

The Diaconate in Liturgy and Life

A Brief History of the Office and Considerations for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church.

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Εν ειρηνῇ τοῦ κυρίου δεηθῶμεν (*En eirini tou kyriou deithomen*)... or in a more literal translation into English, “In the peace of the Lord, let us be in need.” These are the words of the deacon used to begin the “Great” or “Peace” Litany. Peace is an important theme and even a precondition of the Eucharistic celebration. It prepares the Church to offer and receive the Eucharist. At present, we begin the Liturgy with the Litany of Peace by invoking a state of peace—commonly translated into English, “In Peace, let us pray to the Lord.” We are to be *in peace*—the state of wholeness and integration—within ourselves and with one another. As Bishop Kallistos Ware explains, “we are to banish, from within ourselves, feelings of resentment and hostility toward others: bitterness, rancor, inner grumbling, or divisiveness.”¹ Failure to forgive may be the greatest hindrance to knowing God. Moreover, peace with other believers should have primacy over duties in worship. As Christ commands, “So when you are offering your gift to the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.”² The *Didache*³ also emphasizes this precondition of the communal sacrament—“Let none who has a quarrel with his fellow join you until they be reconciled, so that your sacrifice may be undefiled.”⁴ This peace, however, is something that does not come from

¹ Bishop Kallistos Ware, “In Peace Let us Pray to the Lord: Peace and Healing in the Divine Liturgy,” <http://www.incommunion.org/ka14.htm>, April 1999. Henceforth: Ware, “Peace and Healing in the Divine Liturgy.”

² Matthew 5: 23-24, NRSV.

³ The *Didache* is a 2nd c. church document outlining early church liturgics and ethics.

⁴ *Didache* 14:2.

our own doing but comes only from God—“For the peace *from above* and for the salvation of our souls...” Finally, this peace is not only inward looking but also looks to embrace all—“For the peace of the whole world...and for the communion [union] of all.” Peace and unity go together.⁵

In the early Church, this litany was prayed immediately before the Kiss of Peace exchange. The Kiss of Peace signified membership in the communion of believers. It was part of the baptismal rite and the reception of converts into the faith. It was further included by the *Apostolic Constitutions*⁶ in the form of the Prayer for the Faithful—“...and let the *deacon* [emphasis mine] say to all, salute one another with the holy kiss...”⁷

According to the noted liturgical historian, Hugh Wybrew, “The Kiss unites the worshippers among themselves, and so enables them to be united with the One, for union with God is impossible for those who are divided among themselves.”⁸ This unity allows the congregation to not only confess the Trinity as “one in essence and undivided” in the Creed whose recitation usually follows the exchange of the Kiss, but reflect it. As Bishop Kallistos explains, “We are made in the image of God, we are made in the image of God the Holy Trinity; and the Holy Trinity signifies mutual love. If we are made in the image of the Trinity, that means we are made to love one another.”⁹

The Church is in the world to serve the community, to draw us closer to God and one another. The link between liturgy and service is crucial to what it means to gather as Church in

⁵ Bishop Kallistos Ware, “In Peace Let us Pray to the Lord: Peace and Healing in the Divine Liturgy,” paraphrasing Fr. Lev Gillet from *Serve the Lord with Gladness*, <http://www.incommunion.org/ka14.htm>, April 1999.

⁶ The *Apostolic Constitutions* is a 4th-5th century document of Syriac origin that outlines early Church ethics and liturgics.

⁷ *Apostolic Constitutions*, VIII, 11.

⁸ Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy, The Development of the Eucharist Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite*. (Crestwood, New York: SVS Press), p. 93.

⁹ Ware, “Peace and Healing in the Divine Liturgy.”

worship. Liturgically, as we have seen, it is the deacon's function to bring the people together and unite them in corporate prayer. It is in our service to the other that we are united with them. Our service to the other brings them with us to worship. (The following remarks are part of a more in-depth presentation on the topic, including a history of the order and an examination of its restoration (male and, in many cases, female) within different faith traditions.)

The Diaconate—A Brief History

A. Biblical Times

The Church's ministry, modeled after Christ's example, grew out of the needs of the community. In the early Church, the Hellenists complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Apostles realized that they could not attend to both the word of God and serve "tables."¹⁰ According to the account in Acts (Acts 6:1-6), they sought out "seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task."¹¹ This has commonly marked the beginning of a differentiated ministry, and as Mary Truesdell, a Deaconess in the Episcopal Church, states in her article, *The Office of the Deaconess*, "has always been taken by the Church as the embryonic beginning of the office of the deacon."¹²

The first place where we find the word "deacon" used as a title is in Romans. St. Paul writing to the Romans says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon (*diakonon*) of the

¹⁰ In Greek, *trapeza*. Although the word in this passage is usually translated as "table," it can also be translated as "bank." It refers to the function of distributing food (and possibly other supplies) to the poor, elderly, those widowed, etc.

¹¹ Acts 6:3, NRSV.

¹² Truesdell, Mary P., *The Office of the Deaconess*. Accessed via www.philosophy-religion.org/diaconate/chapter_7.htm on 8/12/2004. Ms. Truesdell was ordered a Deaconess in the Episcopal Church in 1919. This article appeared as part of an anthology on the Diaconate in 1967.

church at Cenchreae...”¹³ Although some have argued that this passage only refers to Phoebe as a “helper,” Dr. Kyriaki FitzGerald in her article, “The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess,” cites the works of Origen and Chrysostom to show that patristic tradition upholds Phoebe’s position as a deaconess.¹⁴ (In addition, Phoebe is referenced in the second ordination prayer of the female deacon in the Byzantine Rite.

Master and Lord, You do not reject women who offer themselves, and by divine counsel, to minister as is fitting to your holy houses, but you accept them in the order of ministers. Give the grace of your Holy Spirit to this servant of Yours also, who wishes to offer herself to you, and to accomplish the grace of the diaconate, as You gave the grace of Your diaconate to Phoebe, whom you called to the work of the ministry. ...¹⁵)

B. Early Church

We have evidence of the existence of deaconesses and deacons in the early Church as well. In a secular text, one of the letters from Pliny, Governor of Bithynia, to Trajan (112AD), he asks for guidance on how to handle the Christian sect, writing that he had to place “two women called ‘deaconesses’ under torture.”¹⁶ In addition, we have evidence of the existence of the male and female deacon and a general understanding of the functions of each from early church documents. We know that each was answerable to the bishop. While the male deacons ministered to men, the female deacons ministered to women. Moreover, each also had a liturgical role, although there is disagreement as to their precise functions. This parallelism can be seen in the *Apostolic Constitutions* passage that outlines the character of the deacon,

¹³ Romans 16:1, NRSV.

¹⁴ FitzGerald, Dr. Kyriaki Karidoyanes, “The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess” in *Women and the Priesthood*, Fr. Thomas Hopko, ed. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1983), p. 77-78. Henceforth: FitzGerald, “The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess.”

¹⁵ Original in the *Barberini Codex gr. 336*. Translated by Archimandrite Ephrem (Lash). Accessed via www.anastasis.org.uk/woman_deacon.htm on 8/12/2004.

¹⁶ *Letters of Pliny and Trajan*. Accessed via www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pliny-trajan1.html on 9/05/2004.

Let the deacons be in all things unspotted, as the bishop himself is to be, only more active; ... that they may minister to the infirm.... And let the deaconess be diligent in taking care of the women; but both of them ready to carry messages, to travel about, to minister, and to serve...¹⁷

This reflects an earlier understanding of the functions of the office found in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*.¹⁸ The *Didascalia* contains sections on the character of the deaconess, and her ministry of assisting in the baptism of women and instruction of women converts. In addition, it contains sections for both the deacon and deaconess advising each to care for the people and to work closely with the Bishop.¹⁹

C. Byzantine Period

During the Byzantine period, the diaconal office in the east, especially that of women, flourished. This can be seen by the number of women deacon saints on the liturgical calendar, including Sts. Macrina, the sister of Sts. Gregory and Basil (July 19), Nonna, the wife of St. Gregory of Nazianzus (August 5), Olympias, close friend and confidant of John Chrysostom (July 25), Xenia “the merciful” (Jan 24-5th c.), and Irene of Chrysovalantou (July 28-late 9th/early 10th c.)²⁰ In addition, we have descriptions of the makeup of the clergy serving during the Liturgy at Hagia Sophia which included “forty deaconesses.”²¹

¹⁷ *Apostolic Constitutions*, Chapter III, no. 19.

¹⁸ The *Didascalia Apostolorum* is a later 3rd century-early 4th century document outlining pastoral and Church practice. The eight books of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* were subsequently incorporated into the *Apostolic Constitutions* with some minor variation.

¹⁹ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Chapter 16.

²⁰ Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), pp. 28-56, referencing the *Meterikon*. Henceforth: FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*.

²¹ Gryson, Roger, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. Jean Laporte and Mary Louise Hall, trans., (NY: Liturgical Press, 1980), p. 71 as referenced in Gvosdov, Matushka Ellen, *The Female Diaconate: An Historical Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing, 1991). Henceforth Gvosdov, *The Female Diaconate*.

During this time, the male diaconate in the East also grew in prominence. They held high positions in church governance, including participating in the Ecumenical councils (e.g. Athanasius of Alexandria was a deacon and secretary for his bishop at the Council of Nicaea in 325). They also served as emissaries and ambassadors of the episcopal seat in diplomatic matters. Moreover, they were administrators of church-run homes for the poor and widows, orphanages, and hospitals.²²

Decline of the Order in the East

The order of the female diaconate began to decline sometime after the twelfth century. By this time, there were fewer adult baptisms so female deacons were no longer needed at initiation. In addition, in late Byzantium the rise of influence of Levitical rules, especially those regarding women, led to the perception that the shedding of blood made a woman “unclean” and therefore, unable to enter the sanctuary or participate in the liturgical life of the Church. It should be noted that this is in direct contradiction to the understanding of ‘uncleanness’ found in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*. Chapter 26 of the *Didascalia* admonishes Christians to abandon the rabbinical rules of ‘uncleanness.’

[Are they de-]void of the Holy Spirit.[?] For through baptism they receive the Holy Spirit, who is ever with those that work righteousness, and does **not** [emphasis mine] depart from them by reason of natural issues and the intercourse of marriage, but is ever and always with those who possess Him...²³

It goes on to explicitly state that the Holy Spirit remains with a woman during her monthly period and that giving into Rabbinical taboos and rules opens the way for the *wrong spirit*.²⁴ The *Apostolic Constitutions* extends this emphasis,

²² Touloumes, Deacon Photios, *The Diaconate in the Orthodox Church*. Accessed via hocna.org/orthodox-worship/Diaconate.htm on 9/6/2004. Available on 11/182008 at: <http://orthodoxyinfo.org/Diaconate.htm>.

²³ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Chapter 26.

²⁴ *Ibid*, Chapter 26.

...For neither the lawful mixture [=intercourse], nor childbearing, nor the menstrual purgation, nor nocturnal pollution can defile the nature of a [person], or separate the Holy Spirit from him...but only impiety towards God, and transgression, and injustice towards one's neighbor...²⁵

With the rise of Islam and the subsequent fall of the Eastern part of the Roman empire to the Ottomans, the Church turned inward. It could no longer participate in many of the philanthropic aspects of its ministry. Moreover, many of the traditional duties of the male deacon were being assumed by the priest and by the growing number of those in the so-called “minor orders.” This led to the position of the diaconate being perceived as more of a “transitional” one, on the way to being ordained a presbyter. Although the male deacon retained his role in the liturgical assembly, the office had devolved greatly. Unfortunately, this is what typically remains of the order in the East today.

Modern Renewal of the Office

A. Western Churches

In modern times, the diaconate has experienced a renewal and rejuvenation, most notably (and somewhat ironically) in the Western Christian churches. While this movement is due mostly to the needs of the local churches, it is instructive to us, as Orthodox Christians, to realize that the theological reasoning and justification for a re-institution of the order came from careful study of the Early Church, primarily its expression in the East. In the interests of time, I will only highlight one western faith tradition, the Anglican/Episcopal Church. (I want to emphasize that I am only speaking of the diaconate, and not ordination to the presbytery or episcopacy.)

Example: The Anglican/ Episcopal Church

²⁵ *Apostolic Constitutions*, Chapter VI, no. 27.

As early as the 17th century, the Anglican/Episcopal Church blessed a form of ministry for women that focused on caring for the sick, the poor and needy, women and children. This was the beginning of the reinstatement of the office of the diaconate, a process that spanned over three hundred years. It was a juxtaposition of women filling the various ministerial needs of the Church and a growing understanding of the theological underpinnings of the order.

It wasn't until 1968 that the *ordained, permanent* diaconate in the Episcopal Church, for both women and men, was finally restored. The deaconess was now considered to be within the ranks of the higher clergy, specifically within the diaconate. In addition, the male diaconate was no longer solely a transitional office to the priesthood but, could be a permanent, vocational office. The intention was to restore "the ancient, full, and equal order of ministry based on the call to imitate Christ in service to the poor and the needy."²⁶

In many ways, the years of ministry of the deaconess provided a model for the restoration of the fully ordained, permanent diaconate for men and women. The deacon's duties continue to include serving directly under the bishop and helping to carry out the bishop's ministry. She or he also functions within the ministries of liturgy, word, and charity, particularly the ministries among the poor, sick, and oppressed.²⁷

Since its reinstatement, the number of deacons has nearly doubled. According to Dr. Thomas Ferguson, former faculty member at the Episcopal School for Deacons [who received his ThM from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology], "The current renaissance of the diaconate is part of the church's recovering its own sense of *diakonia*, of being called and sent

²⁶ *Lifting Up the Servants of God: The Deacon, Servant and Ministry and the Future of the Church*. Accessed via www.sfd.edu/LiftingUpServants.html on 11/22/04.

²⁷ *Deacons in the Anglican Churches*. Accessed via www.diakonoi.org/naadinfo.html on 1/12/2005. Henceforth *Deacons in the Anglican Churches*.

into the world to serve.”²⁸ This rejuvenation has been instrumental in helping all baptized Christians within the Episcopal Church to live out their “Baptismal Covenant,” especially as reflected in the last two questions asked at the time of baptism:

- a) Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- b) Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?²⁹

In summary, according to the North American Association for the Diaconate, “The diaconate of the Anglican churches is an historic order, with roots in the ancient church, adapting to the needs of the church and the world in our own age. It is a gift from God for the nurture of God’s people and the proclamation of God’s gospel.”³⁰

Eastern Orthodox Church

Although the diaconate in the Eastern Orthodox Church has remained an active ministry since apostolic times, its scope and function have greatly diminished since the fall of Byzantium. The male diaconate generally functions solely in the liturgical realm and, oftentimes, has become just a transitional stage to ordination to the presbytery. The female diaconate has virtually disappeared. It is my hope that the Church will someday not only restore the ordained female diaconate, but revitalize the office, encouraging women to serve within the community and the

²⁸ Ferguson, Dr. Thomas, *Lifting Up the Servants of God: The Deacon, Servant Ministry, and the Future of the Church*. Accessed via www.sfd.edu/LiftingUpServants.html on 11/22/2004.

²⁹ *Book of Common Prayer* (revised 1979). Accessed via vidicon.dandello.net/bocp on 11/22/04. Henceforth *Book of Common Prayer*.

³⁰ *Deacons in the Anglican Churches*.

Liturgy as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, a noted French Orthodox theologian (of blessed memory), and others have said, in the “context of the culture and present requirements of the day.”³¹

There have been numerous attempts for over one-hundred and fifty years to reinstitute the female diaconate. As early as 1855, the sister of Czar Nicholas I tried to restore the office.³² Other prominent Russians also lobbied for its restoration, including Aleksandr Gumilevsky and Mother Catherine (Countess Efimovskiy). According to numerous sources, in 1905-06, several bishops, archbishops, and metropolitans of the Russian Orthodox Church encouraged the effort. According to a report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women in Agapia in 1976, this issue was to be a major topic at the Council of the Russian Church beginning in 1917, but due to the political turmoil in Russia at the time, the council’s work was not addressed.³³ (It should be noted that other items on the agenda included adopting the use of the vernacular in the liturgical services and the reinstatement of the married episcopacy.)

Other efforts were made in Greece. On Pentecost Sunday in 1911, Archbishop (now, Saint) Nektarios ordained a nun to the diaconate to serve the needs of the monastery. A few years later, Archbishop Chrysostomos of Athens appointed “monastic ‘deaconesses’ who were nuns actually appointed to the subdiaconate.”³⁴

More recently, the issue has been discussed at the international conferences for Orthodox women in Agapia, Romania (1976—at which its restoration was unanimously recommended), Sophia, Bulgaria (1987), Rhodes, Greece (1988), Crete (1990), Damascus, Syria (1996) and Istanbul (1997). Furthermore, in July of 2000, after over a year of careful review of the subject,

³¹ *An Orthodox Diaconate for Women?* Reported in *Sobornost* 23:1 (2001), pp. 60-63.

³² Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate*.

³³ Ibid, referencing Tarasar, Constance J. and Irina Kirillova, eds., *Orthodox Women: Their Role and Participation in the Orthodox Church* (Report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women, Sept. 11-17, 1976, Agapia, Romania) (New York: World Council of Churches Press), p.27.

³⁴ FitzGerald, “The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess,” p. 90 referencing Theodorou, *Cheirotonia*.

a formal letter was sent to the Ecumenical Patriarch by more than a dozen members of the Orthodox community in Paris, including such noted Orthodox theologians as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Fr. Boris Bobrinskoy, Olivier Clément, and Nicolas Lossky. The letter traces the history of the female diaconate and notes that the Patriarch himself has stated that there is “no obstacle in canon law [that] stands in the way of the ordination of women to the diaconate. This institution of the early Church deserves to be revitalized.”³⁵ It also states that the order should “involve more than a simple and archaeological reconstitution of the ancient ministry of the deaconesses ...it is a question of its revitalization, in other words of its realization in the context of the culture and requirements of the present day.”³⁶

What would the deaconess do in the Church today? The question is generally preceded by the acknowledgement that the ancient deaconess assisted in the baptism of women, etc. It is oftentimes assumed that since we no longer have many adult baptisms (infant baptism being the norm) that we no longer need deaconesses. (Although a simplistic analogy, it is interesting that the same question is not asked of the male diaconate. i.e. Since we no longer need ‘table servers’ at the Eucharist, a function of the biblical diaconate, why do we need male deacons?) This issue has been discussed within Orthodox circles as well. According to the report of the Crete consultation (1990), a deacon or deaconess could

lead people in prayer, give spiritual counsel, distribute Holy Communion where possible. [In addition] The renewal of the diaconate for both men and women would meet many of the needs of the Church in a changing world...catechetical work...pastoral relations...serving the same needs for monastic communities without a presbyter ...reading prayers for special occasions, ...performing social work ...pastoral care ...engaging in youth and college ministry ...counseling ...anointing the infirm ...carrying

³⁵ *An Orthodox Diaconate for Women?* Reported in *Sobornost* 23:1 (2001), pp. 60-63.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

out missionary work ...ministering to the sick, ...assisting the bishop or presbyter in the liturgical services....³⁷

The report concludes that a creative restoration of the diaconate for women, could lead in turn to the renewal in the diaconate for men as well.³⁸

Considerations for a Reinstated Female Diaconate.

A) The Liturgical Role of the Female Deacon.

When discussing the reinstatement of the female diaconate, the question of her liturgical role, including her service within the altar area, often arises. (It is my opinion, if this question were settled, we would currently have women deacons in the Orthodox Church.) According to the *First Apology* of Justin the Martyr (~150 AD), the ministry of the deacon was expressed in the liturgical celebration of the gathered Eucharistic assembly,

...reading the gospel, leading the intercessions of the people, receiving the gifts of the people and 'setting the table' for the meal, serving the Eucharistic meal....[Moreover] the social service carried on by the deacons seems to be rooted in the liturgical celebration.³⁹

As we have seen, the link between liturgy and service is crucial not only to the office of the diaconate, but to our understanding of what it means to gather as Church in worship. It is in our service to the other that we are united with them. Our service to the other brings them with us to worship. We are their visible representatives. Although the liturgy enables us to encounter God in a variety of ways and at differing levels, allowing us to experience a "taste of the Kingdom,"

³⁷ *Orthodox Women's Consultation on Church and Culture*, Crete, January 1990. Accessed via <http://members.iinet.net.au/~mmjournal/MA...REPORTS/CRETE%20%Consultation%201990.htm> on 4/28/2003. Available on 11/18/2008 at: <http://members.iinet.net.au/~mmjournal/MaryMartha/CONSULTATIONS%20and%20REPORTS/CRETE%20Consultation%201990.html>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, (London: Anglican Communion Publications, 1996), p. 10 referencing *Apology* of Justin the Martyr.

we must always remember that we are not fully, as yet, in the *eschaton* [end times]. We live in the here and now and are called to draw all closer to God. In my opinion, it is a distortion of the office to have the male deacon serve only during the liturgy, but not within the community, and conversely, to have a future female deacon serve within the community, but not during the liturgy. As Dr. FitzGerald says in her book, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*,

It is important to remember that in the past women deacons did have important responsibilities in the Eucharist assembly as well as in the administration of baptism, in praying with and for those in need, and in bringing Holy Communion to those unable to attend the Eucharist. ... Today, these expressions of ministry can certainly continue. At the same time, we also need to examine how women deacons can participate in the Eucharist and other liturgical services in a manner which is expressive of the living Tradition of the Church and which is not defined by cultural norms of another time.⁴⁰

B) The Need.

But do we really need a rejuvenated diaconate and in particular, a restored female diaconate? To help answer this question, it is instructive to understand the responsibilities of a typical parish priest. Fr. Alexander Garklavs outlined a number of functions expected of today's parish priest in his presentation at the 2004 Pastoral Conference held at St. Tikhon's Monastery in June of 2004. In addition to all the liturgical duties of the priest (Sunday and any daily liturgical services, baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.), he enumerates some of the priest's responsibilities in parish life in America:

Pastoral visitations, educational work, Bible study, adult study, youth work, teen work, working with choirs and choir directors, marriage preparation, marital counseling, visiting shut-ins, grief counseling, [hospital visits], office work, preparing and printing bulletins and schedules, parish mailing, aspects of parish

⁴⁰ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 197.

administration: parish council meetings, budgets, agendas, PR, building committees, sunshine committees, yard work, etc.⁴¹

As far back as 1953, Archbishop Michael of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America realized that there is so much to do in each community that the

endeavors of these priests alone do not suffice. For should the priest wish to know, as he must his spiritual children by name, their problems, and their spiritual and moral needs, this would certainly be beyond his physical and spiritual resources.

These tremendous needs of the Greek Orthodox Church in America has urged us to make a fervent appeal such as this to our daughters-in-Christ, . . . With the future welfare of our Church and membership at heart, we are considering the establishment in this country of an order of deaconess.⁴²

Clearly, a rejuvenated diaconate, a ministry that has service as its primary focus, is necessary in our Church today. No one person can fill all the duties necessary for the building up of the Body of Christ, the Church. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “Each of us has been given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”⁴³ The diaconate is not merely a “stepping stone” to higher orders. It is, as Dr. FitzGerald explains, “a full and parallel order of ordained ministry to which both men and women are called by God.”⁴⁴

C) Is an *ordained* ministry necessary?

It is an unfortunate effect of clericalism that lay participation in our churches varies widely. This is especially true of the participation of women. The range of women’s participation in the life of the Church can vary from diocese to diocese and even from parish to parish within each diocese. Still, many laywomen are already doing diaconal work in our

⁴¹ Garklavs, Rev. Alexander, *The Orthodox Pastor in the 21st century*. Talk presented at the 2004 Pastoral Conference (OCA) at St. Tikhon’s Monastery, South Canaan, PA, June 2-4, 2004. Accessed via www.oca.org.

⁴² FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 154-5.

⁴³ 1 Cor. 12:7, NRSV.

⁴⁴ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 165.

parishes. Is ordination, then, necessary? What does an “ordination” mean? To begin to answer these questions, it is important to remember that we are all called to ministry within the Body of Christ. Each of us is called to minister to others in our daily lives—we are all expected to teach others, especially those in our care; to be able to perform CPR on our neighbor, if necessary, for example. And yet, we set apart certain people to do such tasks on a professional basis. Unlike us, they must be trained in their profession and pass exams before we, as a society, confer a designation on them as “teacher” or “medical professional.” Likewise, throughout history the Church has “set apart” those “consecrated for service.” There are theological reasons for blessing someone in ministry.

[First,] Those who are set aside for ministry have the authority of the Church but they are also integrated into and accountable to the Church. [There are no “loose wheels.” This is a reciprocal relationship. The Church is also accountable to them by providing support and preparation for carrying out diaconal ministries in its name.]

[Second,] Setting aside a person by the Church is a way to affirm the fact that we, as a Church, are members of one another [and Third,] We believe that it is by the grace of the Holy Spirit that spiritual and pastoral gifts are enlivened.⁴⁵

Moreover, an ordination by the bishop who is the guarantor of the unity of the faith, is *universal in scope*. The authority of the bishop is rooted in Jesus Christ and it is Christ who confers it by the Holy Spirit through the act of ordination.⁴⁶ As Dr. FitzGerald acknowledges, “Ordination is not a right or a possession of anyone. Rather, it is a profound acknowledgement, by the Church, of God’s action in the life of a particular person who is called to serve Him and

⁴⁵ Sarah Byrne, “Orthodox Chaplaincy: Reflections and Recommendations” in *The St. Nina Quarterly* forthcoming.

⁴⁶ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order paper, No. 11 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), p. 22.

His Church in a distinctive and public manner.”⁴⁷ It is an action that is beyond temporality, connecting us with those that have gone before us and those that have yet to live. It is a connection to the Church—past, present, and future.

Meeting the Orthodox Deaconess in the 21st century

The Church is blessed to have a number of laywomen working in diaconal roles already, including pastoral assistants, chaplains, ecclesiarchs, and monastics. Through conversations and reflection, I have collected some of their experiences. I would like to now share them with you now. (Most of the reflections below are verbatim accounts of their experiences. In some cases, I have contextualized their comments for clarity.)

Reflections of a Chaplain

The first time I was scheduled to serve over night as an on-call chaplain, I received a page at 5 am. I groggily called the Intensive Care Unit, and spoke to a nurse who requested that I visit an anxious, weeping patient who would be undergoing surgery later that morning. I was told that the patient, “Andrew” was Orthodox Jewish. The nurse said that Andrea had a tracheotomy, and therefore could not speak. I entered the small ICU, which was silent but for the beeping ventilator and monitors. I introduced myself to Andrew, a 50-year old man with a scraggly beard and dark eyes. I told him that I would be happy to sit with him in this time of anxiety, and pray with him if he desired. “I understand you are Jewish,” I said, thinking that I might try to locate his rabbi if he had specific religious needs. He shook his head, and began awkwardly attempting to cross himself in an Orthodox manner. “Oh!”, I said, “You’re Orthodox!” Apparently, he had been misunderstood. “Actually, so am I!”, I said. His eyes registered surprise and joy, and he began crying calmer, gentler tears. He took a pad and wrote in large, shaky letters, “I am Orthodox. I am scared.” I put my hand on his shoulder and consoled him, and after a short conversation (via the notepad) about his surgery and his fears, I offered to pray for him. I taped an icon of the Resurrection on the wall across from his bed, and standing beside him, chanted the Trisagion prayers and a Psalm. Andrew became visibly calmer; a sense of peace came over his face. He left for surgery, trusting in God’s protection. I did not see Andrew again, but I believe that God led me to him on that early morning, to ease his fears and to refocus his heart on God’s loving presence in a time of suffering.

[Now, how much more complete would this story have been if the “deaconess” could have brought communion to the afflicted and ailing?]

⁴⁷ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 184.

Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant

It is Pentecost and I am to give my sermon. I am nervous but excited to be speaking about the Descent of the Holy Spirit! When I preach or teach, I know I am doing what I love, doing what I am called to do. I get to use my passions and gifts in a way that benefits the community I love.

[There seems to be no better ministry than to be able to use one's gifts (on a *universal* basis) for the community that one loves.]

Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant

I am tired. I have just finished a long day at work and am drained. I have to lead the adult Bible Study tonight. I go to the chapel to collect my thoughts. We are reading and studying a passage from Matthew today. I ask God to give me the words. I read the passage slowly aloud. During the bible study, I am surprised at the profoundness of the words that come out of my mouth. I am energized and enlivened as are those around me. It is getting late so we wrap it up. I am totally exhausted when I get home but filled with the Spirit.

[As a "deaconess" she could read and preach not just for the small group in the Bible Study, but for all in the liturgical assembly.]

Reflections of an Ecclesiarch

I am directing students in the preparation of the chapel. We are approaching Holy Week. I need to be aware of all the liturgical order of the services, the rubrics, the chanting... I put on my robe in the vestry and notice how the bishop is getting dressed, something I have never seen before. I explain part of the *Proscomidia* service to a young seminarian. I have always enjoyed the teaching part of this job. At first, some of the guys were "a little leary" of a woman doing this job. After all, I am not only a woman, but a convert. But, it has been a transformative process for all of us. Now, when challenged, they come to my defense, "of course she should do it, she knows what she is doing."

[It is important in our ministry as "deaconesses" to not only earn the authority, but have others recognize it.]

Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant.

I am helping Father with the Bridegroom services during Holy Week. At this particular service none of the altar servers are available. Father quickly motions for me to go into the altar and get one of the candles for the procession. I don't know whether I wanted to be an altar server growing up or not. Now, here I was carrying the candle in the procession. Such a simple thing... Somehow, I knew exactly what to do. It was a great honor. To be able to serve and be more fully integrated into the worship service gave me a connection to the liturgy of the Church in a way that I had never experienced before. Everyone should have the opportunity to experience the liturgy this way.

[Perhaps, our daughters will get that opportunity. I remember that my sister wanted to be an altar server when she younger. They said that only boys could do it because they could be priests one day. But, if altar service led to the priesthood then our seminaries would be full of those boys. However, they are not. As a seminary student, I was always amazed at the things they know about the service of which I had no idea. I certainly missed a great catechetical opportunity. They say that anyone who has business “back there” and has the blessing to do so can serve and that there is no reason why girls can’t and yet they don’t allow us. I have spent many years frustrated by the policy. I remember my younger brother and how proud he was to serve at the altar. I also remember other boys who could care less but felt entitled to their service. We are all called to build up the Body of Christ. Is the Church utilizing all of the talents of its members to do so?

Altar service is an important but misused service in the Church. Women serve in women’s monasteries. And prior to the fall of communism, women served almost ubiquitously within the altar area in Russia. In addition, there are young women who serve in isolated parishes in England and in the US. Would ordaining women to the diaconate and allowing women and girls to serve within the altar area allow for a more authentic form of altar service?]

Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant.

Father always said that no one person can meet all the spiritual needs of the congregation. Lately, he has asked me to hear confessions. Although, I am trained in pastoral care, I am nervous as this is such an awesome responsibility...

[I remember reading that Paul Meyendorff (Professor of Liturgical Theology, St. Vladimir’s Seminary) as a young child in France, would be taken to the monastery by his mother to go to confession with one of the nuns. It was only after he had been properly counseled that he would then approach the priest for absolution.⁴⁸ This is an example of carrying on that tradition within the parish context. However, it is important that deaconesses and those giving spiritual counsel be trained to do so. In addition, by setting her aside to minister in this capacity, the deaconess is accountable to the Church.]

The diaconate most closely manifests our ministry to the world. It helps us bring all of creation into unity with God. Unfortunately, our lives are often fragmented. We are disconnected from those around us. A revitalized diaconate can help bridge this gap. He or she can “interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes for the world.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Meyendorff, Paul, “Penance in the Orthodox Church Today,” *Studia Liturgica* 18 (1988), p. 105.

⁴⁹ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 543.

Moreover, the Church in America faces a great many challenges in order to minister to the needs of Her faithful. Certainly, a rejuvenated diaconate—a ministry dedicated to service—for and by both men and women can, in the words of Dr. FitzGerald, “bear witness to Christ the Servant as well as facilitate a creative and salutary response by the Church to so many of the spiritual challenges which face us today.”⁵⁰

The Liturgy gives us a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. But it should also make us *restless*, as we realize how far we are from that ideal for most of our life. We need to recognize our faults and limitations and move beyond them, striving to do the will of God “on earth as it is in heaven.” A community whose members are hurt is deformed. We need to be the Church, a therapeutic, healing community. It is then that we can experience the love of God more fully in this world as in the next.

Thank you.

⁵⁰ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 195.