

## What the Holy Father meant to say ...

Phyllis Zagano | Aug. 14, 2013 Just Catholic

So, am I the only person on the planet who thinks Pope Francis said "yes" to women as deacons? The question was about what concrete measures the church should take, "for instance, the female diaconate or a woman at the head of a dicastery?"

No matter a little Rome-speak in his answer. I am pretty sure he said "yes" to ordaining women as deacons.

The question came in Italian from *Le Figaro* religion editor Jean-Marie Guénois and also on behalf of a colleague from the French Catholic newspaper *La Croix*. Guénois spoke directly: "You said that the church without women loses its fruitfulness." And then Guénois asked about women as deacons and about women heading major portions of the church's bureaucracy.

Media reports burst with analysis of Francis' "who am I to judge" comment made on that plane ride from Rio. But a complete English translation of Francis's mostly Italian 80-minute chat with reporters on the aircraft is posted by the highly conservative Catholic News Agency (CNA). An outgrowth of the Peru-based ACI Prensa, CNA gives free access to Catholic entities. Its aim is to proselytize while it informs. It ran the transcript. It did not seem to focus on *Le Figaro*'s question about women as deacons or the pope's apparently positive answer.

Nor did anyone else. Most news outlets were falling over each other, racing to move the pope's comments about "gay persons" "his term. News flash: the pope reiterated Catholic teaching, both about homosexual activity and about the ordination of women as priests.

But the pope did not rule out "nor has any church teaching ruled out" the restoration of women to the ordained order of deacon. In fact, he led right into the current international discussion about women in the diaconate.

And, if the pope has reasserted that women cannot be ordained priests, then what is the problem? The fear of the naysayers to this obvious way to admit women to positions ordinarily "often legally" held only by clerics is that women as deacons portend women as priests. Such, of course, is a red herring. The church has stated (more or less definitively, depending on whose analysis you side with) that women cannot be priests.

There is ample theological argumentation and historical evidence "Eastern and Western" that women have been and can again be ordained as deacons. In fact, the real problem about including women in ordained ministry is the lens through which the governing church (the men) sees the working church (the women), and that point was not lost on anyone.

Significant whining came from the bloggers and pundits about Francis's use of the term "a theology of the woman." Most stated the obvious: Your Holiness, women are people, too. Theological anthropology fully covers both halves of the church.

Of course, the critics argued that the pope did not include women in the church's theological anthropology. I am sure he did not mean it to come out that way. For him, I think, the church needs to include women within the

fuller understandings of theological anthropology. For him, I think, women are made in the image and likeness of God.

With or without what he called "a profound theology of the woman" the pope most assuredly said that the church needs women. Francis said, directly, that "the role of the woman in the church must not only end as mom, worker, limited. No! It's something else ... I think that we need to move further ahead in the development of this role and charism of the woman."

Francis continued, "I think that we haven't yet come up with a deep theology of the woman in the church. [She can] only do this, only do that. Now she is an altar server, now she reads the readings, she is the president of Caritas " But there is more! We need to make a profound theology of the woman. This is what I think."

Thank you, Pope Francis. And, thank you Jean-Marie Guénois.

As American poet E.E. Cummings once wrote: "Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question."

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. She will speak Sept. 20-21 at Wisdom House in Litchfield, Conn.; Oct. 13 at Thomas More Chapel of Yale University; and Oct. 23 at Boston College. Her recent books include *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan), *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (Paulist Press) and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig, Paulist Press).]

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