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June 2018



## Meet New Board Member Kyra Limberakis



**Kyra Limberakis, M.T.S.**, is Associate Director of the CrossRoad Summer Institute and Assistant Director of the Office of Vocation & Ministry at Hellenic College Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology.

She received her Bachelors from Villanova University and her Masters of Theological Studies from the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry where she focused her studies on youth and young adult ministry as well as the ministry of women in the Church. Kyra's experience in youth work includes serving as staff for her metropolis camp, Ionian Village, and CrossRoad—all programs that were part of her own faith formation. Her current

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work also includes running programs for undergraduate women at Hellenic College. In addition to working in full time ministry, Kyra has written articles on the topic of young women's faith formation as resilient persons in and for the life of the Church. Since graduating, she has continued to take theology and ministry classes at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary while working full time.

The granddaughter of an Orthodox priest, she is committed to the education and ministry of young people for the future of the Church.

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## Household Names

*Junia, Phoebe, & Prisca in Early Christian Rome*

by Michael Peppard

appearing April 23, 2018 in [Commonweal](#)

Paul's letter to the Romans is considered the "most significant theological text in Christian history." But if we examine it from another lens, we will be made aware of his reference to three specific women and how they were important to both Paul and the Christians in Rome and Corinth. At a time when women were considered second class and uneducated, these women, among others, were considered "authoritative leaders" in the unfolding Christian communities.

[Read the article](#)

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## Women's Gifts and the Diaconate

by Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D.

originally posted on [Public Orthodoxy](#)

The reinstatement of the ordained female diaconate in the Orthodox Church today would result in a much-needed and transformative outpouring of women's gifts into the Church and into the world.

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In order to appreciate the positive potential of the female diaconate, we must understand the absolute parity of women and men in the eyes of the Orthodox Church. The Church has always understood men and women to be equally created in the image and likeness of God, even if its broader cultural surrounding was highly patriarchal. As such, statements like this from Saint Basil were nothing short of radical: “The natures are alike of equal honor, the virtues are equal, the struggle equal, the judgment alike” (On the Human Condition). This thinking is representative of early Church Fathers, including Gregory of Nazianzus and Clement of Alexandria, and amounts to a rejection of any hierarchical understanding of the relationship between men and women in the Roman world. Indeed, this understanding of women and men as equal in their creation by God is one of Christianity’s great gifts to the world.

To be sure, this does not mean that all human life has been experienced in this way; indeed, the subjugation of women (at least within marriage) was part of the Fall (“[Your husband] shall rule over you” Genesis 3:16). We as Orthodox, however, do not enshrine any of the other characteristics of our fallen state outlined in Genesis as part of a sanctified and unquestioned order of things—difficult labor, our inclination toward violence, pain during childbirth, etc.—instead, we understand all of these conditions as worthy of our efforts to mitigate and overcome and that will ultimately be overcome.

Also, to be sure, this does not mean that all Christians throughout history embraced this understanding. For example, the early Church acquiesced to Roman norms of a patrician man’s authority in the domain of his household after it transitioned from a community that expected an imminent second coming to a community that was learning how to self-perpetuate. There is also no shortage of memorable misogynistic quips from famous rigorists, like Tertullian, who claimed, “Woman is a temple built over a sewer.”

There is nothing disrespectful to the Church in acknowledging that it has an imperfect historical record on this issue. In fact, it is our responsibility as Christians to lovingly mend any tears in

the fabric of the Church's earthly presence. Most importantly, these ideas have never been considered to be the basis for an Orthodox understanding of the essence of women and man, not in their own time nor our own.

The weight of our tradition reflects the sentiment expressed above by St. Basil: that women and men are equal, a truth which, of course, was illustrated by Jesus Christ himself. He accorded respect and dignity to women at every turn as recorded in the Gospels, even in the most unlikely of circumstances. There may be no greater affirmation of the respect, dignity, and equality of women with men than the fact that it was his women friends to whom he first appeared as the risen Christ.

And here is the second thing that must be understood in order to appreciate the possibility of the female diaconate for the Church today: Even within the context of the Church's conviction of the essential equality of women and men, there is no sense that the Church understands women and men to be perfectly equivalent. Instead, there has always been an understanding and appreciation for the ways in which the human experience is lived out differently between women and men; the incarnational reality of women and men is not the same. This is reflected in the lives of the saints, in the marriage rite, in the iconography of the Church, the hymnography of the Church, and so on.

When we fully appreciate the fundamental parity between women and men, it becomes clear that any objection to the female diaconate based on women being subordinate to men holds no weight in the Orthodox context. And when we fully appreciate the longstanding acknowledgement of women and men's different lived experiences and perspectives—their different incarnational realities—we also appreciate that men and women have different gifts to offer the Church.

In this light, the fading away of the female diaconate in the late Byzantine era for what looks to be complex historical reasons can only be understood as a tragedy. With an isolated exception here and there, for something like eight hundred years the Church has not benefited from women's gifts offered as

deaconesses. Of course, women have contributed to the life of the Church in innumerable ways in every historical and temporal context, but the loss of this sort of ordained ministry—which has the support, the protection, and oversight, and the authority of the Church—has deprived the Church of the experiences, perspectives, and unique gifts of generations of its faithful women.

An aside: Considering that the female diaconate has sound historical precedence and theological underpinnings, that the same cannot be said for the female priesthood, and that there is effectively no movement in the Orthodox Church today to even consider—much less push for—the female priesthood, we ought to be able to consider the female diaconate on its own merits.

Particular to the female diaconate: The Church needs its women's gifts. It needs them by virtue of their baptism; simply on the basis of the unique gifts each human person has to offer. It also needs them because women have a different lived experience than men, a different incarnational reality than men, and therefore have different gifts to offer the Church as women. Women or men can offer the expertise of chaplains, administrators, pastoral counselors, but only women can offer the gifts garnered from their incarnational reality as women.

Any resistance to the female diaconate based on the concern that its effect would be to erase differences between women and men is unfounded. Instead, the female diaconate would honor the differences in the incarnational reality of women, and would allow the Church to benefit from these differences. In fact, refusing to consider the female diaconate out of fear of the Church succumbing to trends in the larger society around us that seek to elide any differences between women and men is actually, and ironically, a capitulation to society's trends.

Women need women's gifts; they need woman-to-woman ministry. This is not an antiquated idea that we here in enlightened America have outgrown. There is a reason I belong to an all-woman book group. There is wisdom behind the decision of the hospice where

I volunteer to pair female respite caregivers with female patients (and male respite caregivers with male patients). There are times when a woman needs to be ministered to by another woman. And, yes, this happens informally in parishes (and book groups), but the good that could be done would be a hundredfold more if there were theologically and pastorally trained women ordained as deaconesses, ready to minister to other women, with the oversight, support, and authority of the Church.

The whole Church—not only women—needs women’s gifts. Women have a different lived experience of sexual abuse and assault, from which the whole Church would benefit. Women have a different perspective on authority, its judicious use, its squandering, its misuse, its abuse, from which the whole Church would benefit. Women have a different view of childrearing, marriage, and family life, from which the whole Church would benefit—and so on. And, again, yes, some of these gifts are already being shared with the Church here in the twenty-first century—with women on now on parish councils, teaching in seminaries, and so on—but this cannot compare to the ways in which women’s gifts would be truly infused into the life of the Church if women were ordained to the diaconate, and thus had the sacramental blessing of this ministry. As I understand it, the recognition of both the need for woman-to-woman ministry and the ways in which women’s gifts benefit the entire Church prompted the Patriarch of Alexandria to reinstitute the order of deaconesses in Africa last year.

I truly believe that the reinstitution of the ordained female diaconate in the other autocephalous Orthodox churches would do the opposite of undermining the differences between women and men; that it would instead allow the gifts of women to more fully be given to the Church and the world; that these gifts would be honored, celebrated, and realized in new, wonderful, and unanticipated ways; and that the female diaconate would prompt an efflorescence of healing, well-being, flourishing, and hope in the life of my beloved Orthodox Church today.

*Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D., is a scholar of Orthodox theology, Professor of Theology at Saint*

*Sophia Ukrainian Orthodox Seminary, and a Board Member of the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess.*

*Public Orthodoxy seeks to promote conversation by providing a forum for diverse perspectives on contemporary issues related to Orthodox Christianity. The positions expressed in this essay are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent the views of the editors or the Orthodox Christian Studies Center.*

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## **St. Phoebe Center Celebrates Five Year Anniversary**

Early in 2013, three Orthodox Christians (one a retired priest), met at a coffee shop in Columbus, Ohio to discuss the possibility of a center dedicated to education regarding the historical deaconess and her role. Those faithful were Archpriest Very Reverend Father Daniel Rentel, Caren Calendine Stayer, Ph.D., and AnnMarie Mecera.

Recognizing the wide-reaching capabilities of the internet, the three agreed that developing a website that would serve as a virtual center would be a good start. They believed that the internet and social media, used appropriately, could spread the word about this center, and serve as a viable educational opportunity. Aware that websites, articles, books, meetings and discussions already existed and have taken place, the three were convinced that their endeavor would need to be unique. Therefore, they sought to build an advisory board consisting of scholars and proponents of the female diaconate who would be committed to exploring appropriate discussion in the present.

Since that initial meeting in 2013, the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess has realized a significant list of accomplishments in building awareness of the history of the female diaconate, the God-given talents and gifts women in the 21st century have to offer the faithful, and how those unique gifts and talents have the potential of complementing those of the

male, all for the purpose of helping the faithful in their journey to salvation.

The board is humbled by the task set before them, and is prayerful for God's will to be done.

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## **St. Phoebe Center Timeline**

2013

- The initial meeting of Archpriest Very Reverend Fr. Daniel Rentel, AnnMarie Mecera, and Caren Calendine Stayer, Ph.D., took place in Columbus, Ohio, to discuss the feasibility of creating an organization dedicated to exploring the history of the female diaconate, and the possibility of its restoration
- The initial board, prior to incorporation, consisted of Archpriest Very Reverend Fr. Daniel Rentel, AnnMarie Mecera, Caren Calendine Stayer, Ph.D., Teva Regule, Ph.D. (candidate), and Valerie Karras, Ph.D.

2014

- A website was officially launched in May of 2014, and a Facebook page was established shortly after. Board members began writing articles on various aspects of the female diaconate for the website.
- Board Member Teva Regule, Ph.D. (candidate), made a presentation at the Volos Academy Canon Law Conference titled, "Women and the Canons of the Church: A Difficult Relationship in May of 2014.
- The St. Phoebe Center hosted its first conference in December of 2014 in New York City, titled "Women & Diaconal Ministry in the Orthodox Church: Past, Present & Future." It was the first U.S. conference to be held on women deacons, and drew attendees from across the U.S.



as well as the UK.

## 2015

- Papers on “Deaconesses, Ordination of Women, and Orthodox Theology” were delivered by board members Teva Regule, Ph.D. (candidate), and Valerie Karras, Ph.D., at the January 2015 meeting of the Center for Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies “Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou” (CEMES) in Thessaloniki, Greece.
- A recap of the NYC conference and a historical presentation was held in Columbus, Ohio in May 2015. Presenters were Archpriest Very Reverend Fr. Daniel Rentel, Caren Calenda Stayer, Ph.D., and AnnMarie Mecera.
- A regional presentation, “Restoring the Holy Orthodox Tradition of Deaconesses” was held in Falls Church, VA in May, 2015 with presentations by Matuskha Alexandra Safchuk and Marilyn Rouvelas.
- Board Member Valerie Karras, Ph.D., gave a talk, “The Liturgical Roles of Women in the Early and Byzantine Church” in Glen Cove, NY in June, 2015.
- In October 2015, the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess was granted 501c3 non-profit status. Bylaws were executed in April 2016 with the first official board of directors being AnnMarie Mecera (Chair), Gust Mecera (Treasurer), Caren Calendine Stayer, Ph.D., (Secretary), Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D., Teva Regule, Ph.D. (candidate), and Helen Theodoropoulos, Ph.D. An advisory board was named and consisted of Metropolitan Kallistos, Archpriest V.Rev Daniel Rentel, V. Rev. John McGuckin, Valerie Karras, Ph.D., Cathy Vrugitz, and Demetra Jaquet, D.Min.

## 2016

- An email newsletter program was developed and the first mailing occurred in February 2016.
- “Women and the Great and Holy Orthodox Council” by board member Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D., Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Ph.D., board member Teva Regule, Ph.D. (candidate), Alexandra Lobas Safchuk, and Gayle E. Woloschak, Ph.D., was released in April, 2016.
- The work of the St. Phoebe Center was mentioned in the July 2016 Commonweal magazine article, “Will the Church Get Women Deacons?”

## 2017

- “Women Willing to Offer Themselves: The Historic Consecration of Deaconesses in Africa” by board member Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D., was published in The Wheel Journal in March 2017.
- Board member Helen Theodoropoulos, Ph.D., gave a presentation titled “The Deaconess in the Orthodox Church” in Glenview, Illinois in April, 2017.
- Board member Helen Theodoropoulos, Ph.D., gave a presentation titled “The Deaconess in the Orthodox Church” to the group Ecumenism Metro Chicago in May, 2017.
- “Not a Novelty: The Eastern Orthodox Case for Deaconesses” by board member Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D., was published in Commonweal magazine in June 2017.
- The St. Phoebe Center hosted its second conference “Renewing the Male and Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church” in Irvine, California in October, 2017. Nineteen speakers and moderators came together to make presentations and serve on panels.

- The article "Not a Novelty: The Eastern Orthodox Case for Deaconesses" by Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D., (board member) was published in the June 2, 2017 issue of Commonweal magazine.
- A recap of the October conference and presentation on the deaconess was made in Columbus, Ohio by board member AnnMarie Mecera in Columbus, Ohio in November 2017.
- The St. Phoebe Center Library was founded in the fall of 2017 when advisory board member Demetra Jaquet, D.Min, donated 87 scholarly works (some out of print or hard to find) to the St. Phoebe Center.

2018

- Board member Teva Regule, Ph.D., gave a presentation in Cambridge, MA, titled "The Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church? The State of the Question" in April 2018.
- The article "Women's Gifts and the Diaconate," by Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D., was published on Public Orthodoxy in March 2018.
- The article "Women Deacons in Africa; Not in America," by Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D., was published on Public Orthodoxy in March 2018.

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## **Host a Presentation at Your Parish**

The St. Phoebe Center invites you to host a presentation at your parish on restoration of the female diaconate. We can provide a speaker and materials. Please contact us via email at [stphoebecenter@gmail.com](mailto:stphoebecenter@gmail.com).

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