

St. Phoebe Center

FOR THE HISTORY OF THE DEACONESS

REFLECTIONS ON THE WOMEN & DIACONAL MINISTRY CONFERENCE

Archpriest Very Reverend Father Daniel Rentel

I've been with the Center from its inception under the inspiration and leadership of Ann Marie Mecera. We have worked together almost from the beginning of St. Gregory's in Columbus. I'll not go over her credentials but I can honestly confess that without her support as lay vice-chair of the Parish Council here this parish would most likely not exist.

From Diocesan Council member to the OCA Pension Board, she also found time for publications of value to the Orthodox religious education community.

Our task was to bring into being an Orthodox Community of believers that would allow Orthodoxy to survive and grow in 21st Century America. To that end we determined that women in the Church while vital to the very existence of most every parish had no recognized, blessed ministry for them. To compensate we created a Greetings Committee comprised mostly of young girls under the competent guidance of a very competent woman. Women only carried the corners of the Winding Sheet during Holy Week processions. We once had a female seminary graduate from St. Vladimir's offer a sermon which she had done many times on assignment in a parish on the East Coast. It created quite a stir, causing me to cancel such occasions in the future to spare other young ladies the hurt. When I was told not to allow infant girls to enter the altar during the baptismal processions I determined not to allow boys to do the same entry. I stopped taking some of the prayers for the 40 Day after Childbirth because research by many scholars found them inspired by thinking in the medieval world. In an article by Fr. Alexander Lebedev, 1996 he writes:

"There are significantly more prayers found in the unabridged service books used by the Church that deal with the uncleanness of a male who has a seminal emission (either involuntary or voluntary) than there are prayers that deal with the uncleanness of a woman who has just given birth. For example, there is a 10-page service that is to be read by a priest "who has been tempted" in his sleep," which is a gentle euphemism for a priest who has a nocturnal seminal emission. I won't try to translate any more than just one of the prayers . . ."

More, how could it be that setting aside as readers, choir directors, psalmists not be open to women?

Point these out to suggest that I did come lightly into accepting a position on the Committee. Nor did I have any intention of remaining passive, sort of just lending my name. The work and the findings of all of those participating in the Conference at Columbia, I am in full agreement with. And I do agree with our Beloved Diocesan Hierarch, PAUL, that there must be found a starting point around which the whole Church can coalesce. How to make that happen must be a goal for St. Phoebe's to further.

A starting point would be to accept that the minor orders be opened once again to all. I don't believe that in the formative centuries of the Church these offices were perceived as 'steps to the priesthood.' (V. Kesich 1st 200 years for the Church's view on women.) They blessed the action at hand. Imagine for a moment might result. Women like their male counterparts go into the altar to receive the blessing for reading of the epistle. After some initial fuss, the process becomes normalized.

Could it not be with hierarchical blessings and support allow for the setting aside of acolytes? A young girl in a robe carrying a candle, holding a fan, accepted in time. Think of the impact on a young mind; how the neither male nor female but the one in Christ would help to solidify the essence of being a member of the Body.

All the while, preaching, teaching the truth of the female diaconate as a terminal ordination for women. Helping believers understand that the mind of those of the early Church were not influenced by events from later centuries that brought into being foreign notions of male/female roles and realities. Think here in terms of Barbarian invasions, the conquests and attitudes toward women in the world of Islam. (Had impact as the Empire shrunk).

My thinking now after half a century of priesthood, much, much interest in absorbing information and insights of others then putting them to use, and the impending threat I can envision if we just allow the matter to remain in place. A new Pew finding indicates that Orthodoxy in America has lost 47% of its population in a poll that was completed in 2014. Suggests to me that there may be things we can do to have our world think again how much they are loved by the Savior.

All of us.