News



People attend Mass at Knock Shrine in Ireland Aug. 21. The Mass launched the one-year countdown to the 2018 World Meeting of Families in Ireland. (CNS/courtesy John McElroy)



by Sarah Mac Donald

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The Association of Catholic Priests in Ireland has called on the Irish bishops to halt the introduction of permanent deacons in their dioceses until the Vatican's commission on women deacons has concluded its report and Pope Francis has made a decision based on its findings.

In their statement, association leaders said they believed that proceeding with the introduction of male deacons at this time would add "another male clerical layer to ministry" which was "insensitive, disrespectful of women and counter-productive at this present critical time."

The call by the Association of Catholic Priests follows a public statement by one of association's leadership team, parish priest Fr. Roy Donovan, who warned Aug. 9 that introducing permanent deacons without women is "extending patriarchy."

Donovan, who is a priest of the Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly, made his comments following news that Archbishop Kieran O'Reilly is setting up a group there to research the introduction of the diaconate ministry for the first time. The group is due to begin its work this autumn.

As many as 15 out of the Irish church's 26 dioceses have already introduced training for permanent deacons. NCR approached Fr. Michael Duignan, national director of the permanent diaconate in Ireland, who was unavailable for comment, as were a number of diocesan directors for the permanent diaconate.

Donovan objects to the fact that the church currently confines the permanent diaconate to men. In his statement, he asked, "What are the implications of this when already there are so many women involved on the ground, in all kinds of ministries, without been given much status and power? Have they not also earned their place at the top table?"

The Vatican announced the commission in August 2016, which Francis established to look at the history of women deacons in the early church, with a view to possibly opening the diaconate to women.

"I am passionate about the church and creating a space for women," Donovan told NCR. "My speaking out has not come out of the blue but from many years of being influenced and inspired by women in parishes and in my life. I owe a debt of

gratitude to women for what they have taught me especially about the compassion and inclusiveness of Christ."

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Based in a parish in the city of Limerick, Donovan credited women with having the ability to see the bigger picture and to think systemically. His experience of dealing with women has convinced him that women must be at the top table.

"Members of my own family, particularly my sisters and nieces have challenged me about belonging to an 'exclusively top table male church,' " he said. "I owe it to them to speak out loud."

Donovan suggested that allowing a male-only diaconate "questions the nature of relationships priests have with their mothers, sisters and nieces. It also questions the nature of relationships priests have with women."

"We have a long way to go to implement the originality of the Gospel of Jesus — a ministry of equals among equals," he said. "After all, Mary Magdalene, known as the Apostle to the Apostles, was the first minister of the good news — proclaiming that Jesus is alive!"

Donovan told NCR that since his Aug. 9 statement, he has received many reactions from a wide variety of people, the majority of whom have agreed with him.

"They have asked me to keep the subject of women deaconesses and exclusion of women from the top table on the agenda," he said. "Some comments emphasized that there are no structures in the church where women’s voices can be heard. It gave them hope that this conversation has started and it has sparked new energy and an excitement."



Fr. Roy Donovan

Last year, a poll carried out by the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association and the Irish Examiner newspaper found that 80 percent of Irish Catholics support the ordination of women with 58 percent strongly supporting it.

While heartened by these comments, Donovan said the lack of response from fellow priests has been "disappointing."

Of the current vocations crisis and decline in priest numbers, he stated, "The reality is that priests are quickly dying off and those left are getting older and not being replaced. It is sad that the sole solution given to us by the bishops is the male diaconate. It is beyond comprehension that men at the top table can’t find other solutions."

Donovan drew a comparison between the church's present stance in refusing women a place at the top table and withholding food from starving masses at a time of famine.

"The grain stores are full of food but locked away behind 'guarded' doors while the people outside starve" he said. "We have the solutions. The grain is there but the people are not fed. We are starving people of the richness and nourishment that women can bring. We prefer an exclusive priesthood which is dying out due to a lack of numbers.

"Women will not harm the church and yet we are unwilling to let them in. Why are men not willing to share the priesthood? Why do men believe women are not worthy of this?"

Women's Ordination Worldwide backed Donvoan's recent public statements in support of women's ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood and the diaconate.

"The Church hierarchy must rid itself of the sin of sexism and once and for all, model its own Gospel values by recognizing women as equal partners in faith," Women's Ordination Worldwide stated.

While Donovan and the Association of Catholic Priests' comments have been greeted by Women's Ordination Worldwide and other reform-minded groups, they are unlikely to garner any support among the Irish bishops.

Bishop Denis Nulty told NCR that the Association of Catholic Priests' call for halt on recruitment to the permanent diaconate was made "at a time when we already have a number of people in training."

Nulty was attending the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin’s family picnic day at Punchestown Racecourse Aug. 27, where up to 2,000 families from across his diocese launched preparations for next year’s World Meeting of Families in Ireland. He explained to NCR that four men are currently undergoing training at the moment in the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin and another eight permanent deacons are "contributing hugely."

"I would not want in any way to derogate their wonderful contribution to our diocesan family," he said adding that he was "quite delighted with how the permanent diaconate is working in our diocese."

Nulty said he respected "all people and all voices" on this issue but as Kildare and Leighlin had been one of the first Irish dioceses to introduce permanent deacons, he hoped their contribution would continue.



Bishop Denis Nulty of the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin, Aug. 27 at a diocesan picnic at Punchestown Racecourse, which was part of preparations for the 2018 World Meeting of Families in Ireland

One bishop who did voice support for Donovan was County Laois-born Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan, who has been excommunicated by the Vatican. She was ordained a priest during the first ordination of a woman in the United States in Pittsburgh in July 2006 and was later ordained a bishop in Santa Barbara, California, in April 2009.

The former nun now ministers as a priest in Mary, Mother of Jesus Inclusive Catholic Community in Sarasota, Florida. Visiting Ireland in August to invite Irish women who feel called to priesthood to join her movement of women priests, she told NCR she hoped there would soon be new members of the women’s ordination movement in

Australia and Ireland.

The 69-year-old presided at a Mass in Dublin and demanded "equal rites" and "equal rights." She said the failure to ordain women was a "lack of imagination" on the part of the hierarchy.

As the movement's numbers expand, she warned the church, "We are not leaving the church; we are leading the church towards equality, inclusivity and justice."

"This is a good thing that we are doing and a holy work," she said. "The church needs to heal the wounds of hundreds of years of sexism. We are sick and tired of clericalism. Get rid of the clerical system."

[Sarah Mac Donald is a freelance journalist based in Dublin.]

This story appears in the **Women deacons** feature series. View the full series.
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