

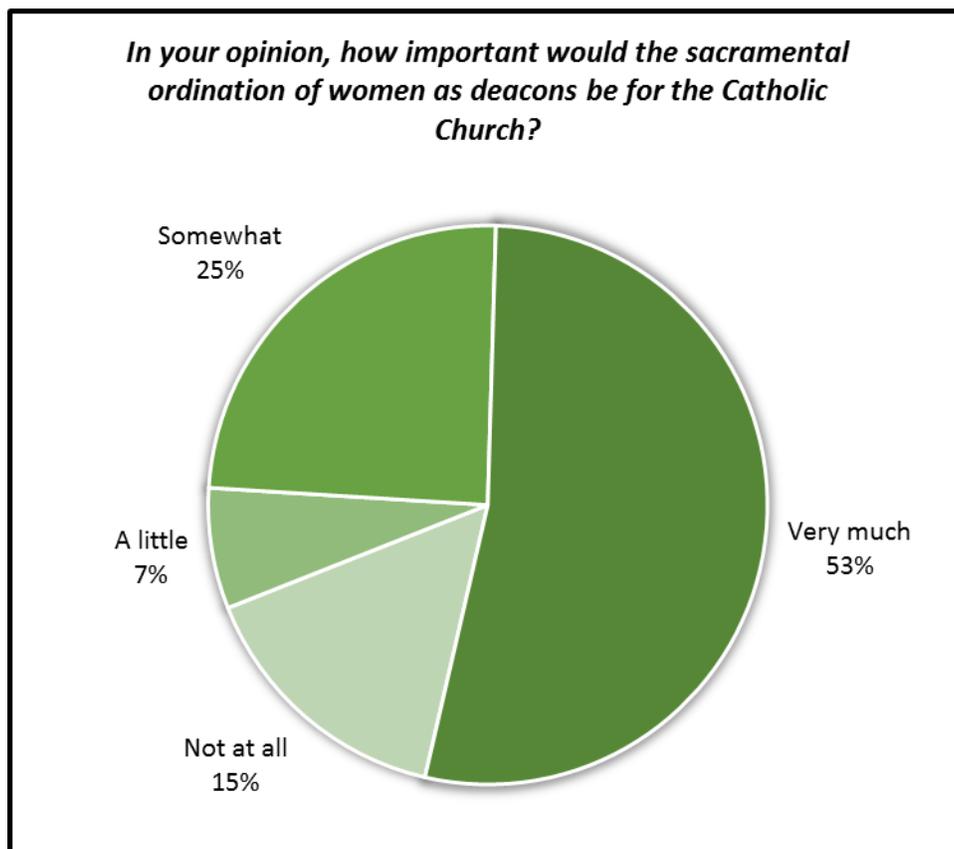
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Survey of Religious Institutes: The Sacramental Ordination of Women as Deacons

Washington, DC, August 2018 CARA, The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, has released results of a new survey of religious superiors, female and male, in the United States regarding the sacramental ordination of women as deacons. The survey sought to understand these superiors' awareness of and attitudes about The Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate. Pope Francis stated his intention to form this papal commission during a 2016 meeting with the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) when he was asked by a superior "What prevents the Church from including women among permanent deacons?" In his answer Pope Francis remarked, "I would like to constitute an official commission to study the question: I think it will be good for the Church to clarify this point." The papal commission was formed and met for the first time in November 2016.

Overall, 76% of religious superiors were aware of the commission before being surveyed and 69% knew that the commission had formed and met. Seventy-three percent of responding superiors believe it is theoretically possible to sacramentally ordain women as deacons (77% of female superiors and 76% of male superiors). Seventy-two percent believe the Catholic Church should authorize sacramental ordination of women as deacons (74% of female superiors and 69% of male superiors). Despite the majority believing it is possible and that the Church should authorize female deacons, a minority, 45% of the respondents, believe the Church will do so (50% of female superiors and 35% of male superiors). If the sacramental ordination of deacons were authorized by the Church, 58% of superiors believe their bishop would implement this and sacramentally ordain women as deacons.



Seventy-eight percent of superiors believe the sacramental ordination of women as deacons would be “somewhat” or “very much” important for the Catholic Church (53% “very much” only). Yet, many do not believe this would be as important to their community. Forty-five percent believe female deacons would be “somewhat” or “very much” important for their religious institute or society (16% “very much” only).

A majority of respondents, 64% were at least “somewhat” aware of any history of women ordained as deacons. Many, 84%, also believe that the sacramental ordination of women as deacons would at least “somewhat” create a greater call for women to be ordained as priests. On multiple occasions, Pope Francis has noted that female priests are not an option. Most recently, in a 2018 interview with Reuters, he remarked, “John Paul II was clear and closed the door, and I won’t turn on this. It was a serious thing, not capricious.”

Most superiors of women’s institutes or societies do not believe that an opening for female deacons would bring more candidates to their community. Sixty-one percent do not believe they would see an increase in candidates, 18% didn’t know if they would, 17% thought maybe they would see more candidates and 4% believe the sacramental ordination of women as deacons would increase the number of candidates seeking to join their institute or society. Half of female superiors do not believe any of their current members would be interested in becoming a deacon.

Female superiors were asked open-ended questions about the benefits, concerns, and challenges if the diaconate were opened to women as an ordained ministry. The most common benefits cited include a greater capacity to perform liturgical and sacramental duties, a greater acceptance of women and their gifts in the Church, and the continuation of current ministries but with a higher status. Challenges and concerns frequently noted include confusion over who the deacon would be accountable to, the acceptance of female deacons by clergy and other religious, concerns that it would create a two-tiered membership within religious communities, the issue of balance between community life and a deacon’s ministry to the external community, and that this step would reinforce the hierarchal structure of the Catholic Church.

Major superiors of women were also invited to write a response to this question: “*If the diaconate were opened to women as an ordained ministry, would you, your councilors, and / or chapter consider allowing members to be ordained? Why or why not?*” Nearly six in ten who provided a response indicated that they would consider allowing members to be ordained. A quarter of the respondents said they would not consider allowing their members to become ordained. The remainder did not clearly indicate whether they would or not.

Survey Details

CARA surveyed all U.S. religious institutes and societies of apostolic life. Using mailing lists provided by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR), and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), CARA sent a questionnaire to each major superior (by email or physical mail). CARA also sent questionnaires and cover letters to superiors of monasteries of contemplative nuns (who do not belong to either LCWR or CMSWR). All communications included instructions for how to respond in multiple ways (on paper/mail, online, and by fax).

CARA mailed surveys to a total of 777 potential respondents.¹ This included:

- 290 women’s units who are members of LCWR
- 117 women’s units who are members of CMSWR
- 137 women’s contemplative units
- 236 men’s units who are members of CMSM

¹ Three units are on membership lists for both LCWR and CMSWR. These units were sent only one invitation to respond and are counted only once.

The survey was in the field from the first response on January 26, 2018 to May 30, 2018 when data collection was cut off. Throughout this time, CARA conducted extensive follow-up by mail, e-mail, telephone, and FAX. CARA received completed responses from 385 religious institutes for a response rate of 50%.² This results in a margin of sampling error of ± 3.55 percentage points.

When releasing survey data CARA often receives responses such as “The Church is not a democracy” which seems to imply that the survey is being presented as a “vote” on a particular issue. This is never the purpose of survey research by social scientists. A survey of a population is not a census and the respondents are not presented with a ballot—just questions that seek to measure attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. It is also the case that any survey of respondents in the United States would not carry much weight as a “vote” in a global Church where the U.S. represents only about 5% of all Catholics in the world. This particular study sought to understand how superiors or religious institutes in the United States think about the question of female deacons during a time in which a papal commission is studying this issue. It should provide insight into how these respondents might react to the work of that commission in the future.

Origin of the Papal Commission

In May 2016 meeting with the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) Pope Francis received the following question:

Consecrated women already do much work with the poor and the marginalized, they teach catechism, they accompany the sick and the dying, they distribute Communion; in many countries they lead the communal prayers in the absence of a priest and in those circumstances they give a homily. In the Church there is the office of the permanent diaconate, but it is open only to men, married or not. What prevents the Church from including women among permanent deacons, as was the case in the primitive Church? Why not constitute an official commission to study the matter? Can you give us an example of where you see the possibility of better integration of women and consecrated women in the life of the Church?

Pope Francis responded,

This question goes in the direction of “doing”: consecrated women already do much work with the poor, they do many things ... “doing”. And it touches on the problem of the permanent diaconate. Some might say that the “permanent deaconesses” in the life of the Church are mothers-in-law [laughter]. Indeed this existed in early times: there was a beginning... I remember that it was a theme which interested me considerably when I came to Rome for meetings, and I stayed at the Domus Paolo VI; there was a good Syrian theologian there, who had produced a critical edition and translation of the Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian. One day I asked him about this, and he explained to me that in the early times of the Church there were some deaconesses. But what were these deaconesses? Were they ordained or not? The Council of Chalcedon (in 451) speaks about this, but it is somewhat unclear. What was the role of deaconesses in those times? It seems — I was told by this man, who is now dead but who was a good professor, wise and erudite — it seems that the role of the deaconesses was to help in the baptism of women, with their immersion; for the sake of decorum they baptized them; and also anointed the body of women, in baptism. And another curious fact: when there was a judgement on a marriage because a husband beat his wife and she went to the bishop to lay a complaint, deaconesses were responsible for inspecting the bruises left on the woman’s body from her husband’s blows, and for informing the bishop. This I remember. There are various publications on the diaconate in the Church, but it is not clear how it was in the past. I think I will ask the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to refer me to some studies on this theme, because I have answered you only on the basis of what I heard from this priest, who was a learned and good researcher, on the permanent diaconate. In addition, I would like to constitute an official commission

² The actual response rate is likely somewhat higher due to some units that could not be reached. Although each unit was sent an invitation to respond and multiple reminders, CARA cannot know how many units did not respond due to merger, closure, or incorrect contact information. For comparison, another study in which CARA surveyed the same population the response rate was 60% (Bendyna, Mary E. and Mary L. Gautier. 2009. *Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.).

to study the question: I think it will be good for the Church to clarify this point; I agree, and I will speak [to the Congregation] in order to do something of this nature [emphasis added].

Then you say: “We agree with you, Holy Father, that you have on several occasions raised the issue of the need for a more incisive role for women in decision-making roles in the Church”. This is clear. “Can you give me an example of where you see the possibility of better integration of women and of consecrated women in the life of the Church?” I will say something afterwards, because I have seen that there is a general question. In the consultations of the Congregation for Religious, in the assemblies, women religious must be present: this is true. In consultations on so many problems which get presented, consecrated women must be present. Another thing: improved integration. At the moment specific examples do not come to mind, but there is still what I said earlier: seeking out the judgement of consecrated women, because women see things with an originality different to that of men; and this is enriching, in consultation, and decision-making, and in practice.

This work that you carry out with the poor, the marginalized, teaching catechism, accompanying the sick and the dying, this is very “maternal” work, where the maternity of the Church is expressed the most. But there are men who do the same, and that’s fine: consecrated men, hospitaller orders... and that is important.

So then, with regard to the diaconate, yes, I think that it is useful to have a commission that clarifies this area properly, especially with regard to the early times of the Church.

With regard to improved integration, I repeat what I said earlier.

Source: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco_20160512_uisg.html

About CARA, The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate is a national, nonprofit research center that conducts social scientific studies about the Catholic Church. Founded in 1964 and affiliated with Georgetown University since 1989, CARA has three major dimensions to its mission: to increase the Church’s self-understanding, to serve the applied research needs of Church decision-makers, and to advance scholarly research on religion, particularly Catholicism.

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