

The Unity of the Sacrament of Holy Orders

According to Aimé Mortimort, there does exist conclusive historical evidence of the existence of a deaconess¹ who has received the sacrament of Holy Orders.² However, one thing does emerge clearly from the historical evidence is that there were deaconesses who performed a liturgical role in the rite of Baptism,³ who stood at the entrances to seat people by separating them out,⁴ as well as other functions, but they were never ordained to serve at the altar.⁵ While the question of the historical existence of deaconesses is a necessary aspect of research, there is one aspect of the discussion of the restoration of deaconesses which is tacitly ignored, viz. the dogmatic question about the nature of Holy Orders.⁶ For this reason, this article will concern itself not with the

¹The proper English substantive for a female who has been raised to the diaconate is “deaconess.” The use of the term “deacon”, i.e. the masculine form, in relation to females receiving the diaconate has become wide spread. Like its counter part “female priests,” it is grammatically incorrect. The term “priest” and “deacon” are masculine and should not be used coupled with an adjective which is by nature feminine. While the English language does not depend on gender as much as other romance languages, there are certain words in English which have a gender, and the grammatical structures, for linguistic reasons, should be retained. Perhaps some wish to avoid the terms “priestess” and “deaconess” due to the terms’ pagan overtones. Mortimort in *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986) uses the term “female deacon” but in a specific sense. Normally speaking, he refers to women who have been raised to the level of the diaconate as deaconesses, however, he tends to retain the term “female deacon” for a woman who has received the sacrament of Holy Orders as opposed to a “deaconess” who has not received Holy Orders but serves some function in the Church.

²Mortimort, op. cit., passim. The entire text re-iterates this point. It should be noted, however, that there are other “periti” who consider the historical evidence as supporting the existence of deaconess receiving the sacrament of Holy Orders. Among others, see Gryson, *The Minister of Women in the Early Church*.

³Mortimort, op. cit, p. 38, 112 and 241ff. among others.

⁴Ibid., p. 72.

⁵Ibid., passim.

⁶In this article, the term “Holy Orders” will refer primarily to the sacrament of Holy Orders, i.e. the diaconate, priesthood and episcopate. However, the reader should keep in mind that traditionally there were seven holy orders. The minor orders were not considered as a sacrament but sacramentals. Moreover, it has been generally considered that the subdiaconate, which was previously considered a major order, was not, in fact, a sacrament but a sacramental. See Pesch (*Praelectiones Dogmaticae*, Friburg, 1924), vol. 7, tract. II, art. II, p. 289-298.

historical considerations,⁷ but with a doctrinal consideration which seems to be of the utmost importance in regards to whether a woman is capable of receiving the sacrament of Holy Orders.

The Canon Law Society of America

Recently, the Canon Law Society of America (CLSA) published a report by an ad hoc committee which supported the restoration of deaconesses. In its document, *The Canonical Implications of Ordaining Women to the Permanent Diaconate*, the CLSA tends to side with Gryson's historical interpretation. However, the document does not simply state that ordination of women to the diaconate, historically speaking, is clearly demonstrated. What it tends to do is to discuss the existence of deaconesses and their functions without a clear discussion of the doctrinal considerations.⁸ Stress tends to be laid on four things, viz. the lack of historical evidence that deaconesses were *not* ordained to the diaconate,⁹ the fact that Paul VI restored the permanent diaconate for men,¹⁰ the idea that the cultural milieu would support the restoration of deaconesses¹¹

⁷The historical considerations are far too extensive for an article of this nature.

⁸The document does contain a short section on the doctrinal considerations on pages thirty-one to thirty-four. However, key doctrinal issues, like the one to be discussed shortly, are notably absent.

⁹CLSA, *The Canonical Implications of Ordaining Women to the Permanent Diaconate*, (Canon Law Society of America, Washington, D.C., 1995) p. 5-18. It should be noted that a negative argument cannot be employed in order to arrive at a positive conclusion. In other words, just because the historical evidence does not decisively demonstrate they were not ordained does not necessarily support the argument that they were ordained.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 22f. Consequently, because he restored it for men, the Church could restore it for women.

¹¹Ibid., p. 26-30. While this is open to debate, the discussion of it will not be broached here.

and finally that the canonical requirements could be altered.¹²

In the final analysis, the CLSA views the restriction of receiving the diaconate to men as one of purely ecclesiastical regulation¹³ and not one of divine positive law. This is based on a twofold argument; the first is the discussion of the position provided in the previous paragraph and the second is on an imprecise assertion about the Church's power over the sacraments. The document states:

Thus, the Church has power over the sacraments to determine what is necessary for their valid and lawful celebration, and to provide for their ready availability to all God's people. ...Thus over the centuries Church authorities have modified the celebration of certain sacraments, including the determination of what is necessary for their valid celebration. ...In light of what the Church has determined in the past, it is within the competence of appropriate Church authorities to determine who may be ordained a permanent deacon. ... Similarly, in light of past experience, it is within the competence of supreme Church authority to determine that women may be ordained to the permanent diaconate...¹⁴

The formulation of this argument is erroneous because it is imprecise. While it is true that the Church has power over the sacraments, it is not true that the Church has power over what constitutes validity for *all* of the sacraments.¹⁵ With some sacraments, the Church is not at liberty to change the

¹²Ibid., p. 35-49. Part of the canonical considerations includes an analysis of the current requirements for validity and liceity for the sacrament. Aside from canon 1024 (CIC/83), the remaining canonical requirements for permanent "deaconessate" would be the same as it is for permanent deacons.

¹³Ibid., p. 38ff.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁵The document by the CLSA does state that the Church authorities "have modified the celebration of *certain* sacraments, including the determination of what is necessary for their valid celebration." Emphasis mine.

matter and form¹⁶ nor the necessary qualities required of the subject of the reception of the sacrament.¹⁷ Therefore, the CLSA document has not clearly established that the Church is in a position to alter the subject or recipient of the sacrament of Holy Orders since they have not demonstrated clearly that historically deaconesses received the sacrament nor have they demonstrated theologically (i.e. doctrinally) that the Church can change the required qualities of the subject of the sacrament of Holy Orders.¹⁸

Ordinatio Sacerdotalis

On May 22nd, 1994, John Paul II promulgated the apostolic letter “*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*” stating:

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of our ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk. 22:32), we declare that the Church has no capacity whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.¹⁹

¹⁶E.g. Baptism and the Eucharist. Even though the form of the Eucharistic consecration has varied slightly, those things which are considered essential to the validity have remained the same throughout time. Therefore, to drop “mysterium fidei” from the form of consecration of the wine does not affect validity. But the Church is not in a position to alter the words “Hoc est corpus meum” or “This is my body” with respect to the Eucharist.

¹⁷For instance, the Church does not have the authority to stop the requirement of baptism for the valid reception of the other sacraments.

¹⁸As time advances, a slow gathering of documentation is being mounted on both sides of this issue. However, those who fall into the same position as the CLSA document generally tend to propose the same arguments and for this reason the CLSA document is representative of most of those holding the same position.

¹⁹Para. 4. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

This document, in our present discussion, enunciates three vital points. The first is what is obvious, viz. that the Holy Father has stated that the Church cannot confer priestly ordination on a woman. The second is that the Church herself knows and sees that she does not possess absolute power over the sacraments and that this extends to the ordination of women to the priesthood.²⁰ Therefore, with respect to the subject of the recipient of the sacrament of Holy Orders to the degree of the priesthood, a woman is incapable of its reception. The third is perhaps the most important in light of the current discussion, viz. the wording selected by the Holy Father. He specifically said that *priestly* ordination cannot be conferred on women. In other words, some have read this document as saying that women cannot receive the priesthood but they could receive the diaconate.²¹ It is this wording that has led the CLSA and others to assert that women are not completely closed off from receiving the sacrament of Holy Orders, since they could receive it to the degree of the diaconate.

The Unity of Holy Orders

The theologians of the past in their discussion of the sacrament of Holy Orders generally did not discuss the notion of women becoming deacons as a real possibility. For them, women were excluded from orders and there were no distinctions made between the possibility of a woman becoming a priest and her possibility of becoming a deacon; they were merely excluded from all

²⁰The Holy Father in the above quote uses the Latin word “*facultas*” where I have translated it as capacity. The wording is interesting since it seems to imply that it might be possible, theoretically speaking, for a woman to receive Holy Orders, but that God simply has not given the Church permission or the “*faculties*,” if you will, to do so. Perhaps such a reading presses the issue too much but using the term “*facultas*” as opposed to “*capacitas*,” for instance, does seem to imply more than merely the Church lacking the authority to ordain women.

²¹Incidentally, if this method of reading is to be employed, why has the possibility of women to be consecrated bishops not been proffered by those advocating the deaconessate?

Holy Orders. The reason why women were considered to be excluded from being a deacon if they could not be considered a priest is because the sacrament of Holy Orders comprises a single sacrament. The theologians do not provide a lengthy discussion of the matter but usually just state the principle outright:

Diaconate, presbyterate and episcopate are sacramental grades of Order. However, they are not three distinct sacraments, but conjointly form the one Sacrament of Order. The priestly power is found in its whole fullness in the episcopate, in a lower grade of perfection in the presbyterate; the lowest grade of the participation in the priestly power as found in the diaconate.²²

Ott merely states that, while there are different orders, there is only one sacrament. The Church has formally defined that there are (only) seven sacraments of the New Law.²³ If one were to say that they were distinct sacraments, then there would be nine sacraments and not seven.²⁴ Such a teaching has never been part of doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Some of the theologians refer to Saint Thomas Aquinas in this regards noting the following

²²Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Tan Books and Publishers, Inc.: Rockford, Illinois, 1974), p. 454. See also Noldin, *Summa Theologiae Moralis* (Oeniponte: Lipsiae, Ratisbona, 1940), Vol. III, p. 463: “Omnes ordines ex unitate finis, ad quem referuntur, unum tantummodo sacramentum consistuunt, cum omnes ordinentur ad unum eucharistiae sacramentum et sacrificium”; Prummer, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis* (Herder & Co: Friburgi, 1933), Vol. III, p. 421: “Insuper omnes ordines constituunt unum sacramentum ex unitate finis, ad quem ordinantur, nempe omnes ordinantur ad eucharistiam” and Tanquerey, *Synopsis Theologiae Dogmaticae* (Benzinger Brothers, Inc.: New York, 1952), p. 719: “Etsi plures sint ordines, unum est tamen ordinis sacramentum.”

²³See Trent, sess. VII, canon 1: Denz. 844/1601 (Denzinger, Henricus and Schönmetzer, Adolfus, eds. *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*. Herder: Roma, 1976).

²⁴That is, there would be Baptism, Confirmation, Confession, Holy Communion, Matrimony, Extreme Unction and instead of merely “Holy Orders” as the seventh sacrament, there would be three more sacraments, viz. Diaconate, Presbyterate and Episcopate.

passage from his commentary on the *Sentences*:²⁵

The distinction of orders is not of the entire whole into the parts, nor of the universal whole, but of the whole of powers; of which its nature is such that the whole is in one according to its complete nature (rationem); in others, however, it is some participation of it; and so it is here; for the full whole of this sacrament is in one order, namely, the priesthood, but in others it is a certain participation in orders; ... and therefore all orders are one sacrament. .²⁶

Saint Thomas has noted that Holy Orders comprises one sacrament in which there are degrees of participation in the one order which is complete or whole in one order, viz. the priesthood. In other words, there are not three sacraments of Holy Orders but one sacrament of Holy Orders.

A close analysis of the text is quite fruitful in order to understand the sacrament. He says that the distinction of orders is not of the entire whole into the parts; in other words, the whole of the sacrament is not divided into the various parts. So there is not one sacrament of Holy Orders in which the deacon gets one part, the priest another and the bishop a third. Moreover, orders is not “of the universal whole.” In other words, each part does not contain the entire whole as such; so a Deacon (i.e. the part) does not possess the fullness of the priesthood (i.e. the whole) and each, viz. the priest, deacon and bishop, are not individual parts each having the whole of the thing. This is a bit difficult to understand and the analogy of the Eucharist is quite useful in showing this type of division of the whole into the parts. In the Eucharist, each part which is broken off from the Host

²⁵Most of them refer to the *Supplementum* of the *Summa Theologiae*, e.g. see Tanquerey, loc. cit. and Prummer, loc. cit. The difficulty with this is that the supplement is not the actual composition of Saint Thomas but is a compilation from other works by a later author. However, the common reference of the manualists to S.T. Suppl., q. 37, a. 1, ad 2 is identical to this a citation in the *Sentences*; see below.

²⁶IV Sent. d. 24, q. 2, a. 1 ad 2: “distinctio ordinum non est totius integralis in partes, neque totius universalis, sed totius potestativi; cuius haec est natura quod totum secundum completam rationem est in uno, in aliis autem est aliqua participatio ipsius; et ita est hic: tota enim plenitudo hujus sacramenti est in uno ordine, scilicet sacerdotio; sed in aliis est quaedam participatio ordinis; ...et ideo omnes ordines sunt unum sacramentum.” All quotations from Saint Thomas can be found in the Leonine edition (*Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia*, Iussu Impensaue :Leonis XIII, edita., Roma: ex Typographia Polyglotta et al., 1882).

contains the whole of Christ; Saint Thomas is saying that the Sacrament of Holy Orders does not function this way.

What Saint Thomas is saying is that the Sacrament of Holy Orders comprises a single sacrament of which each part participates in the whole according to *degree*.²⁷ In other words, orders has to do with powers and the bishop possesses more powers than the priest, who possesses more powers than the deacon. Each have powers but one to a lesser degree than the another. So a bishop who has the fullness of the priesthood²⁸ has the sacrament of Holy Orders in its fullness, i.e. in the greatest degree. Whereas a priest or a deacon likewise has the same Sacrament of Holy Orders but to a lesser degree. Hence, the sacrament is the same in each but they are distinguished according to the degree of the sacrament which they possess which, in turn, determines their powers or what they can do. Therefore, there is one Sacrament of Holy Orders but varying degrees of that one sacrament.

In fact, in all Church documents and among the theologians, this sacrament is always referred to in the singular and not in the plural.²⁹ Moreover, when they refer to the exclusion from the sacrament of Holy Orders for women, it is always done in such a way that there is no distinction made between exclusion from a particular degree; it is always made as an exclusion from this entire

²⁷The use of the term “degree” can be found in many ecclesiastical documents but recently it finds its place in the joint declaration of the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Congregation for the Clergy in association with the documents on the *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* and the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, para. 1: “The Sacrament of apostolic ministry comprises three degrees.”

²⁸See Vatican II, *Prebyterorum Ordinis*, para. 7 and *Lumen Gentium*, para. 41 (Pauline Books and Media, 1994). The last reference is of interest because it indicates that priests participate to a degree in the fullness of the priesthood possessed by bishops. This counters the position that the priest possesses the fullness of the priesthood but the full exercise of the powers are loosed once one is consecrated a bishop. Regardless of one’s position on the matter, it does not affect the current issue at hand, viz. whether women can be ordained to the diaconate.

²⁹Even in the new code we see, “Sacram ordinationem valide recipit solus vir baptizatus” (CIC/83 - can. 1024; the CIC/17 - can. 968 is identical in wording); see also Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology* (Sheed and Ward: New York, 1943), Vol. IV, p. 25; Noldin, op. cit., p. 463. Ott, op. cit., p. 459: “The sacrament of Order can be validly received by a baptized person of the male sex only,” Prummer, op. cit, p.421-431 and Tanquerey, op. cit., p. 735.

sacrament. The reason this follows is that if masculinity is *necessary* for the reception of this sacrament in any degree, then it must be in all degrees; for the sacrament of Holy Orders is essentially one, i.e. it is the same in a deacon, priest and bishop. What differs is their fullness of possession of the sacrament. In other words, the requirements which are essential for the sacrament are the same for all of the degrees since they are essentially the same sacrament. If it is of divine law that one must be male to receive the priesthood, then it is of divine law for the diaconate as well, because they are not different sacraments.

The operative principle here is that of non-contradiction: one cannot be capable of receiving Holy Orders and not receiving Holy Orders in the same time and in the same respect. “Degree” does not constitute a “respect” or the way one looks at the sacrament since it is accidental and not essential. If degree were essential to Holy Orders, then there would be three sacraments; for there would be three essentially different things of which the specific difference would be the degree. Therefore, degree cannot be the criteria upon which one bases the valid reception of the sacrament by a particular subject.³⁰ In other words, the Sacrament of Holy Orders is one sacrament comprising a whole. If one is to receive it (regardless of degree) one must be male, for masculinity is necessary for the sacrament *in se*, i.e. in general or in itself.

³⁰This is quite clear in the case of the permanent diaconate. It is recognized that a man, who is married, can be ordained to the permanent diaconate and could, likewise, be ordained to the priesthood. What bars him from advancing from one degree to another is not some essential difference in the sacrament which makes him an unfit subject, but the Church’s positive law (i.e. something accidental) that those who are married in the Latin rite cannot become priests. In other words, by divine law, the conditions for receiving the Holy Orders in general have been set, viz. Baptism and masculinity of the subject and there does not appear to be any divine positive law regulating the advancement of one order to another, for since one can receive the lesser, he can receive the higher. However, the Church can place regulations about the advancement to Holy Orders and in Holy Orders, but these in themselves do not deny the *intrinsic* capacity of a man to receive all of the degrees of this sacrament.

Conclusion

This brings us back to the Holy Fathers wording of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. When the Holy Father said: “I declare that the Church has no capacity whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women” the term “priestly” here would encompass the entire sacrament in all its degrees. While it is not entirely clear exactly what the Holy Father’s intention is regarding the term “priestly” here,³¹ one should not infer that therefore women can be ordained to the diaconessate. However, this does not exclude the theological (as well as historically based) possibility of having deaconesses who are fully functional³² like a deacon but they would not have the sacrament of Holy Orders. Such action on the side of Church would be disastrous, for it would increase the confusion about the nature of the priesthood which is already a serious difficulty.³³ Moreover, it would increase the widening gap between doctrine and practice which has already become a serious problem in the Church. If only a male can be ordained which is fundamentally ordered to the service of the sacrifice of the altar, then to allow women to be deaconesses, would imply that the congruity between service at the altar

³¹My suspicion is that the Church is being cautious and is a bit leery that the historical evidence is not absolutely conclusive. She does not want to declare something about which the historical evidence has not been thoroughly parsed out.

³²Since abbesses have been given the power to bless in the past and since women now can serve at the altar, they could be allowed to perform the functions of a deacon since this prohibition is merely ecclesiastical law. Moreover, since Baptism can be conferred by anyone in cases of emergency and since marriage is something essentially contracted by the two parties, nothing would prohibit the Church from allowing women deaconesses to officiate marriages and baptize. Finally, since the prohibition to preach is merely ecclesiastical law (i.e. assuming St. Paul’s admonition that women should not speak in Church is purely advisory or “historically conditioned”), there is no reason why a deaconess could not preach. In effect, there is nothing barring a deaconess doing all the things a deacon does; she would merely lack orders.

³³Like some of the ancient “ordinations” of deaconesses in the past, there would be nothing to bar the Church authorities from having a laying on of hands and saying of a formula. The only thing that would be understood is that this action would not confer the sacrament of Holy Orders.

and orders is not important. Moreover, we must ask ourselves whatever happened to the holy approach of the Church in the past which heeded the monitions and advice of the saints? Are the divinely inspired writings of Saint Paul with regards to women in the Church to be totally ignored without suffering some ill effects?

Fr. Chad Ripperger, F.S.S.P., Ph.D.
Copyright © 2006