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CARA Press Contact:

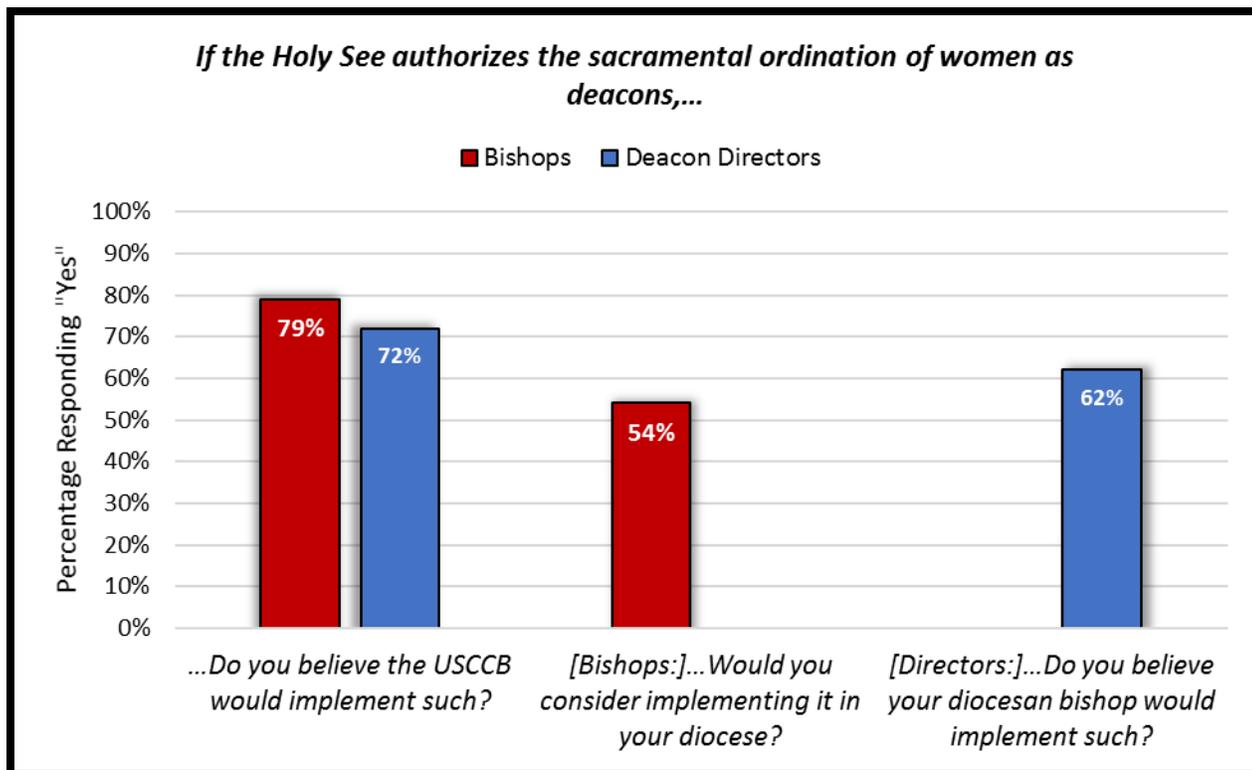
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## Opinions of Bishops and Deacon Directors on the Ordination of Women as Deacons

Washington, DC, January 2019 CARA, The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, has released results of a new survey of Catholic bishops and diocesan deacon directors in the United States regarding the sacramental ordination of women as deacons. The survey sought to understand the bishops' and deacon directors' 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.

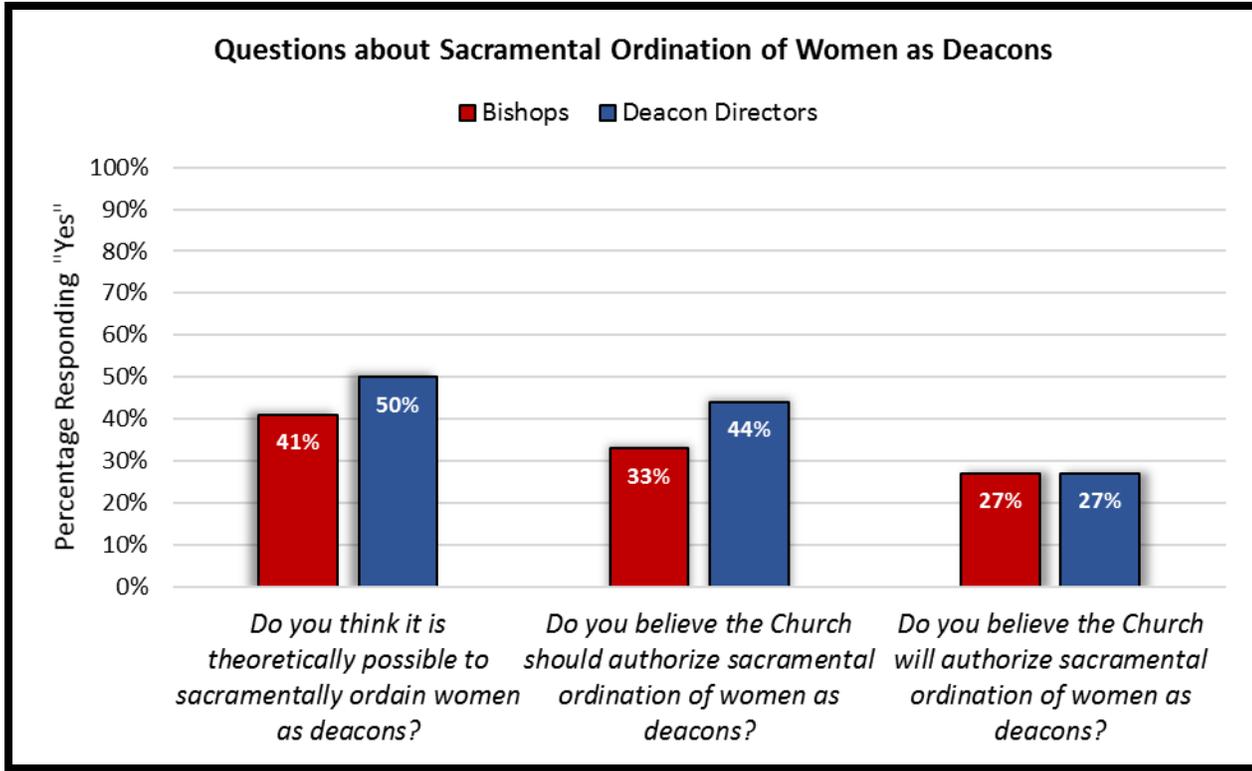
A hypothetical question was asked of the bishops and deacon directors: "If the Holy See authorizes the sacramental ordination of women as deacons, do you believe the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops would implement such?" Since no report from the Papal Commission had been released at the time of the survey the respondents were offering their speculation.



Almost four in five bishops (79%) and three in four deacon directors (72%) responded positively to the question.

When the question was further refined to ask: “If the Holy See authorizes the sacramental ordination of women as deacons, would you consider implementing it in your diocese?” just over one-half of the bishops said yes, and more than six in ten of the deacon directors said that their bishop would implement this.

Interestingly, when the bishops and deacon directors were asked for their individual understanding of the possibility of sacramentally ordaining women as deacons, a smaller proportion thought it was theoretically possible. Two in five bishops (41%) and one-half (50%) of the deacon directors think it is theoretically possible.

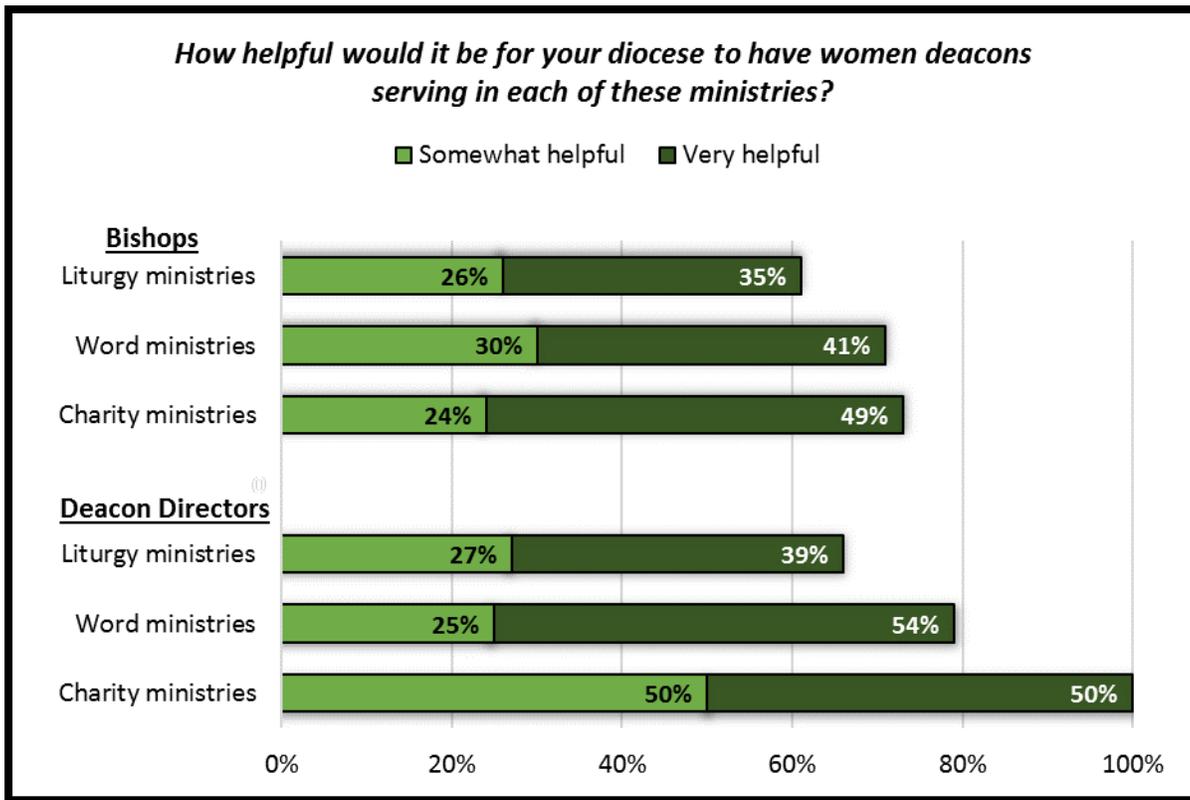


When asked “Do you believe the Church should authorize sacramental ordination of women as deacons?” only one-third of the bishops (33%) and two in five of the deacon directors (44%) believe the Church should do so. Only one-quarter of the bishops and deacon directors (27% for each) believe that the Church will authorize the sacramental ordination of women as deacons.

In their responses, it appears that the bishops and deacon directors would positively respond to the sacramental ordination of women as deacons if the Holy See authorizes it, but they themselves do not believe the Holy See will do so.

The commitment of their diocese to increasing women’s involvement in ecclesial leadership is strongly supported by both the bishops and deacon directors. Among the bishops 64% “strongly agree” and 33% “agree somewhat” that their diocese is committed to increasing women’s involvement in ecclesial leadership. The deacon directors agree a little less so, as 40% “strongly agree” and 46% “somewhat agree.”

The majority of bishops and deacon directors respond that if the Holy See authorizes the ordination of women as deacons, then they would find it helpful to have women deacons serving in a wide variety of ministries. Notably, a number of the bishops and deacon directors commented that lay women are already effectively serving in most of these ministries, particularly in the ministries of Charity and Word.



Among the greatest identified challenges would be the opposition to having women deacons by others in the Church (priests, deacons, and laity) and the impact of this decision on the Church’s teaching on priesthood.

The greatest possible benefits are seen as three-fold: improving the amount and quality of ministries by the inclusion of women deacons, women sharing in the sacramental grace of the diaconate, and giving more prominence to women’s experience and voice in the Church.

### Data Collection Methodology

The bishops and deacon directors were surveyed using two separate survey instruments. The surveys were distributed in September 2018. The survey was conducted anonymously. The final response rates were as follows:

- Out of 192 bishops invited to participate (several dioceses were awaiting the appointment of a new bishop), 108 responded to the survey (a final response rate of 56%). This results in a margin of sampling error of  $\pm 6.25$  percentage points.
- Out of 186 deacon directors invited to participate in the survey, 133 responded to the survey (a final response rate of 72%). This results in a margin of sampling error of  $\pm 4.55$  percentage points.

When releasing survey data, CARA sometimes receives comments 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 the United States represents only about 5% of all Catholics in the world. This particular study sought to understand how bishops and deacon directors in the United States think about the question of women 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 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](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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