

HEALING FROM ADVERSITY AS A WOMAN IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH TODAY

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ABSTRACT

Violence, adversity, trauma, and burnout in women are conditions that unfortunately exist in our society today. Statistics show that miscarriages occur in fifteen to twenty-five percent of recognized pregnancies, abortions are performed on twenty-one percent of women in the U.S., an estimated 65 million people are care-givers for family members (with sixty-six percent being women), and an estimated thirty-five percent of women across the world have suffered from domestic violence. What's more, approximately one in four women was sexually abused in her childhood. In a parish of one hundred members, then, (fifty of those being female), approximately *twelve of those fifty women were sexually abused as children*. These statistics include *our women*, our fellow parishioners who are hurting and grieving from trauma and adversity that has or is currently affecting their spirituality and well-being. My presentation will explore how women who experience isolation, violence, trauma, burnout, and illness may find it impossible to seek counseling and healing from a priest or other male clergy. I will discuss why male clergy may not (simply by virtue of gender) possess the gifts, experiences, or perspectives necessary to help a woman in need of counseling, why it may not even be appropriate for male clergy to ministry to women in these situations, and how it could even be damaging to both clergy and women. I will explore how revival of the female diaconate could serve as a welcomed, critically-needed, and authentic ministry for providing to women hope, healing, and a connection to the Eucharist. Finally, I will demonstrate that this ministry to women can help build up the *entire Church body today*.

When a woman is in need of counseling, support, healing and a place of refuge, our churches should be a place—perhaps the first place—she goes. When she does, it is typically our priests who stand in the role of counselor and spiritual guide.

But this method of spiritual care comes with some complications. Is it realistic and reasonable for our priests to be the only providers of spiritual care to their flock? Can he devote the time and energy to counseling when he is charged with dozens of responsibilities that all carry great weight? What's more, our seminaries do not provide this type of training and education; therefore, while they may be equipped with every good intention, their advice and direction can sometimes do more harm than good!

Then there is this to consider: by virtue of his gender, a priest does not possess the unique perspectives, gifts, and experiences of a woman that are instrumental—perhaps critical—in helping women in their time of need. What's more, it can be too upsetting, too painful, too awkward or embarrassing for her to approach her priest—or any man for that matter—for counseling and healing when she has experienced something as traumatic as a miscarriage, abortion, infidelities, or sexual or domestic abuse.

Finally, there is another aspect to consider: the healing ministry of *touch*. Healing does not just lie in words and prayer, but when a person holds another person's hand, hugs or fully embraces her, something powerful can happen. Research suggests that people who are touched

appropriately and regularly can feel less isolated; it can reduce stress and anxiety and promote positive feelings.¹

Yet we also know that physical contact between a man (the priest in this case) and a woman can be complicated...awkward...even inappropriate; we know it has led in some cases to damaging emotional attachments for the woman who is already vulnerable, and the priest who can be tempted by these relationships. It can lead to cases of sexual misconduct that never had to happen.

Hope for our sisters in Christ, can be found in the ancient role of the female diaconate—a woman-to-woman ministry that is not something new, or conjured up. Sound scholarship demonstrates that for the first thousand years of our Church history, women were ordained to the diaconate to carry out as many as thirteen different duties; ministries including visiting sick women and shut-ins; education of women and children; even administrative responsibilities.² While these duties varied depending on location, situation, and need, most of these ministries, are still sorely needed today. Think about the sick and dying; women who are pregnant, new mothers, those with young children; the disabled; the newly baptized and chrismated; caregivers; and the lonely.

We know that the church determined it necessary to ordain these women; sound scholarship tells us so. Unfortunately, the duties we see delegated to our deacons today—in those churches that even have deacons—make it confusing to imagine what it might be like if both male and female deacons were given tasks of ministry and service. Imagine the work that could be done, to bring healing, comfort, and salvation to *more* people! Imagine what fruits could be realized if those deacons and deaconesses worked with professionals such as those members of OCAMPR, along with their parish priests, to aid in the healing and salvation of these women in need.

In a certain parish with which I am familiar, the priest was counseling a female parishioner who was having problems in her marriage. Over time, the counseling sessions resulted in an inappropriate attachment between the priest and this woman. It destroyed the priest's marriage, it further damaged the relationship between the husband and wife; divisions occurred between parishioners. This is not a new story. But could counseling and spiritual direction provided by a female deacon have helped prevent the damage that occurred on so many levels?

Hope can be found through the women in our Churches—in an ordained role; one originally flowing from the wisdom of the early Church. And if we understand the sacrament of ordination, then we wholeheartedly understand why the female serving in this role of ministry must be ordained as well!

¹ Maria Konnikova, "The Power of Touch," *The New Yorker* <https://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/power-touch>, March 4, 2015.

² FitzGerald, Kyriaki Karidoyannes. *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998.
Gryson, Roger. *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. Trans. Jean Laporte and Mary Louise Hall. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976.
Karras, Valerie. "Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church." *Church History* 73:2 (June 2004), 272-312.
Madigan, Kevin and Carolyn Osiek, eds. and trans. *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005.
Vassiliadis, Petros, et.al., eds. *Deaconesses, the Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

I borrow from the succinct explanation of the significance of ordination by theologian Dr Teva Regule to say that ordination is tied to the liturgy and the altar; it connects the one ordained to the sacramental life of the Church, providing the authority, credibility, recognition, support, and protection of the Church to the one ordained. Naturally, being ordained also demands public accountability to the Church and obedience to the bishop.

Consider the following statistics and how they relate to our discussion today: miscarriages occur in ten to fifteen percent of recognized pregnancies³; abortions are performed on twenty-one percent of women in the U.S.⁴; one in nine U.S. women experience postpartum depression⁵; forty percent of adult Americans indicated they experienced loneliness⁶; an estimated sixty-five million people are care-givers for family members (sixty-six percent of those are women)⁷; an estimated thirty-five percent of women across the world have been subjected to domestic violence⁸, and approximately one in four women was sexually abused as a child⁹. This means that in a parish of one hundred members, (assuming fifty are female), approximately twelve of those fifty women were sexually abused. Between five and seven women have experienced miscarriages; ten have had abortions; seventeen have suffered domestic violence. That is not to mention the loneliness, depression, and other adversities that go unrecognized. These are not just women in other parishes; these are our women as well; women who may be standing next to us in church; women who are our sisters in Christ.

Dr Regule also tells a story from her pastoral care residency in an Orthodox nursing home that demonstrates how the female deacon might serve a great need. Dr Regule was responsible for nine women and one man on her rounds during her six week residency. She says:

Many wanted to talk; about important things in their lives, women type things, reproductive issues, loss of a child, problems they may have had with their husbands, things they might never discuss or feel comfortable discussing with a man. They also wanted to talk about things unsettled in their lives, regrets, what lay ahead of them when they leave this world. I took a lot of ‘confessions.’

Dr Regule reflects by saying, “How could those encounters have been enhanced if I could have brought the healing power of Christ through the sacraments of the Church? Some of those people,” she points out, “had been in the nursing home for years—yet none of them had a pastoral visit from their priest or deacon in all the time they were there.”

When I gave a presentation about this topic to a parish, a woman came up to me afterwards and told me that prior to becoming Orthodox, she had been abused twice by a priest in another denomination. “I would never go to a priest for help now,” she said.

For the women in our parishes, there is hope. There is the potential for healing, counseling from a deaconess who has been properly trained and connected by ordination to the

³ March of Dimes, Miscarriage, <https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/miscarriage.aspx>, November 30, 2019.

⁴ Guttmacher Institute Fact Sheet “Induced Abortion in the United States,” <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states?gclid=Cj0KEQjwxqS-BRDRgPLp0q2t0IUBEiQAQfMXRO5Cqso2Y8OELChrKDG0DtsWsAhdBkw6H-AvXpjluUaAsIo8P8HAQ>, May 2016.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Depression Among Women, Post Partum Depression, <https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/depression/index.htm>, November 30, 2019.

⁶ Frank J. Ninivaggi, M.D., F.A.P.A., “Loneliness: A New Epidemic in the USA,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/envy/201902/loneliness-new-epidemic-in-the-usa>, February 12, 2019.

⁷ Caregiver Action Network, Caregiver Statistics, <http://caregiveraction.org/resources/caregiver-statistics>, November 30, 2019.

⁸ World Health Organization (WHO), Global Health Observatory (GHO) data, Violence against women, http://www.who.int/gho/women_and_health/violence/en/, November 30, 2019.

⁹ “Startling Statistics: Child sexual abuse and what the church can begin doing about it,” <http://religionnews.com/2014/01/09/startling-statistics/>, January 9, 2014.

Eucharist and to her community, and readily available by virtue of her ordination. For the women in our parishes, there is hope for communion—little ‘c’—which is defined as “the sharing and exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings on a mental and spiritual level.” We can be counseled, encouraged, prayed over, and led in the first steps to healing and salvation through this potentially powerful and fruitful woman-to-woman ministry. We can be led to communion with a capital ‘C’ and receive the Holy Eucharist as the ultimate hope for our salvation.

A story a young woman in her thirties told me illustrates another way in which the female diaconate could enrich spiritual growth in our parishes:

My yiayia told me to stop climbing trees when I was little to avoid cutting my knee since I took communion that day. I was told not to take communion when menstruating for fear of losing the communion through my issue of blood. These ‘yiayia’ beliefs are little ‘t’ traditions that are not theologically sound but passed down through generations. These beliefs are still somehow present that tell women they are unclean. Having role models that are theologically trained would help cut down on ‘yiayiaology’ beliefs.

When we discuss the revival of the female diaconate, we must also consider the potential fruits this ministry could have on the *entire* church. When healing takes place among our women, they will not only be stronger in their faith and in their journey to salvation, but their healing and faith can overflow into their marriages, families, relationships, and parish communities.

And finally, let us look to Christ Himself and the radical examples He offered during His ministry on this earth: at a time when women were second class citizens and held no authority, He made it clear that women had an important role in the life of the church. He spoke to the Samaritan woman; he healed the woman with the flow of blood; he revealed His resurrection first to the faithful myrrh-bearing women.

When I read the titles and presenters of the papers and workshops for this year’s OCAMPR conference, I am elated for the possibilities that exist for ministering to one another in fullness.

Imagine what fruits could be enjoyed if deacons and deaconesses could work with such people, and then engage other laity to work *with* them in this ministry, and perhaps even take their work beyond the parish into the streets of their cities and towns—possibly working with organizations such as FOCUS North America, or the Ephraim Project, Inc.

How can we suggest that just our men can—or should—carry out these ministries? How can we ignore the exceptional contributions women have made in our society, and then ask them to check them at the church door?

Let us imagine a church where we do not fear what we have not experienced; let us not ignore the unique and beautiful gifts, talents, experiences, and love that women can provide. Let us imagine and strive for a Church in which we can fully love one another, care for each other, and build up the entire Church body today through revival of the female diaconate.

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AUTHOR BIO

AnnMarie Mecera is the founder of the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess. She became passionate about the woman’s role in Orthodoxy after research conducted for a paper she presented at the University of Leeds, and years of involvement in the Orthodox Church. With a

degree in journalism from Ohio University, AnnMarie has worked in the marketing field for 40 years. She has been an independent marketing strategist for over three decades. AnnMarie wrote the religious education manual for pre-schoolers titled “A Way of Life: Introducing Your Children to the Orthodox Faith”, which has been called ‘by far the best resource for introducing pre-schoolers and younger children to the faith.’ She served for nearly 20 years as her parish Lay Vice-Chair, was a member of various OCA task forces, a Pre-Conciliar Commission, the OCA Diocesan Council for the Midwest Diocese, and the OCA Pension Board. AnnMarie also assisted Project Mexico with its Public Relations for several years. She currently lives in the Orlando, Florida area, and attends St. Stephen the Protomartyr Church where she mentors young women and helps carry out the Sisterhood Program.