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A woman is depicted at prayer in an ancient Christian mosaic seen in the Vatican's Pio Cristiano Museum. (Wikimedia Commons/Miguel Hermoso Cuesta)

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Growing up, I never heard about St. Phoebe. She, like so many women of the early church, was lost to me for a long time.

The female doctors of the church — Catherine, Teresa, Thérèse, and, later, Hildegard — were beacons whose wisdom, faith and example I was drawn to. As a young adult, I grew to know and love Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles, as well as a number of other women saints, who, each in her own way, invited me to be more fully myself and more fully engaged with my faith.

Not until my late 20s do I recall Phoebe's name surfacing in my consciousness and even then, I couldn't place her beyond the heading "women of the early church." The reasons she remained in the shadows of my consciousness are as much a reflection of my own life and learning as of the institutions that have taught me and their conscious and unconscious influence on our wider perspectives as individuals and a church.

Phoebe appears in Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he exhorts the Romans: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae." Paul writes, "I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me" (Romans 16:1-2).

Brief though it is, this introduction is full of import. In these two verses, Paul provides critical information about the woman he has entrusted to deliver his letter to Rome.

Calling her sister, deacon and benefactor, Paul signals that Phoebe is his co-worker in the kingdom. He has chosen her to convey his message and it is his hope that they, like her, will come to believe and to support the Christian mission. By identifying Phoebe as a deacon, Paul indicates that she was a preacher and teacher

of the faith and gives us the earliest written record of women's ordained ministry in the church.

When I first heard about Phoebe's ministry, I wondered how I hadn't heard about it sooner. A search of the Scriptures used at daily Mass revealed why Phoebe hadn't crossed my path. "In the continuous reading from Romans, verses one and two of chapter 16 are omitted," Benedictine Sr. Ruth Fox writes in her work on women in the Bible, "Thus churchgoers will never hear in our liturgy of Phoebe, a woman who was a deacon."

One can't be sure of the reason for this omission, but by excluding Phoebe (and the stories of many other women) from the lectionary, the church makes a distinctive choice about the models of church and stories of faith it chooses to lift up. Phoebe's absence from daily readings obscures the history of women deacons in our church and directs popular consciousness away from considering women's place in ordained roles of leadership in the church.

Phoebe is part of a much larger story of women deacons. In the Western church, from the first Christian communities through the 12th century, women carried out the ministry of the diaconate in its fullness, serving in the diaconal ministries: baptizing and anointing, proclaiming and preaching on the Gospel, caring for those on the margins, assisting in liturgy, and helping to sustain the life of the church through their ordained ministry.

Yet, in the 12th century, when the diaconate became a transitional ministry exclusively for men pursuing priesthood, women deacons ceased to be ordained.

For 800 years, the permanent diaconate lay dormant. Without the presence of permanent deacons, the diaconate became synonymous with the priesthood, with the transitional diaconate serving as a step on the way to priestly ordination. As time went on, this association became ingrained in the popular understanding of who deacons were and what deacons did.

Not until the time of the Second Vatican Council did the permanent diaconate again find its footing in the church.

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Noting that a permanent diaconate would bolster the identity of the church as servant and address issues of decreasing priestly vocations, ecumenical relations, and relations between lay Catholics and clergy, the council fathers recommended the restoration of the permanent diaconate in 1965, opening the vocation of deacon to single and married men after Pope Paul VI's 1967 approval of the restoration.

Since then, the ministry of the diaconate as a permanent vocation has continued to take shape.

Fifty years later, we continue to witness the implementation and lived interpretation of Vatican II. In the last four years, the issue of women deacons has resurfaced with two papal commission being assembled, and a rising awareness of the long-forgotten history of women deacons in our church.

As the synod for the Amazon so clearly pointed out, women in the Amazon are already doing the work of deacons, just without the official recognition and sacramental grace of the church. The same could be said of women around the world — whether lay ecclesial ministers or vowed women religious — whose ministry embodies the church's call to servant leadership and without which the body of Christ would be significantly deprived.

In his commendation, St. Paul told the Romans to graciously receive Phoebe and give her any help she needed. At this time in our world and our church can't we ask the same, that women be received in the Lord and given all the help they need to truly share their gifts in ministry in the church? Can we think creatively about what has been and what could be?

Could we imagine, in the words of Thomas Baker, "the energy that would be released by another 18,000 or 36,000 deacons, many of them younger, many of

them women, half of them of Hispanic and Asian heritage, asked by their bishops to open up new ways and places for people to encounter Christ?"

Just over 50 years into the implementation of the reforms of Vatican II, we must recognize that our understanding of the ministry of the permanent diaconate is still taking form. Now is the time to consider not only the historical precedence of women deacons but the hope creative thinking about this ministry and vocation offers for the life of the church and the world.

In the words of Phyllis Zagano, "Can the Church accept an ordained woman deacon? If history is the predictor, the answer is yes. If the present is the predictor, the answer is also yes. There is no need for the ministry of women to be restricted by misogyny; there is no reason that women cannot be icons of Christ."

Lifting up women as icons of Christ begins with valuing the ministry of women. It is to recognize and affirm with Pope Francis that "women have put up a sign and said, 'Please listen to us. May we be heard.' And I pick up that gauntlet."

Picking up that gauntlet means listening to and lifting up the voices and needs of today, learning the stories of the past, and praying for the Spirit's guidance for the future.

As we celebrate the feast of St. Phoebe on Sept. 3, a group of women will do just that through a virtual prayer service hosted by ReceiveHerInTheLord.org. Praying for the current papal commission on women deacons and for the ongoing renewal of the ministry of the diaconate, they are following in the footsteps of Phoebe in spreading the good news by witnessing to their call to serve, to preach and to share Christ's love.

"When the people of God risk becoming comfortable, deacons constantly press the body of believers into the presence of a suffering, homeless, incarcerated, sick, marginalized Christ. And when the people of God risk becoming defeated and forlorn, deacons constantly draw up the healing, consoling, nourishing, resurrecting power of Christ," the organizers of the event write.

At this time in our church and our world, that is just what we need — people willing to go to the ends of the earth with the good news, bearing it with their own experience and creating a space where it can come alive for everyone.

[A Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Colleen Gibson is the author of the blog Wandering in Wonder and has been published in various periodicals, including America, Commonweal and Give Us This Day. She currently serves as coordinator of services at the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey.]