





# Pastoral animators' beliefs and attitudes towards women's diaconate in the Philippines

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The Synthesis Report of the Synod on Synodality (2023) emphasised valuing women's active roles in the church and continuing theological and pastoral research on women's access to the diaconate. This research explored Filipino Catholic pastoral animators' views on women's ordination to the permanent diaconate. It hopes to provide episcopal leaders in the third-largest Catholic country in the world with an insight into where the pastoral animators stand regarding the issue and, more broadly, on how the respondents view women's leadership roles. It addresses a geographical and methodological gap, as the first in-depth empirical investigation on the issue in the country. A survey ( $n = 415$ ) was conducted using snowball sampling. The findings revealed that a vast majority support women's diaconate, because women and men equally received the 'variety of gifts of the Spirit' in baptism (74.6%), and that the reality is women are already performing diaconal tasks (73.9%). There was also huge support (69.0%) for qualified women to be allowed to preach in Mass. A lesser percentage (41.0%) endorsed women's ordination to the permanent diaconate; the average mean score indicates a 'neither agree nor disagree' stance, which does not align with recent surveys showing Filipino's positive view of women's leadership in business and politics. The study concludes that the topic of women's diaconate holds importance in the Philippine context, receiving widespread endorsement despite the mixed support for women's ordination to the ministry. It equips the church with a valuable perspective on the requisite pastoral education and the misconceptions that must be addressed, in light of the equal dignity and capability of women and men, and the need for women deacons because of the shortage of priests.

**Contribution:** This article addresses a geographical and methodological gap in the study of Catholic attitudes towards women's ordination to the diaconate in the Philippine context.

**Keywords:** women ordination; women's diaconate; women in the church; deacon; Philippine church.

## Introduction

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis dedicated himself and the Catholic Church to advancing the vision of a synodal church – one that embraces inclusivity and active participation (Pope Francis 2015). In particular, the Synthesis Report of the Synod on Synodality (October 2023) no. 9i on 'Women in the Life and Mission of the Church' states how churches worldwide have underlined the need for recognising and valuing the active contribution of women in the Church. More specifically 9n notes that 'theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate should be continued' (Synthesis Report 2023).

Many Protestant churches had started ordaining women to the diaconate and the priesthood in the 20th century but in the Catholic Church, it is only now that the issue of women's diaconate is being discussed on a global scale. The *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document) of the Synod on Synodality points out that: 'Most of the Continental Assemblies and the syntheses of several Episcopal Conferences call for the question of women's inclusion in the diaconate to be considered' (General Secretariat of the Synod 2022). The permanent diaconate was restored in the Catholic Church in 1965 at the Second Vatican Council. This allows married men to be ordained as deacons. While the theology of the diaconate is not fully developed because it has just been recently restored in the Catholic Church, its biblical roots point to the deacon as witness, reflection or embodiment of Christ as Servant (Cerrato 2024), in their disposition and the service they render to the Christian community, especially to the marginalised and excluded.

In the Philippines, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) petitioned the Vatican for the ordination of permanent deacons only in July 2023, more than 50 years after its

restoration, and it received the Vatican approval on 17 August 2023. The 2023 National Synthesis report of the synodal consultations held in the Philippines, did not mention the issue of women deacons and instead focused on the lack of active participation of men in the church (CBCP 2022), which it regards as the greater problem since most leaders in parishes and dioceses are women.

During the 2024 Synod, there was an allusion to women's ordination to the diaconate as a 'niche issue' talked about in Europe or North America, which has become 'all-consuming' and an obsession leading to the neglect of other important issues (Allen 2024). This was picked up by the media, generating the impression that the issue of women's diaconate is a Western obsession.

Indeed, insofar as publications on the issue of women deacons are concerned, most of these were produced in the Global North, such as follows: on women deacons in the Bible – Romans 16:1, 1 Timothy 3:8–13 (Marucci 2016; Sorci 2016; Stiefel 1995); the existence of ordained female deacons in the Eastern church in the early Christian period (Karras 2004:2, 13–19); the sacramentality of the ordination of women and its substantial equality to the male diaconate in the undivided church (Marucci 2016; Sorci 2016; Vagaggini 2016); the existence of at least one extant liturgical ceremony for ordaining both men and women deacons (Marucci 2016; Zagano 2023); the opposing view that the women ordained as deaconesses were not 'equivalent' to the men ordained as deacons and the unicity of orders thereby suggesting that because women cannot be ordained as priests, they cannot be ordained as deacons (International Theological Commission 2002); the decline of the women's diaconate because of the rise of infant baptism (Sorci 2016) and in the Western church, because of women's 'impure' state [i.e. menstruation], which required that they be kept distant from the sacred (Zagano 2018).

Empirical studies have also been done to gauge, for instance, the perspective of US Catholics on the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate. Two social scientific studies of Catholic women in the US (2017) and leaders of men's and women's religious institutes and orders in the US (2018) by the Centre for Applied Research in the Apoštoláte (CARA), and a non-scientific online poll by the US Catholic magazine (2018), all showed a majority of the respondents support the ordination of women to the diaconate (Berrelleza & Zagano 2019).

While there are relatively less academic publications from the Global South on women deacons, some of which focus on the state of the question (Rakoczy 2020), this does not mean that it is not an important issue for them. The 2019 Amazon Synod proposed to continue the study of the permanent diaconate for women (Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region 2019 no. 103) after the first commission created by Pope Francis in 2016 failed to agree on the specific role or the sacramental character of the ministry, even as it confirmed that there were female deacons in some parts of the church in its early history (Pope Francis 2019). Some feminist theologians from the Global South,

however, disagree with the ordination of women as deacons as it will simply incorporate 'women into the lowest strata of the gendered ecclesiastical hierarchy' (Abraham 2019:40). Astrid Gajiwala Lobo points out that being accountable to the clergy 'can be disastrous for women because already their service is often exploited and reduced to servitude' (Joseph 2019). The fear is that even as deacons, women will not be given leadership or decision-making roles in the church, and deacons of either sex will lead to clericalism in the church.

This study aims to respond to the question: How do Catholic pastoral animators in the Philippines view the issue of women's diaconate, and in particular, their ordination to the permanent diaconate? This research adopts a feminist egalitarian perspective – based on studies in feminist theological anthropology and ecclesiology – in interpreting the results of the study.

At this historical juncture, when the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate is being discussed in the Catholic Church, this research can be useful in guiding ecclesial discernment, both on the global and local level especially in case the Pope would allow the ordination of women to the diaconate, subject to the decision of each local church (Kasper 2024). It can provide episcopal leaders in the Philippines, the third-largest Catholic country in the world (Catholic Population by Country 2025), with an insight into where the pastoral animators stand on the issue. The research is also informative on how pastoral animators in the country currently view the role of women in the church.

The research addresses a geographical gap since it is the only in-depth study on the issue in the Philippines and possibly Asian context. Furthermore, by employing a quantitative approach, the study responds to a methodological gap as well in existing research on women deacons; it marks the first empirical investigation into Filipino Catholics' views on (ordaining) women as permanent deacons.

## Research methods and design

The target respondents in this study are pastoral animators grounded in pastoral life and the church's outreach to the poor, one of a deacon's main concerns. The inclusion criteria are as follows: a pastoral animator, 18 years old or above, and working or worked in parishes or dioceses with Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) or Mission Stations. An exclusion criterion is when the BEC or Mission station where the pastoral animator worked is not based in the Philippines.

The actual sample size ( $n = 415$ ) was generated from the three major groups of islands in the Philippines (Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao). Considering that the study involves the statistical tests ANOVA (analysis of variance) and  $t$ -test, the required minimum sample size is 393 (when the expected effect size or Pearson's  $r$  is 0.2, the assumed power is 0.8, and alpha is set at 0.05). The actual sample size of 415 in this study allows the elimination of a few illogical respondents if needed. Pearson's  $r$  is expected to be 0.2 when the correlation

is expected to be subtle, as in fields such as psychology and religious studies because of the complexity of behaviour and other situational factors. We did not assume a larger effect size or Pearson's  $r$  because that will make the required sample size smaller. A study with a larger sample size with the same  $r$ , statistical power and alpha (target  $p$ -value) as compared to a similar study with a smaller sample size will have a stronger claim to generalisability. For comparison, the religious study of Jomud et al. (2016) sets a Pearson's  $r$  at 0.3 with 320 respondents, while the psychological study of Tipon et al. (2021) has a Pearson's  $r$  of 0.265 with a sample size of 258.

Power – the chance of detecting the relationship if it actually exists – is set at 0.8 because it ensures a balance between Type II error (false negative) and Type I error (false positive). This means there is an 80% chance of detecting an effect if it exists.

The survey was conducted using a Google Form shared on various Facebook pages or via email through a convenience sampling strategy (snowballing). Some face-to-face interviews were conducted for those with difficulty accessing the Internet. To be more inclusive, the survey has been translated into Filipino, Cebuano and Hiligaynon to reach a wider audience.

Through the Responses tab of the Google Form, the data were exported to Google Sheets, where data cleaning was performed. The cleaning process involved excluding responses coming from Filipinos based in other countries. Those with missing responses to whole parts (Part I or II) were discarded from the face-to-face interview questionnaires. These were likewise encoded and cleaned in the same Google Sheet as the rest of the responses. From 508 responses, the number was whittled down to 415 after the cleaning process.

The survey has two parts. Part I focuses on the respondent's current knowledge about women deacons. An intervention is done before the second part, informing the respondents of the roles of a deacon, and that Phoebe is the only disciple in the Bible who was called deacon:

In 1965, Vatican II restored the permanent diaconate in the Catholic Church. This means that the diaconate is no longer simply a transitional state prior to ordination to the priesthood but a permanent, separate ministry open to married men. At present permanent deacons are found mostly in North America and some parts of Europe and Australia. Finally, after 50 years since its restoration, the CBCP decided to send a petition to Rome for the ordination of permanent deacons (Picardal 2023). On 17 August 2023, the Vatican approved the CBCP petition. The role of a permanent deacon includes all those listed under question no. 5. Not included among the roles of a deacon is the hearing of confession. St. Phoebe, a woman, is the only disciple in the Bible who was explicitly referred to as a deacon. (Rm 16: 1–2)

This intervention was framed in a neutral way, stating only facts, thus limiting potential bias.

Part II deals with respondents' views in favour of or against women's diaconate, particularly the ordination of women

to the diaconate. The questionnaire consists of 16 statements. A 5-point Likert scale measures the participants' agreement to a statement (1-Strongly Agree, 2-Agree, 3-Neither Agree nor Disagree/Not Sure, 4-Disagree and 5-Strongly Disagree). The following scale was used to interpret the mean scores: 1.0–1.80 (Strongly Agree); 1.81–2.60 Agree; 2.61–3.40 Neither Agree nor Disagree; 3.41–4.20 Disagree; and 4.21–5.0 Strongly Disagree (Pimentel 2010).

The study analysed the quantitative data using a post-hoc one-way ANOVA test to compare views on women deacons based on demographic profiles. This test was used because it allowed for a quicker comparison of two or more pairs of groups compared to the  $t$ -test. Post-hoc analyses are follow-up statistical procedures performed after obtaining a significant ANOVA result. While ANOVA determines whether significant differences exist among three or more group means, it does not identify the particular pairs that differ. Post-hoc tests provide this precise comparison between individual group means.

Unless otherwise stated in the text, a  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$  exists with all the other groups in that category when a significant difference is mentioned. A  $p$ -value that is less than or equal to 0.05 suggests that there is a significant relation between the variables, meaning that this is unlikely because of chance.

Instead of regression analysis, ANOVA was used in the 'age demographic presentation' because of the categorical nature of the data, which was grouped by generation rather than by interval: Gen Z born roughly from 1997 to 2012; Millennials 1981–1996; Gen X 1965–1980; Baby Boomers 1946–1964; Silent Generation 1945–1928 (Dimock 2019). This approach allows for more defined groupings. The survey, conducted in 2024, utilised age ranges that were approximately 3 years younger or less than the typical age ranges for each generation. This choice is justified by the country's relatively different levels of technology, economics and parenting (CGK n.d.). Regression analysis could not be done involving the age variable because the age data do not qualify as interval data since the age ranges for each group are not equal. Likewise, regression analysis could not be used for other variables such as educational attainment, as the ranges for each label are neither equal nor numerical. For educational attainment, for example, suitable data for regression analysis would be the number of years of schooling, while the choices in the survey are Elementary, High School, College and MA/PhD.

For the qualitative analysis, responses – the comments the respondents wrote after answering Q7–16 – were gathered together and categorised according to themes based on arguments in favour or against women's ordination to the diaconate.

## Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the De la Salle University Research Ethics Review Committee, and

ethics consent was received on 26 April 2024. The ethics approval number is 2024–035C. Written consent was obtained from both online and face-to-face respondents. The data collected in this study were completely anonymous. No personally identifiable information was collected, and the information the participants chose to provide could not be connected to them. The data from the online survey were stored securely in a Google Drive, while the face-to-face survey forms were kept in a locked cabinet. Both of these are accessible only to the researchers. The surveys will be kept until 1 year after the results are published, after which they will be permanently deleted or shredded and thrown in a secured bin.

## Results and analysis

The sample ( $N = 415$ ) can be classified into the following structural categories:

**Age:** 18–25 years (12.8%); 26–40 years (15.6%); 41–59 years (37.3%); 60–74 years (29.9%); 75 years and above (4.2%).

**Gender:** Men (29.1%); Women (69.2%); Non-binary (1.7%).

**State of life:** Priest (4.2%); Religious (28.6%); Lay–Married (40.6%); Lay–Single (26.7%).

**Educational attainment:** Elementary (1.0%); High School (6.4%); College (46.1%); MA/PhD (46.3%).

The BEC or Mission Stations where they have worked are classified as follows:

**Location:** Urban (59.4%); Rural (40.1%).

**Region:** National Capital Region (NCR), Luzon (35.2%); Other parts of Luzon (15.2%); Visayas (19.9%); Mindanao (29.5%).

**Focus:** Liturgical (42.1%); Developmental (11.1%); Liberational (0.7%); All of the above (42.3%).

The missing rate for response on the demographics is 1.4%, which is not likely to alter the statistical result (Grace n.d.). Missing data were excluded and ignored in statistical tests.

### Pre-knowledge of permanent deacons

Even though the implementation of a permanent diaconate was only approved in 2023 in the Philippine church, Table 1 shows a vast majority of the respondents have heard of the permanent diaconate and are familiar with most of their roles.

The youngest or the Gen Z respondents (18–25 years old), however, have *significantly* ( $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$ ) less knowledge than the rest of the age groups that married men can become

permanent deacons (Q2), as well as in three of the roles of a permanent deacon (Q3–4, 5, 9). They are also *significantly* less aware of the presence of women distributing communion (Q5–2). Those based in rural areas *significantly* disagreed more that married men can become permanent deacons (Q2) and are less aware in relation to four of the roles of a permanent deacon (Q3–2, 5, 9, 10).

### Awareness of women's performance of the diaconal roles

More than a majority agree that the following roles of a deacon have been done by women in their parish/diocese: social action and denouncing injustice (64.2%), distributing communion (61.0%), reading the gospel and delivering a homily (51.8%).

Those living in rural areas *significantly* agreed more than the rest to the presence of women administering baptism and blessing a marriage in their parish/diocese, reading the gospel and giving a homily.

Based on the orientation of the BECs or Mission stations, those whose BECs are more holistic in focus *significantly* agree more than those from liturgically oriented BECs, that women are engaged in social action and denouncing injustice. Those from liberation-oriented BECs *significantly* agree more that women are already administering a parish than those from liturgically or developmentally oriented BECs or Mission Stations.

**TABLE 1:** Familiarity with the roles of a (permanent) deacon.

Statements	SA/A (%)	NAD (%)	SD/D (%)
1. I have heard of permanent deacons before.	80.4	1.0	18.4
2. Married men can become permanent deacons.	65.7	10.8	23.2
3. Which of the following are the roles of permanent deacons?			
3.1. Administer baptism	75.9	8.9	15.1
3.2. Distribute communion	90.6	3.7	5.4
3.3. Bless a marriage	58.9	12.8	28.2
3.4. Bring the viaticum to the dying	78.5	7.9	13.3
3.5. Preside over liturgies without priests	79.7	8.7	11.4
3.6. Officiate at funeral and burial services	69.6	6.2	24.0
3.7. Hear confessions	44.4	23.6	31.8
3.8. Read the Gospel and give a homily	83.7	5.9	10.1
3.9. Social action and denouncing injustice	75.5	8.4	15.9
3.10. Administer a parish	58.9	16.7	19.2
4. The diaconate is simply a stepping stone to the priesthood.	41.7	12.3	45.7
5. Which of these roles are already being done by women leaders/women religious in your parish/diocese?			
5.1. Administer baptism	26.9	18	54.8
5.2. Distribute communion	61.0	9.9	28.9
5.3. Bless a marriage	19.6	21.8	37.4
5.4. Bring the viaticum to the dying	47.8	13.9	25.7
5.5. Preside over liturgies without priests	39.1	17.1	43.6
5.6. Officiate at funeral and burial services	35.9	18.8	45.0
5.7. Read the gospel and give a homily	51.8	14.3	33.6
5.8. Social action and denouncing injustice	64.2	15.2	20.5
5.9. Administer a parish	41.0	20.2	38.5
6. Ordaining women as deacons will give them the possibility of being placed in positions of governance in the church.	68.0	10.0	22.0

SA/A, strongly agree/agree; NAD, neither agree nor disagree/not sure; SD/D, strongly disagree/disagree.



## Attitudes towards [ordination to] women's diaconate

Table 2 shows that more than two-thirds of the respondents strongly agree or agree to the following: (1) that the church should allow women deacons in recognition of women and men's equal reception of the variety of gifts of the Spirit in baptism (Q7); (2) that the church should allow women deacons since women religious [including lay women] are already doing the tasks of a deacon in far-flung areas (Q8). The comments also underline the pastoral need for women deacons (Table 4) because of the lack of priests.

In particular, there is huge support (69%) for women with the proper formation to be allowed to preach in Mass, a task of a deacon that could potentially be open to lay women (Q15). There is *significantly* stronger endorsement of Q15 coming from women compared to the rest of the groups.

Almost nearing two-thirds agreement (65.2%) is the affirmation that in being ordained as deacons, women can have the power of governance, which can help declericalise church structures (Q16). Some respondents, however, counter: '[I]t depends; clericalism may be an issue of power [more] than gender; even women can turn out to be clerical'. 'Women diaconate can either be co-opted into clericalism, reinforcing hierarchical mindset, or can be a transforming presence'.

The agreement with Q16 did not automatically translate to endorsement of the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate, which was only at 41.0%. This estimate was

**TABLE 2:** Attitudes towards (ordination to) women's diaconate.

Statements	SA/A (%)	NAD (%)	SD/D (%)
7. The Church should allow women deacons in recognition of women and men's equal reception 'of the variety of gifts of the Spirit' in baptism.	74.6	10.3	15.2
8. The Church should allow women deacons since women religious are already doing the tasks of a deacon in far-flung areas.	73.9	7.7	17.1
9. The Church should establish the ministry of women deacons but should not ordain them because only men can be ordained.	44.3	17.4	38.1
10. It is important to be absolutely certain that a woman had been ordained as deacon in the history of the church before it allows the ordination of women as permanent deacons.	50.4	17.5	31.9
11. We should oppose ordaining women to the diaconate because the next time, they will be advocating ordination of women to the priesthood.	26.9	19.0	53.8
12. Allowing women to become deacons will discourage men from engaging in the ministry and the more we shall lose the men in the church.	27.8	18.4	53.5
13. The core problem in the refusal to grant women official leadership positions in the church is machismo or the belief in the superiority of men over women.	57.5	16.7	25.6
14. Ordaining women as deacons will only reinforce the church's clericalisation.	35.1	20.9	43.7
15. Women with the proper formation should be allowed to preach in Mass.	69.0	11.2	19.6
16. In being ordained to the diaconate, women can have the power of governance which can help in declericalising church structures.	65.2	15.6	20.0

Note: The following scale was used to interpret the mean scores: 1.0–1.80 (Strongly Agree); 1.81–2.60 Agree; 2.61–3.40 Neither Agree nor Disagree; 3.41–4.20 Disagree; 4.21–5.0 Strongly Disagree (Pimentel 2010).

SA/A, strongly agree/agree; NAD, neither agree nor disagree/not sure; SD/D, strongly disagree/disagree.

computed based on the average percentage of respondents who strongly disagree or disagree with Q9 (The Church should establish the ministry of women deacons but should not ordain them because only men can be ordained), 38.1%, and Q14 (Ordaining women as deacons will only reinforce church's clericalisation), 43.7%. The ANOVA post-hoc comparison shows that Q9 and Q14 measure the same construct or variable. Based on the mean scores as shown in Table 3, the average mean score of Q9 (2.96) and Q14 (3.13) is 3.045, indicating an ambivalent stance towards the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate. In support of this position, respondents' comments underline church teaching and tradition against women's ordination (Table 4). The majority of the respondents (57.5%) strongly agree or agree with Q13 'The core problem in the refusal to grant women official leadership positions in the church is machismo or the belief in the superiority of men over women'. Respondents point to the persistence of patriarchy in church and society. Table 4 shows that 85 out of 509 respondents express beliefs in (theological) complementarity favouring men's leadership.

There is also the need among some (50.4%) to be absolutely certain that there exists a precedent in church history before ordained women deacons are allowed (Q10).

Among the interviewees, 27.8% strongly agree or agree with Q12 'Allowing women to become deacons will discourage men from engaging in the ministry, and the more we shall lose the men in the church'. This statement is based on a fear often expressed by Filipino bishops and clergy concerning expanding the role of women and girls, especially in areas linked to liturgy (e.g. altar girls, eucharistic ministers). The survey showed that 53.5% of respondents strongly

**TABLE 3:** Mean score of attitudes towards (ordination to) women's diaconate.

Statements	Mean	Interpretation
7. The Church should allow women deacons in recognition of women and men's equal reception 'of the variety of gifts of the Spirit' in baptism.	2.12	Agree
8. The Church should allow women deacons since women religious are already doing the tasks of a deacon in far-flung areas.	2.13	Agree
9. The Church should establish the ministry of women deacons but should not ordain them because only men can be ordained.	2.96	NAD
10. It is important to be absolutely certain that a woman had been ordained as deacon in the history of the church before it allows the ordination of women as permanent deacons.	2.75	NAD
11. We should oppose ordaining women to the diaconate because the next time, they will be advocating ordination of women to the priesthood.	3.38	NAD
12. Allowing women to become deacons will discourage men from engaging in the ministry and the more we shall lose the men in the church.	3.39	NAD
13. The core problem in the refusal to grant women official leadership positions in the church is machismo or the belief in the superiority of men over women.	2.53	Agree
14. Ordaining women as deacons will only reinforce the church's clericalisation.	3.13	NAD
15. Women with the proper formation should be allowed to preach in Mass.	2.25	Agree
16. In being ordained to the diaconate, women can have the power of governance which can help in declericalizing church structures.	2.38	Agree

NAD, neither agree nor disagree/not sure.

**TABLE 4:** Major themes from respondents' comments ( $N = 509$ ).

Themes	Number of comments
Equality of rights and responsibilities for women and men	129
Special gifts of women in favor of equal roles	8
Equality of women and men to preach	58
[Theological] Complementarity in favor of men leading	85
Tradition and judgment of church authorities against women's ordination	14
Pastoral need/Call of the spirit	76
Others	139
<b>Total comments</b>	<b>509</b>

disagree or disagree with the statement, with an interviewee noting that there are no empirical studies to back this up: 'That is a hypothetical statement only'.

Only 26.9% of respondents strongly agree or agree with Q11 'We should oppose ordaining women to the diaconate because the next time they will be advocating the ordination of women to the priesthood'. Respondents counter, noting the lack of correlation between the two and that they do not logically follow. The youngest respondents (18–25 years old), however, *significantly* agree with Q11.

Based on aggregate groups, the youngest respondents who are least knowledgeable about the role of women deacons *significantly* disagree more that the church should allow women deacons in recognition of women and men's equal reception 'of the variety of gifts of the Spirit' in baptism (Q7). Similarly, the youngest respondents *significantly* disagree that women with the proper formation should be allowed to preach in Mass (Q15) and that, in being ordained to the diaconate, women can have the power of governance that can help declericalise church structures (Q16).

Those with postgraduate degrees *significantly* disagree more than the rest with the following statements against women ordination: (1) the church should establish the ministry of women deacons but should not ordain them because only men can be ordained (Q9); (2) allowing women to become deacons will discourage men from engaging in the ministry and the more we shall lose the men in the church (Q12). On the other hand, while elementary graduate leaders *significantly* endorse women in the diaconate, they *significantly* disagree with their ordination as suggested by their response to Q9, Q12 and Q14 (Ordaining women as deacons will only reinforce the church's clericalisation).

The type of formation the respondents had based on the focus of their BECs or Mission Stations is also important as those from holistic BECs *significantly* disagree more than those from liturgically focused BECs in opposing ordaining women to the diaconate because the next time, they will be advocating the ordination of women to the priesthood (Q11).

There is no significant difference in the attitudes of male and female respondents towards ordination of women to the permanent diaconate. While 4.2% of the respondents generated by the snowball sampling are priests, this did not

necessarily skew the results, as there is no significant difference in the response of priests to Q7–Q16. However, the mean of the combined responses of priests and religious (32.8% of the sample) to Q11 (We should oppose ordaining women to the diaconate because the next time, they will be advocating ordination of women to the priesthood) and Q14 (Ordaining women as deacons will only reinforce the church's clericalisation), is 3.76 (disagree), which significantly differs from the mean of the combined responses of married and single lay that disfavours more the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate.

## Discussion

Our survey in the Philippine context shows that a vast majority support having women deacons in recognition of women and men's equal reception 'of the variety of gifts of the Spirit' in baptism and since religious and lay women are already doing the tasks of a deacon not only in far-flung areas but elsewhere as well. Another reason is the pastoral need; the current ratio in the Philippines is one priest to 7000 parishioners compared to the ideal, that is, one priest to 2000 parishioners (Naval 2024). The personal accompaniment of parishioners suffers because priests are focused on sacramental celebrations.

There is likewise substantial support for permitting women with proper training to preach during Mass (69%), with a significantly stronger endorsement from the women respondents. This aligns with the results of the International Survey on Catholic Women ( $n = 17200$ ), which reveals that 77% of the respondents strongly agree or agree that women preachers should be able to give the homily during Mass (McEwan, McPhillips & Pepper 2023:41).

Almost two-thirds of the respondents further believe that in being ordained to the diaconate, women can have the power of governance (*The Code of Canon Law* [Catholic Church 1983]), which can help declericalise church structures. The 2022 Philippine Synodal Report raised clericalism as a major problem: 'Clericalism, elitism and unapproachability dominate the relationship between the laity and the clergy' (CBCP 2022:8). But for the diaconal ordination of women to make an impact towards eradicating clericalism, it should be viewed as an integral part of the church's journey towards greater inclusivity and participation, aligning with the broader goal of synodality. Without this perspective, it risks perpetuating clericalisation within the church, as suggested by the respondents, as well as the Philippine National Synodal Discerning Team on Women Deacons (CBCP 2024:47).

While there is explicit support for establishing the ministry of women deacons, there is ambivalence about ordaining women to the permanent diaconate. This hesitation stems from the belief that only men can be ordained, possibly because of the perception that the diaconate is merely a stepping stone to the priesthood (Q4). The misunderstanding that the diaconate is only a transitional stage may be because permanent deacons do not yet exist in the Philippines. Q4 also shows a weak correlation with Q9 (The church should

establish the ministry of women deacons but should not ordain them because only men can be ordained), Q11 (We should oppose ordaining women to the diaconate because the next time, they will be advocating ordination of women to the priesthood) and Q14 (Ordaining women as deacons will only reinforce the church's clericalisation). Future studies can explore if a causal relation exists between these variables.

Respondents also view the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate as a slippery slope that can eventually lead to the ordination of women as priests, which, in their perspective, is not sanctioned by Jesus.

Others hold that the ordination of women will reinforce the church's clericalisation (Q14). Several arguments can be raised against this. Firstly, if the ordination to the permanent diaconate will clericalise the church, should not the church stop ordaining men as well. Secondly, a study in the United States (US) has shown, albeit based on self-perception, that permanent deacons, mostly middle-aged ministers, rate high in the scale for servant and transformational leadership characteristics. Since this study shows no significant relation between these attributes and the number of years as deacons, this suggests that this is not a product of formation as deacon, but they were recruited precisely because they possessed these attributes (Reed & Ferrari 2016). This implies the importance of recruiting candidates who do not hold a clericalist mentality. Thirdly, formation in the theology of the diaconate can prevent clericalism if it highlights the diaconate as establishing the basis for all ordained ministry, that is, Christ, who is servant and deacon for all (Donnet 2020), and if done within a broader vision of a synodal church.

The ambivalence towards the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate is also because of the persistence of the belief in the complementarity of women and men, favouring men's leadership (Table 4). Religious leadership in lowland pre-colonial Philippines was held by the *babaylan* [a woman or a transgender woman], while the *Datu* [a man] led raids and trading and headed the *barangay*, the basic socio-economic unit. Both positions were highly respected within the community. Such complementarity in roles serves equality rather than the domination of one group by another. This system had been subverted by the Spanish colonisers and replaced by the all-male hierarchy in the church and society. Today, women's leadership in the secular sphere has been recognised more. For example, the Philippines has the highest number of women in senior executive positions in the world (Esquire Philippines 2024), while a recent survey by Stratbase-Social Weather Stations (SWS) showed that a majority of Filipinos view women in politics as more effective leaders than men, with a stronger focus on pressing social issues (Gomez 2025). These, however, do not translate to a more equal perspective on ordained leadership roles for men and women in the church.

The qualitative feedback of our respondents further indicates the impact of the long-standing exclusion of women in

leadership roles in church tradition, a misunderstanding that Jesus forbade women's ordination to the diaconate, and the view that women's roles can be expanded without the need for ordination, in keeping with their designated position in the church.

Affirming that 'holy orders is reserved for men', Pope Francis states that the diaconate 'is the first degree of holy orders in the Catholic Church, followed by the priesthood and finally the episcopate' (Brockhaus 2023). He argues that women contribute distinctively to the church through maternal and nurturing qualities, exemplified by Mary (Pope Francis 2020 no.:101). In contrast, men are called to emulate Christ, including but not exclusively in ordained roles. This theological stance is problematic because Christ's humanity transcends gender, and women, like men, are baptised into Christ. Both women and men equally bear God's image, receive the Holy Spirit's gifts and are called to inclusivity and communion – recognising each person's unique talents in determining their role in the church. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that the rationale for the restoration of the diaconal ministry as a permanent order was the shortage of priests. *Lumen Gentium*, which proposed the reinstatement of the permanent diaconate, focused on the practical role (function) rather than the theological identity of the deacon. Elyse Raby, therefore, rightly asks:

Why is it that just at the moment when so many women point out that they can fulfil and are already fulfilling diaconal functions that a functionalist account of ministry becomes problematic? (Raby 2022:64)

The survey also indicates some fear that giving women more leadership roles would further lessen men's active participation in the church (Q12). This allegedly happened when women were allowed to become lectors and commentators (Sanchez & Puen 2018). In other faith traditions where women have been ordained as permanent deacon or priest, the number of ordained women remained smaller than that of men (Deckman 2023). Feminist theologian Marife Revollido notes that at the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (a national church in communion with the Anglican communion, which has ordained women since 1997), the number of ordained women, including permanent deacons, is currently at 46, while that of ordained males is at 1450. Hostile cultural attitudes against women's leadership continue to persist. If indeed the number of lectors and commentators decreased when women were allowed to join the ministry, there is no analysis of why this happened. Instead, the response is to insist on an equal but complementary theological anthropology, with some roles relegated to women and others to men. Underlying this is a narrative of competition instead of a narrative of communion, where each individual's charism or gift is recognised.

Lastly, it is also important to note that for half of the respondents, the ordination of women to the diaconate must be based on establishing a precedent in the church's history. At least one liturgical ceremony exists to ordain



men and women deacons (Marucci 2016; Zagano 2023). The 2002 International Theological Commission counter-argues that the women ordained as deaconesses were not 'equivalent' to the men ordained as deacons. Nevertheless, while on the one hand, the church needs to take a gender-fair examination of the history of the ordination of women to the diaconate, on the other hand, it is not always the case in the development of church doctrines and practices that an explicit precedent was needed. The Holy Spirit is not active only in the past but remains at work today as we discern the signs of the times. For instance, the decision made at the Council of Jerusalem (Ac 15) to exempt Gentile Christians from circumcision did not have a direct precedent in previous practices. However, this can be inferred from Jesus' inclusive teachings and actions (CBCP 2024:46).

Regarding aggregate groups, the youngest respondents in this research (18–25 years of age) are *significantly* less likely to agree to the ordination of women to the permanent diaconate. This may be because of the following reasons as revealed by the above-stated results: (1) their lack of knowledge of the nature and roles of a deacon; (2) their objection to women diaconate and women preaching in Mass; and (3) their belief that this will not help declericalise the church. These results show a similar trend to the findings of the International Survey on Catholic Women where it is also those aged 18–25 years old who are least among the age groups to strongly agree or agree that women should be eligible for ordination to the priesthood (McEwan et al. 2023:47).

Age, level of education and the focus of their BECs or mission stations *significantly* shaped the respondents' views about women's ordination to the diaconate.

Those with postgraduate degrees are more likely to support women's ordination, as evidenced in their *significant* disagreement with Q9 and Q12. This aligns with the results of the America Media national survey of Catholic women ( $n = 1508$ ) conducted by CARA, where the highly educated respondents show greater support for the ordination of women as deacons compared to the other groups (Berrelleza & Zagano 2019).

The abovementioned results reveal the need for the local church to discuss the issue of women's diaconate more broadly towards a more 'incisive' participation of women in the church, and in light of pressing pastoral need. While women are already active as local church leaders, they continue to be excluded, especially from liturgical roles. Furthermore, the diaconal tasks women are already performing must be recognised formally. Towards this end, we recommend that: (1) education sessions be conducted in parishes or dioceses on the nature of the permanent diaconate and the roles of a permanent deacon; (2) both clergy and lay people be given gender sensitivity and gender justice orientation as the study revealed the persistence of patriarchal attitudes in the church; (3) a special focus should be given to the theological education and formation of the younger generation;

(4) scientific studies be conducted to ascertain whether there is a causal relation between the view that the diaconate is merely a stepping stone to the priesthood and people's negative stance towards women's ordination to the permanent diaconate, as well as, whether men indeed lose interest in positions of leadership in the church when these are made accessible to women; and (5) to treat the lack of active participation of men in the church as a separate issue from women's access to leadership and liturgical roles such as the ordination to the diaconate.

## Strengths and limitations

The use of quantitative analysis tools (post-hoc test of one-way ANOVA) is a main strength of this study, as this allows for the aggregated analysis of the responses and, consequently, a more nuanced understanding of the results. A limitation of the study is the high percentage of respondents from those with MA and/or PhD (46.3%), as well as priests and religious (32.8%) relative to the target population. This may have skewed the results towards a more positive view of the ordination of women deacons. Future studies can aim for a more proportional representation.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that the issue of women's diaconate in the Catholic Church is significant in the Philippine context. A vast majority of the pastoral animators surveyed support women's diaconate because women and men equally received the 'variety of gifts of the Spirit' in baptism, on top of the reality that women are already performing diaconal tasks. There is also a pastoral need arising from a lack of priests. Furthermore, a substantial majority endorse allowing women to preach during Mass, a deacon's task that can also be open to laywomen.

Almost two-thirds believe that by being ordained as deacons, women can have the power of governance to help declericalise church structures. This does not, however, translate to explicit support for women's ordination to the permanent diaconate, as the mean average indicates the respondents' ambivalent (neither agree nor disagree) position on the issue.

The findings of this research present the church with vital perspectives on requisite pastoral formation and misconceptions that must be addressed. Furthermore, age, level of education and the focus of their BECs or Mission Stations *significantly* shaped the respondents' views about women's ordination to the diaconate. The post-hoc test of one-way ANOVA suggests that special attention should be given to the youngest participants (18–25 years old), who are the least knowledgeable, and are notably more opposed to allowing female deacons. They need to be more educated about the diaconate and the history of the female diaconate in particular. The post-hoc analysis also reveals that those with postgraduate degrees and those from mission stations or BECs that are holistic in their focus are more likely to support women's ordination, thus underlining the



importance of education and formation in instilling value for the equal dignity and gifts of women and men for ministry.

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## Authors' contributions

A.M.B. was responsible for conceptualisation, methodology, carrying out the investigation, formal analysis, writing of the original draft, review and editing, project administration and supervision. T.M.C. carried out the investigation, visualisation, data curation and review and editing. F.R.C. was responsible for software, formal analysis, validation and review and editing. M.F.P.B. carried out the investigation, data curation and review and editing.

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## Data availability

The raw data that support the findings of this study are openly available at: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/14nzQIW13vDEVj0ZI3OcNEHHJ2qHoE\\_4yVmPLlo\\_IY-c/edit?gid=1636742230#gid=1636742230](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/14nzQIW13vDEVj0ZI3OcNEHHJ2qHoE_4yVmPLlo_IY-c/edit?gid=1636742230#gid=1636742230). The tables, graphs, ANOVA results and comments by respondents are accessible at: [https://www.academia.edu/127659755/Data\\_on\\_Survey\\_re\\_Ordination\\_of\\_Women\\_to\\_the\\_Permanent\\_Diaconate](https://www.academia.edu/127659755/Data_on_Survey_re_Ordination_of_Women_to_the_Permanent_Diaconate).

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