - si rivolgono, pertanto, ai singoli Ordinari affinché vogliano spiegare ai propri fedeli ed applicare diligentemente la suindicata direttiva. Questa Notificazione è stata approvata dal Santo Padre, il 14 settembre 2001. Dal Vaticano, 17 settembre 2001.”

catholicosate of Cilicia (Antelias, Lebanon) is led by His Holiness Aram I.

While the Armenian Apostolic Church is divided administratively into two separate and independent churches—Echmiadzin and Cilicia—the churches consider themselves to be one church in the theological sense. The Catholic Church engages in dialogue with them separately within the context of dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox Churches. (The others in this dialogue are the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Egypt; Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, Damascus; Orthodox Church of Ethiopia; Orthodox Church of Eritrea; and Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church).

Without denying the hierarchical and juridical distinctions between and among these churches and specifically between and among Echmiadzin and Cilicia and their adherents, the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches from the Catholic point of view must be understood within the context of the fundamental underlying conciliar document, *Unitatis redintegratio*, which unequivocally recognizes the sacraments (and specifically the eucharist and orders) of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. In addition, there are three relatively recent joint or common declarations by the Catholic Church and the Armenian Church: that of May 12, 1970, between Paul VI and Vasken I, supreme catholicos and patriarch of all Armenians (Echmiadzin, 1955–95); of December 13, 1996, between John Paul II and His Holiness Karekin I, supreme patriarch and catholicos of all Armenians (Echmiadzin, 1995–99); and of January 25, 1997, between Pope John Paul II and Catholicos Aram I Keshishian (Cilicia, 1995–present).

The Armenian Apostolic Church has a modern history of monastic women deacons who served as deacons during the Divine Liturgy in their convents and who, since the mid-twentieth century, have served as deacons in the liturgy in parish churches and cathedrals (in Echmiadzin, Tiflis, and Constantinople). The Armenian catholicosate of Cilicia has at least three ordained women in Lebanon, and the Armenian patriarchate of Constantinople lists at least one protodeacon, Mother Hrip'sime, who was ordained in 1984.<sup>14</sup> Her name is that of the legendary virgin who fled the advances of the Emperor Diocletian to Armenia, where she refused King Tiridates, who had her and her companions tortured and killed. Many women servants of the Armenian Church have taken her name; there are extant photographs of nineteenth-century Protodeaconess Sister Hrip'sime Aghek'-Tahireanc' of Jerusalem in her liturgical vestments.<sup>15</sup>

The Diocese of the Armenian Church in America (East) has recently begun to call its historical women deacons “deaconesses,” distinguishing the “deaconess” (a monastic woman deacon) from a “woman deacon” (an active woman deacon not in a religious order). Even so, the Armenian Apostolic Church con-

<sup>14</sup>From the official church calendar published by the Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey: “Mother Hrip'sime Proto-deacon Sasunian, born in Soghukoluk, Antioch in 1928; became a nun in 1953; Proto-deacon in 1984; Mother Superior in 1998. Member of the Kalfayan Order” (Fr. Krikor Mak-soudian, tr., *Oratsuyts* [Istanbul: Armenian Patriarchate, 2001], p. 254).

<sup>15</sup>See Abel Oghlukian, *The Deaconess in the Armenian Church*, tr. S. Peter Cowe (New Rochelle, NY: St. Nersess, 1993). A history of women deacons in the Armenian Church is presented in M. Kristin Arat, “Die diakonissen der Armenischen kirche in kanonischer sicht,” *Handes Amsorya* (1987), pp. 153–189.

siders these women to be truly ordained. Since the Armenian Apostolic Church is interested in its relations with Catholics, with the Orthodox and other Oriental Orthodox, and with Anglicans, recognition of the validity of the orders of ordained women—its own and those of other churches—and the validity of the sacraments they perform is extremely important.

The ordination of women deacons is not a point of division between the Armenian Church and the Anglican, Orthodox, or Oriental Orthodox Churches, but it does raise questions in ecumenical dialogue between it and the Catholic Church, which has not responded to these apparently valid and licit ordinations.

### *The Orthodox Church of Greece*

The vote of the Holy Synod of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Greece in October, 2004, to restore the female diaconate marks an important return to tradition by this branch of Orthodoxy. Even though it did not have to take the matter to a vote—three ecumenical councils honored by the Orthodox have already determined that women can be ordained to the diaconate—the church's entire Holy Synod considered the topic.<sup>16</sup> The decision does not affect the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America or the Greek Orthodox Church as it exists in Australia, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom, or other parts of the world, each of which is part of the Ecumenical Patriarchate headquartered in Constantinople and led by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. The Orthodox Church of Greece declared its autocephaly unilaterally in 1833 and received its independence from Constantinople in 1850.<sup>17</sup>

The Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church was created on the occasion of the visit of Pope John Paul II to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1979. During the commission's fifth plenary session in 1988, in which the fourteen autocephalous and autonomous Orthodox Churches (including the Orthodox Church of Greece) took part, it approved "The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church, with Particular Reference to the Importance of the Apostolic Succession for the Sanctification and Unity of the People of God." This common document depends upon the common affirmation of the apostolic succession and validity of sacraments of each member of the commission ("We rely on the certitude that in our Churches apostolic succession is fundamental for the sanctification and the unity of the people of God"<sup>18</sup>) but leaves the matter of papal pri-

<sup>16</sup>The ecumenical councils generally agreed to by all Christendom (except for the Oriental Orthodox, who recognize the first three, and the Assyrian Church of the East, which recognizes the first two) are Nicea (325 C.E.), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (430), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople (553), Constantinople (680), and Nicea (787). The Armenians did not attend councils after 430.

<sup>17</sup>See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1997).

<sup>18</sup>The Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church approved in its fifth plenary session at the monastery of New Valamo, Finland, June 19–27, 1988, the common statement titled "The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church, with Particular Reference to the Importance of the Apostolic Succession for the Sanctification and Unity of the People of God," no. 1; see [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_cu](http://www.vatican.va/roman_cu)

macy for further meetings.

The document defines the diaconate as part of the sacrament of order, “exercised at the service of the bishop and the priest, in the liturgy, in the work of evangelization and in the service of charity.”<sup>19</sup> It leaves the discussion of the diaconate at that. It does not directly address women deacons. Earlier, the document appeals to tradition regarding the ordination of women to the priesthood:

32. Throughout the entire history of our Churches, women have played a fundamental role, as witnessed not only by the most Holy Mother of God, but also by the holy women mentioned in the New Testament, by the numerous women saints whom we venerate, as well as by so many other women who up to the present day have served the Church in many ways. Their particular charisms are very important for the building up of the Body of Christ. But our Churches remain faithful to the historical and theological tradition according to which they ordain only men to the priestly ministry.<sup>20</sup>

The following paragraph appears to reaffirm the “iconic argument” against the ordination of women:

33. Just as the apostles gathered together the first communities, by proclaiming Christ, by celebration [*sic*] the eucharist, by leading the baptised towards growing communion with Christ and with each other, so the bishop, established by the same Spirit, continues to preach the same Gospel, to preside at the same eucharist, to serve the unity and sanctification of the same community. He is thus the icon of Christ the servant among his brethren.<sup>21</sup>

However, while the joint Catholic-Orthodox document makes no connection, explicit or implicit, between the diaconate and the priesthood or the episcopate, the notion of “Christ the servant” is more in keeping with the theology of the diaconate. Even so, there is no discrepancy between the deacon and bishop, each being the “icon of Christ the servant,” since the episcopacy incorporates the diaconate as well as the priesthood. (In modern times the Catholic priesthood incorporates the diaconate as well, but not to such a degree that the priest as icon of “Christ...bridegroom and head of the Church”<sup>22</sup> cannot concurrently be deacon and “icon of Christ the servant.”) That is, any “iconic argument” rendered can be distinguished between an “iconic argument” on behalf of the priesthood and an “iconic argument” on behalf of the diaconate, necessarily conjoined in the episcopacy (and there symbolized by the bishops’ wearing of both a priestly chasuble and a diaconal dalmatic in major ceremonies, especially ordinations).<sup>23</sup>

---

ria/pontifical\_councils/chrstuni/ch\_orthodox\_docs/rc\_pc\_chrstuni\_doc\_19880626\_finland\_en.html (accessed February 25, 2008).

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., no. 43.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., no. 32.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., no. 33.

<sup>22</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores* (15 October 1976) No. 5.

<sup>23</sup>The 1886 *Caeremoniale Episcoporum*, revised after Vatican II, retains the older tradition. “The vestments worn by the bishop at a liturgical celebration are the same as those worn by presbyters; but in accordance with traditional usage, it is fitting that at a solemn celebration he wear under the chasuble a dalmatic (which may always be white.). This applies particularly to the celebration of



This governing document relative to the Catholic Church's understanding of the apostolic succession and validity of orders of the Orthodox Church of Greece—and of all Orthodoxy—makes no statement regarding the long-standing tradition of Orthodox women deacons, ordained in modern times according to the ancient Byzantine ritual used by Orthodox Saint Nectarios (1846–1920), bishop of Pentapolis, who ordained two women deacons in 1911.<sup>24</sup> Up to the 1950's, Greek Orthodox nuns became monastic deaconesses, and in 1986 Christodoulos, then metropolitan of Demetrias and now the archbishop of Athens and all of Greece, ordained a woman deacon according to the same ritual. Archbishop Christodoulos presided over the October, 2004, Synod that voted to restore the practice of monastic women deacons throughout the Church of Greece, although some synod members asked for ordained women deacons active in social ministry as well.<sup>25</sup> It is generally understood that “ordination” (*cheirotomia*) is envisioned, as opposed to “blessing” (*cheirothesia*).<sup>26</sup>

Like the ordination of women deacons in the Armenian Church, the ordination of women deacons in Orthodoxy poses questions only for the Catholic Church in ecumenical dialogue with its sister churches.

### *Old Catholic Churches*

In 1889 Old Catholic bishops of the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland signed the Union of Utrecht. The Church of Utrecht formed in the Netherlands in late 1723 in reaction to papal assertion of authority over the Netherlands' clergy and property. In 1870, Old Catholic dioceses were established by the Union of Utrecht in response to the dogmas of papal infallibility and supreme jurisdiction of Vatican I. The Union of Utrecht also rejects the dogma of the Immaculate Conception promulgated by Pius IX in 1854 and rejects the disciplines (but not the doctrine) of the Council of Trent.

Today, member churches of the Union of Utrecht of the Old Catholic Churches are represented in the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference, whose *ex-officio* head is the Old Catholic archbishop of Utrecht. The member churches—the Old Catholic Church of the Netherlands, Catholic Diocese of the Old Catholics in Germany, Old Catholic Church of Austria, Christian Catholic Church of Switzerland, Old Catholic Church of the Czech Republic, and the

---

ordinations, the blessing of an abbot or abbess, and the dedication of a church and an altar” (*Ceremonial of Bishops* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989], part 1, chap. 4, no. 56, p. 33).

<sup>24</sup>St. Nectarios the Wonderworker was metropolitan of Pentapolis briefly, but he was removed from office in 1890. He became an educator in Greece, and in 1904 he founded a female monastery, the Holy Trinity Convent in Aegina, to which he retired in 1908. His body was found incorrupt after death. The Orthodox Church declared him a saint in 1961.

<sup>25</sup>“Church Steps Back to the Future,” *Kathimerini English Daily*, October 9, 2004; *ANA English-Language Section of October 9*; available at <http://www.hri.org/news/greek/ana/2004/04-10-09.ana.html#14>.

<sup>26</sup>Phyllis Zagano, “Grant Her Your Spirit: The Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church of Greece,” *America* 192 (February 7, 2005): 18–21; translated as “Chiesa Ortodossa Greca: Il ripristino del diaconato femminile,” *Adista* (February 26, 2005). See <http://www.dimensionesperanza.it/modules/xfsection/article.php?articleid=1497>

Polish-Catholic Church of Poland—are considered by the Catholic Church to have valid sacraments and orders. The Polish National Catholic Church, in the United States (Scranton, Pennsylvania), which the Catholic Church also considers to have valid sacraments, does not ordain women, and it no longer belongs to the Union of Utrecht.<sup>27</sup>

Those in full communion with the Union of Utrecht Old Catholics are the Anglican Communion and the Philippine Independent Church.<sup>28</sup> There are numerous Old Catholic groups in the U.S., some of which claim to be descendants of Union of Utrecht Old Catholic Churches.<sup>29</sup> While the Catholic Church technically regards their orders and sacraments as valid, when the clergy of these various Old Catholic groups in the United States request reception to the Catholic Church, they are received as laypersons.

For the purposes of this essay, the focus is on the Old Catholic Church signers to the Union of Utrecht that the Catholic Church recognizes as having valid sacraments and orders.

The votes of the synods of the Old Catholic Churches in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and Switzerland to admit women to the diaconate and, later, to the priesthood and, in theory, to the episcopate led the Old Catholic Church in the Czech Republic to consider the matter. At its 2003 Synod, the Old Catholic Church in the Czech Republic failed to approve a proposal to open all grades of order to women. However, the proposal to admit women to the diaconate was accepted by vote (27 yes, 3 no, 16 abstentions). At that time there was only one female candidate for the diaconate and none for other grades of order. Hana Karasova was ordained deacon in October, 2003, by Old Catholic Bishop Dusan Hejbal.<sup>30</sup> The next synod to be convened by the Old Catholic Church in the Czech Republic may take up the matter of women priests. In the meanwhile, the Old Catholic Church in the Czech Republic is the only Western church whose orders and apostolic succession are recognized by the Catholic Church and that ordains women solely to the diaconate and, affirmatively, not to priesthood.

Prescinding from the practices of other Old Catholic Churches, and assuming the apostolic succession of the ordaining Czech Old Catholic bishop, the or-

---

<sup>27</sup>United States Catholic Conference, Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, "Pastoral Guidelines concerning Admission of Polish National Catholics to Sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church (Canon 844)."

<sup>28</sup>The Iglesia Filipina Independiente broke from Rome in 1902. The Bonn Agreement of July 2, 1931, established intercommunion (now referred to as "full communion") between the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Church of England.

<sup>29</sup>Among the others that use the term "Old Catholic" in the United States are the Old Catholic Church of America, the Old Catholic Church in North America, the Catholic Apostolic National Church, and the Independent Old Catholic Church of America. The Catholic Church technically recognizes the validity of orders in the Autocephalous Church Movement (the Catholic Apostolic Church), which has ordained women since the 1960's, but since it receives persons ordained by the movement as laypersons, it has made no statement regarding the validity of women's ordination within the movement.

<sup>30</sup>Martina Schneibergova and Jana Sustova, *Anhören*, "Die altkatholische Kirche hat ihre erste Diakonin," Radio Praha (October 30, 2003): "Die altkatholische Kirche in Tschechien hat unter ihren Geistlichen die erste Frau. Über die Weihe der ersten Diakonin durch den altkatholischen Bischof Dusan Hejbal berichtet Martina Schneibergova"; text of report is available at <http://radio.cz/de/artikel/46864>.

dination of Karasova creates a window to the West independent of and not to be confused with the late-twentieth-century ordinations of women deacons and priests in the underground Catholic Church in the Czech Republic.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

The Catholic Church has made a limited attempt to deny the history and possibility of women deacons through various curial statements, as well as with the 2002 document of the International Theological Commission titled “Le diaconate: Évolution et perspectives,” which argues that the rite of institution and the functions of the women deacons of the ancient church were not identical to those of the men deacons of the ancient church.<sup>32</sup> Yet, in churches that have not fully abandoned the tradition (which happened in other churches around the sixth century in the West and, for the most part, the eleventh century in the East, until modern times), women have been and are being ordained to the diaconate. The likely ritual for the Orthodox Church of Greece is derived from the Apostolic Constitutions<sup>33</sup> and contains a ritual deep in the history of the Catholic

---

<sup>31</sup>Ludmila Javorová (b. 1932) was secretly ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1970 by Bishop Felix Maria Davidek (1921–88) in the Czechoslovakian underground Koinótés fellowship. The Catholic Church considers Bishop Davidek an affiliated bishop of the Diocese of Brno, Moravia, Czech Republic. The Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared the secret ordinations by the fellowship illicit in February, 2000, and regularized fifty celibate and twenty-two married men by reordaining them *sub-conditione*, but it never made any statement directly about the ordained women. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration, “On Bishops and Priests Ordained Secretly in the Czech Republic” (February 11, 2000). Javorová was not invited to be reordained, although apparently her bishop asked her not to exercise priestly ministry, and she has complied. As many as five other women were ordained, some solely to the diaconate. See Miriam Therese Winter, *Out of the Depths: The Story of Ludmila Javorova, Ordained Roman Catholic Priest* (New York: Crossroad, 2001); Petr Fiala and Jiří Hanuš, *Skrytá církev: Felix M. Davidek a společenství Koinótés* (Brno, Czech Republic: CDK, 1999).

<sup>32</sup>See note 11, above.

<sup>33</sup>See Gryson, *Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, p. 62, citing F. X. Funk, *Didascalia et constitutiones Apostolorum*, 2 vols. (Paderborn, 1905; reprint, Turin, 1964), pp. 524, 13–24. The earliest known ordination ritual for a woman deacon is present in the Apostolic Constitutions. See Paul F. Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1990), p. 116. See also Ecumenical Patriarchate, *The Place of Women in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*, Report of the Interorthodox Symposium, Rhodes (Rhodes), Greece, October 10–November 7, 1988, ed. Gennadios Limouris (Katerini, Greece: Tertios Publications, 1992), pp. 31–32. The liturgical text as reconstructed by Jacob Goar, in *Euchologion sive Rituale Graecorum* (Paris, 1647), pp. 262–264, reflects the likely liturgy to be used. Goar reconstructed the ancient formulae of the Greek Liturgy using seven manuscripts, most probably Barberini, Grottaferrata, St. Mark (Florence), Tillianus, Allatianus, Coresianus, and the Royal Library (France), as follows: “Holy and Omnipotent Lord, through the birth of your Only Son our God from a Virgin according to the flesh, you have sanctified woman. You grant not only to men, but also to women the grace and coming of the Holy Spirit. Please also now, Lord, look on this your maid servant and dedicate her to the task of your diaconate, and pour out into her the abundant giving of your Holy Spirit. Preserve her while she performs her ministry according to what is pleasing to you, in the orthodox faith and irreproachable conduct. For to you is due all glory, honor and worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always and in all ages. Amen.” Note that the woman deacon is ordained to ministry (*leitourgia*). The translation is by John Wijngaards and is available at [http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac\\_gr4.htm](http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/deac_gr4.htm).

Church as well. For a church recognized as having valid orders by the Catholic Church to use this ritual in modern times with the authority of tradition brings forth multiple questions regarding interchurch relations and could move forward the internal discussion of restoring the tradition of women deacons in the Catholic Church. This is especially true in the cases of the three churches discussed here.

The ecumenical dimension of the female diaconate cannot be ignored. Clearly, should a Catholic curial office declare the orders of women deacons in the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church of Greece, and Old Catholic Churches invalid, it could force a serious fracture in ecumenical relations. The Catholic reaction to the ordination of women priests (but not women deacons) in Anglicanism sets the precedence for a reaction, but not for a reaction regarding women deacons.<sup>34</sup> (The Catholic reaction to the ordination of Anglican women is curious in light of the encyclical of Leo XIII titled *Apostolicae curae* (September 18, 1896), which declares Anglican orders null. If Anglican orders are null, why would it matter if Anglican women are ordained?) Even so, the Catholic Church has made no official comment on the ordination of women deacons in Anglicanism.

Despite discussion of the question of monastic or nonmonastic women deacons, the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches apparently do not consider the orders of their women deacons to be the equivalent of minor orders. So also the Union of Utrecht Old Catholic Churches clearly considers the ordination of women to the diaconate as ordination to major orders. However, even without consideration of the actions taken by the Old Catholic Church in the Czech Republic or those Old Catholic Churches in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands, official Catholic reaction to the ordination of women to the diaconate in the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches would shed light on the Catholic Church's understanding of its own history.

Independent of whether the ordained women of the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches have been or are to be ordained as monastic women deacons, only to serve within their monasteries, or as women deacons in service to the larger community, their churches recognize them as validly ordained to major orders; the Catholic Church's response can solidify or explode the ecumenical balance between and among the various churches involved. Granted, other issues divide Christianity with equal energy and emotion, but none has such

---

<sup>34</sup>“When the question of the ordination of women arose in the Anglican Communion, Pope Paul VI, out of fidelity to his office of safeguarding the Apostolic Tradition, and also with a view to removing a new obstacle placed in the way of Christian unity, reminded Anglicans of the position of the Catholic Church: ‘She holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God’s plan for his Church’” (John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, May 22, 1994, quoting Paul VI, Response to the Letter of His Grace the Most Reverend Dr. F. D. Coggan, Archbishop of Canterbury, concerning the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood [November 30, 1975]; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 68, (1976): 599).

clear support of the ancient tradition of the church.<sup>35</sup>

Prescinding from the fact of priestly ordinations in some of the Union of Utrecht Old Catholic Churches and other Christian denominations, there remain few Christian denominations that do not ordain women deacons. If the Catholic Church chose to recognize and return to the larger and longer tradition of ordaining women deacons, it might solidify its position on the ordination of women priests. As noted above, the Catholic Church argues that it does not have the authority to ordain women to the priesthood. If that argument is correct, the Catholic Church could easily return to the tradition of ordaining women deacons. If that argument is not correct, then the delay in a return to the tradition is political, rather than theological.

It would seem logical that a decision by the Catholic Church to return to its tradition of ordaining women deacons might better foster Christian unity, as well as help the Catholic Church regain its lost authority in matters of human rights and equality.

Without question, the ordination of women deacons is one of singular interest and import in ecumenical discussion. Prior to the election of Benedict XVI, Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (and a member of the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith and for Eastern Churches), told a reporter in New York that the question of ordaining women to the diaconate is “not settled.”<sup>36</sup> His comment could be read as recognition of the apparent unwillingness or inability of the requisite dicasteries to render a decision, but the fact that he commented on the record at all supports the import of the topic.

The reasons given for the continued refusal to render a decision on restoring the female diaconate obliquely (and perhaps unintentionally) present the Catholic Church’s need for ministry by women deacons. In the same meeting referenced above, Kasper added that women were already doing what they would do if they were ordained as deacons.<sup>37</sup> Such is not the case. While by exceptional rescripts (official papal decrees) women sometimes can fulfill some duties of deacons (witnessing marriages, solemnly baptizing), there are canonical restrictions against laypersons preaching or sharing authority. The Code of Canon Law (as well as the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches) specifically forbids nonordained persons to preach at Eucharistic Liturgies or have any ordinary juridical authority.<sup>38</sup> For example, a woman may be a member of a marriage tribunal, but as a noncleric she cannot be a single signer of an opinion. Such would evidence ordinary juridical authority of a woman over a man. Similarly, the neu-

---

<sup>35</sup>Speaking at an ecumenical congress at Ushaw College, Durham, England, Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, pointed out that differences within Christianity over moral issues—he specifically noted homosexuality, abortion, and euthanasia—are not on the top of the hierarchy of truths but they are very emotional and, therefore, very divisive” (*Catholic News Service*, January 13, 2006).

<sup>36</sup>Tracy Early, “Ecumenism Undergoing ‘Radical Change’ in 21st Century, Cardinal Says,” *Catholic News Service*, March 17, 2005.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>See *Code of Canon Law*: C. 767.1: “Among the forms of preaching, the homily . . . is part of the liturgy itself and is reserved to a priest or deacon.” C. 274.1: “Only clerics can obtain offices for whose exercise the power of orders or the power of ecclesiastical governance is required.”

ralgic issue of preaching and functioning in diaconal capacity at liturgy, particularly at the Liturgy of the Eucharist, are expressly forbidden. Each flares at the prospect of ordained women deacons in the Catholic Church.

Hence, while a number of diaconal ministries are performed by nonordained persons, and certain diaconal juridical and sacramental authority can be delegated to nonordained persons, no Catholic woman genuinely functions as a deacon.

The 2002 International Theological Commission document states that the functions of women deacons of the ancient church are not the same as the functions of the deacon today.<sup>39</sup> Still, the document makes no clear statement about whether women were sacramentally ordained, or whether the tradition will be revived. What the church has done the church can do again. Women are ordained in churches whose sacraments and apostolic succession are recognized by the Catholic Church. How, exactly, does the Catholic Church view them? If the Catholic Church recognizes their unbroken or returned-to tradition, will it recognize its own?

These questions need to be asked, and they need to be answered.

---

<sup>39</sup>“[T]he deaconesses mentioned in the ancient tradition of the Church—as suggested by their rite of institution and the functions they exercised—are not purely and simply the same as deacons”; in the original document: “[L]es deaconesses dont il est fait mention dans la Tradition de l’Église ancienne—selon ce que suggèrent le rite d’institution et les fonctions exercées—ne sont pas purement et simplement assimilables aux diacres” (“Le diaconat,” 107); my translation.

