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Phyllis Zagano, professor at Hofstra University, author and scholar of religious studies, presents her new book The Vatican and Women Deacons at the America Media headquarters in New York, May 21, 2026. At left is Robert Ellsberg, publisher of Orbis Books. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



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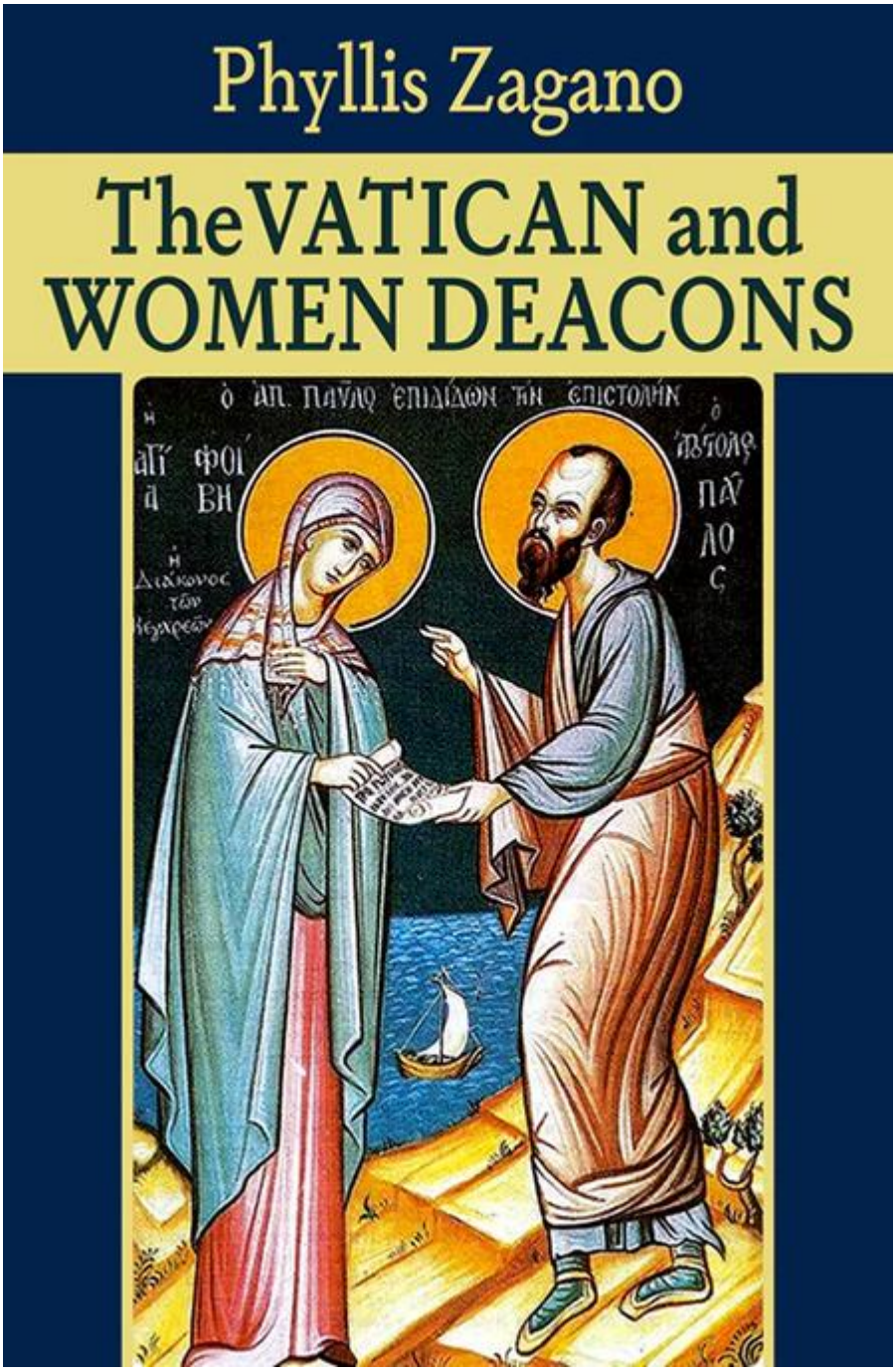
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Phyllis Zagano has spent her academic life pursuing a question that the Catholic Church itself seems unable to put down: Were women once ordained as deacons, and if so, what does that mean for the church today?

For decades, the issue has lingered in the background of ecclesial debate — resurfacing in Vatican commissions, theological papers, synods and private conversations, only to recede again without resolution. Yet the question has never entirely disappeared. It has remained, as Zagano calls it in her new book *The Vatican and Women Deacons* (Orbis Books), a "simmering question," repeatedly revisited but never settled.

For more than 50 years, she writes that Vatican commissions have returned to the issue of women deacons "over, and over, and over, since 1973," studying many of the same historical materials and often arriving at competing conclusions.

Few people have followed this issue more closely than Zagano herself.



Book cover for *The Vatican and Women Deacons*, by Phyllis Zagano (Orbis Books)

A professor at Hofstra University and an author of more than 27 books and hundreds of scholarly and popular articles, Zagano is one of the foremost authorities on women and the diaconate in the Catholic Church. In 2016, Pope Francis appointed her to the first Pontifical Commission for the Study of the Diaconate of Women, placing her inside the very institution she had spent decades studying from the outside.

Her personal investment dates back even further. Recalling her time as a part-time student at the Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, New York, in the late 1970s, Zagano writes that she once told then-papal nuncio Archbishop Jean Jadot she was studying "to be a deacon." After questioning her, he offered words that would prove unexpectedly prophetic: "Don't quit." Years later, she said, Pope Francis repeated essentially the same advice.

Now, in *The Vatican and Women Deacons*, Zagano offers an investigation on the issue — a five-year archival journey that stretched across Europe and uncovered documents long unseen or unpublished. The work took her into monastic archives in northern Italy, through collections in Paris, London and Spain and eventually to previously inaccessible Vatican material.

"One paper, one archive led to other archives," she said in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter.

The resulting portrait is also a history of the Vatican itself — of documents drafted and shelved, commissions formed and dissolved and questions deferred rather than resolved. The deeper issue, Zagano argues, may no longer be whether women once served as sacramentally ordained deacons in the church. The more pressing question may be whether the church is willing to reconsider what it has already found.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity purposes.



A woman holds a sign in support of women deacons as Pope Francis leads his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Nov. 6, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)

***NCR*: Professor Zagano, your book appears to suggest that the question is no longer "Did women deacons exist?" but "Why has the church had such difficulty deciding what their existence means?" Have we moved from a historical debate to a debate about institutional self-understanding?**

Zagano: I think it's necessary to understand that history is not dispositive. You cannot argue that every woman deacon was ordained sacramentally, but neither can you argue that no woman deacon was ordained sacramentally and that will never be resolved. If you have two academics, you'll have four opinions. It's important to understand that in history we know bishops used the same liturgy to ordain men and women as deacons.

Speaking of history, exactly on this point, when precisely did you realize that accumulating evidence was not actually moving the whole theological conversation and debate?

The Vatican was interested in the history of women deacons, but negatively, like "women only baptized nude women and we don't do that anymore." That's what you would hear in a seminary. A seminary professor in Philadelphia told me years ago that ordaining a woman was like ordaining a lamppost or a cat. That to me is the nexus of the problem. I think the argument keeps getting pushed back to history, because history is always circular, and you can never make a determination based on history and that's not necessary.

We don't need to recover what women did in the past; we need to see what women can do today. How is the diaconate lived today? That is the question. How can women perform it? The question is not can women be ordained. The question is whether women should be ordained. I think bishops would be lucky if they get women to work for them at this point.



Phyllis Zagano, professor at Hofstra University, author and scholar of religious studies, presents her new book *The Vatican and Women Deacons* at the America Media headquarters in New York, May 20, 2026. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

You have had the unusual experience of being both a scholar and a participant — someone researching Vatican processes and also sitting inside them, especially under Pope Francis. Did this participation change your understanding of how decisions on this issue are really made?

I think it clarified my understanding of how decisions on women deacons are not made. It's quite obvious to me that commission after commission is a holding pattern. Two of the commissions' published papers — one published a study, the International Theological Commission in 2022 and then in 2025 the Petrocchi commission presented a letter — both say that this is something the magisterium must decide. So, whether you want to say they are kicking the can down the road or it's a game of "Chutes and Ladders," every commission ended by saying, "We can't make this decision on our own."

Whether the commission was leaning pro or against, they can't make the decision on their own, because the diaconate is a function of the church. It was created by the church. We know women were ordained sacramentally. They don't want to admit that, but we know that women were sacramentally ordained. That to some indicates that women can be ordained as priests, but either you believe what the Vatican teaches about priesthood or you don't.

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Do you think that, with all this focus on synodality over the past three years, the era of secrecy and unpublished work on the issue of women deacons might come to an end?

In terms of preparing documents, no, because documents go through several drafts, and you wouldn't want anything to come out in a draft that then has to be changed if it's coming from the Vatican. It's not so much secrecy, but lack of transparency. It's also a problem of reciprocity. The problem is that the decisions are made predominantly by men, so we only have the male version of the world. That was

brought out in the synod; you can't have synodality unless you understand the reciprocity between genders. So that's where the important movement will come.

I think the problems of transparency are deeper not so much in the Vatican, but in dioceses relative to money. We don't know who does what with what money many times in diocesan structures, and those kinds of decisions have great impact on people because they have put their lives and personal funds into their parishes and diocesan structures. When talking about decision-making, I think it goes beyond the documents about women in the diaconate. I think it's all part of a puzzle. The secrecy will continue because it's "their church," it is the church of the hierarchy, and that is really the problem of clericalism: "We're clerics and you are not."

You spoke very directly about misogyny. Some people might argue that the issue is theology rather than sexism. Why have you come to see misogyny instead as the central issue rather than a peripheral one? You suggested that many arguments about women deacons ultimately rest on assumptions about women's bodies and women's relationships that are not sacred compared to men's relationships. How much of this debate do you think is more anthropological rather than theological?

I think the whole discussion is historical, anthropological and theological. You can't resolve the discussion without looking at all the pieces. If we, in terms of anthropology, don't have a better understanding of gendered bodies, and we don't have a denial of the taboos about women's bodies, we won't get any place. I think that Pope Francis' determination that women can be installed as lectors and acolytes, as well as other laypersons, is very important, because then women will be on the other side of the altar rail. They would be near the sacred. The original complaint about women deacons by Pope Gelasius I in the fifth century, that women were at the altar and the ancient blood taboos about women, just will go away.

Matthew Blastares in the 14th century said yes, women were ordained as deacons, but on account of their menses, they were restricted from the altar. In certain countries altar linens had to be rinsed first by a man, then handed on over the altar rail to the woman to be laundered and ironed. Women could never touch a sacred vessel.*

It depends on culture, what culture you are in. The church is not a monolith. The best example I think we have is the Greek church because they don't have these hang-ups about marriage, married priests or about women. There are women

deacons historically in Orthodoxy, and even today in Africa a woman was sacramentally ordained a deacon with the permission of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria and all Africa.



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What do you think is the church losing by not allowing women deacons today?

If by the church you mean the people of God, you have half of the people of God not represented and officially deemed unable to represent Christ, that's a huge problem. The church is losing half of the human view of life, which would include half of the way to view the Gospel, half of the way to understand the needs of the people of God. It's not a question of power, it's more a question of a perception that the

Catholic Church is saying to the world that women are not important by saying women cannot be ordained as deacons.

In medieval Europe, the question was whether women are the same species as men. That's really the bottom line. When God is male, the male becomes God. The argument is that Christ does not live in the resurrection in women. To say that is damning. Not only Christians, but everyone in the world, can point to the Catholic Church to say women are second class and women don't deserve the same respect as men.

You worked with Pope Francis on the women deacons issue. If Pope Leo XIV called you tomorrow and asked for a single sentence of advice — not a commission report — what would you say?

I would suggest that he tell the church that there is no doctrine forbidding the ordination of women as deacons, that if national bishops' assemblies feel this is good for their areas to request the permission, knowing that individual bishops can do what they wish, that is what I would ask him to consider. Not to force any bishop to ordain anyone, but rather to affirm that this is simply an abandoned practice, and also to accept the implicit request of the Amazon synod to ordain women deacons, as well as the request of the team leader of the European synod team for women in leadership and ordained women deacons. The pope's response to the European team leader was that it is a problem of culture. The problem of culture is solved by his simply saying, "If it's acceptable in your culture, then you ordain women as deacons."

**This story has been updated to correct a misheard word.*