

Article

Women in the Liturgy in the Vision of Pope Francis

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Abstract: Where is the rightful place of women in the liturgy? How do the liturgical initiatives of Pope Francis uplift and empower women, particularly in the service of the liturgy? Using Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's theology of *ekklesia* of women, this study examines the dynamics of Pope Francis' liturgical initiatives expressed in his promotion of greater participation of women in the liturgy through baptism; the groundbreaking decision to include and readjust the regulations to permit women to serve as acolytes and lectors; and the creation of study commissions on the female diaconate. Within these initiatives, the focus is the revival of women's participation as evidenced in the earliest epochs of the Church and how these profound adjustments affected Catholic Christian women in every aspect of their lives. Undeterred by the struggles women are facing, the liturgy empowers them to serve with equal commitment and fervor as their male counterparts.

Keywords: Catholic Church, feminist theology, liturgical ministries, liturgy, Pope Francis and women.

Introduction

After the abdication of Pope Benedict XVI on the night of March 13, 2013, the College of Cardinals elected an Argentinian and archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, to the papacy. It is indeed a moment in history, and there is so much new about him: he was the first Latin American and Jesuit to assume the Petrine office. As newly elected pope, Bergoglio chose the papal name "Francis" for the first time—a signal that he wanted to show a different face of the Church. Pope Francis is taking on new ground in initiating and implementing radical changes, particularly in matters that greatly affect the Church. Catholics began to speak of the "Francis effect," the hope that a more welcoming and inclusive Church would attract people inside and outside the Church, reigniting evangelical fervor.

One of the highlights of these radical changes is the women's role in the Church, enshrined in his apostolic letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (104):

“Demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded... This presents a great challenge for pastors and theologians, who are in a position to recognize more fully what this entails with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church's life.”

This explains Pope Francis' stand on women's participation, advocating for the necessity of a feminine dimension in the Church. Unlike any previous pope, he concretized and advanced this stand by appointing lay women to key positions in the Holy See. As of this writing, the following women are: Sr. Rafaella Petrini as secretary-general of the Vatican City State; Sr. Alessandra Smerilli as secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, making her the highest-ranking woman in the Roman Curia; and Sr. Natalie Becquart as undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops. Other notable appointments include Barbara Jatta as the first-ever director of the Vatican Museums; Gabriella Gambino and Linda Ghisoni as undersecretaries in the Dicastery for the Laity, Family, and Life; and Francesca Di Giovanni as the undersecretary of the Section for Relations with States at the Vatican. Along with these appointments given to women, Pope Francis has shown his commitment to advancing women's roles in the Church and giving them more opportunities for leadership and authority. This is a stirring era for the Church as it continues to develop and prosper under the guidance of a progressive and inclusive Pope.

Indivisibly united in the life of the Church is the liturgy, “the summit which the activity of the Church is directed” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10). It is remarkable, however, that throngs of women are present in all the Church's liturgical activities than men. In all capacities and with their natural propensity for beauty, order, and eye for detail, women do a great job in the area of liturgy and liturgical formation (Manabat 2012, 69). In the Philippines, some women pray the Liturgy of the Hours, popularly known as “breviary,” and attend the Mass daily. Women actively serve in various lay liturgical ministries such as readers, altar servers, greeters, collectors or usherettes, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, catechists, sacristans, and those in the area of liturgical environment. Many more women go on pilgrimages and join *fiesta* and Holy Week processions. Women lead in parishes and basic ecclesial communities. Lastly, women have become scholars of the liturgy, to name a few: Dr. Josefina M. Manabat, Sr. Mary Margaret Tapang, and Sr. Maria Cecilia M. Payawal; both religious are from the community of Pious Disciples of the Divine Master. Dr. Manabat is the first-ever woman to earn a Doctorate in Sacred Liturgy at the prestigious Pontifical Atheneum San't Anselmo, a pontifical university in Rome specializing

in liturgy and sacramental theology. All these initiatives of Christian women exemplify their manifold contribution to the liturgy of the Church.

This study explores some of the initiatives of Pope Francis that shaped the renewed understanding of women in the area of liturgy. In her study of women in liturgical history, Berger (1999, p. 5) asserts that “the mainstream historical narrative of the liturgy has been shaped substantially by the invisibility and/or exclusion of women.” Thus, Christian worship has been deeply gendered. For instance, there is still a sexist tone addressing the liturgical assembly as “brethren” in the *Ordo Missae* during moments of inviting the people to pray instead of using inclusive language. Writing about this study of women in the liturgy necessitates a recourse to feminist theology, ecclesiology, and historical treatment to understand these initiatives of Pope Francis.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s “The *Ekklesia* of Women”

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, in her book *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* published in 1983, argues that all Christian men and women who comprise the *Ekklesia* (gathering; Church) have become cultically justified and redeemed through the expiatory Death of Christ, making them worthy to be seated in the Lord’s banquet. As time progressed in the Church, the People of God were monopolized by kyriarchal tendencies and clerical-centered structures. With this in mind, the androcentric Church “in turn has always sought to control these [women] communities by colonizing them through male theology, liturgy, law, and spirituality” (Schussler Fiorenza 1983, 346). Thus, it is necessary to reconceptualize the Church and the ministry. This reconceptualization, according to Schussler Fiorenza, can be attained through the theology of “*ekklesia* of women.”

Schussler Fiorenza (1983, 344) defined the *ekklesia* of women as women Christians “claiming their religious powers, participating in the decision-making process of the Church, and nurturing each other as women Christians.” This perspective makes it clear that through baptism, laywomen like men, are also called to a higher calling in the service of the Church without the benefit of ordination. The grace of ordination is one among many other ministries that sustain the Church’s existence, and this theology emphasizes “commitment to the liberation struggle of women and all peoples, by being accountable to women and their future, and by nurturing solidarity within the *ekklesia* of women” (Schussler Fiorenza 1983, 346), which enables all Christians to exercise, whether ordained or non-ordained. Therefore, the *ekklesia* of women calls for sustained resistance to all forms of patriarchal tendencies, oppression, and marginalization of women within the ecclesial life. To attain women’s emancipation requires a desacralization and declericalization of the Church ministry. In this sense, priesthood or the title “priest” is not an exclusive term for

ordained Christian men, but rather an inclusive definition referring to all men and women Christians.

In her other work *Discipleship of Equals* published in 1993, Schussler Fiorenza argues the importance of the primacy of the “gifts” of the Holy Spirit, which implies including and not undermining the importance of sacred ordination in the life of the Church:

“I argue, if further clericalization and hierarchical monopolization of ecclesial ministries is to be avoided, women must insist that, as baptized and confirmed members of the church, they are entitled to hold responsible leading positions in the church. Women and men, professors, directors of seminaries, college teachers, catechists, missionaries, liturgical ministers, church administrators, pastoral assistants, journalists, social workers, lawyers, or organists do not need ordination for exercising their ecclesial ministry. Vocation, spiritual giftedness, and commitment suffice” (Fiorenza 1993, 35).

In line with the statement mentioned above, instead of pushing for the incorporation of women into diaconate and priesthood which will further marginalize them, Schussler Fiorenza advocates desacralization and declericalization of the Church ministry. This recognizes the gifts infused by the Holy Spirit in every woman and man, with liberty to serve in building the Body of Christ, the Church.

Without explicitly mentioning the term “*ekklesia* of women,” Pope Francis hints at it in the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* on governing the reforms in the Roman Curia. In Art. 14 §3, the constitution legislated that officials of the Curia can be selected from among “the clerics, members of the Institutes of the Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and lay men and women who are distinguished for their experience, proven expertise attested by appropriate academic degrees, virtue, and prudence.” In other words, any member of the faithful can be appointed to head or be part of the Curia as officials at the discretion of the Pope, acknowledging that high-ranking positions in the Church extend beyond bishops and other ordained men. This paved the way for appointing lay people, particularly women as mentioned in the Introduction.

From this overview, and using the lens of *ekklesia* of women, the Pope revolutionizes the Church in favor of women to include their rightful participation in the ecclesial life and involvement in its decision-making process, without requiring ordination to the clerical state. This centuries-old practice of equating ordination and administration of the Church was indefinitely shattered, paving the way for reviving the true nature of the Church in the New Testament epoch as people called by God to build and contribute to the Body of Christ regardless of place in the Church and, ultimately, gender. For the Pope, the real issues at

stake are the fundamental rights of women as baptized persons and their equal membership and inclusion in the Church.¹

The Liturgical Reform of the Second Vatican Council

In understanding the liturgical reform set in motion by the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) and its impact on women's participation in the liturgy, it is important to offer an exposition on one of the monumental documents of the Council: the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. The exposition was intended to shed light on the status of Catholic Christian women in the implementation of the liturgical reform.

On December 4, 1963, the Second Vatican Council promulgated its first document, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. In the aftermath of Pope Paul VI's approval of the Constitution, the 2,152 council fathers cast an overwhelming 2,147 votes in favor of it. Consequently, Pope Paul VI gave his approval, yet surprisingly, there was no specific mention of the role of women in the Liturgy Constitution. Hence, it is good to ask the question: Why is that so? Where are the women in the mind of the Liturgy Constitution? The drafters of the constitution are all male, composed of members of the preparatory committees, the *periti* [sg. *peritus*] or theological consultants of the council, and the council fathers who are bishops themselves. Women were invisible in drafting any portions of the Constitution but somehow contributed to the casual conversations either with the *periti* or the bishops. Nonetheless, it does not answer the question on the absence of the role of women in the worship life of the Church.

The answer, according to Roll (2015, p. 38), lies behind the continuity with Vatican II documents, specifically in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* and Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*:

“The key concept underlying the unique dignity of all the baptized (men and women) can be found well expressed, not in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* but in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in paragraph 11: Baptism incorporates persons into the Church, orients them to the worship of God, and grants them rebirth as sons and daughters of God. Paragraph 7 of *Lumen Gentium* inscribes the theological core of Baptism as the incorporation into the Mystical Body

¹ In 2016, the Congregation (Vatican Congregations are now called Dicasteries) for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, an office of the Roman Curia responsible for overseeing and regulating the liturgical and sacramental activity of the Church, issued a decree about the rite of washing of the feet and legislated that washing the feet of women, as well as men, was an option, rather than limiting the ceremony to washing the feet only to men. In readjusting the rubrics for the rite of the washing of the feet, he presents Jesus calling both men and women “to wash one another's feet” (John 13:14) to emulate the Savior's example of unconditional love and mercy.

of Christ of his brothers and sisters who have died and risen with him in baptism. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People, anchors the call of the laity to act as apostles in their particular life circumstances out of their baptism [paragraph 3].”

In toto, the two documents highlight the centrality of the sacrament of baptism; Christian men and women are both called to be a living presence of Christ to others and be configured to Christ Himself. Still, this answer does not suffice. Roll (2015, p. 38) has this to say again:

“A recognition of the dignity given at sacramental and, in Catholic belief, ontological dignity given at baptism can be discerned in female as well as male Christians. **Being female (or any other human characteristic) does not, in fact, diminish or weaken the nature of baptism.** There is no two-track baptism or multi-level baptism. The Trinitarian formula is the same regardless of gender, and so is water.”

Therefore, from considerations presented regarding the absence of the specific role of women in the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* allows the people to rediscover from “the most basic sacramental and ontological perspective the dignity of both men and women established by Christ through the sacrament of baptism” (Roll 2015, p. 37). This calls for a holistic and dynamic reading of the Vatican II documents to further understand women in sectors of the Church, including the liturgy. In the words of Schussler Fiorenza (1983, p. 344), “baptism is the sacrament that calls us into the discipleship of equals.” The message is clear: through the waters of baptism, Christian women are also sharers in the priestly mission of Christ, and no one can take that away from them.

In the contemporary Church where kyriarchal attitude and clericalism still pervade, it is necessary to assert the importance of baptism. Why does it matter? Active participation is the bedrock of the liturgy: “In the reform and promotion of the liturgy, full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, p. 14). Active participation is not a jargon exclusively for the benefit of ordained men but for all faithful men, women, and even those who do not identify as such. Active participation is not a concession given by the hierarchy composed of all ordained men to the lay people: it is rooted in the sacrament of baptism. In the mind of the Council, the most effective way to avail themselves of the spiritual benefits of the liturgy is through full and active participation. The Church, whatever happens, should not deprive all faithful of these treasures.

The Role of Women in the Liturgy

With the Second Vatican Council's far-reaching project of reform, the Church covered significant grounds in allowing women to take active ministerial roles in the liturgy. Demonstrating further the pastoral vision of equality of men and women and demasculinizing the Church in the area of liturgy, Pope Francis, in his own initiative, extended the lectorate and acolytate—formerly reserved for men preparing for ordination—to women, and studying the possibility of reviving the ministry of women deacons. This section will continue to critically explore the far-reaching impact of the liturgical reform of Vatican II beginning with Paul VI's motu proprio *Ministeria Quaedam*.

1. Minor Orders and the Motu Proprio *Ministeria Quaedam*

Before August 15, 1972, the date of publication of the motu proprio *Ministeria Quaedam* by the Pope of liturgical *aggiornamento* Paul VI, lay liturgical ministries were practically unknown. Nonetheless, there were two principal categories of ministries in the Latin Rite of the Church: namely, major and minor orders, which are all reserved to men.

The major orders consisted of the subdiaconate, diaconate, and presbyterate. The episcopate or the office of the bishop was simply called episcopate; it was not classified as part of the major orders, and the candidate was “consecrated,” but not ordained. The minor orders comprised the office of porter, lector, exorcist, and acolyte. The practice then was to confer the minor orders only to the candidates to the presbyterate, a preparatory stage. Both categories were conferred through the liturgical “rite of ordination” (*Ministeria Quaedam* 1972).

Looking at the history of the Church from the sixth century until before Vatican II, there was a liturgical anomaly in the rites of conferring, specifically, the subdiaconate and the minor orders. The subdiaconate, though a member of the clerical higher class, did not receive the laying on of hands which is an essential rite of the sacrament of Holy Orders. Meanwhile, the deacons, presbyters, and bishops did. The rite of ordination for the offices in minor orders was amusing. In his study of the history of lay liturgical ministries, Fr. Hernandez (2012, p. 52) described how candidates were ordained:

“The porter had the task of guarding the church building, opening, and locking its doors. It seemed to have been ceremonial and titular only since that was the only time – the first and the last time – that a porter would do it. The reader at his ordination was presented with the Bible, but he did not read at all the epistles at Mass; this function belonged to the subdeacon. The ordained acolyte likewise practically never served at the altar since there were altar servers and, at high Mass, there was the subdeacon. The exorcist was forbidden at his ordination, without

proper authorization, to exercise his extraordinary power to expel and cast out Satan from people, places, and things.”

Stated differently, men were nominally ordained to minor orders, but their ordination was merely symbolic, and they were not expected to carry out the vocation for which they were appointed. Pope Paul VI's *motu proprio* addressed the matter by introducing a radical reform. The following are some of its main features:

First, it eliminated the first tonsure, so that entrance into the clerical state is now joined to the diaconate;

Second, it renamed the minor orders “ministries,” and called their conferral no longer “ordination” but “institution;”

Third, it allowed the instituted ministries to be given to lay persons, thus no longer reserving them for holy orders. It retained for the Latin Rite the two ministries of lector and acolyte, re-entrusting to them the offices usurped by the subdeacon, namely, the reading of the epistle (or biblical readings except the Gospel which was reserved to the deacons and priests) and assisting in the preparation of the gifts at Mass;

Lastly, in addition to the two ministries of lector and acolytes, the Conferences of Bishops may request the Holy See to establish others they judge necessary or useful to their respective local Churches.

These reforms of *Ministeria Quaedam* were not innovations so to speak, but rather recoveries of the tradition of the Church's ministries. But what was the basis for Paul VI's *motu proprio*? There is one source that offers a pretty good idea of what went on in the early Church. This is the third-century *Apostolic Tradition* ascribed to Hippolytus of Rome. The ancient document clearly distinguishes between ordination and institution. For ordination, the document uses the Greek word *cheirotonia*, which implies the laying on of hands on the candidate; while for institution, the ancient source uses the word *katastasis*, or the installation of a person to an office. It reveals that bishops, presbyters, and deacons are ordained, that is, they receive laying on of hands (Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* 3rd century A.D. cited in Bradshaw 2023, 14; 35-39).

The *motu proprio* made a controversial regulation: “In accordance with the ancient tradition of the Church, institution to the ministries of lector and acolyte is reserved to men” (*Ministeria Quaedam* 1972). Furthermore, Vatican authorities clarified that part of the *motu proprio* by saying that it did not stop women from being deputed to read the biblical readings and to serve at the altar in liturgical celebrations. However, for such a function, no canonical institution (of lectors and acolytes) by the bishop was required. Furthermore,

the Holy See allowed women to be extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion through the Sacred Congregation of the Sacraments (1973, p. 1). On the other hand, women's capacity to function as altar servers was clarified and acknowledged by the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts in 1994 through its *communiqué*. The document limited the lectorate and acolytate to lay men.

In a book about musings on liturgical reform, Fr. Chupungco (2010, p. 20) finds the *motu proprio* as a tone-setter, gradually allowing women, without the benefit of the institution, to be part of the lay liturgical ministries. Notably, a distinction exists between an *instituted* acolyte and one *functioning* as an acolyte. To function as an acolyte is on a temporary basis or deputation, to act as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion or altar server. The same goes with instituted lectors and deputized readers. Despite its limitations on women, *Ministeria Quaedam* tried its best to push the door of welcome to women by being deputized liturgical ministers, all thanks to later clarifications from the Vatican that made these functions open to women. In this period, there were movements, but more were needed.

2. Ministry of Acolytate and Lectorate to Women

On January 10, 2021, Pope Francis issued an apostolic letter as *motu proprio* bearing the Latin title *Spiritus Domini*, confirming women can both serve in the liturgy as lectors and acolytes in a stable manner like their men counterparts. Lectors and acolytes are liturgical ministries in the Church that have roots in early Christianity and conferred to the baptized as *katastasis* or installation (Hippolytus' Apostolic Tradition 3rd century A.D. cited in Bradshaw 2023, p. 43-44). With the letter, the Holy Father amended the Code of Canon Law, removing the word *vir* in the Latin original, meaning persons of the male sex. In Latin original, it is now *laici* or lay persons, therefore both men and women. With the amendments made by the Holy Father, the Canon (230 §1) has now the following words: "**Lay persons** who possess the age and qualifications established by the decree of the conference of bishops **can be admitted on a stable basis through the prescribed liturgical rite to the ministries of lector and acolyte.**"

In this regard, Pope Francis made it clear though that this change will not lead to the ordination of women to priesthood. In referencing *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, the said document makes a clear indication that institution to the ministry of lectors and acolytes is not about sacramental orders. Lectors and acolytes share in something of that priesthood of Christ in baptism, but it is totally distinct from those ordained ministers bestowed in the sacrament of holy orders. The Holy Father underscored the differentiation when referring to a noble role that women can assume, or more precisely, a novel manner in which they can execute that role, as it can now possess a permanent rather than a transitory character.

“The institution of women lectors and acolytes is, it seems to me, a slightly easier question to settle” (Chupungco 2010, p. 19). Decades after, these brief yet prophetic words of Fr. Anscar Chupungco came to fruition through the apostolic letter of Pope Francis. This new role of women in the liturgy as stipulated by *Spiritus Domini* was not a new idea, but one that has been established over decades by the tradition of the Church and evidenced in the ancient documents for that matter. This development was guided by the spirit of the Vatican II liturgical reform, “that sound tradition may be retained, and yet open to legitimate progress” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 23). In giving women access to the ministry of lectors and acolytes, the Holy Father promoted the education of the equal dignity of both men and women in the Church. All liturgical ministries whether lay or ordained are not about power, but about service to the Church rooted in baptism. More clearly, the instituted women lectors and acolytes serve as a powerful statement of the Church to be gender-inclusive, following the footsteps of Christ taking women seriously and choosing them to be one of his primary collaborators in His mission.

3. Commissions to Study Women Deacons

A more revolutionary move happened during the third year of Pope Francis’ pontificate, which opened the discussion on the possibility of ordaining women in the diaconate. It is good to note that the ordination of women to the diaconate is a separate question from the ordination of women to the presbyterate and eventually to episcopate. In other words, the ordination of women to the priesthood is not under consideration, as this discussion has already been settled by Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (4), “**I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitely held by all the Church’s faithful.**”

Going back to the discussion on women’s diaconate, it is through a woman religious, a nun, from the assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), who asked the Pope to further study the possibility of women deacons (McElwee 2016). The Pope has since established two study commissions to take up this question.

Before delving into the discussion of study commissions for women diaconate created by Pope Francis, many liturgical scholars like Marcel Metzger and Pietro Sorci assert that there is abundant evidence that women served as deacons in the early centuries of the Church. Metzger (1997, p. 98) investigates the ceremonies of ordination found in the ancient document *Apostolic Constitutions*, and he describes the laying on of hands together with the prayer of consecration, not only for bishops [8.4-5], presbyters [8.16], and deacons [8.17-18], but also for deaconesses [8.19-20].

In the study of the female liturgical ministries in the Eastern and Western Churches, Sorci (2016, p. 93) concluded that women diaconate in the Western Church was a

permanent ministry with the same liturgical and pastoral functions as their male counterparts. These functions were assisting in the Rite of Christian Initiation, especially during pre-baptismal and post-baptismal anointing, for the women neophytes. People were naked when they were immersed in the baptismal pool, hence having men deacons assisting women would have been highly inappropriate. The same reservation applied to men visiting sick women in their homes. Women deacons were also in charge of forming women converts, assisting women in temporal means, and channeling women's concerns to the bishop.

However, no evidence exists that women deacons had a public role in teaching or preaching. Despite this limited function in public sphere, women deacons were part of the clerical hierarchy. Women deacons continue to thrive today in the Eastern Churches and some revived the ministry after its extinction. The Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt is a good example of the revival of women's diaconate in the East, reestablished in 1981 by Pope Shenouda (Chaillot 2018, p. 307). In the Western Church, by the end of the sixth century, women deacons were already in decline due to the notion of cultic purity, meaning suitability to approach sacred places and vessels. It was believed that menstruation and childbirth made a woman ritually "impure," a remnant of the Jewish sexist notion of impurity. Another reason for the eventual decline was the transition from Christian Initiation for adults—with its need for modesty—to infant baptism. By the twelfth century, women deacons became nowhere to be found (Metzger 1997, p. 112).

Fast forward to 2002, the International Theological Commission published the results of its study on the diaconate under the title *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*. The study document, by its nature, had no legislative weight, unlike other Vatican documents such as decrees, instructions, declarations, directories, and the like. It was simply a study document. Despite evidence from historical data and some pertinent liturgical documents about the veracity of women deacons, the study document had this to say as to the ordination of women to the diaconate: "It pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in the Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question." In other words, the document left the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate an open question.

Going back to the study commissions established by Pope Francis, the first commission was established three months after the meeting with the religious women superiors of UISG. The Holy Father structured the first commission in a gender-balanced membership consisting of experts in patristics, ecclesiology, and spirituality. Among the appointed members of the commission are six faculty members of pontifical universities, four members of the International Theological Commission, and a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, all headed by the secretary of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, Archbishop Luis Francisco Ladaria (Zauzmer 2016). Unfortunately, the members of the study commission had been unable to come to a consensus about the role of women

deacons in the early centuries of the Church. The report was given to the Holy Father in May 2019.

A few months after the first commission submitted their inconclusive report to Pope Francis, the question of women's diaconate was revived, all thanks to the pressing needs raised by the Special Synod on the Pan-Amazon Region in October 2019. The synod fathers requested the Pope to review the question of women deacons in view of the pastoral need of the continent, namely, the shortage of priests and other real-life challenges facing the region (Winfield 2020). In April 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pope created a new study commission treating the same question on women deacons. This time a new set of gender-balanced members were appointed to the commission. The president of the commission was Cardinal Guisepppe Petrocchi, the Archbishop of L'Aquila in Italy, assisted by a secretary and officer of the Doctrinal Congregation, Fr. Denis Dupont-Fauville. None of the members from the earlier commissions have been appointed to the new commission for unknown reasons. The new study commission served as Pope Francis' response to the request of the synod fathers of the Pan-Amazon and yet, at the same appears, a follow-up to the earlier commissions (McElwee 2020). As of this writing, it is officially unknown whether there is progress on this study or whether the commission has already written a report of its own.

Looking again at the history of the early Church, women deacons and their male counterparts assumed important roles in the community, not only in the liturgy but in the overall apostolate of the Church. These male and female deacons served as the face of the Church to the people entrusted to their care. This is reflected upon by the Consecratory Prayer of the Deacons: "May there abound in them every **Gospel virtue: unfeigned love, concern for the sick and poor, unassuming authority, the purity of innocence, and observance of spiritual discipline**" (Rites of Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests, and of Deacons, p. 141). Indeed, the essence of the diaconate is the embodiment of Christ's command of loving service.

In creating the study commissions on the possibility of women deacons, Pope Francis wants to enrich the liturgy and the Church with these women who have the necessary personal, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral qualities to serve in this ministry. Those in opposition must not fear; since women diaconate is never and will never be a step toward the female priesthood, but rather an independent and permanent ministry separate from priesthood. Even the Pope has made his thoughts on women deacons known by saying "no" to an April 2024 interview with Norah O' Donnel (CBS News, 2024). The ordination of women deacons is a question that will continue to be discussed, reflected upon, and considered. In terms of the revival of women diaconate, only the Holy Spirit in the Church knows when it will be and when it is necessary.

Conclusion: “There were also Many Women There...”

“There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him; among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee” (Matthew 27:55-56).

In his pontificate, Pope Francis emphasized the irrefutable importance of women in the Church. And the common and ultimate expression of the Church to begin with is in the liturgy. Continuing the reform envisioned by Vatican II, Pope Francis manifested it by giving a deserved space to the participation of women in the liturgy and opening what seemed unthinkable, like the discussion on women diaconate. Despite the absence of the specific role of women in the Liturgy Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, women function in the liturgy more than ever, recovering the ancient practice of their involvement. Furthermore, circumventing the *motu proprio Ministeria Quaedam*, the Mother Church gradually opened to women, without the benefit of the formal institution to be lay ministers. This eventually led to the realization that women could do more in adorning the liturgy with feminine genius. It is remarkable and a breath of fresh air to the Church that women are now installed to the ministries of lector and acolyte, which were formerly reserved and dominated by men.

On the other hand, the question of women deacons is still murky because of the lack of transparency of study commissions. However, this initiative of the Pope himself is a good start for the Church, that previously seemed impenetrable due to prevailing patriarchalism. The female contribution is indispensable now more than ever. Despite the many suffering and injustice that Christian women are experiencing, liturgy serves as their refuge and strength. By installing women as lectors and acolytes, the Church empowers them so that they can also serve with equal commitment and fervor as their male counterparts. In opening the discussion of the possibility of women diaconate, the Church recognizes that it needs the Holy Spirit to guide Her search for the truth of our faith that needs to be unlocked. Womanhood and motherhood are essential in the life of the Church. The Holy Father seconded this on many occasions, asserting the necessary role of women in all aspects of the Church’s life and mission (Dulle 2023).

Therefore, this study concludes by way of Gospel exposition. In the liturgy of the Calvary, evangelist St. Matthew tells the story of the Crucifixion of Jesus. When the Apostles and disciples abandoned the Lord as if the world also abandoned Him, the presence of Mother Mary, together with the faithful women disciples, had been the source of support extended to Jesus during his painful hours. The women disciples stood up and courageously remained at the foot of the Cross contemplating, once and for all, the worship that they just witnessed. In occupying liturgical roles that they are allowed to assume, women follow the example of women disciples of the Lord, that is, to be available and committed to their

service to the Body of Christ. If the parish church reflects the beauty of heavenly liturgy and uplifts the minds and hearts of worshipers, it is because **there were also many women there** who gave their all-in-all for the Lord. The future of the Church and the liturgy are women.

That in all things God may be glorified.

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