

FEMALE DIACONATE IN THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES IN THE PAST AND TODAY

By Christine Chaillot

The topic of deaconesses and female diaconate is being debated today in different Churches, Protestant, Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. It is a reflection based on the fact that deaconesses are mentioned in the New Testament and in other documents of the Early Church. Today the topic of deaconesses is also studied, discussed and experienced in the Eastern Orthodox of Byzantine tradition which accepted the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and the Oriental Orthodox Churches which include the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Ethiopian Church, the Armenian Church (with two catholicoses with seats in Etchmiadzin (Armenia) and Antelias (Lebanon) as well as two patriarchs in Jerusalem and Istanbul), the Syrian Orthodox Church as well as related Churches in Eritrea, India and around the world. In the Eastern Orthodox Churches several Consultations about the ministry of women have taken place: in 1976 (in Agapia in Romania), in 1988 (in Rhodes), in 1996 (in Damascus in Syria), in 1997 (in Istanbul, Turkey, and in 1998 (Nairobi in Kenya). In a recent article[1], I wrote about the deaconesses in these Oriental Churches, including the Assyrian Church of the East of Eastern Syriac rite, on their history and gave examples of activities in the past and today, including at the canonical, hagiographical and liturgical levels.

In the Byzantine tradition, both the Didascalia and the Constitutions agree that the deaconess assisted the bishop in the baptism of women and in their catechetical formation. In the Byzantine Church some of the best-known deaconesses include Olympias, who helped John Chrysostom, or Makrina, the sister of Saint Basil the Great, both of the 4th century. Some deaconesses became heads of houses where a large number of deaconesses lived. They also became abbesses of convents. The ministry of deaconesses remained alive until at least the 11th century and perhaps until the end of the Byzantine empire (1453). As evidence, the prayers of the ordination rites of the Byzantine period are characteristic, for example that of the Codex Barberinus (8th c.) and of the Codex Coislinus (11th c.). The texts of these rites describe the ordination of deaconesses as cheirotonia (in Greek) and not as appointment or blessing (cheirothesia).

In the Syriac tradition similar texts on deaconesses are mentioned. One of the most important sources on deaconesses to survive is a Syriac translation (probably of the first half of the 3rd century) of the Didascalia, a collection of canonical precepts originally written in Greek. There the bishop is to appoint a woman “for the ministry to women”, for example to visit women in non-Christian houses, to assist at baptism with anointing of women, and then to instruct them spiritually. Syriac canons such as Questions from the Oriental Fathers (c. 6th c.), mention a certain number of regional variations in the

ordination of deaconesses. Towards the end of the 7th century, the Syrian Orthodox Jacob of Edessa ruled that the deaconess does not have religious authority in the use of the altar “because she has not become the deaconess of the altar but of sick women”. Some canonical texts assert that the ordination of deaconesses is of a different nature from that of deacons. In the 6th century, Severus, the patriarch of Antioch from 512 to 518, had several deaconesses among his correspondents, including women of considerable education. In the Syrian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Michael I (d. 1199) does not rule out the possibility that deaconesses might be needed again some day.

In the Eastern Syriac tradition, in the Church of the East, we find the first explicit mention of deaconesses only in the late 7th century (Synod of 676) in a collection of canons, the Synodicon Orientale in which canon 9 specifies that in communities of consecrated women (bnath qyama, literally “daughters of the covenant”) the most virtuous are made deaconesses, carrying out the anointing of adult women at baptism. This role reappears in several later canon law sources of the Church of the East. We do not know when a deaconess was ordained for the last time in the Eastern Syriac tradition, but it was at least as late as 1739.

In the Churches of Syriac rites, manuscripts mention the ordination rite for deaconesses. The prayers for the ordination of deaconesses continue to be copied in both the western and eastern Syriac Churches into the modern period, whether or not these were actually used. This is also the case in the Armenian Church tradition.

In the Armenian Church, we know nothing about deaconesses (sarkavaguhi, and sarkawag for deacon) or women deacons before the 9th-10th century. In 1184 Mkhitar Gosh describes women deacons who can read the Gospel and preach in the convent, and are present at the time of baptisms of women (Commentary on the Liturgy, chapter 225). In 1299, Bishop Stepanos Orbelian (d. 1304), in his History of the Province of Sisakan (chapter 27, on the orders of the Church), speaks of the deaconess as Gospel reader and preacher, but her function at baptism is not mentioned; she served on the altar and not only in convent churches albeit she stood apart from the male deacon and she did not touch the Holy Gifts; she then wore a stole on the right side.

In the 17th century, a period of cultural, spiritual and monastic revival in the Armenian Church, deaconesses appear outside Armenia, in Persia (today Iran). In the 17th and 18th centuries deaconesses are to be found in nunneries. A fully organized setting of deaconesses can be observed at Saint Catherine’s convent at New Julfa (today, Isphahan, Iran), founded in 1623 with three nuns coming from the previous convent in Julfa (now in Azerbaijan). In 1839 there were sixteen nuns. At least three other Armenian convents are mentioned where Armenian deaconesses were ordained: in Tiflis (today Tbilisi in Georgia),

Shushi (today in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus) and Constantinople (today Istanbul in Turkey).

As to the Armenian prayer used, chronologically, it goes from a prayer of benediction without ordination to the ordination prayer with the same rite used as that for a male deacon, except for the passage concerning the future priesthood of the candidate. The early Armenian prayer for deaconesses is probably taken from the Byzantine prayer in Georgian translation, possibly based on the Apostolic Constitutions.

In the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which was under the jurisdiction of the Coptic patriarchate until 1959, we do not have ancient evidence about deaconesses.

[1] Published in Theologia 91:2 (2020), 19-49.



Christine Chaillot, is Swiss, lives in Geneva, and is an Orthodox Christian, under the Ecumenical Patriarchate. She is the author and editor of several articles and books on the life and spirituality of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, on the Eastern Orthodox and also on the Dialogue between these two families of Churches. Her books have been published in eleven languages.