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## CHAPTER FORTY

### THE FINAL COMMUNIQUÉ

#### At the Conclusion of the International Theological Conference: "Deaconesses, Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology"

"The Church is called to articulate its prophetic word [ . . . ] Our heart is set on the long-awaited Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church in order to witness to its unity as well as to its responsibility and care for the contemporary world [ . . . ] The Church does not live for itself but is obliged to witness to and share God's gifts with those near and afar." Bearing in mind this message from the 2014 Synod of the Primates of the Orthodox Church, as well as the recommendation by His Beatitude Archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus on the same occasion, that the Orthodox Church "should be also concerned with the role of women in the Church and strengthen her position on the issue of the ordination of women, while after a serious study and consideration of all parameters, restoring the order of deaconesses in the Church," the Centre for Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies "Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou" (CEMES), together with the Theological Schools of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, and Holy Cross of Boston, U.S.A., jointly organized an international theological conference on "Deaconesses, ordination of women and Orthodox theology."

The conference was convened in Thessaloniki (January 22-24, 2015) at the premises of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (which graciously provided all electronic facilities for live coverage), and at the amphitheater "Panteleimon Papageorgiou" of the Holy Monastery of St. Theodora of Thessaloniki, which hosts the offices of CEMES and was inaugurated in 2013 by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. It was dedicated to 94-year-old Prof. Emeritus Evangelos Theodorou who, 60 years ago was the first among Orthodox theologians to initiate scholarly discussion on the ordination of deaconesses to the sacramental priesthood in the Orthodox Church. Conscious that a thorough theological examination of all aspects of this issue (which have,

over the years, been discussed widely and ecumenically) constitutes a primary responsibility of the Orthodox academic community to the Orthodox Church in general, the above academic institutions organized this conference along the same lines of the conference held two years ago by CEMES: "An Orthodox approach for a theology of religions" (June 14-15, 2013).

The conference was initially placed within the context of a two-year-project by CEMES, entitled: "Humble Theological Contribution to the Orthodox Church on its Way to the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council". Although the issues debated during the conference were not included in the official agenda of this long-anticipated Pan-Orthodox synod, the intervention of the Primate of the Church of Cyprus prompted the inclusion of this conference within the overall framework of the project. It was symbolically launched on the day that the Orthodox churches commemorate St. Mary Magdalene, equal to the apostles, with an open invitation to all interested theologians.

The concept of the conference was an in-depth examination of the theological argumentation by Orthodox scholars, one generation after the Rhodes Consultation, with a view to exploring the progress in recent biblical and theological scholarship. In other words, the centrality of "Orthodox theology" in the title of the conference was stressed, alongside the reference to "deaconesses" as a central and parallel focus, without neglecting the overall question of the "ordination of women" inasmuch as it now poses a challenge not only from outside the canonical boundaries of the Orthodox Church but also from its ecclesiastical dignitaries and theological scholars.

The theological perspective of the conference was prompted by Metropolitan John [Zizioulas] of Pergamon, who has argued for a purely theological conversation on this subject, especially on the thorny question of the ordination of women, which has divided churches and Christian denominations both vertically and horizontally. As the official representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate addressing the Anglican communion during its Lambeth Conference two decades ago, Metropolitan John warned all concerned that this problem could not be solved by using either the argument from sociology or the argument from tradition. What is desperately needed is to address this delicate issue, which has resulted in painful divisions within and among almost all Christian traditions, on a theological basis.

Most of the conference papers focused on the order of deaconesses (or women deacons), and the issue of the restoration of deaconesses was adopted by all speakers, participants and attendees. An institution so

deeply, theologically and historically rooted in our Orthodox tradition and, most importantly, with conciliar and canonical validity, despite falling for the time being into disuse, must be urgently revived in order to support and strengthen the authentic witness of our Church in society and the world. This, of course, does not mean that the role of lay women in the Orthodox Church's witness should not be vigorously encouraged.

All participants agreed that, in accordance with the current canonical restrictions, women are forbidden to enter into the sacramental or "hieratic" priesthood, except the "diaconal" one. For over a generation, the Orthodox Church has held a clear and concrete position on this matter, as explicitly expressed in the final document of the Rhodes Conference, which also patently recommended that "the apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived" (§ 32). Quite recently, however, a number of Orthodox theologians have expressed reservations concerning the theological validity of some arguments proposed against the ordination of women. The reformulation by Metropolitan Kallistos [Ware] of Diokleia of his seminal argumentation on the ordination of women; the tireless approach to the issue by the late Dr. Elizabeth Behr-Sigel, as well as her titanic struggle to upgrade the role of women in the Orthodox Church and its liturgy; and the theological views formulated by the late Prof. Nikos Matsoukas, one of the greatest Orthodox dogmatic theologians of our time; as well as a number of Orthodox theological dissertations and post-doctoral studies and other scholarly contributions all seem to have challenged the opposition to the ordination of women on the basis of Orthodox theology and tradition.

Apart from recommending that the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council consider the restoration of the order of deaconesses, our conference did not come to conclusions, choosing to leave any final decision to the appropriate ecclesiastical authorities in the hope that they will also consider other relevant parameters. Speakers simply raised some serious theological concerns on all issues discussed (see Appendix) and underlined the inconsistency in the conventional Orthodox view that appeals to "tradition" with regard to the overall question of the "ordination of women," but ignores the same tradition in relation to the revival of the order of deaconesses and the participation of women in the sacramental diaconal priesthood.

Nearly 40 papers were presented at the conference, in addition to insightful messages from ecclesiastical (namely, the Ecumenical Patriarch) and academic authorities from various theological schools. The papers covered almost all areas of biblical, liturgical, patristic, systematic, canonical, and historical theology. Although most focused on the issues

from an Orthodox perspective, their sober analysis can provide theological argumentation for the wider Christian community, to the churches and Christian denominations that exclude women from the sacramental priesthood (such as Roman Catholics and some evangelicals) and to those that have already adopted their ordination, such as Anglicans and mainstream Protestants. Other papers provided an objective and critical study of the history, experience and theological arguments of other Christian traditions from an Orthodox perspective. Finally, the conference did not omit to address the perspective of other, non-Orthodox Christians.

With regard to the issue of women's ordination, it was humbly suggested that, from an Orthodox point of view, the theological arguments used so far in the inter-Christian dialogue need to be reformulated; this is possible, feasible and legitimate, even if this requires further scholarly research.

All the papers delivered at this international theological conference will be published electronically on the official website of CEMES ([cemes.weebly.com](http://cemes.weebly.com)), and in printed form as part of the series of CEMES editions. Finally, all of our scholarly endeavor will be humbly submitted to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and all other Orthodox churches.

## Appendix

### Synopsis and Codification of the Reflections and Questions Raised at the Conference

1. How important, for the Orthodox Church's theological arsenal, is the fact that the institution of deaconesses has a conciliar ecumenical and canonical foundation which, in fact, has never been repealed by a subsequent synodical decision?
2. Since deaconesses were installed into their ministry through ordination (*hierotonia*), which was the same as for the major orders of the clergy, and not by a simple laying on of hands (*hierothesia*), and their ordination had an absolute likeness in form and content to the ordinations of the major order of the clergy, does not the reluctance by many Orthodox churches to proceed to the rejuvenation of the order of deaconesses affect the witness of the Church today?
3. Can the clear assurance in ancient prayers that Christ did not ban women from liturgical duties in the churches (see, "rejecting no woman...from serving in your holy houses" [*ὁ μὴδὲ γυναικάς...λειτουργεῖν τοῖς ἁγίοις οἴκοις σου ἀποβαλλόμενος*]) help the Orthodox Church to immediately proceed to the rejuvenation of the order of deaconesses?
4. Can the proposed distinction of the sacramental priesthood into "diaconal" and "hieratic," (i.e. a quantitative rather than qualitative distinction) help the Orthodox Church to restore her traditional ancient practice and ordain deaconesses?
5. How can the interpretation in the canonical sources that the deaconess, as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, held a higher position even than that of the presbyters, who were considered symbols of the apostles, affect the possibility of upgrading the status of women in relation to the theological legitimacy of their participation in the diaconal sacramental priesthood?
6. Can Orthodox bishops at any time, without any relevant conciliar decision, ordain deaconesses and accept them into the major orders of the clergy?
7. If the Orthodox Church is characterized by its liturgical (and Eucharistic) theology, how crucial is it today to revive the order of ordained deaconesses for their necessary missionary witness, particularly in the area of ministry?
8. If the human person is determined by his/her relationship with others and if the Eucharistic community is (for the Orthodox) the primary

framework for constructive and virtuous relationships (which are fully possible for both men and women), on what theological grounds can one today exclude women from even the diaconal sacramental priesthood?

9. Does the presence of demonic elements (e.g. ideas about women being cursed for their culpability in the Fall and their eternal punishment in subjugation to the man, as well as their impurity and consequent marginalization in the Church's life of worship and administration, etc.) compromise the Church's witness to the world, additionally raising an enormous ethical problem?
10. Throughout Western Christian history, there has been a gradual, perhaps unconscious, degradation of women on three issues: the status and position of Mary Magdalene, of St. Junia, and the institution of deaconesses. The long-standing tradition of the East, on the other hand, takes pride in these persons and institutions. How can this affect the position of the Orthodox Church?
11. How does the now academically indisputable evidence in the New Testament and in the early Christian centuries of important women "apostles" (e.g. Junia) affect the Orthodox theological argument on the need for the rejuvenation of the order of deaconesses, and even on the discussion of women's ordination?
12. If great Orthodox theologians, such as St. Gregory the Theologian and St. John Chrysostom, speak about the priesthood with metaphors based not on male paternal models but on examples of virtue for the community, and if these hierarchs use both masculine and feminine metaphors to describe the method and the ministry of the priesthood, what theological arguments can justify the exclusion of women today, even from the diaconal priesthood?
13. Does Patriarch Gregory of Antioch's reference that connects women (until the 6<sup>th</sup> century) with the apostolic office and ordination («Μαθέτω Πέτρος ὁ ἀρνησάμενός με, ὅτι δύναμαι καὶ γυναῖκας ἀποστόλους χειροτονεῖν» PG 88, 1864b) not demonstrate that there is at least some evidence that the Church held a different attitude in the Eastern Christian tradition regarding the liturgical role of women?
14. Does the exclusive "male priesthood" – derived from the historically indisputable male form of the incarnate God – constitute a binding element of divine grace? How strong is this theological argument, and how consistent is it with the dogma of Chalcedon?
15. Is the exclusion of women from the sacramental priesthood, especially from the "diaconal" one in the course of history, based on human law (*de jure humano*) or divine law (*de jure divino*)?

16. What impact can the close terminological connection that St. Basil the Great repeatedly makes in his anaphora between "diaconal" and "sacramental" have on the liturgical role of women?
17. On the thorny issue of the ordination of women, should the Orthodox Church and its theology use liturgical, canonical, Trinitarian, Christological, ecclesiological, eschatological or sociological criteria?
18. In selecting theological criteria, should priority be given – and if so, how much – to the long-standing "primary" liturgical tradition of the Church over the various doctrinal expressions that were subsequently formulated?
19. Is it theologically legitimate to use human, biological concepts of gender and the supposedly masculine or feminine structures of each of the persons of the Holy Trinity?
20. How and to what extent does the basic Orthodox theological position that at the eschaton there will be no discrimination based on biological sex, influence the debate about the liturgical and sacramental role of women?
21. Does the invocation of elements of ontological reduction and the division of the human being into two hierarchically superimposed sexes negate the doctrine of the divine incarnation and nullify its objectives?
22. If, according to Orthodox Christian anthropology, the archetype of the human being is Christ, does the invocation of the male sex of the word of God provide theological, canonical, historical-critical, and liturgical grounds for the exclusion of women, even from the diaconal sacramental priesthood?
23. If every human person is created unique, complete and free, designed to achieve deification (*theosis*) through his/her virtuous life, how is it possible theologically to define the nature of man, or even his virtuous life, on the basis of gender? Does this not lead to a denial of the completeness of human nature at the crown of creation, as well as its call to the "likeness"?
24. Regarding the ministry of the priesthood, does not the selective use and transfer of practices based on gender – which theologically and anthropologically permit the impairment of the human person – substantially undermine, rather than encourage, the achievement of the Orthodox ideal of *theosis*?