

WOMEN & DIACONAL MINISTRY IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH:

Past, Present & Future / December 6, 2014

Parish Administration & Philanthropic Outreach

by AnnMarie Mecera

I speak to you today primarily from my experiences in a leadership role in my parish for nearly 20 years. In that time, I also served the church on both diocesan and national levels. The parish I have attended since 1986 is located in the state capital. It is near a major university with 50,000 students. The parish is vibrant and alive with children, young adults, the middle-aged and elderly. The parish attracts converts who bring their friends, who then become converts. A thriving outreach program has been established and operated for about a decade in our urban, low socio-economic neighborhood. This philanthropic program has been life-changing—not just to the neighborhood, but to those of us who chose to feed the poor, hungry and infirm face to face.

In the 80's, however, my parish was still in mission status and my parish priest was a full-time teacher. He needed administrative and pastoral help, but more importantly, he WANTED help; he understood the gifts that could be found in sharing his ministry. I was a young mother at that time, having just turned 30. Father asked me to be the parish council president. I agreed. That single event catapulted both our parish and me into territories we never had been before nor anticipated.

For the past several weeks now, I have considered how my ministry could have made a difference if I had been an ordained deaconess—a position, by the way, that does not and should not lead to the priesthood in any way. Here is what my experience has taught me:

- An ordained person brings theologically sound proposals, thinking and discussion to planning, administration and implementation in the parish. When that is coupled with feminine gifts, there is an order and balance that allows God to work fully.
- The ordained female can address certain needs and issues affecting women and children in a way that an ordained male cannot--simply by virtue of gender. God gave us differing gifts that we see exemplified in families. The parish is a family, also, requiring the differing gifts of both male AND female.

- With a formal theological education, the deaconess possesses some formal authority to collaborate with the hierarch/priest and even to make some decisions on her own.
- An ordained female would help address the practical issues of parish education, communications, choir music, management and preparation of the liturgical cycle.
- She would help with finances and outreach.
- With her theological training, she would approach these countless tasks with right thinking—without the need for hand-holding by the priest in every instance.

Thirteen different duties of the deaconess can be identified. Found in two main sources: *The Study of Liturgy*, Oxford, 1978 and *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West*, 1990, these tasks include administration, supervision at Liturgy, taking charge of properties, reporting to the Bishop, providing pastoral care to women, sheltering guests, and more.

Now let us consider the philanthropic opportunities a deaconess provides.

I mentioned earlier that our parish implemented a rather unique neighborhood outreach program. We are deliberately located near The Ohio State University campus for the purpose of serving Orthodox students there. Our neighborhood however, is made up of many low-income households. In the early years, men and women would come to our door asking for assistance. Inexperienced and torn by what felt comfortable to us and our fundamental Christian understanding of helping the poor, we stumbled, we made mistakes, we frightened parishioners away who did not want to come in contact with those with mental illnesses and addictions. Our priest's wife was held up at gunpoint. These were tough times. Father and I spent countless hours talking about what we could do. What SHOULD we do. How do we keep people from leaving. How do we oppose those who wanted to move the church to a 'safer' neighborhood?

We were steadfast. Someone from the parish came forward with the absolute characteristics needed to face a very different culture head on. He knew boundaries. He knew that a mere handout would do no one any good. That was the beginning of a neighborhood outreach program that has evolved to offer several meals a week, teaching skills and responsibility, raising self-esteem, and loving interaction between the neighborhood folks and parishioners. On Holy Saturday, it is the

neighborhood people—those afflicted with demons and addictions—who stand guard in the streets for us as we process with our Lord’s body.

Can you imagine the impact a deaconess could have in this particular situation—not to mention those opportunities in your neighborhood regardless of where it is located--in ministering to the mothers, children and families of these neighborhoods?

In her paper *The Benevolent Tradition: The Charity of Women*, Karen Halvorsen states this:

“Through sacrifice, mercy, and charity, women down through church history may have given us our greatest examples of love demonstrated and proven through selfless giving and service to others.”

Scripture is full of examples of women as bearers of philanthropic outreach and charitable giving. Philanthropy is at the heart of the Christian faith, and women, with their God-given nature to be sensitive to the needs of others, can help philanthropy spread to the nooks and crannies where it is so desperately needed.

Halvorsen also says: “Two of the five basic offices established in Acts and the Epistles were made up of women: “widows and deaconesses.” Both were ministries of charitable service. Leadership was maintained through service. Paul describes Phoebe, a deaconess in the church at Cenchreae, (SEHN-kree-ay) as a *prostatis*. She was a female guardian, a protector. In its technical usage this term referred to a legal representative of strangers who were deprived of civil rights, or to a patron. Phoebe, “a helper of many and of me [Paul] as well,” (Rom. 16:22) apparently provided financial aid, and possibly legal assistance.”

John Chryssavgis speaks about the deacon and deaconess sharing the same duties in his book titled *Remembering and Reclaiming the Diakonia*

"Throughout the present study, the deliberate focus is on the development of the ordained male diaconate in the early Church and contemporary practice. However, all that is said about the role and function of male deacons is largely applicable also to female deacons. Indeed. Indeed in scriptural and patristic literature alike, the Greek word *diaconos* can denote either a male or a female deacon."

In essence, what the male deacon did for the men, the female deacon did for women.

What then does an ordained role bring to us? **1. accountability** and **2. order.**

Accountability. There IS a difference when someone is ORDAINED. Think about the difference between your parish priest and a lay person visiting you in the hospital. That lay person may be the most pious person in your parish. The difference is that **ordination leads to a greater and far different level of obedience and accountability.**

As for order, the presence of women in the administration of the Church is currently absent. The current administration of the Church does not reflect what I believe is the full intention of Christ—when he spoke to the Samaritan woman; when he healed the woman’s flow of blood; when he began his ministry sooner than He intended because His mother *asked*; when the myrrh-bearing women were the *first to hear of Christ’s resurrection and ran to tell the apostles.*

But let’s not stop there. The ordained role allows us to officially recognize and put to work the gifts and talents of ALL God’s people.

Why would we ignore 50% of the talents and gifts God gives to His people by not setting them aside with ordination so they can fully minister in an accountable and credible manner?

Surely women are carrying out God’s work as lay ministers, and should continue to do so. We are ALL called to be ministers of course. But how could an ordained deaconess make a difference in the life of a parish?

The presence of women in the administration of the Church on an ordained level reflects Christ’s intentions for His Church.

I use my own experiences to illustrate how ordination can make a difference in the administration of a parish. As a deaconess charged with parish administration, I could have used my God-given feminine talents and gifts to help my parish priest in the administration of the church in a much more theologically-based manner. I would have had the theological background and blessing of ordination that would have helped me with decisions, planning and executing on an administration level.

For the women and men I came into contact with or ministered to, their perceptions of me would be different. They would have known that I worked through the bishop’s blessing; that I possessed a theological understanding in which I used to carry out the administrative duties of the parish and complement the parish priest. There would not be the temptation to divide the parish into the ‘business’ side and the ‘theological’ side.

I would help the priest by visiting the sick women and children of our parish, teaching the Faith, providing counsel to the new parent, the new wife, the struggling wife, the overwhelmed mother, the burned-out caregiver, the dying. Parishioners would know I would protect their privacy and minister to them in confidentiality.

I would be able to help prepare catechumens and newcomers with classes and instruction.

I could assist with baptisms by meeting with parents and godparents, counseling, even participating in part of the baptismal service.

I could minister to the families, mothers and children of our parish neighborhood.

I am convinced, after 20 years of serving in an administrative role for my beloved Church, that a deaconess can provide much needed service to the parish priest, the women and children of the parish, its surrounding community, and the Church itself. She can offer the gifts and talents given to her by God to use for His Glory and for His people. She reflects the fullness of the Church as Christ intended. She brings order, obedience and accountability to the community. She is the Theotokos, the Samaritan woman, the woman with the flow of blood, the Myrrhbearing women—and St. Phoebe.

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