

CHURCH

## The diaconate divides Vatican commission on women deacons

ECCLESIA

05\_12\_2025



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Yesterday, 4 December 2025, the [summary](#) of the Study Commission on the Female Diaconate, which was presented to the Holy Father on 18 September, was made public. Signed by Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, Archbishop Emeritus of L'Aquila, as President of

the Commission, and the Secretary, theologian Monsignor Denis Dupont-Fauville, the document presents the Commission's overall findings on the status of the question regarding the possibility and modalities of a female diaconate in the Catholic Church.

**The commission comprised ten members (five men and five women) and was established by Pope Francis in 2020** to continue the work of a previous commission established by the same pontiff in 2016. The latter was chaired by Cardinal Luis Francisco Ladaria Ferrer, who was then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The first commission concluded its work in 2018, presenting a summary of its findings to the Pope in December of that year. However, the outcome remains largely unknown to this day.

**Cardinal Petrocchi noted two theological currents within the commission he chaired.** The first takes up the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*, which states that diaconal ordination is *ad ministerium*, not *ad sacerdotium*. According to this teaching, the ordination of women as deacons would not conflict with the prohibition of priestly ordination. The second current acknowledges this distinction but insists on the substantial unity of the priesthood in its three degrees and its spousal meaning. This means that candidates must be male. According to the cardinal, this split suggests "a prudent line of evaluation", accompanied by "a rigorous and extensive critical examination of the diaconate itself", greater involvement of women in lay ministries, and enhancement of "baptismal diaconia" as the foundation of any ecclesial ministry.

**The summary presents the results of the three working sessions held in September 2021, July 2022 and February 2025 respectively.** The results of the votes on three theses from the first session were announced. The Commission unanimously approved the statement that, given the current state of historical research and our knowledge of biblical and patristic evidence, the female diaconate, which developed differently in various regions of ancient Christianity, was not considered the female equivalent of the male diaconate and did not appear to have a sacramental nature. The members of the Commission also unanimously recognised that there are multiple questions regarding the compatibility of the diaconal ordination of women with Catholic doctrine on ordained ministry.

**The ten members' personal opinions on the possibility of establishing a female diaconate** as the third degree of the sacrament of Holy Orders appeared to be more heterogeneous. Four members were absolutely opposed to the introduction of an ordained female diaconate, while five opposed this position (one ballot was left blank). Four members expressed a provisionally unfavourable position, but were open to

further developments. Only two members were absolutely in favour of an ordained female diaconate, a position opposed by six members (two blank ballots). Conversely, the proposal to establish new ministries received unanimous approval.

**The summary of the second session outlines the outcome of the vote on the following thesis:** 'The status of the question surrounding historical research and theological investigation, considered in their mutual implications, excludes the possibility of proceeding in the direction of admitting women to the diaconate as a degree of the sacrament of Holy Orders.' Seven votes were in favour and one was against the idea that there is no historical or theological basis for supporting an ordained female diaconate. However, it was recognised that, as with priestly ordination, it is not currently possible to make a definitive judgement.

**The third and final session involved evaluating external material**, as the Synod had invited contributions to the Commission from anyone. The summary notes that, although the material came from only twenty-two individuals or groups, it was considerable and mostly expressed convictions in conflict with the Catholic (and Orthodox) Church's tradition of admitting only baptised men to the sacrament of Holy Orders. Many of these petitions did not merely request the admission of women to the sacrament of the diaconate; they also argued that the other degrees of Holy Orders (priesthood and episcopate) should be accessible to women. These contributions considered the argument based on the masculinity of Jesus Christ to be 'sexist and narrow', leading to 'discrimination against women'.

**The Commission therefore felt obliged to express its opinion on whether masculinity is an essential** or accidental quality in candidates for Holy Orders and whether it can be considered 'an integral part of sacramental identity' or an expression of 'the nuptial meaning of salvation'. On this question, the Commission was divided, with five votes in favour and five against. A much broader consensus was achieved on the proposal to entrust pastors with the task of broadening women's access to established ministries and creating new ones (9 *placet* against 1 non *placet*).

**From the summary, it is clear that there is substantial consensus that the deaconesses of the early Church were not the female equivalent of deacons**, which would seem to close the debate on the historical level. Theological considerations, however, present a more complicated picture. Regarding the ordained female diaconate, the Commission acknowledged that the ordination of women as deacons would raise issues of compatibility with Catholic doctrine on Holy Orders. However, it did not close the debate, as evidenced by the varying opinions on thesis no. 5. The

Commission president's concluding remarks, as well as the vote in the final session, also highlight a real split which appears to depend on how the diaconate is understood.

**It seems that a substantially shared conclusion will never be reached at the level of study and debate.** Ultimately, the Pope is the only person who can definitively settle the question, as he is not bound by the Commission's opinion and can decide whether and how to pronounce himself.