

Documentation: Orthodox Liturgists Support Ordination of Women Deacons

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ORTHODOX LITURGISTS ISSUE A STATEMENT OF SUPPORT FOR THE REVIVAL OF THE ORDER OF DEACONESS BY THE PATRIARCHATE OF ALEXANDRIA

It has come to our attention that the venerable Patriarchate of Alexandria, after due consideration, has decided to reinstitute the ancient order of deaconess, in order to better serve the pastoral needs of the ever-increasing number of missionary parishes within the Patriarchate which serves the entire continent of Africa. The validity of this decision, however, has been questioned by some.

We the undersigned, active and emeriti professors of liturgics and liturgical theology at various theological schools and seminaries in Greece and the United States of America, wish to express respectfully our support of His Beatitude Patriarch Theodoros and the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Alexandria in their effort to restore in a timely fashion the order of deaconess within the borders of the Patriarchate.

The historical, theological, canonical, and liturgical validity of the order of deaconess has been attested to time and again in recent years by Orthodox scholars and theologians. Although the order of deaconess gradually fell into decline by the end of the fifteenth century, it survived among the Oriental Orthodox Churches and in some monastic communities. The Russian Orthodox Church before the 1917 Revolution and again in more recent times has considered restoring it. Likewise St. Nektarios and other contemporary Greek bishops have ordained deaconesses. In fact, the Church of Greece established a School of Deaconesses, which in the end developed into a school for social workers.

The reinstitution of the female diaconate does not constitute an innovation, as some would have us believe, but the revitalization of a once functional, vibrant, and effectual ministry in order to provide the opportunity for qualified women to offer in our era their unique and specific gifts in the service of God's people as publicly commissioned and authorized educators, evangelists, preachers, counselors, social workers, et.al.

Initially, the liturgical role of the female diaconate, according to the sources, appears to have been limited. These same sources provide us with the rite of ordination of a female deacon, which is strikingly similar to that of the male deacon. Significantly, the liturgical vestments are the same as those of the male deacon's. The decision as to whether or not women deacons will perform added liturgical functions in our times, as one theologian puts it, "remains exclusively the prerogative of bishops in synod."

Indeed, the very process of restoring the female diaconate requires careful consideration of several other factors as well, including the adequate preparation and education of the people who will be called upon to receive, honor, and respect the deaconesses assigned to their parishes. Also crucial to the process of restoration is to carefully articulate the qualities and qualifications of the candidates for the office. St. Paul in his Pastoral Epistles

provides guidance as to the qualities required of the candidate. The canons tell us of some qualifications, such as the minimum age of the candidate. However, nothing is said of other qualifications such as the education and marital status of the candidate. These and other matters, including the public attire, remuneration, and the method of assignment and removal of the deaconess, must also be addressed. Above all, the process requires that the role and functions of the deaconess be identified, properly defined, and clearly stated.

Talk of the restoration of the order of female deacons has been with us for several decades. In fact, one of the conclusions (VIII) of the Inter-Orthodox Symposium, "The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church" which was held on the Island of Rhodes in 1988, addressed this very issue. It bears repeating parts of the conclusion: "The apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived...The revival of this ancient order should be envisaged on the basis of the ancient prototypes testified in many sources...Such a revival would represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world in many spheres...and in response to the increasing specific needs of our time...The revival of women deacons in the Orthodox Church would emphasize in a special way the dignity of woman and give recognition to her contribution to the work of the Church as a whole."

Generally speaking, it is safe to say that only doctrinal impediments and commonly accepted authoritative precedents would preclude an autocephalous Church from enacting liturgical reforms within its borders. Liturgical and canonical issues that have implications beyond the local church are generally resolved through a consensus of the autocephalous churches. The restoration of the female diaconate is such that neither doctrinal issues nor authoritative precedents are at stake. It is refreshing to know that a local Church has taken up the challenge, has studied the matter carefully, and is proposing measures for the implementation of a significant reform, the restoration of the order of deaconess, through a prudently conceived program.

In light of this, we respectfully support the decision of the Patriarchate of Alexandria to restore the female diaconate, thus giving flesh to an idea that has been discussed and studied by pastors and theologians for decades.

With deep reverence and respect,

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