

FAQs about Women Deacons

(For more detailed answers, and additional FAQs, see “FAQs” at www.orthodoxdeaconess.org.)

Q. Is there biblical evidence of the female deacon and the diaconate in general?

A. Yes. A female deacon is first mentioned in Romans 16:1 when Paul refers to Phoebe as a “deacon of the church.” (The Greek is *diakonon tes ekklesias*.) Though this New Testament term denoting deacon is not gender specific, the feminized term meaning ‘deaconess’ has been used interchangeably with ‘deacon’ since the sixth century. The text for the establishment of the male diaconate is in Acts 6:1-6 when Stephen is selected as the first deacon. Saints Stephen and Phoebe are now the prototypes and patrons of the diaconate.

Q. Some people think that deaconesses in the early Church were not ordained.

A. Over time the Church established three ordained positions: deacon, priest, and bishop. The ordination [*cheirotomia*] of women to the diaconate in the early Church is well-documented. Her ordination rite is included, for example, in the earliest extant *Euchologion* [service book] of the Church, the Barberini Codex from the eighth century.

Q. If women are ordained to the diaconate, won't the next step be to ordain them to the priesthood?

A. No. Ordination to the diaconate is not just a “stepping stone” to the priesthood. For close to a thousand years the Church ordained women to the diaconate, and this did not lead to ordination to the priesthood, so there is no basis to conclude that this would be the case today.

Q. Were women ordained as deaconesses in the early Church only to help with female baptisms? If so, why would we need them today?

A. Female deacons did more than help with female baptisms in the early Church. The responsibilities of the deaconess are mentioned in early church manuals (e.g., the 3rd century *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the 4th century *Apostolic Constitutions*) and prescriptions for the office are mentioned in the canons of the church (e.g., Canon 40 of the 7th century Council of Trullo). Thirteen different duties of the deaconess are listed in historical works such as *The Study of Liturgy*, Oxford, 1978 and *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West*, 1990. Her duties included: administration, supervision at liturgy, taking charge of properties, reporting to the bishop, providing pastoral care to women, sheltering guests, and more. Most of those needs still exist today. It is unrealistic to think that the parish priest can meet all the needs of his parish. Counseling by a woman deacon could be especially helpful for women struggling with issues related to marital relations, motherhood, abortion, miscarriage, sexual abuse, and caregiving.

Q. Why are there no female deacons in the Orthodox Church today?

A. Although the female diaconate has fallen into disuse, the order has never been abolished or disallowed by any Ecumenical Council or canon of the Eastern Church. No one knows definitively why the ministry withered away. There is a misconception that as infant baptism became more common, women deacons were not needed; but that is only a partial answer—there are many women deacons on the historical record after infant baptism became the norm.

Other theories include the influence of new canons espousing a Levitical understanding of female “impurity” (menstruating women should not be at the altar or take communion, etc.) and the invasion of centers of Christianity that resulted in the curtailment of the social and philanthropic outreach done by the diaconate. It is worth noting that the male diaconate experienced a decline over time as well.

Q. Why can't women just continue serving without being ordained, like they do now?

A. An ordination is a setting apart of a person for ministry in a particular community. Having been recognized by the community, the person's gifts are then enlivened by the grace of the Holy Spirit at ordination in the context of the Eucharist, at the altar, and by the bishop. The ordained person's service is tied to the liturgy and the altar as the source and summit of his or her ministry. He or she is connected to the sacramental life of the Church; for example, a deacon can take communion to the sick but a lay chaplain cannot. With the blessing of the bishop, the ministry of the diaconate is universal in scope and confers the authority, credibility, recognition, support, and protection of the Church. Being ordained to the diaconate also demands public accountability to the Church and obedience to the bishop.

Q. What efforts have been made to restore the ordination of women deacons?

A. In the early part of the twentieth century, the Russian Orthodox Church's Moscow Council (1917–18) discussed the issue, but no action was taken due to the Bolshevik Revolution. In Greece in 1911, Archbishop (now, Saint) Nektarios ordained a nun to the diaconate to serve the needs of her monastery. Toward the end of the twentieth century, The Ecumenical Patriarchate convened in 1988 an Inter-Orthodox Consultation, “The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women” at Rhodes, Greece, attended by bishops, priests, and academics from twelve of the autocephalous churches. The consultation affirmed the rite of ordination (*cheirotomia*) and declared that “the apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived.” Thirteen years later the Synod of the Church of Greece in 2004, led by Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens, took steps to reinstitute the female diaconate to serve the needs of remote monasteries, but this effort ended with the falling asleep of the archbishop. In 2017, the Patriarch of the Synod of Alexandria consecrated one woman as “Deaconess of the Missions” and five others as deaconesses to help with missionary efforts including adult baptism, marriage, and catechism in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This step was taken to address the needs of the local Church in Africa.

Q. Theoretically, any bishop could ordain (*cheirotomia*) a woman deacon today, so why doesn't this happen?

A. Reviving this ordained, historical office is considered a controversial action by some and will likely take the agreement of a synod of bishops, rather than the action of a lone bishop. It will certainly take extensive prayer and discernment on the part of the entire Church. The Synod of Alexandria's decision to name women as deaconesses now stands as an example of one way of reviving the female diaconate today. St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess supports the revival of the diaconate for both men and women today, including ordination for women deacons.

Q. Are there specific examples of deaconesses from Church history?

There are many examples of deaconesses from history: Saint Olympias, the friend and confidant of Saint John Chrysostom; Saint Nonna, the mother of Saint Gregory the Theologian; Saint Macrina, sister of Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Basil; and Saint Irene of Chrysovalantou, an abbess of the ninth century. At the height of the Byzantine Empire, one could find deaconesses in a variety of places, including Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Thessaloniki.