Vatican



Catholic scholar and author Phyllis Zagano speaks during a symposium on the history and future of women deacons Jan. 15 at Fordham University's Lincoln Center campus in New York City. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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In speaking publicly about the disagreement among the members of the Vatican's commission on the history of women deacons in the Catholic Church, Pope Francis is seeking to broaden the conversation on the issue, said one member of the group.

"He's trying to bring out discussion," said Phyllis Zagano, a theologian and one of the 12 people Francis appointed to the commission in 2016.

"I think he's calling on the bishops to talk about this, and challenging them," said Zagano, speaking May 10 to a small group of journalists just hours after the pontiff had spoken about the commission with members of the International Union of Superiors General, which originally asked for the group's creation.

Zagano, who is also an NCR columnist and has published widely on the history of women deacons, said she is "totally at peace" with the pope's remarks, and his decision to give the commission's report to Maltese Sr. Carmen Sammut, the president of UISG.

"The Holy Father is saying … it's up to the commissioners to continue their research and speak about it," she said. "For me, I felt that I was being asked to do more publishing."

"I think the pope's way smarter than I am and he knows exactly what he's doing," said Zagano.

Francis had first spoken about the deacons commission in response to a question from NCR during an in-flight press conference May 7. The pope said the commission had been unable to come to agreement about the role of women deacons in the early centuries of Christianity, but would continue their studies on the issue individually.

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In his May 10 audience with some 850 UISG members, Francis said he had given a report on what the commission was able to agree on to Sammut, who also leads the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa.

The pope added that he might call on members of the commission again to check on what new facts they have found about the ministry of women in the early church.

Zagano focused in her meeting with journalists on her research about the history of women deacons. She said she could not share details about the commission's work, what the group had discussed, or what issues members had agreed or disagreed about.

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She did reveal that the group last met in June 2018, and said she did not know exactly what the report that Francis gave to Sammut contained.

"I don't know what the Holy Father gave to Carmen," she said. "We left in June and I don't even know if we're being called back."

Zagano said the discussion about the role of women deacons in the early church had been going on for centuries.

"I would like to see what can be public and have the broader discussion happen, formally and informally," she said. "Because history alone is not dispositive. As the Holy Father has said, the church is not a museum."

"I think that the discussion needs to go beyond the historical," said Zagano. "History alone cannot decide the matter."

> "If the Holy Father would and were able to have a woman next to him proclaiming the Gospel in St. Peter's, he's telling the world women [are] not the same, but equal in the eyes of God."
>
> *— Phyllis Zagano*
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In continuing the discussion about women deacons, Zagano said, "the church has the opportunity to tell the world that women are made in the image and likeness of God." She noted that many women around the world suffer discrimination or violence because of their gender.

"If the Holy Father would and were able to have a woman next to him proclaiming the Gospel in St. Peter's, he's telling the world women [are] not the same, but equal in the eyes of God," she said.

'That's the important point here," she said. "That's what I'm fighting for."

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