

The Vocational Diaconate: Book Reviews and Discussion

by **Deacon Canon D. Michael Jackson**
Diocese of Qu'Appelle, Anglican Church of Canada

The ministerial order of deacons is the subject of discussion and debate, conferences and research, development and experimentation in a number of Christian churches – among them Roman Catholic and Eastern, Anglican/Episcopal, Lutheran and Methodist. Diaconal ministry in these traditions was assessed by the contributors to a book I edited for Sacristy Press in Durham, UK, in 2019, ***The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective: Ecclesiology, Liturgy and Practice***. Continued interest in the diaconate is evidenced by some other recent publications. In this document, I offer reviews of three very different books, one Anglican and two Roman Catholic, followed by a discussion paper.

Deacon by design: The ups and downs of an Anglican deacon was self-published in 2019 by a leading deacon in the Church of England, **Gill Kimber**. Faced with a state church which has been largely indifferent, at times even hostile, to the diaconate, Deacon Kimber tells a revealing personal story of dedication and perseverance in following her diaconal vocation.

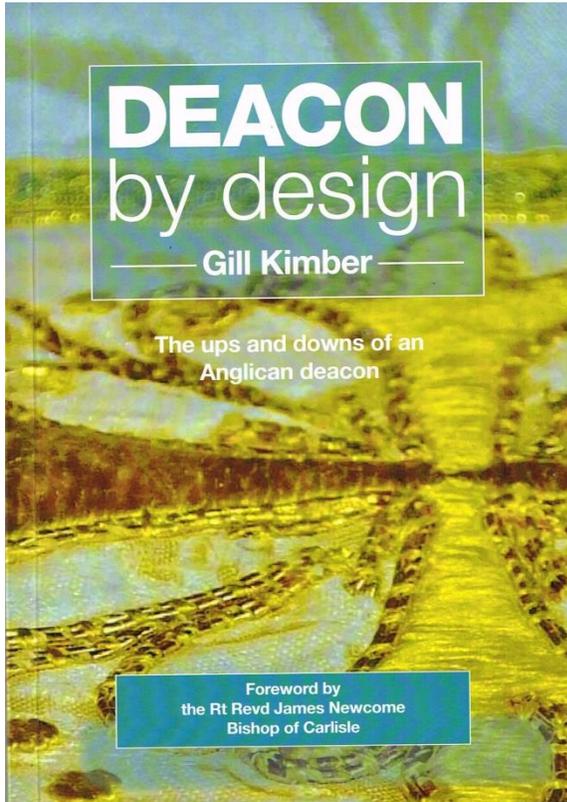
Paulist Press in New York continues its commendable its series of publications on the diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church, featuring authors such as Deacons Owen Cummings, William Ditewig and James Keating, Fr. Kenan Osborne, and Dr. Phyllis Zagano. **James Keating's** latest book, ***Remain in Me: Holy Orders, Prayer, and Ministry*** (2019), focuses on spirituality and prayer life for ordained clergy – deacons and priests alike. In ***Women: Icons of Christ*** (2020), **Phyllis Zagano** raises again the topical – and controversial – issue of ordaining women as deacons in the Roman Catholic and Eastern-rite communions.

The books by Deacon Kimber and Dr. Zagano have some interesting points in common: women in ministry, and the relationship of the transitional diaconate with the permanent or vocational diaconate. This has led me to add a paper on sequential ordination and the contested theory of the unity of orders. I look forward to your responses and continuing the discussion!

Michael Jackson
Regina, Canada
October 2020
diaconate2018@sasktel.net



Gill Kimber. *Deacon by design: The up and downs of an Anglican deacon.*
 Self-published through Verité CM Limited, Worthing, UK, 2019



The title of this book says it all: *deacon by design*. Gill Kimber was not, is not, a deacon because she had to be to qualify for the priesthood – she chose the diaconate as a permanent vocation, something still all too rare in the Church of England. Was it smooth sailing? The secondary title gives the answer! Ordained in 1991, Ms. Kimber was in the first wave of women deacons in the C of E. Most of them went on the priesthood when it was opened to women in 1994. Gill Kimber deliberately did not.

Deacon by design is a very personal story. Deacon Kimber, daughter and granddaughter of priests from the Catholic tradition of the Church of England, had no intention of marrying a clergyman or being one herself. Her husband was a Baptist and they both served as lay missionaries in Nigeria for ten years. Returning to England in 1985 with four children, they found their lives completely up-ended. Gill’s husband Geoff followed a call to ministry in the Church of

England and persevered through seminary to ordination as a priest. Then it was Gill’s turn to experience a call – to the diaconate. Her chapter titles are revealing: “Fighting God”; “God’s Mysterious Ways”; “Now It’s Your Turn”; “A Bumpy Ride”; “A Deacon At Last.”

Discernment, acceptance for ordination, theological college, the parish “curacy” required for C of E clergy, all presented challenges for a mother of four. But Gill Kimber faced even more obstacles. Women’s ordained ministry was still a novelty in the 1980s and opposed in particular by two parties in the Church of England: at one end, conservative Anglo-Catholics who shared with Roman Catholics and Orthodox the belief that only men could be ordained; at the other end, conservative evangelicals with a “powerful conviction that the Bible teaches that women should not be in any kind of spiritual leadership” (63). After Ms. Kimber was ordained deacon in 1991, a hostile incumbent from the latter school made her parish curacy painful. And the diaconate was widely regarded as a dubious form of ministry, essentially a pro forma training year for the priesthood. Attending one of the first ordinations of women priests in 1994, Deacon Kimber experienced patronizing comments, familiar to many deacons then and since, that she too would eventually graduate into the “higher order” of ministry.

Deacon Kimber shared in her husband’s parish ministry and worked at Coventry Cathedral. Then in 2002 they both felt a call to serve abroad, for three years in a health and education project in Sibiu, Romania. This was followed by a two-year stint teaching at a theological school in Alba Iulia at the invitation of the Romanian Orthodox archbishop, together with involvement in an evangelical Orthodox group. Throughout the five years in Romania, although her husband was acknowledged and welcomed as an Anglican priest, Gill Kimber could not identify herself as a deacon, given Orthodox sensitivities to women’s ordination – hence the chapter title “Undercover Deacon” ! The couple returned to England in 2007, ministering in an inner-city parish in Birmingham until retirement to rural Devon in 2012.

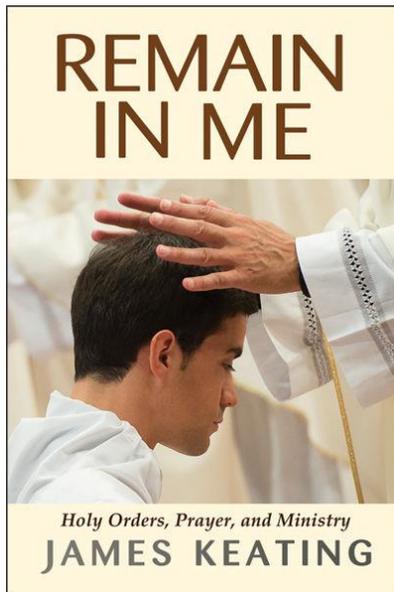
Fortunately, the story does not end there. Finding herself in the deacon-friendly diocese of Exeter, Gill Kimber made contact with the local church authorities and was soon asked to take over as warden of the diocesan College of Deacons. She also found that a great supporter of the diaconate, Dr. Paul Avis, was canon theologian at Exeter Cathedral and visiting professor of theology at the University of Exeter. She promptly recruited him to speak at the annual diocesan deacons’ day. Deacon Kimber had been actively involved in the Diaconal Association of the Church of England (DACE), formed in 1988, and shared in its great disappointment when the report *For such a time of this* on diaconal ministry was rejected in 2001 by the House of Laity in the Church of England’s General Synod under pressure from lay readers. It was, says Ms. Kimber, “a serious blow, one from which DACE never really recovered” (68). The organization disbanded in 2017.

Gill Kimber then took active steps to revive diaconal dialogue through a deacons’ network, a website and a blog: <https://deaconstories.wordpress.com> She found a strong advocate in Bishop James Newcome of Carlisle, who contributed the Foreword to *Deacon by design*. In 2018, her group organized a major conference on the diaconate in Birmingham, with Paul Avis as a keynote speaker. By 2020, the bishops and dioceses of Chichester, Portsmouth, Carlisle, Exeter, London, Plymouth, York, and St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich had expressed support for the diaconate and a number of diaconal ordinations had taken place, including seventeen lay readers ordained by the Archbishop of York. Although there are still fewer than 200 distinctive deacons in the Church of England, the future looks brighter than it has for a generation.

Deacon Kimber concludes the book with a series of recommendations. End prejudice and discrimination against the diaconate. Clarify the distinctiveness of each ministry – “there is no need for [lay] readers to see deacons as rivals.” Establish a national policy on the diaconate. Create “relevant vocational discernment and training” (140). Find suitable posts for deacons, notably in team ministries. Will the day will come when “deacons will at last be able to take their rightful place, affirmed, respected and deployed as the third order of ministry within the Church of England?” (139). “My prayer,” she says, “is that this hope, shimmering on the horizon at present, will be a real oasis at last and not yet another mirage” (142). If the vocational diaconate finally turns out not be a “mirage” in the C of E, it will be largely due to the dedication and leadership of deacons like Gill Kimber.

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James Keating. *Remain in Me: Holy Orders, Prayer, and Ministry*. New York: Paulist Press, 2019



At first glance, this book by Roman Catholic theologian James Keating may seem somewhat removed from the normal preoccupations of deacons. By and large the diaconate is viewed as a practical, hands-on order rather than a contemplative one. Furthermore, the emphasis of *Remain in Me* on the spiritual dimension of the deacon's *parish* ministry may not appeal to those, notably in the Anglican/Episcopal and Lutheran churches, who see social justice outside the parish as the primary role of the diaconate. And the book is intended for all those in holy orders, not only deacons.

Yet Dr. Keating, Director of the Institute of Priestly Formation at Creighton University in Omaha, is himself a deacon and has made a considerable contribution to the study of the diaconate. His books at Paulist Press include *The Deacon Reader* (ed.) in 2006, *The Heart of the Diaconate: Communion with the Servant Mysteries of Christ* in 2015, and *The Character of the Deacon: Spiritual and Pastoral Foundations* (ed.) in 2017. In his writings, Deacon Keating focuses on the significance of prayer and the spiritual life for priests *and* deacons.

Remain in Me presupposes priests and deacons collaborating as a team in parish ministry. The author sees a “natural union” between them, which carries “the potential to ignite a brotherhood of creative pastoral thinking” (xii). In his foreword to the book, Fr. Donald Haggerty wryly comments that “in general, priests, unless truly humble, are not inclined to take instructions from the services of a deacon” – adding that in this case it would be “to their loss and detriment” (ix).

An experienced spiritual director himself, James Keating calls for a thorough grounding of clergy in prayer and thus in “a living communion with the Trinity” if their ministry is to be authentic and fruitful. “As we slowly become clerics who *are prayer* and not simply ones who *say prayers*,” he says, “the Spirit can more easily speak through us to the infinite variety of needs and wounds our people bring to us for healing” (19). Deacon Keating does not underestimate the challenges of the spiritual life. In particular, he points to the danger of *busyness* on the part of the ordained. “Some of us,” he observes, “can become slaves to busyness out of neurotic need” (46); ministerial identity can be confused with “a feverish life of activity” (55).

To overcome obstacles to the interior life, Dr. Keating recommends seeking the counsel of a spiritual director. With such help, the cleric comes to realize that “the spiritual life is not a personal accomplishment or failure; it is, instead, an awakening to the presence of God as love at the very core of our being” (5). This experience of divine love permeates and underlies the ministry of the ordained. Deacons should take note of Deacon Keating's observation that spiritual direction can “help us to integrate more fully our call to charity, word and sacrament” (20) – the balanced, tripartite, diaconal vocation emphasized in his book *The Character of the Deacon*.

Remain in Me offers advice and assistance to those seeking the prayerful life in their own ministry. A chapter entitled “Suffering Temptations” and another on “Prayer Renewed” suggest how to accept one’s own vulnerability as a path to understanding that of others and deal with feelings of loneliness and isolation. In the face of inevitable setbacks, we can counter a sense of failure by gratefully receiving God’s mercy and rejecting “the lie of ‘perfection’ ” (40). Solitude and contemplation can be vehicles for an encounter with God which, says Deacon Keating, is a “seeing that moves one to *action*, a receiving that prompts *giving*” (53).

The sacrament of holy orders is itself a channel for God’s grace: “For the deacon, it is his configuration to Christ, the Word sent and proclaimed to the needy, which orders his imagination” (61). Deacon Keating cautions that “clerics are not there to help people in the way a social worker is” – other professionals are more competent in this field. Rather, “our primary gift to others is our fascination with God” (58). The role of the cleric, including the deacon, is as much to *be with* people as to *do* things *for* them. This involves suffering, reconciliation, conversion, and introducing Christ to others. There is a counter-cultural prophetic dimension in the ministry of the ordained, going beyond the cultural idols of every age to show the all-encompassing love of God “through our sacramental, proclaimed, and charitable ministries” (71).

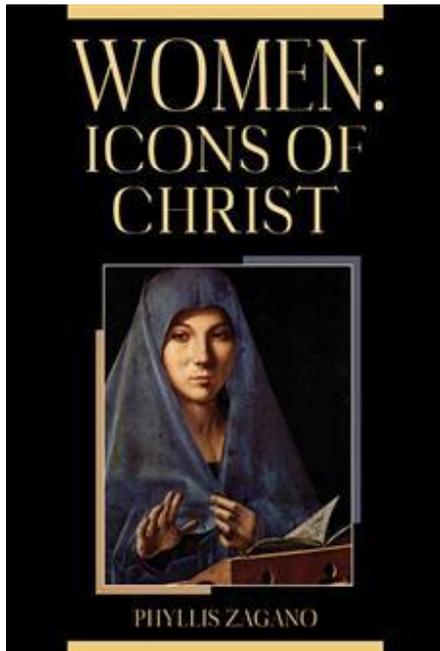
Remain in Me concludes with a chapter called “United in Holy Orders.” Non-Roman Catholics will find the pages on clerical celibacy to be of peripheral interest; much more applicable is the exploration of prayer and spirituality in the family life of the married deacon. The relationship between deacons and priests is briefly addressed in the context of the Eucharist and the laying on of hands by the bishop; one would have welcomed a fuller treatment of this topic.

Pope Francis, who particularly appeals to Anglicans/Episcopalians, is only cited once in *Remain in Me*, whereas John Paul II and especially Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI are quoted multiple times. Also noteworthy is the absence of references to the ministry of *women*. Interestingly, James Keating has been named by Pope Francis to the second papal commission examining the question of female deacons in the Roman Catholic Church, as has Dominic Cerrato, another U.S. deacon and author of the book *In the Person Christ the Servant*. It will be interesting to see how this commission plays out. The first, appointed by Francis in 2016, wrapped up its work in 2019, apparently unable to agree whether women were validly ordained to the diaconate in the early Church. A member of that commission, Phyllis Zagano, has a very different perspective; her latest book, *Women: Icons of Christ*, is the subject of our next review.

Finally, those for whom social justice is the main focus of the diaconate should not easily dismiss *Remain in Me*. Deacon James Keating sees the spiritual life as the foundation of *all* diaconal ministry, including “charity.” And he reminds us that the deacon can contribute substantially to parish ministry.

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Phyllis Zagano. *Women: Icons of Christ*. New York: Paulist Press, 2020



Phyllis Zagano is the acknowledged expert on the subject of women in the diaconate. For two decades she has asserted in her books, articles, blogs and media appearances that women were ordained as deacons in the early Church and well beyond – and that the Roman Catholic Church can, and now should, restore the female diaconate. She has backed her case with scrupulous, indeed redoubtable, scholarship, alongside an energetic personal commitment to a change she believes would immeasurably enrich the Church.

Dr. Zagano was a member of the first papal commission appointed in 2016 by Pope Francis to inquire into the issue of women deacons. The commission disbanded in 2019 after failing to come to an agreement on the question of whether women were actually and validly ordained as deacons in the early Church. This must have been an exercise in frustration and disappointment for Phyllis Zagano. It clearly provides the background and context for her latest book, *Women: Icons of Christ*.

Reader of her previous books will find this one very different, even disconcerting, in its form and style. While buttressed by the author's customary theological and historical research, *Women: Icons of Christ* is a passionate *cri de coeur* for the rightful place of women, not only in the Christian Church but in the world at large. In her Introduction, Dr. Zagano decries the dismal fate of women in many societies who are “denied their full humanity by customs and traditions stuck in medieval mores or worse” (xiii). What then of a Church where half of the members are female but cannot be ordained as ministers? This, she says, is a scandal, “a disfigurement of the entire Body of Christ” (xii). The book sets out to show why.

Rather than following a pattern of linear argument, it tends to shift frequently from one topic to another and to discuss issues such as the unity of orders several times in different chapters. This is because the book adopts a thematic approach based on five ministerial functions that women deacons originally filled: baptism, catechesis, altar service, reconciliation, and anointing. Each is illustrated and supported by detailed historical and theological references. That women were ordained deacons is a given for Dr. Zagano; so is the sad story of how they were eventually deprived of their ministerial functions by a misogynist society, on the grounds that women could not image Christ. Hence the title *Women: Icons of Christ*.

Baptism, the first of these ministerial functions, is also the most striking. Theologically, says the author, baptism “configures the person to Christ” regardless of gender – “all persons are made in the likeness and image of God” (2). In the elliptic style characteristic of the book, the author quickly transitions into the debate over women's ordination: if all people image God, why the objection to women deacons? She describes the development of the *cursus honorum*, which relegated the diaconate to a stage on the way to the priesthood and was later compounded by the

doctrine of the “unicity of orders”: the three orders of ministry are subsumed into one, so that the deacon is an embryo priest. *Ergo*, because women are barred from the priesthood they cannot be ordained deacons. But Phyllis Zagano reiterates that in the early Church, where the diaconate was seen as a separate, equal order, there *were* women deacons; they ministered particularly to women in baptism but performed other liturgical and pastoral functions as well. She backs up her stance with biblical references such as that to the deacon Phoebe in Romans 16, quotations from the Church Fathers, and abundant historical evidence.

The other chapters in *Women: Icons of Christ* follow a similar pattern: the ministerial function is a departure point for examining the theological and historical cases for and against women deacons. Thus, *catechesis* prompts a discussion of women teaching and preaching in the early Church and of catechisms as they relate to women and ordination. There is a digression here, as there was in the preceding chapter on baptism, about the commissioning of the “Seven” by the apostles in Acts. Popes Benedict XVI and Francis see this as the beginning of the diaconate as an ordained ministry of charity, although neither links it to women’s ministry. Dr. Zagano’s point is that whereas Jesus chose the apostles, the early Church created the diaconate; hence the doctrine that only men can be bishops or priests does not – and did not – apply to the diaconate. This reasoning seems tenuous, especially as biblical scholarship casts considerable doubt on the assertion that the Seven of Acts were the first deacons; indeed, several scholars reject this view.¹

Altar service provides an opportunity to delve into the long and painful history of misogyny in the Church. While there is evidence that female deacons served at the altar, objections were raised to this as early as the fourth century and accelerated in the following five hundred years until women were banned from the sanctuary on the grounds that they were unclean because of their menstrual cycles. The ban continued into the 20th century and is still found in conservative circles where girls and women are not even allowed to be acolytes. Dr. Zagano sees mandatory clerical celibacy and its persistence in the Latin (though not the Eastern) rite as another form of ecclesiastical misogyny.

The chapter on *spiritual direction & confession* traces the role of women as “confessors and spiritual companions”. Deacons, including women, could hear confessions until the early Middle Ages, when the practice stopped. Spiritual direction, however, is a different matter. Numerous religious and secular women have been, and are very much today, sought-after spiritual directors. Here Phyllis Zagano makes an intriguing and convincing point: the need for *ministry to women by women*. This was a prime role of female deacons in the early Church. Dr. Zagano sees a modern equivalent, making use of women’s skills and talents (often paid lip service by male church leaders, including popes), so that women’s stories can be better heard.

In the *anointing of the sick*, as in baptism, the early female deacons fulfilled an important ministry to women. Arguably this should be the case today, for example for women chaplains in institutions. This chapter is predominantly a discussion of Roman Catholic practices in anointing and in confession (also dealt with in the previous chapter). Originally permitted for deacons and lay ministers, unction – anointing with holy oil – became the sole preserve of priests as clericalism tightened its grip.

¹ For example, J.M. Barnett in *The Diaconate: A Full and Equal Order* (1995), John N. Collins in *Deacons and the Church* (2002), Paul Avis in “The Diaconate: a flagship ministry?” (2013).

Conclusions

Phyllis Zagano's "Conclusions" to *Women: Icons of Christ* are succinct and characteristically frank. Women were ordained deacons in the early Church and should be again. The objection that women cannot "image" Christ is, says Dr. Zagano, a "naive physicalism" (119) which contradicts the baptismal reality that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. The other objection, that women cannot approach the sacred, is an "ancient taboo" (120), compounded by clerical celibacy for men, and is well past its due date. Both objections deny the full humanity of women. The Catholic Church, trenchantly argues Phyllis Zagano, should restore the female diaconate – both for its own integrity and for the general well-being of women in the world. The issue is a legal, not a doctrinal, one and it can be resolved by a simple change in canon law, stating that both men and women are admitted to the ministerial order of deacons.

Discussion

- Those who experience the diaconate in non-Roman Catholic churches such as my own Anglican Communion may view the questions raised by Phyllis Zagano as of peripheral interest – after all, Anglicans have ordained women deacons since the 1960s/70s (and subsequently women priests and later bishops). This view should be challenged, however, on two counts:
 - Prior to the 1960s, Anglicans generally shared the same assumptions about women, especially ordained women, as our Roman Catholic counterparts (when I was ordained deacon in 1977 my parish still did not allow girls to be servers, a practice I promptly changed!).
 - As by far the largest ecclesial communion, Roman Catholicism has an immense influence on how Christianity is practised and perceived, with a corollary: on how *women* are perceived and treated in the world at large, a crucial issue graphically described by Dr. Zagano. What Rome decides about women deacons affects us all.
- "Unicity of orders" (also known as unity of orders) – the doctrine that the priesthood incorporates the diaconate – is a theological rationalization of the historical *cursum honorum* and is used as an argument to deny the possibility of ordaining women deacons. But, says Dr. Zagano, "the Catholic Churches most assuredly have ordained women as deacons" (xiv). Thus the unicity of orders argument can be turned on its head: since women *were* deacons, they could also be priests!
- *Women: Icons of Christ* will displease two groups.
 - Those in movements such as Women's Ordination Worldwide will be disappointed that Dr. Zagano does not support the ordination of women to the priesthood. She makes it clear that this has not occurred in the Catholic and Eastern Churches and likely never will (she has commented that if women deacons had been allowed, this might have taken some of the steam out of the women priests' movement).
 - At the conservative end of the spectrum, those opposed to ordination of women at all will take issue with the very notion of female deacons: simply put, women should not, cannot, be ordained to any order of sacred ministry (Deacon Gill Kimber encountered the same objection in the Church of England).

Both ends of the spectrum treat the diaconate as a secondary form of ministry: the one as a poor second-best to the priesthood; the other merely as a stage towards it. This reviewer joins with Phyllis Zagano in rejecting both points of view: the diaconate is a full order of ministry with its own integrity. Although the Anglican Communion has come to a different conclusion, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Churches restrict the presbyterate and episcopate to men, based on their own historical and theological rationales; that is their reality. But *Women: Icons of Christ* makes a very compelling case for their re-opening of the order of *deacons* to women.

- Arguably, the opposition to female deacons in the Roman Catholic Church primarily reflects cultural and historical traditions, even though theological rationales have been devised to justify it. It is, understandably, very difficult indeed to change a mindset based on more than a millennium of church practice and teaching: that females are not fully equal to males in the Church; that they cannot be ordained to ministerial office; and that, in the Latin rite, clerical celibacy is mandatory. There is also the fear that if women were ordained to the diaconate, this might be the thin edge of the wedge for women priests. Once again, the doctrine of the unity of orders and the regrettable (in my view) persistence of the transitional diaconate cloud and hamper the open consideration of women deacons.
- Finally, *Women: Icons of Christ* challenges the very notion that women *cannot* be icons of Christ, that they “cannot serve and be *in persona Christi servi*, in the person of Christ the servant,” as deacons are called to be. This is key to the traditionalist resistance to the female diaconate, widespread in the world-wide Roman Catholic Church despite calls from many, including bishops, that the matter be considered. Phyllis Zagano calls for the historic and deep-rooted misogyny in the Church to be addressed. The female diaconate would be a valuable step in that direction.
- Which brings us back to the second papal commission appointed by Pope Francis in 2020. As noted in the previous review, two American deacons are members of the commission, James Keating and Dominic Cerrato. Dr. Cerrato’s book, *In the Person of Christ the Servant: A Theology of the Diaconate Based on the Personalist Thought of Pope John Paul II*, is in counterpoint to Dr. Zagano’s *Women: Icons of Christ*. The author subscribes to the unicity of orders and the idea that the (male) deacon images Christ: “by virtue of the fact that the deacon has been ontologically configured to Christ the Servant, he acts *in persona Christi sacri*.” As for Dr. Keating, whom Deacon Cerrato quotes extensively, this reviewer has not found any references to the female diaconate in his work. Both authors appear, implicitly at least, not to be in favour of women deacons. It would have been preferable (in my opinion as an outsider) to have representation on the commission of those who have expressed positive views on the subject, such as Deacon William Ditewig and Father Kenan B. Osborne.

Evidently the theory of the unity of orders and the practice of the transitional diaconate are the crux of the matter, and to these we now turn.

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The Issue of Sequential and Cumulative Ordination

The theory of the unicity or unity of orders is two-fold in nature: (a) the historical development of the *cursus honorum* based on the ancient Roman practice of promotion through grades in a hierarchy; and (b) the theological rationale that the “lower” orders are incorporated into the higher ones, so that priests are also deacons and bishops are also priests and deacons. Another way to describe these two sides of the coin is “sequential” ordination (grades in a hierarchy) and “cumulative” ordination (doctrinal explanation). This practice displaced “direct ordination” to each of the three orders of ministry.

Direct ordination applied to the episcopate as well as the presbyterate in the early Church: lay people could be ordained to any of the three orders of ministry.² For example, in 218 Callistus, a deacon, became a bishop, then pope. Cyprian of Carthage was ordained presbyter in 257 without having been a deacon. Athanasius was directly ordained bishop of Alexandria in 328. In 374, Ambrose was baptized and then directly ordained bishop of Milan. Augustine was ordained directly to the presbyterate in 391. However, “sequential” ordination began in the fourth century and gradually became generalized over the next five centuries, although both practices continued side-by-side until as late as the tenth century. The main reason for electing bishops from the presbyterate was to ensure adequate episcopal preparation and training, although the diaconate could, and on occasion did, serve the same purpose. There was not the same rationale for presbyters to first be deacons and the practice emerged much later. It became codified from the tenth century as canonical practice, although in theory it was not required for priestly ordination. Thus “sequential” ordination could be interpreted as a form of preparation and “cumulative” ordination as retrospective mediaeval theology justifying it.

As U.S. Episcopal deacon Ormonde Plater put it, “although cumulative ordination occurs in the context of sequential ordination, it is entirely different concept [...] an interpretation of what happens in sequential ordination.” He went on to say:

This leads to a common assumption that deacons are presbyters in a pupa stage, and to a popular theology that priests acquire *diakonia* from their brief passage through the diaconate. There is no scriptural or patristic basis for a theology of cumulative orders, and there is no medieval basis for extending it to the diaconate. [...] [In ordination rites] before becoming a priest the deacon symbolically resigns the diaconate.³

Ironically, the two staunchest defenders of sequential/cumulative ordination are the Vatican and... the Church of England. The “Mother Church” of the world-wide Anglican Communion clings stubbornly to the notion that “you are a deacon first and even if later you become a priest or a bishop, you never cease to be a deacon,” in the words of a 2003 report for the Diocese of Salisbury.⁴ A book by Rosalind Brown, *Being a Deacon Today*, says Bishop David Stancliffe in

² A good historical explanation is found in the chapter by Canadian scholar John St. H. Gibaut, “Sequential Ordination in Historical Perspective,” in Edwin F. Hallenbeck, ed., *The Orders of Ministry: Reflections on Direct Ordination* (Providence, RI: North American Association for the Diaconate, 1996), 73-95.

³ Ormonde Plater, “Through the Dust – Patristic presbyterianism,” in *The Orders of Ministry*, 97-98.

⁴ *The Distinctive Diaconate. A Report to the Board of Ministry, the Diocese of Salisbury* (Salisbury: Sarum College Press, 2003), 6.

its Foreword, is written in part for “all those who are already deacons but are inclined to forget it – the priests and bishops of our Church.”⁵ Canon Brown herself has referred to “the Russian dolls’ model of ordination... inside some baptized Christians there is a deacon, inside some deacons there is a priest, and inside some priests there is a bishop.”⁶

There is of course strong support for this view in the Roman Catholic tradition. Deacon James Keating states that “becoming a deacon is a prerequisite to the priesthood [...] There can be no sacrifice (priesthood) without service (diaconate).” He quotes Pope Benedict XVI as saying “Every priest, of course, continues as a deacon.”⁷ Deacon Dominic Cerrato affirms that “the priest is still, in a certain sense, a deacon”; “the diaconate is implicit in the priesthood.”⁸ The consequences of sequential/cumulative ordination, however, differ between the two Churches. For Roman Catholics, because Christ only named male apostles, only a man can be ordained priest: “acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice.”⁹ If one accepts the “unicity of orders” theory, that ordination to the diaconate confers on the deacon the intrinsic capacity to be ordained priest, then women, who are barred from the priesthood, cannot be deacons either.

For the Church of England, this is no longer an issue, since, as in most provinces of the Anglican Communion, women can now be ordained priests. Instead, the effect of cumulative ordination is the relegation of the diaconate, both male and female, to an “inferior office,” to quote the title of a remarkable book by Francis Young, *Inferior Office? A History of Deacons in the Church of England*.¹⁰ By and large, opinion in the Church of England views the diaconal ministry of service as an integral part of, and hence a necessary preparation for, the priesthood, to the extent that many advocate a transitional diaconate extending several years rather than the traditional year. At the limit, says Francis Young, presbyters and bishops are “another group of deacons” and you don’t need “distinctive deacons to represent the diaconate.” The notion of direct or *per saltum* ordination to the priesthood and abolition of the transitional diaconate gains no traction in the Church of England, although it has been widely discussed elsewhere.¹¹

The direct ordination movement in the Episcopal Church in the USA, active in the mid-1990s when *The Orders of Ministry* was published, seems to have faltered. Church of England deacon Gill Kimber, who agrees with this reviewer on the desirability of ending the transitional diaconate, comments that “so many in the C of E have theologised what was essentially a cultural and historical development, owing more to the *cursus honorum* and Constantine than to

⁵ *Being a Deacon Today. Exploring a distinctive ministry in the Church and in the World* (Norwich: Canterbury Press; Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005), viii.

⁶ “Theological Underpinnings of the Diaconate,” in D. Michael Jackson, ed., *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective: Ecclesiology, Liturgy and Practice* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2019), 13.

⁷ James Keating, *The Heart of the Diaconate: Communion with the Servant Mysteries of Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), 2-3.

⁸ Dominic Cerrato, *In the Person of Christ the Servant: A Theology of the Diaconate Based on the Personalist Thought of Pope John Paul II* (Bloomington, Ohio: St. Ephraem Press, 2014), 203, 205.

⁹ *Lumen gentium* 10, cited in *Women: Icons of Christ*, xviii.

¹⁰ Cambridge: James Clark & Co, 2015.

¹¹ See for example the chapters by American Episcopal deacon Susanne Watson Epting, Scottish Episcopal priest Alison Peden, and Canadian Anglican deacon Maylanne Maybee in *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective*.

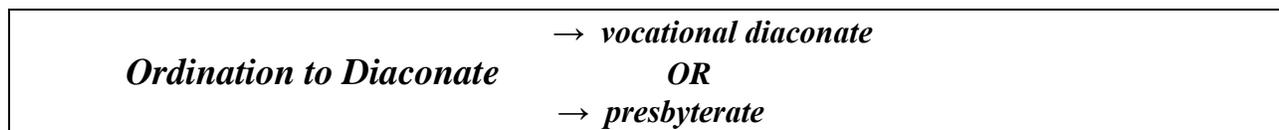
any high-flying theology!”¹² While, as we noted in our review of *Deacon by design*, there are now more bishops and dioceses in England ordaining people for the vocational diaconate, direct ordination finds very little support among the church leadership. I am grateful, however, to Deacon Kimber for drawing to my attention an exception: Bishop James Newcome of Carlisle, a staunch promoter of the vocational diaconate in the C of E.

“Deacons are not – and should never have been – ‘mini-priests’ or ‘probationers in waiting’,” says Bishop Newcome. “It does therefore seem very hard to justify retaining a ‘transitional’ diaconate [...] Priests... could be ordained priest straight away: – or, ideally, given a probationary year as at present but without being called deacons.”¹³

Regrettably, Bishop Newcome finds himself in a very distinct minority! Abolition of the transitional diaconate may be logical, historically justifiable and theologically sound, but given a thousand-year history, the difficulty of reaching a consensus in the Anglican Communion, and ecumenical implications, it is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Where then do we turn?

Paul Avis, the Church of England theologian referred to in our review of *Deacon by design* and a strong supporter of the diaconate, has written perceptively about its biblical, historical, theological and ecumenical rationale and implications. He sees the diaconate as an order with its own identity and integrity and as a key to “a ministry shaped by mission.” However, Professor Avis is also a supporter of sequential ordination. “Diaconal ministry embodies the fundamental commission of the Church in the service of the Lord,” he says. “Any further ordination can only be built on the foundation of the diaconate.”¹⁴ His case is based on the “new hermeneutic of *diakonia*” as a divine commission, moving away from the traditional view of the diaconate as a ministry of (humble) service, now superseded by the work of John Collins,¹⁵ to one of the *tria munera* – the three-fold diaconal ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care. It is the only plausible argument I have seen for sequential ordination. And sequential ordination is going to be with us for a long time regardless of the valid (in my view) case for direct ordination.

Francis Young, commenting on the work of Paul Avis, agrees that “the diaconate should be considered the default vocation of all who are called to ordained ministry.” He adds that “I see a reformed and restructured transitional diaconate as the way to get back to a distinctive diaconate, as transitional deacons choose to become distinctive deacons.”¹⁶ For Dr. Avis and Dr. Young, the pattern would thus be as follows:



¹² Communication with the author, September 2020.

¹³ James Newcome, “The Case for a Distinctive Diaconate,” presentation to conference on the diaconate, Diocese of Carlisle, 13 March 2018.

¹⁴ Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (London & New York, T & T Clark, 2005), 113. See also his article “The Diaconate: a flagship ministry?” in *Theology and Ministry* 2 (2013).

¹⁵ See his *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford University Press, 1990) and *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2002).

¹⁶ Communication with the author, February 2020.

This could provide a *modus vivendi*, accommodating and promoting the vocational diaconate until the Churches eventually agree that the transitional diaconate is no longer warranted.

Would this pattern assist the Roman Catholic Church in restoring the female diaconate? There are those in that Church, as in Anglicanism, who argue for the elimination of the transitional diaconate. William Ditewig notes that,

Some theologians are beginning to suggest that since the vocation of the seminarian is properly to the priesthood and not to the diaconate, and because a transitional diaconate no longer seems to be serving the real pastoral and practical needs of the people of God, the practice should be discontinued.

Referring to vision of the Second Vatican Council and of Pope John Paul II for the diaconal role of the whole Church, Deacon Ditewig says that,

If this conciliar and papal vision is ever to reach its full potential, these theologians suggest that retaining a vestige of the *cursus honorum* – in which all ordained ministry is to be interpreted and find its fulfilment within the priesthood – is an anachronism that ought to be stopped.

While acknowledging that other theologians argue for the retention of the transitional diaconate, Dr. Ditewig points out that “whether the Church continues to ordain transitional deacons or not is within her authority to adjust or adapt, just as was done with tonsure, the minor orders, and the subdiaconate.”¹⁷ Elsewhere, he says “the use of one sacramental order as a necessary prerequisite to another is a pattern that, as a minimum, is no longer absolute and should be most closely examined.”¹⁸ Some other Roman Catholic writers agree. Susan K. Wood proposes “abandoning a transitional diaconate as a sacramental prerequisite to presbyteral ordination.”¹⁹ Richard Gaillardetz reminds us that “the ancient tradition in no way presupposed that one must advance from one ordained ministry to the next.” He argues that “the existence of a ‘transitional diaconate’ risks denigrating diaconal ministry by reducing it to a kind of pastoral internship or field education assignment.”²⁰

Even if, as seems most likely, the Church retains the transitional diaconate within *sequential* ordination for men, it could open the diaconate to women by discarding the interpretation of *cumulative* ordination. Kenan B. Osborne believes that “if the permanent male diaconate can be re-established after eleven hundred years of inactivity, then in a similar way there can be a re-establishing of the ministry of deaconesses after a similar length of inactivity.”²¹

As Phyllis Zagano has pointed out,

¹⁷ *101 Questions and Answers on Deacons* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 27-28.

¹⁸ *The Emerging Diaconate: Servant Leaders in a Servant Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 135.

¹⁹ Susan K. Wood, S.C.L., *Sacramental Orders* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 166-171.

²⁰ Richard R. Gaillardetz, “On the Theological Integrity of the Diaconate,” in Cummings, Ditewig and Gaillardetz, *Theology of the Diaconate: The State of the Question* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 71.

²¹ Kenan B. Osborne, OFM, *The Permanent Diaconate: Its History and Place in the Sacrament of Orders* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 174.

...there is no direct link between ordaining a woman as a deacon and ordaining a woman as a priest, except for the conflation of the diaconate into the priesthood in the West, and the concurrent reduction of the diaconate to a step on the way to priesthood. In other words, the permanent diaconate – of men and women – is just that. Diaconal ordination does not imply priestly ordination.²²

Deacon Thomas Baker says,

Much of the resistance to women deacons is based on a fear that it would create an expectation that women priests wouldn't be far behind. [...] But at some point, perhaps a vision of the opportunity, rather than the risks, will carry the day. For my part, I can't imagine a change in discipline that would bring more life to the church, and more promise for its future.²³

Will this “vision of the opportunity, rather than the risks” eventually “carry the day” in the Roman Catholic Church? Despite the formidable forces arrayed against it, one can only hope, and pray, that women will, when the time is right, find their place again in the order of deacons.²⁴

And let us also hope and pray that one day Anglicans and Roman Catholics will no longer treat the diaconate as an “inferior office” – or a transitional one.

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²² *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 12.

²³ Thomas Baker. *Deacon (I Like Being in Parish Ministry series)* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2002), 40.

²⁴ See the chapters on “Women and the Diaconate” by Maylanne Maybee and Gloria Marie Jones, OP, in *The Diaconate in Ecumenical Perspective*.