



Presentation

of Synodal Forum III

“Women in ministries and offices in the Church”

for the First Reading

at the Third Synodal Assembly (3-5 February 2022)

for the implementation text

“Diaconate of women”

[Result of the ballot in the Forum: 20 Yes, 1 abstention]

Introduction

The debate on women’s access to the diaconate has been conducted on a broad theological and ecclesial basis in the German local churches since the 2nd Vatican Council. The diaconal profile of the Church has been raised with the establishment of the permanent diaconate as an independent sacramental office with ordination “unto a ministry of service” (LG 29). The decree on mission states as follows: “For there are men who actually carry out the functions of the deacon’s office, either preaching the word of God as catechists, or presiding over scattered Christian communities in the name of the pastor and the bishop, or practicing charity in social or relief work. It is only right to strengthen them by the imposition of hands which has come down from the Apostles, and to bind them more closely to the altar, that they may carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate.” (AG 16). The diaconate is understood as a special representation of the diaconal Christ as part of the Church’s one sacramental ministry of salvation. In view of the strong presence of women in the various diaconal fields, in honorary and full-time ministries, but also bearing in mind the continuing professionalisation of the various ministries in the field of caritas, and the danger of a clash between charitable ministries, on the one hand, and ministries in the congregation, on the other, the question of a diaconal leadership ministry for women, via which the diaconal profile of the congregation can be enhanced, has arisen in a new way in recent years.

In most cases it was women in the congregations engaging in apostolic activities, but also single and married women active in parish congregations, who shaped the face of the Church in diaconal terms. In the history of the Christian faith, the “sisters” have made a decisive contribution to the Church being recognised as a credible institution, and to the development of a trusting, fraternal community in the Church. The question of diaconal ministry for women has been raised in the context of the German local church since the beginning of the 20th Century, including in the course of the enhanced professionalisation of social and diaconal tasks and of the newly-emerging training of women for pastoral and parish ministries. The later Cardinal Michael Faulhaber of Munich presented historical studies on the diaconate of women. He blessed seven women as deaconesses on 10 October 1919. The “Association of Catholic Women Deacons” was formed; Ellen Ammann, who was the founder of the railway station mission and of the social-caritative women’s school in Munich, as well as being co-founder of the Catholic Women’s Association in Bavaria, belonged to this group of women. Edith Stein, who at that time worked at the German Institute for Educational Studies in Münster, presented reflections on the ordination of women as deacons in 1932: “Recent times have shown a change in the strong desire for female forces for ecclesiastical and charitable work, as well as pastoral care. Efforts are being made by women to lend this activity once more the character of an ordained ecclesiastical office, and it may well be that this demand will one day be heard. The question is whether this would then be the first step on a path that would ultimately lead to the priesthood of women. In dogmatic terms, there seems to me to be nothing to prevent the Church from carrying out such a hitherto unheard-of innovation...”¹. The diaconate of women was discussed within the liturgical movement by Odo Casel, Ildefons Herwegen and Pius Parsch. The topic was further considered in the Catholic German Women’s Federation. A discussion of this topic in the Council was on the wish list of female German Catholics in the run-up to the Second Vatican Council. In 1974, the Würzburg Synod adopted a vote to examine the question of the diaconate of women and, in view of the pastoral situation at the time, to admit women to be ordained as deaconesses. The Synod put it as follows in its resolution entitled “The pastoral ministries in the congregation”: “Many women in many church provinces, not only in mission areas, perform a wealth of activities which in themselves belong to the office of deacon. Excluding these women from ordination means a theologically and pastorally unjustifiable separation of the function and the sacramentally-mediated power of salvation.”² An argumentation is advanced here which strikes at the heart of the debates about the diaconate of women, down to the present day: a functional separation, i.e. a separation of the diaconal task of women in pastoral ministry, and of the sacramental power of salvation, is not possible. A large part of the tasks in the diaconate of the congregation, and at professional level in caritas, have been taken on for many years by women who have acquired theological, socio-pedagogical or other skills relevant to exercising these activities. The office of a deaconess -

¹ Edith Stein, *Beruf des Mannes und der Frau nach Natur- und Gnadenordnung*, in: *Die christliche Frau* 30 (1932) 5-20, 20.

² *Die pastoralen Dienste in der Gemeinde (Beschluss)*, in: L. Bertsch et al. (eds.), *Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Beschlüsse der Vollversammlung*, Offizielle Gesamtausgabe I, Freiburg 1976, 597-636, 617 (Chapter 4.2.2).

in the sense of a leadership ministry exercised by a woman - will make precisely this diaconate visible also in the celebration of the liturgy³.

Although the vote of the Würzburg Synod went unanswered, the topic continued to be relevant, and has been increasingly taken up again since the 1990s. A scholarly congress on the diaconate of women was held at the Academy of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart in Hohenheim in April 1997. This led to the founding of the Diaconate of Women network, which runs theological-pastoral training courses for women who aspire to such an office. The women's associations KDFB and kfd have taken up the topic since the beginning of the new millennium. The annual nationwide "Day of the Diaconate" on the Feast of St. Catherine of Siena (29 April) - since 2013 also in collaboration with the Central Committee of Catholics (ZdK) - provides an important motivation to the ecclesial and theological debate in the Church and in theological circles on the diaconate of women, so that it has become a central theme of the renewal process within the Church, and of structural change in German local churches.

Theological debates have been conducted since the Second Vatican Council on permitting women to enter the diaconate, and on the question of the sacramentality of such an office, also in the perspective of the universal Church. There is no disagreement about the fact that there was a female diaconate in the first millennium, that this went on until the 11th Century in the Western Church, and until the late Byzantine period in the Eastern Church. That having been said, the interpretation of the historical findings is disputed: It is argued both in favour of a sacramental diaconate of women in the Church of the first millennium, and at the same time of the "otherness" of the diaconate of women, which is said to suggest that the ministry of women was non-sacramental in nature. This tension was already evident in the 1970s in the debates between liturgical scholars Cipriano Vagaggini and Aimé-Georges Martimort, and it reappears in today's theological debates. The "otherness" of the diaconate of women is linked to the argumentative figure of the representation of Christ, which makes it impossible for women to be ordained as deacons. The question however arises as to whether the ordination of women as congregational deacons, a non-sacramental office, as proposed by Cardinal Walter Kasper in a lecture to the Spring Plenary Assembly of the 2013 German Bishops' Conference in Trier, would do justice to the diaconal leadership tasks that women have de facto taken on for many years. Women who have assumed similar diaconal leadership tasks to those of men - who can be ordained as permanent deacons - would only be given access to a "second class" diaconate. The principle of gender equality, which the German bishops have espoused several times in their statements in recent years, is thus undermined⁴.

³ Cf. for further comments on the diaconate of women: Dorothea Reiningger, *Diakonat der Frau in der Einen Kirche. Diskussionen, Entscheidungen und pastoral-praktische Erfahrungen in der christlichen Ökumene und ihr Beitrag zur römisch-katholischen Diskussion*, Ostfildern 1999; Peter Hünermann et al. (eds.), *Diakonat. Ein Amt für Frauen in der Kirche - ein frauengerechtes Amt?*, Ostfildern 1997.

⁴ Cf. Phyllis Zagano (ed.), *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches. Essays by Cipriano Vagaggini, Collegeville/Minnesota 2013*; Phyllis Zagano, *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church*, New York 2000; Margit Eckholt, *Frauen-diakonat - neue Bewegung?*, in: *Theologisch-praktische Quartalschrift* 165 (2017) 266-275; *Der Diakonat - Entwicklung und Perspektiven. Studien der internationalen Theologischen Kommission zum sakramentalen Diakonat*, ed. by G. L. Müller, Würzburg 2004.- Arguing against a sacramental diaconate for women: Manfred Hauke, *Die spezifische Christusrepräsentation des Presbyters und des Diakons*, in: Manfred Hauke/Helmut Hoping (eds.), *Der Diakonat. Geschichte und Theologie*, Regensburg 2019, 361-394.

Pope Benedict XVI opened up a door in the Motu Proprio "*Omnium in mentem*" of 26 October 2009 to continue to work on a dogmatic, pastoral theological foundation for a diaconate of women. It distinguishes between the ordination of bishops and priests, on the one hand, and the ordination of deacons, on the other. Deacons do not receive the mission and empowerment "in the person of Christ the Head", but are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word and charity. Permanent deacons are ordained to perform precisely this ministry, and a sacramental diaconate of women will also further deepen the representation of the "*Christus diakonos*" in precisely this sense. Men and women represent Jesus Christ in precisely the same way; the ordination of women as deacons is a "grace opportunity" for the Church Herself to grow in credibility and to correspond to the gender equality that is grounded in the depth of Biblical revelation.

It is to be hoped that the commission set up by Pope Francis to further elaborate the work on the Biblical and historical foundations of the diaconate of women will enhance this fundamental diaconal dimension of the ministry, and help to open up the diaconate as a sacramental ministry for both men and women, irrespective of gender. The reflection on the diaconate of women makes it necessary to look further into the three-tier ordo. The Second Vatican Council has paved the way for rethinking the diversity of the "*ministeria*" in this one ordo. In an ecumenical perspective, it is relevant to consider the ordinations of women deacons in churches whose ministries are recognised by Rome. The Orthodox Patriarchates of Alexandria and Jerusalem thus reintroduced the ordination of deaconesses in 2017. As the ordination of three "sub-deaconesses" in a migrant congregation of Chaldean Christians in Stuttgart-Bottanang on 10 September 2012 also made clear, these are ordinations with the imposition of hands that emphasise the apostolic succession, and thus the representation of Christ, of this office. Soteriological and pneumatological lines of argument can be strengthened in the dialogue with the Orthodox tradition. These developments are significant for the work of the Roman Commission on the diaconate of women.

Motion

The fundamental diaconal process of the Church, which the Second Vatican Council emphasised as a central component of the Church's identity alongside the task of evangelisation, can be enhanced by establishing the office of deaconess. The Church fulfils Her potential as the Church of Jesus Christ when She makes the mercy of God concrete in the footsteps of the "poor Jesus" (LG 8). In view of the need to raise this diaconal profile of the Church, the Synodal Assembly is requested to resolve as follows:

A more profound awareness of the diaconal Church should be created at the various levels of the German local churches, in the dioceses and associations, at further training events for pastoral workers, and in theological training at faculties and institutes.

The work of the "Deaconate of Women Network", and the implementation of the third course for the training of women deacons, will be networked with the training of permanent deacons. Joint training modules are to be considered in order to raise the diaconal profile of a fraternal Church that is committed to gender equality.

The available research results on the diaconate of women from the context of the German local churches will be taken up and continued, and introduced into the dialogue within the universal Church. It is to be hoped that they will flow into the work of the Roman Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate. The regional Bishops' Conferences will have a say in the appointment of members of the Roman Commission on the Diaconate.

The pastoral considerations and theological research from the context of the German local churches are to be taken up in the universal Church's synodal process that has been initiated by Pope Francis, and discussed in intercontinental perspectives.

The German local churches sent a vote to Rome at the end of the Würzburg Synod with regard to the examination of the establishment of a sacramental diaconate of women. The bishops have held several discussions with the Roman Congregations. In this spirit, the German Bishops' Conference is now requesting an indult with regard to can. 1024 of canon law ("A baptised male alone receives sacred ordination validly.") in order to open up the diaconal ministry to women.

Reasoning

The Church is credible when She bears witness to God's mercy as a diaconal Church, and this witness is given through the various ministries of men and women alongside those who are in need, who face violence, or who are marginalised because of gender, social or ethnic affiliation. A diaconal leadership ministry in the shape of the sacramental diaconate exercised by women will help enhance this credibility and raise the diaconal profile of the Church. Men and women are called in equal measure to exercise the diaconal ministry, and there can be no exclusion here on the basis of gender.

The debate on the diaconate of women offers an opportunity to engage in a fundamental process of reflection on the ministerial structure of the Church. A diaconal ministry can contribute to the "de-clericalisation" of which Pope Francis has spoken several times. "Our Church sees Herself as a Church alongside the poor. She must raise Her diaconal profile for the sake of Her credibility. The mission of all Christians to engage as deacons is also reflected in the sacramental diaconate. Since diaconal work is predominantly done by women, women in particular are indispensable as deacons."⁵ These were the words of the Catholic German Women's League in 2010 in the statement entitled "Being a Church in Partnership". The Central Committee of Catholics, and the Presidents of the German Bishops' Conference, have expressed similar sentiments in recent years. It is to be hoped that synergies will emerge between the work of the Roman Commission, the worldwide synodal process convened by Pope Francis, and the theological and pastoral considerations in the context of the local churches in Germany. The establishment of a diaconate for women precisely in the sense of the sacramental representation of the diaconal Christ, against the background of the concrete diaconal tasks of women, and in connection with the liturgical functions which women deacons have exercised in the history of the Church and which are to be further refined today with regard to the min-

⁵ KDFB, *Partnerschaftlich Kirche sein! Für ein partnerschaftliches Zusammenwirken von Mann und Frau in der Kirche*, National Delegates Assembly, Bonn, 17 October 2010, 4.

istry of preaching, the administration of the sacraments of baptism, anointing of the sick and marriage support, can be a sign of hope in this respect that the theology of ministry can be further developed to bring about the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the wake of the Second Vatican Council in following the poor Jesus, and thus to also develop new theological perspectives, including with regard to the "ordo".