

Monastic Scribe XCIV: January 9, 2026

WOMEN AND RELIGION

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” so Thomas Jefferson wrote in our Declaration of Independence. In studying the American Revolution, it is eminently self-evident that Blacks, Indigenous Americans, as well as women, were not included in the “men”. Our country was founded as a patriarchy of white males as most other countries have been founded for centuries. The Civil Rights movement, women’s suffrage demands, and many on-going contemporary awakenings have slowly changed some of this. We have yet, however, to elect a woman President as in other countries. There have even been recent voices in America advocating taking away women’s right to vote. Can we claim to have made progress?

Religious institutions have not been any better. Many Protestant denominations have women ministers and priests, though some do not. The Anglican communion is split over ordaining women priests. This includes an Anglican church in our country that separated from the American Episcopal Church over this issue. Recently a woman was named an Archbishop in one Scandinavian country. Some provinces have withdrawn because of this move. Women Rabbis are to be found in Reformed Judaism if not among the Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Christians have, up until now, not ordained women deacons. But the Patriarchate of Alexandria has recently ordained one woman. Rome usually accepts what the Orthodox do but has not yet given any reaction to this ordination.

This brings us to the Roman Catholic Church itself. Women have come a long way since the Second Vatican Council in many minor ministries of the church such as being Lectors at Mass. There, however, has been growing at a rapid pace a demand for the ordination of women to the priesthood and, more immediately, to the diaconate. The Vatican Council accepted the permanent diaconate of men, which not been common since the twelfth century. These men are often called lay deacons but, in fact, they are clerical deacons, one of the three steps of Holy Orders. And therein is found a problem for some to consider women deacons. Can women be clerics? Christine Schenk calls the situation a “hot potato the Vatican can’t seem to handle”.

There have been two official commissions designated to study the issue of women deacons. The first one was set up by Pope Francis in 2016 at the request of women’s religious orders and they studied the history of the diaconate. The

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Pope concluded that they could not reach a consensus. A second commission was set up in 2020 at the request of the Synod of the Pan-Amazon Region. The matter was given to theologians to study and was meant not only to study the history but also the broader questions including the theology and contemporary possibility of female deacons. In 2019 it was given to a new commission of five men and five women. It had its last session in February 2025. A summary report was sent to Pope Leo who notably had it published, whereas all previous decisions were kept secret. The commission turned down the diaconate for the present and asked for more theological discussion. Six of the ten members voted against women for the diaconate, two for it, two abstained.

So what are the issues? Many women, and men alike, believe Holy Orders is a right that flows from their Baptism. They believe that the female voice is needed to complement the male voice in leading and teaching the church. They say women have particular gifts that men do not have and would enhance the church. Many women, similar to gays and trans people, feel left out for not seeing their own species in leadership. As a man, I may miss some other of their arguments.

These arguments are met with strong objections of long tradition and the way it has always been. There are cardinals and bishops who protest against women, as well as men, taking part in a Synod and infringing on their power. Some believe that theology cannot change. Since Jesus was a male, they say only males may be ordained. At the base there is no doubt some still believe that women are inferior and incapable of leadership. They seem to forget that Anne Seton and Frances Cabrini and many other women have led schools, hospitals, universities and that they are doctors, lawyers, scientists and every other office that men formally coveted.

In the United States we contend with a particular brand of narrow evangelicalism. There are many Catholics in the MAGA movement who have joined this view with a political viewpoint that is far from the teaching of Jesus. They really don't know the depth of real Catholic teaching which is a way of seeing the world and creation from a sacramental understanding which promotes the goodness of all people, whether man or woman, whether any nation or ethnic group.

The Church certainly suffers from many limited ways of seeing the world. It suffers partly because it has had a narrow view of sexuality which has backfired in the sexual abuse crisis. It suffers because of clericalism and abuse of power. We

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need to know our true Catholic tradition and know it more deeply. Pope Leo speaks with a voice that challenges the narrower, un-Christ-like ways of seeing and acting. We need to support the Pope and understand the forces within the church itself that challenge the teaching that Christ, as well as the Apostolic church, the Councils and Papal teaching on justice, reaching out to the poor and needy. This includes, of course, the place of women in our church today.

This is a quick view of the question. You may have some deeper understandings. You can write me at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.