NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

St. Nicholas church and its conversation on women deacons

Porsia Tunzi | Nov. 8, 2012 NCR Today

Fr. Bill Tkachuk, the pastor at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Chicago, recently discussed his parish's conversation about women deacons, a conversation that has been ongoing since 2010, with *NCR* for a story in our Nov. 9-22 print edition, "Women Deacons: A Distinct Question [1]."

Although Tkachuk agreed to the interview with *NCR*, he "did not want to give the impression that [he and his parish] were involved in some sort of campaign or crusade, because that would change the nature of this particular conversation."

"This is not a movement," he continued. "This is a conversation that we think the church should be having. It's about people understanding the issue out there."

The following is a summary of Tkachuk's interview.

In 2010, not long after he started at St. Nicholas, Tkachuk was approached by a man asking about entering the diaconate. Around the same time, Tkachuk also became aware of questions about women, the diaconate and ordination within the parish.

The parish held various meetings to see how parishioners felt and what they thought about the diaconate. The meetings allowed both men and women to share their opinions on a man entering the diaconate, which led to more questions about women's role in the diaconate process.

Interested parishioners, with the support of Tkachuk, planned four education nights:

- The first education night focused on lay ministry in the church since the Second Vatican Council.
- The second explained the diaconate itself: What it is and how the formation program begins in a parish.
- The third discussed why the issue of women's ordination into the diaconate remains an open question within the church.
- The fourth examined the question: "How does the prophet (person receiving a call) maintain their energy in a time when they are feeling called to things that the church or the world doesn't agree on?"

Following the third education night -- on women and the diaconate -- Tkachuk had a conversation with one woman who didn't know that she and other parishioners could be talking about the topic. Tkachuk knew this was an unanswered question in the church and told her that conversation was allowed.

In the summer of 2010, a few parishioners approached Tkachuk and asked if a parishwide conversation could begin, to which Tkachuk agreed.

In fall 2010, the man who previously approached Tkachuk entered the diaconate program for the Chicago archdiocese. Women who wished to know more about the process were also invited to explore the role of the diaconate alongside the man who entered into the program.

A number of women came forward and, once they understood the role of a deacon, said they felt more called to lay ministry instead.

Lynne Mapes-Riordan still felt called to the diaconate, especially once she knew it remained an open question within the church. Tkachuk told Mapes-Riordan that her gender was the only thing that stopped him from giving her an application.

Mapes-Riordan declined to be interviewed for this story.

In addition to the man entering into the diaconate program, the inquiring group as a whole, including Mapes-Riordan, proceeded in creating three subgroups to approaching the issue of women deacons. One group focused on creating ways to educate the rest of the parish. A second group focused on how the parish could support the women who perceive this call to the diaconate in a time when they cannot enter into the program. A third group focused on how they could reach out to the cardinal and other parishes that might be interested in pursuing the conversation.

The group focusing on education has brought in a number of speakers to the parish, including one in October, and produced a pamphlet to explain to parishioners what the conversation is about. The group is working on a second pamphlet.

In pursuing the idea of women becoming deacons, there have been different perspectives and opinions within the parish.

Some parishioners felt the parish should demand that women be admitted into the diaconate. Yet this group was reminded that that mentality deters having a real conversation. On the other side of the spectrum was a group who thought the parish was causing trouble just by bringing up the idea of women deacons. Tkachuk reminded the members of this group that the church has kept the idea of women deacons as an open question.

By the spring of 2011, one subgroup worked on preparing a position paper to send to Cardinal Francis George based on theological research and people they have consulted. The paper covered a number of issues, including statements on why they felt it was important for the church to consider women entering the diaconate and the benefits for the church of having women as ordained deacons. They asked George if he would be willing to bring their concern to the Vatican. The letter was sent in April 2011.

Tkachuk met privately with George to discuss the intent of the conversation the parish group wanted to have. George was reassured it would indeed be a conversation and not misinformed demands.

On Sept. 11, 2011, a meeting was held between St. Nicholas parishioners, Tkachuk and George. Tkachuk commented that the meeting was a positive experience with a "good conversation." George agreed to bring the conversation to Rome in February 2012.

After the meeting, George met privately with Mapes-Riordan to discuss her personal calling to the diaconate.

Tkachuk said George did bring the open question of women deacons to Rome in February, but they have been unable to schedule a meeting since then.

However, the conversation still continues today within the St. Nicholas parish.

The conversation about women deacons was unexpected, but Tkachuk has been supportive since the beginning.

He said it was important for him that the laity raised the question and wanted dialogue on an issue that the

church has not yet made a decision on. St. Nicholas parishioners have done the work to inform themselves, to understand the issue and to study how best to pursue a conversation.

"Hopefully, those who see us as rebel-rousing [will] see that we are simply having a conversation," Tkachuk told *NCR*.

This conversation has been a good model of how issues can be discussed and how the laity can bring ideas and concerns to the higher levels of the church, Tkachuk continued.

Other parishes have contacted Tkachuk for advice on how to start a dialogue on women in the diaconate in their own parishes. St. Nicholas has made its pamphlet available, as well as any other information a parish may want to share within their own parish.

[Porsia Tunzi is an *NCR* Bertelsen intern. Her e-mail address is **ptunzi@ncronline.org**.]

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