

## The Catholic Church needs women deacons now | Opinion

Women have long been stalwart supporters of the mission of Catholicism and held other leadership positions in the church. This is a logical next step.

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Pope Francis at the Papal Mass on the the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia on Sept. 27, 2015.

Six years ago this month, Pope Francis visited Philadelphia, and the cheering crowds that packed the Parkway — along with millions of TV viewers — listened to his holy words. The Jesuit from an Italian immigrant family and raised in Argentina brought much joy, hope, and grace to a city, region, and country in 2015.

Since then, Pope Francis' tumultuous agenda has raised major questions and concerns about his pastoral direction, from both conservative and progressive bishops, clergy, and the laity. He has spoken on issues of worldwide relevance, such as what to do about migrants and refugees, being better stewards of the environment, and showing compassion to those whose lifestyle and beliefs veer from traditional Catholic teachings, such as same-sex marriage and abortion. He frequently rails against capitalism, mirroring the sentiments of many young adults in the United States.

Another policy change considered by the pope is having female deacons, a change that could do more to enliven and contemporize the Catholic Church than any prelate's act since [Vatican II](#), a historic assembly of Roman Catholic religious leaders in the early 1960s that is credited with modernizing the church at the time.

In April 2020, the Vatican announced that [Pope Francis had created a new commission to study the question of a female diaconate in the Catholic Church](#), but so far no action has been made.

The debate over female deacons should skip the obligatory conservative-vs.-progressive wrangling, as the rationale in its favor comes from an enlightened historical, biblical, sociocultural, and practical understanding of what the Catholic Church needs today.

Women have been stalwarts of the mission of Catholicism, not only serving the church's mission but building and running other organizations committed to education, health care, social services, and charity, among others. In fact, the Catholic Church afforded women leadership positions well before secular organizations. Female religious leaders were named school principals, presidents of colleges, and heads of hospitals or nonprofits, much before secular organizations allowed them to take such titles. Catholic women can write the book on women in leadership. It's long past time for Pope Francis to allow women to be ordained as deacons.

Pope Francis' visit to Philadelphia coincided with the city's hosting of the World Meeting of Families. If women naturally have been entrusted to be stewards of "the family," which Catholics hold sacrosanct, why not have them play a leading role in nurturing the church?

[In January, the Vatican announced](#) that women could assist in liturgical celebrations such as lectors and acolytes, formalizing the presence of women at the altar. But since the 1970s, U.S. Catholics have seen women's faces on their altars, serving as lectors, Eucharistic ministers, altar servers, and a sundry of other duties. The presence of women in a sacristy or on an altar is well beyond any shock factor today. The rationale for increasing their "duties" is much more than simply "adding extra hands" to the work of the church, but rather admitting that to disenfranchise half of the faithful as servants of the Lord is hegemonic. In fact, [a 2015 study from Pew reports](#) that six in 10 Catholics think the church should allow women to be priests.

When parishioners compliment deacons of the church, it's typically not for assisting pastors, who certainly need help with many aspects, from simple temporal matters to celebrating the Mass. Instead, parishioners appreciate it when lay deacons can relate to the questions, concerns, fears, and pain offered by the laypeople. While deacons do not have the order to hear confessions, they prepare

and deliver homilies that penetrate the minds, hearts, and souls of the parishioners. While communication style, language, and interpersonal approaches could potentially be different for male deacons vs. female deacons, there will be no significant difference to the benefits and impact to parishioners. And, in fact, female deacons may even be better able to relate to the issues facing the women in their congregations, allowing them to minister more meaningfully.

For the sake of the future of the Catholic Church, it is time that Pope Francis decree the formation of women as deacons to serve the Catholic Church. Of all the acts he makes in his tenure, this one will do more to enliven the church than any other.

***Stephen F. Gambescia** writes from Philadelphia. His father was one of the first deacons ordained in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.*