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## First U.S. Conference on Women Deacons Draws Attendees from Across the U.S. and England

Enthusiasm and prayer marked the first U.S. conference on women deacons in the Orthodox Church sponsored in New York City, on December 6, by St. Phoebe Center for the History of the Deaconess. Although the issue of the reinstatement and rejuvenation of the ordained deaconess has been discussed in Orthodox circles for over 150 years, this is the first time that a conference has been devoted to the exploration of this issue particularly and addressed how an ordained female diaconate could help the Church today.

The well-attended conference—drawing participants from England, California, and Illinois, among other Northeast and Midwest locales—reinforced the need and desire for the rejuvenation of the ordination of women deacons. Inspired by the conference, attendees hope to make a difference in a possible revitalization of this ministry, which can only happen with the approval of Orthodox bishops.

One of the strengths of Orthodoxy is its adherence to tradition; and the tradition of women deacons starts with its patron saint, St. Phoebe, who was designated a deacon by St. Paul. The conference, entitled “Women & Diaconal Ministry in the Orthodox Church: Past, Present & Future,” focused on the solid evidence of women deacons in the past with talks by Doctors Valerie Karras, Caren Stayer, and Phyllis Zagano. One of the most pressing issues regarding revitalization of this order is the question of what women deacons would do today. Possible *diakonia* (service) by women deacons in the present day was suggested by speakers who are now engaged in these vital church ministries: Chaplaincy by Clio Pavlantis; Spiritual Direction by Sister Rebecca Cown of New Skete Monastery; Ministry of the Word (as chanters, readers, and homilists) by Professor Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Brown University; and parish administration and outreach to underprivileged communities by Ann Marie Mecera. Their work not only augments that of parish priests and bishops who are challenged in the overwhelming needs in their communities, but also

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connects the church and the world more particularly. Ann Marie Mecera, chair of the St. Phoebe Center, also emphasized the importance of the grace, accountability, and obedience that come with the sacrament of ordination. Paulina Pedas, a high school student, shared reflections of her experience as a young Orthodox woman. Speakers for women deacons in the future, Teva Regule (PhD candidate) and Rev. Fr. Steven Tsichlis, emphasized that defining the service of women deacons is essential in convincing both the clergy and the laity of why ordination should be re-instituted. Fr. Tsichlis relayed the practical challenges as coordinator of the male diaconate program that began in 2007 in the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of San Francisco. Participants learned that defining the role of deacons is essential and ongoing for both male and female deacons.

The daylong conference provided attendees with an excellent historical base on which to stand and the inspiration to continue in a realistic and prayerful journey together and with others.

The issue of the ordination of women deacons has been on the backburner for a number of years, but was moved forward in March, 2014, by His Eminence Archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus at the high-level synaxis of the primates of the Orthodox autocephalous churches in Istanbul where they set the date and tentative procedures for the Holy and Great Council of 2016. He suggested that the position of women and the resetting of the institution of deaconesses should be studied. This encouraging and courageous statement gave hope to those who have been following this issue for a number of years. The last wave of optimism was in 1988 at an Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation in Rhodes convened by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople that included representatives from all the Orthodox Churches to examine the issue in preparation for a Holy and Great Council someday. That consultation, "The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women," unanimously affirmed that ordinations had taken place in the past and the order should be revived.

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