

Solomon, 23:1

2001

Reports

AN ORTHODOX DIACONATE FOR WOMEN?

The document below, which grew out of discussions in the Parisian committee concerned with 'Women and men in the Church', was signed by more than a dozen members of the Orthodox community in Paris (9 July 2000). Among the signatories (in alphabetical order) are Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Fr Boris Bobrinsky, Olivier Clément and Nicolas Lossky. Three of the signatories are priests. Of the laity who signed, six are women.

The letter was acknowledged by the patriarchate of Constantinople with an assurance that it would be submitted to a competent commission. A version of the same document was subsequently circulated to all heads of Orthodox Churches. So far (May 2001) the letter has also elicited a formal response from the patriarchates of Antioch and Moscow, as well as from Churches of Finland and Poland.

Your All-holiness,

We are emboldened to address you on the subject of an important question which has been posed to our Church and in our Church over the past decades. It concerns the possible restoration of the diaconate for women, a ministry which existed and flourished in patristic times — as is evident on the basis of diligent research undertaken by historians of the period.

The aspiration that the ancient order of deaconesses might be revived has exercised a number of prophetic figures over the past hundred years or so. One of these was St Nektarios, bishop of Aegina, who ordained a nun to the diaconate in 1911. The desirability of such ordinations was much discussed in cultivated

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circles of the Russian Orthodox Church during the second half of the nineteenth century. These discussions were beginning to bear fruit by the beginning of the twentieth century under the auspices of the Grand Duchess Elisabeth, who was to die as a martyr to the faith at the time of the Russian revolution. It may be remembered that a proposal for the restoration of a diaconate for woman was on the agenda of the pan-Russian Church Council of 1917-18, but went no further in the fraught conditions of the time.

However, it is over the last three decades, in the context of profound cultural changes, as well as ecumenical discussions, that the question of a possible restoration of the order has imposed itself as a challenge in the minds of Orthodox Christians. This being so, 1976 was the year when it already made its mark in the conclusions of the first international congress of Orthodox women, which was held at the Agapia monastery in Romania. The conference was jointly chaired by three bishops, who severally represented the ecumenical patriarchate of Constantinople, the patriarchate of Antioch, and the patriarchate of Romania.

In 1988 took place the pan-Orthodox consultation at Rhodes on 'the position of women in the Church'. This was a consultation which, at the invitation of your predecessor of blessed memory, the ecumenical patriarch Dimitrios I, assembled something like sixty bishops and theologians (among them, nearly twenty women). The restoration of a diaconate for women gained their unanimous support. Equally unanimous on this question were the Orthodox women who assembled in Damascus (1996) and Constantinople (1997). Regretfully, it must be noted that nothing concrete has been undertaken in response to these unanimous aspirations and resolutions. It would seem as if the question has been put on ice. It is an indeterminate state of affairs, which we find difficult to justify by reference to authentic Orthodox Tradition, and it explains our presumption in turning to your All-holiness as we do.

When your All-holiness was interviewed by journalists in Geneva a few years ago, you stated that 'no obstacle in canon law stands in the way of ordination of women to the diaconate. This institution of the early Church deserves to be revitalised'. It is a declaration which provides us much comfort. It would seem important to us

that it should be better known, and that the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, as 'first among equals', should share it with his brethren in the episcopate. The publication of such a text at the heart of the Orthodox world would rank as an act of considerable importance: it would demonstrate that fidelity to the authentic and living Tradition of the Church in no way inhibits the creative reading of the signs of the times (Matthew 16:3) which Christ urged on his disciples, but serves rather to encourage it.

In actual fact, the aim envisaged by us would involve more than a simple and archaeological reconstitution of the ancient ministry of deaconesses. In accordance with the term used by your All-holiness, it is a question of its revitalisation, in other words of its realisation in the context of the culture and requirements of the present day, while yet remaining faithful to its original and its essential aims.

In accordance with the manners and conventions of the ancient world such as prevailed in the Judaic and Romano-Hellenistic societies where Christianity developed, men and women led distinct or even separate lives. Hence the ministry of Christian deaconesses was essentially intended to fulfil the needs of women. The deaconess would assist the priest in the anointment of women at baptism, she would instruct them, she would visit them when they were sick, she would succour them in times of need. Theirs was a rather wide-ranging ministry, in sum, with liturgical, catechetical and philanthropic functions, all suited to the social structures of the time.

It is not a question of formal reproduction of their way of life. In our modern societies, where men and women increasingly share in the same activities and responsibilities, each in his or her appropriate fashion, the deaconess ought to serve the ecclesial community in its entirety, and in ways which will need to be developed and adapted to the circumstances and requirements of the cultural context, for which the guidance of the Holy Spirit will be sought. As the conclusions of the Rhodes consultation underlined, there is a new factor which needs to be taken into account: many women now have access to higher education, and to theological studies in particular.

In order that our parishes should function both as assemblies for liturgical prayer and as focal points for a life in common, it would seem advisable to call on those whose education, gifts and personal charisma might predispose them for service as assistants and collaborators for a priest, who might otherwise be gravely overburdened.

Increased awareness of this situation might also prompt a reconsideration of the male diaconate, since here is a ministry which has become too narrowly liturgical in our time. The profound link between the sacrament of the altar and the 'sacrament of the brother' (St John Chrysostom's phrase) is forgotten or at least obscured. It could be that the restoration of a diaconate for women would redirect us to it.

At the present time many responsibilities in our communities are taken up by women. In actual fact, a proportion of them exercise a ministry which is semi-diaconal. Were the Church to recognise and confirm their vocation by invoking the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon them, the epiclesis of their diaconal ordination would fortify these women in their ministry. This would also be important.

It with these things in mind that we turn to your All-holiness, hoping that you yourself might publish a text which would clearly define the legitimacy of a creative restoration of the diaconate for women and thus permit the timely revival of a ministry which would fully conform to the Tradition of our Church.

We humbly ask for your blessing, and assure your All-holiness of our profound and filial respect.

POPE JOHN XXIII

A street in Istanbul has been renamed in honour of Pope John XXIII. It was an event which brought Christians of the East and West together, as well as Jews and Muslims. The author of this report attended the celebrations on behalf of the Catholic bishops' conference of Scotland.