

The Tradition of the Female Deacon in the Eastern Churches

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St. Phoebe Center Conference on
“Women and Diaconal Ministry in the Orthodox Church:
Past, Present, and Future”

Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY

December 6, 2014

PURPOSE OF HISTORY SESSION

- To briefly review the scholarship on the history of the deaconess, both East and West
- To lay the groundwork for discussions later in the day about the present and future
- To familiarize everyone with material you can take with you
 - Book list; book sales
 - We ask you to share and discuss this historical material with others in your parish

TIMELINE—REJUVENATION

FROM PATRISTIC PERIOD (4TH -7TH C.)

- **Apostolic period (AD 60-80):** Letters of Paul (Rom 16:1 re Phoebe)
- **Subapostolic period (late 1st/early 2nd c.):** deuterio-Pauline epistles (I Tim. 3), letter of Trajan to Pliny the Younger
- **Byzantine period (330-1453)** – comparable to Early, High, and Late Middle Ages plus early Renaissance in Western Europe
 - Early church manuals (*Didascalia Apostolorum*, late 3rd/early 4th c.; *Testamentum Domini*, c.350; *Apostolic Constitutions*, c.370, Syriac)
 - **325-787:** Seven Ecumenical Councils
 - Saints' lives, church calendars, *typika* (monastic rules), homilies, grave inscriptions, letters
 - **988:** conversion of Vladimir and the Rus'
 - **12th c.** or earlier: office of deaconess in Byz. church fell into disuse
- **Early modern period in America**
 - **1768:** first group of Greek Orthodox arrives in what is now Florida
 - **1794:** first formal Russian Orthodox mission arrives in what is now Alaska

BYZANTINE EMPIRE AND FIVE PATRIARCHATES CIRCA 565 A.D.



OTHER CONSECRATED WOMEN'S ORDERS AND LEADERSHIP ROLES

- **Ecclesiastical, spiritual, evangelical leaders**
 - leaders of house churches
 - missionaries
 - ascetics
 - martyrs
- **Consecrated roles**
 - virgins and nuns
 - widows
- **Occasional liturgical roles** (less common in public than in convents)

VIRGINS & NUNS: LITURGICAL ROLES

Virgins (consecrated)

- Special seating and first to receive the Eucharist among women (*Apostolic Constitutions* II, 57 and VIII, 13)
- Chanting at *agape* meal (Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* 25)
- Commemoration in prayers

Nuns

- Chanting in some urban churches (Thessaloniki)
- Seclusion (*abaton*) required greater liturgical activity
 - Chanting at services (some hours held in the dormitories)
 - Acolyte-type functions

CONSECRATED WIDOWS

- **Evidence from apostolic times to the fifth century**
 - 1 Timothy 5: 3-16
- **Normally considered consecrated but not ordained**
 - exception is the *Testamentum Domini*, whose Widows appear to be ordained
- **Eligibility requirements**
 - Minimum age of 60
 - Married only once
 - Good reputation
- **Functions**
 - Prayer and fasting on behalf of the church
 - Counseling of younger women in the community
 - Assistance at baptism and liturgy (*Testamentum*)

WIDOWS

Widows and deaconesses co-existed for a while:

“The bishop sits for you in the place of God Almighty. But the deacon stands in the place of Christ; and do you love him. And the deaconess shall be honored by you in the place of the Holy Spirit; and the presbyters shall be to you in the likeness of the Apostles; and the orphans and widows shall be reckoned by you in the likeness of the altar.” (Didascalia Apostolorum 88)

Bonnie Bowman Thurston (*Widows*): the altar metaphor is related to their vocation in 1 Tim. 5:5 to be in “supplications and prayers night and day.”

- Exhorted to pray often, especially in the night and at special seasons of the church

MYRRHBEARERS

- **Church of Jerusalem (12th-c. manuscript)**
 - Began sometime between the 5th and 9th centuries
 - Existed until at least the 12th century
 - Probably ordained
- **Liturgical Functions at Easter**
 - Chanted and prepared the Holy Sepulchre with patriarch, archdeacon, and chanters on Holy Saturday
 - Participated in the Liturgy of St. James
 - Easter matins
 - chanted
 - censed patriarch at the tomb
 - carried the *triskellion* in procession to the *bema*
 - censed during the Gospel reading, then entered the sepulchre and censed and anointed it

PROCESSIONAL INCENSE-BEARERS



Fresco detail, monastery of the Panagia Vlachernitissa, Arta, Greece

MODERN SCHOLARSHIP ON THE FEMALE DIACONATE

- **Jan Chrysostom Pankowski** – *De Diaconissis* (1866)
- **A. Kalsbach** – *Die altkirchliche Einrichtung der Diakonissen bis zu ihrem Erlöschen* (1926)
- **Evangelos Theodorou** – “Ἡ «χειροτονία» ἢ «χειροθεσία» τῶν διακονισσῶν” (*Θεολογία*, 1954-55)
- **Roger Gryson** – *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (1972; 1976 in English)
- **Cipriano Vagaggini** – “L'ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina” (*OCP*, 1974)
- **Aimé Georges Martimort** – *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (1982; 1986 in English)
- **Kyriaki Karidoyannes FitzGerald** – *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry* (1998)
- **Phyllis Zagano** – *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions About the Diaconate* (2012)

ORDAINED FEMALE DEACONS

- Evidence exists from apostolic times to the 12th century (and sporadically thereafter)
 - **Phoebe** (Rom. 16:1 – *diakonos/διάκονος*) – Origen and Chrysostom both interpret the term as “deacon”
 - Early church orders 3rd-4th c. (*Didascalia Apostolorum, Apostolic Constitutions, Testamentum Domini*) – use both “deacon” and “deaconess”
 - Saints’ *vitae*, legislation, canons, seals, epigrams
 - church manuals, service order books (*euchologia*)
- Apparently they were related to the Widows – they had similar eligibility and functions – but displaced them
- Deaconesses originally served in parishes, but later were predominantly nuns (abbesses, bishops’ wives)

WHY DID THE CHURCH HAVE FEMALE DEACONS?

- **Pastoral imperative:** the need to minister to the women faithful in the church
- **Socio-cultural issues** affecting the church's ability to fulfill its pastoral responsibilities to women
 - **Seclusion of women**
 - propriety
 - safeguarding virginity
 - **Social segregation of the sexes** spatially and in function
 - male – public/*agora*
 - female – private/home

FUNCTIONS OF FEMALE DEACONS

- Assisted with the baptism of adult women (church orders)
- Instructed newly baptized women in the faith (*Didascalia*)
- Chaperoned women's meetings with male clergy (*Apostolic Constitutions*)
- Kept order in the women's section of the church (*Apostolic Constitutions*)
- Chanted at services (e.g., matins at Hagia Sophia – travel diary of Anthony of Novgorod, 12th c.)
- Took the Eucharist to sick women in their homes (*Didascalia Apostolorum*)
- Served as abbesses and liturgical leaders in women's monasteries (saints' lives)

THE BYZANTINE DEACONESS WAS RANKED WITH THE HIGHER CLERGY

- later distinction between *cheirotonia* and *cheirothesia*
- *diakonos* used for both male and female deacons (e.g., *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Justinian's *Novel 3*)
- Justinian's *Novel 6* includes female deacons in his rules for ordinations to the "priesthood" (*ἱεροσύνη*) in its broad sense (bishop/presbyter/deacon)
- The deaconess's ordination rite includes the prayer beginning "The divine grace" (*Ἡ θεῖα χάρις*), which was common to the three major orders of clergy
- Byzantine *euchologia* (service books) always listed the female deacon's ordination rite immediately after the male deacon's, regardless of whether they were organized in ascending or descending order (some don't even bother to give the full rite)

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- **Minimum age**
 - originally 60 years old (Theodosius)
 - later reduced to 50 and then 40 years old (Justinian)
 - exceptions existed, e.g., Olympias
- **Unmarried marital status**
 - Virgin
 - Widow of one husband
- **Moral conduct expected**
 - More severe penalties for the misconduct of female deacons than for male deacons (confiscation of property; even death penalty)

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE ORDINATION RITE OF THE FEMALE DEACON

- Her ordination occurred during the eucharistic liturgy, at the same point as did (does) the male deacon's (i.e., immediately following the *anaphora*)
- Occurred at the altar, with the bishop's laying on of hands and his reading of two prayers; the prayers include God's call to the ordinand and an *epiklesis*
- Her ordination rite followed the same pattern as the male deacon's, with only two minor differences:
 - She was vested with the *orarion* crossed in the same way as the subdeacon's (**or** the deacon's at communion)
 - After receiving the Eucharist from the bishop at the altar, she was given the chalice and replaced it on the altar

1ST BYZANTINE ORDINATION PRAYER FOR THE FEMALE DEACON

Holy and almighty God, who through the birth of your only-begotten Son and our God from the Virgin according to the flesh sanctified the female, and not to men alone but also to women bestowed grace and the advent of your Holy Spirit; now, Lord, look upon this your servant and call her to the work of your diaconate, and send down upon her the abundant gift of your Holy Spirit; keep her in orthodox faith, in blameless conduct, always fulfilling her ministry according to your pleasure; because to you is due all glory and honor

- *Barberini 336 codex, 163.3 (8th c.)*

2ND BYZANTINE ORDINATION PRAYER FOR THE FEMALE DEACON

Lord, Lord, who do not reject women offering themselves and wishing to minister in your holy houses in accordance with what is fitting, but receive them in an order of ministers; bestow the grace of your Holy Spirit also on this your servant who wishes to offer herself to you, and fill her with the grace of the diaconate, as you gave the grace of your diaconate to Phoebe whom you called to the work of ministry.

- *Barberini 336* codex, 164.10 (8th c.)

DEACONESS SAINTS

- **We all see them on the church calendar and see their icons**
- **They are a significant part of the tradition and are models of leadership and holiness**
- **Madigan and Osiek found in the Christian East 40 literary references and 61 inscriptions giving us information on named deaconesses**
- **At least 23 women saints have been considered deaconesses in the Orthodox church calendar (FitzGerald)**
 - **contemporaneous confirmation is lacking in a couple of cases, but it still shows church reverence for them**

ST. PHOEBE (1ST C., CENCHREAE)



I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon [diakonou] of the church which is at Cenchreae; that you receive her in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help here in whatever manner she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.
Romans 16: 1-2

Icon: St. Phoebe Center

TROPARION TO ST. PHOEBE (OCA)

Enlightened by grace

And taught the Faith by the chosen
vessel of Christ,

You were found worthy of the
diaconate;

And you carried Paul's words to Rome.

O Deaconess Phoebe, pray to Christ
God that his Spirit may enlighten our
souls!

CHRYSOSTOM ON ST. PHOEBE

“See how much he [the Apostle Paul] distinguishes her, for he mentions her before all the others and calls her ‘sister.’ It is no small thing to be called Paul’s sister, and he adds to her status by calling her ‘deacon’... Both men and women, let us imitate this holy one.”

- *Homily 30* on Romans 16:1-2 (trans. Madigan and Osiek)

CHRYSOSTOM'S EXEGESIS OF 1 TIMOTHY 3

John Chrysostom's discussion of marriage rules for women deacons is based on 1 Timothy 3:11, "Likewise women must be modest, not slanderers, sober and faithful in every way."

"Some say he [the Apostle Paul] is talking about women in general, but that cannot be. Why would he want to insert into the middle of what he is saying something about women? But rather, he is speaking of women who hold the rank of deacon. 'Deacons should be husband of one wife.' This is also appropriate for women deacons (*diakonoi*), for it is necessary, good, and right, most especially in the church."

- *Homily 11* on 1 Timothy 3:11 (trans. Madigan and Osiek)

FOURTH CENTURY DEACONESSES

NONNA, THE MOTHER OF GREGORY THE THEOLOGIAN



CLERICAL FAMILIES

- **Nonna** prayed for her husband Gregory's conversion: he was baptized, made a presbyter, and then became bishop of Nazianzus (Gregory the Elder)
- After her husband's death, she devoted herself to prayer
- Her son was Gregory the Theologian
- Her daughter, **St. Gorgonia**, a mother of 5, is also recognized as a deaconess; she was a student of scripture and was renowned for her charity, opening her own house to the poor

Similarly, **St. Theosevia**, wife (?) of St. Gregory of Nyssa, was ordained a deaconess when he became a bishop

St. Macrina, sister of Ss. Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great, was often considered a deaconess as well as an abbess

WIVES OF BISHOPS

It was apparently not unusual for women to be ordained as deaconess at the same time their husbands were ordained as bishop.

The wife of him who is advanced to the Episcopal dignity shall be separated from her husband by their mutual consent, and after his ordination and consecration to the episcopate she shall enter a monastery situated at a distance from the abode of the bishop, and there let her enjoy the bishop's provision. And if she is deemed worthy she may be advanced to the dignity of a deaconess.

- Canon XLVIII of the Quinisext Council (*in trullo*), 692

ST. OLYMPIAS, D. EARLY 5TH C.

DEACONESS OF CONSTANTINOPLE

- From one of wealthiest families in the empire; St. Gregory of Nazianzus was a family friend
- Widowed at age 20 after a brief marriage to a prefect; refused to remarry
- Was made a deacon by Bishop Nektarios at age 29 (not canonical)
- A strict ascetic, she founded a women's monastery in Constantinople with a passage to the Church of Hagia Sophia
- From her personal fortune, she gave money and land lavishly to the poor and sick, and also to the church and clergy; she funded a hospital and an orphanage
- Corresponded with and supported her close friend, John Chrysostom, in his exile

RENOWNED FOR HER CHARITY TO THE POOR AND TO THE CHURCH



ORDINATIONS OF WOMEN DEACONS BY JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

“He [Chrysostom] also ordained (*cheirotonei*) deacons (*diakonous*) of the holy Church her three relatives Elisanthia, Martyria, and Palladia for the monastery, so that by the four diaconal services (*diakonia*), the established procedure might be carried on by them unbroken and without interruption.”

- *Life of Olympias 7* (Trans. Madigan and Osiek)
- Seems to imply liturgical duties, apparently too routine to give us much detail: leading the Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours)?
- Exchange of letters: “To my lady, the most reverend and divinely favored deaconess Olympias, I, John, Bishop, send greeting in the Lord.” (trans. WRW Stephens)

OTHER DEACONESSSES APPEARING IN SAINTS' LIVES

ROMANA THE DEACON (*LIFE OF PELAGIA*, 4TH C ANTIOCH)

- Pelagia was a repentant “harlot” who ran away to live disguised as a male monk
- “And her sponsor was the most holy lady Romana, first of the deaconesses, who took her and went up to the place for catechumens.” (*Life of Pelagia*)
- After baptism, she stayed with Deacon Romana.
- Seeing a vision of the devil, Pelagia asked Romana to call for Bishop Nonnus (deaconess was intermediary for bishop)
- Romana came to love her as a daughter and wept when Pelagia ran away to the (male) monastery

DEACONESSSES AND VIRGINS IN SUSANNA'S LIFE (3RD C. PALESTINE)

- Susanna disguised herself as a monk; when she was forced to reveal herself, she asked for two deaconesses and two Virgins to witness her identity
- Bishop Kleopas made her a deacon and the head of a house of Virgins

ST. IRENE OF CHRYSOVALANTON (LATE 9TH/EARLY 10TH C.)

“Without delay the patriarch rose from his throne at once and asked for a censer. Burning incense and praising God he initiated a hymn befitting the occasion. Then he first ordained Irene deaconess of the Great Church – for through the Spirit in him he knew her purity – and thereafter consecrated her with the seal of [the] hegumenate... .”

- *Life of Irene* (trans. Jan O. Rosenqvist)

ST. IRENE

DEACONESS AND ABBESS

- Prayer and fasting
- Spiritual direction of her nuns
- Clairvoyance
- Advice to nobles and member of the imperial family

Irene keeping all-night vigil

(Icon from oca.org)



DEACONESSES: MODELS OF HOLINESS AND LEADERSHIP

What do we take away from a review of these women's lives?

- **Women deacons existed in many churches**
- **Those we know by name were often from prominent families and interacted with the most renowned men of their day (note: there were also many who were less prominent, such those we know from grave inscriptions)**
- **Women deaconesses were often linked to positions of leadership, such as abbesses and the wives of bishops – it was the only ordained office for women, so perhaps it was sometimes bestowed as an honor**
- **Women deacons often engaged in charitable work, especially among women, and often from their own money**
- **These women as models of holiness are still relevant to us: prayer, spiritual direction, intermediaries with the bishop, chaperones, scholarship and teaching (especially teaching other women), administration, self-sacrifice, and charitable outreach**

WHY DID THE FEMALE DIACONATE FALL INTO DISUSE?

A variety of theories have been suggested

- Fall in the number of adult **female converts**
- Shift of the female diaconate from parishes to **monasteries**
- Influence of **Islam** – greater seclusion of women
- Rise of **Levitical ritual impurity** in the Byzantine Church
 - **Old Testament** as source, not late antique culture
 - Classical and Hellenistic Greek culture had no notion of ritual impurity attached to menstruation or childbirth
 - The Levitical law was given as the explicit (or sometimes implicit) source, but was not applied consistently (i.e., men were exempted)
 - **Geography** – two competing theologies
 - **Antioch**: rejected ritual impurity (combating Judaizers?)
 - **Alexandria**: imposed ritual impurity restrictions (on women) – the “canons” of Dionysius enter through Council *in trullo* (692)

3RD-4TH C. ANTIOCH: NO RITUAL IMPURITY

“O woman, when thou art seven days in thy separation, ... thou standest in need of prayer and the Eucharist, and the coming of the Holy Ghost, as *having been guilty of no fault in this matter*. For neither lawful mixture, nor child-bearing, nor the menstrual purgation, nor nocturnal pollution, can defile the nature of a man, or separate the Holy Spirit from him. ... [Meditate] in His laws without observing any such things, such as the natural purgation, lawful mixture, child-birth, a miscarriage, or a blemish of the body; since such observations are the vain inventions of foolish men, and such inventions have no sense in them.”

- *Apostolic Constitutions VI, 27*

“The woman in child-bed is unclean. Yet God made child-birth, and the seed of copulation. Why then is the woman unclean, unless something further was intimated? And what was this? He intended to produce piety in the soul, and to deter it from fornication.”

- St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 3 on Titus*

3RD-4TH C. ALEXANDRIA: LEVITICAL RITUAL IMPURITY

“Concerning women in their menstrual separation (*en aphedrō*), whether it is right for them in such a condition to enter the house of God, I think it unnecessary even to inquire. For I think that they, being faithful and pious, *would not dare in such a condition either to approach the holy table or to touch the body and blood of Christ. For even the woman who had the twelve-year discharge and was eager for a cure touched not him but only his fringe.* It is unobjectionable to pray in any state and to remember the Lord in any condition and to beseech him to obtain aid, but he who is not completely pure in both soul and body shall be prevented from approaching the holy and the holy of holies.”

- Dionysius of Alexandria, *2nd Canonical Letter to Basilides*

A menstruous woman should wait to attend liturgy and should not receive the Eucharist “until she has been purified of it [*ἕως οὐ καθαρισθῆ*].”

- Timothy of Alexandria, *Canonical Replies 6 and 7*

“The woman who has given birth stays outside the holy place forty days if the child which she has borne is male, *and if it is female, eighty days.* If she enters the church, she is to pray with the catechumens.”

- *Canons of Hippolytus 18*

8TH-11TH C. BYZANTINE CHURCH: ADOPTION OF RITUAL IMPURITY

Euchologia

In the 8th-c. Barberini 336 codex, the 40-day blessing is a single prayer for the child with no rubrics; the mother is not mentioned. In the 11th-c. Grottaferrata G.b.I. Codex, there is a full service with rubrics, named after the *mother* and including two prayers regarding her *purification*; the rubrics vary on taking infants into the altar.

Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople (9th c.)

Canon 78: If a newborn received emergency baptism before the 40-day service, then, until the mother was purified at 40 days, the mother was not to breastfeed, touch, or even come near the infant, and another (Christian) woman was to be brought in as a wet nurse

Canon 79: A newly-baptized woman who began to menstruate within a few days after baptism was to receive the Eucharist in her home

Canon 80: A woman who was menstruating when she was to receive baptism was to defer it until she had been “purified” (*καθαρισθῆ*)

12TH-14TH C. CONSTANTINOPLE: LATE BYZANTINE CANONISTS

“Today we see such [menstruating] women in *gynaeeceae* and especially in monasteries standing freely in the vestibules [*pronaous*], which are decorated with all sorts of sacred images, and devoting themselves to the praises of God. And inquiring how this can be, we hear that they are not attending church – which does not seem so to me. For these vestibules are not for common use [*koinoi*] like the forecourts [*proaulia*] of the churches, but are a part of them set aside for women who are not prevented from attending church.”

- Theodore Balsamon, *Commentary on Dionysius' Canon 2*

On the issue of male ejaculants, “nothing created by God is by its nature impure.”

Regarding female deacons in the early church: “Later, however, the Fathers forbade them to approach the altar and carry out any service [*ὑπηρεσίας*] there because of their menstrual periods.”

- Matthew Blastares, Letter *Kappa*, ch. 28; Letter *Gamma*, chap. 11

DISCUSSION AND REVIVAL OF THE DEACONESS, 19TH - EARLY 20TH C.

Armenian Apostolic Church – Medieval Period

- evidence of a female diaconate from the 9th c., strong 12th-13th c.
- assisted in the baptism of women and sometimes children
- existed entirely within monasteries
 - preached to women
 - read the gospel in places "where men should not enter" (Smbat Constable), but from "a corner," not from the *bema*
 - warned "not [to] approach the service of the holy sacrament in any way like male deacons" (Step'anos Orbelian, Archbishop of Siunik)

Armenian Apostolic Church – Modern Period

- evidence reappears in 17th c.; many ordained in 19th & 20th c. – all nuns
- vested identically to male deacon, except for veil
- served identically to the male deacon liturgically



Vested Armenian deaconess of the late 19th century

DISCUSSION AND REVIVAL OF THE DEACONESS, 19TH - 20TH C.

Church of Russia

- 19th c. – royals and several other prominent Russians supported the “restoration” of the female diaconate (never existed in Russia before)
- 1905-06 – several high-ranking bishops encouraged this effort
- 1917 – discussed at All-Russia *sobornost* but tabled for further research

Church of Greece

- St. Nektarios (early 20th c.) – ordained several nuns at Aegina
- School for Deaconesses created in 1950's in expectation of restoration
- Synod of the Church of Greece has voted to reinstitute the ordained female diaconate, beginning with remote women's monasteries (2003)

Coptic Church

- deaconesses are considered to be consecrated, not ordained
- typical diaconal ministries: education, social services, etc.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- The female diaconate was one of a **variety of ordained or consecrated women's orders** in eastern Christianity in the early and medieval/Byzantine period, perhaps developing from the Widows
- Deaconesses' functions included both **pastoral ministry** and "secluded" **liturgical ministry** geared specifically to Christian women
- Several **women saints** in the early church either were deaconesses or were later assumed to be deaconesses by the Orthodox Church
- Female deacons were **ordained** and counted among the **major orders** of clergy in the Byzantine church
- Deaconesses died out in the medieval/Byzantine period for perhaps a variety of reasons, but **ritual impurity** was an explicit rationale
- The 19th and 20th centuries saw, in various Orthodox churches, discussion of a restored female diaconate, ordination of deaconesses by an individual bishop, and vibrant consecrated or ordained female diaconates in the Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox churches

