

Would Women Deacons Be Progress for the Catholic Church?
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The firm answer to the above question is: maybe. When the category of deacon was re-introduced half a century ago, I wrote that the move represented one of two things: either the beginning of a revolution in the Roman Catholic Church or an attempt to shore up the collapsing structure of the present church. I was strongly inclined to the second view. However, there was a possibility that the first of those things could happen, given that the church at that moment of history seemed to be on the verge of a shake-up, such as had not happened since the Reformation. Fifty years later it is clear that the forces for radical change were already exhausted at that time. Deacons were placed into the existing structure with the intention of opposing any change in church structure.

This time, of course, it could be different. The existence of men as deacons did little to prevent a further erosion of church authority. Women in great numbers might over run the male priesthood and achieve something new. When male deacons were introduced, the sure signs that it represented a reactionary move was that they were forced to undergo long training, often in a seminary setting, their wives were not part of the story, and their powers were severely limited. The set of rules were constructed to make sure that the division between the “clergy and laity” was kept intact. There was some danger that the job of being a “layman” who is a helper to the clergy could blur the line.

What might signal a seriousness for the category of deacon would be an announcement that every woman who has been a nun for five years can be ordained immediately if she wishes. Every woman who has exercised a leadership role in a parish or church organization would also be an immediate candidate for the diaconate. In that kind of change the role of the deacon would be left fluid; it might start with hearing confessions (a sacramental practice almost dormant because of the medieval way it was carried out); administering the sacrament to the dying could be immediately included in the deacon’s job description; performing baptism (which can already be done by any church member) could be a usual part of the deacon’s work; the deacon could be the church’s witness when two people marry each other; and deacons might be homilists, although to do that well (better than the present standard fare) they might need some special preparation.

What would be left for the priest to do? The central act of the Catholic Church’s liturgy is the celebration of the Eucharist. The central act of priesthood is the leadership role at the Eucharist. Priests would also continue to be administrators of parish and diocesan units of the church. At least they would be “overseers” (the origin of the term presbyter) of those experts called to help the priest administrators.

If anything like this were to occur the obvious question that would follow is why restrict priesthood to men who promise at the age of twenty-five not to engage in sexual activity for the rest of their lives. The question is already frequently asked why the priesthood is restricted to celibate men. Why not ordain women? Why not have a married clergy? The most likely effect of either of those changes would be to solidify the split between “clergy and laity” whereas any progress requires getting rid of both categories.

The split in organization between a clerical class and a laity is common in the contemporary world. The Christian Church is one of the main sources of this kind of organization. Very often the clerical class go by the name “professionals,” another word borrowed from church history. A professional is someone who professes a belief in something. The term originated in the monastery when members were “professed in vows.” In the British American colonies one can find references to someone as a professor of the Christian religion (not a university teacher but someone who actually practiced the religion).

There are parallels in the secular world where a split between clergy (professionals) and lay people are being challenged. Examples are politics, law and medicine. Take the last area where a professional class of men seized power from women in the nineteenth century. They took the title of “doctor” meaning learned; everyone else was a lay person. The doctor class depended on a group of women called nurses who until the second half of the twentieth century did not have college degrees, but they did most of the work of caring for the sick.

We are in the middle of a major change from the medical profession to “the health professions,” led particularly by well-educated women. Some become physicians, some become nurse practitioners, some continue to do the always needed work of tending the suffering. But the biggest change is that with the internet and other sources of knowledge no one has to be a lay person about their own health. We need the special knowledge that physicians and surgeons have but the best of them realize that the patient and his or her body have to be agents in healing. It is a different role for physicians and some of them hate the changes but there is no going back to the nineteenth century relation of “doctor” and laity.

The Jesus movement that became the Christian Church began by announcing the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. The church was not up to including the sisterhood of women but at least it did not begin with a structure of male clergy and a mostly female laity. The historical data is mixed and debatable but at the least women did play a significant part in the early church. Implied in Christian belief was the equality of every person before a divine creator and judge. The beginning of a split into two classes began with the introduction of great numbers of converts who received little education in what it meant to be a Christian. The essential difference among church members was between “clerics” who could read and the laity who could not. “Laity” was simply the word for people but in this split the word quickly took on the meaning of people who lack knowledge and power.

A promising resistance to this split occurred with the monastic movement. The men in the desert and later in the monastic communities attempted to model the Christian gospel (“evangelical counsels”). The community of brothers ordained one brother to serve as priest for the community. The brothers were warned to avoid two things: women and bishops. They were much more successful in avoiding women. The new clerical class ordained the monks as an effective strategy to guarantee there would only be two classes in the church: clergy and laity.

The near disappearance of women in early monasticism was a weakness preventing a reform that might have led the church to becoming a Christian community of brothers and sisters. When women later came in great number to communities of nuns their position was as “daughters of

the church” not sisters who are the church. The description of monks and nuns as “the religious” was inaccurate from the beginning. In the earlier meaning of “religion” as practices of worship it was not too far off. But at least since the seventeenth century, the terms “the religious” and “religious life” are ridiculously misused in the Roman Catholic Church. It is a serious problem in understanding the religious life of all Catholics and the church engaging in dialogue with anyone who lives a religious life.

The Roman Catholic Church’s categories of membership – clergy, religious, lay – may seem to be a three tier system but the middle category of “the religious” is almost entirely made up of nuns who are treated by the clergy as helpers with no ecclesiastical power. The ordained men in religious orders usually call themselves priests; only a few of them consider themselves brothers who serve when needed in a liturgical role. The actual structure is still the readers and the nonreaders or those who command and those who are expected to obey. But many women in religious orders have used their ambiguous position to speak out forcefully on the side of peace, justice and equality. The prominent men have been fewer.

The category of deacon could possibly be used to subvert the two class structure of the church. But it would have to be accompanied by a stout resistance to the existing language of the church as composed of clergy and lay. As long as there is a laity there will be need of a clergy. Organizations that call themselves “lay” will never be very effective if they continue to accept a self-description that means lacking in competence. Perhaps to get going an organization may have to appeal to people currently called laity but as soon as feasible they have to rethink the categories of church membership in a way that is a better self-description and one that opens membership beyond those called laity. There are certainly nuns who are “religious women” and can be sisters in the church with women who are currently designated as lay. There are even some anti-clerical priests who might find a home with the men who make up the brotherhood of Christians.

Any attempts at changing the fundamental language of an institution are met by ridicule. Neologisms are almost always a failure. The only effective change requires experiments in which the language of the group is organically related to its history. Christian history has some rich possibilities for rethinking a bureaucratic pattern that tends to deaden people’s interest and enthusiasm. Any attempt to work significant changes of structure in an organization of more than a billion people looks pretty innocuous. But since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has been in rapid change; most of the effort has unfortunately been directed at shutting the window that Pope John XXIII opened. Changes in church teaching will surely continue but the direction of that teaching is unclear. The future of the church is not only important to Roman Catholics but to the world at large.