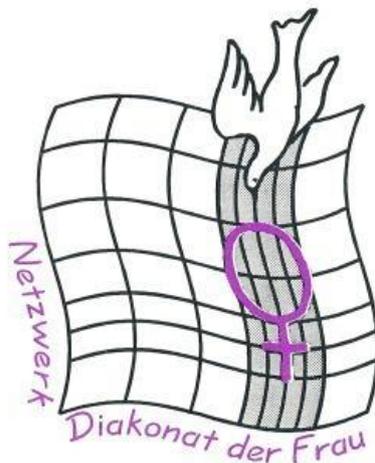


# Sacramental diaconate of women

Contribution to the global church dialogue  
in the context of the Synod of Bishops  
2021-2024

Presented by  
Network Diaconate of Women



# Sacramental diaconate of women

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Imprint

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# The diaconate of women - a topic of global synodal processes

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Margit Eckholt

*The diaconate of women is a central topic in the various local church synodal processes and at the World Synod convened by Pope Francis, which met in Rome in October 2023 as a first step and will meet again in October 2024. It is clear from the debates that a fundamental clarification of the ministerial theological anchoring of the diaconate of women is needed - and this is a special task in the intercultural exchange between the two sessions of the World Synod.*

For the first time, 56 women - women religious, catechists, theologians, canon law students, women in leadership positions in their dioceses or associations - took part in the first consultation of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023 and many of them have clearly positioned themselves in favour of further gender justice in the Church. In the continental preparatory processes, it has become clear that the call for a fraternal church, for further participation for the laity and the denunciation of clericalism and machismo are central requests in all local churches. The question of a diaconate for women has been raised from various regions of the world and - albeit only very briefly - taken up in the synod's preparatory document, the "Instrumentum laboris" (2023). Point 2.3 of the worksheets states: "The continental assemblies of the Middle East, Latin America, Oceania and Europe, as well as the syntheses of numerous bishops' conferences, call for a rethink of the question of women's access to the diaconate. Is it possible to provide for this, and in which form?"<sup>1</sup> The diaconate for women was a topic at the Synod itself, as various Synod participants reported, and in the final document, the "Synthesis Report" entitled "A Synodal Church in Mission", reference is made to the diaconate for women in several places: above all in the context of the fundamental renewal of the Church in the sense of a diaconal Church alongside those in need and the importance of a renewed diaconate in this context.<sup>2</sup> It speaks very clearly of a fraternal church and the equal dignity of men and women based on baptism, which means "co-responsibility at every level of the life of the church"<sup>3</sup>. "Different positions," according to the sub-chapter on 'Women in the Life and Mission of the Church', "have been expressed with regard to women's access to the diaconal ministry. For some, such a step is unacceptable because it means a discontinuity with tradition. For others, however, opening up access to the diaconate to women would restore the practice of the early Church.

Others are still considering whether this is an appropriate and necessary response to the signs of the times, according to tradition, and a response that could find an echo in the hearts of many who seek new energy and vitality in the Church." "Reflection on the theology of the diaconate" is important<sup>4</sup>, and "theological and pastoral research on women's access to the diaconate should be continued", with particular reference to the results of the commission on the diaconate for women set up by the Pope and to the theological, historical and exegetical studies that have been undertaken so far. The "results of this research should be presented to the next session of the Synod Assembly".<sup>5</sup> On 14 March 2024, Pope Francis decided to move the topic to a separate working group.

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<sup>1</sup> XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BISHOPS' SYNOD, Instrumentum laboris for the first session (October 2023). Synod 2021-2024 Communion, Participation, Mission, No. 2.3, p. 50, in:

[https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/presse\\_2023/2023-Instrumentum-laboris-TED.pdf](https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2023/2023-Instrumentum-laboris-TED.pdf) (16 March 2024). These considerations are further developed in an article for the journal "Diakonia", which will be published in 2024.

<sup>2</sup> XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. First session (4-29 October 2023). Synthesis report. Towards a Synodal Church in Mission, in: <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/german/2023.10.28-DEU-Synthesis-Report.pdf> (16 March 2024): Part 1 Chapter 4.4 "The poor, protagonists on the journey of the Church" refers to the diaconate: "As part of the reorientation of diaconal ministry, a more decisive focus on service to the poor should be promoted."

<sup>3</sup> In Part 2, Chapter 9 on "Women in the Life and Mission of the Church" it says under point b): "In Christ, women and men are clothed with the same baptismal dignity and receive equally the diversity of the gifts of the Spirit (cf. Gal 3:28). Men and women are called to a community characterised by a non-competitive co-responsibility that is to be realised at all levels of church life. As Pope Francis told us, together we are "a people having a vocation and called by the power of the Beatitudes".

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Synthesis Report, Part 2, Chapter 9, k. The theology of the diaconate stands in the context of fundamentally new theological reflections on ministry, against clericalism and machismo.

<sup>5</sup> Synthesis Report, Part 2, Chapter 9, n.

The question of women in the diaconal ministry is not a question of the churches of the North, but also arises in the contexts of the South. There are regions of the world where the diaconate for women - as in Amazonia - is an existential issue for the survival of communities where access is often difficult, and other regions - such as German-speaking countries - where the diaconate for women has become a central theme of the work of women's organisations and the accompanying theological work since the late 1990s. It is precisely in this context that the "Diaconate of Women Network" was created. Following the Amazon Synod, Pope Francis published the post-synodal exhortation "Querida Amazonia" (2020); although the Pope recognises the missionary and pastoral activities of women in the Amazon region, he marks a clear boundary to the sacramental ministry by referring to the impossibility of women being able to "represent" Jesus Christ, and he does not talk about the diaconate of women - even though it was an important topic at the Synod.<sup>6</sup> Synodal processes are underway in various regions of the world in these years; in Ireland and Australia, the question of ministries for women is an issue, and in Germany, five synodal assemblies were held between January 2020 and March 2023 as part of the Synodal Pathway. In Forum 3 "Women in the ministries and offices of the church", a basic text with biblical-historical, systematic-theological and pastoral perspectives on the protagonism of women in the church was developed, and the vote on women in sacramental ministries and the diaconate for women based on the action text was adopted by the Synodal Assembly - also with a 2/3 majority of the bishops.<sup>7</sup> The task over the next few years will be to deepen these perspectives in theological-scientific work and to introduce them into the synodal process of the world church. The vote refers to the "Osnabrück Theses" (December 2017), which make it clear that it is not the admission of women to the ministry that has to be justified, but their exclusion, and that the ministerial structure must be changed in such a way that women are included on an equal footing and that the church can fulfil itself anew as a diaconal church, alongside the poor and those in need.<sup>8</sup>

The debates on the diaconate for women on the Synodal Path and also in the World Synod make it clear that a fundamental clarification of the theological anchoring of the diaconate for women is required. Is the diaconate for women associated with an ordination, as liturgical forms from the 1st millennium show, or only with a "blessing"?<sup>9</sup> If so, the diaconate for women would be understood as a mere diaconal appointment for service in the church. However, does this correspond to the equal rights of men and women, as emphasised by the Second Vatican Council (e.g. in GS 29), and does this correspond to the real diaconal presence of highly qualified and professionally trained women who already take on diaconal leadership tasks in the many places where need cries out to heaven? The access of people of all genders to the sacramental ministry corresponds to the perspective of gender justice presented in the pastoral constitution "Gaudium et Spes". With regard to the diaconate for women, it is important to develop independent theological arguments that do not (only) concern the ordination of women to the priesthood, analogous to the formation of the permanent diaconate in the course of the renewal of the theology of ministries at the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation QUERIDA AMAZONIA, 2020, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20200202\\_querida-amazonia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html) (16.3.2024; abbreviated: QA): Pope Francis explicitly takes a stand against the sacramental ordination of women, which is justified by an essentialist gender typology and a "theology of women" corresponding to the "genius" of women: "Jesus Christ shows himself as the Bridegroom of the community celebrating the Eucharist in the form of a man who presides over it as the sign of the one Priest." (QA 101)

<sup>7</sup> On the Synodal Way, see Margit Eckholt, Entering the global dialogue on synodality. The Synodal Way of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany in the context of the global synodal process, in: *Anzeiger für die Seelsorge. Zeitschrift für Pastoral und Gemeindepraxis* 132 (2023) 20-23; dies., "Den Reichtum der gegensätzlichen Spannungen aufnehmen". The synodal path as a spiritual process, in: *ok ordenskorrespondenz. Zeitschrift für Fragen des Ordenslebens* 64 (2023) 398-410; dies., Zwischen Ermüchterung und Hoffnung. The Synodal Path of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany, in: *ET Studies* 2/2023, 317-327

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the Osnabrück Theses, in: Margit Eckholt et al. (eds.), *Frauen in kirchlichen Ämtern. Reform Movements in Ecumenism*, Freiburg/Göttingen 2018, 465-476, 476: "We will continue to make theological contributions to the necessary differentiation between the opening of the diaconate and other ministries for women within the one (sacramental) ordo. The diaconate as a ministry for men and women reinforces the basic diaconal orientation of the Church."

<sup>9</sup> In his lecture on the study day "The cooperation of women and men in the service and life of the church" at the spring plenary assembly of the DBK on 20 February 2013 in Trier, Cardinal Walter Kasper speaks of a "blessing" with regard to the office of deacon, see: [http://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse\\_downloads/presse\\_2012/2013-035-Studentag-FVV-Trier\\_Vortrag-K-Kasper.pdf](http://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2012/2013-035-Studentag-FVV-Trier_Vortrag-K-Kasper.pdf) (16.4.2023)

Second Vatican Council.<sup>10</sup> The question of the diaconate for women must be discussed in connection with a reflection on the theological and pastoral significance of the (permanent) diaconate in the context of a diaconal church.

When Pope Francis takes a position against the establishment of a sacramental ministry for women, he cites a "reductionism", as if women "would only be granted a status in the Church and greater participation if they were admitted to holy orders" (QA 100). He speaks of reducing the understanding of the Church to a "functional structure" (QA 100); "such a view would in reality be a limitation of perspectives: it would direct us towards a clericalisation of women and diminish the great value of what they have already given as well as subtly lead to an impoverishment of their indispensable contribution" (QA 100). This is why - according to the letter following the Amazon Synod - he is concerned with the "emergence of other specifically female ministries and charisms" that "respond to the particular needs of the Amazonian peoples at this moment in history" (QA 102). However, the establishment of an independent diaconate for women without ordination cannot be a way out of such a "clericalisation" of women - which is of course neither desired nor intended - nor of the unresolved theological debates about a sacramental ministry for women.

In his letter "Omnium in mentem" (26 October 2009), Pope Benedict XVI paved the way for further reflection on the representation of Christ in the diaconal ministry. The deacon is ordained "ad ministerium" (cf. LG 29), he represents Jesus Christ as "diakonos", not Jesus Christ as "caput", as head.<sup>11</sup> Of course, these two forms of sacramental representation belong together; no hierarchisation can be introduced here, as this would devalue the sacramental significance of the diaconal ministry. But the differentiation of the perspectives of sacramentality enables reflection on the independent character of the diaconate and contributes to further defining the church as a "diaconal church". It is precisely in this context that it will be important to develop the quality of a sacramentally understood diaconate for women from the concrete diaconal practice of women and in the service of the diaconal church. This fundamental clarification of the ministerial theological anchoring of the diaconate of women is a special task in the intercultural exchange between the two sessions of the World Synod.

16.3.2024

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. on this: Margit Eckholt, *Ohne die Frauen ist keine Kirche zu machen. The Awakening of the Council and the Signs of the Times*, Ostfildern 2012, e.g. 62-65.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation in the form of a "Motu Proprio" *Omnium in Mentem*, with which some norms of the Code of Canon Law are amended, in: [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/de/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_apl\\_20091026\\_codex-iuris-canonici.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/de/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20091026_codex-iuris-canonici.html) (16 March 2024) Cf. on this: Sabine Demel, *Frauenendiakonat als Endstation - Weiterdenken verboten?* in: *Theologie und Glaube* 102 (2012) 275-286. In this context, it should also be discussed whether Christ is not already represented as the "head" when baptism is administered - a ministry that is also possible for laypeople. In this respect, the debates about "Omnium in Mentem" and the diaconate remain open.

# Network Diaconate of Women - Genesis, goals and tasks

Irmentraud Kobusch and Dr Jutta Mader-Schömer

The demand for the ordination of women as deacons plays an important part in the discussion about the fair participation of women in the mission and ministries of the church. The Network for the Diaconate of Women<sup>12</sup> has been advocating this for more than 25 years - with conviction and unwaveringly, even though it has often been criticised and ignored for years. It is supported by its members, above all by the two women's organisations KDFB (Katholischer Deutscher Frauenbund) and kfd (Katholische Frauengemeinschaft Deutschlands) at all levels, but also increasingly by diocesan and Catholic councils and the ZdK (Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken). In this way, we are all jointly setting an example for the participation of women in church ministry **and** for a different face of the church.

For the network, this is by no means an expression of a hidden strategy to achieve the priesthood that may actually be desired for women. We are carried and moved by the conviction of the great importance of the office of the permanent diaconate as an independent office within the ordo, with its own profile and with a specific vocation.

## 1. A demand with a long history

The call for the diaconate of women has a long history. As early as at the beginning of the 20th century, there were voices that made the diaconate of women an issue in the context of the emerging reflection on the position of women in the church. Cardinal Faulhaber, who later became Cardinal of Munich, expressed his views on this in 1912. In the 1930s, Edith Stein also complained about deterioration compared to the early days of the church, when women had official functions as ordained deaconesses. These are just a few examples.

The efforts that emerged in the 1950s to (re)introduce the permanent diaconate as an independent ministry of the church - after it had withered away for centuries to become a transitional stage for men on the way to the priesthood - also explicitly enquired about the diaconate for women. In Germany, women were involved in the efforts to revitalise and raise the profile of the early church diaconate office. However, in order not to put more strain on the efforts to establish the permanent diaconate for married men, the question of women was not pursued further. The women renounced. This was later expressly regretted by some pioneers of the German diaconate movement. This was a wrong decision, they said, and they should have insisted on the admission of both sexes.

With the dogmatic constitution "Lumen gentium" (LG 29), the permanent diaconate was reintroduced by the Second Vatican Council in 1964. Unfortunately only for men. Isolated voices of Council fathers, e.g. Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan of Atlanta (USA), in favour of the inclusion of women in the ordo of the diaconate, were not taken into account.

This means that the establishment of the diaconate remains unfinished and incomplete to this day.

This was recognised immediately after the Council. A broad discussion started, not only in German-speaking and Western European countries, but also in Canada and the USA. In 1974, the "Würzburg Synod" (joint synod of the dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany), after extensive discussion and after obtaining several expert opinions, addressed the following vote to the Pope: "...to examine the question of the diaconate of women in accordance with current theological knowledge and, in view of the current pastoral situation, possibly to admit women to the diaconate."

This vote has not yet been answered. Today, it is more relevant than ever.

The demand for the diaconate of women was upheld. Between 1990 and 1995, working groups on the diaconate of women were set up in many dioceses, often in cooperation with women's organisations. This

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<sup>12</sup> <https://diakon.at.de/>

work was also continued after John Paul II's apostolic letter "ordinatio sacerdotalis" (1994), which established the impossibility of ordaining women to the priesthood with high magisterial authority - even if this is still controversial today.

An intensive theological discussion developed around the understanding and profiling of the diaconate and the diaconate of women.<sup>13</sup> The Diaconate of Women network played a major part in these developments. It was founded in 1997 following an international congress on the diaconate of women, with the aim of networking and advocating the topic.

## 2. A profiled demand

In our view, the network's tireless advocacy for the introduction of the sacramental permanent diaconate for women combines perspectives that are decisive for the future of the Church, especially in view of the incomprehensible extent of abuse cases.

The focus on the further development of the church as a place of diaconal action was already laid down in the statutes. The aim of the network is: "...a renewal of the church in the sense of a serving, diaconal church, where women and men live the service of Jesus Christ together and on an equal footing and initiate, accompany and organise diaconia locally."

For the network, it is essential to justify and link the demand for the diaconate of women with the demand for a diaconal church.

The three basic acts of the Church - Martyria / witnessing the Word, Diakonia / service to others and Liturgia / service to God - together express and fulfil the essence of the Church. Through them, Jesus Christ becomes visible in the actions of the Church, his preaching, his life and his action for the salvation of mankind. Jesus Christ served people. He confirmed this: I have come not to be served but to serve (Mk 10:45 / Mt 20:28). This is how he lived in his devotion to the poor and the little ones, in his devotion to those in need in every respect. He heard their cry, saw their need and changed their situation by helping and healing them. He sent his disciples to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick. (Luke 9:2).

Living Diakonia in the footsteps of Jesus is therefore a profound and fundamental mission and mandate of the Church: proclaiming the good news in the spoken word and in healing deeds. Pope Benedict XVI formulated this in a magnificent way in his first encyclical "Deus Caritas est" in 2005: *"Practising charity for widows and orphans, for prisoners, for the sick and needy of whatever kind is just as much a part of the nature of the Church as the ministry of the sacraments and the proclamation of the Gospel. The Church can no more omit the ministry of love than it can sacrament and word."* (22) *"...For the Church, the service of charity is not a kind of welfare activity that could be left to others, but is part of its nature, an indispensable expression of its very essence".* (25). In future, the Church will have to live this dimension much more clearly than before. The experiences of the corona pandemic have shown this once again in a very different and urgent way. It is not enough to delegate care for the poor to institutions (Caritas, social centres, Catholic Women's Social Service, etc.), as indispensable as these are. It belongs at the centre of the activities of the Church.

The office of the diaconate reflects this succession of the serving Christ in the ministerial structure of the church. The diaconate is the leadership service for diaconia. This understanding of the office of the diaconate is now widely accepted.<sup>14</sup> Those who fulfil this office are responsible for ensuring that diakonia can be seen and experienced in all places of the church: The eye and ear of the church for the poor, fraternal

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<sup>13</sup> Here are some examples of theological development from the wealth of literature: HÜNERMANN, PETER et al: Diaconate. An office for women in the church - an office suitable for women? Ostfildern 1997; REININGER, DOROTHEA: Diakoniat der Frau in der einen Kirche, Ostfildern 1999; KUBERA, URSULA / PATT, STEFANIE (eds.): Brannte nicht unser Herz. The first diaconate circle for women: Experiences and Visions, 2nd ed. Ostfildern 2004; WINKLER, DIETMAR W. (ed.): Diakoniat der Frau. Findings from a biblical, Eastern Church, liturgical and systemic theological perspective, Vienna 2010.

<sup>14</sup> See more recently: KIESSLING, KLAUS / WODTKE-WERNER, VERENA (eds.): Das Gesicht der Kirche im Alltag der Menschen? The place of the diaconal ministry in a diaconal church, Ostfildern 2023.

solidarity with all people, a widened sight for the need and deficiencies in the remotest spots of the community, building bridges and going to the margins, as Pope Francis has called for. The office of the diaconate carries concern for people into the centre, into the heart of the Church. It interprets their need in preaching and gives them a voice in the liturgy.

Through the office of the diaconate, it is the church itself that goes and sees people, turns towards them for help and heal them and takes their needs into the preaching and liturgy of the congregation.

All tasks of the diaconate serve this one, central task. A study by the International Diaconate Centre makes it clear that the majority of deacons see it this way and thus unnerve a traditional understanding of ministry. Many do not see themselves in isolation, at the altar, primarily in liturgical ministry. Instead, they see themselves among the people, for the people and with the people, especially the marginalised, the poor.

However, it is precisely this understanding of the office of the diaconate that cannot be credibly realised without women as deacons. To summarise: without women as deacons, the diaconate as a ministry of the church only breathes with one lung, so to speak. Many deacons now recognise this.

### **3. A demand which has become concrete**

In many places, women are already acting like deacons. People experience them as women acting in a diaconal way, following Jesus Christ. And women feel the vocation to the office of deaconess.

With the training courses for which it is responsible, the network gives these women the opportunity and a spiritual place to explore their vocation as a deaconess, to clarify it, to live it and to acquire the skills that a deaconess of the future needs. The "Network Diaconate of Women" has so far qualified women for *leadership roles in a diaconal church* in three diaconate circles (1999-2002; 2003-2006 and 2020-2024). The network chose the title *Leadership Services in a Diaconal Church* after a Vatican notification in 2001, which declared that courses to prepare women for the diaconate were not permitted in the Catholic Church. 23 women have completed the two previous diaconate circles. The recently completed 3rd training course has given 13 women the opportunity to follow a spiritual vocation path and to learn to live with the tension and pain that the ordination of deaconesses still does not exist. And it is completely open as to when it will happen. In the further training programme, they acquire skills and knowledge that enable them to take on diaconal leadership roles in different places of the church.

In doing so, the network is once again making a constructive, creative and very personal statement in favour of the sacramental diaconate of women. It contributes to the development and profiling of a sustainable form of the diaconate of women, which is repeatedly called for from many sides.

### **4. A demand with potential for realisation - now**

The time is favourable. The time is ripe. The arguments are on the table:

Many researchers agree that the church can continue the tradition of a "women's ministry" that existed during the first millennium.<sup>15</sup> They are convinced that the latest research and preserved ordination forms prove the sacramentality of this office. The much-discussed question of the unity of the *ordo* is defined by renowned researchers together with the Second Vatican Council as a unity in the diversity of ministries and thus no longer hierarchical. Following an amendment to canon law in 2009, this diversity in the unity of the ministry is to be understood in the sense of a qualitatively differentiated representation of Christ. The deacon/deaconess is ordained to "ministry", not to the "priesthood". If the presbyterate and diaconate are qualitatively different, then it is theologically unconvincing to apply the ban on the ordination of women to the priesthood to the diaconate. Proposals for ways to immediately introduce the diaconate for women that

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<sup>15</sup> REININGER, DOROTHEA: *The Diaconate of Women in the One Church. Discussions, decisions and pastoral-practical experiences in Christian ecumenism and their contribution to the Roman Catholic discussion.* With a foreword by Bishop Karl Lehmann. Ostfildern, 1999.

are feasible under canon law - e.g. by way of an indult - have been around for years.<sup>16</sup> And also the indication that the demand for the opening of the diaconate is about service, not the clerical exercise of power: "The "insistent presence" of women is also necessary in service, certainly in service to other women, but in service to the poor and neglected of society, for whom the "church" is only a place to turn to in fear."<sup>17</sup>

We can see from this quote, in numerous conferences and gatherings, e.g. the "God's Strong Daughters" conference in Leipzig in September 2023 (and virtually worldwide), that the demand for the ordination of women as deacons is being raised in many regions of the global church.<sup>18</sup> This is demonstrated by the initiative of women religious superiors and the Amazon Synod. In her contribution (pp. 2-6), Dr Eckholt referred very clearly to the vote of the Synodal Path 2023 in Germany and the demands raised from various places in the global Church.

## **5. A demand with reform potential for the entire church**

The speedy introduction of the sacramental diaconate for women would be a tremendously important signal. Since its introduction, the office of the diaconate has been an ordained ministry in development - an office that develops in very different ways throughout the world church, that adapts in its form to the respective local church and pastoral situation, that inculturates itself into the respective cultural situation at different speeds. The sacramental diaconate of women could be organised in a similar way.

With women and men working together and in partnership in the sacramental office of the diaconate, a model for a new face of the church can be developed in a timely manner and in agreement with the world church and ecumenical organisations:

- for a credible diaconal church
- for a church that finally begins to realise and live the equal coexistence of women and men
- for a church that finally refrains from wanting to create special ministries for women
- for a church that faces up to the historical development, conditionality, changeability and mutability of its ministries and sees this as an opportunity
- for a church that inculturates its ministries into the respective social and cultural context of the world church and accepts pastoral challenges
- for a church that frees its understanding of ministry from the narrow focus on the priestly ministry and the Eucharistic authority associated with it
- for a church that turns away from the abuse of power and sacralisation of the ministry, that goes to the margins and lives the gospel of the serving Christ.

For the "Network Diaconate of Women", the commitment to the ordination of women to the diaconate is a passionate commitment to the credible diaconal future of the Church and to a ministerial structure that wants to be nothing else than a sign and instrument of God's love for people.

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<sup>16</sup> cf. ANUTH, BERNHARD SVEN: Possibilities and consequences of a sacramental diaconate for women. Canonistic perspectives, in: ANUTH, BERNHARD SVEN / DENNEMARCK, BERND / IHLLI, STEFAN (eds.): Von Barmherzigkeit und Recht will ich singen, pp. 41-70, Regensburg, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> [Women religious, deaconesses Questions and answers: Why would the ministry of women religious/deacons be beneficial? | Global Sisters report \(globalsistersreport.org\)](#), retrieved 01.05.2024. Translated by google

<sup>18</sup> Cf. KIESSLING, KLAUS / WODTKE-WERNER, VERENA: The face of the church in people's everyday lives? The place of the diaconal ministry in a diaconal church. Ostfildern, 2023, where distinguished advocates for a distinctive diaconate to promote diaconal church development, also from the world church, have their say.



ST. MARIENHAUS



FRANZISKANERINNEN  
BMVA

## Appeal to the members of the World Synod for the diaconate for women

Dear Synod Members,

At the Assembly of Superiors General of the UISG (Unione Internazionale delle Superiore Generali = International Union of Superiors General) in Rome in 2016, we Superiors General asked Pope Francis in an audience to allow women access to the ordination of deaconesses.

This request was presented to the Holy Father again at the 2019 UISG meeting.

Convinced of the vocation of women to the diaconal ministry, I gladly responded to the request of the *Diaconate of Women Network* to organise a third course of study at our motherhouse in Waldbreitbach and informed our diocesan bishop in Trier of this in a letter.

In September 2020, we welcomed 16 participants from 10 German dioceses to Waldbreitbach.

They are women who feel called by God to the diaconate and want to follow their longing to serve Christ in their neighbour.

They are involved in the church, in their parishes, in diaconal organisations, in their families and in a wide variety of professional fields with dedication and responsibility. People confide in them in the most diverse, often existential situations of life and, thanks to a relationship based on trust, wish to receive the anointing of the sick, baptism or the sacrament of marriage.

As Franciscan Sisters, we stand by these women and take their desire for sacramental ordination as deaconesses very seriously, as well as the hurt they often experience when their vocation is rejected.

I have the greatest respect for the commitment and perseverance of these 'mulieres probatae', in whom God's spirit has taken up residence since their baptism. It is He who guides them and keeps the longing for this ministry alive in them.

Although sacramental ordination as a deaconess is still not permitted in our church today, these women persevere and face up to the demanding requirements of the three-year degree programme.

God has poured out his Holy Spirit on everyone and given them his gifts, his charisms, for the good of all.

Dear Synod members, I ask you from the bottom of my heart to honour the Lord's call to these women, not to extinguish the spirit and to finally decide on the path to the ordination of deaconesses.

United in prayer

*Sr Edith-Maria Magar* OSF

Superior General of the Franciscan Sisters of Waldbreitbach

## Experiences and voices of graduates

The third training course "Diaconal Leadership Services for Women" ended on 13 April with a closing celebration in the motherhouse church of the Waldbreitbach Franciscan Sisters. The Eucharistic celebration was presided over by Auxiliary Bishop Ludger Schepers (Essen). All graduates were involved in the preparation and organisation of the service and the ceremony.



AB Schepers

13 graduates

Team and course organisers

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*The scope of the training programme and the requirements almost put me off. I thought about it for a long time. Diaconal work had always been very important in my family, social and church commitments were a matter of course. When it came to deciding what to study, I might have chosen theology - to become a priest. So I became a doctor - by no means an embarrassing decision. The training course for diaconate was an opportunity for me to concern myself with my vocation. Where is my place in life? Where is my place to preach the Gospel? Where does God become visible to me and others? These three years have helped to revitalise my faith. I go through life with an alert eye and see which of my talents are needed and where. Nobody personally has a right to be ordained, but the parishes also have a right to ordained women.*

Dr Gabriele Komesker, child and adolescent psychiatrist

*I was in the teaching profession for 25 years and taught Catholic religion. But I felt this dissatisfaction inside me. I had the feeling that I wasn't in the right place. It was important for me to take part in the network's training programme. There is this calling, this fire from within. There is this voice that says: get up, keep going! This resistance within the church has nothing to do with faith. My perseverance does. That's why I'm an optimist.*

Claudia Köring, former secondary school teacher

*The voice of women is missing in our church. After all, we are the ones who often work full-time and on a voluntary basis in diaconal fields of work. It would be so important for us women to be able to live out our vocation. The decision to take part in the training programme for diaconal leadership services has grown in me over the years. Many coincidences have come about. I felt that God was leading me and that this was my calling. After the further training, I continue to try to live what is possible for me. I have been leading various projects in my parish for a long time. The course is a great enrichment for my work in the parish. I am passionate about caring for people, especially the disadvantaged, the sick and the poor. This concern must be brought back into the centre of the church. And if there is ever an ordination as a deacon, then I say yes.*

Dr Stefanie Heller, medical doctor

*The Roman Catholic Church lacks centuries of female co-responsibility and co-organisation of how the Church appears in the world. Throughout the centuries, as now, there have been and still are enthusiastic, gifted, called and suitable women. Vocation is not a question of gender.*

*It is incomprehensible to me that the church preaches about God but disregards his callings.*

*It is offensive beyond all measure that women and their vocations are still systematically ignored.*

*This is an abuse of power and contemptuous of people - because it is contemptuous of women.*

*The Church can only convincingly stand up for the world, for human dignity and human rights - and this commitment is urgently needed - if, among other things, it admits women to all ministries.*

*On a more personal note: As a teenager, it crystallised for me that I wanted to follow the one who has "words of eternal life" (John 6:68). I found it a discrepancy that the Basic Law guarantees women equal dignity, but the Catholic Church systematically denies this to women under canon law.*

*When I found out about the Diaconate of Women network, I left a message for them to let me know when a new course was starting.*

*I only told a few people about my participation in the course. Their feedback was encouraging. Their tenor was clear: there are two options: leave or work on change. They thought it was good that I wanted to work on change. I was particularly impressed by what they didn't say. None of them were surprised that I intended to go down this path. They confirmed that my commitment to the church, to people and the associated testimony of faith suited me.*

*I was encouraged by the further training in diaconal leadership, the theological and human commitment in the Synodal Path and the publications of women's personal vocation stories (note: Philippa Rath "Weil Gott es so will").*

*It confirmed that I am one of many and that my vocation is quite normal.*

*I hope that everyone's vocations will finally be recognised and valued.*

Beate Wittenbrink, Diploma in Social Work and Alternative Practitioner for Psychotherapy

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*One day, by a huge coincidence, I ended up in a church where a deacon ordination was taking place. I was completely thrilled and experienced an aha effect: this is what I want to do. I had accompanied communion children for many years as a catechist. The idea took root, the desire to do diaconal work. Even though, of course, I heard: 'Forget it, you're a woman'. While researching, I came across the Diaconate of Women network. It was right up my street, even if I first had to see how I could reconcile it with my job and four children, given the requirements, especially the theology degree. I felt supported and carried on the course. I don't give up, also because so many people fight with me. I often think to myself: what good things could I have done if the diaconate was also my profession?*

Petra Kurzawski, IT system administrator

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## **Last but not least: Diaconal church? Ordain women as deacons!**

Prof. em. Dr Dr h.c. mult. Peter Hünemann

Catholic women experience a church that does not give them the opportunity to fulfil their vocation, because vocation is only permitted in preformed forms that have not grown out of the needs of contemporary society, but belong to earlier times. How can they help people who are desperately searching for their own identity or who find themselves in existential fear, personal distress and social marginalisation, servitude and alienation?

**How can the Church be today's Church, "a sign and instrument of the most intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (LG 1), which does not allow its members, if they are women, to respond to the present need and take responsibility for it?**