

Image: [Pope St. Gelasius I](#) (r. 492-496 A.D.), who dealt with the abuse of women serving in the sanctuary during his pontificate.

On Francis' New "Deaconess" Panel

There never was nor can there ever be the office of "deaconess" in the Catholic Church.

When I use the word "deaconess" in this context, I mean a female counterpart to the male office of deacon. There was never any such office.

If the term "deaconess" appears in Church history, we find it to be an imprecise term that will vary not only from age to age, but from one geographic location to the next. Father Aimé George Martimont, author of the scholarly and definitive work on the subject titled *Deaconesses, An Historical Study*, observes "The Christians of antiquity did not have a single, fixed idea of what deaconesses were supposed to be." [1]

Yet on August 2 of this year, Pope Francis created a commission to study the possibility of allowing women to serve as deacons in the Catholic Church. Pursuing such a venture can only ignite further chaos in the Church and confusion among the faithful.

Extremely Limited Function

There was never an office of deaconess in the Latin Church.[2] We do come across references to deaconesses in various Greek and Eastern Rites. Yet the office is not uniformly found in the Oriental churches, and all mention is sporadic between the second and tenth centuries. Some Eastern Church territories, such as the church in Egypt, Ethiopia and the Maronites never accepted any office of deaconess.[3]

The women who were called "deaconesses" were not ordained in any sacramental sense of the word, but received a kind of blessing for certain ecclesiastical service. These "deaconesses" were primarily consecrated women whose work was highly restricted - usually limited assistance to other females. This included assisting women at baptisms and other services where the presence of men would have offended modesty.

"Moreover," writes Father Martimont, "it must be even more strongly emphasized that deaconesses were never allowed to teach or preach in public." [4]

It is of no use to appeal to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans in which Phoebe the "deaconess" is mentioned. The mind of the Church on this matter is summarized in the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas. We read, "The Angelic Doctor commenting on the New Testament ... saw

Phoebe in the Epistle to the Romans only as one of those women who ‘served’ Christ and the Apostles, or who carried out works of charity in the manner of widows of 1 Timothy 5:10.”[5]

As for the Latin Church, we provide three ancient and authoritative texts that demonstrate how foreign was any idea in the early Church of women deaconesses, women’s ordination, and women serving in the sanctuary.

As early as the 4th century, there is the fiery directive from the bishops of the Council of Nimes in 396 A.D.:

“Equally, it has been reported by some that, contrary to the apostolic discipline – indeed a thing unheard of until now – it has been observed, though it is not known exactly where, that women have been raised to the ministry of deacons. Ecclesiastical discipline does not permit this, for it is unseemly; such an ordination should be annulled, since it is irregular; and vigilance is required lest in the future anyone should have the boldness to act in this fashion again.”

The Council of Orange in 441 A.D. spoke likewise:

“In no way whatsoever should deaconesses ever be ordained. If there already are deaconesses, they should bow their heads beneath the blessing which is given to all the people.”[6]

Then there is the forceful decree *Necessaria rerum* of Pope Gelasius, addressed to the bishops of southern Italy, dated March 11, 494. While not dealing directly with deaconesses, it manifests how alien was the idea of women in the sanctuary performing any form of priestly function:

“It is with impatience that we learned this: divine things have suffered such a degradation that female ministers serving at the sacred altars have been approved. The exercise of roles reserved to men has been given to the sex which they do not belong.”[7]

What would the Bishops of Nimes, the Council of Orange, and Pope Gelasius say about the

plethora of lady-readers, altar girls, "let us pray to the Lord" prayer leaders, liturgical dancers and Eucharistic ministerettes now fluttering in great numbers throughout post-Conciliar sanctuaries?

No Continuity

As we follow the work of Father Martimont - whose calm, meticulous, thorough scholarship includes vast historical references from liturgical texts, euchologies (Eastern Rite), pontificals, ecclesiastical legislation, homilies, letters and other pertinent documents - we learn "the continuity of true ecclesiastical discipline was lacking in the case of deaconesses." [8] There is no continuity from the ancient days of the Church until now. Only a modernist pick-and-choose antiquarianism - forbidden by the Church - could "justify" any thought of establishing the office of deaconess.

Even in Eastern Rites the practice was not observed "always, everywhere and by everyone." The presence of deaconesses was so infrequent and scattered that we see in the writings of St. Jerome, a man who traveled widely in the East and knew it well, he "nowhere spoke about deaconesses, not even in his letter 394 to the priest Nepotian, to which he indicates the proper attitude to adopt toward virgins and widows." [9]

As noted earlier, the institution of deaconesses was most often involved with the baptism of adult women. In various Eastern Rites at the time, in a ritual that connects baptism with Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, adults were baptized naked - a practice happily long extinct. [10]

Thus writes Father Martimont, "As long as adult baptism were the norm, the necessity that brought about its creation [the office of deaconess] was geographically limited and rapidly becoming obsolete." Even during this time the woman assisting the adult women being baptized did not necessarily have to be a "deaconess" but could be a pious matron of the congregation. [11] Again, the practice only occurred in various churches of the Eastern Rite, never in the Latin Rite.

A concise summary of the deaconess' limited function is contained in the *Canonical Resolutions* of James of Edessa (Eastern Rite) written somewhere between 683 and 708 A.D. The instruction proceeds in a dialogue format:

"Addai: Does the deaconess, like the deacon, have the power to put a portion of the sacred Host into the consecrated chalice?

"James: In no way can she do this. The deaconess did not become a deaconess in order to serve at the altar but rather for the sake of women who are ill.

"Addai: I would like to learn in a few words what the powers of the deaconess in the Church are.

"James: She has no power over the altar, because when she was instituted, it was not in the name of the altar, but only to fulfill certain functions in the Church. These are her sole powers: to sweep the sanctuary and to light the lamps, and she is only permitted to perform these two functions if no priest or deacon is available. If she is in a convent of women, she can remove the sacred Hosts from the tabernacle [= cabinet], only because there is no priest or deacon present, and give them out to the other sisters only or to small children who may also be present. [Comment: Keep in mind this is within the context of the Eastern Rite where the consecrated Eucharist is not touched by human hands, but delivered to the communicant by means of a small spoon – JV] But it is not permitted to her to take the Hosts off the altar, nor carry them to the altar nor indeed in any way to touch the table of life [the altar]. She anoints adult women when they are baptized; she visits women who are ill and cares for them. These are the only powers possessed by deaconesses with regard to the work of the priests." [12]

Even if we come upon ancient Eastern Rite rituals that speak of "ordination" of deaconess, the word "ordination" is here used in a loose sense that has nothing to do with the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The Patriarch Severus of Antioch, writing in the sixth century, explains, "In the case of deaconesses ... ordination is performed less with regards to the needs of the mystery than exclusively with regard to doing honor." He continues, "In the cities, deaconesses habitually exercise a ministry relating to the divine bath of regeneration in the case of women who are being baptized." [13]

Anachronism and Ambiguity

The office of deaconess – sporadic as it was – virtually disappeared by the time of the eleventh century. So much so that Greek and Eastern Canonists of the Middle Ages did not even know who or what deaconesses were, for by then deaconesses had long since ceased to exist. [14] The office had become an obsolete curiosity.

Nothing could be more anachronistic than an attempt to "revive" the office of deaconess in a manner unrelated to its limited practice in the early Church, and use it as an official title to formalize today's raging novelty of women in the sanctuary and "lay ministers" of the

Eucharist.



Yet this is precisely the aim of Francis' [new deaconess panel](#), which consists of six men, six women – a politically-correct gender-balanced structure rather than a panel of scholars of unquestionable competence regarding the Catholic Faith of all time.

The panel includes Phyllis Zagano, senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University in New York, a bold advocate of women's ordination. It's not hard to guess what the panel's conclusions may be – a forgone conclusion in favor of approving some form of "deaconesses." As we know from the British satire *Yes, Prime Minister*, "The government never publicly opens the debate until it has already privately made up its mind."

We are painfully aware of the distasteful tactics of modern discussions that seek to introduce more revolution: Muddying the historical waters, imprecision of terms, clever use of anachronisms, calculated ambiguity, significant silence concerning any historic fact that frustrates the forgone conclusion of the panel's ultimate aim. Combine all this with the massive ignorance of today's un-catechized Catholics who are children of the Vatican II revolution, under the sway of the bucking-bronco Bergoglio pontificate that favors novelty and deprecates alleged "small-minded rules." The results can only be lethal for doctrinal and liturgical integrity.

"Fraught with Ambiguity"

There is no need to re-study the matter of deaconesses, especially when the definitive work of Father Martimort already demonstrates that the ancient, sporadic office of deaconess has nothing to do with women performing priestly functions.

We can do no better than close with the final paragraph of Father Martimort's superb work. He writes: "The complexity of the facts about deaconesses and the proper context of these facts prove to be quite extraordinary. There exists a danger of distorting both the facts and

the texts whenever one is dealing with them secondhand. It is also difficult to avoid anachronisms when trying to resolve the problem of the present by reference to the solutions appropriate to a past that is long gone."

Father Martimort concludes: "For the fact is that the ancient institution of deaconess, even in its own time, was encumbered with not a few ambiguities, as we have seen. In my opinion, if the restoration of the institution of deaconesses were indeed to be sought after so many centuries, such a restoration itself could only be fraught with ambiguity." [15]

Any move toward the establishment of "deaconess" stands already condemned by the consistent teaching of the Popes, manifested in that of Benedict XV who warned, "We wish to have this law of the ancients held in reverence, *'let nothing new be introduced, but only what has been handed down.'* This must be held an inviolable law in matters of Faith." [16]

A new office of deaconess introduced in the post-Conciliar Church will resemble nothing of history and contain nothing that has been handed down. The practice existed only sporadically in various geographical locations of the Eastern church, was severely restricted in its activity, and had disappeared by the 11th century.

If "deaconesses" are approved, we will face an embarrassing imitation of contemporary Protestant practice - ministerettes in goofy robes pretending to be men, usurping activities that belong to the priest alone. The office of deaconess will further accustom Catholics to see women in roles of ecclesiastical leadership and pave the way for more discussion of "women priests."

The introduction of the destructive novelty of "deaconess" can only lead to further degradation of the Church and the priesthood. It must be firmly resisted.

Notes:

[1] *Deaconesses, An Historical Study*, Aimé Georges Martimort, [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986], p. 241. The book is an exhaustive historic and scholarly treatment, probably the best on the topic.

[2] For a comprehensive explanation, see in Part II of Father Martimort's book we've been quoting "Deaconesses in the Latin Church." Here he explains there was no such thing up until the 5th century, and anything remotely regarded as some sort of deaconess was strictly limited to that of a particular office inside - and only inside - a convent of nuns, and even here only between the 6th and 12th centuries.

[3] Martimort, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 226. A fuller discussion of “Phoebe” appears on pp. 18-20.
- [6] Both quotes (Nimes and Orange), *ibid.*, p. 193.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- [10] See *ibid.*, pp. 131-132.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- [16] Pope Benedict XV, [*Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum Principis*](#) (Nov. 1, 1914), n. 25.