

Q. What is the goal of the St. Phoebe Center?

A. The purpose of the St. Phoebe Center is to provide education regarding the historical deaconess in the church, highlight the diaconal ministry women are doing today, and working for the restoration of the female diaconate for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Q. Does the St. Phoebe Center promote the ordination of women to the priesthood?

A. No, ordination to the priesthood is not part of the Orthodox Christian Tradition, and the St. Phoebe Center does not promote ordination to the priesthood.

Q. If women become ordained as deacons, won't the next step be women becoming ordained to the priesthood?

A. Ordination to the priesthood is not on the agenda for the St. Phoebe Center, and it is not within the Tradition of the Orthodox Church. Ordination to the diaconate is *not* a natural 'stepping stone' to the priesthood, (as well as that of reader, sub-deacon, or deacon) although one or more of these is typically practiced as such in today's cultures. The one-thousand-year practice of ordaining women to the diaconate did not lead to ordination of women to the priesthood; therefore within the framework of the Orthodox Church, we should not think that would be the case today.

Q. Some people profess that the deaconess was not really an ordained role.

A. Women's ordination to the diaconate is well-documented. It appears in the Didascalia. Canon 40 of the Council in Trullo acknowledges the order of the deaconess and provides age guidelines for her ordination. Prayers for the Ordination Rite of the Byzantine Deaconess are found in the service taken from the Barberion Codex and the Bessarionos Codex, and dating from the eighth to the tenth centuries. In his doctoral dissertation, "'Ordination' or 'Appointment' of Deaconesses", Dr. Evangelos Theodorou, Emeritus Professor and Former Rector at the University of Athens, Greece, concluded that the rite to ordain women deacons was a sacramental ordination. This was also considered a higher order because she was ordained by the bishop, during the liturgy, at the altar in the same place as the deacon, she was handed the chalice, and presented with the stole.

Q. Is the push for restoration of the female deacon a result of what the Episcopal and Anglican Churches are practicing with female presbyters and bishops?

A. No, this is not a result of what other denominations are doing. The Orthodox Church looks to Holy Scripture, Holy Tradition, and meeting the needs of its people in the decisions it makes. Moreover, calls for the restoration of this office are over one hundred years old. More information can be found on this topic [here](#).

Q. If women were ordained in the early church to primarily help with female baptisms, why would their role need to be restored today?

A. Female deacons did more than help with female baptisms. *Thirteen different duties* of the deaconess are listed in *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.

Q. Aren't these duties being carried out by our priests?

A. The priest is the rector and shepherd of his parish. To think that the parish priest can meet ALL of the needs of his parish—counseling, administration, liturgical, etc. —is unrealistic and unhealthy for both the priest and his parish. Ordained members of his parish [deacon and deaconess] can help the rector carry out these pastoral and ministerial roles, which can result in a far more faithful and spiritually healthy parish.

Q. Couldn't the deacon help the priest with these pastoral and ministerial duties?

A. Yes, the deacon certainly could! The original duty of the deacon was one of ministry and service. Unfortunately, we have seen these responsibilities fall away, leaving only the liturgical role. As a result, many of our faithful see a distorted view of the deacon. Restoring the rightful role of the deacon is just as important to the health and well-being of the Orthodox faithful.

As for the deacon and priest carrying out pastoral and ministerial roles, this ignores the gifts and talents of 50% of our faithful! It also assumes that the deacon and priest can successfully address all of the unique needs and challenges of women. This simply is not the case. Same-sex counseling is beneficial and needed. There is a reason women seek out other women as friends, and why men seek out other men as friends. There is a common ground that exists that allows each gender to help each other with their unique needs and challenges. For women, that can include counseling on marital relations, motherhood, abortion, miscarriages, sexual abuse, caregiving, and other issues.

Ignoring 50% of the talents and gifts God gives to His people by not setting them aside with ordination so they can minister in an accountable and credible manner is scandalous. Marginalizing the needs of 50% of Christ's flock by not allowing them to be ministered to by

their own gender is also scandalous.

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

A. The official ordination of women to the diaconate provides accountability and order. It demands obedience to her bishop, and requires confidentiality. She would need appropriate training. Ordination would give her a unique and important credibility that the lay minister does not possess. Ordination leads to a greater and far different level of obedience and accountability than that of the lay minister. The ordained role allows us to officially recognize and put to work the gifts and talents of ALL God's people for the health and well-being of ALL His people.

Q. The church has been just fine over the past 1,000 years, so why is there a need to restore the female deacon?

A. Many would argue that things are NOT fine in the church. Recent statistics show that over 60% of Greek Orthodox families of the last generation and 90% of Americans with Greek roots are no longer in communion with the Church. Sexual misconduct exists that could be avoided in part with female deacons serving in ministry. Without females holding an official role in the church as in the early church, 50% of the church is not adequately ministered to. Women possess unique gifts that can strengthen the church and its people. Although our contemporary culture does not segregate men and women as they did in the early church, it is still unhealthy and unrealistic for only males to attempt to successfully minister to females.

In a presentation made by Valerie Karras, Th.D., Ph.D., at the "Deaconesses, Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology International Theological Conference" in Thessaloniki, Greece, Dr. Karras states, "The Church's historical division according to sex of public and private diaconal ministries paralleled the gendered division of functions in almost all aspect of life in the late antique and Byzantine societies in which Orthodox Christianity developed." Dr. Karras also states, "If we examine the cultural context of the historical female diaconate, we cannot fail but be astonished that, in a society where women served almost no public roles and held no public offices, the Church nevertheless not only employed women to serve the pastoral and liturgical needs of its female faithful but ranked them among its major orders of clergy, fully ordaining them in a rite virtually identical to that of their male counterparts." We need to question why the church is not ordaining women today when the cultural barriers of the early church are non-existent.

Q. In what ways could a female diaconate benefit the Church today?

A. In her presentation at the Women & Diaconal Ministry Conference in New York City in December of 2014, Teva Regule PhD (candidate) stated the following: "...a female diaconate is needed to be able to serve fully all of the faithful. For instance, there is still a need for a ministry of women to women. Furthermore, the Church could and should avail itself to the talents and gifts of one-half of the faithful for the building up of the Body. More specifically, the

entire body of the Church could benefit from restoration of the female diaconate in the following ways: strengthening the pastoral care of the faithful; recapturing the philanthropic dimension of the Liturgy; focusing on the Word of God; and connecting the pastoral, social, and liturgical dimensions of the diaconate more fully. These aspects are more fully described in Ms. Regule's [presentation](#).

Q. Is there biblical evidence of the female deacon?

A. In addition to recording the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the texts of the New Testament include information on the early formation and organization of the Church. What we now recognize as the three-fold ordained ministry—bishop, presbyter, and deacon—was, however, only in its embryonic stages. The Church would later develop these ministries to continue its mission. For the diaconate, the classic text for the establishment of the (male) diaconate is found in Acts 6: 1–6. It is here that Stephen is selected as the first deacon. The female deacon is first mentioned in Romans 16:1 where Paul refers to Phoebe as a “deacon of the church” (*diakonon ths ekkhlsias*.) Although some have suggested that “deacon” in this context merely means a “helper” or “servant,” the Church has recognized Phoebe as the prototype of the female deacon just as Stephen is recognized as such for the male deacon. Each is mentioned in their respective ordination prayers in the Byzantine Rite. For instance, in the second prayer of ordination of the female deacon in the Byzantine Rite, Phoebe is the biblical model referenced:

Master and Lord, You do not reject women who offer themselves, and by divine counsel, to minister as is fitting to your holy houses, but you accept them in the order of ministers. Give the grace of your Holy Spirit to this servant of Yours also, who wishes to offer herself to you, and to accomplish the grace of the diaconate, as You gave the grace of Your diaconate to Phoebe, whom you called to the work of the ministry....
(www.anastasis.org.uk/woman_deacon.htm. Original in the *Barberini Codex gr. 336*.
Translated by Archimandrite Ephrem.)

Later in the biblical text, Paul (or his school) outlines some of the moral or ethical qualifications for those who hold church office. In 1Timothy 3:1–13, he describes these for the offices of bishop (*episcopos*) and deacon. Although the inclusion of the female deacon in this passage is not definitive—the corresponding text to the qualifications of the male deacon (1 Tim. 3:11) merely says “women” (*gunaikas*) and some suggest that this refers to the wives of deacons—a strong case can be made that the text is referring to women deacons.

- 1) First, the parallelism of the text (comparing the characteristics of the bishop and deacon) suggests strongly that it is describing the moral characteristics of the woman deacon.
- 2) Second, later church manuals (e.g. Didascalia Apostolorum, Apostolic Constitutions) describe the moral character of the male and female diaconate similarly. In these texts, the existence of the female diaconate is more explicit.
- 3) Third, in general, a number of early church fathers recognized woman as co-ministers (*sundiakonous*) with men (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Theodoret, and John Chrysostom). Moreover, in his commentary on 1Timothy, Chrysostom argues that Paul is not referring to women in general in this passage, but those women who have the

“dignity” or “authority” (*axiwma*) of the diaconate. (Homily 11 on 1 Timothy, PG 62, 553 CD)

As with many church practices, it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from the biblical record. What we can say is that although practices in the early church differed depending on time and place, we can see that women were recognized as co-ministers with men from biblical times and, in some cases, were set apart for diaconal ministry.