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The Deaconess in the Orthodox Church

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The History of the Deaconess: the early Church through the 12th century

Efforts in the modern era to renew the ministry of the Deaconess: mid 19th century to the present

Why ordination? Why not simply pursue these ministries as laypersons?

What would be the diaconal ministries of deaconesses today? What are the needs?

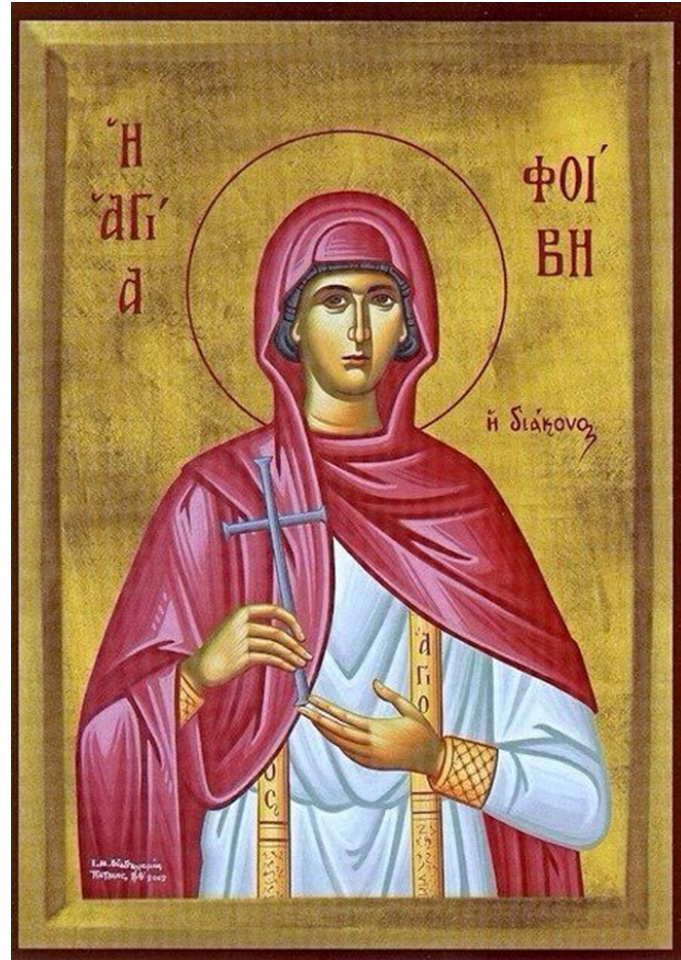
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Historical evidence for the ordained order of the female deacon:

•Evidence from apostolic times



•**Phoebe** The first witness of the order of women deacons is in Rom. 16:1-2: “I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a deaconess (*diakonos/διάκονος*, *servant*) of the church in Cenchrea.”
**Origen and Chrysostom both interpret the term as “deacon.”
**Phoebe is commemorated on Sept 3 and referred to as a “model deaconess” in Orthodox liturgical texts. In her icon she is often identified as “deaconess,” and is also often shown wearing the diaconal stole

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1 Timothy 3:11: After a section detailing requirements for deacons, the next passage reads: *“Likewise, the women must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.”*

While some have taken this to refer to the wives of deacons, many scholars argue that the literary format, context and logic of the passage indicate that it is about women deacons. Chrysostom supports this point and says:

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 (*diakonoï*), for it is necessary, good, and right, most especially in the church. (*Homily 11* on 1 Timothy 3:11)

Pliny the Younger, a pagan writing in about 112, mentions Christian deaconesses in Bithynia

St. Clement of Alexandria (before 215) claims that the female diaconate was necessary and existed since the apostolic period.

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•Early church orders, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, *Apostolic Constitutions*, *Testamentum Domini* (3rd- 4th centuries) give directions for both “deacon” and “deaconess”

Apostolic Constitutions, Book VII.19:

Concerning a deaconess, I Bartholomew make this constitution: O bishop, you shall lay your hands upon her in the presence of the presbytery, and of the deacons and deaconesses, and shall say:—

O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who replenished with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; who did not disdain that Your only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, ordained women to be keepers of Your holy gates—do Thou now also look down upon this Your servant, who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Your Holy Spirit, and cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Your glory, and the praise of Your Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to You and the Holy Spirit for ever. Amen.

Other sources corroborating the presence and work of deaconesses:

- Saints’ lives (*vitae*); legislation, canons of local and Ecumenical councils, seals, epigrams, writings of the Church Fathers, writings of historians and chronographers
- church manuals, service order books (*euchologia*)

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The Byzantine Deaconess was ranked with the higher clergy; when the distinction developed between ‘ordained’ (*cheirotomia*) and ‘consecrated’ (*cheirothesia*), both the deacon and the deaconess were confirmed through ordination, (*cheirotomia*, used for the major orders), not consecration (*cheirothesia*, used for the minor orders).

- Justinian’s *Novel 6* (6th c.) 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

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

•Minimum age

- originally 60 years old (Theodosius)
- later reduced to 50 and then 40 years old (Justinian); occasional exceptions

•Unmarried marital status

- Virgin or Widow of one husband

•Moral conduct expected

- severe penalties for the misconduct of female deacons (confiscation of property; even death penalty)

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Key elements of the ordination rite of the female deacon in the Byzantine period:

- Her ordination occurred during the eucharistic liturgy, at the same point as 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 (which is how the deacon wears it at communion)
- After receiving the Eucharist from the bishop at the altar, she was given the chalice and replaced it on the altar

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1ST BYZANTINE ORDINATION PRAYER FOR THE FEMALE DEACON

O God, the Holy and almighty, who sanctified woman through the birth in the flesh of your only-begotten Son and our God from the Virgin; and bestowed the grace and advent of your Holy Spirit not to men alone but also to women; look now, Lord, 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; preserve her in the 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

Sovereign Lord, You who do not reject women offering themselves and wishing to minister in your holy houses in accordance with what is fitting, but receive them into an order of ministers; bestow the grace of your Holy Spirit also upon this your servant who desires 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.)*

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Deaconess Saints:

- Scholars have found over 40 literary references and 61 inscriptions giving us information on named deaconesses in the Christian East
- At least 23 women saints have been considered deaconesses in the Orthodox church calendar.
- St Olympias, who founded monasteries, orphanages and hospitals in Constantinople, and was a great friend and important supporter of St. John Chrysostom, is a deaconess chosen to be included in the dome at SS Peter and Paul to witness to the diaconal work of women in the Church. Three of her relatives, Elisanthia, Martyria, and Palladia, were also ordained deaconesses by St. John Chrysostom to assist her.
- Important female deacons noted in Holy Scripture and in Patristic writings are: St Phoebe, named by St Paul as the great helper of many and as deaconess; St Nonna and St Gorgonia, the mother and sister of St Gregory the Theologian; and St. Macrina, the sister of St. Basil the Great.
- Famous deaconesses known through the lives of Saints are St Tatiana of Rome, St Romana, St Susanna, and St. Irene Chrysovalanton.

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St Tatiana of Rome the Deaconess St Olympia of Constantinople the Deaconess

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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, including performing the actual anointing (*church orders*)
- Catechized women, and then 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 homebound women (*Didascalia Apostolorum, also noted by St Photios in letter to a bishop, 9th c.*)
- Served as abbesses and liturgical leaders in women's monasteries

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WHY DID THE FEMALE DIACONATE FALL INTO DISUSE?

Various theories suggested:

- Decline in the number of adult female converts
- Shift of the duties of the female diaconate from parishes to monasteries
- The Influence of **Islam** – including the greater circumscription of the public activity of women
- The increasing importance of **Levitical ritual impurity** in the Byzantine Church (with restrictions on menstruating women in worship being imposed in the 7th and 8th centuries)
- The Levitical law was given as the explicit (or sometimes implicit) source, but was not applied consistently, in particular, men were exempted
- Shift in scope and activities of the other orders of the clergy

Conflict between the traditions and influence of the Church at Antioch and the Church at Alexandria:

- **Antioch**: rejected ritual impurity (possibly in combating Judaizers)
- **Alexandria**: imposed ritual impurity restrictions (on women) – the “canons” of Dionysius enter through the *Council in Trullo* (Quinisext, 692)

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

- 19th c. – in the 1830's proposals considered revitalizing the ministry of ordained deaconesses (which did not previously exist in Russia), for the purpose of missionary work in China. Later, royals, some hierarchs, and several other prominent Russians supported the restoration of the female diaconate to serve in parish churches and in philanthropic work
- 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
- In 2003 the Synod of the Church of Greece voted to reinstitute the ordained female diaconate, beginning with remote women's monasteries

Major Conferences Calling for the restoration of the Deaconess:

- 1976 Consultation on the Role and Participation of Women in the Orthodox Church (Agapia, Romania)
- 1988 Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation (Rhodes, Greece)
- 1996 Discerning the 'Signs of the Times': Women in the Life of the Orthodox Church (Damascus, Syria)
- 1997 Inter-Orthodox Conference for Women (Istanbul, Turkey)

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From the official statement issued by the 1988 Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation (Rhodes, Greece), and confirmed by multiple subsequent Conferences:

“The apostolic order of the deaconess should be revived. It was never altogether abandoned in the Orthodox Church though it has tended to fall into disuse. There is ample evidence from apostolic times, from the patristic, canonical and liturgical tradition, well into the Byzantine period (and even in our own day) that this order was held in high honor. The deaconess was ordained within the sanctuary during the Divine Liturgy with two prayers, she received the Orarion (the deacon’s stole) and received Holy Communion at the Altar... The revival of this ancient order should be envisaged on the basis of the ancient prototypes testified to in many sources ... and with the prayers found in the Apostolic Constitutions and the ancient Byzantine liturgical books.”

This restoration “would represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world. This would be all the more true if the diaconate in general (male as well as female) were restored in all places in its original, manifold services (diakoniai) with extension into the social sphere, in the spirit of the ancient tradition and in response to the increasing specific needs of our time.”

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- The Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Alexandria resolved to restore the deaconess ministry during its session held in November 2016.
- On the feast of the Great Martyr Theodore of Tyre, 17 February 2016, a festive Divine Liturgy was celebrated at the Holy Church of St Nicholas, within the Missionary Centre of Kolwezi, Democratic Republic of the Congo. At the end of the Divine Liturgy, Patriarch Theodoros of Alexandria consecrated the Catechist elder Theano, one of the first members of the Missionary staff in Kolwezi, to “Deaconess of the Missions” of the Holy Metropolis of Katanga and read the prayer for one entering the “ecclesiastic ministry” for three Nuns and two Catechists, in order for them to assist the missionary effort of the Holy Metropolis, particularly in the Sacraments of Baptisms of adults and marriages, as well as in the Catechetical department of the local Church.
- Photographic evidence indicates this was a consecration (*cheirothesia*, given to lower clergy), not an ordination (*cheirotomia*, given to the higher clergy); no *orarion* (diaconal stole) was conferred on the candidates, but the new (sub)deaconesses wear the subdiaconal towel on their heads and carry the subdeacon’s water bowl.
- The Patriarch specifically identifies the consecrated women as ‘deaconesses’

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Patriarch Theodoros of Alexandria Performs first Consecration of Deaconesses, February 23, 2017



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Why ordination?

- Set apart for service, the deaconess is graced by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the work of service to which she has been called
- Ordination establishes the deaconess in unity with the faith, and keeps her in the truth, by placing her under the spiritual and ecclesiastical authority (the *omophorion*) of the Bishop
- Ordination provides direction, support, training, certification, authorization, and episcopal oversight for the deaconess
- The work of the deaconess is made permanent, public, accountable, and universal
- The deaconess is incorporated into the life of the Church, the life of the Church is sealed into the life of the deaconess, and the service she gives to the Church becomes the presence of the Church in outreach to those in need
- Ordination provides a connection to the entire life and community of the Church, past, present and future

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What would be the diaconal ministries of deaconesses today? What are the needs?

The first deacons were ordained to a pastoral ministry and to assist in the process of the Church's worship: Acts 6:1-6 (to attend to the needs of the widows "in the daily distribution", and to "serve tables" at the gathering of the Church)

In keeping with the diaconate's tradition of the past, deacons and deaconesses may serve in many capacities as circumstances, needs and talents allow. They traditionally and in a special way are ambassadors of their Bishop, and so their duties and ministries will vary according to the direction of their Bishop, the needs of the particular pastoral context, and their particular training and talents.

They may be appointed to specifically assist at a particular parish; or may serve multiple parishes at the diocesan level; or may be attached to a specific institution such as a monastery, hospital, extended care facility, a shelter or group home; or may be attached to the work of a particular Bishop or priest (in, for example, the missionary field)

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Possible Ministries for the Deaconess (and Deacon)

Pastoral care for the marginalized: serving the hungry, the poor, the orphaned, the homeless, praying with those in prison

Attending the emotional and spiritual needs of the elderly, disabled, ill, and dying (including chaplaincy or visitations at hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices)

Assisting the priest in counseling women suffering domestic violence, miscarriage or infertility, sexual abuse and rape, unwanted pregnancy, the consequences of abortion, and other issues specific to women

Education: catechesis, youth and adult education, Bible study, theological study

Lead people in prayer, assist with liturgical worship, music and church order

Distribute Holy Communion to the ill or the homebound

Missionary work: with limited resources in the missionary field, all of the above work of the deaconess (and deacon) becomes more crucial

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A Final Thought:

The female diaconate is not about recognition or status. It's about the Church going into the world to meet the needs of a suffering humanity, both those within the body of Christ and those still seeking Him.

Do we have the courage and vision to restore this ancient order to act as the hands of the Church in meeting the particular conditions and needs of our parishes and the wider world today?

Let us not be a Church of scarcity and lack, accepting what is missing, or what we can't do or provide. We are a Church of abundance and love. Through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, conferred in the mystery of ordination to the diaconate of women and men, this infinite abundance can reach further into the lives of all.

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