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Authors distill issues of the diaconate and women

by Maureen Daly

WOMEN DEACONS: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

By Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig and Phyllis Zagano

Published by Paulist Press, \$14.95

Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future is an eminently reasonable book. Plain and simple, at only 128 pages, it is a distillation of answers to the essential questions. To wit: Were there ever women deacons in the Catholic church? Is it presently possible to ordain women according to church teaching and the Second Vatican Council vision of the restored diaconate? What would the church look like with women deacons?

And, to be very clear, the authors jointly state in their introduction: "This book is not about women priests."

Gary Macy, chair of the department of religious studies and professor of theology at Santa Clara University in California, covers the past, the historical argument.

Macy, author of *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (Oxford University Press, 2007), writes that there is ample scholarship to show that "women served as deacons from the earliest centuries of Christianity and remained active in both the Eastern and Western churches until the 12th century." A scholar of the history of liturgy, Macy writes, "Even more important ... is the existence of the liturgy for the ordination of women as deacons." He quotes from ancient ordination rites. In this chapter and throughout, *Women Deacons'* ample endnotes make it a useful reference. For example, there are nine notes on Macy's first page, each one a full citation of recent collections of historical documents. The endnotes cover 24 of the book's 128 pages, a handy compendium of sources, the beginning of a syllabus.

Why did the practice come to an end? Macy cites 12th- and 14th-century canonists and concludes, "It seems that the major reason women stopped being ordained deacons in both the East and the West was the gradual introduction of purity laws from the Hebrew Scriptures. Menstruation and childbirth were seen as impediments to women serving at the altar or to their eventually being ordained." The other thing that occurred, he says, was a "radical change in the definition of ordination" after the 11th-century church reform movement and the 12th-century Scholastic and canonical debates. Before that time, ordination was the assignment of a certain task or role in the community; after, it was defined as conferring a power that could be exercised in any community. Macy quotes the 12th-century canonist: "But I say that a woman is not able to receive orders. ... If therefore a female is in fact ordained, she does not receive orders." Macy explains, "In other words, even if a woman were ordained, it would not 'take.'" The mere fact of being a woman would negate any effect ordination might have." In one century, "writers moved from conceding that women were once ordained, to teaching that women never were ordained, to teaching, finally, that women never could and never would be ordained."

Deacon William T. Ditewig takes up the question of present possibilities, the theological and pastoral question: "Can and should women be ordained as deacons?"

Ditewig, ordained in 1990, was for five years executive director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for the Diaconate and the Secretariat for Evangelization. He was professor of theology and director of graduate programs at St. Leo University near Tampa, Fla., and is now director of faith formation, diaconate and planning for the Monterey, Calif., diocese. He is the author of *The Emerging Diaconate: Servant Leaders in a Servant Church* (Paulist, 2007).

His question: "Is it possible, based on an examination of church teaching and the vision of the Second Vatican Council vis-à-vis the diaconate, to ordain women as deacons? Ours is a worthy and legitimate question, although this is an emotional issue for many who fear it. ... This is not an act of defiance, which is how some people might interpret it, but rather of enthusiastic commitment to the best our tradition has to offer to the church and the world of our time."

Ditewig provides a timeline of key documents of the development of the sacrament of holy orders to include the diaconate as a "proper and permanent order" distinct from priesthood. He notes that Pope John Paul II, in his 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* ("On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone?"), "never referred explicitly to the diaconate, nor used more inclusive terms such as clergy."

The renewal of the permanent diaconate came about as result of Vatican II. Ditewig writes that, in *Lumen Gentium*, "deacons were said to be 'strengthened by sacramental grace' " and the decree *Ad Gentes* (on the "Missionary Activity of the Church?"), which said that it was "only right" to strengthen persons who were already preaching, practicing charity, and performing the service of deacons with the grace of ordination. Following the logic of Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens, Ditewig says, "The church is entitled to all of the graces the Holy Spirit provides, and one of these graces is the diaconate: Why should the church be denied the gift of women as well as men serving as deacons?"

The future of women deacons is taken up by Phyllis Zagano, author of *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church* (Crossroad/Herder, 2000) and columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*.

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Zagano quotes church leaders who say there is no need for ordained women deacons because women already do the service work of deacons. She asks, "What can an ordained woman do that an unordained woman cannot? The question is perhaps better posited: What can a cleric do that a non-cleric cannot?" She answers that the two most important functions are preaching and judging in church proceedings. But it is more than a matter of functions. The ordained have also made a "public and permanent dedication of their lives to sacred ministry" and have received "acceptance and ratification of that sacred ministry at the hands of the diocesan bishop."

Zagano considers who would become a deacon. If members of religious orders, how would that change their order or their membership? If married, what then would be the role of the husband? She writes, "The practicalities of returning women to the diaconate are complex, but ... the only genuine reason for the church to restore women to ordained diaconal service is the needs of the church."

Women Deacons is clearly a work of advocacy. Macy, Ditewig and Zagano all believe that the church would be well-served by ordained women deacons. In the book's foreword, Susan A. Ross of Loyola University Chicago writes, "This book should be required reading for all bishops and clergy." I agree that it is a very useful book, a quick review of the arguments and a source book for the key documents, presented by three authoritative writers.

[Maureen Daly was an editor at Catholic News Service for 10 years. She earned a master's degree in theology at the Ecumenical Institute of St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore.]

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