

## Women Deacons in the Maronite Church

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### Abstract

The study investigates the inclusion of women deacons in the canons of the National Synod of Mount Lebanon of 1736, which formalized Latinization of the Maronite Church, providing for codification of its particular law. The canons were approved *in forma specifica* by Pope Clement XII and have never been modified or overruled, thereby giving evidence of the liceity of ordaining women deacons in the Catholic Church.

### Keywords

women deacons, diaconate, Maronite Church, women's ordination

The Syriac Maronite Church of Antioch takes its name from the hermit St. Maron, who died ca. 410. Maronites suffered severed persecution in 517, when 350 Maronite monks were martyred due to their adherence to the formula of the Council of Chalcedon pronouncing Christ as “true God and true man,” and again during the seventh century, during which they fled to the mountains of Lebanon for refuge.

Headquartered in Lebanon, where Maronites comprise the largest portion of the population of the country, the church generally rejects claims that it ever separated from Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> The only Eastern Catholic Church without an Orthodox counterpart, the

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1. Only the Maronite Church of Cyprus came under Orthodoxy, but under duress. “The view is commonly held that the Maronites [of Cyprus] were brought under the Orthodox bishops, under whom they remained until 1840, when, thanks chiefly to the efforts of the

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Maronite Church counts approximately 3.5 million members in Lebanon, and in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Cyprus, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and the United States. It derives from the West Syrian tradition.

After the Council of Trent, Maronite liturgy underwent significant Latinization. The Maronite council at Qannoubine in 1580 affirmed Latin usages regarding, among other things, the rites of initiation,<sup>2</sup> and Latinization continues despite the late nineteenth-century call of Leo XIII for Maronites to return their roots. The church sought to return to its earliest usages and to restore the traditions of the Syrian Church of Antioch after the Second Vatican Council.<sup>3</sup> A new missal, approved in 1992, demonstrates a commitment to the Antiochean liturgy: it removes some centuries-old Latin accretions and features six Maronite-specific anaphoras.

The present study investigates the inclusion of women deacons in the canons of the National Synod of Mount Lebanon of 1736, which formalized Latinization of the Maronite Church, providing for codification of its particular law. The brief synod, which included Maronite priest Joseph Assemani as Pope Clement XII's Apostolic Visitor, opened on September 30, 1736 and lasted four days. In fact, the basic text of the synod canons was written in Rome in Latin by Assemani and extended the post-Trent Latinizations.<sup>4</sup> Even so, the Synod validated the ancient practices of the Maronite Church. Standard histories note that the Synod process established dioceses, affirmed Maronite Catholicity, regularized Maronite sacramental formulae in many areas—including to either require Latin practice (regarding infant communion and confirmation, and full-body anointing in extreme unction) or prefer it (regarding immersion baptism)—and carefully delineated diocesan personnel. The Synod canons forbade the Maronite practice of double monasteries of men and of women, and called for the establishment of schools in villages and cities. However, one

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French Consul, they returned to the rule of the Maronite patriarch in the Lebanon.” George Hill, *A History of Cyprus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972) 4:382.

2. Saïd Eliaas Saïd, “La ‘Latinisation’ dans les églises orientales: une esquisse,” in *Les liturgies syriaques*, ed. F. Cassingena-Trévedy and I. Jurasz, *Études Syriaques* 3 (Paris: Geunther, 2006) 222–28 at 225. The Latinization movement would not have focused on women deacons, who effectively died out in the West by the thirteenth century. A Maronite seminary was established in Rome in 1584.
3. Matti Moosa, *The Maronites in History* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2005) 277, 334n11.
4. Saïd, “La ‘Latinisation’ dans les églises orientales”: 226–27. Some have theorized that the synod worked from the Arabic text, although those who knew both languages at the time did not comment on any differences. A recent comparison of the Arabic text, which is a translation of the Latin text, shows some technical distinctions. See Elias Atallah, *Le Synode Libanais de 1736: Son influence sur la restructuration de l'Église Maronite* and *Le Synod Libanais de 1736: Traduction du Texte Original Arabe* (Paris: Cero-Letouzey & Ane, 2000). In any event, the Latin text, here examined, is the approved text.

important point is often, if not always, overlooked: the ordination of women to the diaconate.<sup>5</sup>

Synod canons, approved *in forma specifica* by Pope Benedict XIV in 1741 and thereby having the force of papal law, include women deacons.<sup>6</sup> Without question, women were ordained as deacons in many Eastern churches, as copious research demonstrates.<sup>7</sup> While discussion about the sacramentality of the ordinations of women to the diaconate continues, including some argumentation that the female body cannot be a proper “subject” of the sacrament of order,<sup>8</sup> the fact of ordained women deacons in history is indisputable. As to the character of their ordinations, one must note that identical ordination liturgies exist, distinguished only by gender-specific language. Therefore, it can be assumed that if the ordaining prelate intended to perform a true ordination of a man as deacon, so would he intend to perform a true ordination of a woman as deacon (or deaconess, as later documents prefer). Further, as evidenced by the tasks and duties of these women deacons, one must recall that ancient sacramental practice would not allow the sacred to be approached by nonordained persons.

There are many sources for the historical facts regarding women deacons, but the references to the liturgy of ordination and the papally approved law regarding women deacons in the Maronite Church confirm the obvious. Women deacons existed and they ministered.<sup>9</sup> The recurring question is, Were they ordained or merely blessed?

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5. A *comprehensive* history of the Synod appears in Angela Mattoni “Fasi Storiche de Sinodo Libanese del 1736,” *Studi sull’Oriente Cristiano* 13 (2009), 207–26.
  6. The term “women deacons” is preferred to distinguish the ordained from the wives of male deacons and of bishops, often called “deaconesses.” While not all “deaconesses” received their title as a blessed honorific, contemporary usage of “women deacons” more clearly matches earliest historical sources that use both masculine and feminine articles for “deacon,” and indicates true ordination.
  7. See, for example, Cipriano Vagaggini, “L’ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina,” *Orentialia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974); Vagaggini, *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches: Essays by Cipriano Vagaggini*, ed. Phyllis Zagano (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2013). Earlier commentary appears in, for example, Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1976); Aimé George Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986); Ute Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, trans. Linda Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000); Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Catholic Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2005).
  8. See Sara Butler “Women Deacons and Sacramental Symbolism,” *New Diaconal Review* 6 (2011), <http://www.idc-nec.org/NDRV1Issue06.pdf>; and “Continuing the Dialogue on Women in the Diaconate” *New Diaconal Review* 9 (2012), [https://issuu.com/newdiaconal-review/docs/ndr\\_volume1issue09\\_60ppb](https://issuu.com/newdiaconal-review/docs/ndr_volume1issue09_60ppb). (All URLs cited herein were accessed June 1, 2016.)
  9. For example, while in the Syriac tradition deacons are not generally allowed to baptize males or females, for the sake of decency deaconesses participate in female baptisms:

Many liturgies of ordinations of women to the diaconate, including the East Syriac liturgy, have an epiclesis,<sup>10</sup> but West Syriac liturgies offer little if any direct manuscript evidence of liturgies specifically for women, in part because ancient manuscripts were destroyed in pro-Latinization actions, or perhaps because the identical liturgies were used for men and for women.

## Women Deacons and the Synod Canons

Several writers have noted that the Synod canons present women deacons as a fact of Maronite history, if not of current practice. Writing in 1951, Felix M. Cappello includes it among his catalogue of reasons then put forth for women deacons:

6. The principal argument is taken from the Lebanese Maronite Synod of 1736, approved *in forma specifica*. In it, it is expressly said that a deaconess is ordained to exercise specific offices or duties which suppose a spiritual power.

From the exact text: “Deaconesses among Us, who observe perpetual virginity, who are considered chaste, having foregone marriage, and who are devoted to ecclesiastical ministries by episcopal blessing . . . The necessary works of the deaconess: a) they watch over the doors by which women enter the church and ensure that each obtains a seat; b) they assist the women who are to be baptized remove their clothing and receive they who are baptized after baptism; c) they anoint the unclothed bodies, which are anointed in baptism and confirmation and also in extreme unction with chrism or oil; they wash the bodies of deceased women before they bury them; d) they explain the principals of the faith to uneducated and unskilled women; e) they bring women to the bishop or the priests or deacons, attesting to their integrity and honesty; f) when a virgin consecrated to God

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“The priest merely puts his hand behind a curtain and makes the sign of the cross.” A. J. Maclean and W. H. Browne, *The Catholicos of the East and His People (1898)* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010) 276–77. J.-M. Fiey states that among Western Syrians, the Patriarch Cyriaque stipulated that the sister chosen as monastic superior is ordained “deaconess.” “Cénobitisme féminin ancien dans les églises syriennes orientales et occidentales,” *L’Orient syrien* 10 (1995) 300.

10. The Syriac text and Latin translation are in J. S. Assemani, *Biblioteca Orientalis III*, 2 (Rome, 1728) dccclii–liiii, and specifically states the woman is brought into the diaconate. The epiclesis is included: “give to her through your mercy the grace of the Holy Spirit.” Paul F. Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West* (New York: Pueblo, 1980) 162–63. Bradshaw does not date this East Syriac liturgy, which he notes is from the Latin rendering of ms. Vat. Syr. 51 (A.D. 1152), from J. M. Vosté, *Pontificale iuxta ritum Ecclesiae Syrorum occidentalium* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1941–1944) 158–62 and 201–2. Vosté adds a footnote to the text, in which he opines that the liturgy was not for a true ordination but rather for a blessing, perhaps presaging the modern understanding of “not for the priesthood, but for the ministry.” It is in the twelfth century that objections to females being “ordainable” took root while, coincidentally, there were fewer and fewer persons entering the diaconate as a permanent vocation and “ordination” came to be connected with priestly ordination alone.

comes under suspicion of having lost her integrity, it is necessary for her to be examined by the deaconesses to whom the decision is left; g) finally, the deaconess is responsible (on behalf of the bishop) for the oversight of nuns in monasteries, their sacred rituals and means of support.

“Although the duties of deaconesses in regard to the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and extreme unction have already ceased because there is no longer anointing of the whole body, abbesses perform these functions in sacred houses of virgins dedicated to God. Abbesses truly receive the blessing of a deaconess, and they carry out all functions that have been conceded to deaconesses in the councils. At no time are they permitted to approach the altar to offer communion to the nuns, even in the absence of a priest or deacon.

“If a bishop, for urgent necessity, truly wished to ordain a woman aside from the abbess as deaconess, he is to ordain a woman whose chastity and doctrine is testified to according to the cited canons, [so that she may be able to preside over the women in the Church and teach the most uneducated women in it who are looking forward to the sacraments of baptism, confession and communion.]”<sup>11</sup>

These sections of the canons have been examined in recent studies. International Theological Commission (ITC) member Cipriano Vagaggini mentioned the Maronite tradition and this Synod in his 1974 essay on women deacons in the East, which was apparently prepared at the request of Pope Paul VI.<sup>12</sup> In 1982, Aimé George Martimort attempted to discredit the significance of evidence for women deacons among the Maronites.<sup>13</sup> Vagaggini again mentioned the Maronite tradition in his requested intervention before the 1987 Synod of Bishops, in which he also wrote

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11. F. M. Cappello, *Tractatus canonico-moralis de Sacramentis* (Torino: 1951) 4: 55–56; italics original; text in brackets is included in Johannes Morinus, *De sacris Ecclesiae ordinationibus secundum antiquos recentiores latinos, graecos . . . commentarius. Editio nova; tertia parte auctior . . . repurgata. Romae: apud haeredes Barbiellini* (1758) chap. 2, 124–26. We find the majority of these same duties of women deacons in the *Didiscalia*, which survives in Syriac translation and which was later copied to the *Apostolic Constitutions*. Each demonstrates the woman deacon was ordained. The continuance of the tradition is noted in Canon 18 of Syriac canons of the fifth or sixth centuries. I. E. Rahmani, *Studia Syriaca* 3 (Charfet, 1908) 24–32, 54–66.
  12. Vagaggini, “L’ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina,” *Orentialia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974) 146–89. Regarding the possibility that Vagaggini’s article is actually a suppressed study of the International Theological Commission, see Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* (New York: Paulist, 1993) 640. That possibility was affirmed to this author by the *Orentialia Christiana Periodica*’s editor who published it, Robert F. Taft. Vagaggini’s synodal intervention appeared as “La diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina,” *Il Regno* 32 (1987) 672–73. Each appears in English in Zagano, ed., *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches*, and in Phyllis Zagano, ed., *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2016).
  13. Martimort, *Deaconesses* 174–78, 184.

that any historical and now outmoded limitations on the women deacons of history need not be applied in the present.<sup>14</sup>

The Synod document provides important evidence: women deacons had positions and duties within the Maronite Church. While their recorded duties were not identical to those of male deacons, they were tasked with (1) guarding the women's entrances to the assembly; (2) assisting women at baptism; (3) anointing women at baptism, confirmation, and in extreme unction;<sup>15</sup> (4) catechizing other women; (5) determining the validity of charges against consecrated virgins; (6) overseeing—on behalf of the bishop—nuns in monasteries, their sacred rituals, and means of support. In modern times, this latter duty can be well understood as that of the diocesan vicar for religious on behalf of the bishop: oversight of religious communities without financial responsibility for them. Some, if not all, of the listed tasks and duties exist today and in many cultures are more appropriately performed by women for women.

So, what can be deduced from Maronite practice as evidenced by its law? One would assume the intent of the ordaining bishop was in concert with the general practice of the church. Considering the sacred ministerial duties of the woman ordained, particularly the anointing at baptism, confirmation, and extreme unction, one might think the question of sacramental ordination would be easily settled.

While women deacons are not mentioned in Pierre Dib's 1919 discussion of Maronite liturgy,<sup>16</sup> they are well documented in earlier sources,<sup>17</sup> attesting to an earlier tradition carried through or at least recalled up to 1736. Writing in 1898, Robinson had reported that Maronite abbesses were still made deaconesses, and that "the Pontifical then in use includes granting the power to make Priests and Deacons, Sub-Deacons and Deaconesses" in the prayer for the consecration of a bishop.<sup>18</sup>

## Debate over Sacramentality

The debate over Maronite practice echoes the modern debate about the sacramentality of the ordination of women deacons in Catholic Churches that, fraught as it is with anachronistic interpretations, continues. Were the women "ordained" or merely "blessed"? The late twentieth-century debate between Roger Gryson and Aimé Georges

14. See Zagano, ed., *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate* 5; and Zagano, ed., *Women Deacons?* 9.

15. For example, while Denzinger's rendition of the Maronite rite of baptism and confirmation gives instructions for the Sacerdotus and the Diaconus, it is impossible to imagine that a male deacon only would be indicated by the following: "Diaconus vero ungit totum ejus corpus" (Indeed, the deacon anoints the whole of one's body) where the candidate is female. "Ordo baptismi et confirmationis Syrirum Maronitarum anonymus," in *Ritus Orientalium, Coptorum, Syrorum et Armenorum, in Administrandis Sacramentis*, ed. Henrich Denzinger (Würzburg: Stahel, 1863) 351–60 at 357.

16. Pierre Dib, *Etude sur la Liturgie Maronite* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1919).

17. J. Forget, "Diaconesses," in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, ed. A. Vacant (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1911) 4: 686–703.

18. Cecilia Robinson, *The Ministry of Deaconesses* (London: Methuen, 1898) 99.

Martimort<sup>19</sup> set the parameters for the continuing discussion on sacramental ordination of women deacons.

Using identical sources, Gryson, in 1972, and Martimort, ten years later, present opposing views of historical facts regarding the ordinations of women as deacons, even as Martimort leaves the question unresolved and states, “a proposal based on an ‘archeological’ institution” obscures the needs of the church and the call to all women to serve it.<sup>20</sup> Writing before Martimort, Louis Boyer argued that “a renovation of the female diaconate, just like that of the male diaconate, and perhaps even more so, should today be much more than a simple restoration: it should be a creative development with manifold implications.”<sup>21</sup> In 1997, Corrado Marucci discussed the Maronite synodal canons on women deacons, suggesting that the explanation and perhaps the answer to Martimort’s objections—that deaconesses are not included the section on ordination—lies in the mixed nature of the long eighteenth-century synodal document. Again, we must underscore that Martimort leaves the question unresolved. Marucci posits that the ordination of women to the diaconate is at least theoretically possible to this day.<sup>22</sup>

Obviously, the prevailing view would have a marked application, especially since the most recent comment from Rome is a 78-page inconclusive study document by the International Theological Commission (ITC) that leaves the question open to “the ministry of discernment” in the church.<sup>23</sup> Whether the discernment is over the question of sacramentality or over the question of the restoration of the attested-to practice of ordaining women as deacons is unclear, and in any event a subsequent “clarification” by the Commission Secretary affirmed the fact that it could not rule

19. Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*; Martimort, *Deaconesses*.

20. Martimort, *Deaconesses* 250.

21. Louis Boyer, *Woman in the Church*, trans. Marilyn Teichert (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1979) 93–94.

22. Corrado Marucci, “History and Value of the Feminine Diaconate in the Ancient Church,” trans. Phyllis Zagano in Zagano, *Women Deacons?* 30–56 at 41 and 43–44, originally published as “Storia e valore del diaconato femminile nella Chiesa antica,” *Rassegna di Teologia* 38 (1997) 781 and 784; see also, Pietro Sorci, “The Diaconate and Other Liturgical Ministries of Women,” trans. Phyllis Zagano in Zagano, *Women Deacons?* 57–95 at 85–86, originally published as “Diaconato e altri ministeri liturgici della donna,” in *La Donna nel pensiero Cristiano antico*, ed. Umberto Mattioli (Genova: Marietti Editore, 1992) 331–64.

23. The International Theological Commission document has been published in French: “Le diaconat: Évolution et perspectives,” *La documentation catholique* 23 (January 19, 2003) 58–107, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_pro\\_05072004\\_diaconate\\_fr.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_fr.html); and in Italian: “Il Diaconato: Evoluzione e Prospettive,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 1 (2003) 253–336, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_pro\\_05072004\\_diaconate\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_it.html). An unofficial English translation was published in London under the title “From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles” by The Catholic Truth Society in 2003: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_pro\\_05072004\\_diaconate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_05072004_diaconate_en.html). The official French-language document was initially posted on the Vatican website; the unofficial English and Italian, as well as German, Polish, Portuguese, and Spanish versions have recently been added.

authoritatively.<sup>24</sup> A previous 17- or 18-page recommendation attesting to the church's ability to restore its tradition of women deacons apparently was passed by the entire International Theological Commission in 1997, printed and numbered, but its prefect, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, refused to promulgate it.<sup>25</sup> That document was sent back to a new subcommittee headed by an Augustinian scholar (and student of Ratzinger), which presented the published 78-page 2002 document.<sup>26</sup>

In the interim between the 1997 ITC document and the 2002 ITC document, various offices made smaller attempts to rule out women deacons. In 2000 Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez, then-prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, published a letter condemning what he termed the "abuse" committed by Bishop Samuel Ruiz García and his Coadjutor, Bishop Raúl Vera López, who laid hands on the wives of men being ordained as deacons in the Mexican diocese of San Crisóbal de Las Casas.<sup>27</sup> In 2001 the Cardinal prefects of three curial offices (Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger; Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, Jorge Medina Estévez; and Clergy, Dario Castrillón Hoyos) summarily issued a four-paragraph "Notification" regarding the training of women for the diaconate then underway in German-speaking countries, which is thought to have precipitated the Roman Catholic Womanpriest movement in Europe among those women then being trained.<sup>28</sup>

In his 1972 book on the topic, Gryson concluded that "Women deacons then receive a true ordination, with nothing distinguishing it formally from the ordination of their male colleagues."<sup>29</sup> Martimort's 1982 rejoinder disputes the possibility of women

24. "Clarification on the ITC Study on the Diaconate," *L'Osservatore Romano* [Eng. ed.], Oct 30, 2002, 12, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/ITCDIACO.HTM>.

25. See Phyllis Zagano, "It's Time: The Case for Women Deacons," *Commonweal*, December 21, 2012, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/it%E2%80%99s-time>.

26. The subcommittee chair was Fr. Henrique de Noronha Galvão (b. 1937) (Portugal), whose 1979 dissertation *Die existentielle Gotteserkenntnis bei Augustin: Eine hermeneutische Lektüre der Confessiones* was directed by Joseph Ratzinger, and comprised Fr. Santiago del Cura Elena (Spain), professor on the Theological Faculty of Northern Spain (Burgos); Fr. Pierre Gaudette (Canada), emeritus, Grand Séminaire de Québec; Roland Minnerath (b. 1946, France) named Archbishop of Dijon, France in 2004; Gerhard Ludwig Müller (Germany), named Bishop of Regensburg upon publication of the 2002 document and prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2012 under Benedict XVI; Luis Antonio G. Tagle (b. 1957, Philippines), named a bishop in 2001, Archbishop of Manila in 2011, and cardinal a year later; and Prof. Fr. Ladislaus Vanyo (Hungary).

27. *Enchiridion Vaticanum* (hereafter cited as *EV*) 19, 2000, 1057, 601. A later decree by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was issued providing excommunication for anyone participating in the "sacred ordination of a woman," without, however, defining "sacred ordination." It appears that Vatican documents and Canon Law consistently refer to priestly and episcopal, but not diaconal, ordination as "sacred ordination." Such does not conflict with the understanding that the diaconal ordination is part of the Sacrament of Orders. The distinction is liturgically marked by the fact that only priests and bishops are anointed at ordination.

28. *EV* 20, 2001, 1800, 1200. See Phyllis Zagano, *Women & Catholicism: Gender, Communion, and Authority* (New York: Macmillan, 2011) 118 and 182n89. Each signer of the Notification is now retired.

29. Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* 113.



ordained as deacons.<sup>30</sup> Martimort spends four pages discussing what he terms the “curious” inclusion of women deacons in canons of the Synod of Mount Lebanon of 1736, arguing that in his studies the Maronite pontifical does not include a ceremony for the ordination of women deacons “as far back as possible . . . to the thirteenth century,” possibly depending on Pierre Dib and not mentioning Vosté. Martimort argues that the second part of the synod document notes other ordinations, including subdeacon and deacon, but not of women deacons. He does, however, note that the third part includes mention of “deaconesses.”<sup>31</sup>

Martimort also incorrectly states that immersion baptism was forbidden by the Synod; rather, Synod documents prefer Latin usage. He thereby concludes that if immersion baptism is forbidden, there is no need for women deacons and that the inclusion of women deacons (“*diaconesse*”) in the Synod document is both anachronistic and a mistake. He does, however, write that the Synod allows abbesses to receive the “blessing of deaconesses.”

What Martimort does not consider in his criticism of the canons of the National Synod of Mount Lebanon of 1736 is the possibility that in later centuries the ritual for the ordination of a deacon could be used for either male or female candidates, especially given the historical evidence of earlier liturgies for women ordained as deacons throughout the East.<sup>32</sup> Neither does Martimort explore the central reason for women deacons: ministry to women. The assumption that ministry to women was no longer needed as immersion baptisms faded belies its own argument. The twelfth-century Syriac Pontifical of Michael the Great includes ministry to the sick among their duties: “She visits and anoints women who are ill.”<sup>33</sup> The eighteenth-century synod document presents these and many other tasks and duties of the women deacons.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusions

The synod document affirms that the diaconate for women became enclosed within Maronite monasteries over the centuries, and that the women ordained were

30. A third possibility is gaining popularity: women were ordained as deacons, but it was not a “true” or “sacred” ordination. That is, the ordination of women was merely a blessing, even though it was termed ordination by canons and liturgical texts. Such interpretation redounds to the argument that the female body is somehow defective matter for the sacrament of orders.

31. Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 174–78. Pietro Sorci argues that the late seventeenth-century attempts by Patriarch Stefano Douaihî to reform liturgy according to Maronite tradition was opposed by the Latinizing current, and therefore the Pontifical and its rites ignore specific reference to deaconesses. See Sorci, “Diaconato e altri ministeri liturgici” 331–64, and “The Diaconate and Other Liturgical Ministries,” 85.

32. Would the Maronite Church be the only Eastern Church without women deacons? More likely its historical distance from Rome would have preserved the older tradition.

33. See also Wilhelm de Vries, *Sackramententheologie bei den syrischen Monophysiten* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1940) 220.

34. *Ibid.*

principally abbesses. However, the synod document also affirms the possibility that the bishop might have need for women deacons outside the enclosure, specifically to catechize and assist women in worship. One cannot help but recall one reason adduced by the Second Vatican Council for restoring the diaconate: to strengthen those already performing diaconal works with the grace and charism of orders. Certainly today there are many women, inside and outside the Maronite tradition, who are performing diaconal duties and whose ministries would be strengthened by the charism of diaconal orders. To argue that ordination is unnecessary for women performing diaconal ministry is to argue that ordination is unnecessary for men performing diaconal ministry.

The heart of the Maronite synodal reasoning for women deacons is the heart of the need today. Women have need of and deserve ministry, and many women already are ministering to women. Would not that ministry by and to women benefit from the grace and charism of orders? Further, would not the sacramental ministry by women meet the stated goals of the renewed diaconate and “enrich the Church with the functions of the diaconate” and also “provide regions, where there [is] a shortage of clergy, with sacred ministers”?<sup>35</sup>

The value of this synod document is that it substantiates a particular church’s modern recognition of its own history of ordained women and presupposes that church’s future need for ministry by women ordained as deacons. The fact that the Catholic Church encompasses the Maronite tradition and accepts papal law regarding it should allow other Catholic churches to request what has been approved *in forma specifica* for the Maronite Church: the ordination of women to the diaconate.

### Author biography

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35. Three reasons lay behind this choice: (1) a desire to enrich the Church with the functions of the diaconate, which otherwise, in many regions, could only be exercised with great difficulty; (2) the intention of strengthening with the grace of diaconal ordination those who already exercised many of the functions of the Diaconate; (3) a concern to provide regions, where there was a shortage of clergy, with sacred ministers. Congregation for Catholic Education and Congregation for the Clergy, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons: Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* (March 31, 1998), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_31031998\\_directorium-diaconi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_31031998_directorium-diaconi_en.html).