

CHAPTER TWO

DEACONESSSES, THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN AND ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

RESPONSE BY
PROF. EMERITUS EVANGELOS THEODOROU

Your Grace,

Respected and beloved participants,

Allow me first of all to express my warm gratitude and congratulate my former student and now distinguished and esteemed colleague, Prof. Petros Vassiliadis, for the nice initiative within the framework of activities of the brilliant theological Center of Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies, to organize such a nice conference. Thanks are also due to his elect partners, the speakers, male and female, and especially to my former and new colleagues at the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. This School has always been a pioneer in many fields, and radiant. The show and the organization, after all, of this conference is clear proof. I am proud because, many years ago, for eight consecutive years (which were perhaps the most beautiful years of my life), I was a professor of this School.

From the bottom of my heart, I also greet my dear, old and new, members of the Holy Cross Theological School in Boston, U.S.A., which is also innovative and has a special place, a distinct position, among all American theological schools. To this School, too, I am connected through many beautiful, old memories.

Special thanks are also due to my dear colleague of the Higher Ecclesiastical Academy of Athens, Prof. Dimitrios Passakos, whose technological skill has allowed my spiritual presence among you, something that made my great regret affordable, because I cannot be physically present among you.

Great is also my gratitude to Prof. Kyriaki Karydoyanes FitzGerald, who came from the U.S.A. and spoke with both compliments and praise for me. Many years ago, Prof. FitzGerald, along with her fine husband, Reverend Prof. Thomas, have on many occasions promoted my contribution to theological literature, especially the institution of deaconesses. I am very pleased with their presence at this conference. Finally, I wholeheartedly thank all of you who, with your presence, animate this prestigious conference to my honor, supporting in this way the issue of the ordination of deaconesses.

Sixty-five years ago, in 1949, with my book entitled, *Heroines of Christian Love: The Deaconesses through the Centuries*, and in 1954, with my doctoral thesis on the ordination of deaconesses, I sowed a few seeds that afterwards flourished, thus highlighting and promoting the issue of the ordination of deaconesses.

Today, Roman Catholics and Orthodox do not have deaconesses. Deaconesses are variously in Protestant, Old Catholic, and Anglican communities. We have not yet this traditional institution, but it is auspicious – promising I would say – that there is a huge movement in all the Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church, to revive the institution of deaconesses. Today, the sounds of more and more voices are heard in favour of reviving the institution of deaconesses and their ordination. In Orthodoxy, I would like to remind you of the courageous efforts made many years ago by the *Apostoliki Diakonia* to establish the School of Deaconesses, print my first book *Heroines of Christian Love*, and spread the idea for the renewal of this old institution of the Church. Not to mention, of course, the numerous inter-Orthodox conferences which have focused on this issue, and particularly and above all the Pan-Orthodox Conference of Rhodes – convened by the care and under the auspices of the Holy Ecumenical Patriarchate – which showed the need for the revival of the institution of deaconesses.

The presence among the speakers of my colleague and old friend, Dr. Zagano, underlines the huge traffic that takes place in America to renew this diaconal institution. Dr. Zagano, in her books and other publications, makes frequent reference to my own works on this issue. Like Prof. FitzGerald in the Greek Orthodox Church in America, Dr. Zagano, within the Roman Catholic Church, has become an apostle of the revival of this institution. And in Europe, there is huge movement in this direction, especially in Germany. There are reports, there are cardinals, there are theological schools, there are doctoral dissertations, seminars, etc., all of which are pushing to revive the institution. Enough women are already prepared to become deaconesses, and all of them are waiting for the

approval of the Vatican, to authorize the ordination and their accession to the active diaconal service of the Church.

I am sure, though, that the distinguished speakers in the various sessions of the conference will highlight anything that advocates the revival of the institution of ordained deaconesses, indicating at the same time the difficulties and obstacles that must be left aside.

Allow me to now say a few words on this issue. I will not, of course, bring owls to Athens. I will not say anything new, but repeat some of what I have said and written over these past 65 years. I will only highlight a few key points that should perhaps be identified and addressed during the conference.

Deaconesses undoubtedly existed in the Church of the apostles. It is well known what St. Paul the apostle wrote about the existence of Phoebe, a deacon in the Church of Kechreae, near Corinth, whom he extols in the Letter to the Romans. But up to the end of the 4th century AD, we do not have ordination prayers, i.e. texts that show the structure of ordination in the various ranks of the clergy in the Church. Since the end of the 4th century, however, the *Apostolic Orders* has included a special rite for the consecration of deaconesses, similar in form and content to that which exists for all the upper and lower clergy ranks. At that time, of course, no distinction was made within the Church between upper and lower clergy.

The rite of ordinations says: *Prayer or epiclesis on the ordination of Bishop, then Prayer and epiclesis on the ordination of Deacon, then of Presbyter, then of Deaconess, Subdeacon, Reader etc.* And the blessing and grace of God is sought to send the Holy Spirit to consecrate the deaconess and the other ordained.

But from the 5th century AD onwards, the ordination rite developed and became more extensive and, I would say, triumphant. We notice that, for the ordination of deaconesses, requested again within it is God's blessing and grace to send the Holy Spirit to make the *ad valorem* of the becoming deaconess a servant and celebrant of the Church.

Thus, for the ordination rite of deaconesses, there are two longer prayers of consecration, similar to the other ranks of the upper clergy, that of the bishop, the presbyter and the deacon. In both of these prayers, what is stressed is that God gave his blessing and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, not only to men but also to women, and they ask God to send his Spirit to sanctify the deaconess. This is done in both prayers. In between, the prayers for peace are inserted, where again the Church prays *υπέρ της νυν προχειριζομένης* to become worthy of the office, which is called to serve.

Careful study of these ordination rites, both morphologically and in terms of content, leads to the following conclusions:

1. During these described ordination rites, the laying on of hands of the so-called lower clergy, (i.e. the singer, the reader, the subdeacon) were performed outside the sanctuary, not during the Eucharistic liturgy. Further, this took place without singing, "the divine grace that always heals the patient etc." For the deaconesses in the process of ordination, as for upper clergy – bishop, presbyter and deacon – two prayers were heard. And we can discern that the deaconess standing before her ordination in front of the beautiful gate had her head covered with a *maphorion* and, when the time came, she was transferred to the altar, where she was ordained by the bishop with the laying of his hands on her head, invoking the Holy Spirit to make her worthy for the service she was about to undertake.

It should be noted that the invocation prayer: *η Θεία Χάρις η πάντοτε τα ασθενή θεραπεύουσα*, (the divine grace that always heals the patient), which is heard in the ordinations of the senior clerics and of deaconesses, is a feature only of senior ordinations. It is never heard during the laying on of hands of the lower clergy.

From this evidence it becomes obvious that during the ordination of deaconesses, all the essential elements of the ordination of a deacon are present. The deaconess is vested, like the deacon, with diaconal *orarion* and she communes at the time of Holy Communion, like the deacon, inside the Holy Sanctuary, taking the Holy Grail from the hands of the bishop and placing it on the altar.

One would normally expect that, with the expansion and more elaborate ordination rites and ceremonies of the deaconesses, like those of all the priests, the deaconess would be relegated to the lower clergy. The Church, however, took her and put her ordination together with those of the higher ordinations of the upper clergy.

All these explain why, in the canonical orders of the Church, the female deacons have many tasks related to the diaconal sacramental priesthood. They certainly did not have the tasks of the presbyters but, we should not forget that neither did the deacon, because he never performed sacraments.

2. Also, the following topic should be investigated: the so-called Syrian teaching, the 3rd century AD *Didaskalia*, and the *Apostolic Orders* of the late 4th century, reveal a hierarchy of degrees of priesthood. The bishop, who is the symbol of God the Father, stands higher, followed by the deacon as a symbol of Christ. Then there is the deaconess, as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, after which comes the presbyter, as a symbol of the

apostles. This hierarchical arrangement must be explained: why is the Syrian teaching of the apostles and apostolic orders placed with the deaconesses even before the presbyters?

3. It should be noted that in the canonical rules of the Church, the deaconesses are mentioned within the ranks of the clergy. The 1st, 4th, and the quinisext ecumenical councils all have special rules for the ordination of deaconesses.

The subsequent civil law, which we know represents the Church practice of the time, and in particular the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, the famous *Codex Justinianus*, incorporates deaconesses in the clergy. It has an arrangement with the inscription: "on bishops and priests", where it also places deaconesses. Then we have the *nouvellae* — the *neares* — as we call them, of Justinian, which frequently mentioned women deacons. The 6th *nouvella*, for example, has the characteristic title *περί του πως δει χειροτονείσθαι τον επίσκοπον* (how the bishop should be ordained), which refers to the bishops, the presbyters and the deacons, male and female. We also have the 3rd Justinian *nouvella*, which determines the number of the clergy in various churches, listing the number of clergy serving in the Hagia Sophia as 60 priests, 100 deacons and 40 deaconesses.

4. It should also be borne in mind that in the Orthodox Church, against the various doctrinal or canonical expressions developed later, the primacy belongs to the earlier advanced primary liturgical experience and practice of the Church, the worship of which — as the late German professor, Friedrich Heiler would say — is "das gebetete dogma" or, in other words, the praying doctrine expressed in the liturgical prayer. Let us also recall the well-known Latin expression, *lex orandi est lex credendi*, i.e., the Law of Faith is associated with the Law of Worship.

For these reasons, all opinions refusing the ordination of deaconesses are simply unwarranted. It is testified in the liturgical texts and, the dogmatic expressions for various ranks in the priesthood are later than these liturgical texts. Therefore, these liturgical texts of the Church should not be overlooked.

Finally, we should never forget that while the ecumenical councils, as we said, recognize the ordination of deaconesses, no church doctrinal decision exists to date that repeals the ordination of deaconesses. This is potentially still valid in the Church and, it seems, has survived throughout history in some monasteries: St. Nektarios, a 20th century saint, ordained deaconesses on the island of Aegina; the penultimate Archbishop of Athens, the late Archbishop Christodoulos, ordained a deaconess in a convent of the Metropolis of Demetrias.

5. We must distinguish between the "diaconal" sacramental priesthood and the "hierurgic" sacramental priesthood. All senior clerics have a sacramental priesthood, but some have special gifts and functions. The deacon cannot do what a priest does. The deaconess, like the deacon, has no operational tasks, but this is the division which the Church makes according to the different gifts. But the priesthood is one, and always presupposes the descent of the Holy Spirit and, the deaconesses undoubtedly have such priesthood.

6. Some say that today, there are not many devout female persons who could be ordained deaconesses, while there are plenty of fine women who, in different parishes, perform many diaconal services, especially in the field of solidarity and charity. But we must not forget that in the history of the Church there were always devoted women. Remember the immense work of John Chrysostom, who had next to him not only the St. Olympias, but many deaconesses: Sylvina Pentadia, Procla, Amproukle, Saviniane, Elissanthia, Palladia, Martyria, and many others.

Our struggle is the awakening of the Church, in order that, in a time of crisis, like the present one, the diaconal service is not limited to soup kitchens and various other ministerial departments. It must remember that one of the main tasks is to care for Christ in the person of suffering brothers. A great Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, remarked that "in the future the Church will either become diaconal or will cease to exist". Of course, this was a rhetorical exaggeration, because the Church has not only diaconal services, but liturgical, missionary, preaching, tacking etc., too. What Rahner wanted to emphasize was that the Church must be awakened and undertake bold diaconal services in society. Perhaps Pope Francis today moves in this direction on behalf of the Catholic Church.

The revival of the institution of deaconesses, finally, can start from the monasteries with the nuns of the great order (*megaloschemes*), as at the end of the Byzantine period. After all, in the ancient Church, the deaconesses were selected among pious virgins and widows. However, by the end of the Byzantine period, deaconesses were taken from the *megaloschemes*. It is easier to start from them because the nun has an ecclesiastical appearance with robes, which will not seem extraordinary. And once parishioners realize that some prestigious monasteries have deaconesses/nuns, then they would wish their parishes to become diaconal centers which also have deaconesses. What I herewith propose, is the reverse process of the one followed in the ancient Church. The institution of deaconesses in parishes spread to the monasteries. Today, conversely, the monasteries can spread slowly and quietly to parishes.

Of course, the issue of reviving the institution of deaconesses will meet problems. When it starts to be more actively operated, it is likely to trigger some separation. This must be taken into account and avoided at all costs because, I would say, the demand for the peace and unity of the Church is also an ecclesiological request and should not be underestimated.

7. As for discussion on the overall issue of the "ordination of women", our Orthodox theology should not resort to the inappropriate use of human, biological concepts about sex and the alleged male or female form of each of the persons of the Holy Trinity, thus relegating the apophatic character – inaccessible to human intellect – to Trinitarian doctrine. The Orthodox should use ecclesiological criteria aimed at building the Church of Christ. They should also use Christological theology, which teaches on the God-Man, that the salvation in His work incorporated and received all human nature, male and female. And so they should seek the division of responsibilities among the services of the Church, according to the variety of their charisms. This diversity of charisms is what was particularly raised by the ancient Church.

Once again, I feel obliged to express my warm gratitude to Prof. Vassiliadis, all the members of the scientific and organizational committees, those who sent messages to the conference in my honor, those who labored in many respects, Prof. FitzGerald for her very touching laudatum, the chairpersons of the various sessions of the conference, those who travelled from America and other parts of Greece, and all the participants.

I wish all good success to the conference, with the blessing of the Honorary President of the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies, "Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou", His Eminence Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Mgr. Anthimos, who creates hope that, with his well-organized diaconal services in his diocese – and of course the same is true for the Archdiocese of Athens and the other holy dioceses – it will also be including, in the near future, the order of deaconesses.

I will not add anything else. I only intended to remind you of some basic points on the issue, and to wish your conference successful and good results for the benefit of our Church.

Many thanks for your patience.