

Including women in the Catholic Church

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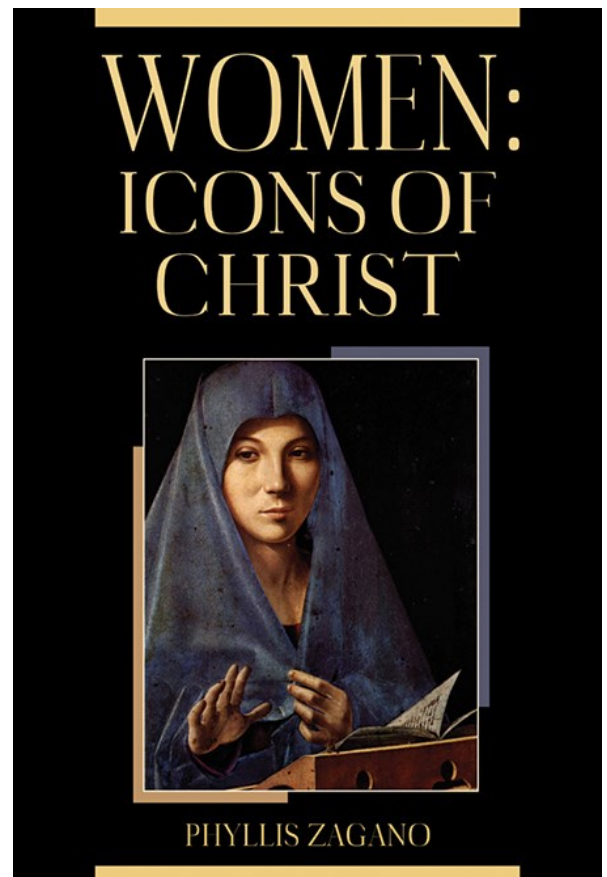
Phyllis Zagano's latest book *Women: Icons of Christ* is a must read for all who desire equality for women in our world and an inclusive practice of Catholic faith. The critical issue Zagano presents in this book is that ordaining women to the diaconate is a not a new or forbidden act in Catholic history but rather a return to a practice that endured for hundreds of years.

Zagano is Senior Research Associate in Residence and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Hofstra University, New York. Her scholarship on women and the diaconate is well-known and she is a respected contributor to international forums.

From the new testament onwards Zagano shows that women were active members of the evolving Christian community, consistent with the culture and custom of the time, they were ordained in the same way as their male counterparts by the laying on of hands and calling the Holy Spirit. They ministered to people through baptism, teaching catechism, providing altar service, spiritual direction, confession, and anointing the sick until the twelfth century.

With her usual rigorous scholarship Zagano cites literary, historical and epigraphical evidence that indicate the presence of women in the diaconate. She identifies how the clerical culture of the Catholic church developed from Christ's time on, revealing how the appalling vilification of women increased to the extent that the clerical culture had snuffed out women's voices and leadership in sacramental ministry by the twelfth century. Women deacons in western Christianity were barred from even entering the sanctuary and handling sacred vessels.

This clerical culture, which Pope Francis calls 'a cancer in our midst', continues to destroy our church's ability to bring Christ's message of love and justice to our world. It impacts destructively on all women but particularly on women and children in countries whose governments have poor human rights records that do not recognise women's equality.



Zagano's opening question is 'Who can be an icon of Christ?' She states that 'Beneath every objection to restoring women to the ordained diaconate is the suggestion that women cannot image Christ. Of course, women do not, cannot "image" the human male Jesus exactly. But the extraordinary fact of the Incarnation is that Jesus, God, became human. Women are human. And all humans are made in the image and likeness of God.'

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The question haunts her. She notes that 'documents of the Second Vatican Council teach that all good people who are part of the Church, all good people caught within the net the world calls Christianity, all these good people relying on the exquisite promise of Christ's resurrection are the Body of Christ. It would stand to reason, then, that "all good people" means precisely that. "All good people" means all good men and women.'

Our church leaders' refusal to acknowledge women's equality and share ministry with women is transparently misogynistic and not Christ like. To the world it looks like misogyny and hypocrisy that obstructs the Church's message and mission for good in the world. Even when initiatives for reform arise and commissions are established their recommendations are rejected. A pattern of rejection and resistance to change has developed.

In the 1960's, Pope Paul VI, rejected the first Commission's report and presented *Humanae Vitae* in 1968; in April 1976 the Pontifical Biblical Commission consulted on the possibility of women's priesthood stated that 'scripture alone does not exclude women from ordination'. This was disregarded and in 1994 Pope John Paul II issued *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* banning the discussion of the issue on church premises.

Then in 2016 the first commission on the role of women deacons in the early church, on which Zagano represented the USA, was disregarded. Let's hope and pray the new commission has more success. Last year at the Amazonian Synod, the issue of married priests and deacons was rejected despite a two thirds majority vote in its favour. Even in the last weeks, misogyny has raised its ugly head in the title of the Pope's most recent exhortation *Fratelli Tutti* (Brothers all). First thought to be a mistake, when concerns were expressed and suggestions made to add *sorelli* or sisters to the title. The request was refused. All these actions reflect our leadership's fear of losing the support of their colleagues who wish to maintain power and distrust and dislike women. This all impacts negatively on women's lives.

Fr. Frank Brennan SJ in his homily when *Fratelli Tutti* was released, which coincided with the delivery of Australia's national budget, pointed to the fact that the ABC's panel to comment on the social justice aspects of the national budget, happened to choose all prominent women who offered rigorous and competent critiques on national television. In contrast, to the Catholic Church that was not prepared to acknowledge women, who represent more than half the church, in the title of its last exhortation.

Women: Icons of Christ is a compact, though sometimes dense, resource that offers a wealth of excellent information and knowledge to all working in Church reform. While Zagano writes of the experience of Catholicism in US, there is so much in this book that is relevant to us in Australia. Following the horror of the child abuse and the recommendations of the National Royal Commission into Institutional Sexual Abuse of Children which emphasised the issue of women's participation, the Catholic community is preparing for a Plenary Council, due to be held in Adelaide in October 2021. This Plenary Council is the first such Council since 1937 in Australia. It seeks to look at reforms that will make our church relevant to our times. Preparatory

consultations have indicated that women's participation in decision making and ministry is the governance issue most reflected in the consultations and thousands of submissions. Restoring ordination of women to the diaconate would immediately start to change this clerical culture and move towards full equality for women and all.

Zagano states that restoring women to the diaconate 'is a legal not doctrinal issue and that minor changes to appropriate canons will allow the Church to provide for its pastoral needs. Without doubt, the needs of the Church universal must be addressed, but in a manner so that individual local churches are able make their own decisions based on their own needs.'

Committed Catholics in Australia would agree. Zagano notes that Pope Benedict XVI modified five canons of the 1983 Code of Canon Law including two regarding ordination Canons 1008 and 1009 to make clear that the diaconate and priesthood are separate and distinct orders. The point she makes here is that if canon law has been changed before it can be changed again. In the case of the diaconate it can happen very simply by adding 'women' to Canon 1024. So many women and men yearn for and would welcome being ministered to by women. Our world rejects pious religiosity and is crying out for a Catholic ecclesiology to guide us to live life in Christ's message of social justice and love.

Zagano's new book *Women: Icons of Christ* presents new hope for an inclusive church. Importantly, if the church is unable to treat people equally, the church will not realise its enormous potential for our world. Restoring women to ordination in the diaconate would be a substantial step towards equality for all in our church.

Marilyn Hatton is a member of Catholics Speak Out, Concerned Catholics and convener of the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform. She has represented Australia at international forums concerned with full equality for all and an inclusive Catholic church. Marilyn has held professional public sector positions concerned with national policy and programs to improve the status of women.

[*Women: Icons of Christ* will launch at the Women as Church conference running 27 October to 29 October 2020.](#)

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