
**Catholic approaches to the ministry of women:
An abyss of symbolism**

Malines Conversations Group

Madeira

16th May 2022

1. Historical invisibility

2. Symbolic invisibility

2.1. The decisive turning point of the conciliar period

2.2. Persistent invisibility in the biblical
hermeneutics of the liturgy

3. Canonical invisibility: women in pastoral
responsibility

4. The year 2021 reveals the French-speaking
Catholic unease or malaise about women's
ministries

Conclusion: Transitioning through “baby steps”

What could the Malines Conversations Group do?

1. Historical invisibility



“The bishop shall communicate, then the presbyters, the deacons, the subdeacons, the readers, the cantors, the ascetics, and among the women the deacons, the virgins and widows, then the children, and finally all the people, in order, with reverence and piety, and without tumult.”
Apostolic Constitutions (from Syria, circa 380)

“It is not permitted for a woman to touch the Lord's tablecloth with her hand” (can. 37, Diocesan synod of Auxerre, circa 585)

2. Symbolic invisibility

2.1. The decisive turning point of the conciliar period

"41. Secondly, the part that women are now playing in political life is everywhere evident. This is a development that is perhaps of swifter growth among Christian nations, but it is also happening extensively, if more slowly, among nations that are heirs to different traditions and imbued with a different culture. Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons."

Pope John XXIII, encyclical *Pacem in Terris*
(11/04/1963)



2.1. The decisive turning point of the conciliar period

“If therefore in the Church everyone does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God. And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ.”

Lumen gentium (1964) 32



2.2. Persistent invisibility in the biblical hermeneutics of the liturgy



Liturgical invisibility: Phoebe, Miriam,
Deborah, Maria Magdalena

Who ? (1964-1966): 17: *relator 1* Godfrey Diekmann OSB ,
Relator 2 Cipriano Vagaggini, Emmanuel Lanne OSB, Adrien
Nocent OSB, Aimon-Marie Roguet OP, Jean Gaillard OSB,
André Rose, Pierre Jounel, Lucien Deiss Spiritain, José Feder
SI, Hilaire Marot OSB, Heinz Schürmann, Pacifico Massi,
Heinrich Kahlefeld, Klemens Tilmann, H. Oster

Bible de la liturgie (2014), Romans 16:1; *diakonos* [Phoebe]
translated by “minister”

3. Canonical invisibility: women in pastoral responsibility

Exemples where women are appointed to positions of governance: Belgium, France, Switzerland

Theological question: link between the power of jurisdiction and the power of ordination



Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* reforming the Roman Curia (19/3/2022)

[illegible]

“A consolidated practice in the Latin Church has also confirmed, in fact, that these lay **ministries** [*ministeria*], since they are based on the Sacrament of Baptism, may be entrusted to all suitable faithful, whether male or female, in accordance with what is already implicitly provided for by Canon 230 § 2.”

**LUMEN
VITAE**

REVUE
INTERNATIONALE
DE L'ECCLÉSIOLOGIE
ET DE PASTORALE

**L'institutionnalisation
du ministère de catéchiste**

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Results ?

Nothing (Belgium, France)

Who (French-speaking Switzerland):



a recent controversy in France

“servantes d’assemblées”, “servantes de la liturgie”



Conclusion: Transitioning through “baby steps”



- For non-ordained ministries, there would be deeper impasses at the symbolic and pastoral level than at the theological level.
- This transition by “baby steps” starts with the entrusted ministries, then the instituted ministries, then the diaconate, then the presbyterate, and finally the episcopate.
- If the “baby steps” are a difficulty, perhaps it would be necessary to take a big leap instead, allowing us to cross over the “abyss of symbolism”.

What could the Malines Conversations Group do?



1. Know the exegetical and historical work on governance and other ministries by women in the early centuries, and the contextualisation of their discarding. This already exists.
2. liturgical work (Catholic, Orthodox?) on lectionaries and some ritual practices left over from pre-conciliar liturgical theology; and work towards reform of contentious issues
3. theological work on the articulation between the power of order and the power of jurisdiction from the perspective of women.
4. pastoral and communication work to denounce discriminatory practices without theological basis