Opinion
Guest Voices



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Phyllis Zagano

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The Vatican has issued, solely in Italian, the opinion of the chair of Pope Francis' Second Commission for the Study of the Diaconate. Its substance can be translated quickly: Women cannot be ordained as deacons because they cannot "image Christ."

It is in effect a statement that the Catholic Church officially views women as "other."

The commentary, signed by retired Italian Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, further damages the world's picture of the Catholic Church, already tarnished by abuse scandals and reports of financial mismanagement.

Presented as a summary of the Second Commission's work, the document further displays the problem of "culture" that Pope Leo XIV repeatedly mentioned as he responded to the European report at the October Jubilee of Synod Teams in Rome. Leo may have meant the secular culture, but the Vatican's culture of clericalism is clearly displayed in the document.

Even under careful review, the seven-page text is unrelentingly opaque. Footnotes refer to unpublished commission reports and votes, some suggesting that votes were taken when not all commission members were present. Further, there is only a brief (and dismissive) mention of documents about women deacons submitted at the behest of the 2024 meeting of the Synod on Synodality to the separate Study Group 5, which Pope Francis established to take the question away from the Synod as a whole.

The document misstates Orthodox tradition, ignoring its long history of ordained women deacons — Orthodoxy's preferred term is "deaconesses" — throughout its wide and varied history, or in its recent past: The Greek Orthodox Church of Zimbabwe ordained a deaconess in May 2024, with the permission of the Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa.

This is an ecumenical misstep made just after Pope Leo's trip to Turkey and Lebanon, where he met with leaders of Eastern Orthodoxy and with the patriarch of the Maronite Church, whose canon law allows for the ordination of women as deacons.

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If synodal discussion is to include all Christians, it would be best to collect all the facts.

The document does not rule out women deacons, but it tries to, even as it states more study is necessary.

The Final Document of the Synod on Synodality, promulgated by Francis as magisterial, or official church teaching, states that discernment on including women in the diaconate needs to continue and that "what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped."

Are the synthesized opinions of a few unnamed people the final word? Throughout the synodal process, repeated reports from dioceses and bishops' conferences worldwide asked to restore the tradition of ordaining women as deacons. Have those voices been silenced?

It is hard to believe that Leo, educated by the best American male and female scholars at Chicago's Catholic Theological Union and a former diocesan bishop who had no problem delegating sacramental authority to women, shares Petrocchi's view. He did allow the publication of this report. But is it his notice that the Francis era is over, and it is time for genuine synodal discussion on the question?

True, the church is not a democracy, and synodality is not a political process. The point of synodality is for all the people of God to prayerfully discern how best to foster the church's mission, which, in short, is preaching the gospel and acting on it.

When taken seriously, the gospel is a dangerous document. In its own way, this latest Vatican missive is too. It is dated Sept. 18, the feast day of the second-century Saint Irene. Mostly known in Coptic and Orthodox traditions, Irene's insistence on her Christian faith ultimately caused her martyrdom. That a commission now seeks to kill synodal discussion about women deacons can only end in more suffering for women all over the world.