

On 12 May 2016, in his audience with the members of International Union of Superiors General (UISG), Pope Francis answered a number of questions put forth by the women religious. The second question read out to him stated: «Consecrated women already do much work with the poor and the marginalized, they teach catechism, they accompany the sick and the dying, they distribute Communion; in many countries they lead the communal prayers in the absence of a priest and in those circumstances they give a homily. In the Church there is the office of the permanent diaconate, but it is open only to men, married or not. What prevents the Church from including women among permanent deacons, as was the case in the primitive Church? Why not constitute an official commission to study the matter? Can you give us an example of where you see the possibility of better integration of women and consecrated women in the life of the Church?»¹. This question/proposal is to be interpreted in the context of the first question, which read: «[...] women are excluded from decision-making processes in the Church, especially at the highest levels, and from preaching at the Eucharist. An important obstacle to the Church's full embrace of "feminine genius" is the bond that decision-making processes and preaching both have with priestly ordination. Do you see a way of separating leadership roles and preaching at the Eucharist from ordination, so that our Church can be more open to receiving the genius of women in the very near future?»².

The crux of the matter is not diaconate ordination for women as such, but a role in the decision-making processes in the Church. The second question, therefore, in a way seems to show a "way-out", that is if the Magisterium cannot separate the "government" from the sacred order, then by opening diaconate ordination to women, the problem could be solved. The diaconate is not intended in the sense of *διακονία* / *diaconia* (service or ministry) rather as a means to exercise *potestas* (power). Such a "temptation" within the Church by no means is new. The case of Msgr. Peter Ebere Okpaleke – appointed bishop of the diocese of Ahira, Nigeria, in 2012, but could not take possession of his diocese until July 2017, because some priests of that diocese wanted a bishop belonging to the majority Mbaise tribe – is an example of seeking "power" by means so alien to the nature of the Church³.

1 FRANCIS, *Address To the International Union of Superiors General (UISG)*, 12 May 2016.

2 *Ivi*.

3 It may be recalled that on 8 June 2017, Pope Francis called upon all the priests of Ahira diocese to write to him a personal and individual letter, before 9 July 2017, asking forgiveness; those failing to do so within

The purpose of our reflection here is not about the diaconate ordination of women – on this matter Pope Francis has already constituted a Study Commission⁴ – rather to pause a while on two points: (i) a recurrent tendency within the Church, to seek “power” by way of various strategies, and (ii) the reason for the restoration of permanent diaconate.

The Church must become autochthonous, women must be involved more and more in the administration of the Church, but seeking “power” by using rights-for-women, language, caste/tribe or region as bargaining chip goes against the very purpose of the Church: «The Church’s first purpose is to be the sacrament of the inner union of men with God. Because men’s communion with one another is rooted in the union with God, the Church is also the sacrament of the unity of the human race. In her, this unity is already begun, since she gathers men “from every nation, from all tribes and people and tongues”; at the same time, the Church is the “sign and instrument” of the full realisation of the unity yet to come», (CCC 775). Anyone trying to create division within the Church works against the Church; hence, does not love Christ either.

In the Acts of the Apostles, deacons were chosen for a specific service. Having heard complaints of discrimination against the Hellenists in the daily distribution «[...] the Twelve summoned the whole body of disciples together and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God to serve at tables. So, friends, choose from among yourselves seven respected men full of Spirit and wisdom, that we may appoint them to this task. As for us, we shall give ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. [...] They presented these [seven] men to the apostles who first prayed over them and then laid hands upon them» (Acts 6,2-4.6). The Apostles were very clear of the mandate they received from the Lord: to teach all nations all that the Master had commanded (cf. Mt 28,19-20). Teaching was to be done by the Apostles and ministering to the poor was to be done by the deacons.

The Church by the XX century having spread to «all nations» (Mt 28,19) needed more labourers (cf. Mt 9,37), above all “local labourers”: it was in this context that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council intended restoring the permanent diaconate. In the mission territories, catechists being the ones assisting priests, it was even proposed of or-

that date would incur, ipso facto, suspension *a divinis* and would lose whatever office they hold in the diocese: http://www.fides.org/it/news/62436-VATICANO_Il_Papa_profondamente_addolorato_per_le_vicende_della_diocesi_di_Ahiara#.WWW0Uu9OGNAY [<http://www.webcitation.org/6sF4Yh1U9>].

4 The news briefing of the “Sala stampa della Santa Sede”, on 2 August 2016 (B0567), made public the constitution of “Commissione di Studio sul Diaconato delle Donne” and the names of the members of the commission: cf. <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/08/02/0569/01268.html>.

daining them as deacons⁵. When the decree on the missionary activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, was finally promulgated, regarding diaconate it said: «Wherever it appears opportune to episcopal conferences, the diaconate should be restored as a permanent state of life [...]» (n. 16, § 6). The same paragraph also made reference to the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, which in n. 29, § 1, lists the functions of a deacon. The n. 29, § 2, giving reason for the restoration of diaconate, states: «Since, however, the laws and customs of the Latin Church in force today in many areas render it difficult to fulfil these functions, which are so extremely necessary for the life of the Church, it will be possible in the future to restore the diaconate as a proper and permanent rank of the hierarchy». The purpose, therefore was to spiritually assist people, especially where the presence of priests was insufficient or there were no priests.

Taking cue from G. Incitti's study, only an insignificant number of dioceses have permanent deacons. Although the restoration of permanent diaconate was intended for the mission territories, fifty and more years after the promulgation of the decree *Ad Gentes*, permanent diaconate does not find a place in those territories. Those studying the possibility of opening diaconate to women cannot ignore this fact.

To bring the light of Christ to all people (LG 1) being the mission of the Church, active involvement of all the Christ's faithful, each according to his or her particular condition (can. 204, § 1; CCEO can. 7, § 1) is the need of the hour. Unfortunately, so many opportunities offered in the Code of Canon Law to the laity remain yet to be effective, not just in the mission territories, but also in the rest of the world. The clergy has a responsibility to train, involve and value the expertise of the laity in realising the mission of the Church (cann. 228; 229; CCEO cann. 403, § 2; 404; 408).

Elias Frank
The director
(e.frank@urbaniana.edu)

5 On the discussion of Council Fathers regarding the restoration of diaconate, kindly refer: G. INCITTI, *Catechisti, ma non diaconi permanenti! La risposta delle giovani Chiese all'invito del Concilio* (AG, 16), in this issue of "Ius Missionale", 101-139.