

“The ministry of women in the Church continues to be a vital issue. This new collection presents us with an ample dossier of carefully researched essays on the history of women deacons and the possibility of restoring this valuable ministry today. We owe Phyllis Zagano a debt of gratitude for collecting these pieces, many of them appearing for the first time in English. This book deserves serious attention by historians, theologians, and Church leaders alike.”

—John Baldovin, SJ
Boston College School of Theology & Ministry

“This helpful collection of academic essays, many of them newly translated into English, shows that the idea of reconstituting the diaconate for women has been around for a very long time. Phyllis Zagano is second to none in the pursuit of this question, and her introduction summarizes beautifully what everyone should know who is interested in the issue.”

—Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ
Charles Fischer Professor of New Testament Emerita
Brite Divinity School

“Since the reestablishment of the permanent diaconate at the Second Vatican Council, some 42,000 men have been ordained throughout the world to serve as deacons. At the same time, there has been a parallel conversation about the possibility of women as ordained deacons. Dr. Zagano and her collaborators have collected important articles on the history and theology of the diaconate for women, some translated into English for the first time. This volume is an indispensable resource for the continuing discussion.”

—Emil A. Wcela
Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus
Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York
Past President, Catholic Biblical Association

Women Deacons?

Essays with Answers

Edited by
Phyllis Zagano



A Michael Glazier Book

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Philippe Delhay, "Rétrospective et prospective des ministères féminins dans L'Eglise," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 3 (1972), 55-75. Reprinted with permission of *Revue théologique de Louvain*.

Peter Hünermann, "Conclusions Regarding the Female Diaconate," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975): 325-33. Valerie A. Karras, "The Liturgical Function of Consecrated Women in the Byzantine Church," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 96-116. Phyllis Zagano, "Remembering Tradition: Women's Monastic Rituals and the Diaconate" *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 787-811. Reprinted with permission of *Theological Studies*.

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Jennifer H. Stiefel, "Women Deacons in 1 Timothy: A Linguistic and Literary Look at 'Women Likewise . . .' (1 Tim 3.11)," *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 442-57. Reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press.

Cipriano Vagaggini, "La diaconessa nella tradizione bizantina," *Il Regno* 32 (1987): 672-73. Reprinted with permission of *Il Regno*.

Cipriano Vagaggini, "L'ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974): 146-89. Reprinted with permission of Edizioni Orientalia Christiana.

Ugo Zanetti, "Y eut-il des diaconesses en Égypte?," *Vetera Christianorum* 27 (1990): 369-73. Reprinted with permission of Edipuglia, SRL.

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Introduction

While the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate in the Catholic Churches has become a major topic of discussion in many quarters, significant and serious prior work on the question has receded into the unexamined past for much of the English-speaking world. Two critical reasons stand out: first, significant work in French and Italian remained untranslated until now; second, some of the works in French and Italian translated here were dismissed in a footnote regarding the question of whether women deacons received the “imposition of hands” as in other major ordinations to a study document on the diaconate published by the International Theological Committee (ITC) in 2002.

Each essay in this collection fairly discusses the major historical questions regarding women in the diaconate: Were they ordained to the major order of deacon? What were their tasks and functions? Can they belong to the renewed order of deacon today?

The ITC did not fully answer these questions. Regarding women in the diaconate, it concluded (1) the “deaconesses” of history were not equivalent to the deacons; (2) the unity of the sacrament of Order is clear, and the presbyterate and episcopate are distinct from the ministry of the diaconate; (3) it pertains to the Church’s ministry of discernment to pronounce authoritatively the question of women in the diaconate. Since the ITC study document’s publication, canons 1008 and 1009 of the Code of Canon Law have been revised to more clearly distinguish the presbyterate and the diaconate, as in the previously published Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The 2002 ITC study document, first published in French as “Le Diaconate: Evolution et Perspectives,” languished for many years on the Vatican website only in French and Italian. Later, an English translation prepared by the Catholic Truth Society in London appeared on the website. Still later, other translations to German, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish gradually appeared. Some discussion has begun in these language groups, principally guided by the 2002 ITC study document.

Some have noted problems with the current English translation. The study document's English title, "From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles," translates the title of its first chapter, not the title of the entire document. The ensuing English translation skews the document even further from the history of women ordained as deacons in the Churches East and West over the centuries. The serious reader is well advised to read the French original.

Although the 2002 study document is the most recent commentary on women deacons issued from Vatican sources, it has no legislative weight. It is neither a Decree, nor an Instruction, nor a Declaration, nor a Circular Letter, nor a Directory. It is not a Notification, a Norm, nor an Ordinance, nor an Indult, nor a Rescript. In short, it is simply a study document, and one with a rather checkered history.

The diaconate was a topic of great discussion during the Second Vatican Council. In addition to the determinations and recommendations by the assembled bishops to restore the diaconate as a permanent order in the Church, some bishops asked (publicly or privately) about restoring women to the ordained diaconate. Their discussions did not carry forth to the documents regarding the diaconate, which specified male candidates and allowed for married men to be ordained. Since that time, the diaconate has grown to include approximately 42,000 men, and no women. The essays in this volume continue the conversation begun at Vatican II about restoring women to the ordained diaconate.

Following the close of Vatican II, the very fact and function of the diaconate continued as a topic of concern. Yves Congar added some commentary on the diaconate as a permanent office in a short book review titled "Variétés des ministères et renouveau diaconal" in the small publication, *Diacres aujourd'hui*. In 1972, another scholar, ITC secretary Philippe Delhaye, presented a strong essay in *Revue théologique de Louvain* supporting the proposition that women could be ordained as deacons. While Delhaye argues (in support of Roger Gryson, whose work he responds to) that women are capable of receiving Holy Orders, he does not think the Church has the right to modify its beliefs on priesthood. According to both Congar and Delhaye, there appeared to be no objective barrier to restoring women to the ordained diaconate.

Soon, Pope Paul VI asked about women in the diaconate. Could women be ordained as deacons? The answer came from the respected scholar of Eastern liturgy and ITC member, Cipriano Vagaggini, OSB Cam (1909–1999): "Yes." However, neither Vagaggini's nor Delhaye's scholarly essays joined other study documents then coming from the

ITC, which at the time included the world's most prestigious theologians. Delhaye's work had already been published in Belgium, at Louvain. Two years later, Vagaggini's essay appeared in Rome, in *Orientalia christiana periodica*, a publication of the Pontifical Biblical Institute of Gregorian University then under the editorial direction of Robert F. Taft, SJ.

Vagaggini's essay, "L'ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina," gives perhaps the strongest detailed evidence for the relatively common practice of ordaining women as deacons in the Eastern Churches. Vagaggini concludes that women can again be given diaconal ordination equal to the ordinations of male deacons and that restrictions against women performing certain functions of male deacons (distributing Communion, etc.) no longer exist.

Delhaye's, Vagaggini's, and the findings of others gained notoriety in scholarly circles, and in the years following two liturgy scholars, Roger Gryson (1938–) and Aimé Georges Martimort (1911–2000), wrote competing works on women as deacons.¹ Using identical sources, Gryson's *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* and Martimort's *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* came to opposing conclusions. Martimort, particularly, profoundly disagrees with Vagaggini and calls Vagaggini's *Orientalia* article a "seductive presentation of a case" (for ordaining women as deacons).² Even so, Martimort does not completely close the case on women deacons.

During the 1970s and 1980s, discussion and debate about women as deacons continued, often eclipsed by discussion about women as priests. However, in 1987 Vagaggini was asked to make an intervention before the Synod of Bishops on the Laity, which gathered 231 bishops and sixty lay auditors. Of the four topics under consideration by the synod, the fourth, "women in the church," found Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland asking that women be included in all non-sacerdotal ministries and Vagaggini presenting a précis of his longer argument: "La diaconessa nella tradizione bizantina," later published in the Italian journal, *Il Regno*.

The question of restoring women to the diaconate, however, remained (and remains) conjoined to the question of women as priests, in part due

¹Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. Jean Laporte and Mary Louise Hall (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976); original: *Le ministère des femmes dans l'Église ancienne. Recherches et synthèse, Section d'histoire 4* (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1972); Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, trans. K. D. Whitehead (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986); original: *Les Diaconesses: Essai Historique* (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1982).

²Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 75.

to the general decline of the diaconate in the West as it became simply a step on the way to priesthood. However, many Eastern Churches retained the tradition of women deacons.

The 2002 ITC document reflects the argument that to be ordained deacon one must be eligible to be ordained priest, noting one small commentary that the deacon must be suitable for “higher orders.” (The ITC seems to take this as meaning priesthood, although the episcopacy is more certainly meant.) However, the diaconate of women had never been seen as a step on the way to priesthood, even as it was absorbed into many abbeys and monasteries and later conjoined with the office of abbess or prioress.

In the early 1990s, scholarship on women deacons increased: In 1990 Ugo Zanetti, OSB, looked at the possibility of women deacons in Egypt and answered in the affirmative with a linguistic study, “Y eut-il des diaconesses en Égypte?,” published in *Vetera christianorum*. In 1992, Franciscan Pietro Sorci joined the discussion with his essay, on the diaconal ministries of women, “Diaconato ed altri ministeri liturgici della donna” in a book-length collection titled *La Donna nel pensiero cristiano antico*. Considerations also appeared in English: Anglican deacon J. H. Stiefel presented a significant study on the mention of deacons in Scripture: “Women Deacons in 1 Timothy: A Linguistic and Literary Look at ‘Women Likewise . . .’ (1 Tim 3.11),” in *New Testament Studies*, which definitively argues that the women so mentioned were most assuredly deacons.

In the early 1990s, the history of women in the diaconate remained a point of discussion. Who were they? What did they do? Were they ordained? Depending on the writer’s expertise, one or another of these points found emphasis. Most scholars—including it seems the members of the ITC—had no problem with ordaining women as deacons. In fact, from 1992 to 1997, a subcommittee of the ITC prepared a short French-language study document opining just that. The paper, perhaps seventeen or eighteen pages in length, was printed and numbered. The president of the ITC and prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, refused to sign it. The question of women in the diaconate was sent back to a newly configured committee, which retained only Henrique de Noronha Galvão, a former graduate student of Ratzinger, as its newly appointed chair.

Concurrent with the non-publication of the first findings of the ITC in 1997, Corrado Marucci, SJ, reviewed the history of women in the diaconate in a detailed work, “Storia e valore del diaconato femminile

nella Chiesa antica,” which appeared in Italian in *Rassegna di Teologia*. Like Vagaggini, Marucci reviews the history of women ordained as deacons, in this article emphasizing their tasks and functions and arguing in even more detail than Vagaggini on behalf of the historicity of their ordinations.

Meanwhile, the ITC, now reconfigured somewhat with new membership, and a smaller subcommittee newly appointed to rewrite or create anew a study document that addressed women in the diaconate, worked from 1997 to 2002 to complete a document that Cardinal Ratzinger would approve. Among the committee members was Gerhard L. Müller. Several sections of Müller’s 2000 book, *Priestertum und Diakonat*, appear (without citation) in the 2002 document.³ Müller was named bishop of Regensburg shortly after the 2002 document’s publication, then followed Cardinal William Levada as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (and therefore president of the ITC) in 2012.

Despite the fact that the 2002 ITC study document is the most recent comment from Rome regarding women in the diaconate—*Inter insigniores* (1976) and *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994) pointedly leave the diaconate aside—there is the common misperception by many in the church that women are barred from the diaconate by more than a merely ecclesiastical law. As the discussion has continued, we find calls within the Orthodox Churches to more widely restore the practice of ordaining women as deacons, even as scholars search through history to determine how the earliest women deacons functioned liturgically. In 2005, Greek Orthodox scholar Valerie A. Karras published “The Liturgical Function of Consecrated Women in the Byzantine Church” in the journal *Theological Studies*.

Other relatively recent scholarship underscores the fact that the female diaconate in the West was relegated to monasteries, where it remains to this day in some churches of Orthodoxy. My own 2011 article, “Remembering Tradition: Women’s Monastic Rituals and the Diaconate,” also in *Theological Studies*, reviews the conflation of ceremonies within monasteries, while demonstrating that remnants of diaconal ordination remain within Carthusian women’s traditions practiced to this day.

³See Gerhard L. Müller, *Priesthood and Diaconate* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002) trans. by Michael J. Miller of *Priestertum und Diakonat. Der Empfänger des Weihesakramentes in schöpfungstheologischer und christologischer Perspecti* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 2000).

Finally, in a 2010 edited work, *Diakonia, Diaconiae, Diaconato. Semantica e Storia nei padri della Chiesa*, Corrado Marucci, SJ, discusses the only scriptural reference to a deacon by name: Phoebe. Within his article, “Il ‘diaconato’ di Febe (*Rom.16,1-2*) secondo l’esegesi moderna,” we find even more evidence of the long history of women as deacons.

The final essay in this collection is actually one of the earliest. Written by German priest Peter Hünermann in 1975, “Conclusions Regarding the Female Diaconate” presented a summary of the arguments for women as deacons in *Theological Studies*. Its conclusions, now more than forty years old, represent the discussions in the many German works not otherwise found here except within the bibliography of sources. It is interesting that at this point in time, there are no scholars writing against the inclusion of women in the renewed diaconate. Some German-language work now in translation, such as the previously mentioned book by Müller, and work by the German Mariologist Manfred Haucke, and Martimort’s French-language book of the 1980s still influences the one or two persons who write against women deacons. What unfortunately passes for informed discussion on the matter is too often relegated to Internet-level hearsay. This collection is aimed at presenting the entire story, the majority of which the ITC may have accepted between 1992 and 1997 but which it eventually eviscerated in 2002.

I am deeply appreciative of the many individuals and organizations that have supported this year-long project of reviewing the literature and translating from Italian and French some very important essays that the ITC seems to have discounted.

The majority of the initial translation work was done by Dr. Carmela Leonforte-Plimack, my able assistant at Hofstra University, whose attention to linguistic detail is unmatched. I give deep thanks as well to the many who helped with, and in some cases did first drafts of, some translations: Gabrielle Corbally, RSHM, and Drs. Peter J. Houle, Valerie Karras, Amanda Quantz, and Robert F. Taft, SJ. I am especially grateful to Corrado Marucci, SJ, and Ugo Zanetti, OSB, each of whom reviewed the initial translations of their works. Needless to say, the errors that may remain are mine alone.

I am grateful as well to those at Hofstra University who made this project easier, even possible, by their expert assistance: Dr. Steven D. Smith, Comparative Literature and Languages, Dr. David Woolwine, reference librarian, and the Hofstra Interlibrary Loan Staff; Monica Yatsyla, manager of Instructional Design Services, and the staff and student workers of Faculty Computing Services; Department of Religion

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May the conversation continue.

Phyllis Zagano

July 22, 2015

Feast of St. Mary Magdalene

1

The “Diaconate” of Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2) According to Modern Exegesis

Corrado Marucci

The Modern Exegesis

Without doubt, for all modern exegetes the greatest problem posed by the sixteenth chapter of the letter to the Romans is deciding whether this chapter, which consists almost exclusively of greetings to figures unknown to us (except for the couple Priscilla and Aquila), was originally linked to the previous fifteen [chapters] as we read them today, or rather it was first sent to Ephesus, either with or without prior letters, and then, for some unclear reason, added to the letter to the Romans. A second interest that animates commentators regards the varied world of Paul’s collaborators, which in Romans 16 emerges in its entire complexity (no fewer than twenty-six friends of the apostle are named, eight among them send greetings together with Paul, and fourteen/fifteen of them are women).¹ In this short paper I am only interested in a more limited topic, that is, the issue found in the first line of the chapter, which in the twenty-seventh edition of the Nestle-Aland (1993) reads: συνίστημι δὲ ὑμῖν Φοίβην τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν, οὗσαν [καὶ] διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς. The text is practically certain; the sole doubt concerns the presence or absence of the conjunction καὶ after οὗσαν: this presence is attested to only by some witnesses of the neutral text (P46 [Chester Be-

“Il ‘diaconato’ di Febe (Rom. 16,1-2) secondo l’esegesi moderna,” in *Diakonia, Diaconiae, Diaconato. Semantica e Storia nei padri della Chiesa* (Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum 2010), 685–95.

¹The uncertainty of the number is due to the person indicated in v. 7, in the accusative case, in the capital codices with the letters IOYNIAN, which, according to the implied accent and added later, may refer either to a nominative Ἰουνιάς (masculine hypocorism of Iunianus) or to Ἰουνία (feminine Iunia).

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atty II, c. 200²], N2, B, C*, *bo*), while it is lacking in the majority of manuscripts. NA27 puts it in square brackets, which means that according to the committee of five curators its presence is not thoroughly certain. Given that this preposition is lacking in the greater number of both small and capital letter manuscripts, its presence seems difficult to maintain, notwithstanding the great value of the Chester Beatty papyrus. As to the so-called internal criteria, the presence of the conjunction seems unnecessary (the result would be “Phoebe our sister, who is *also* deaconess in the church of Cenchraea”). Neither of the two editions of the *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* by Bruce Metzger discusses the variant, and the majority of commentators and translations omit it.³

When considering the content of the chapter, there is nearly unanimous agreement in identifying Phoebe, whom Paul here recommends, with the person entrusted to carry the actual letter to the Romans; this indicates that Paul regards her as highly trustworthy. Given the pagan origin of the name Φοιβη, well known in Greek mythography,⁴ it should here be the case of a pagan convert to Christianity, according to some a *liberta* [freed slave], a fact that the Apostle expresses by using the familiar term of “sister” (implying in the faith). In this regard, however, Father Huby is correct in indicating that Judaic epigraphy in imperial Rome does not allow complete certainty of this, due to the fact that there were

² According to K. and B. Aland, *Der Text des Neuen Testaments* (Stuttgart, 1989, 103.109) exponent of the *freier Text*.

³ Among the not few exceptions we recall those by Father Lagrange in his commentary at p. 362, by H. Schlier, and by Dunn.

⁴ This name means “the resplendent.” Phoebe is above all one of the Titan goddesses, daughters of Uranus and Gaia, who begets two daughters Leto and Asteria from her marriage to Coeus; Leto then begets Apollo and Artemis. To Phoebe is sometimes attributed the establishment of the Delphic oracle, which she then gave to her grandson Apollo. Another Phoebe is one of the Leucippides, who is married to Castor or Pollux. Finally one of the five Heliades, daughters of the Sun (Elios), is named Phoebe. Even Eusebius of Caesarea, in his *Praep. Ev.*, twice recalls the Phoebe of Greek mythology (IV,23,7 and VI,1,2), as do various ecclesiastical writers after him. The historical figures carrying the name are rare: Suetonius, in his *Aug.* 65, 1, recalls Phoebe, a freed slave of Augustus’s daughter Julia, who commits suicide after discovering Julia’s adultery; the Supplement X of PRE (1965) records the existence of a Phoebe Vocontia, *emboliaria*, of whom CIL VI 10 127 (= Dess. 5262) commemorates the premature death at only twelve years of age. Further information in Gibson, *cit.*

Jewish women called Aphrodisia or Dionysia.⁵ According to the greater number of exegetes, the fact that the second title of Phoebe (διάκονος) is introduced by the present participle οὔσαν means that she is still such at the moment of sending [the letter], perhaps even that the mission to Rome is part of her functions. The sphere of such functions is the community, the ἐκκλησία, of Cenchræa, which is the easternmost of the three ports in Corinth, around seven kilometers southeast of Corinth, on the Sinus Saronicus (Saronic Gulf), a lively center of commerce toward the east, developed by the Roman administration.⁶

Now, speaking of Phoebe, it is fairly surprising that in v. 2 the Apostle gives her the title of προστάτις, not only of many faithful, but of Paul himself. This term too, which is the feminine of προστάτης⁷ (used eight times in the Septuagint,⁸ but not elsewhere in the New Testament), is not thoroughly univocal, although a juridical connotation limited to the meaning of assistant in trial issues is not to be excluded, but most probably it implies a role of patron or lawyer, like the Latin *patrona*.⁹ On the other hand, the context excludes the meaning of "female president" or "overseer." Obviously, one should wonder whether this function of Phoebe as προστάτις has to do with that of διάκονος presented in the first line.

However, in Romans 16:1-2, the term that has attracted the most attention is without a doubt διάκονος, which is attributed to Phoebe. It is a noun and an adjective with one ending, common in classical Greek from

⁵Cf. J. Huby, *Épître aux Romains* (Paris, 1940), 496.

⁶The doubts and the alternative hypothesis of W. Michaelis (cf. "Kenkreá," in ZNW, 25, 1926, 144–54) have not encountered any approval among scholars: the German exegete, on the basis of the fact that there exist at least five other Κενκρεάι thinks that the one implied in Rom 16:1 could be a town in Troad (Troas).

⁷The feminine is largely used in secular Greek: cf. Sophocles, *Oedipus Col.* 458 (according to the Jebb edition 1884–1896); Appian, *BellCiv.* 1, 1; Cornutus, *Theologiae Graec. Comp.* (Lang, 37, ll. 20s.); Lucian, *bis accusatus* 29i, *Charid.* 10; Cassius Dio 42, 39; *Papyri Graecae Magicae Osl.*I, 338 etc. The masculine had a true technical meaning in both pagan (cf. OGIS 209; SIG 1109,13; CIG I, 126) and Jewish religious contexts (cf. Schürer⁴ III, 89). Further details in G. Heinrici, in *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie* 19 (1876): 516ff.

⁸Cf. 1 Chr 27:31; 29:6; 2 Chr 8:10; 24:11 (twice); 1 Ezra 2:12; Sir 45, 24BSA, and 2 Mac. 3:4. The term translates flexions of פקד and of שר.

⁹According to Mommsen (*Römisches Strafrecht*, Leipzig, 1899, 378 n.1) during the [Roman] principality, *patronus* (*causae*) is synonym for *advocatus*, even if less used (cf. Tacitus, *dial.* 1; Pliny, *ep.*3:4 etc.).

the time of the tragedians onward, corresponding to the Latin *minister*, that is, *servant* (as opposed to δούλος, Latin *servus*, that is, slave). To the same semantic group also belongs ὑπηρέτης, used twenty times in the New Testament meaning “servant, collaborator,” also in a spiritual and apostolic context. The etymology of διάκονος is uncertain; the case against a derivation from διά + κόνις (one who raises the dust for being in a hurry, analogically with ἐγ-κονέω = hasten) is supported by the fact that the α in διάκονος is long while the α in διά is short.¹⁰ Therefore, the term probably originated from the obsolete forms διάκω/διήκω. In the Septuagint the term is present only six or seven times (Esth 1:10; 2:2; 6:1;¹¹ 6:3-5; 4 Macc. 9:17; Prov 10:4); whenever an original Hebrew term is present it reads *na’ar* or *šāraṭ*. In the Hellenistic epigraphies διάκονος is used in the sense of “server in a temple.”¹² In the New Testament the root διακον- is found in three flexions: the verb διακονέω (thirty-six/thirty-seven times), the noun διακονία (thirty-three/thirty-four times¹³), and the noun διάκονος (twenty-nine times). The feminine ἡ διάκονος is not frequent, but it is well documented even outside the New Testament;¹⁴ in addition, canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon (451) required that διάκονον μὴ χειροτονεῖσθαι γυναῖκα πρὸ ἐτῶν τεσσαράκοντα (the official Latin text has *diaconissa!*). In

¹⁰ Chantraine, in his *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* admits this etymology among the possible ones, as Frisk had cautiously done, and he explains the change of quantity in the α of διάκονος with the fact that the term was very old.

¹¹ According to the text of the Sistine edition of 1587; all the other manuscripts have διδάσκαλος.

¹² Cf. Buckler-Robinson, in *American Journal of Archeology* 20 (1914): 45.

¹³ The uncertainty of this reoccurrence as well as of that of the previous term derives from the presence of some variations valued differently in NA²⁶ than in the previous editions.

¹⁴ Cf. Aristophanes, *Eccles.* 1116 (fourth/fifth c. BC); Demosthenes 762 (=XXIV, 197); 1155 (=XLVII, 52) (?) of the fourth century; Heraclitus the Stoic, *Allegoriae (or Quaestiones Homericae)* 28, 5 (Bonn, 1919, 43, l.15) of the first century BC or AD; Epictetus II, XXIII, 8; III, VII, 28; (AD first c.); Flavius Josephus, *Ant.* 1, 298; *Vita Aesopi* G 7 P. (of a woman at the service of the goddess Isis); *CIG* 3037,5(?).14; (Metropolis in Lidia); Marco Diacono, *Vita Porphyrii* 102 (a.p. 81,6 of the Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana of 1895) of the beginning of the fifth century (?); *Mitteilungen des Dt. Arch. Instituts, Athenische Abt.* 14 (1889), 210; H. Usener, Hg., *Legenden der helgen Pelagia*, Bonn, 1879, 11, l. 18, perhaps fifth century (the old translation into Italian by various authors, *Pélagie la péninente*, Paris, 1984, II, 236f; here, however, the critical text suggested by the authors has διακόνισσα: cf. I, 88, l. 249).

ecclesiastical Greek this would be soon replaced by διακόνισσα.¹⁵ In Philo of Alexandria's works the root διακον- is present thirteen times, five as a noun.¹⁶ Flavius Josephus, a contemporary of the evangelist Luke, uses διάκονος fourteen times in the slightly different meaning of server, cup-bearer, assistant, medium, and mediator,¹⁷ and he uses διακονία in the sense of religious service only a few times (*Ant.* 5, 34).

In the twenty-nine occurrences within the New Testament the root often has an impractical meaning, rather it has a discerning, spiritual, or even mystical sense: in Colossians 1:25 Paul defines himself as διάκονος of the Church, of the Body of Christ, *according to the οικονομία τοῦ θεοῦ granted to me to realize his word among you*; in Romans 15:8 even Christ has become διάκονος περιτομῆς!

Given that at least during the entire first millennium there existed, mostly in the East and more rarely in the West, the female diaconate analogous to the male diaconate,¹⁸ the question that essentially all modern exegetes pose regards the relation of this with the feminine term διάκονος in Romans 16:1. Indeed, from the logical point of view there are three possibilities: (1) it [διάκονος] has a noble meaning, but not ministerial in a technical sense; it means more or less "who is at the service"; (2) the noun mirrors an ecclesial situation where a ministerial significance of the diaconate, and, furthermore, precisely of a diaconate of women, is outlined; (3) finally, Romans 16:1 is the first evidence of a true and proper female diaconate, parallel to the male diaconate (testified to in Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8-12; 4:6; Titus 1:9), even though in a basic form, as for the other ministries that emerge in the New Testament (bishops, presbyters, deacons, true widows, teachers, etc.). Any conclusion must take into account the fact that some exegetes date the epistle to the Romans to the spring of 55 or 56 (Kümmel, Friedrich, Bornkamm), others to the beginning of 57 or 58 (Schlier, Bruce), others yet to 58 (Wikenhauser-Schmid, Michel, Kalsbach): in any case around twenty-five years after the death of Jesus, that is, in an era when the ecclesial fabric was at its beginning.

¹⁵ Cf. IG 3, 3527; First Council of Nicaea, *can.* 19 (twice); *Const. ap.* 3:7; *CI* 1, 2, 13 etc.

¹⁶ It is *de post. Caini* 165; *gig.* 12; *Ios.* 241; *de vita Mois.* I, 199 and *de vita cont.* 75.

¹⁷ Cf. *Bellum* 3, 354.388.626, *Ant.* 1, 298; 6, 52; 7, 201. 224; 8, 354; 9, 54. 55; 11, 188. 228.255; 12, 187.

¹⁸ See evidence in Marucci, *op. cit.*

Analysis of the thirty or so most important commentaries on the epistle to the Romans of the last one hundred years,¹⁹ of the liturgical translations into the major European languages, of the dictionaries of biblical theology, and of the scanty literature on the subject has led me to establish the actual presence of all the three above-mentioned possibilities. The first meaning, though, is definitely in the minority, more hinted at than anything else;²⁰ for the other two it is obvious that the boundary is uncertain and variable. Those in favor of an at least vaguely ministerial meaning [of the term] consider its activities as care of the sick, aid to the poor, and assistance to the bishop during the baptism of women.²¹

It seems to me that among the conclusions we can draw from this analysis, the first is that, at least this time, no denominational influences are detected regarding the choices made. The Catholic Jerusalem Bible, for example, in the famous first edition of 1995 (attributed to the Jesuit father S. Lyonnet) had *deaconesses*, a translation also present in the 1998 edition, while the 1984 *revidierte Fassung der Lutherbibel* has "(Phoebe), die im Dienst der Gemeinde von Kenkree ist"; the current *Einheitsübersetzung* for the Psalms and the New Testament, which is also the official text for the German evangelical churches, does likewise ("Dienerin der Gemeinde . . ."). Uncertain is the *Orthodox Study Bible* of the St. Athanasius Academy (2008), which translates "who is a servant of the Church in Cencree"

¹⁹ I am referring here to F. Godet (1890), Th. Zahn (1910), M.-J. Lagrange (1922³), R. Cornely (1927²), J. Huby (1940), O. Kuss (1940), C. H. Dodd (1947^{repr}), Pirot/Clamer (1948), A. Nygren (1959³), A. Schlatter (1959³; English: 1995), H. W. Schmidt (1962), J. Murray (1965), O. Michel (1966), P. Althaus (1971), E. Käsemann (1974²), H. Schlier (1979²), G. Barbaglio (1980), C. E. B. Cranfield (1980–1981), U. Wilckens (1982), A. Maillot (1984), D. Zeller (1985), J. D. G. Dunn (1988), W. Schmithals (1988), C. K. Barrett (1991²), J. A. Fitzmyer (1993), B. Byrne (1996), H. Krimmer (1996), D. J. Moo (1996).

²⁰ The strongest objections against a ministerial interpretation of the "diaconate" of Phoebe are in Michaelis *op. cit.*, 146; Dellling, *Gottesdienst*, 141, and Kalsbach in the article of RAC III, 917 cited in the bibliography.

²¹ As far as the biblical or philological lexicons are concerned: according to Thayer *διάκονος* of Romans 16:1 is to be translated as *deaconess*, meaning "a woman to whom the care of either poor or sick women was entrusted"; Beyer, in his entry in *ThWNT* regarding the root *διακον-*, does not take a stand on the significance of *διάκονος* in the case of Phoebe; strangely the known philologist M. Zerwick in his *Analysis philological N.T.* (as Rienecker) does not explain the term *διάκονος* in Romans 16:1; on the contrary, Grosvenor's English edition translates it as "deaconess."

but which in a footnote, however, explains that she was *deaconess*; the *New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford, 1989), which is published by the Church of England, in the text has a *deacon*, and in a footnote adds "or *minister*." What concerns the various official translations by CEI [Italian Episcopal Conference] is a mystery: the word used in the 1971 edition was "deaconess of the Church of C."; even the text of the new liturgical version of the New Testament published in 1997 had "deaconess" (379) and yet the final text of the whole Bible, which is now official for the liturgy, has "Phoebe, who is at the service of the Church of C."²² In the footnotes, however, the text mitigates this, explaining that she was "responsible" for that Church (624). For a Catholic it might be interesting to note that the Vulgate, which translates Philippians 1:1 with *diaconibus*, 1 Timothy 3:8 with *diaconos*, and 1 Timothy 3:12 with *diacones*,²³ for Romans 16:1 has *quae est in ministerio ecclesiae*, as for all the other occurrences of *διάκονος*, thus implying that for the translator (Jerome) the term in Romans 16:1 has a generic, not a ministerial, meaning; in the other occurrences of Romans (13:4 [twice], which refers to civilian authority, and 15:8, which refers to Christ) such revered translation has *minister*. The *Nova Vulgata* is only slightly different: *quae est ministra ecclesiae, quae est in Cencris*. As to the Castilian, the *Sagrada Biblia* of BAC, edited by Nacar Fuster and Colunga (1964), translated "Os recomiendo a nuestra hermana Febe, *diaconissa* de la iglesia de C."; also Alonso Schökel and Mateos choose *diaconissa* in the 1975 *Nueva Biblia Española* of 1975.

Second, we must note that during the twentieth century there has been no evolution of or dialectic with regard to the three alternatives, perhaps because of the relatively limited importance of the issue.

Finally, for many commentators the text would demonstrate implicitly that Roman Christians knew what a deacon was, given that Paul does not feel the need to render the meaning explicit.

²² Cf. *La Sacra Bibbia* (Rome, 2008), 2144. The 1961 Salani Bible, edited by the Pontifical Biblical Institute (Giovanni Re S.I. was responsible for Romans), and in 1966 the Marietti Bible (translated by Algisi) did the same.

²³ As we can see, since it is a Grecism, the translator fluctuates between the second and the third declension; later the terms *diaconus* and *diaconissa* will prevail. For all three occurrences there exist manuscripts with variations with regard to the terms given in the text (*diaconis* for Phil 1:1; *diacones* for 1 Tim 3:8; and *diaconi* for 1 Tim 3:12).

The Ecclesial Tradition

Before drawing any conclusion regarding the diaconate of Phoebe it is certainly useful to overview briefly the works of the major ecclesiastical writers.

Origen's (c. 185–254) commentary on the epistle to the Romans has come to us complete, but certainly summarized, in the Latin version by Rufinus of Aquileia, finished by AD 406; although Rufinus's declared intention is to spread Origen's thought throughout the West, one wonders how much in the Latin text belongs to Origen and how much to Rufinus. Many Greek fragments have also been gathered from various sources, but this is no help because none treats chapter 16. The Latin text contains great praise of Phoebe's virtues and often affirms that she and other women in the Church are *ministrae* or *in ministerio ecclesiae*.²⁴ Despite attempts to the contrary, it appears that in essence Origen gives no new information about the Pauline text.

In a commentary—probably spurious—by Jerome we find for the first time words that will reoccur often in the writings of Western exegetes: (*in ministerio Ecclesiae*) *sicut etiam nunc in Orientalibus diaconissae in suo sexu ministrare videntur in baptismo, sive in ministerio verbi, quia privatim docuisse feminas invenimus, sicut Priscillam* [. . .].²⁵

Ambrosiaster, writing between 366 and 384, contemporary of the translation prior to the Vulgate, translates the debated Greek term in Romans 16:1 with *ministra*, but in his brief commentary he repeats the term without explaining in detail what it means.²⁶

John Chrysostom (344?–407) briefly recalls Phoebe in six places within his numerous works. First of all, obviously, in the XXX homily on the letter to the Romans:²⁷ he repeatedly underlines the exceptional praise the Apostle sings of her, but Chrysostom does not specify the meaning of the term δίακονος.

We find even less in the XIII homily, which comments on the third chapter of the letter to the Philippians,²⁸ in the *de profectu evangelii*,²⁹ in the *homilia, dicta postquam reliquiae martyrum*,³⁰ in the *homilia de studio*

²⁴ Cf. T. Heither, Hg., *Origenes. Römerbriefkommentar* [Fontes Christ. 2], I, 242–45.

²⁵ PL 30, 714.

²⁶ Cf. CSE 81, 476f.

²⁷ Cf. PG 60, 663f.

²⁸ Cf. PG 62, 280.

²⁹ Cf. PG 51, 315.

³⁰ Cf. PG 63, 471.

praesentium,³¹ and finally in the *de laudibus Pauli* 3:7.³² Perhaps it is a little amazing that this bishop, by whom no fewer than seventeen letters to the deaconess Olympia have survived,³³ does not even say one word about the "diaconate" of Phoebe.

The writings of *Pelagius*, the Breton ascetic active first in Rome, then in Carthage and in the East between 384 and c. 430, have been handed down under a false name, but today they are unanimously recognized. These works include a commentary on the letter to the Romans. When speaking about Phoebe, Pelagius identifies her as the messenger carrying the letter and explains her ministry with the same words of Pseudo-Jerome: *sicut etiam nunc in Orientalibus diaconissae in suo sexu ministrae videntur in baptismo, sive in ministerio verbi, quia privatim docuisse feminas invenimus, sicut Priscillam*.³⁴

Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) in his commentary on the letter to the Romans does not comment on chapter 16. In his *Adv. libros athei Iuliani* II, 25 he recalls the Phoebe of Greek mythology.³⁵

Theodoret of Cyrus (393?–c. 446), who knew several deaconesses, mentions Phoebe three times. In his *praefatio in epist. S. Pauli* he simply cites Romans 16:1; when explaining the line he affirms that although Cenchrae was a small city, the community was so large as to need a woman deacon; it appears to Theodoret that the help Paul mentions concerns Phoebe's hospitality toward him [the Apostle]. Commenting on 1 Timothy 5:10 Theodoret also recalls Phoebe in passing.³⁶

In the commentary attributed to *Primasius* (which is in reality the Orthodox elaboration of Pelagius's commentary by the school of Casiodorus) Romans 16:1 is explained: *quomodo diacones sunt, sive in ministerio verbi: nam et feminae tunc in suo sexu docebant . . .*³⁷

John of Damascus (c. 650–754) also wrote a commentary on the letters of Saint Paul, which Altaner describes as a compilation of excerpts from the works of John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and Theodoret. As

³¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 489f. (here Chrysostom repeatedly wonders how it was possible that Phoebe was προστάτις of Paul himself).

³² Cf. SCh 300, 174.

³³ Cf. SCh 13.

³⁴ Cf. PL 30, 714f.

³⁵ Cf. SCh 322, 256.

³⁶ Respectively, PG 82,41. 217. 820.

³⁷ PL 68, 504f.

for chapter 16 of Romans the Damascene relates the entire Pauline text but only comments briefly on a few lines, although not on the first two.³⁸

Sedulius Scotus, active in Liege from 848 to 858, does as do many previous and later Latin exegetes: in his brief commentary on Romans 16:1 he repeats the opinion quoted above from Pseudo-Jerome and Pelagius, that is (*in ministerio Ecclesiae*) *sicut etiam in Orientalibus locis diaconissae mulieres in suo sexu ministrae videntur in baptismo sive in ministerio verbi, quia privatim docuisse feminas invenimus (sicut Priscilla) [. . .]*.³⁹

Both the *Pseudo-Ecumenius* (eighth century?) and *Theophylact* [of Ochrid] (eleventh century) in their writings on the letter to the Romans report the Pauline text, but they do not give any explanation of the term *διάκονος*.⁴⁰

Attone, bishop of Vercelli from 924 to 964, in his Epistle VIII proves to be one of the few to explain relatively extensively, to a presbyter named Ambrose, what one must think of such terms as *presbytera*, *diacona*, *ministra*, and *abbatissa* which, other than in Romans 16:1 in the case of Phoebe, occur in several canons of synods and councils. In his opinion, for the needs of the churches of the first centuries *non solum viri, sed etiam feminae praeerant Ecclesiis*, something that the council of Laodicea would later prohibit (canon 11). Among the reasons for justifying a female ministry he explicitly recalls their greater ease in approaching pagan women and the decency required for the baptism of adult women. All this, says Attone, *nunc jam minime expedit*, given the custom of infant baptism of his time. According to Attone it was not advisable for abbesses to be called *diaconae*, as appears was the practice in the past, given that the two terms (*abbatissa* and *diacona*) are contradictory.⁴¹

Among the Latin writers, *Peter Abelard* (1079–1142), is one of the most comprehensive when considering Romans 16:1: he reports the words of the commentary attributed to Jerome (mentioned above), then the words of Epiphanius, who opposed the ordination of women, then the words of Cassiodorus and of Claudius, bishop of Turin. From the various quotations, which he partially repeats in epistle VII and in the *sermo XXXI*, positive judgments emerge about the ministry of women in the Church, as well as one negative evaluation. We get the impression that Abelard tends to favor the positive judgments.⁴²

³⁸ Cf. PG 95, 565ff.

³⁹ PL 103, 123 (there is a simple mention of Phoebe also in col. 127a).

⁴⁰ Cf. PG 134, 113ff.

⁴¹ Cf. PL 118, 628 and, resp., 124, 550.

⁴² Cf. PL 178, 239 ff. 572. 586. 788. 971ff.

Peter Lombard (c. 1095–1160), who in his time was a famous interpreter of the Pauline letters, limits himself, though, to twice recalling Romans 16:1 without explaining what comprised Phoebe's diaconate.⁴³

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), in an article of the *Summa Theologica* titled *Utrum religiosis liceat saecularia negotia tractare* (STh 2a.2ae.187.2), mentions the case of Phoebe as *Sed contra*, to demonstrate the fact that religious can deal with *saecularia negotia* when charity requires. Commenting on Romans 16:1-2, he then recalls Phoebe three times; the only interesting observation is that the apostle must recommend her because, even though she has dedicated herself to God, she has no authority without that recommendation (*Super Rom.* 16:1).

Among the post-Tridentine authors, one must emphasize that W. Estius (1542–1613), the distinguished Dutch theologian called *doctor fundatissimus* by Benedict XIV, when commenting on Romans 16:1-2 and, as far as I know, for the first time on Phoebe's "diaconate," formulates the thesis that would later prevail in Catholic manuals thusly: *non quod in ecclesia sacro diaconatus officio functae fuerint aliquando mulieres, quibus nec loqui in ecclesiis permissum est, 1 Cor. 14 [. . .] sed quia [scl. Phoebe] solita esset suscipere et fovere ministros verbi Dei etc. [. . .] Erant enim olim quae appellabantur diaconissae, non altari servientes, sed aliis quibusdam ecclesiae ministeriis addictae.*⁴⁴

An interesting confirmation of the fact that the ancient [writers] also saw the beginning of the female diaconate in Romans 16:1 is the inscription found in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, according to some dating back to the sixth century, which speaks of a deaconess named Sophia, ἡ δευτέρα Φοίβη.⁴⁵

Ancient martyrologies, including the Roman martyrology up to the present time, have Phoebe among the saints of September 3.

Conclusions

At the end of this brief overview of the history of the interpretation of Romans 16:1, allow me some personal considerations, which may also serve as an attempt to synthesize:

⁴³ Cf. PL 191, 1299, 1527.

⁴⁴ *In Beati Pauli Epistolas Commentaria . . . auctore G. Estio, Parisiis et denuo Neapoli 1741, T.I, 364.*

⁴⁵ Text in RB 1 (1904): 260–62.

- 1) Among the three alternatives I have presented, there is no uniform or prevailing position among exegetes.
- 2) On the contrary, in my opinion, the fact that Romans 16:1 qualifies Phoebe through an aside that neither uses a finite verb form of διακονέω nor a participle such as διακονούσα, but rather says “who is διάκονος of the church of Cenchreae” make us tend decisively toward an interpretation [of διάκονος] where the noun signifies above all a title, a stable function, a ministry not purely civic rather ecclesiastical, although we cannot further specify whether it was a perpetual function, let alone whether it was “sacramental.”
- 3) The fact that the text was written around twenty-five years after the beginning of the Christian tradition does not appear to me as relevant as some contemporary [exegetes] claim; I am not aware of any scholar who, up to now, has convincingly identified, so to speak, gradient growth in ecclesiastical structures; in the attempt to move the birth of the various ministries to very late dates the wish (of Protestant origin) takes precedence over scriptural and historical evidences.
- 4) The fact that a woman performs such “ministry” cannot appear *a priori* impossible for those who bear in mind the general climate of equality of the sexes that emerges in the New Testament.
- 5) The second title attributed to Phoebe, προστάτις of many in the community, should not be linked directly to the title of deaconess; the same is true for her task (hypothetical but probable) of carrying Paul’s letter itself to the [Christian] community in Rome.
- 6) It does not seem to me there is any certain link of Phoebe’s “diaconate” with the institution of the “true widows” (τὰς ὄντως χήρας cf. 1 Tim 5:3ff.) or with the women mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:11 in the passage dealing with deacons.
- 7) The survey of Greek and Latin ecclesiastical writers leads one to say that almost no one of them delves into the definition of the “ministry” of the Phoebe of Romans 16:1, except with a few words; for some Latin writers of the late Middle Ages (beginning with Attone) Phoebe recalls the idea that there were deaconesses in the ancient Church, especially in the East, an institution that later became increasingly rare, if not truly extinct.

Translated by Carmela Leonforte-Plimack with Phyllis Zagano