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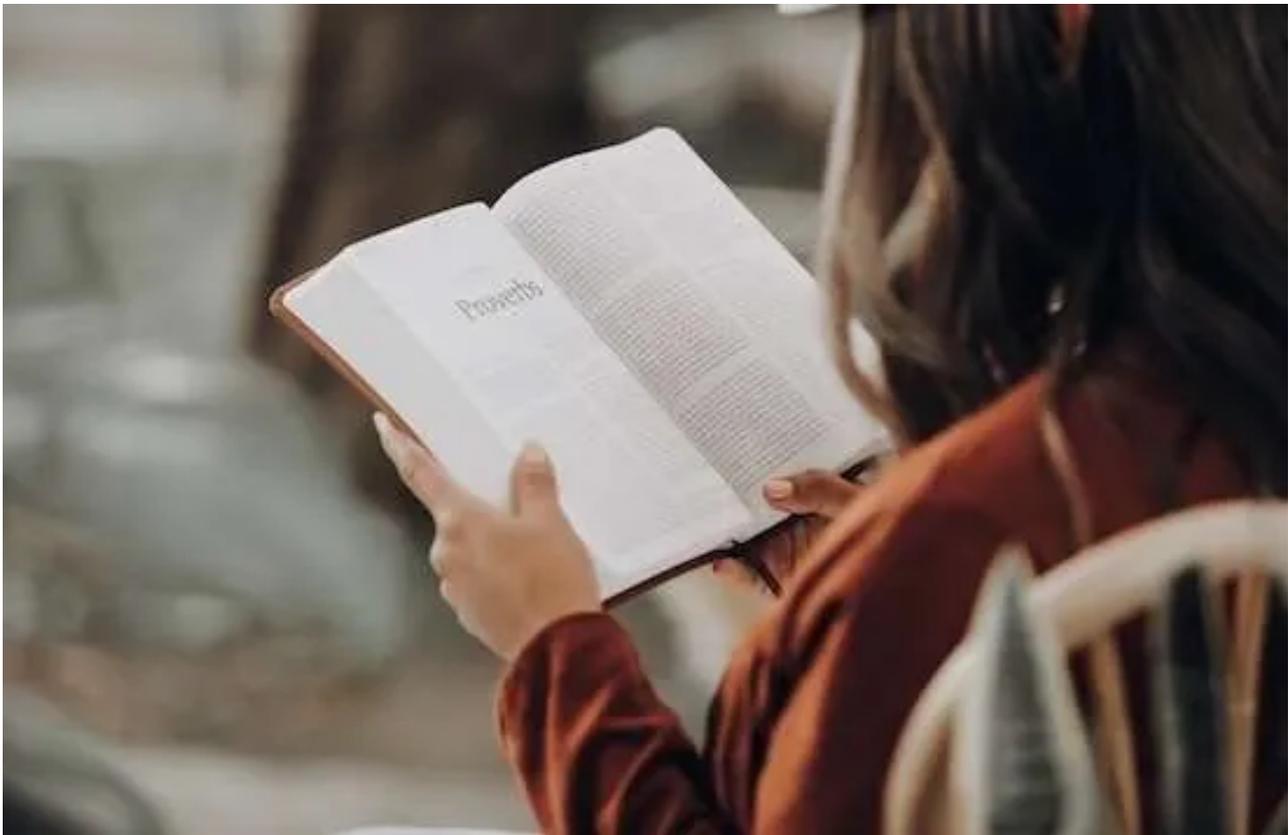
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Pope Francis and (women's) Church work

Is the Jesuit pope paving the way towards women deacons or stopping it in its tracks?



By [Phyllis Zagano](#) | [United States](#)

Legions of female church workers at every level in parishes and chanceries, at episcopal conferences -- and even at the Vatican -- welcomed and welcome Pope Francis' efforts to eliminate clericalism.

The general perception that "they" (clerics) do not need "us" (women) seems to be fading. Or is it?

The great diversity of the "church workers" on which the Catholic Church depends fall into two main categories: paid and unpaid.

The great majority of paid professional positions are held by clerics. The great majority of volunteer, unpaid positions, whether professional or not, are filled by women.

Of course, there is cross-over, but the exploitation of women in what is loosely referred to as "church work" is a scandal that Francis seems ready to repair. For sure, restoring women to the ordained diaconate may be part of the answer, but it is not the only one.

Let us look at three points: 1) Francis' emphasis on lay involvement in the Church; 2) the problem of clericalism; 3) the possibilities for women deacons.

Francis' emphasis on lay involvement in the Church

The Synod of Bishops' special assembly on the Amazon in 2019 held great promise for **women**.

Its twelve language groups spoke forcefully: lay persons should be more involved in governance; the Church should allow women to be formally installed as lectors and acolytes; and the Church must continue to consider ordaining women as deacons.

Reportedly, nine of the twelve language groups asked for women deacons, but the language softened as it traveled through drafts of the Final Document.

Francis' responses came fairly quickly. Yes, he said to the Synod assembly, he would pick up the gauntlet thrown down over women deacons.

But *Querida Amazonia*, his response to the Synod's Final document, struck a different chord. In that post-synodal apostolic exhortation, the **pope** emphasized the fact that parishes could indeed be led by lay people, and that in fact many already were.

So, instead of mentioning installed lay ministries or women deacons in his response to the Final Document, he emphasized Parish Life Coordinators, as described in Code of Canon Law (can. 517§2).

Recalling Francis asked that the Final Document and *Querida Amazonia* be read in tandem, we can see his emphasis on laity is really emphasis on women. After all, two-thirds of parishes in the Amazon region are led and managed by women, mostly women religious.

In *Querida Amazonia*, Francis asks that they be recognized as Parish Life Coordinators (can. 517§2).

He asked that they have set terms of office. He asks that they be professionalized. He implies they should be paid.

Why? Recall the other major request of the Amazon Synod: ordaining *virī probati* (married men of proven virtue) to the priesthood, most probably those already permanent deacons.

Now imagine the Amazon parish led by a woman, which includes a married deacon. If the married deacon becomes a priest, would not the current way of thinking about Church automatically see him as pastor?

With *Querida Amazonia*, Francis deflected the question of married deacons becoming priests, while emphasizing the point of community. And, in emphasizing the point of community he specifically called for Parish Life Coordinators (can. 517§2).

That is, he called for an expansion of that office, which can be filled by lay men and women, religious or secular, as well as deacons. In so doing, he cut the tie between parish leadership and clericalism. Or at least he cut that tie in theory.

The problem of clericalism

The problem of clericalism is real.

Of its many facets, what points to our concern today is the connection between clericalism and law. That is, the Code of Canon Law places ordained clerics, predominantly priests and bishops, above the laity and, it seems, above the law.

There is virtually no way, at least no legal way, for any lay person, to have governance and jurisdiction in the church at the parish or diocesan level.

Even the newly reworked Book VI of the Code of Canon Law, while heavy on penalties, is equally heavy on secrecy and clerical (read episcopal) self-policing.

Five-hundred years ago, Martin Luther called clericalism a destroyer of Christianity. Luther wrote:

Yea, the priests and the monks are deadly enemies, wrangling about their self-conceived way and methods like fools and madmen, not only to the hindrance, but to the very destruction of Christian love and unity.

Each one clings to his sect and despises the others; and they regard the laymen as though they were not Christians. This lamentable condition is only a result of the laws. (Martin Luther, Works of Martin Luther, Philadelphia: A.J. Holman, 1915, p. 295)

How does clericalism affect women and church work?

Women, and anyone else not ordained a priest, are automatically lower ranked members of the Catholic Church. Lower-ranked members -- be they secular or religious, male or female -- are not the first to find professional respect or support in Catholic parishes and chanceries.

Think back to the proposition from the Synod assembly on the Amazon regarding the priestly ordination of married deacons. Is it not the way of the Church to call the ordained priest the pastor, no matter his qualifications?

And, if the former deacon is now the pastor, would the current way of thinking about Church automatically grant him a salary, housing, vacation, retreat, a housekeeper, a cook, transportation and food? Would he not merit a sacristan, a secretary and one or two days "off" per week?

Of course, that scenario paints clericalism in the broadest strokes, and we can assume the parishes and parish groupings in the Amazon region cannot afford well-paid clericalism.

But if we transfer that scenario to other parishes in other countries, is this not the case? In some parishes, the bulk of parish donations go to support the pastor and his personal needs and staff.

Women, where they appear at all, are volunteer catechists and sacristans, and perhaps part-time cooks and secretaries.

I am not even discussing the question of what amount of parish donations go to the poor. If there is parish support of the poor, at least in the United States, a substantial amount of the funding comes from government sources and in-kind donations.

And parish ministries to the poor are staffed predominantly by women. And by and large, those women are volunteers, or at best part-time workers without benefits.

The possibilities for women deacons

So, what is the problem with volunteerism?

Many years ago, when I began serious work on restoring the tradition of ordained women deacons, a friendly monsignor in my archdiocese said, "Oh, so you want to be a volunteer?"

In fact, the larger portion of deacons in the US Church are volunteers, now retired from their "day jobs," who volunteer in the very ministries we think of when we think of "Church."

They visit the sick, they bury the dead, they manage soup kitchens and food banks, they teach catechism, they hold marriage classes. But in many places, the bishop or pastor prefers to hire a deacon (full- or part-time) for positions from the coordinator of religious instruction to the chancellor of a diocese.

So, women are effectively shut out of jobs for which they are eminently qualified, except for their gender, which restricts their ability to be ordained as deacons.

Then there is the fact that, on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord this year, Pope Francis changed canon law to allow both men and women to be installed as acolytes and lectors, which in 1972 effectively replaced the suppressed minor orders of lector, porter, exorcist and acolyte, and the major order of subdeacon.

Experience in each installed office is required for ordination as deacon. Until now only the most conservative of bishops have installed men as lectors and/or acolytes, principally -- it would seem -- to eliminate the possibility of women's altar service and women reading during Mass.

More recently, the pope also established the installed permanent ministry of catechist. This would seem, in part at least, to professionalize catechetical ministry.

These events can both help and hurt the prospects of women achieving paid parish employment, professional or otherwise. These roles have traditionally been filled by lay volunteers, so nothing seems added here except the requirement for training leading up to the installed ministry.

The "but," and it is a large but, is that each of these three installed ministries is connected to diaconal ordination.

The installation as acolyte and lector is, as I said, required prior to diaconal ordination. The ministry of catechist has an even more direct relation to the diaconate.

One reason, or justification, for the restoration of the diaconate as a permanent vocation stemming from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was to strengthen the ministry of catechists with the charism of order.

That was because catechists in developing nations were often serving as today's Parish Life Coordinators (can. 517§2) and performing other diaconal ministries.

The recent trajectory of events seems to bring women closer to the diaconate, and therefore closer to preferential treatment for employment.

The deacon can be the single judge in an ecclesiastical trial. The deacon can witness marriages. The deacon can solemnly baptize.

Do the changes to canon law and the creation of the installed ministry of acolyte mean Pope Francis is about to ordain women as deacons? Probably not.

While he changed canon law regarding lectors and acolytes with a simple *motu proprio* and did the same in creating the new installed ministry of catechist, he also recently promulgated a new Book VI of the Code of Canon Law.

The new book repeats language first presented in 2007 by Cardinal William Levada, then-prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Repeated by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010, it imposes *latae sententiae* excommunication on anyone who "attempts to confer a sacred order on a woman" as well as on the woman ordained (can. 1379§3).

While the pope could change that canon—indeed the bishop presenting the new book to the press said as much—there is not likely to be much movement before the Synod of Bishops' assembly on synodality, which has been postponed until October 2023.

Which brings us back to women and work. What difference does it make if a woman is installed as lector, acolyte, or catechist, or appointed as a Parish Life Coordinator? What difference, indeed, if a woman is ordained a deacon?

In the United States, the Church depends principally on female "church workers" – in pastoral, service, and support positions – in its mission of proclaiming and living the Gospel.

Yet female workers are exploited. They are assumed to be volunteers, no matter their professional training for pastoral or service ministries. Where they do find church employment, often part-time and without benefits, it is service or support work that supports clericalism.

The ethical challenges to the ways "church work" is organized are real and laid bare when the institutional exploitation of such workers – especially women – is examined.

One response, some might say a Gospel-driven response, causes both religious and secular laity to work outside or at least around the traditional structures to provide ministry.

These trained professionals serve as spiritual directors, remunerated by retreat centers and directly by their directees.

They gain employment as chaplains in prisons, hospitals and other secular institutions.

More indirectly, they work in community organization and advocacy groups, or they write and speak and teach outside any Church-affiliated structure and strictures.

That they carry the Gospel to the people is to be applauded. That this is so hard to do within Church structures is sad.



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