

## Research Article

Marie-Line Morin\*

# Women Deacons in the Sacrament of Holy Orders

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2025-0049>

received April 17, 2025; accepted May 28, 2025

**Abstract:** This essay presents the results of a study on the admissibility of women to the diaconate in Holy Orders. Referring to the International Theological Commission's (ITC) analysis of the status of the diaconate (2002), the author clarifies some questions at the heart of the debate on the matter as she offers support to her conclusion that there are no theological obstacles to ordaining women as deacons. Highlighting the coexistence of two types of ministries in the single Holy Orders – that of priests and bishops under the Petrine principle and that of deacons under the Marian principle – she argues that women's ordination to the diaconate is in keeping with the *unity* of the sacrament of Holy Orders. Based on the ITC's suggestion that the diaconal sacramental *specificity* lies in deacons' status of *auxiliary* collaborators with apostolic successors, she also argues that woman, whose *auxiliary* quality is in line with Mary's *surrendering-listening* posture, should be admitted to the diaconate so that the *feminine* signs of God's image and likeness be as equally present in the clergy as the *masculine* so to establish an equal gender symmetry in the sacramental and organizational economy of the Catholic Church.

**Keywords:** Marian-Petrine principle, sacramental unity, feminine-masculine signs, auxiliary collaborators, surrendering-listening posture

## 1 Introduction

When then-Pope Francis created a commission, in 2016, to study the historical status of women deacons, I was excited to think that the conclusions of the research I had done on women's admissibility to the diaconate, based on the International Theological Commission's (ITC) analysis on the status of the diaconate: *From the diakonia of Christ to the diakonia of the apostle* (2002), could be heard. Having sent these conclusions to that commission in 2017, I understood I would have to revisit my work when it ended without reaching a consensus. Unsure of the direction given to the second commission formed in 2020, I decided to review my findings in light of the question the religious superiors of the *International Union of Superiors General* (UISG) had asked to Pope Francis (prompting the first commission's study): "What prevents the Church from including women among permanent deacons [since,] in the absence of a priest[, c]onsecrated women already do much work [like that of deacons]?"<sup>1</sup> I then set out to publish these findings in support of my conclusion that there are no theological obstacles to ordaining women as deacons.

Now, in the course of my writing, the Synod on Synodality was held and a request arose that the issue of women's ordination to the diaconate be addressed. While it was found not mature enough, at the time of the Synod closing, to follow through with a recommendation about such ordination, a more in-depth study on this

---

<sup>1</sup> Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), 2016.

---

\* Corresponding author: Marie-Line Morin, Québec, Canada, e-mail: marielinemorin@gmail.com

subject was entrusted to “the commission assigned to the task”<sup>2</sup> and external researchers were invited to send their contributions to that commission. Meanwhile, the Pope also occasionally answered questions from journalists on this subject and made various comments that caught my attention, two of them pertaining to issues at the heart of the debate on this matter. One of those, where he denied women’s admissibility to the diaconate in Holy Orders,<sup>3</sup> prompted the writing of this essay. Thus, with a conclusion challenging aspects of Pope Francis’ position and considering this invitation to send external studies to the assigned commission, it seemed indicated to publish segments of my study which led to my belief in the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate in Holy Orders.

Having exposed this conclusion at the outset, I make the case in this essay, based on findings extracted from my projected publication, that admitting women to the diaconate is conceivable. I begin doing so, in the first section, as I clarify how *ministry*, in the case of the apostolic successors, priests, and bishops, is linked to the Petrine principle and, in that of deacons, not considered an integral part of apostolic successors’ *ministry* but possibly forming part of the *ecclesiastical* ministry, could relate to the Marian principle. Then, highlighting the co-existence of two types of ministries in the single sacrament of Holy Orders – that of *higher* degrees, of the apostolic succession, and that of *lower* degrees, of the *ecclesiastical* ministry – I support this idea that, while the ministerial functions of the apostolic successors are subject to the Petrine principle, the diaconal ministry’s *ecclesiastical* orientation and integration within the *diakonia* of the *feminine* Church, whose Icon is Mary, could indeed fall under the Marian principle. Finally, I argue in favor of a *female* diaconate as I show that allowing women deacons to serve, alongside men deacons as *auxiliary collaborators* to priests and bishops, would be consistent with the *unity* of the sacrament of Holy Orders.

In the second section I suggest that, by comparison to priesthood where *masculinity* is linked to the symbol of Christ the Head, the diaconate be the degree of Holy Orders that can bear the symbol of *femininity* associated with the Church, Christ’s Body and Bride though still bearing the *masculine* sign of Christ the Head as Bridegroom and Servant. I support this idea by first showing that the *dual gender symbolism* implied in Christian marriage is at the heart of the Covenantal Church. As signs of both *masculinity* and *femininity* are present in the Church under Mary whom the Spirit made “the Mother of the ‘whole Christ,’”<sup>4</sup> so should the hierarchy bear that same symbolic duality: priests and bishops bearing the *masculine* representation of the *sacrificial* Christ Head and Shephard and, with the diaconate’s connection to the *feminine* Church, women deacons bearing the *feminine* symbolism attached to Christ’s Body and Bride, alongside men deacons symbolizing the *servant* Christ Head as Bridegroom. To support this thought, I refer to the interpretation of the marriage analogy by the 1997 International Theological Commission<sup>5</sup> and to John Paul II’s thinking<sup>6</sup> on the Trinity which, as the model of family, is reflected in the *male-female duality* of God’s human creation. Then, referring to James Keating’s concept of *self-effacing* services, I suggest that the *indelible character* to which deacons’ beings are configured when empowered to serve the People of God be understood as an *inner disposition* to *self-surrendering-listening* whence flows the sacramentality of diaconal services, otherwise predominantly oriented toward establishing an ecclesiology of communion. Finally, as this inner disposition can be likened to Mary’s *obedient surrender* to the Spirit and, by virtue of the diaconal ministry’s possible link to the Marian principle I add that while bearing both the *feminine* and *masculine* symbolisms, deacons of both genders would have the *servant* Mary as their primary model. I also further justify the admissibility of the female diaconate on the ground that, as Mary’s Icons women – often thus designated by Pope Francis – are needed, as ordained deacons, to embody and symbolize the *feminine surrendering* and *listening* posture implied in this Marian model. Thus, following these analogously sustained ideas, I reflect on the importance of ordaining *female* deacons who, alongside *male* deacons, priests, and bishops, would help establish an *equal*

2 Catholic News Agency, Almudena Martínez-Bordiú, Vatican City, Oct 25, 2024. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/260101/cardinal-fernandez-says-female-diaconate-will-be-studied-more-intensively>.

3 During an interview with 60 Minutes, CBS, 2024.

4 Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 142.

5 International Theological Commission. *Propositions on the Doctrine of Christian Marriage*, 1997.

6 Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II, 1994, no. 2.

*gender symmetry* “in the sacramental and organizational economy of the Catholic Church”<sup>7</sup> to address, among other challenging issues, that of the sexual abuse scandal.

So with the clarifications and suggestions offered in this essay, I hope to contribute to the study undertaken by the commission assigned to this task (as Cardinal Fernandez indicated) and by the “ministry of discernment”<sup>8</sup> in the Church responsible for pronouncing authoritatively on this question of the *female* diaconate in Holy Orders.

## 2 Clarifying Theological–Doctrinal Questions

The first of two Papal statements that most caught my attention referred to Balthasar’s concept of the Marian-Petrine principle. Answering a question on women’s inadmissibility to the priesthood in an interview with Kerry Webber (America Magazine), Pope Francis said that a woman cannot “enter ordained ministry ... because the Petrine principle has no place for that [, adding that this principle] is that of ministry [he said,] women’s role is linked to] the Marian principle, [also that] of femininity ... in the Church”<sup>9</sup> [, and should be] understood under the Marian “ministerial, ... ecclesial [or] administrative way.”<sup>10</sup> Though it partly clarified the Church’s position on reserving the priesthood to men, this declaration left open the question of women’s possible sharing in the ministry of the diaconate and unclear the meaning of the Marian *ministerial, ecclesial, or administrative way*. Clarifications around this Petrine-Marian principle’s link to the ministry were needed.

The Petrine principle itself is understood to refer to Peter’s ministry, thus to the Twelve and Christ’s apostolic successors, priests, and bishops, not to deacons. First acknowledging that the diaconate’s sacramental *specificity* is not yet defined doctrinally, the ITC states that priests and bishops are part of the apostolic succession since they

belong to the “sacerdotium” [while] deacons would form part of the “ecclesiastical” ministry[. The diaconate,] “non ad sacerdotium, sed ad ministerium,” ... should be recognized as apostolic in its foundation, [but] not in its theological nature.”<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, adds the ITC, deacons “should be considered ... as *auxiliary* collaborators towards the ministry of apostolic succession, and [therefore not], strictly speaking, an integral part of [apostolic successors’ ministry].”<sup>12</sup> Thus recognizing two distinct types of ministries in the same Holy Orders: “the *gradus participations sacerdotalis* ..., and the *gradus servitii* [, the ITC underscores that by their] *way of participating* in the one mission of Christ, [deacons carry] out this mission in the manner of an auxiliary service.”<sup>13</sup> Then, viewing “the Church as a “universal sacrament of salvation,” [it suggests that the] specific sacramental configuration of the diaconal ministry [be] integrated within [the “*diakonia*” of the Church] as a whole.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, given its *ecclesiastical* orientation and its sacramental configuration, thought to be rooted in deacons *auxiliary* status of collaborators with bishops and priests, and under its integration in the Church’s *diakonia*, the diaconal ministry would not fall under the Petrine principle. Hence, the Pope’s comment about this principle *having no place for women* would not apply in the case of women, should they be admitted to the diaconate, participating in *diaconal ministry*.

<sup>7</sup> Pelletier, *L’Église et le féminin*, 148. The translation, throughout this article, of Pelletier’s quotes from French to English is our own.

<sup>8</sup> International Theological Commission. 2002, ch. 7, sec. 4, Conclusion.

<sup>9</sup> Catholic News Agency, Zelda Caldwell, Washington, D.C. Newsroom, Nov 28, 2022. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/252928/pope-francis-explains-to-america-magazine-why-women-cannot-be-ordained-priests>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Nov 28, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from LG 29a, note 308, International Theological Commission. 2002, ch. 7, sec. 3, no. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 3, no. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 4, Conclusion.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 4, Introduction.

Now, the Pope's suggestion that the Marian principle be the reference by which to understand the role of women as it relates to the *femininity of the Church* faces the opposition of many scholars. Among these, theologian Anne-Marie Pelletier warns that placing their role under the Marian principle runs the risk of confining women to being icons of an exalted and idealized image of Mary. Central to her criticism, however, is the fact that the Marian principle, though linked to Mary Mother of the Church, embraces all of ecclesiastic life and involves ministerial services at all levels; those rendered by the faithful and ordained ministers. So, she advises, researchers should not limit their views on women's role in the Church to this Marian principle and, we add, neither should that principle serve the purpose of excluding women from the diaconate. On the contrary, since both principles refer to the two inseparable sides of Christ, Head and Body, they indicate men and women's *interdependence* in the offering of ministerial services that, under the *dual gender* symbolization of the Church, can be part of the *one* sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed, as the ITC considers the diaconate to be part of *ecclesiastical ministry* while clarifying that the ministry of apostolic succession is reserved to priests and bishops, it implicitly recognizes that the *single* Holy Orders contains two types of ministries: that of the *gradus participations sacerdotalis* and that of the *gradus servitii*. And while the *higher* degrees pertaining to the *apostolic succession* fall under the Petrine principle, the *lower* degree could be placed under the Marian principle since, along with the idea of integrating its sacramental configuration in the Church's *diakonia*, the diaconate is thought to belong to the *ecclesiastical* ministry. Thus, while deacons' status, seen by the ITC as that of being *auxiliary* collaborators with apostolic successors, places their services in the realm of the *feminine* Church, whose Icon is Mary, it is plausible to think of the diaconate in reference to the Marian principle and consequently, as the degree of Holy Orders that can include women in its ranks. Then, admitting women, Mary's icons, to the diaconate under this Marian principle, thought to embrace *ministerial services at all levels*, is both in line with Pelletier's stance and consistent with the Pope's comment on that principle being linked to women and to the "femininity (*femineidad*) in the Church."<sup>15</sup>

The Pope's second challenging statement was that of his "No" answer to Norah O'Donnell (CBS News, 2024) who had raised the question of one day seeing women ordained as deacons. Many deplored that this negative response and its additional comment on the inadmissibility of "deaconesses ... within the Holy Orders"<sup>16</sup> would put a halt to further studying the matter, otherwise recommended at the October 2023 Synod Assembly. In fact, this declaration struck at the heart of the issue of sacramental *unity* of Holy Orders which, strongly underlined "by the ecclesial tradition [and] in the teaching of the Magisterium,"<sup>17</sup> is also a central question in the debate around the *female* diaconate. Saying a few words about the meaning of this sacramental *unity* is thus indicated. According to the ITC, the traditional justification of this *unity* by "the relation of this sacrament to the Eucharist"<sup>18</sup> has been modified under Vatican II. Thus, it suggests considering this Council's perspective of the episcopate as "the 'fullness' of the sacrament of Holy Orders and the foundation of its unity [where] ordained ministry [is] perceived as 'hierarchy' [and] deacons represent the 'lowest' degree in the hierarchical scale, in relation to bishops and priests."<sup>19</sup> From that viewpoint, adds the ITC, "internal unity of the sacrament of Holy Orders means that each degree participates 'suo modo' in the triple ministerial 'munus'."<sup>20</sup>

Now, interpreting this participation as one where members of each degree equally share in the functions of those of the other two, opponents to women's ordination as deacons will argue that such ordination would run counter to the sacramental *unity* of Holy Orders since, not admitted to the priesthood, a woman could not share in the ministerial *munus* of the higher degrees. This interpretation implies that deacons partake in priests and bishops' *munus* in a way that is equivalent to that of apostolic successors' sharing in deacons' ministry. Yet, this viewpoint is not in line with the ITC's full statement which adds that the triple ministerial *munus* participation takes place "according to a pattern of decreasing gradation, that is, the higher degree

<sup>15</sup> Catholic News Agency, Caldwell, Nov 28, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Catholic News Agency, Daniel Payne, CNA Staff, May 21, 2024. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/257757/pope-francis-on-female-deacons-no>.

<sup>17</sup> International Theological Commission. 2002, ch. 7, sec. 5, Conclusion.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 3, no. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 3, nos 1 and 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 3, no. 2.

including and exceeding all the reality and functions of the lower degree.”<sup>21</sup> This means that, while the functions of the episcopate include and exceed that of the presbyterate, whose own *munus* include and exceed that of the diaconate, deacons’ participation *does not* include or exceed priests and bishops’ ministerial functions. Since the diaconate is related to the imposition of hands *non ad sacerdotium, sed ad ministerium*, deacons’ empowerment “to serve the People of God”<sup>22</sup> implies a different type of participation in the two *higher* degrees’ *munus*, otherwise engrained in their mission and capacity “to act in the person of Christ the Head.”<sup>23</sup> And where deacons’ sacramental specificity can be found in their status of *auxiliary* collaborators with apostolic successors, their services are *accessory* to priests and bishops’ *munus*. In that, the *lower* degree’s distinct way of sharing in *higher* degrees’ ministry does not run counter to the sacramental *unity* of Holy Orders. On the contrary, its difference indicates that this *unity* is found, not in an *identical* type of partaking but in the three degrees having *two* modes of sharing in the *same* Holy Orders’ global consecration and deputation to “serve the People of God [ , though] each according to his own grade,”<sup>24</sup> one of the apostolic succession, the other of the ecclesiastical ministry.

Consequently, women’s inadmissibility to priesthood cannot be seen as impeding their partaking, as deacons, in *higher* degrees ministerial *munus*. Thus, women’s ordination to the diaconate would not contravene the sacramental *unity* of Holy Orders, as can be illustrated when thinking about *permanent*<sup>25</sup> deacons whose consecration and deputation, like that of *transitional* deacons, place their *munus* in a different type of participation than that of priests and bishops. Indeed, under their status of *auxiliary* collaborators, permanent or transitional deacons bring an *auxiliary essence* to their configured being that gives a *subsidiary* color to their services regardless of an eventual ordination to the priesthood. Thus, while this distinctive type of ministry neither alters their diaconal participation in the *higher* degrees’ ministry nor runs counter to the sacramental *unity* of Holy Orders, so would it be for women deacons who cannot be ordained *ad sacerdotium*. As *permanent male* deacons’ *non-access* to the priesthood does not create a breach in the sacramental *unity* of Holy Orders, so can it be said of *female* deacons, should women’s ordination as such be admitted; their inadmissibility to the priesthood would neither alter their capacity to serve as *auxiliary* collaborators with the apostolic successors nor prevent them from sharing in priests and bishops’ *munus*. Hence, the idea that women’s ineligibility to the priesthood would have their diaconate be inconsistent with the sacramental *unity* of the Holy Order cannot be used to justify their exclusion from the diaconal ordination.

To conclude this section and further sustain the argumentation we have made so far, a few words can be offered as a reply to the possible objection that the diaconate, which is part of the sacrament of Holy Orders, cannot also be part of *ecclesiastical ministries*, considered non-sacramental, unless Jesus had instituted it as such at the Last Supper. Though rooted in Christ, actually, the diaconate is *not directly instituted* by Christ as is the case of priesthood, itself instituted at the Last Supper.<sup>26</sup> The “Church, says the ITC, played a decisive role in its specific historical establishment.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, when acknowledging that the “diaconate is a sacramental reality [integrated] within the single sacrament of Holy Orders”<sup>28</sup> as part of the ecclesiastical ministry, it implies that, while being ecclesiastically oriented, deacons’ ministry is both sacramental and in the keeping with the *unity*

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 3, no. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Code of Canon Law. Can. 1009.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Can. 1009.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Can. 1009.

<sup>25</sup> The use of the word *permanent* indicates that one’s ordination to the diaconate will not be followed by that to priesthood where so called *transitional* diaconate designates that men’s ordination to the diaconate is perceived as a transition toward their ordination to priesthood.

<sup>26</sup> Priesthood is founded on “Christ [who has], through his apostles, made their successors, the bishops namely, sharers in his consecration and mission” CCC, no. 1562, and when Jesus, “declaring Himself constituted a priest for ever, ... delivered (His own body and blood) to be received by His apostles, whom He then constituted priests of the New Testament; and by those words, Do this in commemoration of me, He commanded them and their successors in the priesthood, to offer (them); even as the Catholic Church has always understood and taught.” General Council of Trent, Twenty-second session, ch. 1. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/twenty-second-session.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> International Theological Commission. 2002, ch. 7, sec. 2, no. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 3, no. 3.



of Holy Orders. In fact, it explicitly states that the “clear distinction between the ministries of the bishop and the priests ... and the diaconal ministry<sup>29</sup> [is] admitted within the ‘unity of the sacrament of Holy Orders’.” Thereby, when recognizing that the diaconal ministry is both sacramentality and ecclesiastically oriented, the ITC offers grounds for the “ministry of discernment”<sup>30</sup> to decide whether this view of deacons’ *auxiliary* type of sharing in *higher degrees’ munus* is, indeed, sacramental and thus, rooted in Christ.

### 3 Additional Support: The Feminine and Masculine Symbolisms

In the second part of this essay, additional support can be brought to the ordination of women deacons through the lenses of the diaconate’s possible link to the *feminine* symbolism which, by comparison to that of *masculinity* associated with Christ the Head, relates to Christ’s Body, Church and Bride. We tackle this subject with reference to the 1997 International Theological Commission’s theological interpretation<sup>31</sup> of the marriage analogy – used by St. Paul to talk about the mystery of Christ’s union with his Church (Eph. 5: 32) – which lends credence to the idea that, based on its close connection to the Church, the diaconate could be the degree of Holy Orders that integrates the sign of *femininity* which, along with that of *masculinity* borne by *male* deacons, is linked to the symbolism of the Servant Christ as Bride and Bridegroom. And while this *dual gender* symbolism also refers to the *male-female* duality by which God chose to reflect his image and likeness in his human creation, it can also be tied to the way each of the two types of ministries in Holy Orders symbolize God revealing Himself through Christ who, first incarnate in Jesus’ *male* physical body, is always present in his *female* mystical body the Church. In that, where *masculinity*, a sign of the *sacrificial* Christ as Head and Shephard, is borne by priests and bishops, *femininity*, sign of the Church to which deacons are related, is borne by Mary. However, under the Christian marriage analogy, the symbolism attached to the *servant* Body of Christ would include both that relative to the Bride, borne by *female* deacons embodying the Servant Mary’s Bridal symbolism, and to the Bridegroom, borne by *male* deacons embodying the Servant Christ Bridegroom, both pertaining to the Marian principle. With this reflection, we aim to address the issue found by the 2002 ITC to be central to studies on the diaconate: that of its sacramental *specificity* relating to both the *essence* and *symbolism* tied to deacons, said to act *in persona Christi-Servi* as symbols of Christ Servant. Yet to further justify our stance ahead of the decisions the *ministry of discernment* is called upon to make on the *female* diaconate in Holy Orders, we also put the accuracy of our thoughts to the test of their relevance by outlining concrete implications of admitting women deacons under this *dual gender* symbolism in today’s context.

As seen earlier, by virtue of the diaconate being part of the ecclesiastical ministry, its services could fall under the Marian principle. Thus Mary, Servant of the Lord and Icon of the Church, can also be seen as deacons’ model *par excellence*. While indicating another path in support of women’s admissibility to the diaconate, her *feminine* way of being a *servant* would also exemplify that of all deacons, be they male or female. Thus, since women are the ones who concretely embody Mary’s *femininity*, their admission to the diaconate can be conceived and considered as the means to integrating the Marian *feminine* way of being Servant of the Lord within the sacrament of Holy Orders and thus, in Christ’s Body and Bride. In fact, women’s admission to the diaconate would offer a “concrete, institutional incarnation”<sup>32</sup> to the Marian pole of the Church which, under Balthasar’s theology, Pelletier laments, has “Mary’s encompassing maternity [run] the risk of lacking in consistency and effectiveness in the face of this Petrine pole which, for its part, exists officially, institutionally, through the carrying out of the ministries it is supposed to concentrate.”<sup>33</sup> In that,

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, ch. 7, sec. 5, Conclusion.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 5, Conclusion. “which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question,” 63.

<sup>31</sup> International Theological Commission. *Propositions on the Doctrine of Christian Marriage*, 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Pelletier, *L’Église et le féminin*, 155.

<sup>33</sup> Pelletier substantiates her thought as she criticizes Balthasar’s theology on the “Marian element in the Church encompass[ing] the Petrine element without claiming it for itself[, rooted in his view of Mary who,] ‘queen of the apostles’ [does not claim] apostolic powers for herself [since she] has something else and more,” 155. This viewpoint, she says, ratifies an established discriminatory order where women are viewed as secondary to men who, under the Petrine pole, are kept in “the position of authority [and] governance, which commands the life of the Church, [etc.].” 153.

the *first* degree of Holy Orders could be the one where, bearing the *feminine* symbolism of the Church whose *femininity* Mary embodies, the Marian way of serving could be embodied. Though supposing women thus serve as deacons, this assumption does not imply that *male* deacons would cease representing Christ the Head. On the contrary, under the analogy of Christian matrimony – one of the two sacraments, with Holy Orders, known as being *at the service of communion*<sup>34</sup> – the coexistence of both *females* representing Christ's Body and *males* Christ the Head can be envisioned in the *single* sacrament of Holy Orders, though under that Marian principle, the focus of *male* deacons' representation of Christ the Head would be that of the *serving* Bridegroom. Let us elaborate on this thought as we look at this *dual gender* symbolism from the angle of married women *and* men's involvement in the loving communion that founds families.

In the words of the 1997 International Theological Commission,<sup>35</sup> the matrimonial union, "a figure of the Covenant between God and the people of Israel ..., rises to a new dignity [in the New Testament, as it represents] the mystery that unites Christ and the Church."<sup>36</sup> In its theological interpretation, this commission explains that both "the supreme love and gift of the Lord who shed his blood and the faithful and irrevocable attachment of his Spouse the Church become models and examples for Christian matrimony."<sup>37</sup> That resemblance, which is "a relationship of real sharing in the Covenant of love between Christ and the Church,"<sup>38</sup> rises Christian marriage to the level of "a real symbol and sacramental sign [representing] the Church of Christ concretely in the world and, especially under its family aspect, [rightly called] the 'domestic Church'."<sup>39</sup> This statement makes it clear. As married couples find their model in *both the supreme love and gift of the Lord AND the faithful and irrevocable attachment of his Spouse the Church*, so does the Church, *mother of the whole Christ*, find its full symbolism in the *masculine* AND *feminine* signs: the former being linked to Christ the Head that husbands symbolize through their *loving gift of self* to their brides and the latter to Christ's Body, represented by wives whose attachment also refers to their *loving gift* to their bridegrooms.<sup>40</sup> Thus, while both men and women's *self-offering* is essential to establishing the loving relationship that leads to Christian matrimony and the foundation of family, so are *male* and *female* symbols of both Christ the Head and Christ's Body central to the *dual gender* image and likeness of God reflected by and connected to the Covenantal Church.

This idea is reinforced by then-Pope John Paul II's thoughts on the Trinity as model of family, which he calls the "*first and the most important ... way of the Church*."<sup>41</sup> For him, "the world of all living beings, is inscribed in God's fatherhood, [which comprises] fatherhood and motherhood and consequently[,] the human family."<sup>42</sup> Analogically reading Genesis, John Paul II says that before "God created man in his own image [as] male and female, [he withdrew into himself] to seek the pattern and inspiration in the mystery of his Being."<sup>43</sup> Then, in the Triune communion, which is the "same love with which the Creator embraces the created world, [the communion between the man and the woman created in his] divine image and likeness"<sup>44</sup> finds its eternal pattern. Thus, all of human life, from small communities to society as a whole, is marked by this *primordial duality*. Individuals' *masculinity* and *femininity* derive from it, as well as their equal dignity and each community's "unique richness in the mutual fulfilment of persons."<sup>45</sup>

Now, while this *male* and *female* duality can be seen as indicating two axes of qualities standing for people's various differences and unique identity, the dignity attached to each gender brings to the fore the

<sup>34</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. Table of Contents.

<sup>35</sup> *Propositions on the Doctrine of Christian Marriage*, 1997.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2.1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2.1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2.1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2.1.

<sup>40</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 773.

<sup>41</sup> Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II, 1994, no. 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 6.

importance they both have in defining what John Paul II calls “the qualities of the common good of humanity.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, he clarifies, as the man and the woman’s equal dignity is asserted with the words “Male and female he created them” (Gen. 1: 27, New American Bible Revised Edition), each gender’s specific contribution to this common good is found in the *male* and *female* distinctive ways of bringing forth “the qualities of communion and of complementarity.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, while a man and a woman’s loving union is founded on the partners mutual recognition of the *same* dignity they share as son and daughter of God – as in Adam’s exclamation: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” (Gen. 2: 23) – that union is also brought out of its fusion mode and into a relationship of communion when these partners assert their *distinctiveness*. In that, a married couple grows toward becoming an accurate reflection of the Trinitarian communion when a man and a woman’s loving communion comprises the mutual recognition of both the *sameness* of their dignity and the *distinctiveness* of their identity. This viewpoint does not imply, of course, that gender is a part of God *per se*. It is in line, rather, with Pope Francis’ view of “couple’s fruitful relationship [symbolizing] the mystery of God [who] has within himself fatherhood, sonship and the essence of the family, which is love[, that is,] the Holy Spirit.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, John Paul II’s claim about the *male–female* duality being the primordial mark of all communities and societies suggests that *masculine* and *feminine* qualities reveal important aspects of the Triune Being’s mystery. Hence, the need to recognize that women’s contribution is as equally important as that of men for the ecclesial communion to best reflect its source and model, the Trinitarian communion. Hence also the idea that, in light of the Christian matrimony analogy, the diaconate could be the level of the hierarchy to integrate women who, embodying the *feminine qualities* of God, would contribute to both that reflection and, alongside men deacons and priests, the concrete realization of the ecclesiology of communion. But what would it mean, some might ask, for women deacons to serve in that way? To answer this question, we must first clarify that of the sacramental *essence* of deacons’ services.

In its 2002 study, the ITC talks about *diakonia* as the means by which the ecclesiology of communion can be historically realized and presumes that “the specific sacramental configuration of the diaconal ministry [is to be] integrated in this ‘diakonia’ as a whole.” While the meaning of this *integration* is unclear, the idea that the diaconate sacramental component is linked to the Church’s *diakonia* suggests that deacons’ main focus is “the participation of the ecclesial communion in the communion of the Trinity.”<sup>49</sup> This is consistent with James Keating’s view of deacons who, “strengthened by sacramental grace[,] are dedicated to [serve] the People of God [and] “build up the Body of Christ” (Eph. 41: 12).”<sup>50</sup> This occurs, he says, through deacon’s *self-effacing* services rooted in an *interior self-surrender*, itself rooted in the meaning of St Paul’s words “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me”<sup>51</sup> (Gal. 2: 20). While a priest “makes himself permanently available to the sacrificial mystery of Christ[, Keating adds, a deacon] makes himself permanently available to the servant mystery of Christ.”<sup>52</sup> And while both mysteries coincide at the Eucharist, that of the deacon is manifested through *self-effacing services* where, disappearing “into the action he undertakes at Mass[, his function aims] to keep the circle of charitable receiving and giving turning, both sacramentally and within community.”<sup>53</sup> But how would *self-effaced* deacons *keep the circle of charity turning sacramentally and within community*? The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCCC) offers some clarity.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., no. 6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., no. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 2016, no. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Cardinal Marc Ouellet, The Ecclesiology of Communion, 50 Years after the Opening of Vatican Council II, September 2012, vol. XVIII, no. 6, ch. II, sec. C. <https://adoremus.org/2012/09/the-ecclesiology-of-communion-50-years-after-the-opening-of-vatican-council-ii/>.

<sup>50</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, 1998, no. 7 (to which we added no. 44) in Keating, *The Heart of the Diaconate*, 50.

<sup>51</sup> Keating, *The Heart of the Diaconate*, 51.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>53</sup> Keating quotes Guy Marsini, OSB, from private correspondence June 2010, Ibid., 51.



The “risen Christ unites his faithful people to himself ... by means of the Holy Spirit. In this way, those who believe in Christ ... are united among themselves in charity. They form one body, the Church [...].”<sup>54</sup> This statement leaves no ambiguity. The *Holy Spirit* is the one realizing the ecclesiology of communion; but He does so, says the Compendium, “in the ‘love [that] never ends’ [, the basis of this] communion of men with God [in the Church, which is the purpose governing] everything in her that is a sacramental means.”<sup>55</sup> Could deacons’ *self-effacing* services relate to enabling the Spirit’s *Never-ending Love* to keep that *circle of charitable receiving and giving turn sacramentally* and *within community*? Indeed, adding their *surrender* to Christ to this *self-effacing* disposition we could say that deacons contribute to realizing the *ecclesiology of communion* through a *self-surrendering* disposition which, facilitating the circulation of the *Love* of the Spirit in the souls of the faithful, fosters the emergence of communion between them and with God. To take this idea further, let us parallel deacons’ ministerial orientation to that of priests, though first clarifying the notion of sacramentality related to each degree of Holy Orders.

Canon 1008 of the Code of Canon Law states that by the sacrament of Holy Orders, sacred ministers “are marked with an indelible character [so that,] each according to his own grade, they may serve the People of God by a new and specific title.” Canon 1009 adds that priests and bishops “receive the mission and capacity to act in the person of Christ the Head, whereas deacons are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word and charity.” Including clarifications made by then-Pope Benedict XVI in the *Motu Proprio Omnium in Mentem* (2009), these canons distinguish the ministerial orientation of the diaconate from that of the episcopate and presbyterate in a way that brings resolution to an unresolved question raised by the ITC when referring to the 1983 CIC version: that of deacons pasturing “the People of God and [executing] the functions of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling ‘*in persona Christi Capitis*’.”<sup>56</sup> Thus eliminating the idea that deacons partake in Christ’ priesthood through sacred *power* having effect *ex opere operato*,<sup>57</sup> the wording of the current CIC results in positioning the diaconate differently. That is, it frees the diaconal ministry from the assumption that deacons are conferred with a sacramental *power* to *act in persona Christi*. Yet, having omitted to explain what the *empowerment to serve the People of God* stands for, the CIC left room for interpretations.

While the sacramentality in Holy Orders is founded on the *indelible character* with which the being of sacred ministers is marked, the effects attached to it relate to the type of imposition of hands associated with the specific title of each degree. In that, the imposition of hand *ad sacerdotium* confers a sacred *power* to *act in persona Christi* on the *character* to which priests and bishops’ being is configured. Yet, to the *character* configured on deacons’ being with imposition of hands “*non ad sacerdotium, sed ad ministerium*,”<sup>58</sup> an *undefined* empowerment to serve the People of God is conferred. No specific power is attached to this empowerment except that flowing from deacons’ configured being whose specific *character* or *essence* could be, as seen earlier, that of an *auxiliary* collaborator with the apostolic successors and whose *symbolism* of the Servant Christ relates to the Church. In that regard, the Catechism of the Catholic Church offers some explanation. It first states that the exercise of authority attached to the sacred *power* associated with sacred ministers’ *character* is measured “against the model of Christ, who by love made himself the least and the servant of all.”<sup>59</sup> Then, it adds that in the case of ministerial priesthood, it is measured according to the task of representing “Christ – Head of the Church [and of acting] in the name of the whole Church when presenting to God the prayer of the Church, and above all when offering the Eucharistic sacrifice.” Yet, though associating deacons’ task to the symbol of Christ Servant in the Church when assisting “the bishop and priests in the divine mysteries [and dedicating] themselves to various ministries of charity,”<sup>60</sup> the CCC makes no mention of a measure of authority or sacred power. So, as we consider the ITC’s statement that deacons participate in the mission of Christ “in the manner of an auxiliary service [as] ‘*icona vivens Christi servi in Ecclesia*,’” we can

<sup>54</sup> Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 156.

<sup>55</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 773.

<sup>56</sup> Code of Canon Law, 1983, quoted in International Theological Commission, ch. 7, sec. 3, no. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., ch. 7, sec. 4, no. 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Lumen gentium* 29, quoted in International Theological Commission, ch. 7, sec. 3, no. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1551.

<sup>60</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1569 and 1570.

understand the sacramentality attached to deacon's *indelible character* as an *inner disposition* to serve, as *auxiliary* collaborators to bishops and priests, and to *symbolize* Christ Servant in his Body-Bride.

In that, by comparison to a priest whose *character* is conferred with a *power* having effect *ex opere operato*, the sacramentality attached to a deacon's *character*, empowered to serve the People of God, would be expressed through the *inner disposition* that founds his *self-effacing services* as *auxiliary* collaborator to apostolic successors. In concrete terms, this means that, while priests are in a position that calls for their embodiment of Christ's *power*,<sup>61</sup> deacons are in a place of *powerlessness* which requires they take a *surrendering* posture whence their *self-effacing* services can flow. They are thus *bound*, so to speak, to draw the *sanctity* of their being and actions in the *Endless Love* of the Spirit, hence the outpouring of His *power* in their *charitable* services. This *surrendering-effacing* posture thus appears to be the means by which deacons can facilitate, like a clear *water channel*, the *Love* of the Spirit to circulate in their being and in that of the faithful. As such, they embody the *surrendering-obedient* posture of Mary, often called *channel of divine grace*,<sup>62</sup> when espoused by the Spirit and being thus made Mother of Jesus and of the Church. So, as Keating quotes Psalm 40, "Sacrifice and offering you do not want; but ears open to obedience you gave me"<sup>63</sup> to say that Jesus' *listening to his Father* is the condition to being, like him, the one who serves, so can Mary's *surrendering-listening*<sup>64</sup> posture be considered the model for deacon's way of contributing to the realization of the ecclesiology of communion. Let us further elaborate on this thought knowing this posture is analogous to that which makes the Church a *sacrament* but also, considering that the diaconal ministry's sacramental configuration is to be integrated into the Church's *diakonia*, that on which the realization of that ecclesiological model is thought to be founded.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), the Church is sign and instrument "of communion with God and of unity among all men [by the fact that, as Body of Christ, she] contains and communicates the invisible grace she signifies[: the] saving work of [Christ's] holy and sanctifying humanity."<sup>65</sup> This *invisible grace* of Christ's saving work, says the CCC, though revealed and active in the Church's sacraments, is also made manifest through "the holiness of Christ's members[, that to which the Church's structure] is totally ordered."<sup>66</sup> Thus, if deacons' *surrendering-listening* attitude enables their being to serve as a *channel* to let the *Endless Love* of the Spirit circulate in the hearts of the faithful and among them, their services will necessarily contribute to making people holy both individually and as a communion. In that, their *surrendering-listening* posture appears to be the *inner disposition* through which their ministerial sacramentality is both integrated into the Church's *diakonia* and in phase with Her sacramental communication of *the invisible grace she signifies*. Thus sacramentally rooted in the Church's *diakonia* and oriented toward *building up the Body of Christ* in holiness, *surrendering-listening-serving* deacons are signs and instruments of Christ while simultaneously activating, as it were, the Church's own sacramentality. As they create a space for the *Endless Love* of the Spirit to sanctify the faithful and consolidate their communion as a People of God and with the Trinity, they contribute to making the Church the *universal sacrament of salvation* that she is known to be. Thus, while this *surrendering-listening* disposition can be seen as the means by which deacons can concretely contribute to realizing the ecclesiology of communion, it can also be considered, we suggest, as the sacramental expression of the *auxiliary essence* through which they serve the People of God. Having thus brought clarity to the first

<sup>61</sup> As in the Eucharistic consecration of the Body and Blood of Christ.

<sup>62</sup> Pope Benedict XVI talks about Mary as "a privileged channel [whence] the divine wellspring flows[:] Emmanuel, God-with-us." Ordinary Public Consistory for the Creation of New Cardinals, 25 March 2006. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/zh/homilies/2006/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20060325\\_anello-cardinalizio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/zh/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060325_anello-cardinalizio.html).

<sup>63</sup> Keating, *The Heart of the Diaconate*, 52.

<sup>64</sup> The word *listening* is used henceforth since, equivalent to the word obedience, it better conveys the operational component of the communication implied in every communion. It is also in line with the direct connection Keating makes between *listening* and *surrender* as he refers to "Mary's attentiveness to Christ in Luke 10:38–42 [as that which] carries the desire to give the self." Keating, *The Heart of the Diaconate*, 52.

<sup>65</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. nos. 775 and 774.

<sup>66</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. no. 773.

aspect of the diaconate's sacramental specificity needing clarification, we are led to discuss the second aspect, that of the *symbolic character* attached to that *essence*.

\*\*\*

Based on the close connection between the diaconal ministry and the Church's *diakonia*, the symbolism borne by deacons can be that of both *femininity* and *masculinity* implied in Christian matrimony. Let us explore this idea as we say yet a few words about this diaconal *surrendering-listening* disposition. Though engrained in deacons' configured *character* allowing the *Love* of the Spirit to circulate, this specific sacramental disposition is also rooted in Christ through Jesus' presence "when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt. 18: 20)."<sup>67</sup> Therefore, when making Christ present by facilitating the circulation of the Spirit's Love among the faithful, deacons are serving as *sacred actors*

in this great work wherein God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified [in Christ who] always associates the Church with Himself [as] His beloved Bride who[, in turn,] calls to her Lord, and through Him offers worship to the Eternal Father.<sup>68</sup>

Hence, both the glory of God as Trinity and the sanctification of men and women occur through an ongoing exchange between the Bridegroom Christ and the Bridal Church, Christ's Body. The two are inseparable. As God's glory is revealed by men and women's sanctity which, in turn, glorifies God, a flow of the Trinity's image and likeness is revealed. And when the CCC states that Christ's *sanctification*, which founds the sacramentality of the Church, is measured "according to the 'great mystery' in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom,"<sup>69</sup> it indicates that deacons' ministry to the faithful and to the Church is measured *according to the same great mystery*. This suggests that the *dual gender* symbolism found in Christian matrimony is of great importance when it comes to the Covenantal Church's sacramentality. It gives the *feminine* and *masculine* symbols their rightful place as *signs and instruments of the invisible grace the Church contains and communicates*, that of symbolizing the Triune communion while reflecting the *dual gender* image and likeness God chose to imprint in his human creation and to reveal in Jesus the Sacrificed Christ Head-Bridegroom AND Servant-Body-Bride.

Now, though emphasizing the commonly shared *loving gift of self* in a married couple, this Christian matrimony analogy also highlights the distinctiveness of the *female* and *male* contributions when defining what John Paul II called *the qualities of the common good of humanity*. It thus points to the importance of having women deacons working with clergymen to address two critical issues: 1) that of having equally represented *female* and *male* resources and models in the hierarchy to ensure that God's *dual gender* image and likeness will fully be reflected in the *diakonia* of the Church and, 2) that of the "unequal dissymmetry of genders ... in the sacramental and organizational economy of the Catholic Church"<sup>70</sup> that could have given rise to a culture of *clericalism* which, in turn, has seen the shameful tolerance, by too many leaders, of what Pelletier calls the "nauseous actuality of crimes and abuses committed in the Church."<sup>71</sup> A reflection on each gender's specifics is thus indicated. Though St. Paul's allusion to husbands symbolizing Christ the Head offers guidance to estimate the *masculine* specifics, his call for wives to be submissive is less relevant to our purpose.<sup>72</sup> Pelletier's work will thus help complement our thoughts.

When saying that women signify the *mystical identity of the Church*, Pelletier implicitly refers to Mary's *surrendering-listening* disposition without which, she says, "nothing in the Incarnation"<sup>73</sup> would have existed. This posture is intrinsic to what she calls a Marian *less-visible* type of *powerfulness* that contrasts with more visible power, commonly linked to *masculinity*. She sees this posture at work in Mary's espousal to the Spirit

<sup>67</sup> Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. 1963, no. 7.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., no. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. no. 773.

<sup>70</sup> Pelletier, *L'Église et le féminin*, 148.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>72</sup> The call to be "subordinate to one another" (Eph 5: 21) is for all people forming community.

<sup>73</sup> Pelletier, "Le signe de la femme," 684.

whence the birth of Jesus occurred, but also when Mary went “through the absolute darkness of [her son’s] Passion” which led to Jesus making her Mother of the disciple John. Suggesting this is the type of labor implied in being “a cooperator in the salvation”<sup>74</sup> of the world, Pelletier offers an illustration of this *feminine* disposition in the “fidelity of faith, the struggle of prayer, the humble but sometimes costly practice of fraternal life, [that many cloistered women perfect] in the secret of the life of the world.”<sup>75</sup> We can also see this posture at play during Pentecost when, with the manifestation of the Church,

The Holy Spirit brought to fulfillment in Mary all the waiting and the preparation of the Old Testament for the coming Christ. In a unique way he filled her with grace and made her virginity fruitful so that she could give birth to the Son of God [, and] made her the Mother of the “whole Christ”, that is, of Jesus the Head and of the Church his body.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, Pelletier’s thoughts on the *feminine* way of signifying the Church can be recapped in what we could call women’s *propensity to interior secrecy of life* when facing matters of “the invisible grace [of Christ’s] holy and sanctifying humanity”<sup>77</sup> signified, contained, and communicated by the Church. This view can be enhanced by accounting for the fact that the woman was created *second* (Gen. 2: 18) as the man’s *suited helper*, understood by Pelletier to mean a personalized “help God gives in situations of distress, when [the] man is grappling with a life-threatening danger.”<sup>78</sup> From that angle, we could say that, with their disposition to *auxiliary, inner or less visible spiritually oriented labor*, women personify Mary’s *surrendering-listening* posture and *feminine* way of being a sign of the Church. In that, they clearly embody deacons’ *self-effacing* posture as *auxiliary* collaborators with the apostolic successors. And as Mary’s Icons, they are the ones who can best symbolize Christ’s *feminine* Body-Bride offering her *loving gift of self* in response to her Bridegroom-Christ’s own *Loving Gift*.

Now, aside from stating that men’s *visible* acts of power and dominion are responsible for most of concrete history, Pelletier only briefly presents her views on *masculine* signs through what she calls men’s quality *d’être-chef*<sup>79</sup> (of being-chief). Yet her thoughts can be elaborated by 1) contrasting them with this *feminine* disposition for *auxiliary inner less-visible powerfulness* and 2) considering that man’s creation has occurred *first* (Gen. 2: 7), which highlights the *responsible strength* implied in being among the *firstborn* males called to consecration (Exod. 13: 2) and the primacy of Christ in whom, as “firstborn from the dead[, all] come to life again.”<sup>80</sup> With these characteristics in mind, the *masculine* way of being a sign of Christ the Head could refer to men’s propensity to be *first*, or *head-of-a-line* – as in a “man at the head of a line of soldiers”<sup>81</sup> – in *external* and *more visible* situations requiring *responsible strength* to open *the doors to eternal life* for God’s people. For priests, this implies embodying Christ’s *power* when, under the Petrine principle, they *act in the person of Christ* in matters pertaining to the *sacrificial* mystery of Christ. For deacons, it refers to services offered *in persona Christi–Servi* which, as part of the ecclesiastical ministry and linked to the Marian principle, pertain to matters of the *servant* mystery of Christ. And under the Christian matrimony analogy, *male* deacons would still signify Christ as Head but as *Leading Servant Bridegroom*. Here, St. Paul’s call to husbands to “love their wives as their own bodies” (Col. 5: 28) suggests that, as symbols of Christ handing “himself over for [the Church]” (Col. 5: 25), deacons would personify Christ who “nourishes and cherishes it” (Col. 5: 29). Moreover, as their services also relate to the Marian principle, *male* deacons would also still embody the Marian *surrendering-listening* posture, but they would do so in their *masculine* way of sharing in the mutual *loving gift of self* that founds communion and family. In that, they would emulate Joseph whose *masculinity* is entirely focused on Mary’s *motherhood*, whence his *fatherhood* derives and finds its full meaning.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 685.

<sup>76</sup> Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 142.

<sup>77</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 774.

<sup>78</sup> Pelletier’s biblical interpretation of the Hebrew *ezer* in Pelletier, *Le signe de la femme*, 39.

<sup>79</sup> Pelletier, “Le signe de la femme,” 680. The word *chef*, for Head, is from the French *Bible de Jérusalem*.

<sup>80</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience, Wednesday, 7 September 2005. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2005/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20050907.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20050907.html).

<sup>81</sup> Meaning of the word *chef* in French from Lexilogos. [https://www.lexilogos.com/francais\\_dictionnaire.htm](https://www.lexilogos.com/francais_dictionnaire.htm).

Now, this account of men's quality *d'être-chef* would not be complete if we did not point to Pelletier's insistence that men exercise their *being-chief* in imitation of Christ, obedient to the point of the cross, whose sovereignty as Head of the Church is rooted "in the act of the washing of the feet ... at the hour of the Passion."<sup>82</sup> Though most priests agree with this viewpoint, many recognize the temptation Pelletier saw in those "entrusted with powers in the Church [to] identify the power they exercise ... with their Christian vocation, and to consider it as its own end."<sup>83</sup> As a result, numerous are those who identify to the *power* of Christ tied to their ministry and, valuing to a lesser extent the *feminine less visible* or *powerful* posture, tend to forget that their embodiment of the *feminine* Marian posture is also essential to establishing "communion with Christ [,] the unique center of Christian life[, and] source of its action and fruitfulness."<sup>84</sup> No surprise then to also see many resist to welcome signs of *femininity*, often associated with such *powerlessness*, and limit their opportunities to benefit from the personalized *help God gives*, through women, *in situations of distress* or in their journey toward developing this central-to-Christian-life *surrendering-listening* posture. No surprise either to notice, as a result of such resistance, paired with ancestral prejudices against women, poor understandings of sexuality, the "exaltation of priesthood [and installation of priests] in a posture of omnipotence,"<sup>85</sup> the entrenchment of what Pelletier calls an "unequal dissymmetry of genders ... in the sacramental and organizational economy of the Catholic Church."<sup>86</sup> No surprise then that this situation gave rise to a *feminine deficient* culture of *clericalism* where criminal and abusive behaviors of too many clergymen have been tolerated for too long.

Did Pelletier have these factors in mind when she wrote that signs of *femininity* must reach out specifically to men "entrusted with powers in the Church?"<sup>87</sup> Possibly. Though for us, they indicate an urgent need to empower women in their capacity to both appeal and render accessible to men, and to all Christians, the "great resource of alterity"<sup>88</sup> that *femininity* represents. Women's admission to the diaconate would do just that. While being an acknowledgment of the need to have such *feminine* signs as equally present in the Church's hierarchy as the *masculine*, women's ordination to the diaconate would simultaneously be a sacramental empowerment and a recognition of their capacity to "serve the People of God" that would bear *authority*; not in an authoritarian sense of the term, of course, but in that of the *powerfulness* that comes with the graces attached to their being "marked with an indelible character [when] constituted as sacred ministers."<sup>89</sup> It is our belief, indeed, that to overcome this temptation to identify to power or this resistance to welcome these *less visible* and *powerful* signs of *femininity*, but also to accept more readily the challenges women can bring in their lives and in the exercise of their ministry, many members of the clergy need to know, through an *ecclesial* confirmation, that women have the sacramental *authority*, as *feminine* signs of the Church, to offer such challenges. As deacons, thus confirmed in their God-given *feminine auxiliary* quality, women would be empowered to better assist men in breaking with the distressing situation of what Pelletier calls their "confinement in solitude [and in coming] out of a *tête-à-tête* with [themselves]."<sup>90</sup>

Consider, for example, Peter's resistance to Jesus' invitation to the washing of his feet: "You will never wash my feet" (John 13: 8), he says. Jesus needs to threaten him of having no inheritance with Him for Peter to change his stance. Was it because of his reluctance to take this *lower* position, or to see Jesus *lower* himself to this servant posture? Peter's reaction is typical of the resistance we can imagine present in many clergymen whose position of power has been entrenched in this culture of *clericalism* and enforced by a posture of omnipotence and exaltation from which they will not easily detach. For these men to welcome women as

<sup>82</sup> Pelletier, "Le signe de la femme," 680.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 682.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 682.

<sup>85</sup> Pelletier, *L'Église et le féminin*, 84.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>87</sup> Pelletier, "Le signe de la femme," 682.

<sup>88</sup> As Pelletier designates signs of femininity and masculinity. Pelletier, *L'Église et le féminin*, 164.

<sup>89</sup> Code of Canon Law, Can. 1008.

<sup>90</sup> The term *ezer* also refers, according to Pelletier, to women's "capacity to break the [man's] confinement of solitude [and allow] him to come out of a *tête-à-tête* with himself." Pelletier, "Le signe de la femme," 39.



resources capable of helping them resolve, among other things, the distressing situation of abuse the Church is facing today they need, we believe, this *ecclesial* confirmation that women have the *authority* to serve in ways that could also challenge their reluctance to welcome *feminine* signs of the Church. They need to see and hear that women deacons' *authority* is rooted in Christ who, incidentally, accepted that of the Woman Mary who challenged him to change the water into wine though his "hour ha[d] not yet come" (John 2: 4). Only with women deacons, do we believe, can an *equal symmetry of genders* be established in the *sacramental and organizational economy* of the Church and lead to a transformation of mentalities and culture where, more receptive to *feminine* signs in their lives and accepting women as equals, men can better work with *female* partners to address this abuse crisis at its core, among other important issues, of course. Thus, with equal access to both *male* and *female* deacons assisting them toward adopting the Marian *surrendering-listening* posture that is central to the Christian life, the clergy and the faithful can better partake in this ongoing *loving gift of self* exchange between Christ's Body-Bride and her Bridegroom Christ. Benefiting from such assistance, they can also better contribute to making the People of God the best possible reflection of the Trinity's *dual gender* image and likeness as they can all better participate "in this great work wherein God is perfectly glorified [through men and women] sanctified [in Christ who] always associates the Church with Himself, as] His beloved Bride."<sup>91</sup>

In conclusion, we can say with confidence that ordaining women to the diaconate is both in keeping with the unity of Holy Orders and the necessary path to bringing gender symmetry *in the sacramental and organizational economy* of the Church so as to ensure her symbolization of the *whole Christ* while assisting the People of God in becoming the best possible reflection of the *dual gender* image and likeness of the Trinitarian communion. Sacramentally empowered women deacons would be enabled to serve more efficiently as *feminine* resources since, equally available as the *masculine* and part of the hierarchy of the Church, all Christians could more readily call for their assistance in their journey toward adopting this essential Marian *surrendering-listening* posture. In that, women deacons could better contribute to making the ecclesial communion a more accurate reflection of the *maternal* and *paternal* image that God intended to signify of Himself when He withdrew into the mystery of his Being before creating *male* and *female* human beings. With apostolic successors' *masculine* signification of Christ the Head *offering Himself* to the Father, the Trinity's *Fatherhood* is signified. Its *Motherhood* would thus also be clearly represented through women deacons' *feminine* symbolization of Christ's *female* Body-Bride *offering herself to Christ*. This, of course, alongside men deacons' *masculine* representation of Christ the *Servant Bridegroom* which, under the Marian principle and in the example of Joseph, would relate to the *male* complement of the mutual *Loving Gift of Self* shared between the Bridal Church and her Bridegroom.

Indeed, as married men and women offer themselves to one another through mutual *surrender* and *listening* before they become mothers and fathers, so must Christians reach the point of *surrendering* and *listening* to God to be able to bear fruits. Hence the importance for God's people to benefit from having both *female* and *male* deacons as models and resources assisting them in their journey to adopt the Marian posture implied in the Bridal *loving gift of self*. Without such *feminine* models and resources working alongside *masculine* ones to facilitate the circulation of the Spirit's *Love* in and among themselves, Christians' journey is impaired. Women's ordination to the diaconate would correct that situation by ensuring that the faithful have equal access to *sacramentally empowered female* resources they need in such journeying toward becoming fruitful mothers and fathers. And, though the *female* and *male* symbolism of the Christian marriage analogy first emphasizes the *sameness* of the partners' mutual *gift of self*, when considering it from the angle of the *feminine* or *masculine* distinctiveness, it also points to the differing contribution each gender makes in the communion being established. Yet, when *feminine* signs are seen from the angle of wives' *loving gift of self*, this analogy points to women deacons signifying the bridal posture of Mary who "goes before us all in the holiness that is the Church's mystery as 'the bride without spot or wrinkle'."<sup>92</sup> Thus, when stating that this precedence founds the belief that the "Marian" dimension of the Church precedes the 'Petrine',<sup>93</sup> the CCC implies that

<sup>91</sup> Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, 1963, no. 7.

<sup>92</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 773.

Mary's *surrendering-listening-serving* posture is the predominant model for all deacons, be they *female* or *male*, as well as for priests and bishops, and for all Christians. Hence the need for *feminine* signs to be brought to the fore in matters pertaining to Christ's Bridal-Body, the ecclesial communion representing the Trinitarian communion's *Motherhood*.

So, with the ordination of women deacons, the Church would ensure that all Christians, sacred ministers and the faithful, find equally represented and sacramentally empowered *feminine* models and resources, alongside *masculine* ones, to assist them in embodying this Marian *surrendering-listening* posture. Thus better able to become *Christ-centered* mothers and fathers, all can contribute to realizing the ecclesial communion partaking in the Triune communion as they also contribute in facilitating the *Love* of the Spirit to circulate in and among themselves as the Body of Christ. In that, the People of God can also better journey toward becoming the fullest possible reflection of the Trinity's image and likeness while glorifying God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

**Funding information:** Author states no funding involved.

**Author contribution:** The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results, and manuscript preparation.

**Conflict of interest:** Author states no conflict of interest.

## References

- Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), 2016.
- Cardinal Marc Ouellet. The Ecclesiology of Communion, 50 Years after the Opening of Vatican Council II, September 2012, vol. XVIII, no. 6. <https://adoremus.org/2012/09/the-ecclesiology-of-communion-50-years-after-the-opening-of-vatican-council-ii/>.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church.
- Catholic News Agency, Almudena Martínez-Bordiú, Vatican City, Oct 25, 2024. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/260101/cardinal-fernandez-says-female-diaconate-will-be-studied-more-intensively>.
- Catholic News Agency, Daniel Payne, CNA Staff, May 21, 2024. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/257757/pope-francis-on-female-deacons-no>.
- Catholic News Agency, Zelda Caldwell, Washington, D.C. Newsroom, Nov 28, 2022. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/252928/pope-francis-explains-to-america-magazine-why-women-cannot-be-ordained-priests>.
- Code of Canon Law.
- Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.
- Congregation for the Clergy. *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, 1998.
- Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, 1963.
- General Council of Trends, Council Fathers, 1952. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/twenty-second-session.htm>.
- International Theological Commission. *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, 2002.
- International Theological Commission. *Propositions on the Doctrine of Christian Marriage*, 1997.
- Keating, James. *The Heart of the Diaconate*. New York: Paulist Press, 2015.
- Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II, 1994.
- Pelletier, Anne-Marie. *L'Église et le féminin*. Paris: Salvator, 2021.
- Pelletier, Anne-Marie. *Le signe de la femme*. Paris: Cerf, 2006.
- Pelletier, Anne-Marie. "Le signe de la femme." *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 113:5 (1991), 665–89. <https://www.nrt.be/fr/articles/le-signe-de-la-femme-343>.
- Pope Benedict XVI. Ordinary Public Consistory for the Creation of New Cardinals, 25 March 2006.
- Pope Benedict XVI. General Audience, Wednesday, 7 September 2005.