

SACRED ORDERS

Deaconesses, Pope shields behind Jesuitical preface

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"During the modern era, marked particularly by a fascination with 'clear and distinct' ideas, even the Church has fallen, at times, into the trap of considering fidelity to ideas more important than attention to reality. Reality, however, is always greater than the

idea, and when our theology falls into the trap of clear and distinct ideas it inevitably turns into a bed of Procrustes, sacrificing reality, or part of it, on the altar of the idea."

So writes Pope Francis in his preface to the book *Women and Ministries in the Synodal Church. An Open Dialogue*, hot off the press for Edizioni Paoline, is fruit of the collaboration of three theologians and two Cardinals on the hot topic related to women and ecclesial ministries. The statement is acceptable in its entirety, as long as we understand the extension of the term "reality" when speaking about the Church. This aspect will be examined later in the article.

The publication brings to the public's attention the topics touched upon in the four meetings of the Council of Cardinals (the now famous "C9"), which the Pope called for between the end of 2023 and the spring of 2024, with particular focus on the meeting of last February 5. Contributors included three theologians: Sister Linda Pocher, Daughter of Mary Help of Christians and professor of Mariology, Christology and Fundamental Theology II at the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences Auxilium; Giuliva Di Berardino, consecrated of the Ordo Virginum of the diocese of Verona, and teacher of "dance of praise and adoration"; and Jo Bailey Wells, Anglican "bishop" and undersecretary general of the Anglican Communion. The two C9 cardinals who also put their signatures are Seán Patrick O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston and president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, and Jean-Claude Hollerich, Archbishop of Luxembourg and General Rapporteur of the Synod on Synodality.

Interestingly, two of the five authors are explicitly in favour of the possibility of not only diaconal but also the presbyteral ordination of women. Hollerich, on May 17 last year, had in fact **stated** that the prohibition of women's priesthood, reaffirmed by John Paul II on the basis of the constant and unbroken tradition of the Church, was "binding, but not forever." According to the cardinal, this would actually be the position of Pope Francis. As for the "bishopric," it is quite clear what his ideas are on the matter.

Why is such an important issue, such as the possible access of women to ordained ministry, being debated in such a small group as the Council of Cardinals? Why involve only nine of the more than two hundred prelates who make up the College of Cardinals?

The feeling is that it is being advanced with a certain caution, to avoid arriving at a reaction similar to that which occurred with *Fiducia supplicans*. But then, what are two such extreme positions, such as those of Hollerich and Jo B. Wells, doing in a book published close to the last session of the Synod, complete with a preface by the Pope?

Sister Linda Pocher's interview with EWTN News (read here) may help to understand the reason. The Salesian sets up the question around the female diaconate in a way that leads the reader to adhere to the desired position. Indeed, Sister Pocher explains that there are three collocations around the issue of the female diaconate: the first would like to leave things as they are, since we are not able to understand who the deaconesses of the first centuries really were; the second is “a form of diaconate without ordination, because it is important from an institutional point of view to recognise the service of women in the Church,” through the conferring of an official ministry; and the third calls for a true female diaconate, which, however, would not involve the possibility of priestly ordination, since it would constitute a kind of permanent diaconate, analogous to the male one.

Sister Pocher also reveals that Pope Francis would not be in favour of a true female diaconate, because the ordination of women is an issue “as big as an elephant in the room.”

Put this way, the average reader feels sympathetic to the “moderate” position, i.e., the second one: these poor women will have to be given recognition in the Church, but without the huge fuss that would inevitably be created by the granting of true ordination. It is therefore very likely that the Vatican solution will go in this direction and will be entrusted to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, in coordination with the General Secretariat for the Synod, as **anticipated on July 9 by Cardinal Mario Grech**.

Such a provisional and interlocutory solution, which will have the great advantage of familiarising clergy and faithful with this new figure, pending a further step. Diaconesses who, since the path of acolyte, lectorate and that of extraordinary minister of the Eucharist is already open to women, will be able to serve at the altar, distribute the Eucharist (perhaps with an ad hoc liturgical robe) and assume the role of community leaders.

Let us return to the realism to which the Pope referred. It is absolutely true that an ideological view of faith is always around the corner; the point is to understand what is the extent of the term reality, which rightly stands as an antidote to such drift. When we are faced with the Church and its ministries, this reality cannot be reduced to a sociological dimension, but must continue to encompass the substance of the mystery. That mystery is spousal. And it is for this reason that, even historically, there have never been ordained 'women's ministries', nor have they been linked to the sacrament of order ([read here](#)).

Importantly, with regard to the famous deaconesses of the early centuries, while it is true that there was no practical uniformity among different churches and in different historical periods (on this aspect, nevertheless there was one common fact: they not only could not exercise a ministry comparable to that of the deacon, but not even approaching that which is carried out today by lectors and acolytes. Nor is there any evidence of any participation by them in the governing power. Their liturgical function extended to those acts which, for reasons of decency, it was not appropriate for the deacon to perform, such as the anointing of the bodies of baptised women and the descent into the baptismal waters (which involved immersion). From a pastoral point of view, they were asked to visit the sick. This symbolic realism was very much present in the early Church, and it cannot be sacrificed in the name of practical and sociological realism, which is basically nothing more than a name for ideology. For ideology denies reality even in its mystery-symbolic dimension.

Today's re-proposal of a female diaconate therefore takes place in an extremely dangerous context, one that the Church of the early centuries did not know at all; a context characterised in particular by the fact that women are already being given ministries that were exclusively the preserve of men, and that the climate is that of the vindication of a woman's role in the Church, in ways that do not take into account the female spousal dimension, which is profoundly different from the male dimension. This context therefore - as such - is blatantly ideological.