



by Daniel P. Horan

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 5, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

On Tuesday of this week, the Catholic and Orthodox churches celebrated the [feast of St. Phoebe](#), the early Christian woman that St. Paul introduces as a deacon (diakonos in the Greek) of the church of Cenchreae in his Letter to the Romans ([16:1](#)).

For advocates of the restoration of admission of women to the diaconate in both the [Catholic](#) and the [Orthodox](#) churches, St. Phoebe has served as a patron saint. And having just commemorated this feast, only a few weeks before the convening of the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the [Synod of Bishops](#), which will meet from Oct. 2-27, I have been thinking a lot about women in the church generally and, more specifically, the apparent suspension of any serious consideration by the most senior of church leaders — including and especially the pope — to restore the admission of women to the diaconate.

Despite Pope Francis having previously created two commissions to study the women deacons (first in [2016](#) and then again in [2020](#)), the results of which have still [never been made public](#), there has been little development or clear view of a path forward regarding next steps. Instead, in an interview with [CBS News in May](#), Francis appeared to unequivocally deny the possibility of women being admitted to the diaconate. When asked by journalist Norah O'Donnell, "For a little girl growing up Catholic today, will she ever have the opportunity to be a deacon and participate as a clergy member in the church?" Francis simply said: "No."

Advertisement

Such a course of events raises the legitimate concern that the pope may have been merely placating [women religious](#) and other supporters when establishing the two commissions but was never really seriously considering the possibility of admitting women to the ordained diaconate. One could see a similar sort of backpedaling in the synod's latest [Instrumentum Laboris](#), the working document that serves as the foundational agenda for the gathering, which took the subject of women deacons off the table for the assembly (despite its prominence as a theme in the 2023 synodal meeting).

The topic of women deacons, among other concrete subjects of discussion at the 2023 synod session and in the global consultation phases, were pushed to 10 newly

established "[study groups](#)" earlier this year. The justification for this move has been the desire to [more narrowly focus](#) this October's gathering on the process of synodality and discussions about how to increase broader participation in the church's decision-making.

Despite some [synod participants](#) voicing hope that the study groups might result in something constructive or practical moving forward, I am reminded of the cynical aphorism repeated in higher education and politics alike: committees are where ideas go to die. And given the status of the question of women deacons in this synod process and the failure to share the results of the Vatican commissions so far, that old saying appears to be proven true in the church.

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is clear that the Roman Catholic Church (or at least many of those entrusted with the highest levels of leadership) has a serious problem with women. Francis has made great strides in some aspects of extending invitations for greater involvement by and representation of women in some aspects of church leadership, including the appointment of [several women to significant posts in Vatican dicasteries](#) and expanding voting rights at the synod to all participants, which includes lay and religious women.



Above every Greek Orthodox church's altar, Theotokos, or Mary the Mother of Jesus, symbolically watches over the congregation. The figure, with arms outstretched, welcomes visitors and parishioners alike at St. Sophia Greek Orthodox Cathedral near downtown Los Angeles. (Photo courtesy of Creative Commons/Floyd B. Bariscale)

But the way the pope often speaks about women in abstract ways doesn't sound much different from Pope John Paul II's "separate but equal" complementarianism, which argued for keeping women in "traditional" familial and ecclesial roles and praising their "genius." A decade ago, journalist David Gibson compiled a [list of seven examples](#) of Francis talking about women in what the kids might call "cringy" ways. And these came just from the first year of his pontificate.

Subsequently, Francis has often tried to shut down discussion of admitting women to formal ministerial positions and ordination out of a misplaced paternalism that has sought to [protect women from being "clericalized"](#) and that, [as the pope said in an interview last year](#), "the fact that the woman does not access ministerial life is not a deprivation, because her place is much more important," which he understands as mirroring "Jesus' bride the church." The foundational logic here is that women are lesser, that they need the protection of men and that somehow recognizing their full humanity and capacity for ministry or leadership threatens the core of Christianity.

But what if the church just treated women as fully equal to men?

This has been the basic question raised by women and pro-feminist men in the church for decades, if not centuries. And it is also the question that is leading to scores of young women walking away from Catholicism and other institutional religions today. According to a [large and important study](#) published earlier this year about religious attitudes and identification in the United States, Gen Z women are disaffiliating from religion at a higher rate than men for the first time in history. The study also shows that "nearly two-thirds of Gen Z women say churches do not treat men and women equally."

It doesn't take much imagination to draw the connection between the persistence of sexism and patriarchy in the church, including in apodictic claims about God's intention regarding gender equality in ministry and leadership, and the rise of disaffiliation.

Will ordaining women to the diaconate solve all the gender inequality that exists in the church? No, but it will be a significant and symbolic step toward fuller inclusion and justice.

[Tweet this](#)

I do not believe that it is sufficient merely to point to demographic changes or church attendance as the justification for seeking greater equality for women in the church. Instead, I believe that it is the right thing to do even if young people, women especially, weren't leaving the church in droves. There is enough historical and theological scholarship to make the argument, as so many people like [Phyllis Zagano](#) and others have argued for years, that women should be admitted to the diaconate.

Furthermore, we might ask ourselves: if Jesus entrusted Mary of Magdala to be the first witness to his Resurrection (John 20:11-18) and St. Paul entrusted the Deacon Phoebe to be a minister, messenger, and supporter in the early Christian community (Romans 16:1-2), significant positions in Christian history and the church, then what is our excuse today? What reasons are there apart from patriarchy and misogyny?

Will ordaining women to the diaconate rid the church of the structural sin of clericalism? No, but it will make at least a small contribution to combatting the sin of sexism.

Will ordaining women to the diaconate solve all the gender inequality that exists in the church? No, but it will be a significant and symbolic step toward fuller inclusion and justice.

Will ordaining women to the diaconate solve problems related to the clergy shortage or declining church attendance? No, but it will be an important affirmation of the full humanity of women, while also granting local churches the privilege and blessing of experiencing women preach, teach, baptize, celebrate weddings, serve the poor and suffering and witness to the gospel in such a way that more truly reflects the vision of God's inclusive reign as proclaimed by Jesus. And we will all be better for it.