

Summary of the Study Commission on the Female Diaconate

Editor's note: This English translation of the [Italian original](#), which was published in the Vatican daily bulletin on Dec. 4, 2025, was prepared by Dr. Phyllis Zagano and Denver M. Beattie.

To His Holiness Leo XIV

Dear Holy Father,

I address you because, as is well known, Pope Francis personally took up the question of the possible access of women to the diaconate. For this reason, bearing in mind the work undertaken by the various Commissions appointed to study this topic, I would like to submit to you a brief summary of some thematic nuclei [key concepts], in the hope that they may be of help to you in your discernment.

Drawing on historical research, the first Commission already stated, “The Church has recognized at various times, in various places, and in various forms, the title of deacon/deaconess referring to women, without attributing to it an unequivocal meaning.”¹ This statement is consistent with another proposition presented by the International Theological Commission: “It seems clear that this ministry was not perceived as simply the feminine equivalent of the masculine diaconate.”²

The second Commission, which I chaired, unanimously reached—during its first Session (2021) the following thesis (no. 3): “Given the current state of historical research and our knowledge of biblical and patristic evidence, it may be reasonably affirmed that the female diaconate, which developed unevenly in different parts of the Church, was not understood as the mere female equivalent of the male diaconate and does not appear to have possessed a sacramental character.”³

We know, however, that a purely historical perspective does not allow us to arrive at any definitive certainty. Ultimately, the issue must be decided on the doctrinal level (cf. Benedict XVI, Letter for the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the ITC).

Therefore, issues concerning the diaconal ordination of women remain open to further theological and pastoral investigation, holding firm to the principle of “*communio hierarchica*” which assigns the final decision on these matters to the Magisterium of the Church, as an authoritative response to questions present in some sectors of the People of God.

I would like to clarify that the considerations that follow are inevitably incomplete and fragmentary with respect to the documentation produced by the Commission I chaired.

Nevertheless, they can serve as cognitive “coordinates” [reference points] aimed at fostering a comprehensive overview of the argumentative terrain into which we have ventured.

By a shared methodological choice, the Members of the Commission were called upon, at the end of their deliberations, to express—through a vote—their summary opinion on the key concept that had been debated.

The following table presents, in schematic form, the results of the vote on Thesis no. 3 [mentioned on the previous page] taken during the Second Session.

Thesis Number	Results		
	<i>Placet</i>	<i>Non Placet</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
3	7	0	1

In the year 2021, theological discussion led to the formulation of the following thesis:

“Systematic study on the diaconate, within the framework of the theology of the sacrament of Holy Orders, raises questions concerning the compatibility of the diaconal ordination of women with the Catholic doctrine on ordained ministry.”⁴

The vote on this sentence was unanimous:

Thesis Number	Results		
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
4	10	0	0

Subsequently, the Commission voted on the following assertions:

5A “The undersigned is not in favor of the institution in the Church of the female diaconate understood as the third degree of Holy Orders.”⁵

5B “The undersigned does not at present appear to be in favor of the institution in the Church of the female diaconate understood as the third degree of Holy Orders. This assessment is based on the historical and theological elements acquired to date, without excluding future developments on this matter.”⁶

5C “The undersigned is in favor of the institution in the present-day Church of the female diaconate understood as the third degree of Holy Orders.”⁷

The results of the voting are as follows:

Thesis Number	Results		
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
5A	4	5	1
5B	4	5	1
5C	2	6	2

The Commission also discussed the possibility of instituting potential new ministries and voted unanimously on the following thesis (no. 7):

“The implementation of such instituted ministries could contribute to the synergy between men and women. Their implementation would require the development of appropriate means of formation (theological, practical, mystagogical) and support.”⁸

Thesis Number	Results		
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
7	10	0	0

During the second Session, held in July 2022, in an effort to arrive at a synergistic formulation, the following thesis was voted upon:

“The *status quaestionis* around historical research and theological inquiry, considering their mutual implications, excludes the possibility of proceeding toward the admission of women to the diaconate understood as a degree of the sacrament of Holy Orders. In the light of Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the ecclesiastical Magisterium, this assessment is strong, even though it does not at present permit the formulation of a definitive judgment, as is the case of priestly ordination.”⁹

Thesis Number	Results		
	<i>Placet</i>	<i>Non Placet</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
5	7	1	0

During the final Session, held in February 2025, after the Synod had allowed anyone to submit his or her contribution, the Commission received a substantial and significant amount of written material to analyze on the issue of the female

diaconate. Although many contributions flowed in, these papers were sent in by only twenty-two people or groups and represented few countries. Consequently, although the material is plentiful and, in some cases, skillfully argued, it cannot be considered the voice of the Synod, let alone the People of God as a whole.

Moreover, the significant problematic nature of the topic and the lack of sufficient consensus are also attested by the preparatory documents of the Synod on Synodality. In fact, in them it is stated, for example, that “for some, this step [ordination of women deacons] would be unacceptable because they consider it a discontinuity with Tradition;”¹⁰ or: “...worrying anthropological confusion, which, if granted, would marry the Church to the spirit of the age.”¹¹ It must also be acknowledged that certain Churches firmly oppose this perspective. We have been informed that, in the final document of the Synod, proposition 60 concerning the study of the possibility of the female diaconate received the largest number of negative votes (97 No).

Contributions in favor of the ordained diaconate of women leverage arguments concerning questions of theological anthropology. These convictions are often in conflict with the Tradition of the Catholic (and Orthodox) Church of admitting only baptized men to the Sacrament of Orders.

The theological and cultural currents that support the opening of the diaconate to women argue that the positions of Tradition seem to contradict the following:

- the equal condition of “male” and “female” as the image of God (Gen. 1:27)
- the equal dignity of both genders, based on this biblical fact
- the profession of faith that: “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all ‘one’ in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28)
- social development, which provides for equal access for both genders in all institutional and operational functions (including at the highest level) of political and administrative life in which the civil community is structured.

For these reasons, many petitions do not limit themselves to requesting the admission of women to the sacrament of the diaconate [ordained diaconate], but also argue that the other degrees of Holy Orders (presbyterate and episcopate) should likewise be made accessible to women. The argument based on the masculinity of Jesus Christ is viewed as a sexist and narrow vision that leads to discrimination against women. According to these perspectives, the *repraesentatio Christi* should no longer be tied to categories of gender, but should center on the ministerial mediation of salvation through men and women.

Within this framework, since ordination to the diaconate is not *ad sacerdotium* but *ad ministerium* (LG 29), the exclusion of women would not seem justified, since women are also capable of representing Christ as *diakonos*.¹²

In the documentation received and carefully reviewed, many women described their work for the Church—often carried out with great dedication—as though it were a sufficient criterion for ordination to the diaconate. Others spoke of a strong “feeling” of having been called, as though this were the proof necessary to guarantee to the Church the validity of their vocation and to demand that this conviction be accepted. Many were already performing functions of a diaconal nature, especially in communities without a priest, and believed themselves “worthy” of receiving ordination, having in some way acquired the right to it. Others spoke simply of wanting ordination as a sign of visibility, authority, respect, support and, above all, equality.¹³

Along a very different line of thought, as the third Session progressed, the following thesis was proposed:

“The masculinity of Christ, and therefore the masculinity of those who receive Holy Orders, is not accidental, but an integral part of sacramental identity, preserving the divine order of salvation in Christ. To alter this reality would not be a mere adjustment of ministry but a rupture of the nuptial meaning of salvation.”

The above paragraph had the following outcome in the Commission votes:

- 5 out of 10 Members believed it should be confirmed as is;
- 5 out of 10 Members believed that it should be removed.

In this final Session, the Commission discussed another thesis with particular interest:

“In this regard, today it is appropriate to broaden women’s access to instituted ministries for the service of the community. Pope Francis’ *motu proprio Spiritus Domini* and *Antiquum ministerium*, while reaffirming what was expressed in the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, move in this direction. It now falls to the discernment of pastors to assess which additional ministries may be introduced for the concrete needs of the Church of our time, thus also ensuring an appropriate ecclesial recognition of the diakonia of the baptized, particularly of women. Such recognition will constitute a prophetic sign, especially where women still suffer situations of gender discrimination.”

The outcome of the vote is as follows:

Preamble	Results		
	<i>Placet</i>	<i>Non Placet</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
Diaconia and Diaconate	9	1	0

Final Considerations

I add a personal comment after having carefully informed myself (also thanks to the contribution of my collaborators) about the main conceptual trends emerging both in the extensive material received and from the texts drafted by the different Commissions.

The whole of the documentation, composed by the various successive Commissions, shows that an intense theoretical and existential dialectic exists between two theological orientations (also demonstrated by the results of some votes of the Commissions). One of them insists on the assertion that the ordination of the deacon is “*ad ministerium*,” and not “*ad sacerdotium*”: this factor would open the way toward the ordination of deaconesses. The other insists instead on the unity of the sacrament of Holy Orders, together with the spousal significance of the three degrees constituting it, and rejects the hypothesis of the female diaconate. Moreover, it notes that if the admission of women to the first degree of Orders were approved, it would render inexplicable their exclusion from the others.

The pronouncements of these theological “schools” in antithesis, and the lack of convergence on fundamental doctrinal and pastoral polarities, motivates, in my opinion, maintaining a cautious approach on the topic of the diaconate for women; a choice to be flanked with investigations of a “global scale”, increasingly better “equipped,” and striving, with far-sighted wisdom, to explore these ecclesial horizons.

In this context, it appears indispensable—as a precondition for subsequent discernment—to encourage a rigorous and broadened critical examination focused on the “diaconate itself,” that is, on its sacramental “identity” and its ecclesial “mission,” clarifying certain “structural” and pastoral aspects that are currently not entirely defined. In this “*diakonia* to truth,” the Church must act with evangelical “*parresia*,” but also with due evaluative freedom and discursive transparency.

It should also be noted that in many dioceses around the world, the ministry of the diaconate does not exist, and on entire continents this sacramental institution is almost absent. Where it is operative, the activities of deacons not infrequently coincide with roles proper to lay ministries or ministers in the liturgy, raising questions in the People of God about the specific meaning of their ordination.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the various Commissions were unanimous in pointing out the necessity of expanding “communal spaces” so that women can express adequate participation and co-responsibility in the decision-making bodies of the Church, including through the creation of new lay ministries.

At the end of these considerations, I believe it is important to emphasize that the Commission insisted on the urgency of valuing “*baptismal diakonia*” as the foundation of any ecclesial ministry.

Within this framework, the “*Marian dimension*” as the soul of any “*diakonia*,” in the Church and in humanity, must be increasingly better understood and developed.

Msgr. Denis Dupont-Fauville, who served with dedication and competence as Secretary of the Commission, signs these pages with me.

Hoping to have offered a useful contribution, I greet you with filial devotion, reconfirming my full unity of mind and heart with the Successor of Peter.

With these sentiments of profound esteem and complete pastoral “closeness,” I ask for your paternal blessing and gratefully assure you of my prayers.

Rome, 18 September 2025

In the Lord

Giuseppe Card. Petrocchi

President

Msgr. Denis Dupont-Fauville

Secretary

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¹Text prepared by the first Commission as a whole.

²International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* (2002), II, 4.

³The same [second] Commission points out, “Although certain testimonies, when considered in isolation, may suggest that the female diaconate at certain times and in certain places had sacramental traits, when the sources are evaluated as a whole, according to the hermeneutical criterion of the organic unity of Tradition, it is concluded that, in general, the female diaconate was conceived as a ministry *sui generis*. This ministry—unlike the episcopate, the presbyterate, and the diaconate conferred upon men—does not belong to the line of apostolic succession. In its time, this female diaconate bore witness to the Church’s ability to respond to certain pastoral challenges within societies characterized by a strict separation between the sexes”: Second Session July 11-16, 2022, no. 3.

⁴First Session from September 13 to 18, 2021, no. 4.

⁵First Session from September 13 to 18, 2021, no. 5/A.

⁶First Session from September 13 to 18, 2021, no. 5/B.

⁷First Session from September 13 to 18, 2021, no. 5/C.

⁸First Session from September 13 to 18, 2021, no. 7.

⁹Second Session from July 11 to 16, 2022, no. 5.

¹⁰Summary Report of the First Synodal Session (10/28/23), no. 9.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Cf. Final Document of the Commission on the Diaconate of Women, 7 February 2025.

¹³Cf. Final Document of the Commission on the Diaconate of Women, 7 February 2025.