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Deacons lie prostrate during ordination Mass in St. Peter's Basilica during the Jubilee of Deacons at the Vatican Feb. 23. A Vatican commission has voted against allowing women to serve as deacons. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)



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A Vatican commission studying the possibility of female deacons reported that the current state of historical and theological research "excludes the possibility of proceeding" toward admitting women to the diaconate, a conclusion that slows momentum on one of the church's most debated questions while stopping short of a definitive no.

In a letter sharing the results of its work with Pope Leo XIV and released by the Vatican Dec. 4, the commission reported a 7-1 vote in favor of a statement concluding that the church cannot currently move toward admitting women to the third degree of holy orders, the diaconate.

"In light of Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and ecclesiastical teaching, this assessment is strong, although it does not allow for a definitive judgment to be formulated at this time, as in the case of priestly ordination," said the approved statement voted on in 2022.

Why only eight votes were recorded from the 10-member commission was not explained in the letter.

The "third degree" of the holy order refers to the diaconate as the foundational degree of ordained ministry. The episcopate (for bishops) and the presbyterate (for priests) represent the two other degrees which the church teaches are above the diaconate in the hierarchy of ordained ministry.

Yet a "purely historical perspective does not allow us to reach any definitive certainty," wrote Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, president of the commission, introducing the commission's results. "Ultimately, the question must be decided on a doctrinal level. Therefore, issues relating to the ordination of women as deacons remain open to further theological and pastoral study."

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The study commission was instituted in 2020, the second instituted by Pope Francis to consider the question of the female diaconate. The first commission, formed in 2016 to study the history of women deacons in the church, failed to produce a report of its conclusions.

A separate study group was formed out of the Synod of Synodality to look at various ministerial forms in the church, including the female diaconate, but that group recently communicated that the topic of women's ordination would be left to the 2020 commission.

Petrocchi wrote that while the commission took into consideration submissions on the matter from the public, as requested during the Synod on Synodality, only 22 people or groups from a select few countries sent in entries, therefore "it cannot be considered as the voice of the Synod, much less of the People of God as a whole."

Additionally, the letter noted that the section of the final document of the Synod on Synodality that calls for continued study of the female diaconate received the highest number of "no" votes among any section of the document: 97 out of 364 voting members.

The letter also stated that the commission was evenly split, 5-5, on a statement that held Jesus' masculinity and that of all who receive holy orders "is not accidental" but rather an "integral part of the sacramental identity."

The commission did vote overwhelmingly, 9-to-1, in calling to "expand women's access to ministries established for community service," such as the ministry of catechist or lector formally instituted by Francis.

Ultimately, Petrocchi called for "maintaining a cautious approach to the issue of women in the diaconate," and noted that the commissions have been unanimous in expressing the need for women to "express adequate participation and co-responsibility in the decision-making bodies of the Church, including through the creation of new lay ministries."

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