

## Calls for the Rejuvenation of the Female Diaconate in the Modern Era

c. 1855 — Sister of Czar Nicholas I tries to restore the Office. Other prominent Russians also lobbied for its restoration, including Aleksandr Gumilevsky and Mother Catherine (Countess Efimovsky).<sup>1</sup>

1905–6 — According to numerous sources, several bishops, archbishops, and metropolitans of the Russian Orthodox Church encouraged the effort. According to a report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women in Agapia in 1976, this issue was to be a major topic at the Council of the Russian Church beginning in 1917, but due to the political turmoil in Russia at the time, the council's work was not addressed.<sup>2</sup>

1953 — In 1953, Archbishop Michael of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America calls for its re-establishment in the United States. He realized that there is so much to do in each community that the

endeavors of these priests alone do not suffice. For should the priest wish to know, as he must, his spiritual children by name, their problems, and their spiritual and moral needs, this would certainly be beyond his physical and spiritual resources.

These tremendous needs of the Greek Orthodox Church in America have urged us to make a fervent appeal such as this to our daughters-in-Christ, ... With the future welfare of our Church and membership at heart, we are considering the establishment in this country of an order of deaconess.<sup>3</sup>

The call to re-establish the female diaconate has been made at almost all **International Conferences of Orthodox Women** including: Agapia, Sophia, Crete, Kerala, Levidia, Vendee, Damascus, and Istanbul.<sup>4</sup>

•**Agapia, 1976**—“In the early centuries of the Church and in Byzantine times, the deaconess played a significant role in fulfilling the service, i.e., the true “diakonia” of the Church. In some churches—in Egypt for example, where there are over 150 women fulfilling a diaconal function, this important form of service has been restored to the life of the Church, and in others, a need is felt for providing women with a responsible and full-time vocation in the service of the Church.”

•**Sophia, Bulgaria, 1987**—“Serious consideration must be given to the re-introduction of the ancient order of Deaconess by the hierarchies of the local churches.”

•**Crete, 1990**—“...the urgent need for a renewal of women's ministries, particularly the diaconate...the presence of the deacon or deaconess to lead the people in prayer, to give spiritual counsel, and to distribute Holy Communion where possible....The renewal of the diaconate for both men and women would meet many of the needs of the Church in a changing world...catechetical work...pastoral relations...serving the same needs for monastic communities without a presbyter, ...reading prayers for special occasions,...performing social work...pastoral care, ...engaging in youth and college ministry,... counseling, ... anointing the infirm, ...carrying out missionary work, ...ministering to the sick,...assisting the bishop or presbyter in the liturgical services....creative restoration of the diaconate for women, which we hope will lead in turn to the renewal in the diaconate for men.”

•**Damascus, 1996**—“This Conference also recognizes the important ministry of deaconess as a response to the Holy Spirit for various needs of this present age.”

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate: An Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Light and Life Publishing), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Constance J. Tarasar and Irina Kirillova, eds., *Orthodox Women: Their Role and Participation in the Orthodox Church* (Report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women, Sept. 11-17, 1976, Agapia, Romania) (New York: World Council of Churches Press), p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Kyriaki K. FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press), p. 154-5.

<sup>4</sup> Consultation Reports available in *MaryMartha: International Orthodox Women's Journal*.

•**Istanbul, 1997**—“His Beatitude [Patriarch Karekin II] mentioned the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church has taken the initiative in ordaining women to the Order of the Diaconate, an order in which both men and women are ordained and perform similar duties. ... There is no difference between the ordination service for women and men. Women deacons care for orphans, assist women at baptism, serve liturgically at the altar, read the Gospel and bring the host to the priest. Many of us believe the incorporation of female deacons in the life of the Church will help contribute to the atmosphere of love and learning, and to the life of the Church.”

**1988**—In 1988, Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I convened an International Orthodox consultation in Rhodes, Greece to explore the ministry and ordination of women in the Orthodox Church. **This historic event marks the first expression in the modern era of an international consensus among Orthodox thinkers and leaders to revive this ministry, and provides a substantial foundation for all subsequent conferences.** According to the concluding document from the consultation, “The apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived. It was never altogether abandoned in the Orthodox Church though it has tended to fall into disuse....The deaconess was ordained by the bishop in the sanctuary during the Divine Liturgy with two prayers, she received the *Orarion* (the deacon’s stole) and received Holy Communion at the Altar.”

**1993**—Orthodox Christian Laity calls for restoration of deaconesses as part of its Project for Spiritual Renewal. <http://ocf.org/ocfpublications/project-for-orthodox-renewal/orthodox-women-and-our-church/>

**2000** — In July of 2000, after over a year of careful review of the subject, a formal letter was sent to the Ecumenical Patriarch by more than a dozen members of the Orthodox community in Paris, including such noted Orthodox theologians as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Fr. Boris Bobrinskoy, Olivier Clément, and Nicolas Lossky. The letter traces the history of the female diaconate and notes that the Patriarch himself has stated that there is “no obstacle in canon law [that] stands in the way of the ordination of women to the diaconate. This institution of the early Church deserves to be revitalized.”<sup>5</sup> It also states that the order should “involve more than a simple and archaeological reconstitution of the ancient ministry of the deaconesses ...it is a question of its revitalization, in other words, of its realization in the context of the culture and requirements of the present day.”<sup>6</sup>

<http://orthodoxdeaconess.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/DiaconalLetter-ParisTheologians.pdf>

**2006** — In July of 2006, the Fellowship of St. John the Baptist held their annual conference focusing on “Women and Men in the Church” and resolved to write to the different Orthodox Bishops with pastoral responsibilities in the British Isles, urging them to work actively for the restoration of the diaconate for women in the Orthodox Church. <http://orthodoxdeaconess.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/WOMENBishK-OFSJB.pdf>

**2013**—St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess is founded, a Pan-Orthodox group of women and men, laity and clergy, dedicated to educating and prayerfully advocating for the revival of the ordained female diaconate to help serve the ministerial needs of the Church and the world today. <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/>

**2014** — St. Catherine’s Vision publishes a call for the Rejuvenation of the Ministry of the Ordained Deaconess addressed to His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and the Secretariat of the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church. The proposal reviews the history of the deaconess, emphasizes that it was never disallowed, points to various calls for its rejuvenation, highlights the ordination prayers of the Byzantine rite, and illustrates the need for the ministry today. <http://orthodoxdeaconess.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/December-SCV-Call.pdf>

**2015**—A major international conference, “Deaconesses, Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology,” was sponsored by the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies (CEMES) in Thessaloniki, Greece, January 22-24. It explored the issue of the female diaconate thoroughly—from biblical, liturgical, patristic, systematic, canonical, and historical theology perspectives. A resulting volume featuring 39 scholarly papers on the subject was published in 2017.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *An Orthodox Diaconate for Women?* Reported in *Sobornost* 23:1 (2001), pp. 60-63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Petros Vassiliadis et.al., eds. *Deaconesses, the Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology*. Cambridge Scholars, 2017.

**2020**—*For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, a groundbreaking document on social ethics, is published by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It endorses the modern call for renewal of the female diaconate.

The Church must also remain attentive to the promptings of the Spirit in regard to the ministry of women, especially in our time, when many of the most crucial offices of ecclesial life—theologians, seminary professors, canonists, readers, choir directors, and experts in any number of professions that benefit the community of faith—are occupied by women in increasingly great numbers; and the Church must continue to consider how women can best participate in building up the body of Christ, including a renewal of the order of the female diaconate for today. (Para.29)

The document concludes “...the revitalization of the order of the diaconate, male and female, may serve as an instructive way of assimilating and applying the principles and guidelines proposed in this statement.” (Para.82)

<https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>