

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 work 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 (i.e. the episcopos or presbytery)?

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

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

A. Ordination to the diaconate is not just a "stepping stone" to the priesthood/presbytery. The order has its own charism and ministry. Furthermore, for over a thousand years the Church ordained women to the diaconate and it did not lead to the ordination to the presbytery; therefore within the framework of the Orthodox Church, we should not think that would be the case today.

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

A. Women's ordination to the diaconate is well-documented. The ordination rite with prayers for her ordination are included in the earliest extant Euchologion [Prayerbook] of the Church, the Barberini Codex, as well as the Bessarionos Codex. Furthermore, in his doctoral dissertation, " 'Ordination' [*cheirotomia*] or 'Appointment' [*cheirothesia*] of the Deaconess," Dr. Evangelos Theodorou, Emeritus Professor of Liturgics at the University of Athens, concluded that the rite of the ordination of the deaconess was a sacramental ordination to the higher orders of the clergy. The Deaconess was ordained by the bishop, during the Liturgy, at the altar, and at the same place in the service that the male deacon was ordained. In addition, she was presented with the stole and chalice, and received communion with the clergy prior to the reception by the lower orders of clergy (e.g. sub-deacon) and the laity.

The responsibilities of the Deaconess are also mentioned in early church manuals (e.g. *Didascalia Apostolorum*, *Apostolic Constitutions*) and prescriptions for the office are mentioned in the canonical inheritance of the church (e.g. Canon 40 of the Council of Trullo).

Q. Is the push for restoration of the female deacon a result of what other denominations are doing (e.g. the practice of the Episcopal and Anglican churches to ordain women as 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. The most authoritative call was issued in Rhodes, Greece, in 1988, by an inter-Orthodox consultation attended by bishops and academics of twelve of the autocephalous Churches. 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.

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

A. The priest is the 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 more 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.

Limiting the diaconate to men 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.

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

A. In order to answer this question, it is helpful to understand what an ordination means in an Orthodox context. In one sense, we are all "ordained" into the ministry of Christ—the Royal Priesthood—by virtue of our baptism and chrismation. In a more specific sense, an ordination is a setting apart of people for ministry in a particular community, changing their relationship with the community. Having been recognized by the community, their gifts are then enlivened by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Those elevated to "priesthood" (i.e. bishop, priest, and deacon) are ordained in the context of the Eucharist, at the altar, and by the bishop. Their service is tied to the liturgy and the altar as the source and summit of their ministry. In concrete terms, they connect the liturgy of our lives to the sacramental life of the Church. With the blessing of the bishop, their ministry is universal in scope and confers the authority, credibility, recognition, support, and protection of the Church. It also demands public accountability to the Church and obedience to the bishop.

Lay ministry is important. However, it does not function in a sacramental capacity in the way that an ordained ministry does. (For instance, a lay chaplain can visit and pray with the sick, but cannot bring communion to them.) In addition, the authority, recognition, support, and protection of the Church given to the lay minister can vary greatly. Furthermore, the accountability of the lay minister to the Church can vary as well. (This can even be dangerous to those who are being served in areas where accountability and proper training are particularly important (e.g. pastoral care and spiritual direction.)) Moreover, lay ministry is typically more local in scope and usually dependent on the local priest for its exercise. If the local situation were to change (e.g. a parish gets a new priest who may have a different idea of what a lay minister, in particular a woman, can or should be doing in the church), the ministerial possibilities for her can change abruptly without recourse.

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. 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.

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

A. The female diaconate could benefit the Church by strengthening the pastoral care of the faithful and connecting them to the sacramental life of the Church; 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 a [presentation](#) by Teva Regule PhD (candidate).

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. Here, we see the beginnings of what we now recognize as the three-fold pattern of ordained ministry—bishop, presbyter, and deacon, albeit in their 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 deacons) suggests strongly that it is describing the moral characteristics of women deacons. In both cases, the text first refers to the qualifications of the office holder and then continues to refer to the arrangements of their respective households. Although the text assumes the bishop is male and married with a family, it does not mention any moral prescriptions for his wife. However, in the case of the deacons, the moral qualifications of the “women” are mentioned prior to noting the domestic arrangements and responsibilities of the deacons. This would imply strongly that the “women” (in this case) refers to the women deacons and not the wives of the deacons.
- 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, we know that a number of early church fathers recognized women as co-ministers (*sundiakonous*) with men (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Theodoret, and John Chrysostom). In this case, 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)

The New Testament only shows the ordained offices of the church in their nascent form. However, from the totality of the biblical record, we can see that women were recognized as co-ministers with men from earliest times and, in some cases, were set apart for diaconal ministry.

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

A. First, it is important to realize that 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. *Theoretically*, a bishop could ordain a woman to the diaconate today. (For instance, on Pentecost Sunday in 1911, Archbishop (now, Saint) Nektarios ordained a nun to the diaconate to serve the needs of her monastery.) However, he is unlikely to do so without the approval of the Synod of bishops of the autocephalous church to which he belongs.

In general, the question must be answered within the context of the decline of the diaconate of the church more broadly. From historical sources, we know that by the 7th century in the West, the male diaconate had become mostly a transitional office to the priesthood/presbytery and the ordained female diaconate, which had not been as widely accepted or exercised in the West, had disappeared.

In both cases, the various (active) monastic orders seemed to have assumed many of the historical functions of these ministries.

In the East, both the male and female diaconates were more developed ministries. For instance, the male deacon prepared the offering, assisted in the liturgical celebration, preached, provided pastoral care to the flock, acted as an emissary of the bishop in church and philanthropic matters, etc. The deaconess helped with the baptism of women, taught and provided pastoral care for many of the newly illumined in her care, acted as an agent of the bishop in church matters and philanthropic activity, supervised in the liturgy, etc. However, with the fall of Byzantium the scope and function of the diaconate diminished greatly. Today, the male deacon generally functions almost exclusively in the liturgical realm and, oftentimes, the diaconate has become merely a transitional stage to the ordination to the priesthood/presbytery. The female diaconate has virtually disappeared. There does not seem to be any one factor that led to the diminishment of the diaconate for men and the disappearance of the order for women. Most seem to revolve around social-political realities.

In the early church, the two main ministerial orders were the episcopacy and the diaconate. As the Christianity grew and spread, the presbyter, a delegate of the bishop to the local community, assumed more responsibility for its ministerial and pastoral needs. Later, with the attacks against and eventual collapse of many of the centers of Christianity (e.g. by the Islamic Ottomans), the social and philanthropic outreach of the church—an important diaconal function—as well as its public presence, were more limited.* In addition, or as a result of the declining diaconate, some of the male diaconal duties were assumed by the priest/presbyter (e.g. preparation of the bread and wine for the offering, intoning some petitions, etc. in the liturgical celebration and pastoral care duties outside of the gathering) and/or the sub-deacon (assisting the priest in the liturgical celebration, intoning the petitions of the antiphons, etc.), hollowing out the ministry, but placing additional burdens on the presbyter particularly. The scope of the female diaconate had contracted

over time as well. Once infant baptism became the norm, fewer deaconesses were needed to assist in the baptism of adult women. Eventually, the female deacon was limited to functioning mostly within women's monasteries. Oftentimes, the abbess of the monastery was an ordained deaconess. While she continued to provide instruction and spiritual guidance to those under her care and serve in the liturgy, her ministry was exercised in a more limited context and out of public view. The rise of a more Levitical understanding of "uncleanness" after iconoclasm seemed to contribute to the disappearance of the female diaconate altogether, since it would have prohibited her liturgical ministry at certain times of the month. Moreover, the understanding of women as being "unclean" began to be applied to women more generally, limiting the liturgical activity of all women. ([More information here.](#))

The 20th century saw a flourishing of liturgical scholarship and a serious look at the pastoral needs and institutions of the church, especially in the Christian West. (For the most part, western Christian scholars sought to reclaim the inheritance of the undivided Church, oftentimes by looking to its expression in the East.) Because of what has been called the Liturgical Movement, many of the Christian communities in the West reclaimed an understanding of the vital importance of the diaconate—a ministry of liturgy, word and charity. Today, the permanent diaconate for both men, and in some places women, is thriving in those communities, ministering more fully to the needs of their faithful and the world.

In the Christian East, calls for the reinstatement of the deaconess had begun in Russia in the 19th century. (See [Calls for the Rejuvenation of the Deaconess in Modern Era.](#)) In the early part of the 20th century, the Moscow Council (1917–18) discussed the issue (as well as a number of others aimed at ministering more fully to the faithful), but no action was taken at the time due to the Bolshevik Revolution. Soon, all the Orthodox churches in the "Eastern Bloc" would be subject to state suppression and any attempt at revitalizing church life at the institutional level (including a rejuvenated diaconate for both men and women) would be put on hold; they were concerned primarily with just surviving. These churches have only recently emerged from state control. Similarly, in the Greek-speaking world, the Church in the 20th century was only beginning to re-emerge after 500 hundred years of Ottoman rule. It has only been within the last hundred years that it has begun to re-engage with society and look at its pastoral needs, internal structures, and external mission. Notably, in 2004 the Church of Greece took steps to reinstate the female diaconate to serve the needs of remote monasteries. ([More information here.](#)) Other ecclesial practices that have a much longer history than the disappearance of the female diaconate are beginning to be re-examined and reclaimed by the Orthodox Church as well. For example, frequent communion of the laity (which had fallen into disuse, by some accounts, as early as the 4/5th c) is now encouraged, the reading aloud of the prayers of the liturgy by the celebrant, especially the Anaphora, (a practice that had died out, in some places, as early as the 6th c.) is found in more places, etc. These renewed practices have contributed to the spiritual growth and enrichment of the faithful. Let us hope that the Church will reexamine and see the efficacy of a renewed and rejuvenated diaconate for both men and women similarly to meet the ministerial needs of Her faithful and the world for today.

*Because Christianity was brought to the Slavs during a certain epoch of its existence (i.e. after much of the social and philanthropic emphases of the diaconate had disappeared), the diaconate in the Slavic tradition has usually been more limited in scope and more particularly focused on its liturgical expression.