

SACRAMENTAL ORDINATION OF WOMEN DEACONS—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Sacramental Ordination of Women Deacons for the Global Church
Convener: Gary Macy, Santa Clara University
Moderator: Susan Wood, Marquette University
Presenter(s): Sara Butler, M.S.B.T., University of St. Mary of the Lake
William Ditewig, Diocese of Monterey
Phyllis Zagano, Hofstra University

This panel addressed points in several key convention themes: the validity and liceity of sacraments in general and especially of holy orders, the sacramental nature of diaconal ordination; ecumenical considerations regarding women in ministry; the place and role of women in the Church. The session chair, Susan Wood, is an ecclesiologist. Four experts, Susan Wood, Sara Butler, William Ditewig and Phyllis Zagano have written on sacraments, the diaconate, and ecumenical understandings of the sacramental ministry of the ordained. Generally, and in addition, the panel asked the attendees to consider the following in light of current discussion about women deacons: (1) What is called for in the twenty-first Century? (2) How does the global context inform the question of ordained women deacons? (3) What vision of the person is presented by the church today, and should be presented by the church of the future?

Approximately forty people attended the session. The session was arranged as a panel discussion so the opening remarks by the speakers were limited to fifteen-minute presentations. Dr. Ditewig spoke about the origins of the revival of the permanent diaconate in the nineteenth century and the central role of World War II in the mindset of the participants in Vatican II. Dr. Ditewig insisted that the purpose of the diaconate was to restore an order of service to the Church. Therefore, deacons have a very different ministry than priests and were never meant to supplement a priest shortage. Sr. Butler used historical sources to argue that women deacons in the past were a separate order from male deacons, instituted to minister to women. This order eventually morphed into the leadership of orders of religious women. Dr. Butler concluded that the evidence did not support the revival of an ordained diaconate for women, but that there was no obstacle to an unordained ministry of women. Dr. Zagano argued in favor of reviving the ordination of women deacons based on a different reading of historical sources, on the needs of the present church, and on the principal of equity. Dr. Zagano also pointed out the arguments used to deny women ordination to the priesthood do not apply in the case of ordaining women deacons and that the Vatican has deliberately left the question of women deacons open.

A lively discussion followed. The question of the relationship of the ministry of the deacon as opposed to that of the priest was explored at length. The question of whether an interest in the diaconate was a specifically U.S. interest or of interest to the international church as well was also raised. The question of the decline of both priests and religious in relation to the revival of women deacons was addressed, as was the constitutive role of iconic figures in ordination liturgies. Finally, the importance of vocation and discernment in the process of selection of priest and deacons, both male and potentially female, engendered an animated exchange.

GARY MACY
Santa Clara University
Santa Clara, California