

**RECLAIMING THE TRADITION OF THE CHURCH**  
**Reviving the Diaconate in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America**

**INTRODUCTION**

In 2007, the Synod of Bishops of the GOA instituted a program for the training of candidates for ordination to the (permanent) diaconate following more than a decade of dialogue about this possibility within the Synod – this program had been one of the dreams of the late Metropolitan Anthony (Gergiannakis) of San Francisco (1935-2004) who had been holding “Deacon Candidates Retreats” at the St. Nicholas Ranch and Retreat Center as early as 2001 - and with the Archdiocesan Presbyters Council (APC), the representative body of priests that was originally established in 1970 to be – among other things – an advisory body to the Archbishop. (This is no longer a part of their mission.)

The essential requirements for entry into this program include a minimal education requirement of a BA or its equivalent; a thorough background check; the consent of one’s wife; the approval of one’s parish priest; and finally, the blessing of the local metropolitan. Once admitted, the program established by the Synod entails a three-component approach to training a candidate in preparation for *possible* – and stress must be placed on the word *possible* – ordination to the diaconate. Candidates admitted to the program must agree to complete all of the following:

- 1.) attend three annually offered two week long summer sessions at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology where candidates are instructed in the basics of Orthodox theology, the study of Scripture, Church history, liturgics, etc. Dr. Jim Skedros, the recently appointed dean of Holy Cross, has served as the director of the seminary component since the program’s inception. Upon the completion of this component, candidates receive a certificate of studies.
- 2.) further training in one’s home parish with one’s pastor who serves as a clergy mentor throughout the rest of the year, providing further training in chanting, rubrics and pastoral visitation; and
- 3.) attendance at Metropolis retreats/cluster groups for the training of candidates for the diaconate as determined by the local metropolitan during their three year training period.
- 4.) At the conclusion of their three-year study and training process, candidates must undergo psychological testing.

If the psychological assessment results indicate no major stumbling blocks to ordination, then the candidate – with the blessing of his local metropolitan – applies to the Archdiocese for ordination. The candidate’s approval for ordination is presented to the Synod by the chancellor of the Archdiocese and is ultimately a decision taken by the Synod as a whole – as with all ordinations throughout the GOA.

Since its establishment in 2007, 30 men have completed the program and been ordained as deacons, with at least one such ordination in every Metropolis of the GOA, including the Archdiocesan District under Archbishop Demetrios. The

Metropolis of Atlanta, under Metropolitan Alexios, leads the way with 8 such ordinations; the Metropolis of San Francisco - where I have been asked to coordinate the program as part of the Metropolis of San Francisco Strategic Plan - and the Metropolis of New Jersey have each ordained one. Among the men ordained have been a hospital administrator, an engineer, a program analyst for the Department of Defense, an accountant, a computer programmer and a social worker; several are the sons of GOA clergy. All, I believe, are united by their desire to serve the Church – and as men with families engaged in full-time secular work, their ministry in the Church is done on a volunteer basis

### ***ISSUES, DIFFICULTIES, QUESTIONS***

One of the initial hurdles in getting the program off the ground was simply publicity. Although word went out to all of the Metropolises and parish clergy received e-mails from their metropolitans and/or chancellors at the local level, it all too often seemed as if few clergy had heard of the program. In 2008, while president of the APC, I received an e-mail from a fellow priest on the APC - where the Archdiocesan program had been thoroughly discussed at our meetings – and the chancellor of his Metropolis had informed him that he had never even heard of the program! As a result there were only 4 students in the first summer session at HC/HC.

One of the things done to remedy this in 2009 – during my time of service as president of the Archdiocesan Presbyters Council – was the mailing of a complimentary copy of Archdeacon John Chryssavgis' *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia: The Diaconate Yesterday and Today* (HC/HC Press) to every Greek Orthodox priest in the Archdiocese under the auspices of the APC in order to promote the program. In the letter written to accompany the book, I tried to make two important points: **First**, that “the diaconate, as an ordination, is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church and has always been, from earliest times, one of the fundamental ministries *constituting* the Eucharistic community” and that “the diaconate is not merely a stepping stone to the priesthood but a ministry with its own *taxis* that the Father often connected to Christ Himself.” Therefore “to be faithful to the Church’s scriptural, liturgical and canonical Tradition *requires* us to be a Church in which a properly trained diaconate is flourishing.” I did not think I had said anything theologically controversial. All of you sitting here today may not believe I said anything theologically controversial – but, as I soon discovered, I was wrong.

A number of priests – at least in the GOA - do in fact question the need for a revival of the diaconate; after all, the priest can do everything the deacon does liturgically. Why then are deacons needed? Aren’t deacons liturgically redundant? As has already been discussed here today, the diaconate cannot and should not be reduced to only a liturgical role, a kind of “butler at God’s table” as Aidan Kavanagh, the Roman Catholic liturgical scholar, once remarked. *Diakonia* is broader and deeper than that. But this brings us to an important point: what, concretely, can we say is the “job description” for the diaconate in the local parish? We need to articulate clearly and convincingly how the ministries of the local parish can and will be

enhanced by the revival of the diaconate. I would submit to you that this hasn't been worked through yet in the minds of far too many of our people – including our bishops.

**Second**, and equally as important, I tried to point out the responsibility of the parish priest, as the local pastor who is “on the front lines of parish life,” in “discerning who in (his) community may have an authentic vocation and be a suitable candidate for this important ministry.” Not everyone who presents himself for ordination is a suitable candidate for the diaconate – or, for that matter, ordination to any ministry in the Church. A person's vocation to the diaconate must be validated by the parish priest who will in turn ultimately be the one recommending him to the metropolitan as a potential candidate for the program and serve as his mentor. Unfortunately, it is a simple fact that there are priests who find themselves incapable of saying no to someone who presents himself as a candidate for the program. After all, how bad can he be if he wants to serve the Church? But there are men who present themselves and are not suitable candidates. I will say – without going into too much detail – that this has happened to me and I did in fact say no to one gentleman. So, he left the parish I serve and went to another GOA parish nearby. When that priest was able to discern that this individual was not an appropriate candidate for the program, he moved on to a nearby Antiochian parish. What the outcome of all this will be remains to be seen. Here it needs to be made clear that, in my opinion, the fundamental qualities necessary for ordination are psychological stability, a certain spiritual maturity, a sound Christian moral character found in a person's family, work and social life and a deep desire to serve Christ in the Body of His Church. Where these qualities are absent, there is no foundation upon which to build.

### ***IN THE METROPOLIS OF SAN FRANCISCO***

One of the stated goals of the Strategic Plan for the Metropolis of San Francisco is “to ordain at least one deacon to serve in every parish with 250+ stewards.” This is quite a goal! Metropolitan Gerasimos asked that I serve as the coordinator for our Metropolis of the Archdiocesan Program for the Diaconate. Currently, there is one graduate of the program that has been ordained a deacon – Deacon Daniel Cunningham – and he now serves with me at St. Paul's in Irvine, CA. A second well-qualified candidate at Holy Trinity Church in San Francisco has completed his second year of the Holy Cross component and I believe is well on his way. Four further communities have requested the consideration of possible candidates: Sacramento, Fresno and Camarillo, CA; and Tucson, AZ.

However, all of this is not to say that everything has always gone swimmingly well. Metropolitan Gerasimos, although in charge of the program for the Synod, has made it publicly clear on several occasions that he has “reservations” about the program. A number of clergy have also made it abundantly clear that they in no way support the program and do not believe the diaconate needs to be revived at all. At a clergy meeting this past spring, when I was asked by the Metropolitan to speak to the assembled clergy about the program, two concerns were expressed: a number of clergy feared that this was a way for men to ultimately be ordained as priests and

bypass the four years of seminary education currently required for candidates seeking to serve as priests in the GOA; others wanted to know what would happen if a priest is reassigned and a new priest comes to serve a community with a “pre-existing deacon” and the two clash or do not get along. To the first question the answer was easy: all of the candidates for ordination to the diaconate who complete this program have signed, as part of their entry into the program, a document stating that, in accordance with the guidelines set down by the Synod, they are aware they will never be ordained as priests without completing the full four year program at Holy Cross; nor will they ever seek such a possibility. The second question was put a little more personally: “So, Steve – let’s say you die, or you’re moved by the bishop to some other community and I’m assigned to St. Paul’s. What if Deacon Cunningham and I don’t get along?” To which I could only respond: “Deacon Cunningham is so humble, so gracious and so kind that if there was a problem between the two of you it would be your problem and not his.” (Of course, this issue of people “not getting along” is not unique to a “pre-existing” deacon. Any priest entering a new assignment must deal with a pre-existing parish council, chanter, choir director, office staff – the list goes on and on – and must navigate all of these “pre-existing” patterns of parish relationships with discernment, pastoral sensitivity, wisdom and compassion.) In essence, the underlying issues seem to me to be more about the insecurity of some clergy rather than any theologically grounded objections.

### ***THE EXPERIENCE OF ST. PAUL’S IN IRVINE, CA***

The parish of St. Paul’s in Irvine, CA is blessed to have Deacon Daniel Cunningham, the first graduate of the Archdiocesan Program for the Diaconate from the Metropolis of San Francisco, ordained as a deacon by Metropolitan Gerasimos. After three years, I can only say that my experiences as the local parish priest – as well as those of the entire parish community – have been overwhelmingly positive. Having been a Sunday school teacher, a member of the parish council, the coordinator of our program for preparing *prosphoro* and much else, Deacon Daniel had an intimate knowledge of many facets of the parish’s life before his ordination. Now Deacon Daniel brings an added dimension to the liturgical and sacramental life of the parish, assisting in distributing Holy Communion on Sundays, visiting shut-ins on a regular basis to provide the sacrament of anointing for healing as well as communion, and making occasional hospital visits. He is an active participant in youth programs where I believe he serves as a positive role model, especially for boys. I also think it’s good for the entire parish to see that one of their own can be chosen and called up out of parish life, trained and then blessed to serve God in an ordained capacity. There have been no drawbacks whatsoever and the life and ministries of the parish have been enhanced in numerous ways.

### ***SO –WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF ALL THIS FOR THE TOPIC OF THIS CONFERENCE?***

What are the implications of the revival of the male diaconate in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese for the retrieval and revival of the female diaconate? Obviously some of

the same requirements would still be in order: the basic qualities of personal stability and spiritual maturity, a desire to serve, educational requirements that would include a minimal degree level and a period of preparation and training for the possibility of ordination, psychological testing, the support of one's husband, the approval of one's parish priest and the blessings of one's spiritual father and the local metropolitan.

However, I believe that many among our bishops and clergy would see the revival of a female diaconate as a completely different question than the revival of the diaconate for men. Here we must begin the attempt to change our "human, all-too-human" culture as a Church and meet emotional reactions with sound theology and historical research. We must broaden our understanding of *diakonia* in order to develop a concrete "job description" for the revival of the female diaconate - much of which has already been spoken about today and will be discussed further by Teva in a few moments.



One thing that must change now at the parish level in preparation for the possibility of a female diaconate is that women need to be given positions of leadership and ministry by their priest - in a very public way - to show his support of the gifts women can and do bring to the table. Here I can only speak about St. Paul's where women do serve as chanters and readers - we have one woman, Eve Tibbs, who was tonsured as a reader by the late Metropolitan Anthony - as well as homilists (my cousin, Valerie Karras has served as the homilist at St. Paul's on a number of occasions, including an ecumenical service of prayer for Christian unity that included the local Roman Catholic bishop as well as for the feast day Vespers and Liturgy of the parish) and

teachers of the faith - to adults, not just Sunday School children. Eve Tibbs, whom I mentioned a moment ago, received her Ph.D. in systematic theology from Fuller Seminary and now teaches a weekly women's Bible study and a weekly "Introduction to Orthodox Theology" class. Another woman - Dorothea Love - teaches a weekly class called the Women's Study Fellowship that focuses on Orthodox spirituality as a lived experience of prayer and spiritual discipline. Recently, another woman, Michelle Mylonas, was blessed to serve as a spiritual care volunteer in the chaplain's department of the University of California, Irvine Hospital and Medical Center. Because I believe all such ministry must flow from the Eucharistic life of the parish, I prayed over Michelle at the conclusion of Liturgy one Sunday - a very public blessing of her new ministry. Other ministries, such as feeding the homeless at two different shelters each month, are led and coordinated by several women in the parish. While young girls may not serve on the altar with their male counterparts in the GOA, at St. Paul's they serve with the ushers on Sunday mornings as "ushers-in-training," are recruited to sing in the choir and of

course, during Holy Week serve as bridesmaids and on *Pascha* night as myrrh-bearers, receiving the light of the Paschal candle first, before anyone else, and then spreading that light throughout the congregation. Several years ago, St. Paul's hosted the first ever – at least, in the Metropolis of San Francisco – retreat just for teen-age girls, flying in Dr. Albert Rossi from SVS to talk about relationships, sexuality, marriage, etc. Obviously, much more can and should be done. But I'll leave that to Teva, as I have far exceeded my allotted time. Thank you!

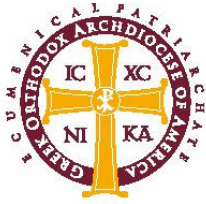
#### A PRAYER OF BLESSING TO BEGIN A HOSPITAL VISITATION/SPIRITUAL CARE MINISTRY

*Blessed are You, O Lord Jesus Christ our God, for You are the King of kings and the Lord of lords. You were crucified for the forgiveness of our sins and it is by Your wounds that we are healed. You rose from the dead that we might have eternal life among the saints in Your Kingdom.*

*Lord Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer, we beg You: send Your Holy Spirit upon this, Your servant Michelle, that she may become a fountain of mercy and healing for all those who are sick and suffering. As You came to serve and not to be served, so grant that she might serve Your people and all people as an instrument of Your grace. As she was clothed with You at baptism, so clothe her now with compassion, kindness, meekness and love that she might be a sign of Your grace, mercy and peace to all those whom she will encounter.*

*For You, O Christ our God, are the Physician of our souls and bodies, and to You do we offer up glory, honor and worship, together with Your Father who is without beginning and Your all-holy, good and life-creating Spirit, always now and forever and to the ages of Ages. AMEN!*





# GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA

## The Archdiocesan Presbyters Council

July 14, 2009  
St. Joseph the Confessor

### A.P.C. 2008-2010

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To the Clergy of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

My brothers:

The diaconate, as an office and a ministry, is rooted in the very nature of the Church herself, precisely as *servant*. The diaconate, as an *ordination*, is a *gift* of the Holy Spirit to the Church and has always been, from earliest times, one of the fundamental ministries *constituting* the Eucharistic community. The diaconate is not merely a stepping-stone to the priesthood but a ministry with its own *taxis* that the Fathers often connected to Christ Himself. To be faithful to the Church's scriptural, liturgical and canonical Tradition requires us to be a Church in which a properly trained diaconate is flourishing.

In the summer of 2007, under the auspices and with the blessings of His Eminence, Archbishop Demetrios of America and the entire Holy Eparchial Synod of our Archdiocese, a new educational and formational initiative began on the campus of Holy Cross in Brookline designed to train men for service to the Church as deacons. To learn more about this new program and its requirements, please go to the Holy Cross website at: <http://www.hchc.edu/holycross/academics/PDP.html>

Enclosed, please find a complimentary copy of *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia: The Diaconate Yesterday and Today* by Deacon John Chryssavgis. This book, just published by HCOP, is being made available to you in order to provide an overview of the theology and history of the diaconate in the life of the Church. As you are on the front lines of parish life, it will be you, in conjunction with your Metropolitan, who will be responsible for discerning who in your community may have an authentic vocation and be a suitable candidate for this important ministry.

May God grant you a restful and spiritually refreshing summer!

Αδελφικῶς,

The Rev. Steven Tsichlis  
President, Archdiocesan Presbyters Council



# GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS OF SAN FRANCISCO

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## ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΦΡΑΓΚΙΣΚΟΥ

TO: Reverend Clergy of the Metropolis of San Francisco

RE: Archdiocesan Program for the Diaconate and the Metropolis Strategic Plan

DATE: April 2, 2014

***“Let them first be tested and then, if they prove themselves blameless,  
let them serve as deacons.”***

***- 1Timothy 3:10***

Brothers,

As most of you know, His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos has asked that I serve as the coordinator of the Archdiocesan Program for the Diaconate for our Metropolis. This program was established in 2007 with the blessings of His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios and the Holy Eparchial Synod of our Archdiocese. Men who have completed this program have now been ordained and are serving in parishes within the Archdiocesan District and the Metropolises of Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, Detroit, New Jersey and San Francisco.

As His Eminence Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon has noted, the diaconate as a ministry is rooted in the very nature of the Church as servant. Ordination to the diaconate is a gift of the Holy Spirit and is one of the fundamental ministries constituting the Eucharistic community. The diaconate is not merely a stepping-stone to the priesthood but a ministry with its own *taxís* that the Fathers often connected to Christ Himself. Understanding the important role a Deacon has in the life of the Church, the Metropolis Strategic Plan includes a Task Force dedicated to Liturgical Life, with one of its objectives being the development of guidelines for a Diaconate program for our Metropolis.

As you are on the front lines of parish life, it will be you – *always* in conjunction with His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos – who will have a key role in identifying and discerning who in your community may have an authentic vocation to serve the Church as a deacon and be a suitable candidate for this important ministry. The best credentials a candidate can bring to the diaconate are the qualities of stability and sound moral character to be found in his life as a Christian believer; and as an assistant to the priest both liturgically and in ministry, a sense of obedience to him as the presbyter and pastor of the local parish.

In the summer of 2007 – again with the blessings of His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios of America and the Holy Eparchial Synod of our Archdiocese – a new educational and formational initiative began on the campus of Holy Cross in Brookline designed to train men for service to the Church as deacons. To learn more about this program and its requirements, please go to the HC/HC website at: [http://www.hchc.edu/academics/diaconate\\_program/](http://www.hchc.edu/academics/diaconate_program/)

As you can see from this webpage, this is minimally a three-year program with a four-part structure that involves summertime studies at Holy Cross; a clergy mentorship program at the



parish level that you must be prepared to engage in; training and support at the Metropolis level with cluster groups and/or annual retreats that will be organized by the Metropolis; and beyond all of this, continuing education, which will be also organized by the Metropolis and local clergy mentors. All of this will be done in order to implement the Strategic Plan of our Metropolis as it pertains to Liturgical Life.

To enter the program requires the candidate to have a bachelor's degree or its equivalent, as well as both a criminal offender CORI check and a sexual offender SORI check. It also requires psychological testing. Needless to say, the candidate's wife must be **fully** supportive of her husband's call to ministry.

**However, before beginning the application process to this program, the following requirements of His Eminence, Metropolitan Gerasimos and the Metropolis of San Francisco must be met:**

- 1.) **First**, a letter to His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos from you as the priest and pastor of the local parish endorsing the potential candidate, stating why you believe your parish requires the ministry of a deacon and what ministries an ordained deacon would serve in your community.
- 2.) His Eminence must meet with both you and the candidate to determine his suitability before he will write the letter of recommendation that is a requirement for entry into the HC/HC program.
- 3.) **All** applications for the program at HC/HC must **first** be sent to His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos for review **before** anything is sent to HC/HC; a copy should also be mailed to me.
- 4.) It must be clearly understood up front that completion of the program does **not** guarantee ordination and that if a candidate completes the process and is ordained as a deacon, it is possible that he may, at the discretion of His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos, be assigned to another parish depending on the larger needs of the Metropolis.

Hopefully, the above guidelines, together with the information found on the HC/HC website, are clear. If you have any questions, or if I can be of any further assistance to you, please do not hesitate to contact me.

*Αδελφικώς,*

*Steve*

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## **A GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT TO SERVE: The Program for Deacons is Growing (September, 2009)**

Have you ever wondered how your priest does it? Conducts services, wipes tears, dances at weddings, visits the sick, teaches, fundraises, blesses houses, soothes broken hearts, mediates and administrates? The truth is we expect all this from our priests in addition to Christ-like perfection and example. Quite a job description! However, the Church never intended everything to fall on his shoulders alone. The Orthodox tradition of ordained ministry has always had a threefold pattern: deacon, priest and bishop. In fact the diaconate is vital if the ordained ministry of the Church is to be fully expressed in all of its potential. So why are there so few deacons in the Greek Orthodox Church today? Why aren't deacons serving in every parish? According to Rev. Dr. Thomas FitzGerald, Dean of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, "Expectations are high for our priests. We focus on them and have forgotten that the diaconate is also a way of responding to the ministerial needs of the community."

### **The Diaconate: A Little-known Ministry**

More deacons will be among us soon. The 32 students who attended classes this past summer on the campus of HC/HC are preparing for ordination to the diaconate through a new Special Program for the Diaconate under the auspices of the Holy Eparchial Synod of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology that began in 2007. They are preparing themselves, but are we as a community-- laity and clergy--ready for them? Do we know the purpose of the diaconate, what deacons did in the past and what they could do today? Who is called to this important ministry and how does someone become a deacon? It is time to begin educating ourselves about this misunderstood ministry.



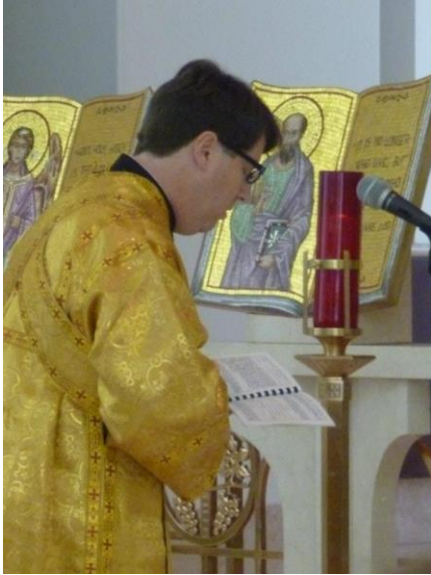
The common perception of the deacon is a man who quickly passes through this order of ministry to become a priest. In most cases, he has finished his theological education, is ordained a deacon and a few days later ordained a priest. The diaconate is often reduced to no more than a rushed step to priesthood, without a time of formation in the area of service (*diakonia*). As a result, this critical ministry has been misunderstood. Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis, a deacon himself for 25 years and author of a new book, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia: The Diaconate Yesterday and Today*, brings a fresh definition to the three-fold ministry: “. . .if we were first to delineate the role and function of the deacon as one of *service—always in the context of love and concern—within the community*, we would be in better position to define the role and function of the priest. . .as one of *sacrifice—always in the light and joy of the resurrection—within the community*, and we would be in better position to discern the role and function of the bishop as *the center of unity—always in the service of truth and teaching—within the community*. . .”

In our secular mindset, we might slight the call to simply “serve.” Yet, from the very beginning the diaconate is rooted in service, and it’s Christ’s example of *diakonia* that should frame our thinking. “For, the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve . . .” (Mark 10:45), and “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22.27). The diaconate formally began when the twelve apostles appointed seven deacons to serve widows who felt neglected in the daily distribution of food in the first Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-6). The first Christian martyr—the first person executed for being a Christian—was St. Stephen, one of these seven men. But service was not limited to waiting on tables in the ensuing years: the Scriptures and prominent Church theologians and historians will go on to describe the deacons’ many responsibilities. St. Paul gives the earliest descriptions of deacons as spokespersons for the community, teachers, mediators, collectors and distributors of aid to the poor. St. Ignatius of Antioch, a second century bishop executed for the faith in Rome, and a most ardent supporter of the diaconate, portrays them as “co-ministers in the liturgy, in the word, in charity, in administration and in authority.” The second and third centuries were a kind of “golden age” for the ministry of the diaconate and deacons have continued to serve bishops and their communities until the present day.

The wide-ranging responsibilities of deacons through the centuries reflected the many and diverse spiritual gifts in the Christian community: “There are varieties of gifts (*charismata*). . . there are varieties of service (*diakonia*), but the Lord is one and the same.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-5) By reviving the diaconate, the fullness of the ordained ministry can be realized and new spiritual energies can emerge within the life of our parishes. Rev. Fr. Steven Tschlis, President of the Archdiocesan Presbyters Council and pastor at St. Paul’s Greek Orthodox Church in Irvine, California, lists many ways in which a deacon may serve today: “Assisting with the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Sacraments, and Holy Week; taking Holy Communion to shut-ins; social work; charitable outreach; teaching about Orthodoxy (if trained); and providing an example of Christian living to the laity.” The truth is our priests need extra hands, feet and hearts. Although most of them have never worked with deacons, they recognize the need. In a PAOI (Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, Berkeley) 2006 survey “Evolving Visions of the Orthodox Priesthood in America,” of the Greek Orthodox priests surveyed in the Metropolises of Chicago and San Francisco metropolises, 70% answered they would find very helpful a trained deacon to share pastoral duties. But deacons not only help the priest, they serve as a bridge between the clergy and the laity. As Father FitzGerald said, “Those who are ordained as deacons are helping other members of the community be better followers of Christ. They contribute to ‘. . . the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ’ (Ephesians 4:12).”

### **Extending the Gifts: Program Participants**

So who is called to this sacred ministry? A diverse professional group has enrolled in the GOA Special Program for the Diaconate that include an accountant, surgeon, FBI agent, lawyer, executive chef, and engineers ranging in age from 28 to early 70s. Each student has felt a special call to the diaconate, not the priesthood. Two men who both married Greek Orthodox women and then converted, Gary Kent and Dan Cunningham, explained how they became interested in the diaconate. **Gary Kent**, 46, a software consultant with



four children, Greek Orthodox Church of St. George, Bethesda, Maryland, put it this way: “Can we in the Body of Christ ignore the call to love and serve the people of our community? Several years ago I talked with my priest about the desire to do more, and he had me help with the altar boys during the liturgy. I considered the St. Stephen’s program at the Antiochian Archdiocese, but then the GOA program started, and I feel blessed to be accepted and am grateful for my priests who have believed in me. Since I am retired from the Navy [a graduate of the Naval Academy] and live in the Washington area, with the blessing of my priests, Rev. Fr. Dimitrios Antokas and Rev. Fr. George Khitiri, we are developing an outreach program to minister at Bethesda Naval Hospital and other hospitals in the

area.” **Dan Cunningham**, 42, the manager of a team of software engineers who has two children and is from St. Paul’s Greek Orthodox Church in Irvine, California, was asked by his former priest at another parish if he would be interested in attending a deacon fact-finding retreat held at the St. Nicholas Ranch in the mountains outside Fresno, California, in 2001. He had never experienced “such love for the Church, and couldn’t get it out of his head.” Fortunately, the GOA program was just starting, so he attended his first two sessions in August, 2008. If ordained, he will do whatever Father Steve and the parish need. His long-term goals include “being in touch with people going through hard times such as sickness and unemployment, taking Holy Communion to those who cannot attend church, and eventually conducting a Bible study program for men at his church.” **Harry Chelpon**, 50, a program analyst at the U.S. Department of Defense with two children, St. Katherine’s Greek Orthodox Church, Falls Church, Virginia, and the son of the assistant priest, Rev. Fr. Ted Chelpon, explained: “God doesn’t ask about your ability, just your availability. I saw how hard my father and Father Costas [Rev. Fr. Costas Pavlakos] work, a 24-7 job in a fishbowl, and wanted to help besides being on the parish council. I was fortunate to have a positive deacon role model, an elderly man who was in our parish helping with the youth and I always felt his guiding hand.”

### **A Three-part Program**

While an individual may feel a calling, applying to the program must be done in consultation with one’s priest and metropolitan. Priests are on the frontline “to discern who in the community may have an authentic vocation and be a suitable candidate for this important ministry,” said Father Tsihchlis. In addition to the man who may become a deacon, Father Antokas emphasizes the deacon’s “family will have a special role too. They are a part of this ministry, so the entire family needs to get into the mindset. This is a calling and a way of life.”

According to Dr. James Skedros, Special Program Coordinator at Holy Cross, the program began with four students in August 2007 and has grown to 36 in August 2009. The growth represents a “lifting the lid off a grassroots movement to serve.” Dr. Skedros

credits Rev. Dr. Frank Marangos (former director, GOA Department of Religious Education) and Dr. Lewis Patsavos (Director of Field Education at Holy Cross) for conceiving this program. The program has three components: 1) Summer sessions at Holy Cross where students are required to complete six one-week sessions available the first two weeks of August each year, 2) training in their home parish with a clergy mentor, and 3) metropolis cluster meetings. Further details and requirements are available online at the Holy Cross website. The cost is \$800 per session that most students pay themselves along with taking personal vacation time to attend--a considerable investment *considering a deacon will not be paid a salary by his church.* In an atmosphere of spiritual retreat during the first two weeks of August (the fasting period in preparation for the celebration of the Dormition of the Mother of God), the students take classes in such subjects as Church history, liturgics, theology, dogmatics, and spirituality, under the guidance of Holy Cross professors. In the rubrics class they learn about the deacon's role in the Divine Liturgy. The laity may be surprised to learn that deacons can read the Gospel, elevate the Holy Gifts during the Consecration and distribute Holy Communion. Back in their home parish, deacons in training are mentored by their priests to learn chanting, help with the Liturgy, make pastoral visits, assist with various ministries and shadow their priests. Since deacons can take Holy Communion and Holy Unction to shut-



ins, careful guidance is required for administering the sacraments, reciting appropriate prayers and extending pastoral care. The program is new, and mentoring guidelines are being developed for specific tasks and spiritual nurturing. Father Antokas and Father Khitiri of St. George have embraced Gary and “treat him as one of their brothers.” The priest is also the intermediary between the student and his

metropolitan who will ordain the deacon. The metropolis cluster meetings, still in the planning stage, will provide opportunities for deacons and their families to come together to understand the challenges of ordained family life, learn more about the faith, and get to know their local metropolitan.

Students who have finished all the requirements and receive evaluations by their local metropolitan and mentor priest will receive a Certificate of Study, but soul-searching questions remain: Are they still called? Are they worthy? Are their families ready for the sacrifice they will need to make? Will his priest recommend him for ordination? Will his metropolitan ordain him and assign him to his parish of choice? An ordination application must be completed. Each student knows it is possible he won't be ordained. But as **Dan Cunningham** explained, “I take the view that anytime I take a step towards Christ, it's the right step. Things may take a different turn than I expect. I can't make assumptions about where this is going. It's up to Him. [I'm trying to discern between] my will and God's will.”

**Walter Dimitri Belsito, Socrates Chaloges, Sal Fazio, Michael Jewler and John Mamangakis** have finished the Program sessions, and are now facing these questions.

**Walter Dimitri Belsito**, 46, a social work supervisor with a child protection agency, a member of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Waterbury, Connecticut, and moderator of a local Orthodox talk show, looks forward to working with his priest, visiting shut-ins with the sacraments and someday helping with adult education. He pointed out that one of the advantages of being a deacon is the likelihood of not being



transferred. **Sal Fazio**, 37, an electrical engineer with one child, a member of Sts. Constantine and Helen Church in Andover, Massachusetts, wanted to be a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church, but married a Greek Orthodox, and converted. He hopes in a small way to be a part of the healing process between Catholics and Orthodox and feels somewhat daunted by the spiritual responsibilities ahead. Another son of a priest, **John Mamangakis**, 52, a hospital administrator with three children and a member of Holy Trinity Church in New Rochelle, NY, had considered going to seminary 25 years ago, but his personal circumstances prevented it. His priest, the

Rev. Nicholas Anctil, approached him about diaconate training, and the possibility sparked a renewed interest in service. Finishing his final two-week sessions at Holy Cross, he characterized his fellow students as an extremely committed group whose attention and attendance never wavered during long days lasting from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm.

Is our Greek Orthodox community—laity, priest and metropolitans—ready to embrace these dedicated individuals? Other Orthodox jurisdictions have already done so. According to Deacon Chryssavgis, as of 2006 the Orthodox Church of America (OCA) through its OCA Diaconal Program had 190 deacons, the largest number among the American Orthodox jurisdictions. The Antiochian Archdiocese provides a three-year correspondence program with three units of residency, the St. Stephen’s Course of Studies that is also used by the Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

### **Understanding the Diaconate: Required Reading**

Now that this important program to bring new life to the diaconate has begun, the time is right to educate ourselves about this essential part of the three-fold ministry. Fortunately, a new book, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia: The Diaconate Yesterday and Today* by Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis has just been published by Holy Cross Orthodox Press, and is recommended reading by Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, Oxford University: “Here exactly is the book that we have long needed to help us rethink the ministry of the deacon in the contemporary Church. Scholarly, yet accessible, it draws on the past to illuminate the future.” His Eminence Metropolitan Methodios of Boston writes: “The author sheds ample light on the existing confusion of the liturgical role and administrative responsibilities of deacons. I join Fr. John in praying that the revitalization of the diaconate may prove to be the basis of restoration of the entire hierarchical and



ministerial structure.” A copy of this book has been sent to all of the clergy of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese under the auspices of the Archdiocesan Presbyters Council.

Our education is not complete without understanding that the historic diaconate also included women. St. Phoebe, described by St. Paul as a deacon in his Letter to the Romans was the first of many, including forty women deacons at the great St. Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople in the fourth century during the time of the emperor Justinian. The ministry of women deacons has also withered despite the fact that the ordination rite in the Orthodox Church still exists, and in 1988 the Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation of the fourteen autocephalous and autonomous Orthodox churches convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople “formally and unanimously advocated the restoration of the order of women deacons.” The definitive book on this subject, *Women Deacons In the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry* by Dr. Kyriaki Kariodoyanes FitzGerald, was also published by Holy Cross Orthodox Press in 1998. Thanks to these two scholars we now have the historical, theological and practical base to support this essential ministry to utilize more gifts and energies of the members of the Body of Christ. Deacon Chryssavgis writes in his book: “The restoration of the diaconate will inevitably remind us of the fundamental truth that the ministry belongs to all of God’s people upon whom the mystery of God is generously and graciously showered in manifold ways.”

- Marilyn Rouvelas is the author of *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs in America*



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# The Deacon's Program at *Our* Seminary

by Dan Cunningham (*ordained to the diaconate on November 20, 2011*)

With the blessing of His Eminence, Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco and Father Steve, I recently enrolled in the Deacon's program at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary in Brookline MA. As part of this program I was given the privilege to attend the first two (of six that are required), one-week sessions offered at Holy Cross last August. The sessions gave me a chance to learn more about the program, study Liturgy, Church history and theology and meet a group of really amazing, faithful people. Because of the importance of the Seminary to the life of our Church in America and the need for deacons in our Churches, Father Steve asked me to share some of my experiences in this short article.

The 3-year educational program is intended to provide training for service as parish deacons. It has been approved by the Synod of Bishops of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America in response to the ever increasing lack of full-time clergy and the need to fully support the sacramental life of the local parish. There is no guarantee that one will be ordained after completing the program; decisions on when/if to ordain anybody to the diaconate are solely up to the local Metropolitan - in our case, Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco. The program consists of 6 one-week academic sessions that take place on the Holy Cross campus and are taught by the Holy Cross faculty. Two back-to-back sessions are offered each year during the first two weeks of August. There are also 6 term paper assignments (2 per year) that participants must complete before they earn their certificate. Along with the scholastic requirements of the program, the participant is expected to prepare for the diaconate on his own with support from his parish priest and other local participants where possible. For example, I'm *slowly* learning about chant during *Orthros* services on Sundays (as well as practicing on my own) and I'm participating in a New Testament Greek language study group with some of the other members of the deacon's program.

Because the deacon's program is not nearly as rigorous as the 4-year full-time degree program that the seminarians go through, those who are ordained after completing the deacon's program will have a special status as *permanent deacons*. This means that they will not be considered qualified for ordination to the priesthood. They will also be permanently assigned to their home parishes and are not expected to be paid a salary by the parish. A good analogy would be a crew of volunteer firemen: they are fully firemen committed to serving their community, but they support themselves through a different profession and therefore are not able to work as full-time firemen. This concept of a permanent diaconate is relatively new to the Greek Orthodox Church in the US and there are some skeptics who have raised concerns about the program. However it's been my experience that most clergy and lay people are in favor of the program. At St. Paul's we've benefited from the permanent diaconate program that the Antiochian



Orthodox Church developed many years ago by having some of the deacons from St. Barnabas Antiochian Orthodox Church in Costa Mesa serve at our parish when needed.

In the Liturgy the basic duties of a deacon are:

1. To lead the people in prayer (the deacon says the words "Let us pray to the Lord" approximately 25 times in the Liturgy)
2. To proclaim the Holy Gospel
3. To help with the preparation and distribution of Communion

It's not just in the Liturgy that a deacon can serve: nearly all services have a role for the deacon, and the deacon can bring Communion and Holy Unction to those who are sick and shut-ins. Obviously, anything the deacon does would be done under the guidance and approval of his parish priest.

During the program, our days were very structured to enable time for prayer and as many classes and time for study as possible. The courses offered in the two sessions this year included: Church History, The Nature and Theology of the Diaconate, Sacramental Theology, Pastoral Care, Hospital Visitation, Orthodox Spirituality, Teleturgics and then some assorted meetings and one-off classes. Church History was taught by Dr. Jim Skedros and focused on the development of Orthodoxy in America (this was one of three Church History courses that will be taught throughout the 3 year program). The class on the Diaconate was taught by Presvytera Kyriaki Fitzgerald and Fr. Tom Fitzgerald (Fr. Tom is also the dean of the seminary) and discussed the role of the deacon in the church as well as some historical information about the diaconate. Sacramental Theology was taught by Fr. Philip Zymaris and explained the role that the sacraments play in our relationship with God. Fr. Nicholas Krommydas taught the course on pastoral care which was mainly an introduction on how to listen effectively. Hospital Visitation was taught by Deacon Markos Nickolas, who gave us some very practical advice for visiting the sick. Fr. Ted Stylianopoulos taught a course on Orthodox Spirituality. Fr. Ted was perhaps the most well prepared, clear and intriguing teacher I've ever been in contact with; I hope you had a chance to attend one of classes when he visited St. Paul's in January. Late in the evenings we had "hands-on" training in the chapel on Teleturgics to walk us through all of the things the deacon does during the Liturgy. I was really impressed by all of the faculty that taught classes at Holy Cross. It left me feeling very proud of our seminary and confident that they prepare our future priests very well. I refer to Holy Cross as "our" seminary because of something Fr. Nick Triantafilou (the president of Holy Cross) spoke to us about in one of his sermons. The general point he made is that Holy Cross gets a lot of support from the parishes: it gets its students from the parishes and it takes those students and prepares them to serve as priests in the parishes. The relationship between the parishes and Holy Cross is so deep that we should all consider it "our seminary".

Although all of the faculty were very supportive of us and made us feel welcome the one person we spent the most time with was Fr. Philip Zymaris. He shortened his trip to

Greece just to help with the program while his family stayed in Greece to finish their vacation. In Fr. Phil's class on Sacramental Theology we learned that it's important to understand that God created the world out of love (because He is love), so that He can enter into a loving relationship with us. God doesn't *need* the world, but it's His will to be in communion with His creation. He explained that there's only one true sacrament, and that is the Mystery of Christ in the Church. Christ came, was crucified, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, but didn't leave us. He is here, with us, in the sacraments. Fr. Phil explained that the sacraments are not just special services held within the walls of the church building, but that our whole life is impacted by the sacraments, and that impact is meant to transform life itself into a sacrament of God's presence and love. It's through the sacraments that Christ works within us by the grace of the Holy Spirit and His intent is that we all become part of His body, which is not a "part-time" job. Fr. Phil also spent nearly every evening with us in the chapel working on Teleturgics, helping us to learn the details of what the Deacon is supposed to do in the Liturgy. Fr. Phil worked really hard to make our time at Holy Cross productive, and we all really appreciated it.

The faculty at Holy Cross were not the only group of people that impressed me. The men who attended the deacon's program left me feeling quite humbled to think that I could be grouped with such amazing people. The background and experiences of these men were incredibly diverse. We had a 33 year-old lawyer from the Bahamas and two 72 year-olds, one who was a retired FBI agent and the other lived on campus. There was one gentleman that had spent 3 years as a novice in a Benedictine (Roman Catholic) monastery and another gentleman who taught himself Greek and Hebrew long before he ever converted to Orthodoxy. We had an EMT, an accountant, a surgeon, several engineers, a children's affairs officer, several veterans, a UPS executive and a couple of priest's kids. We even had a biblical scholar from Harvard Divinity School who also teaches at Holy Cross. In total there were 16 people who participated in the deacon's program and all of them were very knowledgeable about their faith and extremely devoted to their parishes.

We did have some time away from our coursework during the two weeks and we used that time to get to know each other better. I particularly enjoyed a late night ethics discussion I had with my new Bahamian friend Alex and helping put together a swing set at Fr. Phil's house. The current seminarians showed their hospitality by inviting us to a social event in our honor at the married student's common area.

Just before I left for the deacon's program, Fr. Steve said to me, "I hope they don't put you in Polemanakos Residence Hall. That's where I lived when I was at seminary" – which of course meant that's where we were housed. Polemanakos Hall can best be described as a jail without the bars. Fortunately, the only place they could fit us all was in the women's section of the dorm which was undoubtedly much cleaner than the men's section. Don't worry: there were only two women staying in the dorm in August, and they were on a different floor and pretty much kept their distance from all of the

middle-aged male invaders. Although the facilities were not all that nice it was a great experience to spend the two weeks with the rest of the students and have the opportunity to learn about them and their families. The friendships that were formed came so naturally even though all of us came from different places and backgrounds. A brotherhood is being built and that has continued even after classes ended. Since returning to our lives, we've been able to keep in touch via e-mail and conference calls. Two of our brothers had children born. One sadly was very premature and passed away a month later. Whether ordination is in my future or not, I will always feel blessed that I was allowed to participate in the deacon's program and I'm looking forward to attending another two sessions next August.



**Holy Cross Deacon's Program Participants**

***Faculty , top, left to right*** : Dr. Jim Skedros, Dn. Markos Nickolas, Fr. Phil Zymaris, Fr. Nick Triantafilou, Presvytera Kyriaki Fitzgerald, Fr. Tom Fitzgerald

***Students , second row from top, left to right*** : Harry Zaharis, Dimitri Galetsis, Michael Jeweler, Dan Kennedy, Socrates Chaloges, George Kaloroumakis, Bruce Beck, Harry Chelpon, John Mamangakis, Dimitri Belsito, Dan Cunningham, John Derr, Jeff Abell, Sal Fazio, Andrew Giourelis and Alex Maillas