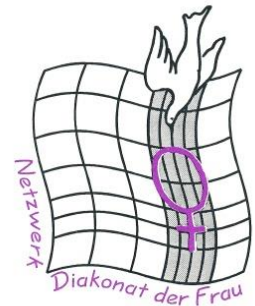


“Women’s Diaconate Network” – What We Stand For



Jesus’ mandate to his disciples, men and women, is : “... ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations’ (Mt 28:19-20)... In our day Jesus’ command to “go and make disciples” echoes in the changing scenarios and ever new challenges to the Church’s mission of evangelization... Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel” (Evangeliium gaudium 19 and 20).

“The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice” (EG 24).

Pope Francis stressed this mandate of Jesus unequivocally several times. This message speaks particularly to those faithful women in the Catholic Church who perform the overwhelming share in the diakonia and charity work, “*who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice*” (EG 24). Without these committed women, the diaconal and evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church, also in the particular case of Germany, would be almost extinguished and non-existent. Diaconal work today takes place mostly in the personal contact with women and men, couples and families, children, young people and elderly people, refugee families and migrants, the sick and the disabled.

The development of this evangelizing and serving mission of the Church makes it imperiously necessary to admit women to the ordained diaconate, for this mission of Jesus Christ is animated, practically carried out, coordinated and led by women, to a great extent – of over 80% - in the communities, parishes, pastoral units and diocese.

In the past, this commitment of the women and their admittance to the diaconate has faced multiple resistance:

1. The medieval and Tridentine concept of ministry appears in the current situation, particularly that of the women, to be “an obsession with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed.” (cf. EG 35)

Contrary to the Patristic Church, the medieval and modern Church defined the ecclesial ministry using the power of Eucharistic consecration as a starting point: the priest has the power of consecration over the Eucharistic body of Christ (*corpus Christi verum*). It is for this reason that he also has the power of governance over the mystical body of Christ. Deacons, subdeacons and lower orders help him in the “*confectio sacramenti*”, (effectation of sacraments) therefore they can be assigned graduated leading functions within the *corpus Christi mysticum*.

2. One denied the historical existence of any female ordained deacons in many oriental Churches, as well as in the Latin Church. Several oriental Churches – as well as Churches of the Reformation – have meanwhile restored this ecclesial tradition, or plan to do so in the future. They use the old ordination rites and redefine the pastoral structure of the diaconate. In the Catholic Church this ecclesial tradition still lives among the Carthusian nuns and among some Uniate Oriental Churches (e.g. the Chaldean Church).
3. One argued that the unity of the sacramental *Ordo* would make the ordination of women impossible, because women – according to the “*Inter insigniores*” of Paul VI – may not become bishops or priests. Such a conclusion is relevant for the diaconate only within the framework of the medieval/Tridentine concept of ministry. The theological differentiation made by “*Omnium in mentem*” from December 15, 2009 between the presbyterate and the diaconate is incompatible with this concept of ministry.¹
4. Both in “*Inter insigniores*” and based upon it, one argued that the theological tradition did not exclude the woman from receiving the sacramental ordination merely on socio-cultural grounds, but also on formal theological grounds. Examining the texts we see the following: Thomas Aquinas excludes the woman from sacramental ordination for the fundamental reason that she finds herself inherently in a “*status subiectionis*”² to the man.

1 [▣] Given that deacons in the Catholic Church—from the Patristic Church until today—have always exercised a limited function of leadership, the theological characteristic that they exercise their function “*in persona Christi servitoris*” (cf. LG) and not “*in persona Christi capitis*” represents a formula which denotes the deacon’s specific leadership function in canon law, as opposed to that of the presbyter. The mere statement that whoever may be ordained to the diaconate may also be ordained to the presbyterate, is not a motivation but an expression of the legislator’s positive will. Cf. Vgl. Bernhard Sven Anuth, *Frauendiakonot in der katholischen Kirche. Aktueller Stand und Perspektiven in kanonischer Sicht*, in: Thomas Schüller, Martin Zumbült (Ed.), *Justitia est constans et perpetua voluntas ius suum cuique tribuendi*, FS für Klaus Lüdicke zum 70. Geburtstag, Essen 2014, 37-85.

2 [▣] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *STh suppl.q.XXXIX, a.1 c.*

Bonaventure argues that the man “is the image of God based on his gender, as stated in 1Cor.11,7³: therefore a woman may by no means be ordained.”⁴ In “Mulieris dignitatem” Pope John Paul II explicitly describes the subordination of the woman to the man, spoken of in Gen. 3. 16 “as a consequence of sin”.⁵

5. The German bishops deplore the lack of preliminary work on a “convincing job description that would really also need a sacramental ordination.”⁶ This proves that they have not perceived what was already done, for example, by the Catholic women’s associations in Germany in matters of experience-based theological formation related to the services, charisms and vocations of the women in the current situation of the Church and of society. Cardinal Stella asked for the collaboration of the bishops in the theological clarification of the ecclesial identity of the diaconate - which is still not sufficiently developed - by means of their job descriptions for deacons. ⁷

A response to this resistance:

Together with the Catholic women’s associations and with the Central Committee of German Catholics, the “Women’s Diaconate Network” has assumed a special task: this network connects together women and men who would like to help straighten the women’s path towards the sacramental ministry of female deacon. Their motivation comes from the wish for “serving Church”. Several women have, over the past few years, used all the possibilities allowed by canon law in order to discern their personal vocation to the diaconate and to acquire the relevant knowledge and practical experience. The “Women’s Diaconate Network” supported them both materially and conceptually with adequate resources.

Through their vocation and their witness of life and faith, these women give a wonderful example of how the women’s diaconate could be shaped in the future.

3 ³ In the Vulgata, 1 Cor. 11, 7-9, reads:” Vir quidem non debet velare caput quoniam imago et gloria est Deimulier autem gloria viri est non enim vir ex muliere est sed mulier ex viro etenim non est creatus vir propter mulierem sed mulier propter virum“

4 ⁴ Cf. Bonaventure In IV Sent. Dist.25, a.2, q.1.With almost identical words, the argument is made by Richard of Middleton ,Durandus, Scotus and Peter Lombard

5 ⁵ Cf. DH 4831

6 ⁶ This was stated by Cardinal Lehmann, himself open to the idea of the diaconate for women in an interview from February 20th , 2013.

7 ⁷ Cf. Cardinal Stella , The permanent Deacon: Identity, formation and mission, in. *Diaconia Christi*, 53(2018) 137-144.

The pastoral situation in Germany is precarious. A comprehensive ministerial and diaconal assistance to the faithful is more and more necessary. Without the involvement of women who would have a share in the ecclesial ministry through the sacrament of the diaconate, this pastoral task is simply impossible to perform.

All of us dream, together with Pope Francis *“of a missionary option, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation”* (EG 27).

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