

# Deacon class halted awaiting talks on women

By Terry McGuire  
Catholic News Service

SEATTLE — Archbishop Raymond G. Hunthausen of Seattle has halted plans to form a new group of permanent deacons in his archdiocese until the role of women in the church is more adequately addressed.

The archbishop announced March 2 that formation of a new deacon class would not serve the best interests of the local church.

"This has been a most difficult decision for me to make," Archbishop Hunthausen wrote in a letter to deacons, priests, parochial ministers and key lay leaders. "I know that my final decision will highlight the women's issue and create new tensions in our church."

Archdiocesan spokesman John McCoy told Catholic News Service March 8 that Coadjutor Archbishop Thomas J. Murphy of Seattle was "supportive of Archbishop Hunthausen's decision."

Archbishop Hunthausen's decision comes at a time in which the archdiocese faces a growing shortage of priests. Some parishes have no resident pastor and a few

have experienced "priestless Sundays" in which the liturgy does not include the celebration of the Eucharist.

Some have said that deacons — who can baptize, witness marriages and deliver homilies — are a way of easing the priest shortage. But others have argued that the diaconate creates another all-male clerical caste that excludes women. About 90 deacons serve parishes throughout the Seattle archdiocese.

Archbishop Hunthausen's decision to cancel a new deacon-formation group coincides with the U.S. bishops' work on a pastoral letter on women in society and in the church. The bishops are expected to vote on a final version of the letter late this year.

In an interview with *The Progress*, archdiocesan newspaper, the archbishop said he made his decision to cancel the new deacon class because of testimony he heard from various lay and religious groups as well as from laypeople during hearings for the bishops writing the pastoral letter on women.

"At those hearings, many women and men told us that the church didn't seem to respect the personhood of women, that the church was patriarchal and unappreciative of women's gifts," he said.

The archbishop conceded that the question of women's ordination and their full role in the church is in the hands of the Vatican, not in his.

"In many instances, decisions are beyond our control," he said. "But in this one, we do have a choice."

Reaction to the archbishop's decision was varied.

Sister Kathleen Pruitt, of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, welcomed the decision. "I think what it tells women is that there is at least room for dialogue," she said.

Others were unsure about linking deacons with the issue of women's role in the church.

Delbert Hoover, a deacon in Federal Way, Wash., said, "I'm not sure how not having a deacon class is going to make a difference."

Hoover said he and other deacons were confused because the archbishop had told them a week earlier that a new deacon class would be formed next year.

The archbishop admitted that he did reverse his earlier, tentative decision about ordaining more deacons.

"I knew that disappointment and pain would accompany my decision on this issue no matter what the final outcome," the archbishop said. "But I had to base my decision on what I'd heard and what my heart told me to do."

Michael Kucharzak, president of the Diaconate Community of Western Washington, praised the archbishop for having the courage to change his mind and do what he thought right for the church.

"I don't look at this as being all that devastating to the program," Kucharzak said. "(Even) if the decision is made to never reinstate another class, I'm sure it's going to be done based on some very careful assessment of what the program is intended to do and how best it serves people."

Archbishop Hunthausen stressed that his decision to cancel a new formation class had no bearing on existing deacons.

"I want to emphasize that this in no way reflects on the deacons or on the program," he said. "We have reason to celebrate and be grateful to the deacons and the service they offer the church."

"But, we need to seriously address the role of women in the church," and canceling the class was "a way that we could clearly indicate the depths of our concern," the archbishop said.

Following an investigation of archdiocesan affairs, the Vatican in 1986 instructed Archbishop Hunthausen to cede authority over several key aspects of archdiocesan life to an auxiliary bishop.

The unprecedented division of episcopal authority provoked controversy, and a three-bishop commission worked out a solution under which Archbishop Hunthausen's powers were restored and then-Bishop Murphy, head of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, Mont., was named coadjutor with power of succession.

The investigation was conducted after concerns were raised about archdiocesan practices in the areas of liturgy, sacraments, ministry to homosexuals, priestly formation, the marriage tribunal and others.

Contributing to this report was John McCoy in Seattle.

## Mahony asks priests, nuns to test vaccine

LOS ANGELES (CNS) — Los Angeles Archbishop Roger M. Mahony has asked priests and nuns from his archdiocese — aged 65 and older — to volunteer to be human guinea pigs for a proposed AIDS vaccine developed by Dr. Jonas Salk, who formulated a vaccine for polio.

Archdiocesan officials confirmed March

11 that Archbishop Mahony had asked for volunteers in a Jan. 25 letter sent to 3,500 priests and nuns at the request of Dr. Brian Henderson, an associate of Salk. The letter said that 10 volunteers are sought.

No human testing has begun, pending approval from California health authorities. The vaccine has been tested on three chimpanzees without signs of infection.

Under California law, the state can permit AIDS testing on uninfected individuals without federal approval. The vaccine has already been tested on 100 people with the AIDS virus, and the U.S. government has given approval to test 1,000 more.

The vaccine is considered risky because it is the only vaccine to contain the whole AIDS virus, albeit a strain killed in the laboratory.

But a test batch of Salk's experimental

polio vaccine contaminated with live polio viruses infected scores of children with polio in 1955, resulting in some deaths.

Archbishop Mahony in his letter said Henderson had specifically asked for senior citizens.

*The Los Angeles Times* quoted Dr. Alexandra Levine, a third associate in the AIDS vaccine project, as saying that Henderson had acted without Salk's knowledge, and that only nuns, who "are at essentially no risk of acquiring AIDS," will be sought.

The Henderson letter, which accompanied Archbishop Mahony's, said Salk, 75, would take the first vaccine himself in keeping with scientific tradition. Salk also had taken the first experimental polio vaccine.

The researchers are "looking for people who would want to volunteer for something that could be very risky," Archbishop Mahony told the Associated Press. "You're really looking for people who have a commitment to humankind and willingness to take risks to benefit others."

Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York said March 11 he would consider taking the vaccine. "Anything that is morally licit," he said, "should be considered."

Cardinal O'Connor visits AIDS patients in New York, usually on a weekly basis.

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