News
Vatican



The heads of women's religious orders leave an audience with Pope Francis in Paul VI hall at the Vatican May 12, 2016. During a question-and-answer session with members of the UISG, the pope said he was willing to establish a commission to study whether women could serve as deacons. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 2, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A major new study has found that more than three-quarters of the leaders of religious orders of priests, brothers and sisters in the U.S. believe it is "theoretically possible" to ordain women as deacons in the Catholic Church.

Nearly as many, according to the just-released report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, believe the church "should authorize" the ordination of women to the diaconate.

The study was released by CARA on Aug. 2, the second anniversary of Pope Francis creating a commission to study the women's diaconate. It surveyed all 777 leaders of Catholic men and women religious orders in the U.S., and got responses over a four-month period from 385, or just below 50 percent.

Among the findings:

- 77 percent believe it is "theoretically possible" to ordain women as deacons;
- 72 percent say the church "should authorize" such ordinations;
- 76 percent say ordaining women as deacons would be "very much" or "somewhat" "beneficial to the Catholic Church's mission";
- 45 percent believe the church will return to the practice of ordaining women as deacons.

The new CARA study, which focuses only on attitudes of leaders of religious orders, follows an earlier study by the group on the wider attitudes of U.S. Catholic women. That study, released in January, found that 60 percent of women thought the church should implement a women's diaconate.

For the new survey, CARA contacted the leaders of all religious orders in the U.S., using mailing lists provided by the three umbrella groups of such orders: the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR).

Each leader was asked to respond to a six-page questionnaire, which included 75 checkbox and five open-ended queries.

Sixty-nine percent of those responding to the survey represented women's orders, and 31 percent represented men's orders, nearly matching the overall demographic breakdown in the U.S.

Twenty-eight percent of the respondents are part of CMSM, the only canonically recognized umbrella group for U.S. priests and brothers; 43 percent of the respondents are part of LCWR, which represents about 1,350 women's communities; and, 17 percent are part of CMSWR, which represents 120 women's communities.

Members of CMSWR, a group of women religious that broke away from the larger LCWR in 1992 and is normally seen as more conservative, were much less enthusiastic about the possibility of women deacons than other respondents.

Advertisement

To the query about whether it is "theoretically possible" for the church to ordain women as deacons, for example, 95 percent of respondents who are part of LCWR and 75 percent of respondents who are part of CMSM said yes. By contrast, 36 percent of respondents who are part of CMSWR agreed.

And to the query about whether the church "should authorize" the ordination of women, 95 percent of respondents who are part of LCWR and 68 percent of respondents who are part of CMSM said yes. Twenty-one percent of respondents who are part of CMSWR agreed.

Responses to the survey's open-ended questions provoked a diverse range of comments.

Of 122 leaders of women's orders responding to a question about the possible internal benefits for their order of ordaining women as deacons, CARA says one in six made comments indicating it would be "a sign of the acceptance of women and their gifts in the church."

One respondent answered: "If the diaconate were opened to women, the primary benefit for our institute would be the official affirmation of the rightful place of women in the church."

But 26 percent of those respondents also cited confusion about to whom a woman deacon who is member of a religious order would be accountable, as she would likely have obligations to both her order and the local bishop as a member of the clergy.

"As long as deacons are subject to Bishops, members of my congregation would not be able to be sent to missions by me as religious superior," wrote one respondent. "Discernment for ministry would always have to take the Bishop's wishes/needs into consideration."

> "If the diaconate were opened to women, the primary benefit for our institute would be the official affirmation of the rightful place of women in the church."
>
> —Respondent to CARA's "Survey of Religious Institutes: The Sacramental Ordination of Women as Deacons" survey

Of 145 leaders of women's orders responding to a question about whether they would allow members of their order to become deacons, nearly 6 in 10 superiors said yes.

"We would consider allowing members to be ordained," said one respondent. "The call would be discerned by the individual sister in conjunction with leadership. Since this would be a call, it would be important to pursue the call with the individual."

"I am sure that our chapter and council would be open to having members ordained if they desired that," said another respondent. "Women in this area would bring a different dimension … that a male dominated Church often does not have."

Among other multiple-choice questions, the respondents were asked if the writing of particular authors influenced their responses.

The top three answers: Thirty-eight percent cited Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister; 36 percent cited Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders; and 15 percent cited theologian Phyllis Zagano, an NCR columnist and a member of Francis' study commission.

The pope created the study commission in August 2016 following a request from the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), a global umbrella group of the leaders of women's religious orders. Twenty-three percent of the respondents hold membership in UISG.

Francis originally agreed to the request to create such a commission during a May 2016 question-and-answer session with some 900 UISG members. NCR, which was one of two outlets to attend that meeting, was the first to report the news.

The Vatican has released no information about the commission, including whether or how many times it has met, since the release announcing its creation.

Cardinal Luis Ladaria, who heads the commission and is the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, spoke publicly about the group for the first time in June. He said it is not planning to advise Francis 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 Ladaria then, adding that his group's "primary objective" is to consider what role women who served as deacons in the first centuries of Christianity were fulfilling.

Although Pope John Paul II claimed in his 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that "the Church has no authority whatsoever" to ordain woman as priests, many church historians have said 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.

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]