

Talk 4. Deaconesses in the Catholic Church

Scriptural roots

Diakonos – Servant, Christ the servant.

Diakonia - ‘Service’ or ‘ministry’.

Diakoneo – verb, to wait on, serve, minister to.

Lk22:27 ‘I am among you as one who serves’ (*diakoneo*).

Mk10:45: ‘The son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many’

Jn. 12:26: ‘where I am there shall my servant (*diakonos*) be also’.

Lk8:1-6. ‘Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women ... who provided for them (*diakoneo*, ‘ministering’) out of their own means.

Acts 6:1-6 ‘Now in those days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution (*diakonia*)... pick out from among you seven men of good repute ... whom we appoint to this duty.’

Rn 16:1: ‘I commend to you our sister Phoebe a deaconess (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchræe, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well’.

Tim 3:8-13: In this passage on deacons (*diakonous*), v11: ‘Women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things’.

Baptismal *diakonia* means that we are united to Christ the servant and can ‘serve’ or ‘minister’ in his name. This baptismal *diakonia* is the underlying foundation of all forms of Christian service and ministry. (‘whatsoever you do...’ Mt 25:40)

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Distinction between Deacons and Deaconesses

Note: ‘*Ordinatio* means incorporation into an *ordo*’, a religious and liturgical act which was a consecration, a blessing or a sacrament.

Today the word ordination is reserved for the sacramental act – for bishops, priests and deacons. (CCC1537-8)

Sacrament of Holy Orders for bishops, priests and deacons, is the sacrament of apostolic ministry with Male only requirement because ‘Jesus chose twelve ...’

Other Orders existed from the beginning of the Church: order of virgins, order of widows, order of catechumens.

‘**Minor Orders**’ gradually developed as a male only, liturgical but non-sacramental, *cursus honorum*: subdeacon, acolyte, exorcist, reader and porter (changes made by Pope Paul VI, Pope JPII and Pope Francis).

Post-apostolic times (e.g. period immediately after the references in St Paul’s letters) there is no further reference to women ‘*diakonos*’ in post-apostolic writings until the 3rd century.

The role of the male *diakonos*, however, continues, mentioned frequently, following Acts 6:1-6, and is mentioned together with priests and bishops.

- ⇒ **Didaskalia**, 3rd century document from one of the Eastern churches, probably from Syria, in a society of sharp separation of the sexes.
First new mention of women *Diakonos* – referencing Lk 8 – the women who ministered to Christ.
These women helped with baptisms. The bishop or deacon anointed the head and the women then continued the anointing of the body. The women deacons also visited sick women.

- ⇒ **Apostolic Constitutions**, 4th century document, also from the Eastern church. *Diakonissa* (deaconess) appears for the first time, with a rite of consecration, including the imposition of hands and prayers. The rite is distinctly different from the prayers for the deacon. Subdeacons and lectors also had the imposition of hands. The prayers do not mention Phoebe but Mary and the women doorkeepers of the tent of meeting (Ex 38:8).
The *diakonissa* could not do anything that a deacon could do. No blessings, no preaching and no other liturgical roles in the sanctuary.

- ⇒ **Council of Nicaea** *diakonissa* mentioned explicitly as ‘lay women’, elsewhere explicitly listed as ‘not clerics’ and in other places listed below deacon or below subdeacon in the *cursus honorum*.

- ⇒ **5th century**, Superiors of convents in the East, especially in isolated places, consecrated abbesses as *diakonissa* in order to distribute communion to the sisters and read an epistle and gospel if no priest or deacon present.

- ⇒ **Byzantine rite**, the consecration of the *diakonissa* had some similarities with subdeacon and one similarity with the rite for the deacon: they are handed a stole and chalice, but the stole is worn like a subdeacon and the woman had no role in the eucharistic liturgy like the deacon.

Conclusion

- **Diakonissa** (deaconess) - always distinguished from male deacon in rite and in roles, no blessings, no preaching, no liturgical role in the sanctuary. No female deacons or female diaconate equivalent to that of male deacons.
- **Diakonissa** - always in the Eastern Churches, in societies with strong separation of the sexes, limited roles, in relation to women and children only, they were often the wives of priests and deacons, abbesses and widows involved in parish work for other women, assisting in adult baptism of women, looking after the sick women, and as

abbesses, also distributing communion to the sisters if no priest or deacon was present.

Options already taken:

- ⇒ Re-institution of the order of consecrated virgins
- ⇒ Formal institution of the lay ministry of catechist
- ⇒ Formal institution of minor orders of acolyte and lector as lay ministries

Not an option today: to institute for the first time (ordained or un-ordained) female deacons with same roles as male deacons, because no precedent in Scripture or Tradition.

Possible Options:

- ⇒ Re-institute (un-ordained) deaconesses - very limited roles and needs have changed.
- ⇒ Re-institute order of widows and order of catechumens.
- ⇒ Open further (un-ordained) lay ministries of the *cursus honorum* (subdeacon removed; lector and acolyte already re-instituted for lay men and women).
- ⇒ Promote meaning and understanding of Baptismal *Diakonia*
- ⇒ Promote meaning and understanding of the differences and complementarity of roles and responsibilities of the sacrament of Baptism and those of the sacrament of Holy Orders: i.e. with regard to the common priesthood of Christ of the baptised, lay teaching (not preaching in the liturgy) and lay governance (because the anointing of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King is shared by lay people through Baptism, in a different, complementary way to Holy Orders).