

Benefits of Ordaining Women Deacons

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My remarks this afternoon will combine a discussion of the benefits of a restored female diaconate with some reflections on what I would like to see in a restored and *renewed* female diaconate, in terms of both qualifications and ministries. All of this will be informed by my several decades of research on the female diaconate and other orders of ordained and consecrated women in the early and Byzantine church. I will also attempt to respond, at least in part, to some of the arguments raised either against the clear historical record or against a modern revival of the historical ordained order.

Overall, the benefits of a restored female diaconate are obvious since they are largely the same as the benefits of a restored permanent male diaconate. As Dn. John Chryssavgis pointed out yesterday evening, it is astounding to look at the numbers and variety of clergy in the early and Byzantine periods and compare that to the typical situation in a modern Orthodox church, particularly here in the West, where we do not have the luxury of state-provided salaries and benefits for our clergy, as they do in Greece, for example. Most of our parishes have only one priest and no deacon. Even in those parishes, generally in the OCA or the Antiochian Archdiocese, that have a deacon, that deacon almost always serves liturgical functions only. He either is not paid at all or is paid very little, and so by necessity must work a full-time job outside of the parish, which necessarily reduces the time he has available to provide any pastoral or administrative ministry to his parish. Also, few if any of the correspondence or other long-distance diaconal education programs provide anything beyond the barest minimum in terms of training in counseling, chaplaincy, and other pastoral care.

So, we have a problem in most of our parishes, namely, that a single priest, or perhaps two priests in a parish with, say, 500 families or more, simply does not have enough hours in the

day to keep up with all the pastoral, educational, and administrative demands of a thriving community. Nor *should* he be expected to juggle all these hats. The priest's primary functions are to celebrate the Eucharist and other sacraments and to preach the Word of God. As Dn. John mentioned, our word "deacon" comes from the Greek word for service, *diakonia*. That service historically has been focused on the areas I mentioned above: pastoral care, education, and administration. Historically, the administrative ministry was conducted at the diocesan level, with deacons filling many of the offices in the diocesan chancery. (It's interesting that the Constantinopolitan patriarchate, as well as many Greek dioceses and metropolises, have continued this practice which was so prevalent in the Byzantine era.) Today, those diocesan administrative functions, as well as similar administrative responsibilities on the parish level could – and probably should – be done by one or more deacons. Just as women serve in every type of administrative office in our society at large, there is no reason why they cannot do the same in the church, and do so with the *charisma* of ordination.

This is probably a good time to discuss the issue of what the qualifications and functions of female deacons were historically, and how we might conceive of them today. (By the way, I normally use the term "female deacons" rather than "deaconesses" since the latter term also refers to the wives of deacons, and also because in the canonical, hagiographical, and other literature, the Greek word διάκονος – deacon – tends to be used more commonly than the word διακόνισσα for women who were actually ordained to the diaconate.) In the early and Byzantine church, women had to be unmarried (they could be widowed, but could only have been married once) and they had to be of advanced age (especially for that time period) in order to be ordained: originally, the minimum age was 60, but it was later lowered to 40, and even then particularly wealthy and well-connected women could be exempted from the age requirement, e.g., St. Olympias, who was ordained at the age of 29 by St. Gregory the Theologian and later was a spiritual child, close confidante, and supporter of St. John Chrysostom. By contrast, married men could be ordained to the diaconate and the minimum age was 25.

If you think about the age requirement and the restriction against married women being ordained, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the church wanted as deacons only women who less likely to be viewed sexually, that is, celibate, generally post-menopausal women. This emphasis is also evident in the harsher penalties applied to female deacons who have sexual lapses. In contrast to their male counterparts, who were simply defrocked, female deacons lost all

their property and, under Justinian, were even subject to the death penalty (although he later repealed that). This double standard – the more stringent requirements coupled with harsher penalties for deviation from these restrictions – is, ironically, an indication that these women really were recognized as part of the clergy. Why else would they be subject to such restrictions and penalties? Their clerical status as deacons was real, despite the fact that their diaconal functions mirrored, on the ecclesiastical level, the social functions of women versus men in ancient societies: women operated in the private sphere of the home while men operated in the public sphere. Hence, as Metropolitan Kallistos observed in his video remarks, female deacons distributed the Eucharist to women in their homes but not to men or women during the Divine Liturgy, nor did they do petitions, read the Gospel, or preach the sermon. (I should note, however, that women *did* preach in the early church; preaching was called “prophesying” and was a charismatic office and function filled by both men *and* women, as we see in Acts and I Corinthians.)

Permit me a slight excursion here into deeper issues of theological anthropology, that is, the theological understanding of human nature. As our society, and many Christian churches, has become more egalitarian, we have seen a rise in rhetoric rejecting such social and ecclesial equality on the basis of what some perceive as a God-ordained hierarchy or ordering of the sexes, commonly referred to as “male headship.” The argument is that the public-private division is a natural complementarity with which God has imbued human nature and that a true equality of the sexes is unnatural and a subversion of that state. Well, in addition to the research I’ve done on women’s liturgical participation, I also have done a goodly amount on this question of the nature of sexual differentiation; in fact, I wrote my doctoral dissertation from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki on the nature of gender as seen in Greek patristic interpretations of the creation accounts. My research showed that the Fathers do *not* believe sexual differentiation – in other words, our existence as male and female – to be significant in terms of the basic nature of humanity. (In fact, they don’t even believe we will continue to exist as male and female in the resurrection, but that’s a whole other aspect of the topic.) The domination of men over women, they believe, is a result of the Fall. St. John Chrysostom is perhaps most explicit regarding the primordial, ontological equality of the sexes, discussing the creation of man and woman in his homilies on 1 Corinthians:

Wherefore you see, she was not subjected as soon as she was made; nor, when He brought her to the man, did either she hear any such thing from God, nor did the man say any such word to her: he said indeed that she was “bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh.” (Gen. 2:23) but of rule or subjection he no where made mention to her.¹

Of course, some argue that God imposed the negative consequences of the Fall and that therefore we must live according to that. However, the other negative consequences listed include toilsome labor, pain in childbirth, and death. We do not say that, because God imposed these consequences on humanity, we therefore should not make use of labor-saving devices or modern medical advances which reduce pain and extend life. Moreover, Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection have restored to humanity a way *back* to where we should be. Why, then, is it only in this one area – the subordination of women – that arguments are made that this inequality of the sexes is God-ordained and must remain static?

Clearly, most people, at least in industrialized countries, have not bought this argument. In our contemporary church and society, men and women are no longer rigidly divided between the public and private spheres; in 21st-century Western societies, women and men have identical public functions in virtually all areas of life, so the public-private dichotomy no longer makes sense. Therefore, applying the “spirit” rather than the “letter” of the law, so to speak, I would advocate for a renewed female diaconate to have both qualifications and functions that are identical to those of the male diaconate.

Liturgically, female deacons today could distribute the Eucharist at the Divine Liturgy, recite petitions, read the Gospel, and preach the sermon. In fact, St. Nectarios ordained some female deacons at the women’s monastery he founded in the early 20th century on the Greek island of Aegina precisely so they *could* do some of these “public” liturgical functions. For example, the female deacons he ordained chanted petitions, which was not a traditional function for them, but he wanted the nuns to have a fuller liturgical life for their daily cycle of services when there was no priest to serve. (Similarly, when the Synod of Greece decided about a decade ago to restore the female diaconate, they planned to begin with nuns at remote monasteries.)

¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on I Corinthians*, Hom. 26, 2 (3) (PG 61: 215). English translation in John Chrysostom, *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, edited by Talbot W. Chambers, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, vol. 12 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994 (reprint)), 150.

Among the Oriental Orthodox churches, the Armenian Apostolic Church reinstated the female diaconate in the 19th century, and it gave its deaconesses the same liturgical functions and vested them the same (with the exception of the veil, as they were all nuns) as their male counterparts.. There are still some female deacons in the Armenian church, and they still are vested and serve liturgically identically to their male counterparts. (You can even see one serving in a YouTube video available through the St. Phoebe Center’s Facebook page.)

Speaking of liturgics, I would advocate that the ordination rite, which in the Byzantine manuals is virtually identical for the male and female diaconate, could be truly identical in form. The few small differences that existed in the Byzantine rite were primarily a reflection of the functional differences between male and female deacons since the female deacon, as I mentioned earlier, did not participate in the public liturgical functions of the male deacon. Thus, e.g., the female deacon was vested with the *orarion* in the manner in which not only the subdeacon wears it (crossed in the back, with both ends coming down in the front), but also the deacon as he reconfigures it shortly before the Eucharist (the two ends were brought to the front so that the male or female deacon could use them to hold the chalice since the clergy did not hold it with their bare hands). Prior to the reception and distribution of the Eucharist, the deacon wears the *orarion* draped over one shoulder and he holds up the front end when reciting petitions; the contemporary female deacon could do similarly. The church may want, however, to retain the separate prayers for the female deacon, which mention, e.g., Phoebe, whom St. Paul particularly commends in Romans 16 and who every early Christian writer in the East understood to be a female deacon. And, of course, the prayers should continue to use the invocation of the “divine grace” (θεῖος χάρις), a formula found in the ordination rites for all the three major orders of clergy (deacon, presbyter/priest, and bishop) but not for the lower orders (subdeacon on down).

There is a mistaken belief that female deacons need not be revived in the modern church since they are no longer needed. This argument rests on a fallacy, namely, that female deacons were needed, historically, only for propriety’s sake for the baptism of adult women converts since even adult men and women in the early centuries of Christianity were baptized in the nude. But we no longer practice the nude baptism of adult converts; therefore, we no longer need female deacons (so the argument goes). In fact, however, various church manuals and other documents from early Christian times describe multiple functions for female deacons. Taking the Eucharist to the sick was one of those and is still an important part of pastoral care today. Taking

the Eucharist to the homebound is not like delivering takeout; it is a form of chaplaincy. Many women, whether physically ill or dealing with any of a host of emotional or spiritual issues, would feel more comfortable talking about those issues with another woman as opposed to a man, no matter how caring and responsive a priest or male deacon might be. In fact, some *men* feel more comfortable discussing certain emotional and other issues with a woman as opposed to another man.

Serving as a chaperone for female parishioners who needed to meet with a male clergyman was yet another historical function of female deacons, and this is clearly still a needed function today. Although clerical molestation of children receives the most press coverage and, rightly, the most outrage within our society, in actual fact, the most common form of clergy sexual misconduct by far is male clergy who become sexually involved with adult female parishioners. Even if the relationship appears to be initiated by the parishioner, this is *always* a form of sexual abuse because of the spiritual power or authority which a clergyman has over a parishioner (regardless of whether the cleric acknowledges that such a power differential in fact exists). Female deacons, particularly those who receive the appropriate training in counseling and spiritual direction, can obviate the need for many women to meet individually with their priest and, in those cases where they do need to meet with their priest, especially on a regular basis, they can provide a discrete presence which would forestall any potential “unfortunate development” in the relationship between priest and parishioner, and avoid “he said, she said” accusations.

I think it’s also important to point out the fallacious, or at least inconsistent and biased, reasoning underlying the argument that we no longer need female deacons, what may be termed an “evolutionary” approach (although I think it more properly should be understood as “*devolutionary*”). I don’t mean here that evolutionary development does not and cannot exist within Orthodoxy. Far too many Orthodox operate under the misguided assumption that there has been *no* liturgical or other type of development within our church and that everything is being done exactly as it was in the time of the apostles, or at least of their grandchildren. No, the reason that I consider the evolutionary argument against female deacons in the modern church to be inconsistent and biased is that this development is assumed to work only one way, that is, in order to *exclude* women from ordination even to an order to which they historically *had* been ordained. (Actually, I find it ironic that this evolutionary argument, as a reason *not* to restore the

female diaconate, tends to be used by exactly the same types of people who in almost any other circumstance eschew any notion of change in Orthodoxy.) Yes, evolution – in liturgy, ecclesiology, and other areas – is truly part of the life of our church, but it should not be used as an excuse to restrict women *more* today than they were a millennium ago, nor to advocate for the permanent abolition of the female diaconate (which, as Metropolitan Kallistos has noted, simply fell into disuse).

Rather, a truly contextualized understanding of the church and its structure would support the expansion of the qualifications and functions of the female diaconate to be identical to those of the male diaconate. Let us ordain to the diaconate young married women with a commitment and passion for church *service*, for *diakonia*. Of course, they must receive the proper training and education. All deacons should have some basic theological education; beyond that, the area in which they wish to serve would dictate what deeper level of education a deacon would need, whether male or female. Those who wish to work in religious education would need, in addition to more theological coursework, training in pedagogy. Those who wish to work in pastoral care would need training in counseling and chaplaincy, including at least one unit of CPE (clinical pastoral education). Those who wish to work with the church's charitable activities would benefit from internships or field service under the tutelage of someone with the knowledge and experience to guide them. The early church recognized that no one person could do everything in the community. We need to recognize that as well.

Although I was asked to, and have tried to, speak to the benefits of a female diaconate in the church, I must also mention what I feel is one of the greatest difficulties, not only to the restoration of a female diaconate, but also to the renewal and expansion of the male diaconate: money. Most of our parishioners, especially among the wealthier Greek and Arab ethnic communities, do not financially support the church as they should. A renewed male and female diaconate, to be truly successful and spark a more vibrant spiritual life within our communities, needs to have deacons who are able to devote themselves *full-time* to their ministry within the church. If we are unable to provide decent salaries with appropriate medical and pension benefits, we will continue our current model of parishes with one priest and, at best, a deacon who is able only to serve liturgically on Sunday mornings.

But we can do so much more. At its heart, *this* is the overriding benefit of restoring and re-envisioning the female diaconate. We can do so much more as a Christian community if we

do not shackle the talents of fully half of our body, if we do not ignore the spiritual gifts which the Holy Spirit bestows on men and women alike. Why should we exist as someone who suffers a paralysis of one side of the body when simply making use of the “modern medicine” of social equality could give us complete use of our full body? Doing more, engaging the women in our community more fully by incorporating them into the diaconate, will take a variety of commitments: a commitment from our hierarchs to study this issue in depth and with a true desire to facilitate spiritually vibrant, theologically savvy, and pastorally caring communities; a commitment from our faithful to provide the financial support needed to have a team of clergy rather than a single, overworked priest who is expected to provide all services to everyone; and, finally, a commitment from those who wish to be ordained (or already are), whether male or female, to commit their lives to the church and to recognize that this lifelong commitment is a marriage. The diaconate is not simply a job. Holy orders is a sacrament of the church, and everyone from the ordinand, through the faithful shouting “Αξιως!”, to the bishop laying on hands in a rite spanning two millennia, must recognize it and support it for what it is, not simply a stepping-stone to the priesthood, but a consecrated life of service to God and to Christ’s church.