

Deaconesses and the Diaconate

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Pope Francis's decision to open the instituted ministry of lectorate and acolytate to women has at the same time clarified the question of deaconesses.¹ These ministries, formerly known as *minor orders*, are no longer to be attached to the sacrament of Holy Orders, but instead, to Baptism. They are non-ordained *lay ministries*, instituted by the Church as a "particular form of exercise of the baptismal priesthood," and are therefore "essentially distinct from the ordained ministry received in the Sacrament of Orders," according to the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium* (LG).² It follows that "these lay ministries, since they are based on the Sacrament of Baptism, may be entrusted to all suitable faithful, whether male or female," since Baptism is the same for all.

On the other hand, ordained ministries, based on another sacrament, have no reason to follow the same regime. They remain reserved for men, since the Church considers that she "has no authority whatsoever

¹ Francis, Apostolic Letter (*motu proprio*) *Spiritus Domini* (January 10, 2021), regarding access of women to the ministries of lector and acolyte (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [AAS] 113, no. 2 [2021]: 169–70); Letter of the Holy Father to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on women's access to the ministries of the lectorate and acolytate, January 10, 2021 (AAS 113, no. 2 [2021] 177–81; *Bollettino* B0016 [11.01.2021]).

² Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* [LG], §10: "Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ" (AAS 57 [1965]: 14).

to confer priestly ordination on women.”³ Except that the diaconate is not a priesthood.⁴ At first sight, therefore, it should not be affected by such a restriction. Some have devised a two-stage strategy. Firstly, to muddy the waters by making the diaconate a “threshold” ministry—a sort of intermediate category between the two priesthoods—to distance it from the presbyterate and the episcopate and bring it closer to the laity, thus opening it up to women. Then, once this first step has been reached, which is considered more accessible, the next builds on it to overcome the obstacle of the other two degrees, emphasizing instead the unity of the sacrament of Holy Orders. Pope Francis’s clarification, however, has had the effect of reaffirming the essential difference between ordained and non-ordained ministry (*tertium non datur*), and of reinforcing the unity of the three degrees of Holy Orders. Now, if the latter form a whole and share the same essence, with only a difference of degree between them, they necessarily follow the same regime if this stems from the common reason for the sacrament of Holy Orders. This is the focus of our contribution.

A Traditional Ministry?

We will not go into the historical background here, which has already been extensively covered.⁵ It does not seem to us that ancient sources allow us to

³ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), §4: “Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful” (*AAS* 86 [1994]: 548).

⁴ *LG* §29: “At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed ‘not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service’ [non ad sacerdotium, sed ad ministerium].” For a more developed formula, see Hippolytus of Rome (attr.), *Apostolic Tradition*, no. 8 (9): “In the ordination of a deacon, the bishop alone shall lay on hands, because he (the deacon) is not being ordained to the priesthood, but to the service of the bishop [non in sacerdotio ordinatur, sed in ministerio episcopi]” (*Sources Chrétiennes* [SC], 11/2:58–59; trans. in *Hippolytus: A Text for Students*, ed. G. Cuming, Gorgias Liturgical Studies 58 [Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010], 13).

⁵ R. Gryson, *Le ministère des femmes dans l’Église ancienne* (Gembloux, Belgium: Duculot, 1971); C. Vagaggini, “L’ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina,” *Orientalia christiana periodica*, 40 (1974): 145–89; A. G. Martimort, *Les diaconesses: Essai historique* (Rome: C.L.V. Edizioni liturgiche, 1982) [trans.: *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986)]; E. Cattaneo, *I ministeri nella Chiesa antica: testi patristici dei primi tre secoli* (Milan: Edizioni Paoline, 1997); G. Macy, “The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages,” *Theological Studies* 61,

invalidate the conclusion of the International Theological Commission's 2002 document on the diaconate: "The deaconesses mentioned in the tradition of the ancient Church—as evidenced by the rite of institution and the functions they exercised—were not purely and simply equivalent to the deacons."⁶ If we simply take the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the difference is indisputable: "A deaconess does not bless, nor perform anything belonging to the office of presbyters or deacons, but only is to keep the doors, and to minister to the presbyters in the baptizing of women, on account of decency."⁷ In particular, she did not proclaim the Gospel in the large assembly, which is the proper role of the deacon, nor did she approach the altar. In the clergy lists of the same work, deaconesses appear with deacons,⁸ or between deacons and minor orders (lectors, acolytes, cantors, porters),⁹ or even between deacons and sub-deacons,¹⁰ but most often they appear after all minor orders.¹¹ Above all, the most frequent is the trilogy of major orders (bishops, presbyters, deacons), which never mentions deaconesses. Clearly, it was not a major order, but rather what we would call an *instituted ministry*. In fact, this is the best proof that the Church is not breaking new ground by opening up instituted ministries to women, since this was already the case for deaconesses.

Originally, minor orders were services within the Church, not always liturgical, in which one could remain for their own sake. Gradually, they became preparatory degrees for ordination to the priesthood, requiring

no. 3 (2000): 481–507; *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*, ed. K. Madigan and C. Osiek (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); G. Macy, W. T. Ditewig, and P. Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011); P. Zagano, "Remembering Tradition: Women's Monastic Rituals and the Diaconate," *Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2011): 787–811; Zagano, "Women Deacons in the Maronite Church," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 3 (2016): 593–602; Zagano, "Women Deacons and Service at the Altar," *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (2018): 590–609; P. Zagano and B. Pottier, "What Do We know about Women Deacons?," *Asian Horizons* 13, no. 4 (2019): 647–58; C. Chaillot, "Deaconesses in the Coptic Orthodox Church," *Ecclesia Orans* 35, no. 2 (2018): 307–25.

⁶ International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* (2002) (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2003), 109 (ch. 7, sec. 2).

⁷ *Constitutiones Apostolorum* [CA] 8.28.6 (SC, 336:230–31; trans. in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* [ed. Roberts, Donaldson, and Coxe] [ANF], 7:494).

⁸ CA 2.26.6; (SC, 320:238–39; ANF, 7:410).

⁹ CA 3.11.3 (SC, 329:146–47; ANF, 7:430).

¹⁰ CA 8.19 (SC, 336:120–21, 220–23; ANF, 7:492).

¹¹ CA 2.26.3 (SC, 320:236–37; ANF 7:410); 6.17.2–4 (SC, 329:348–49; ANF, 7:457); 8.13.14 (SC, 336:208–11; ANF, 7:490); 8.28.7–8 and 8.31.2 (SC, 336:228–35; ANF, 7:494).

that they all be received in succession.¹² The duration of the *cursus honorum* had the effect of making the first degrees highly symbolic, as they were received at an age and for a duration that did not really allow them to be exercised. And this *sacerdotalization* tended to make deaconesses disappear, soon reduced in the West to an honorary title for abbesses. The rites of ordinations (in the sense of incorporation into the orders, whether major or minor) were then unified on the model of the minor orders by the *porrection* of the instruments relating to the exercise of each degree and the corresponding prayer.¹³ For the major orders, the imposition of hands (*impositio manuum*) took on the value of a preparatory rite, an epiclesis on the ordained to dispose him to receive the essential rite with fruit. We had to wait for Pope Pius XII to redefine the imposition of hands as the matter of the sacrament, the form being the consecratory preface which follows, for the diaconate, presbyterate and episcopate.¹⁴ As a result, the *traditio instrumentorum* became an explanatory rite that unfolds the meaning of the essential rite already received. This strengthens the unity of the three degrees, in contrast to the minor orders. The consequences are twofold. On the one hand, it clarifies the sacramentality of the episcopate, which *Lumen Gentium* teaches is the “fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders.”¹⁵ On the other hand, it dis-assimilates the hierarchical priesthood of minor orders, which Paul VI then opened up to the laity,¹⁶ who could receive them and remain in them while remaining in the lay state, with entry into the clerical state being moved to the diaconate.¹⁷ They are therefore no longer clerical orders destined for the hierarchical priesthood, but lay ministries for the exercise of the baptismal priesthood in the service of the one priesthood of Christ in his Church. They are no

¹² L. Ott, *Das Weibesakrament* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1969) [in French as *Le sacrement de l'Ordre*, Histoire des Dogmes 26 (Paris: Cerf, 1971); in Spanish as *El sacramento del Orden* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1976), chaps. 3–4].

¹³ Council of Florence (1431–1445), Decree for the Armenians (Denzinger-Hünermann, 43rd ed. [DH], no. 1326 [matter of the sacrament of Holy Orders]; taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *De articulis fidei et Ecclesiae sacramentis* II).

¹⁴ Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Sacramentum Ordinis* (1947; *AAS* 40 [1948]: 5–7).

¹⁵ *LG* §21 (“plenitudinem conferri sacramenti Ordinis . . .”); §26 (“plenitudine sacramenti Ordinis insignitus”); §41 (“Ad plenitudinem sacerdotii electi”).

¹⁶ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter (*motu proprio*) *Ministeria Quaedam* (1972; reforming the discipline of tonsure, minor orders and the subdiaconate in the Latin Church).

¹⁷ Paul VI, *Ministeria Quaedam*: “I. The tonsure is no longer conferred: entrance into the clerical state is joined to the diaconate.” See also the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* (*Codex Iuris Canonici* [CIC]), can. 266, §1: “Through the reception of the diaconate, a person becomes a cleric.”

longer received by ordination, but by institution. Francis completes this movement of *de-clericalization* and *de-sacerdotalization* of the instituted ministries by opening them up to women.

This difference between the major and minor orders is *essential*. The former are attested in the pastoral letters,¹⁸ already well established as a trilogy by Ignatius of Antioch¹⁹ and universally received. They are part of the deposit of revelation and the divine constitution of the Church. The latter, on the other hand, now *instituted ministries*, do not appear from the outset and have not always been held, everywhere and by everyone.²⁰ So it is with deaconesses. These ministries are clearly ecclesiastical institutions. As such, they cannot be sacraments. In fact, God alone can institute the sacraments that give grace.²¹ The Church has no such power; she can institute only sacramentals.

Added to this is the fact that the sacrament of Holy Orders imparts a character.²² This applies only to the three major degrees, since the sacramentals do not. Here again, the Church would have no power to confer it on her own. Even if the minor orders (instituted ministries) are not reiterated, even if they have a consecratory value, this does not imply that they confer a character. This is only one of its effects and does not exhaust the notion. For St. Thomas Aquinas, the proper function of character is to give instrumental participation in the priesthood of Christ by adding to the soul a spiritual power to transmit or receive the divine things, a power

¹⁸ In the New Testament, the three degrees of the sacrament of Holy Orders do not appear together, but in pairs: episcopate and deacons (1 Tim 3:1–13); presbyters and episcopate (Tit 1:5–9).

¹⁹ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Magnesians* 2–7, 13 (SC, 10/2:80–85, 90–91; *The Fathers of the Church* [FC], vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008], 96–98, 100); *To the Trallians* 2–3, 7.2 (SC, 10/2:96–101; FC, 1:102–4); *To the Philadelphians* 1–4, 7–8, 10.2 (SC, 10/2:120–31; FC, 1:113–17); *To the Smyrnaeans* 8–9.1, 12. 2 (SC, 10/2:138–43; FC, 1:121–23); *To Polycarp* 6.1 (SC, 10.2:150–51; FC, 1:126).

²⁰ St. Vincent de Lérins, *Commonitorium* 2.5: “ut id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est” (*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* [CCSL], 64:149 [lines 24–26]).

²¹ Council of Trent, session 7 (March 3, 1547), Decree on the Sacraments, can. 1 (DH no. 1601); see also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 64, a. 2.

²² Gregory IX, Letter *Consultationi tuae* to the Archbishop of Bari, November 12, 1231 (DH no. 825); Council of Trent, session 7, can. 9 (DH no. 1609); session 23 (July 15, 1563), Decree on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, chap. 4 (DH nos. 1767–68); can. 4 (DH no. 1774); Paul VI, Apostolic Letter (*motu proprio*) *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* (General Norms for Restoring the Permanent Diaconate in the Latin Church): “indelebili suo caractere” (AAS 59 [1967]: 697–704, at 698).

without which the supernatural actions in question could not possibly be accomplished.²³ Thus, without the episcopate, it would be impossible to ordain priests; without the presbyterate, it would be impossible to consecrate the Eucharist or sacramentally forgive sins. But what specific power can the diaconate grant that a baptized person does not already possess? It is hard to define. However, it must have one; otherwise, the diaconate would not be part of the sacrament of Holy Orders and would be relegated to minor orders as a lay ministry. To fully grasp the essential difference between the diaconate and deaconesses, we therefore need to specify how the diaconate is a sacrament with a character, how it relates to the other two degrees of Orders (of divine institution) and how it differs from instituted ministries (of ecclesial institutions).

Sign of Christ the Head?

The first effect of the diaconate is to incorporate the deacon into the hierarchy of the Church.²⁴ This enables him to act in the name of the hierarchy (*hierarchiae nomine*²⁵) by officially representing the Church, and therefore to be a sign of the Church as head and not simply as member. However, the minister is not just a sign; he is also an instrument, since this is what it means to be a minister.²⁶ This means that his action is no longer his own, but that of the Church. In other words, he acts “in the person of the Church” (*in persona totius Ecclesiae*)²⁷ For this, as an animated instrument, he must intend to “do what the Church does,”²⁸ and even, adds Aquinas, with the intention to “do what Christ and the Church do.”²⁹ In other words, he is first and foremost an instrument of Christ.

That a minister is a sign and instrument of Christ and the Church, that he can act *in the person* of Christ and the Church (*in persona Christi et Ecclesiae*), is said of the priest and the bishop (*sacerdos*). But can it be extended to the deacon? In fact, St. Thomas already holds it for the baptized, insofar as any sacramental character makes the one who receives it a minister: “For to possess the sacramental character belongs to God’s

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 63 a. 2, resp.

²⁴ Vatican II, *LG* §29: “In gradu inferiori hierarchiae sistunt Diaconi.”

²⁵ Paul VI, *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem* (p. 702).

²⁶ *ST* III, q. 64, a. 1, resp.; a. 5, resp.

²⁷ *ST* III, q. 64, a. 9, ad 1.

²⁸ *ST* III, q. 64, a. 9, ad 1; Council of Trent, session 7, Decree on the Sacraments, can. 11: “faciendi quod facit Ecclesia” (DH no. 1611).

²⁹ *ST* III, q. 64, a. 8, ad 1.

ministers; but according to the Philosopher, *the minister behaves like an instrument*.³⁰ This applies to every character without distinction, whether of Baptism or of Holy Orders. The difference is not that some are ministers and others are not, or that some receive spiritual power and others do not. Rather, the difference stems from the different natures of the power received, which give rise to different operations: “active power to transmit, passive power to receive”—two instrumental powers that are not of the same order, and do not result in the same acts.³¹ Both involve participation in Christ’s unique priesthood, but not in the same way. Yet it is through the conjunction of the two that Christ exercises his unique priesthood in his Church. *Lumen Gentium* said nothing else about the distinction and articulation of the two priesthoods in §10. In the final analysis, whether the priesthood is baptismal or ordained, the sacramental character gives those who receive it a spiritual power to become a sign and instrument of Christ the priest, making them a truly “sacramental person.”

What then of the diaconate? The deacon is not on the side of the baptismal priesthood, but on the side of the ordained or hierarchical priesthood. As such, the deacon is a sign and instrument of Christ, the Head of the Church.³² Admittedly, he is not a sign in the same way as a priest or a bishop. But the difference is one of degree, not of kind. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, the deacon receives an active power to transmit (common essence), but this power does not empower him to perform the same acts (difference of degree). Rather than dismissing the term “priesthood,” which already applies to Baptism, it is better to recognize that it is analogous. First, it is taken from Christ (first analog); then it extends to the whole Church in the double ministerial participation of the two priesthoods; then it unfolds within the hierarchical priesthood in its entirety and in each of its degrees; finally, the two higher degrees are priestly in a specific sense that should be set aside from the diaconate (here alone). Theological clarification must begin with terminology.

It is not enough for the deacon to be a sign of Christ, the Head of the Church. He must also be his instrument in specific acts. It is not proper to the deacon to be a sign of Christ the servant (*diakonos*), since all ministers

³⁰ ST III, q. 63, a. 2, resp.

³¹ ST III, q. 63, a. 2, resp.

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] §1581: “This sacrament configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ’s instrument for his Church. By ordination one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church [Christi legatus, Capitis Ecclesiae], in his threefold function of priest, prophet and king.”

are. For that is also what it is to be a minister. But it is his proper role to proclaim the Gospel in the large assembly, as a sign and instrument of Christ the Head. Not the Head who governs as Pastor, nor the Head who offers for the Body as Priest, but the Head who delivers the Word as Prophet. The mouth of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The sacramentality of the deacon (the rite and the person) cannot be accounted for unless it is included in the sacramentality of the Word.

The ordination liturgy allows us to reach the same conclusion from the explanatory rites.³³ The bishop is the “fullness of the sacrament of Order” (LG §21), the head of the particular Church (LG §23); for this reason, he receives the holy chrism on his head, to signify this fullness shared from the Head.³⁴ The priest receives holy chrism in the palm of his hands as a sign of the character he has received, an active instrumental power that he can exercise not in fullness, but in dependence on the bishop, whose hand he is, as it were, “the helper and the instrument,” and whom he makes “in a certain way present” (LG §28).³⁵ He is like a sacrament of the bishop, himself a sacrament of Christ. The deacon is not anointed with holy chrism. Does this mean that he has no character? In any case, he does not have the same character, and hence the difference in treatment. But he too receives in his hands³⁶ what the bishop first received on his head: the Book of the Gospels, of which the deacon is then said to have become the “herald” (*praeco*).³⁷ The bishop receives it in his hands after the anointing³⁸ but first above the head during the essential rite of ordination, after the laying on of hands and until the end of the ordination prayer.³⁹ Two lines therefore run from the bishop’s “head” to his “two hands.” A priestly line in the specific sense (*sacerdos*) that links the priest to the bishop; and a prophetic line (*praeco*; κήρυξ) that links the deacon to the bishop in the hierarchical priesthood.

The question of whether or not the deacon is a *sign of Christ the Head* is an important one, since the possibility of ordaining women deacons (and not just instituting them as deaconesses) depends on it.⁴⁰ Indeed, when

³³ Pontificale Romanum, *De Ordinatione Episcopi, Presbyterorum et Diaconorum* (De Ord.), editio typica altera (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1990).

³⁴ De Ord. §49 (ch. 1; p. 26).

³⁵ De Ord. §133 (ch. 2; p. 76).

³⁶ De Ord. §210 (ch. 3; p. 125).

³⁷ De Ord. §210 (ch. 3; p. 125).

³⁸ De Ord. §50 (ch. 1; p. 26).

³⁹ De Ord. §46 (ch. 1; p. 19).

⁴⁰ François Daguet, “Note sur la théologie du diaconat,” *Revue thomiste* 111, no. 4 (2011): 617–28; H. Donneaud, “La représentation sacramentelle du Christ tête,” *Revue*

John Paul II corrected the Catechism of the Catholic Church⁴¹ and then Benedict XVI the Code of Canon Law⁴² to delete the mention of *Christ the Head* in connection with the diaconate, some rightly concluded that this opened the door to the ordination of women. This argument would have been valid if the deletion had been total. But in the operation, certain texts have remained unchanged and continue to hold the meaning of *Christ the Head* for the sacrament of Holy Orders in general, and therefore in its three degrees.⁴³ Moreover, this corresponds to the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* on the hierarchical priesthood, which can no longer be corrected.⁴⁴ So much that the argument is turned on its head and allows us to affirm that, on the contrary, since the meaning of *Christ the Head* is not limited to the priesthood in the specific sense of the presbyterate and episcopate, but applies to the hierarchical priesthood insofar as it differs essentially from the baptismal priesthood, the reasons advanced to justify the impossibility of women entering the priesthood on the basis of the sacramental meaning of *Christ the Head* apply to the sacrament of Holy Orders in all its degrees, including deacons.

Sign of the Male Christ?

We must start from the *facts* of revelation: the *fact* that Christ called only men for the Twelve; the *fact* that the Apostles called only men for the Seven. All this implies a choice made by Christ and then by the Apostles, which for us is normative.⁴⁵ But it must be set against previous biblical facts: the *fact* that the Word was made flesh in the sexed body of a man and

thomiste 113, no. 4 (2013): 615–44; Martin Troupeau, “Pour une approche globale du sacrement de l’ordre en vue d’une meilleure intégration du diaconat,” *Revue thomiste* 116, no. 3 (2016): 355–81.

⁴¹ CCC §875, modified by John Paul II between the first edition (1992) and the definitive edition (1997). This change is recalled by Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter (*motu proprio*) *Omnium in Mentem* (2009), introduction, 8. Depending on the version of the text, the CCC number is sometimes §1581. This may be explained by the fact that John Paul II had also planned to correct this number, but this did not come to fruition. As the official (corrected) text is that of *AAS*, it should read §875. CCC §1581 remains unchanged.

⁴² *CIC*, can. 1008; 1009 (addition of §3): modified by Benedict XVI, *Omnium in Mentem*, aa. 1 and 2. See also Alphonse Borras, “Les diacres d’après les nouveaux canons 1008 et 1009 §3,” *Revue théologique de Louvain* 43, no. 1 (2012): 49–78.

⁴³ CCC §§1534, 1549, 1581, 1585.

⁴⁴ *LG* §10 (second paragraph).

⁴⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Inter Insigniores* on the question of admission of women to the ministerial priesthood, October 15, 1976 (*AAS*

not a woman; the *fact* that God always reveals himself as Father and never as Mother. All these facts are neither isolated nor insignificant; they have their coherence. But the divine wisdom they express escapes us: neither God, nor Christ, nor the Apostles explain them. It therefore remains for the theologian to try to explain them with reasons of fittingness (*argumentum ex convenientia*). The Church is not bound by any of these theological reasons, which are always perfectible and never decisive. But she is bound by these *facts*, which she cannot change, and which impose themselves on her with an unsurpassable normative force.

Unless we accept that these are merely interchangeable social roles, it is not irrelevant that God reveals himself as Father rather than Mother. In the polytheistic context of Israel, revealing himself as Father was tantamount to affirming that he is the unique (without *paredra*) and transcendent God. Indeed, female deities often connoted a more fusional relationship, that of the paganism Israel rejected with the Law of Separation. At the time, temples dedicated to female deities had their priestesses, while male deities had their priests. Israel alone had an exclusively male clergy, not because women were excluded for no reason, but to affirm the unique and transcendent God. To call this into question would be to fall back into this paganism and found a religion that would no longer be that of biblical revelation. For the same reasons, Christ had to be male: for he is the one sent by the Father, the visible face of the Father (John 14:9) and his perfect high priest. Likewise the Apostles, who are the Son's envoys, are sacraments of Christ who is the Father's sacrament. And in their turn, the *episcopos*, presbyters, and deacons are envoys that the Apostles establish to take up sacramentally, in Christ the one high priest, the three degrees of Israel's priesthood (pontiffs, priests, Levites)—a male clergy, because the sacramental sign must bear a certain resemblance to the reality signified.⁴⁶

The hierarchical priesthood, a sign of Christ the Head, must therefore be able to present this face of Christ insofar as he is the visible sign of the invisible Father as much as his humanity is his instrument (*organon*). The baptismal priesthood also makes the baptized a sacrament of Christ (*Christianus alter Christus*); however, he is not a sign of Christ as Head,

69 [1977]: 98–116); Guy Mansini, "On Affirming a Dominical Intention of a Male Priesthood," *Thomist* 61, no. 2 (1997): 301–16.

⁴⁶ Augustine, Letter 98, no. 9: "If the sacred rites [sacramenta] had no resemblance [similitudinem] to the things which they represent, they would not be sacred rites [sacramenta]" (*Patrologia Latina* [PL], 33:364; *Fathers of the Church Patristic Series*, vol. 18 [Letters, vol. 2] [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008], 83–130).

but as a member of the Church. Above all, it is a spiritual priesthood (1 Pet 2:5), fulfilled in the very *depths of the soul*, where sexual difference no longer plays a role.⁴⁷ The same cannot be said of the *visible, external* priesthood that is the hierarchical priesthood.⁴⁸

We can no longer be satisfied with arguments based on sexual difference implying inferiority, or on a social distribution of tasks that is not universal. Psychology itself is not enough. What is needed is a sexual symbolism more firmly rooted in anthropology. Advances in biology no longer support the presentation of male vital power as *active* and female vital power as *passive*. Both are active, and they are genetically equal, but they are different and complementary. The male vital power gives its seed from the outside in, while the female vital power conceives inside to deliver the fruit to the outside. The masculine image is therefore the most appropriate to signify the transcendent gift of God, hence the biblical figures of God the Father and Christ the Bridegroom. The feminine image is the most appropriate to signify the ecclesial reception of this gift, hence the biblical figure of the Church as Bride and Mother. This sexual symbolism is echoed in the difference between the two priesthoods. The hierarchical priesthood sacramentally signifies the transcendent gift of the Father through his Son in the Holy Spirit to his Church. The baptismal priesthood sacramentally signifies the immanent reception of the fruitful gift to develop its fruit within the Body of the Church and deliver it to the world.

The same God who established sexual difference has relied on it from Genesis to Revelation to reveal himself and build his Church in harmony between economies. The Church never ceases to meditate on this Word of Life, which grows and multiplies within her (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). She can therefore always progress in her understanding of the mysteries, but not to the point of dismissing the biblical facts themselves, which would turn Christianity into Gnosticism.

⁴⁷ *ST Supp.*, q. 39, a. 1 (on Peter Lombard, *Sentences* IV, d. 25 q. 2, a. 1. qc. 1), ad 1: "In matters pertaining to the soul, woman does not differ from man as to the thing."

⁴⁸ Council of Trent, session 23, Decree on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, chap. 4: "Since, therefore, in the New Testament the Catholic Church has received from the institution of the Lord the holy, visible sacrifice of the Eucharist, it must also be confessed that there is in this Church a new visible and external priesthood [can. 1], into which the old has been translated (He 7, 12)" (DH no. 1764); can. 1: "If anyone says that there is not in the New Testament a visible and external priesthood . . ." (DH no. 1771).

A New Ministry?

To conclude this study, which is both too brief and too long, let us reiterate that there is an essential difference between the diaconate and deaconesses which reproduces that of the two priesthoods. On the one hand, there is the hierarchical priesthood: the diaconate is a degree of the sacrament of Holy Orders, a sacrament of divine institution that confers an ordained and clerical ministry. And on the other, there is the baptismal priesthood: deaconesses received a sacramental of ecclesial institution, which today corresponds to an instituted, baptismal, and lay ministry. The two priesthoods are not destined to remain face to face, but to collaborate in the service of the one priesthood of Christ (*LG* §10).

It would seem absolutely impossible for the diaconate to be open to women, since the hierarchical priesthood to which it belongs is a sign and instrument of Christ the Head, inasmuch as he sacramentally presents the face of the Father. At the same time, it remains possible to create an instituted ministry of deaconesses, especially since this ministry has already existed, in order to better express all the richness of the baptismal priesthood and the full collaboration between the two priesthoods. It seems to us that Pope Francis reaches the same conclusion when he leaves the door open to reflection on the diaconal ministry of women⁴⁹ while affirming the impossibility for them to accede to the sacrament of Holy Orders.⁵⁰ This is not contradictory if he envisages the possibility of an instituted ministry.

A new ministry for *deaconesses* would be dogmatically possible, but would it be pastorally desirable? Although it is not for us to judge, we do not think it would be appropriate, at least for the time being. In the first place, without a very thorough catechesis, it would be difficult for such a ministry to be received for what it is without confusion with the order of deacons. The terms are confusing. For example, in the absence of a distinct adjective, the expression “diaconal ministry” applies to both deaconesses and the diaconate, even though these two realities are very

⁴⁹ Synod of Bishops, XVI Ordinary General Assembly, session 2 (October 2–27, 2024), “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,” *Final Document*, October 26, 2024, no. 60: “The question of women’s access to the diaconal ministry also remains open, and discernment on this subject must continue” (*Bollettino* B0832 [October 2024]). This *Final Document* was approved by Pope as “part of the ordinary magisterium of the successor of Peter” (*Note Accompanying the Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, October 24, 2024 [*Bollettino* B0934 (November 25, 2024)]).

⁵⁰ Pope Francis, interviewed by Norah O’Donnell on CBS, May 21, 2024.

different sacramentally. It would then be impossible to avoid this ministry from being presented as a female diaconate, the first victory in the claim for a female hierarchical priesthood. And in the second place, the Pope has already opened the acolytate and the lectorate to women. Have these ministries really been received? We still need to make a peaceful assessment of them before considering the need to create an additional ministry, which may be hard to distinguish from the existing ones. And how can we justify a baptismal ministry from which men would be excluded? N.V