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Despite what opponents say, women deacons are for ministry

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Women deacons

About a year ago, I published an open letter to Pope Benedict XVI asking him to make a decision on restoring women to the diaconate. I didn't hear back.

Priest-pederasts, -philanderers and -embezzlers continue to make the news. Parishes and schools are closing all over. Ordinations -- at least in the United States -- are beyond way down. The public relations profile of U.S. bishops seems fixed on same-sex marriage, abortion and the "new evangelization."

Are U.S. bishops carrying the brief for women deacons to their *ad limina* meetings in Rome?

They may be. The issue is picking up speed.

The Cleveland-based activist group FutureChurch has organized its members nationwide to pay pre-*ad limina* calls on bishops. The FutureChurch brief includes restoring women to their traditional place in the diaconate. In addition, a national Books-to-Bishops campaign has sent copies of the newly published *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (by Santa Clara Professor Gary Macy, Monterey Deacon William T. Ditewig and me) to 135 U.S. diocesan bishops to date.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether these or other efforts will have any long-term effects.

The bishops may not take this issue to Rome, but they certainly know about women deacons. With or without them, the national discussion continues. More than 6,000 people signed FutureChurch's open letter to bishops asking for dialogue about married priests and about women deacons. And single

sentences regularly pop up in all sorts of publications, usually in articles complaining about things the church could but will not do -- "not even women as deacons."

While every website mention of women deacons brings out the crazies, there are increasing numbers of nonprofessional commentators whose postings demonstrate serious reflection.

Still, the most violent combination of anger and misinformation comes at the mention of women as deacons, and I cannot for the life of me figure out why. There is nothing spectacular about women deacons. They are a historical fact in both Catholicism and in Orthodoxy, and the effort to restore them more broadly has been gaining momentum for many years.

The Greek Orthodox theologian Evangelos Theodorou wrote about ordained women deacons in his tradition almost 60 years ago, and Elizabeth Behr-Sigal followed suit about 35 years ago. Since then, Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald has continued the discussion. My own work on Catholic women deacons follows on theirs, joined by extraordinary documentary research by Gary Macy, Carolyn Osiek, Kevin Madigan and others.

But the question -- it really is not an "issue" -- raises hackles and voices from among those who respond to articles and opinion columns. Some exclaim about camels' noses and tent flaps; others whine that any woman who thinks about becoming a deacon should become an Episcopalian. Many more deny the absolute fact that question is open. One associate professor at a Midwestern seminary even wrote his own "letter" to the pope. He said, "Millions of women have lived their Catholic faith and have made inestimable contributions to the Church without any desire to prance about the sanctuary in clerical garb."

He really wrote that, clearly encapsulating the objections and fears of Rome, of the crazies and of this lone professor. I honestly never thought about it. They cannot stomach the idea of a woman in vestments. The problem is not women as deacons, or women doing the diaconal work of the church. It is not a problem of women teaching and preaching, of marrying and baptizing, of stewardship or of management. The problem for those who mock the concept of women as deacons simply do not want to see women dressed in clerical garb.

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So if my local bishop on his *ad limina* mentions women deacons, the thought that springs to his mind and that of everyone in the room is a woman weighted down with tons of satin, silk and lace? That is just plan nuts.

The concept of women as deacons is not about Sunday dress-up time. The concept of women as deacons is about service to the church, to the whole church and especially to the women of the church too often bereft of ministry that speaks to their needs on their terms and in their words.

And the church needs the ministry of women to rebuild it, as it suffers under the weight of all those pederasts, philanderers, embezzlers, closed schools and parishes. Women deacons are for ministry. It is about serving the people of God.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. Her most recent books are *Women & Catholicism*, published by Palgrave-Macmillan in June, and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig), newly released by Paulist Press.]

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