

## Women Deacons in the First Millennium of the Church

By Gloria Ulterino

### An Introduction

Where and how did women deacons begin? Some might say, “Oh, it began with Phoebe. You know, she’s the one that Paul praised in his letter to the Romans (written toward the end of the fifties).” He names her “a deacon of the church at Cenchreae,” someone to be welcomed, “for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.” (See Romans 16:1-2, NRSV translation.) Know, as well, that Cenchreae is a harbor town in Greece, not far from Corinth.

Or, we might well name Jesus as the ultimate source of the diaconate. Remember his words at the Last Supper, according to Luke? “For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” (See Luke 22:27.) Where, then, and why, did this order of service originate, for women, as well as men? Why did it die out? Do we *need* such an order of service for women today?

Where to begin? In order to breathe life into what might otherwise seem like exploring the dustbin of history, I probe a significant contemporary event: the Amazonian Synod of October 6–27, 2019, entitled “New Pathways for the Church and for An Integral Ecology.” Why begin here? Because, it can readily open us up to the past, wrestling with some of today’s concerns. Remember now: given that the “lungs of the planet” are struggling to breathe, and that something must be done about it, Pope Francis called for this Synod.

Two hundred and seventy people participated, though only forty of them were women. But they *could*—and *did*—speak out in the small group conversations: five Spanish and four Portuguese groups representing the Amazon region, as well as two Italian and one English/French group. Furthermore, Deborah Rose-Milavec—co-leader of the U.S. reform group FutureChurch—attended the Synod and offered daily reflections on its happenings. She noted that “the bishops, women religious, and others who have sat on the panels in press briefings ... know and love their people and they are fearless, faith-filled innovators.” These are people who “know that God does not live in a rule-bound institution, but in the faces of Her people and in the rivers, trees and skies that hold them.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, according to Deborah, their views were often supported by church officials.

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<sup>1</sup> Rose-Milavec, Notes, October 10<sup>th</sup>.

Bishop Evaristo Pascoal Spengler, OFM, for example, “offered the most lucid and compelling pitch for ordaining women deacons that I would venture to say has ever been heard at a synod.”<sup>2</sup>

As it turns out, the restoration of a women’s diaconate was one “solution” offered to the many pastoral and ecological concerns of the Amazonian church. Let’s take a closer look. On the last day of the Synod, October 26<sup>th</sup>, the Synod participants approved all 120 paragraphs of proposals, as reported by Gerard O’Connell, Vatican Correspondent for *America* magazine, and Luke Hansen, SJ, a former associate editor of *America*. They included: (1) The place of the laity “in the heart of the People of God, in a totally ministerial Church, which bases the identity and mission of every Christian in the sacrament of Baptism.” Indeed, the laity must be “privileged actors” for “building a society of justice and solidarity in the care of our” world. (See paragraph 93, revealing the impact of the Second Vatican Council on the Church.) (2) Furthermore, the church in the Amazon must “promote and confer ministries for men and women in an equitable manner,” (according to paragraph 95). (3) In the absence of priests, the bishop may “mandate and entrust the exercise of pastoral care of the community to a person not invested with the priestly character, who is a member of the community through a ritual act.” (See paragraph 96). (4) Because of Jesus’ collaboration with women, we (the participants) are open to women’s leadership. In fact, in consultations with the Amazonian Church, we discovered that a “majority of Catholic communities are led by women.” (See paragraph 102). (5) Paragraph 103 went on to say this: “In a large number of these consultations, the permanent diaconate for women was created. This made it an important theme during the Synod.” (6) Indeed, (according to paragraph 104), the diaconate “has existed since the beginning of the Church and has been restored as an autonomous and permanent rank by the Second Vatican Council (LG 29).”<sup>3</sup>

With that, we briefly explore the history of women in the diaconate during the First Millennium.<sup>4</sup>

## First of All, the Diaconate in the East/ or Greek-Speaking Church

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<sup>2</sup> Rose-Milavec, Notes, October 25<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> LG refers to *Lumen Gentium*, the Vatican II document on Church.

<sup>4</sup> The information that follows is from the manuscript of my upcoming third book, *What Time Is It? A Deep Reading of Our Lives Throughout the Liturgical Year*.

Why begin in the East? Because the *Didascalia*, an early third century liturgical document from northern Syria, was first to describe the ordination of women to the diaconate. Most of these women remain unknown to us. But, this much we can say. They are older, very likely over the age of 50. Serious. Compassionate. Faith-filled, with a wisdom forged from their life's struggles. Committed to serving God and God's People, mostly other women. Imagine their faces, their courage, their profound faith, their desire to serve.

At the same time, we *do* have the names of a few women. There's Olympias, born into a wealthy, influential family. Married in 385 CE to Nebridius, prefect of Constantinople and widowed a year later, she vowed never to remarry. So it was that Bishop Nectarius ordained her a deacon while she was still in her thirties; not only that, she became one of his personal advisors. Another was Amproukla, woman deacon in Constantinople, to whom John Chrisostom (who died in 411 CE) wrote letters of thanks, for supporting him during his exile. Yet another was Anastasia, recipient of letters from Severus, bishop of Antioch, after he was exiled in 518 CE. Their letters often included Scriptural reflection.

Of course, with the growth of infant Baptism, the need for women deacons dramatically declined. Originally, they had accompanied adult women into large Baptismal fonts, clothing them in the white garment of new life. While the Canonical Collection of the Patriarch Photius of Constantinople recognizes forty women deacons in the ninth century, by two centuries later women were no longer being ordained deacons.

## In the West

We don't hear about women deacons in the West until later on. The liturgical document *Apostolic Tradition* (circa 215 CE) makes no mention of women deacons. Why? Possibly because misogyny had openly reared its ugly head. Ambrosiaster, for example, insisted that men alone are made in the image of God; it would be "a shame," he concluded, "if women dared to talk in church."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Carrado Marucci, "History and Value of the Feminine Diaconate in the Ancient Church," in Zagano, *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers*, 42.

However, by the sixth century, we can name several ordained women deacons: Helaria, called diaconia by her father, St. Remigius of Reims; Anna of Rome; Theodora of Gaul; and Ausonia of Dalmatia. But there is one, around whom exists great drama: St. Radegund, wife of Clothar (Lothair) I, King of the Franks (511-558 CE). Upon leaving the king (circa 550), she demanded ordination to the diaconate at the hands of Medard, Bishop of Noyen. Understandably terrified of the king's wrath, he refused! That is, until some women intervened, clothing Radegund in monastic garb. She then imperiously proclaimed: "If you shrink from consecrating me, and fear man more than God, Pastor, He will require His sheep's soul from your hand."<sup>6</sup> So, Bishop Medard ordained her!

Over time, the diaconate of women receded in the West for the same reasons as in the East. And yet, in the twelfth century the theologian Abelard wrote a passionate defense of women deacons, on behalf of his wife, Abbess Heloise of Paris. Both considered abbesses to be successors to the ancient order of women deacons, "an ordained clerical office established by Christ himself."<sup>7</sup>

### **An Important Question: Were these women authentically, sacramentally ordained?**

Much ink has been spilled in attempting to answer this significant question. Were these women, in point of fact, actually ordained as deacons? Meaning, did the bishop actually lay hands on them and anoint them with oil? Or, were they merely blessed, like the widows? While no absolute consensus exists, many scholars contend that a genuine ordination took place.<sup>8</sup> Once again, the *Didascalia* helps us out here. Speaking of bishops, deacons/deaconesses, and presbyters in Trinitarian terms, it then equates deacons and deaconesses: "Therefore, bishop, make permanent workers of justice (*diakonous*) who may help your people for life. Elect and make deacons from among your people those whom you like: the man so that he might take care of the many things that are necessary, and women for ministry among women."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Gary Macy, "Women Deacons: History," in Gary Macy et al., *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> See Gary Macy, "Women Deacons: History," in Gary Macy et al., *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> See Carrado Marucci, "History and Value of the Feminine Diaconate in the Ancient Church," in Zagano, *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers*, 30-56; also Cipriano Vagaggini, "The Ordination of Deaconesses in the Greek and Byzantine Tradition," in Zagano, *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers*, 96-143.

<sup>9</sup> See Cipriano Vagaggini, "The Ordination of Deaconesses in the Greek and Byzantine Tradition," in Zagano, *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers*, 104.

Fast forward some hundred and fifty years in the East to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a compilation of several documents. Vagaggini, who exhaustively probed these documents, is convinced that women deacons were authentically ordained by the bishop. Hear his prayer over the women: “O Eternal God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, creator of man and of woman, you who have filled with your Spirit Miriam and Deborah, Anna and Hulda; you who have not deemed it unworthy that your only begotten Son be born of a woman; you who instituted women as guardians of the holy parts of the tent of the covenant and of the Temple; You, even now, look upon this [female] servant of yours elected to the diaconate; grant her the Holy Spirit and purify her from all sins of the flesh and of the spirit: so that she might fulfill the task entrusted to her for your glory and for the glory of your Christ, with whom and with the Holy Spirit, glory and adoration be to you and forever and ever.”<sup>10</sup>

It would seem, therefore, that she joined the upper ranks of the clergy: bishop, priest, and deacon. Her ordination, like that of the men, took place in the sanctuary, while servants of lower rank (like widows, lectors, and cantors) took place outside, in the sacristy. Such ordination prepared her to assist women at Baptism, continue their formation, and care for them when they were ill; also, she was to welcome strangers and serve as messenger and mediator for the bishop when called upon by him. Even so, it must be noted that she, as a woman, was held in lower regard than a man. She could not proceed to the priesthood, and the prevailing view regarded her as “fragile, weak, and rather unintelligent.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Were Women Truly Ordained in the West?**

It wasn't until the eighth century that we find rituals for such ordination, in the liturgical book of Bishop Egbert of York. Again, there is an equality of men and women in this prayer: “Give heed, Lord, to our prayers and upon this your servant send forth that spirit of your blessing in order that, enriched by heavenly gifts, he [or she] might be able to obtain grace through your majesty and by living well offer an example to others. Through [our Lord Jesus Christ].”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, there were prayers unique to each gender. Women's prayers emphasized their

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<sup>10</sup> See Cipriano Vagaggini, “The Ordination of Deaconesses in the Greek and Byzantine Tradition,” in Zagano, *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers*, 124.

<sup>11</sup> See Cipriano Vagaggini, “The Ordination of Deaconesses in the Greek and Byzantine Tradition,” in Zagano, *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers*, 117.

<sup>12</sup> See Gary Macy, “Women Deacons: History,” in Gary Macy, et al., *Women Deacons. Past, Present, Future*, 20.

virginity and fidelity, like the wise virgins of Matthew 25:1-13, awaiting their bridegroom. The men's prayers pleaded for God's peace and prosperity, as people made in God's image. Despite these differences, however—and *this is very important*—the tenth century Romano-Germanic Pontifical (or Mainz Pontifical) clearly instructed both women and men to receive the stole or orarium, indicating their preaching role. The laying on of hands and anointing with oil were also prescribed.

In summary, then, the scholar Rolandus proclaimed, in commenting upon the vast collection of church laws amassed by Gratian in the twelfth century: “there is no doubt that it was the custom in the past to ordain women deacons, that is, readers of the Gospel who were not to be ordained before forty years of age, nor were they to be married after ordination.”<sup>13</sup>

### **A Final Blow: Prevailing “Purity Laws” and Miscogyny**

By the thirteenth century, the diaconate of women completely died out. The original need no longer existed. Additionally, the prevailing attitude regarding women stubbornly took root, as named by ancient “purity laws.” Eastern canonist Theodore Balsamon maintained: “In times past, orders (tagmata) of deaconesses were recognized, and they had access to the sanctuary (bema). *But the monthly affliction banished them from the divine and holy sanctuary.*”<sup>14</sup> Fourteenth century canonist Matthew Blastares concurred: “Women deacons then fulfilled a certain service among the clergy (kleroi) which is nearly unknown to everyone now.... *They were forbidden access and performance of these services by later fathers because of their monthly flow that cannot be controlled....*”<sup>15</sup>

### **Has the Time Finally Arrived Today to Ordain Women as Deacons?**

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<sup>13</sup> See Gary Macy, “Women Deacons: History,” in Gary Macy, et al., *Women Deacons. Past, Present, Future*, 26, from Gary Macy, *Hidden History*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> See Gary Macy, “Women Deacons: History,” in Gary Macy, et al., *Women Deacons. Past, Present, Future*, 30-31; also in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 137; my emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> See Gary Macy, “Women Deacons: History,” in Gary Macy, et al., *Women Deacons. Past, Present, Future*, 31,32; also in Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*, 138; again, my emphasis.

Is there a *need* for women deacons today? That's the ultimate question posed by the 1995 report of the Canon Law Society of America. What do *you* say in answer?