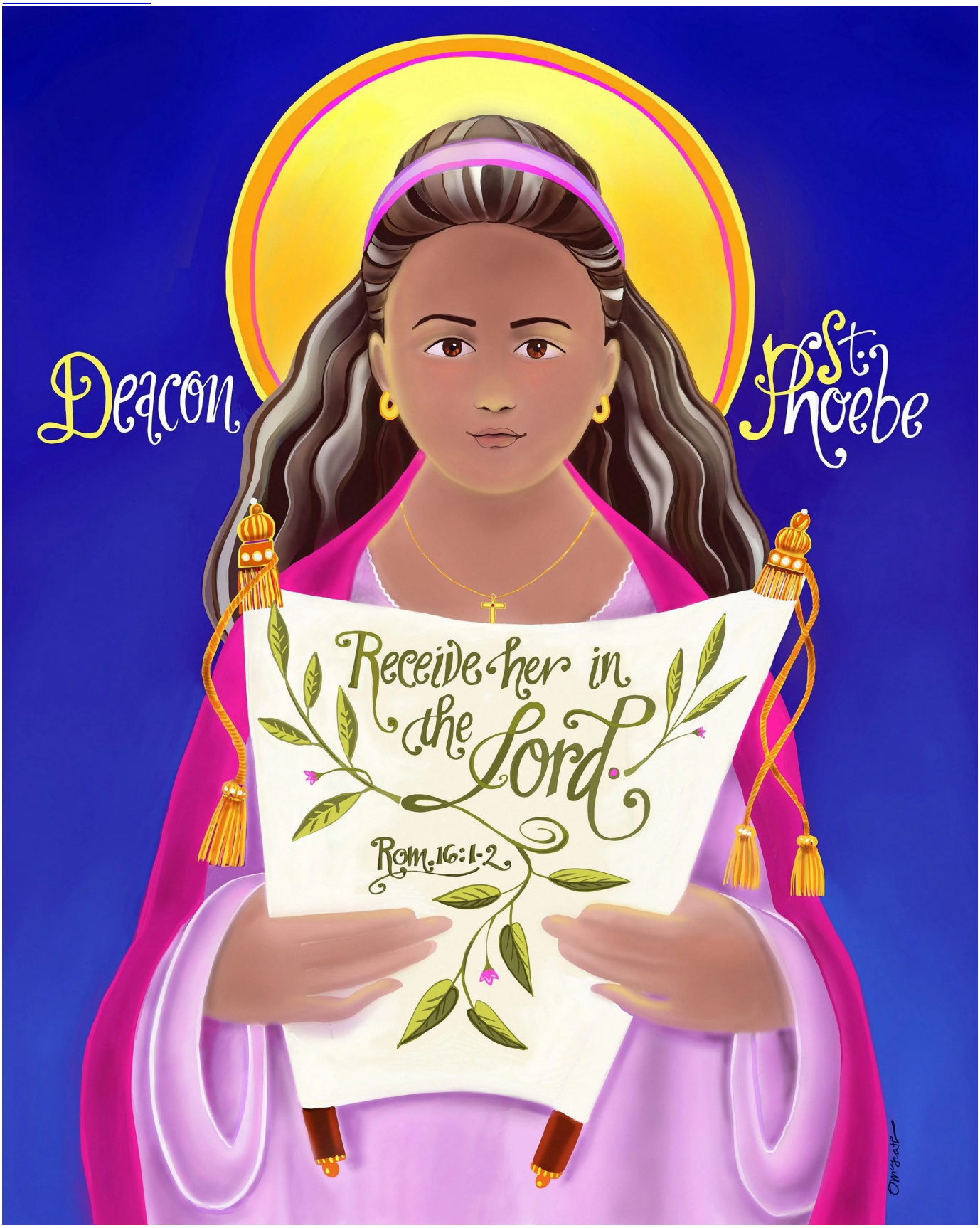
Opinion

Guest Voices



“St. Phoebe”. (Br Mickey McGrath, OSFS)



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October 10, 2025

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Last fall, I had the incredible privilege of being one of 55 pilgrims to Rome with the organization Discerning Deacons, including people from the United States, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, and Australia. We traveled for the opening days of the Synod on Synodality to pray, witness, and discern a restoration of women to the permanent diaconate. I say "restoration" because St Paul's letter to the Romans identifies St. Phoebe as a deacon, and there is ample evidence that women served as deacons for centuries thereafter in the early Church.

The Discerning Deacons delegation was joined by the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon, an organization with lay and women's leadership in service to the Indigenous of that region in South America. Our pilgrimage to the Eternal City included Masses, retreats, panel discussions, tours, interactions with some of the over 350 voting delegates to the synod, and even a meeting with Pope Francis. Even with all the formal gatherings and events, the most impactful for me was my encounter with the remarkably gifted women from Discerning Deacons whose aim is ordination to serve their church and community in ever richer dimensions.

One night, while pondering the many conversations I had, I was struck by one thought: that the Church's current refusal to ordain women as deacons increases human suffering. I understood that there are doors to serving others that ordination opens. There are hospitals, juvenile detention facilities, jails, border ministries, nonprofits, schools, and other services that provide greater access for ordained individuals. On one side are women seeking to be deacons and servants. On the other side are hurting humans in need of love and service. Our refusal to ordain women as deacons is an obstacle to healing. There are people willing to serve the Church and humanity, but who are cast aside because they are women.

In addition, I recently learned that 79% of permanent deacons in the United States are over 60 years old. I merely ask this: What would be more meaningful and compelling to girls, women, and young people in our parishes? A male deacon—often White and over 60—or one who is a Hispanic, Asian, African-American, or Caucasian woman part of and serving in the community?

I can think of no legitimate argument against the ordination of women deacons. The existing ones seem flawed and inconsistent. Concerning Phoebe, people say, "She wasn't ordained." Neither were Paul, Peter, Barnabas, Apollos, or the others. Some say women have other ways to serve. By that logic, so do men—so why be a priest or deacon? Others say God only called men to Holy Orders. Yet Jesus entrusted the first apostolic message of his resurrection to Mary Magdalene. He also told the angry dinner guests in Bethany that a woman's anointing of him will be remembered wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world. (Mark 14:9)

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The Second Vatican Council's "Decree on Ecumenism" even declares that "Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this." Truly the vitality of the Church is dependent upon constant reformation and advancement. For a thousand years, priests could marry. That changed. For 300 years, Greek—not Latin—was the liturgical language of the Church. That changed. For centuries, the faithful only received the Eucharist a couple of times a year. That changed. Pope Pius X wrote that Protestantism was the greatest of heresies and a road to atheism. The Church teaches that no longer, as "Lumen Gentium" recognizes what is good and true in other religions and people of goodwill. A Church that once declared Portugal and Spain could divide the globe,

conquer territories, and enslave dark people is now the home of liberation theology, sanctuary for immigrants, climate change engagement, and efforts for worldwide peace and human dignity.I personally know several talented, Spirit-gifted women whose ministries would be enhanced with diaconal ordination. I also know many others whose call to serve leads them to become deacons and priests and ministers in the Lutheran, Methodist, and other traditions. This unnecessary exodus occurs alongside our weekly Prayers of the Faithful for more people to answer the call to an ordained vocation. With women in Church leadership, the global clergy sex abuse crisis would have been short-lived. Bankrupt dioceses and closures of Black Catholic schools and parishes may not have ever had to happen.

When I was confirmed a Catholic at St. Therese Church in Seattle in 1998, there were at least four African-American women there with the gift of preaching, a heart for service, and leadership abilities. As various priests rotated through the parish—some from Africa, and some from a nearby Jesuit university— these women could have provided the parish with a visible and consistent ordained presence.

Yes, women can serve, teach, minister, lector, and even preach in some places. However, ordination opens doors that right now are closed. Those doors are not for the glory and ego of those seeking ordination. They are doors that, if opened, would expand the gifts of service to a Church in need and a hurting humanity.

We have done studies, convened committees, and gone back and forth on this issue. Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, prefect for the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, declared that it's not the time, and that "there is still no room for a positive decision" on Catholic women deacons. He also said rushing the decision could "become some kind of consolation for some women." On the contrary, the women I was with in Rome were not seeking consolation, but rather a way to better serve the Church they love.

The filmmaker Spike Lee offered a message I would like to share with the Church hierarchy on this point. At the end of his 1988 movie "School Daze," the frustrated activist Dap, played by Laurence Fishburne, screams, "Wake up!"

I sincerely believe our current practice of blocking women from the diaconate hurts the Church we all claim to love, as well as the humans we are called to serve.

This article originally ran at Black Catholic Messenger.

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 7-20, 2025** print issue under the headline: It’s time to wake up: The Catholic Church needs women deacons now..