

By **Daniel Burke**, CNN Religion Editor

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(CNN) — Pope Francis said the Vatican should study the possibility of ordaining women as deacons, answering a call that women, particularly in the United States, have been asking the church to address for decades.

The Pope's potentially groundbreaking remarks came, as they often do, in an off-the-cuff response to a question -- and it was not altogether clear exactly what he meant.

This time, the question came from the heads of women's religious orders, who met with Francis at the Vatican on Thursday and pressed him for concrete ways in which women might play a larger role in leading the Catholic Church. To date, Francis has praised the "feminine genius" but has not carried through on vague promises to appoint more women to leadership positions.

In a series of pointed questions -- the Pope joked that he [felt like a goalie fielding shots](#) -- the women called him out, asking why they can't preach at Mass or be ordained as deacons.

Women can plus "reflections" at Catholic worship services, but only priests should preach homilies at Mass, the Pope answered, according to

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