Spirituality
Vatican



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The president of Pope Francis' commission to study the history of women deacons in the Catholic Church says his group is not planning to advise the pontiff on whether to reinstitute the practice of ordaining women as deacons.

"The Holy Father did not ask us to study if women could be deacons," said Cardinal-designate Luis Ladaria. "The Holy Father asked us to search to say in a clear way the issues … that were present in the early church on this point of the women's diaconate."

Speaking to press June 26, Ladaria, the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said the "primary objective" of his commission is to consider what role women who served as deacons in the first centuries of Christianity were fulfilling.

He also said that there are questions over whether women deacons had the same role as male deacons of the time and over whether their role was dependent on local needs.

"We know that in the early church there were these so-called deaconesses," the cardinal-designate continued.

“What does it mean to say this?” he asked. “Was it the same as male deacons? Or was it not the same? Was it a very diffused thing, or was it a local thing?”*

Ladaria, who is one of 14 prelates Francis will make cardinals in a Vatican ceremony June 28, was speaking during a press briefing organized by the Vatican press office.

The pope first instituted the Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate in August 2016, appointing Ladaria as its president alongside 12 other members. The prefect’s June 26 comments appear to be his first public statements on the issue since his appointment to the group.

Of what his commission will be telling Francis, the doctrinal prefect said that “it is not our job” to tell the pope whether to ordain women as deacons today. “This is not what the Holy Father asked and it is not our job,” he said.

The cardinal-designate added that the work of the commission is at “a good point.”

While the Catholic Church has claimed several times in recent decades that is has no authority to ordain women as priests, many church historians have said that there is abundant evidence that women served as deacons in the early centuries of the church.

The apostle Paul mentions such a woman, Phoebe, in his letter to the Romans.

The Catholic church reinstituted the role of the permanent deacon following the reforms of the landmark 1962-65 Second Vatican Council. The role is generally open to married men who have reached the age of 35.

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Such men are ordained, similar to priests, but can only conduct certain ministries in the church.

While they cannot celebrate the Mass, they frequently lead prayer services, celebrate the sacrament of baptism, and even manage parishes as pastoral administrators in the absence of priests.

Letter to Germans a ‘call to reflection’

Ladaria also spoke in the press conference about a letter he wrote earlier this month to Germany's bishops, asking them to set aside proposed national guidelines on allowing Protestants married to Catholics to receive Communion.

Echoing Francis' remarks aboard the papal flight from Geneva June 21, the cardinal-designate said he was not "hitting the brakes" on the proposal but making a "call to reflection."

"It was just a moment of reflection, seeking to reflect on the fact that this is not a point that is the responsibility of only a country or a diocese, but a responsibility of the universal church," said the prefect.

"A problem like that is a problem which must be studied in a broad situation, the whole church, and not only a local problem," Ladaria added.

"We are not against ecumenism," he said. "No. We have to see all the implications: the relationship of the Catholic Church not only with the Protestants but with the Orthodox and the other churches and ecclesial communities, and not only in Germany but in all the world."

The Catholic Church generally reserves the reception of Communion to its members, holding that the sharing of the sacrament is a sign of unity in the faith. Some non-Catholic spouses say, however, that not being able to receive Communion alongside their partner creates a sense of exclusion.

The issue affects Germany more than most other countries, as the Christian community there is almost evenly split between Catholics and Lutherans.

Asked about how he sees his role as the church's doctrinal chief, Ladaria said he understands his job as to "promote, protect and defend the faith."

Promoting the faith, the cardinal-designate said, means "searching to make sure that the faith may always be better known, more understood."

Defending the faith, he said, can involve "acting, if in some moment, we have to give a clarifying word because there is some problem that is not resolving itself or there is some theologian who is saying something that maybe doesn't work quite well."

“Then we have to intervene to give a clarifying word,” said the prefect. “But we seek to do these interventions always with dialogue, in a discreet way … This is very important.”

**This article has been updated to clarify that Cardinal-designate Ladaria was asking questions about the role of women deacons in the early church.*

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