Vatican

Deacons lie prostrate during ordination Mass in St. Peter's Basilica during the Jubilee of Deacc

Deacons lie prostrate during ordination Mass in St. Peter's Basilica during the Jubilee of Deacons at the Vatican Feb. 23. A Vatican commission has voted against allowing women to serve as deacons. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Most of the members of Pope Francis' new commission to study the ordaining of women as deacons in the Catholic Church appear not to have focused on the matter in their scholarly work.

And the few with publications in that research area seem to have expressed blunt skepticism that the women who served as deacons in the early centuries of the church had roles analogous to those of male deacons, then or today.

The new commission member who has most clearly enunciated such skepticism is Catherine Brown Tkacz, a U.S.-born professor at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv.

Tkacz has written about the issue several times in the Revue d'histoire ecclesiastique, an academic journal published jointly by Belgium's University of Louvain and KU Leuven.* In a 2013 paper in the journal, she argued that the ordination rites for women deacons in the early church showed them to be

"ontologically different" than male deacons.

In a 2015 book review in the same journal, Tkacz expressly criticized the work of Phyllis Zagano, a worldwide expert on the history of women deacons in the church who served on Francis' first commission on the subject.



Tweet by Raymond Arroyo, Dec. 13, 2018

Reviewing Zagano's 2013 book *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches*, which focused on the essays of 20th-century Italian theologian and Camaldolese monk Cipriano Vagaggini, Tkacz called the volume "flawed."

The American-Ukrainian author concluded that women deacons in the early church primarily existed to bring the Eucharist to housebound women, calling them: "In effect ... the first consecrated extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist."

Ordaining women deacons today would not be restoring an earlier practice, she wrote, but "an innovation merely borrowing an ancient name."

The Vatican announced the creation of the new women deacons commission April 8. The new group, composed of 12 members, does not include any of the members of the first commission, which the pontiff had created in 2016.

Zagano said in a brief comment to NCR that she was "not aware of much refereed academic work on women deacons by members of the new commission."

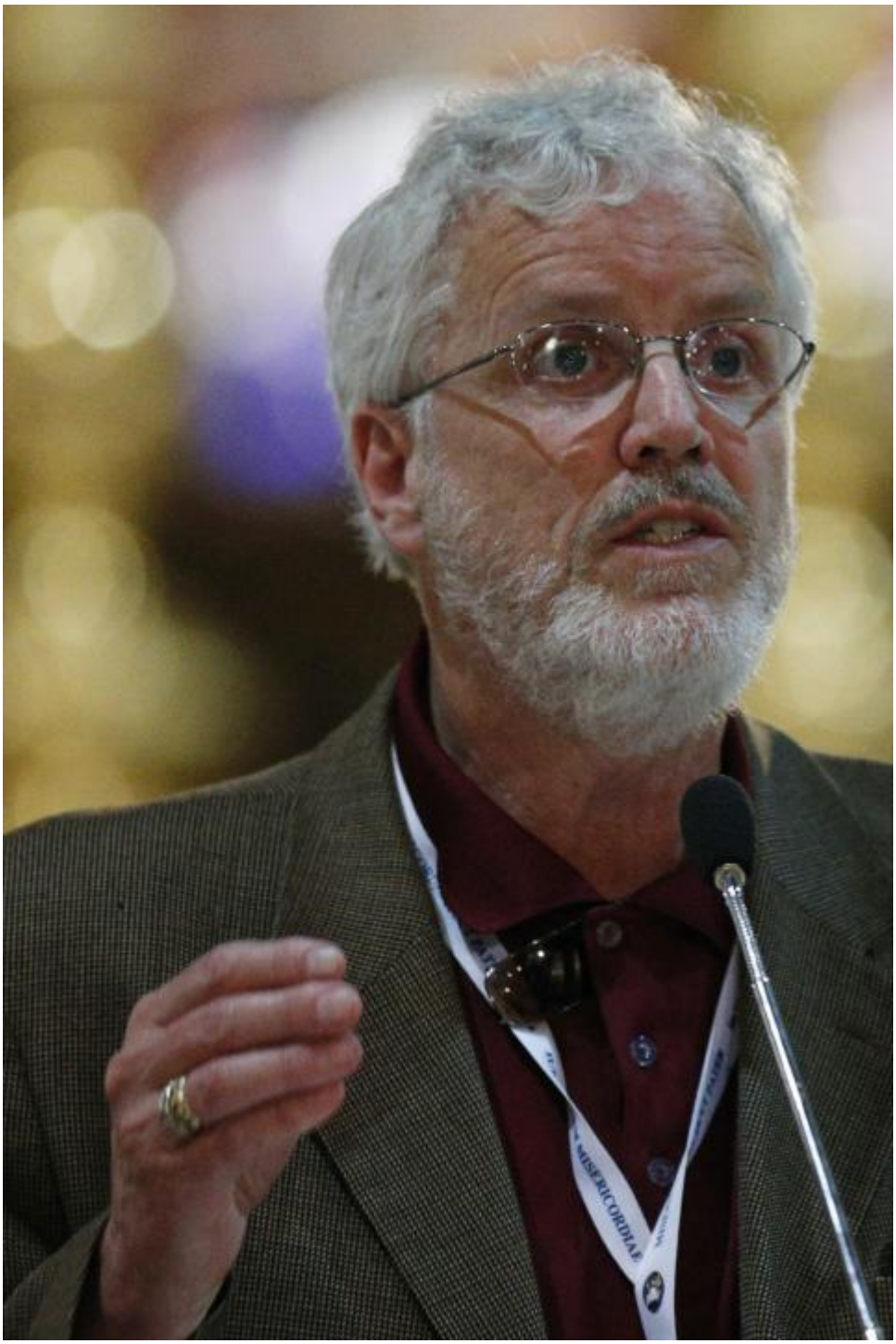
Another new commission member who has expressed opposition to the ordination of women deacons is Fr. Manfred Hauke, a German diocese priest on the University of Lugano's faculty of theology.

Hauke has frequently published on the subject. His 1982 doctoral thesis focused on examining the reasons behind the church's position against the ordination of women as priests. A 2004 book *Das Weihesakrament für die Frau: Eine Forderung der Zeit?* ("The Sacrament for Women: A Matter of Time?") sought to refute arguments that the ordination of women as deacons involved different considerations than the ordination of women as priests.

A third new commission member appears not to have written on the issue on his own but was a member of the Vatican's International Theological Commission when it published its 2002 document on the matter, "From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles," which notably did not come to a conclusion about the church's authority in regard to ordaining women as deacons.

Fr. Santiago del Cura Elena, a Spanish diocesan priest, was a part of the commission's second drafting committee for the document. That group was tasked with reworking an earlier, rejected version of the text, which is widely rumored to have come to a more positive conclusion on the question, but has never been made

available publicly.



Deacon James Keating, director of theological formation at the Institute for Priestly Formation in Omaha, Nebraska, speaks during a conference for permanent deacons and their wives at the Basilica of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome in May 2016. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Among the new commission members who appear not to have written on the issue of women deacons are the two from the United States: Deacons Dominic Cerrato and James Keating.

Keating, who is currently the director of Creighton University's Institute for Priestly Formation but is moving in the fall to become a professor at St. Louis' Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, is known for his spiritual writings and his academic work in moral theology.

He is the author of a number of books on diaconal and priestly ministry, including a 2019 volume from Paulist Press that focused on collaboration between priests and deacons, *Remain in Me: Holy Orders, Prayer, and Ministry*.

Cerrato, the editor of Our Sunday Visitor's The Deacon magazine, does not have a lengthy background of academic publishing. His biography at the Pastoral Solutions Institute, where he offers spiritual direction, says he earned his doctorate from the Graduate Theological Foundation, an unaccredited online institution.

Cerrato is also the author of the 2014 volume *In the Person of Christ the Servant, A Theology of the Diaconate Based on the Personalist Thought of Pope John Paul II*, which lists its publisher as a Bloomingdale, Ohio-based St. Ephraem Press, a publishing house that appears to have no online presence.

Among the four of members of the new commission NCR attempted to reach for comment for this story, Cerrato was the only to reply. He said it was "an honor and a privilege" to be selected for the group and that he was grateful "to serve the Church in this important way."

Caroline Farey, the new commission's only member from the United Kingdom, likewise appears not to have published on the issue of women deacons. Currently a Mission Catechist for the Diocese of Shrewsbury, England, she was the cofounder of the School of the Annunciation, an institute at Buckfast Abbey in Devon.

According to a 2015 release, among the other cofounders of the school was Deacon Nick Donnelly, known for running the acerbic blog and Twitter account formerly titled "Protect the Pope" and now titled "Protect the Faith."

Zagano, a senior research associate in residence at Hofstra University who is also an NCR columnist, also said that the new commission "appears to include individuals

against restoring women to the ordained diaconate."

"Since there has never been any Magisterial finding that women cannot be ordained as deacons, I can only hope and pray that this new commission does not present an argument that women are ontologically different from men or that women cannot image the risen Christ," said Zagano.

"Such would be a terrible betrayal of the people of God, the Body of Christ," she said.

* *An earlier version of this story misidentified KU Leuven as a separate, German institution.*

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