

BOOK REVIEW

The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West. By Gary Macy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 280 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-19518-970-4.

Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future. By Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig and Phyllis Zagano. New York, Paulist Press, 2011. 128 pp. \$14.95. ISBN 978-0-80914-743-4.

What about women deacons and the Church? Prior to the present millennium the two most prominent and exhaustive studies on women deacons were *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* by Roger Gryson and *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* by Aimé Georges Martimort. Both books were originally published in French (the former in 1976, the latter in 1986). Recently there has been much interest in the subject of women's ordination and books such as Ute Eisen's *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* and Madigan and Osiek's *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* were published in 2000 and 2005 respectively. Unlike these other books *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* and *Women Deacons: Past, Present and Future* both bring the argument to the present day, and in the case of *Women Deacons*, into the future.

Gary Macy's book is extremely well-researched. It is an historical work, not a theological one. Half the book is composed of appendices of ordination prayers and rites for deaconesses and abbesses, notes, a bibliography and an index. Macy begins by stating that this book addresses "only the meaning that ordination had for women in Western Christianity from roughly the sixth through the thirteenth centuries" (6). It begins by citing all previous major studies and summarizing their arguments regarding their determination of whether or not women were ordained. Macy goes on to discuss the meaning of ordination prior to the thirteenth century and the ordination rites of those early centuries. He then examines what ministerial roles these ordained women served. He proceeds to talk the reader through the arguments of eleventh and twelfth century theologians and canonists who revised the definition of ordination and in so doing reduced women officeholders to the lay status. "*Episcopae, presbyterae, and deaconesses were not supposed to have existed, at least not as the functional equivalent of bishops, priests, and deacons*" (80) since the new thirteenth century definition of ordination "became limited to those who served at the altar and only to males, women could not be ordained and therefore had never been ordained" (80).

Although the ordination rites for both men and women deacons prior to the thirteenth century had been effected inside the sanctuary with a laying on of hands, and a handing on of the instruments of their office, e.g. stole, scroll or codex of scriptures, the understanding of what actually took place differed. In earlier centuries ordination was to assist a particular community and to exercise a specific ministry. Minor orders such as readers, sub-deacons, acolytes, widows, porters, and others were also considered ordained. The words "ordained" and "consecrated" were used interchangeably. The presbyter or deacon was chosen by the community and then ordained by the bishop, and there was no order of succession from deacon to priest to bishop. Nor was a person's ordination absolute, thus granting them spiritual and permanent powers. A person was ordained to an explicit position for only as long as the community needed them. In the eleventh century, however, a reform movement was underway to clarify the election to church offices, eliminate simony (the buying of episcopal offices), and enforce priestly celibacy (thereby eliminating the passing on of priestly office to one's heirs). They eventually redefined ordination to mean primarily service at the altar and the granting of permanent spiritual powers, powers that could not be granted to women. Theologians had drawn on various sources to support the idea that only a man could be ordained: a rereading of Aristotle's work emphasizing the polarity between men and women; Gratian's *Decretum* (based on earlier, more restrictive Roman law); and even some scriptural sources. They concluded that "It was metaphysically impossible for them [women] to be ordained, to have been ordained, or ever to be ordained" (102).

Macy is careful to state that because the Church decided to eliminate women from what was a formerly ordained office, much of the documentation of rites, canons, and practices have been lost to history. After all why bother to reproduce rites, which would no longer be used? Since the theology of ordination had been re-written there was no point in keeping documentation of an outmoded and irrelevant theology. Therefore, writing a book such as his is like reconstructing a puzzle with pieces missing. In summary he says that he hopes the book begins a discussion.

Historically, is there sufficient evidence to warrant the claim that women were considered to be ordained ministers in the Western church of the early Middle Ages? I have argued that there is. Theologically, does this claim affect how Christianity presently understands ordination? I have argued that it should. I hope the presentation is provocative enough to stimulate others to correct, redirect, refashion, refute, or abandon those positions. If you are intrigued by the questions, I consider the project a success (132).

Women Deacons continues the discussion that Macy's previous book incites. The book begins with an essay by Gary Macy summarizing the arguments he makes in *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination*: women were indeed ordained deacons in the early church and their ordination has been effectively expunged. Then William T. Ditewig, himself a permanent deacon, examines the opinions expressed during Vatican II which allowed for the re-creation of the permanent diaconate and proceeds to summarize the documents describing that office. Finally, Phyllis Zagano's essay looks at a number of issues including: recent statements from Rome, objections to ordaining women, and the nature of diaconal ministry. She also explores who would become deacons if a female diaconate were reinstated, and the implications of ordaining both religious and lay women.

Ditewig makes the point that the permanent diaconate, as well as numerous types of lay ecclesial ministry, are often described as what they are not: "The laity is described as 'nonordained.' Deacons are described as men who 'do not' say Mass, 'do not' hear confessions, 'do not' give the last rites" (41). He says that this negative paradigm, always seen in comparison to the sacerdotal priesthood, must be overcome "if the diaconate is to become the 'proper and permanent' order described by the Council" (41). All the documents dealing with the permanent diaconate are clearly elucidated in Ditewig's essay, including a discussion on whether or not they preclude ordaining women to this office. He deduces that they do not. Ditewig also carefully considers Vatican II and how it envisioned the permanent diaconate explicitly looking at the influential opinions of Cardinals Suenens and Döpfner. Suenens stressed that the Church should not be denied any of the graces of the Holy Spirit and Döpfner's argument was that many are already performing diaconal ministries without the benefits of the sacramental graces conferred by ordination. "Why should these people be denied the grace of the sacrament?" Döpfner asked (67). Finally Ditewig concludes by stating "based on the needs of the Church and the multiple gifts of the Holy Spirit," ordaining women to the diaconate would continue this process (65).

Phyllis Zagano, who has made her life's work the study of the question of women and the diaconate, writes the most provocative essay in the book. She makes some very compelling arguments as to why women should be ordained, as well as shedding light on some of the key issues the hierarchy sees as challenges. Analyzing recent statements from Rome she surmises, "while the law forbids the ordination of women as deacons, no contemporary doctrine on the matter has been defined" (71). She then emphasizes that even if the permanent diaconate were opened to women, the decision of whether or not to ordain a woman would rest with the diocesan bishop (74). She neatly skewers

the fear often voiced that “women deacons portend women priests” (76). If the magisterium teaches very dogmatically (see *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* 1994 and *Responsum ad Dubium* 1995) that women cannot be ordained priests or bishops then what is the problem with having women deacons, she asks (76-77)? A woman ordained to the permanent diaconate would be just that, permanent (76). She discusses diaconal identity rooted in prayer and the ontological and spiritual graces imparted by ordination without which the diaconate is merely functional (84). She points to the fact that an ordained woman deacon would be a cleric and examines what practical effects and advantages to both the woman and the Church are implied (78-81).

Zagano makes the distinction that although a woman is barred from the iconic role of the priest who serves *in persona Christi* as head of the Church, nothing prohibits her from the role of deacon as Christ the servant. Women historically have performed many roles of diaconal service: consoling the bereaved, catechizing, teaching, ministering to the sick, feeding the hungry, and so on. She reasons that women make up more than half the billion or so Catholics in the world and the Church is often derided for their “perceived views of women” (87). Ordaining women would shed positive light on how the Church views women and ministry. Zagano discusses who would make up a female diaconate (sisters, nuns and lay women). She looks at religious orders and enumerates some of the possible problems. For example, a cleric cannot take an order from a lay person, and since all religious are lay people, what would occur if a nun were a deacon, but her superior were not (96)? And she discusses what the Church would look like with women deacons (93-95). Her essay and the book conclude with the question and response: “Would the Church benefit from the restoration of women to the diaconate? There are no guarantees, but if the ministry [gift] of discernment is to be taken to heart, one must answer in the affirmative” (104).

Both these books are eminently readable. Gary Macy's book, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination* is scholarly and gives convincing evidence that women were in fact once ordained to the diaconate. *Women Deacons: Past, Present, and Future* is a good overview and contains the most current research to date on the issue of ordaining women to the permanent diaconate by three experts in their fields.

Robin Senior, M.A. (Theology)
Seminary of the Immaculate Conception
Huntington, NY