Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis greets Norah O'Donnell before an exclusive interview with the "CBS Evening News" anchor at the Vatican April 24 for an interview ahead of the Vatican's inaugural World Children's Day. An hourlong special based on the interview aired on CBS May 20. (OSV News/Courtesy of 60 minutes, CBS NEWS)



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Pope Francis expressed firm opposition to the idea of ordaining Catholic women as deacons in a new U.S. television interview, raising doubts about the possibility that the ongoing three-year synodal process could move forward on the issue.

In an hourlong special aired on CBS May 20, Francis was asked by interviewer Norah O'Donnell specifically about the issue of women deacons.

"I understand you have said no women as priests, but you are studying the idea of women as deacons," O'Donnell asked Francis. "Is that something you're open to?”

"If it is deacons with Holy Orders, no," replied the pope, referencing the sacrament by which deacons, priests and bishops are ordained to their respective ministries.

"But women have always had, I would say, the function of deaconesses without being deacons, right?," Francis continued. "Women are of great service as women, not as ministers, as ministers in this regard, within the Holy Orders."

The pope's remarks, which came in an April 24 interview that was aired in two segments over the last month and in full on May 20, are among the most definitive he has offered on the matter, at least on the public record. They come at a critical time when the question of women's leadership in the church — and the restoration of the female diaconate, in particular — is among the most hotly debated topics to surface during the pope's ongoing synod on synodality, a global consultation process on the future of the Catholic Church.

"For a little girl growing up Catholic today, will she ever have the opportunity to be a deacon and participate as a clergy member in the church?" O'Donnell asked the pontiff.

"No," he bluntly replied.

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Francis has previously established two special commissions to examine the historical questions surrounding the ordination of women to the diaconate, though neither commissions' work has been made public. In 2002, the International Theological Commission also concluded a study of the diaconate that considered the question of women deacons.

The final report of the first session of the synod on synodality in October 2023 specifically requested that the work of the previous papal and theological commissions on women deacons to be presented for further consideration at the next assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to be held in October 2024.

In a June 2023 book, Francis said that he believes Holy Orders should be reserved for men. In February, however, Spanish Salesian Sr. Linda Pocher, who was tapped by the pope to organize several meetings on women's leadership for the pope's Council of Cardinal Advisers, said that Francis is "very much in favor" of the female diaconate.

Among the conclusions of the first session of the synod in October was that "theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate should be continued." In addition, the final report noted that a deeper understanding of the diaconate as a whole is needed.

While in the early church, ministry was not viewed in progressive stages as deacon, priest and bishop, church practice was eventually modified to limit the ordination of deacons only to those destined to become priests. In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI revised church law to make a clear distinction between the purposes for ordination to the priesthood and episcopacy, versus the purposes for ordination to the diaconate.

In March, Francis established 10 working groups to study some of the synod's thorniest questions, including one that has been tasked with studying theological and canonical questions about specific ministerial forms, which includes "the question of women's possible access to the diaconate."

In response to the pope's latest interview, Phyllis Zagano, who was appointed by Francis to serve on the original 2016 Vatican commission to study women deacons, told NCR "it is unfortunate that Pope Francis has allowed himself to be portrayed as denying the Tradition of ordained women deacons in Christianity."

Zagano specifically noted that earlier this month an Orthodox Christian woman was ordained a deaconess in Zimbabwe.

"The question of restoring women to the ordained diaconate is before the Synod on Synodality, and one can only hope the process within Catholicism, and the Orthodox return to Tradition, will be respected," she said via email.

Among other issues Francis discussed in the wide-ranging interview are clergy sexual abuse, same-sex blessings, migration, the environment and his health.

On climate change, the pope lamented that "there are foolish people, and even if you show them the statistics, still the fool will not believe," attributing their denial to either a lack of understanding or a vested financial interests that makes them resistant to combating environmental degradation.

The 87-year-old pope again reiterated that he has no intention of resigning the papacy and noted that he has a busy agenda for this fall, including trips to four countries in Asia Pacific and Oceania, as well as Belgium and Luxembourg.

During the CBS interview — which was recorded in April — the pope also hinted at the possibility of a trip to the United States to address the United Nations' General Assembly on the subject of peace. Since then, a senior Vatican official has confirmed to NCR that the trip is currently off the table.

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