

Seeking the truth about women deacons: a public lecture with Dr Phyllis Zagano

International scholar Dr Phyllis Zagano is often cited as an advocate for women deacons in the Catholic Church. But the US-based academic doesn't see her work as advocacy.

"I don't like to think of myself as an advocate," Dr Zagano said. "I present facts and the fact is that the Church did sacramentally ordain women as deacons."

Dr Zagano will outline the history and arguments for the ordination of women to the diaconate when she delivers a public lecture for the ACU Centre for Liturgy on August 7.

In 2016 Dr Zagano was one of 12 experts appointed to Pope Francis' commission to study the history of women deacons. The appointment was roughly 30 years in the making, through the former Cardinal of the Archdiocese of New York.

Dr Zagano, a US Navy Reserve's Public Affairs Officer at the time, was asked to write a report for Auxiliary Bishop John O'Connor, a newly retired US Navy chaplain, then vicar general of the US Archdiocese for the Military Services. She wrote that deacons should be able to serve as chaplains in the US military. Deacons then, and at present, are not endorsed by the Military Archdiocese to serve as chaplains in the US military.

Her large report led to a meeting with Bishop O'Connor, who set Dr Zagano a new challenge - to write a book on the history of women deacons in the Catholic Church.

"He challenged me to write a book, and he said, 'You write a good book, I'll get it to the Pope,'" Dr Zagano said.

Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church was published in 2000 and propelled Dr Zagano into a decades-long quest for the Church to ordain women as deacons once more.

"There is no doctrinal teaching saying the Church cannot restore the practice (of ordaining women deacons), but it's a practice that is up to the discernment of the Pope since it's currently not allowed in Canon Law," Dr Zagano said.

"But there's no official theological, Magisterial teaching that women cannot be ordained as deacons again. It is not my place to tell the Australian Bishops, or any individual bishop in Australia or any place else, that he must ordain women as deacons. I can only say that as far as I know, he can."

More than twenty years since delving into the history of the female diaconate, Dr Zagano is yet to witness the ordination of a woman deacon.

In her online public lecture, Dr Zagano will offer insights into the ongoing ecclesial discussions about women deacons, including possible decisions at the upcoming October synodal assembly.

"The present is searching for the truth," Dr Zagano said.

"If the Church needs women deacons ordained at this time in history, the Church will not be denied. The Church must listen to the voice of the Spirit."

ACU Centre for Liturgy director Professor Clare Johnson said in light of the Australian Plenary Council's support for the admission of women as deacons (should the universal law of the church be modified to authorise this), and the upcoming synodal assembly in Rome, Dr Zagano's historical insights would be timely.

"The ACU Centre for Liturgy is very pleased to host Dr Zagano for a public lecture on women's inclusion in the diaconate, and how that might shape the liturgical life of the Church," Professor Johnson said.

"Dr Phyllis Zagano has spent several decades investigating the history of ordained women deacons in the Catholic Church, and her research has played a significant role in the ongoing discussions about the possibility of restoring a female diaconate. We look forward to offering an opportunity for people to learn more about this important topic."

MEDIA RELEASE

24 July 2023



What: ACU Centre for Liturgy Online Public Lecture: *Women deacons and the Synod: what happens now?*

Who: Dr Phyllis Zagano

When: Monday 7 August 2023, 10am AEST

Where: Online via Zoom

Register: By Friday 4 August at acu.edu.au/publiclecturecf

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