



ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN LAITY

April 11, 1997

"Where the Church is, the Spirit of God is . . . The Spirit of God is Truth."

During the December 2, 1996 Orthodox Christian Laity Executive Board Meeting with His Eminence Archbishop Spyridon, Timi Loomos Freshman was asked by His Eminence to prepare a paper on the Female Diaconate so that he could further study the issue. Mrs. Freshman has been in touch with Valerie Karras, Demetra Jacquet and Dr. Ellen Gvosdev as well as a network of faithful Orthodox Christian women in the Los Angeles area. Together they compiled research and articles on the subject. Mrs. Freshman coordinated and wrote this short paper on the topic. It is presented to His Eminence in Christian love so that those baptized into Christ feel united in His Church. The dynamics of Orthodox Christian life in our times and place contribute to the logic of restoring the ancient orders of the female and male diaconates. We are confident that the hierarchy and clergy will work together with laypersons so that the diaconate serves to reach out to our brothers and sisters in this land.

The positive role of women in the life of the Church can be strengthened by using our liturgical services to educate the faithful. The period of Lent when the Church offers us the services of the Akathistos Hymn is a perfect time to teach and reflect upon the meaning of the Theotokos and how Orthodox Christianity teaches that as the new Eve she brought a new consciousness to the world about the role of women in the life of the Church, family and community. These services are a time to teach these understandings.

If we rely on the liturgical life of the Church and our tradition, the female diaconate as in the ancient Church can contribute to the spiritual renewal of our life and times.

We submit this study with the hope that it will bring Christ closer to all those who seek Him in love and understanding.

George Matsoukas, President
Orthodox Christian Laity

HISTORY AND FUTURE OF THE FEMALE DIACONATE

EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

The history of the women's diaconate is well established and documented. It begins in apostolic times with St. Paul's co-worker Phoebe, "deacon of the church at Cenchreae." (Romans 18:1)

Deaconesses' service in the church was acknowledged as a MINISTRY.

In addition to Phoebe, Orthodoxy recognizes a number of other women deacons as saints:

Susanna, an ascetic and martyr

Nonna, the mother of St. Gregory the Theologian

Olympias, who was a deacon of Hagia Sophia, and a friend and associate of St.

John Chrysostom.

Chrysostom was a pioneer in trying to promote greater equality between the sexes within the church. Please refer to his quote on Page 10 of [The Female Diaconate: An Historical Perspective](#) by Ellen Gvosdev, which accompanies this overview.

Four Documents Which Substantiate the Existence of the Historical Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church

Didascalia Apostolorum-the term "deaconess" was first used at the Council of Nicea (325AD) and is found in Canon 19 in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*.

Both the *Teaching of the Apostles* and the *Apostolic Constitutions* set out the pastoral and liturgical duties of the deaconesses. The bishop selected women within his jurisdiction to serve as deaconesses and ordained them during the liturgy after the completion of the anaphora (when the male deacon is also ordained) and, significantly, she was ordained in

the altar. After communion by all, she received the chalice from the bishop's hand, which she then replaced on the Prothesis Table. This latter practice applied only to the Byzantine Church, not to the churches in the Middle East in late antiquity, when the *Discalicia* and *Apostolic Constitutions* were written. (Prayer of ordination pages 32-35, refer to Female Diaconate).

Trinity of ministries-Bishop, Deacon, deaconess.

Historical Duties of the Deaconess

- Ministry to women- The deaconess' primary function was to go to the houses of the heathen where there were believing women in need i.e. to bath, aid the ill and infirm etc. Male deacons were not allowed this duty as it would create a scandalous situation.
- Assist the Bishop and presbyter in baptizing.
- Anointed women's bodies with oil, acted as godmother, as a liaison between women and bishop and as a spiritual mentor and instructor in the faith.
- Doorkeeper for the women's entrance and women's section of the church.
- Practiced charity towards other women, administered communion to the sick, and confined, and attended the poor, widows, and orphans.
- She was the female counterpart to the deacon but her duties varied not only from location to location, but from time to time (i.e. era) e.g. When there was no longer a need for help at adult baptisms, she still existed. While women's ministry was a primary concern, she was not limited to that alone.

110 readers

25 singers

The female diaconate was so significant that in Constantinople in the 6th century there was a section of the city referred to as the “Deaconess.”

In the period between the 7th and 10th centuries there was a shift in the duty of the Deaconesses:

- Fewer liturgical duties
- Visited the sick and confined
- Swept the sanctuary
- Held communion within convents

Through the 11th century the Female Diaconate remained an important part of the leadership of the Orthodoxy.

Towards the end of the 12th century the duties of the deaconesses began to erode. A few examples are:

- They were no longer needed to anoint adult women during baptism because of the prevalence of infant baptisms .
- Because of a mistaken interpretation of uncleanness in the Old Testament, deaconesses could no longer perform liturgical duties during menses. (Refer to quote from “*Women in the Eastern Church Past, Present and Future*”)

Education in this respect is important-ideas of Old Testament ritual impurity should be reinterpreted in contexts of the New Testament and Life of Christ. In his homily to Titus, St. John Chrysostom stated that “it is only sin, which makes someone unclean before the Lord.”

There were no more references to **Female Diaconate** until the 19th century.

At that time there was an attempt to revitalize the order of Deaconesses in Russia. In spite of strong support from prominent clergy and laity no restoration was implemented.

1906-Synod of Russian Church accepted significant proposal for restoration of deaconesses.

1911-MOSCOW

Hierarchy in Church stifled the accepted proposal because temporary commitment was suggested instead of life long commitment. The push for restoration did not totally expire, but was accepted as part of the agenda for the Synod of Bishops council 1918, which did not convene due to the Russian revolution.

1911-GREECE

St. Nectarios of Aegina-similar efforts as those in Moscow

Ordained Deaconesses to the Diaconate

Mid 1950's-GREECE

Dr. Evangelos Theodorou of Athens did extensive work on Order of Deaconesses.

- Found two nuns who had been ordained as deaconesses, one in Sparta and one in Volos.

1976-Orthodox Women's Conference in Agapia, Romania declared:

- That an office of deaconesses should be considered for restoration.
- That service of deaconess should be consecrated by the church with blessing of the bishop and lifelong commitment to full vocational service to the church.
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1988-Orthodox Women's Conference in Rhodes, Greece declared;

- That there should be restoration of the Order of Deaconesses
- That there are bishops who at the time had in their archdiocese:
 - ✓ Women readers and chanters
 - ✓ Girls serving as acolytes
 - ✓ Order of Myrrh Bearers (ministry of girls)

1991-Orthodox Women's Conference in Crete, Greece.

At this conference a framework for restoration of order of female diaconate as well as an order of male deacons was established as follows:

SUGGESTED QUALIFICATIONS FOR DEACONESSES

- Reviewing the role in a more dynamic manner not restricted to celibacy and age
- Training in theology-minimum 2 year seminary program
- Practical experience
- Maturity, dedication and moral integrity
- Involvement in church life
- Possess a spiritual depth
- **Deaconesses must be ordained, recognized and sanctified.**

FUNCTIONS FOR THE FEMALE DIACONTE IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES ORTHODOXY

- Teaching our faith to both youth and adults, developing curricula, counseling couples etc.
- Opening closed churches or establishing sites for liturgical prayer where there is no priest as parish is too small or isolated.

- Serving the monastic community where there is no presbyter (fuller liturgical duties in monasteries).
 - Reading prayers of blessing at special occasions.
 - Performing social services in conjunction with the church as part of pastoral care to women and families.
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- Currently there are Orthodox women working in non-Orthodox ministries. We need to have our own ministries within the Orthodox Archdiocese.
 - We have relinquished without our input our duties to government social services agencies and charitable organizations.
 - Our priests cannot physically and emotionally take on all the responsibility
 - To concentrate on liturgical and social ministry and in the Royal Priesthood.
 - To organize Orthodox youth ministries on college campuses within a Pan Orthodox context.
 - Encourage and co-ordinate the lay ministry of the parish. Aid in bridging the gap between clergy and laity in common ministry.
 - Counseling in spiritually related matters.
 - Anointing the infirm, visiting hospitals and nursing homes and taking communion to the handicapped, ill and confined with the Orthodox message of the church.
 - Carrying out missionary work within their own communities, inclusive of all races, creeds and colors.
 - Assist the clergy or presbyter in liturgical service(s).

When the order is renewed it “must not be simply an archeological reconstruction.” (Behr-Sigel 225) To have meaning and be a true diakonia after the model of Christ, the women’s diaconate must be based on authentic Orthodox Theology. It should be creatively structured to serve the needs of the contemporary world and church. (Please refer to the chapter *Orthodox Women & Our Church* by Eva Topping in OCL’s *Project for Orthodox Renewal*).

Using our liturgical services early in the lives of female infants can strengthen the positive role of women in the life of the Church. We need a consistent service that celebrates the entrance of our children into the Church and dedicates them to God and does not set them apart. Women and men must share equally in the dignity and responsibility of service to God and the people of God. The Holy Spirit does not discriminate according to biological categories. Nor should the Church so define its ministries. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male and female.” Gal 3:27-28

We suggest the creation of a task force of knowledgeable and committed women across the United States to pursue such a reinstatement of the Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church. We are submitting the following names to be considered as a core foundation of this task force:

Timi Loomos Freshman
Matushka Ellen Gvosdev
Khouria Elaine Gounaris Hanna
Nancy Holloway
Demetra Jacquet
Valerie Karras
Patricia Manuc
Eva C. Topping

**AT STAKE IS THE EQUALITY AND FULL HUMANITY OF WOMEN WITHIN
THE ORTHODOX CHURCH**

Respectfully submitted by,

Timi Loomos Freshman, Vice President of OCL

NOTES ON PHOTOS OF DEACONS

PHOTO 1

St. Tatiana Deacon of Rome - Russian Icon; note the stole which bears the words, Holy, Holy, Holy in Slavonic. She was a 19th Century Deacon. She is holding the Censor. Note that she is wearing cuffs.

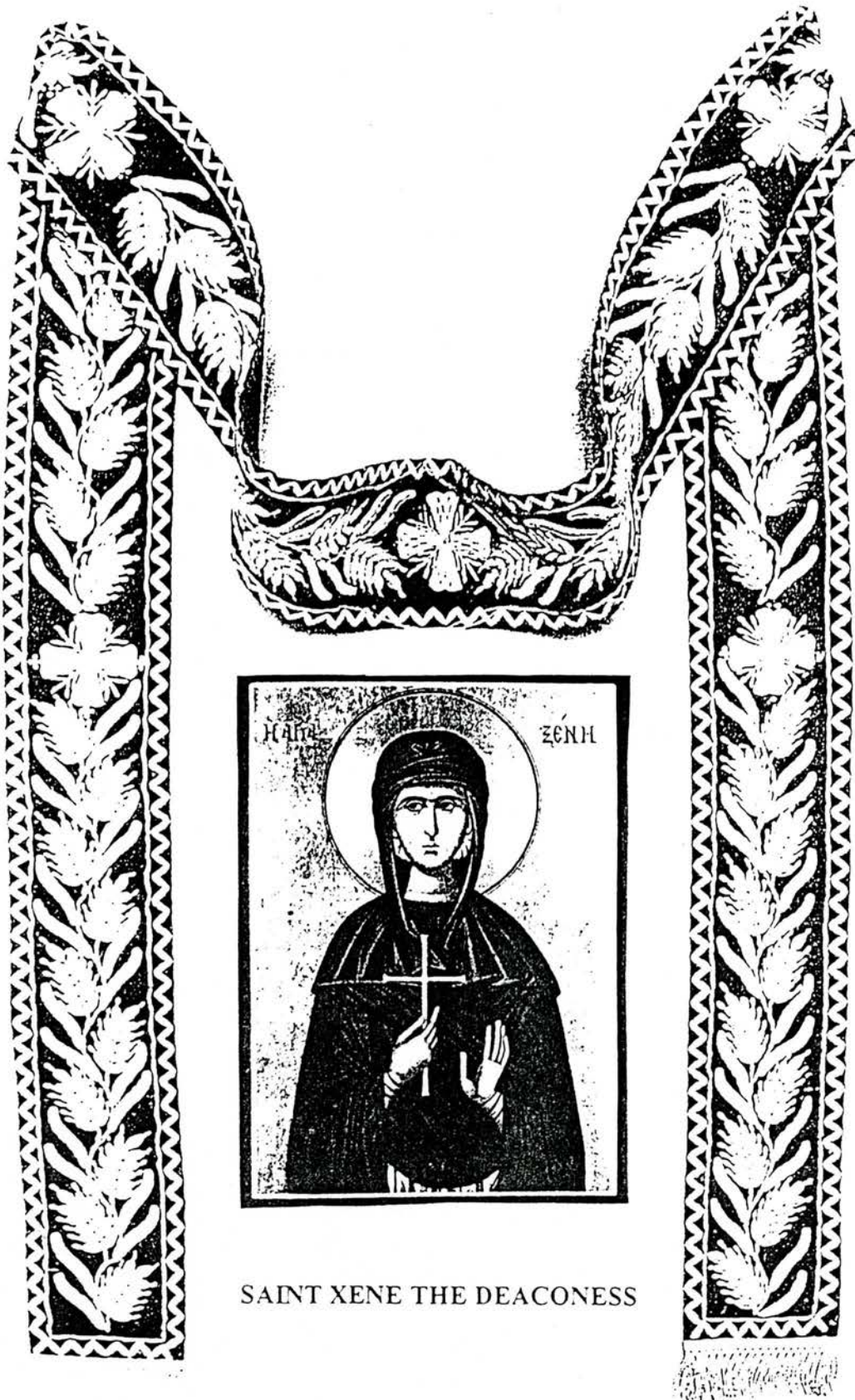
PHOTO 2

St. Xene

PHOTO 3 & 4

Two young women Deacons late 19th Century. One is holding the Deacon's Fan in the Altar. Fan was used by Deacons during consecration of the Holy Gifts.



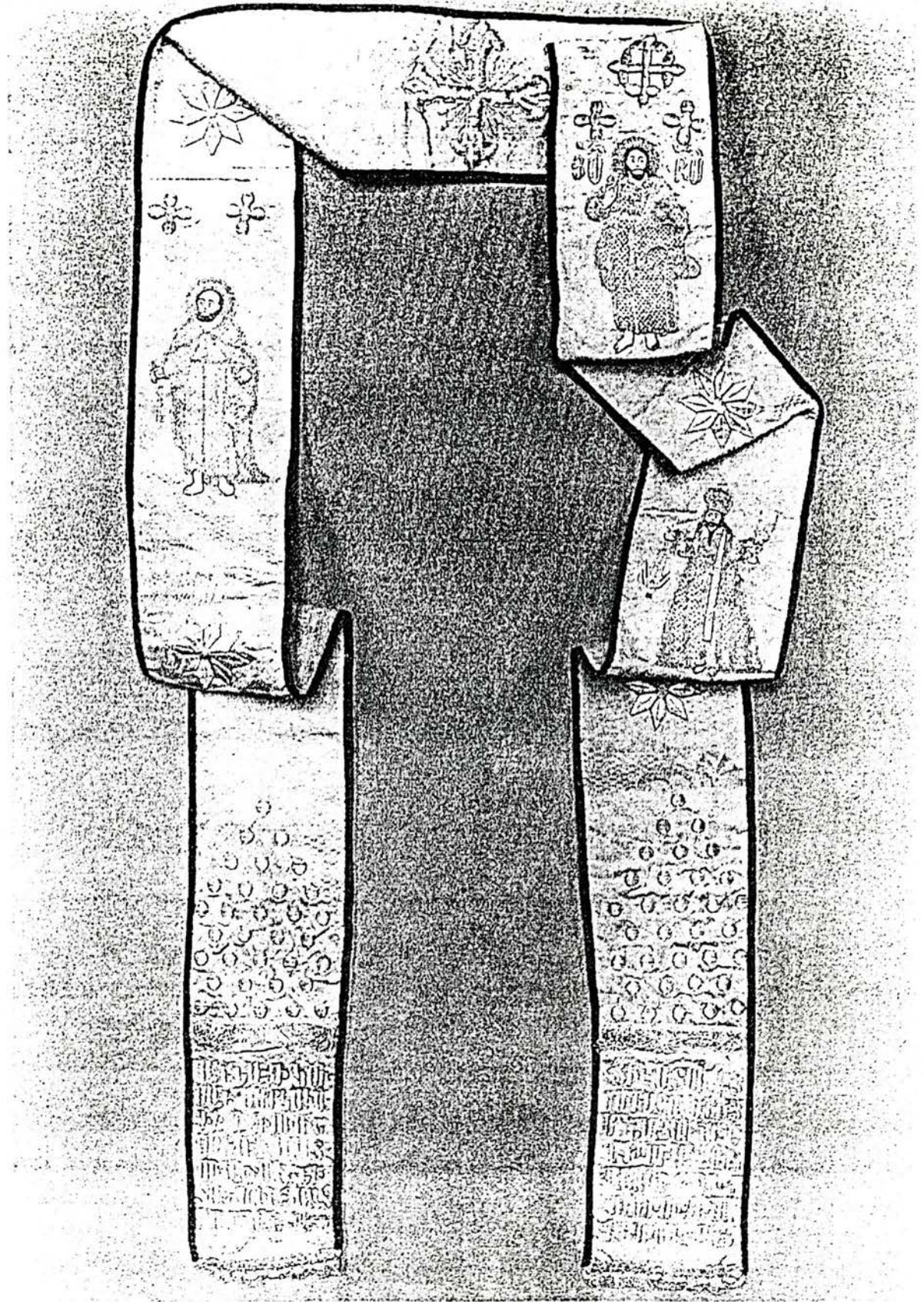


SAINT XENE THE DEACONESS





Photograph, circa 1890, Jerusalem, on the occasion of her promotion to Proto-Deacon



Gold and silver threaded deacon's stole (Etchmiadzin Collection). The inscriptions read: (on the left) *Deaconess Sister Anna at the door of the Cathedral of Holy Theotokos, Astrakhan, 6.IX.1837.* (On the right) *Given by Anna Mnac'akanian in memory of her deceased sister.*

(From female diaconal stole(s) collection, Tbilisi.)

GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
June 3, 1997 at 10:30 AM

Meeting with Archbishop Spyridon and OCL Board Members Tenet, Marudas, Coupounas, Tsoutsoura, Gvosdev, Karakas, Vlahos and Matsoukas.

OPENING STATEMENT

Your Eminence, in this week of the Ascension and as we prepare to celebrate the birthday of the Church the Board of Directors of Orthodox Christian Laity thank you for the opportunity to meet with you once again in your office in the Holy Archdiocese of America.

We come together as loyal sons and daughters of the Church under your leadership. We come to follow up on the feasibility study which you requested during our December 1996 meeting and which you received on April 14 entitled The Challenge of Outreach. The second study, History and Future of the Female Diaconate was presented to you one week later and the authors of that study would like the opportunity to visit you to discuss their study and ideas. They asked me to assist them in making an appointment with you.

The two papers are excellent and over twenty laypersons and clergy were involved in their preparation. They are different in style and form and reflect the diversity, intelligence, faithfulness of our Board and members. They are presented to you with love and the sincere hope that they assist you in developing your vision and direction for the future of Orthodoxy in America.

It should be noted that O.C.L. is not a research foundation but rather an educational ministry of laypersons and clergy that was established ten years ago in response to what was perceived by many as a lack of accountability within the national ministries of the Church and a disregard for procedures that are defined by clergy-laity conferences. This education ministry has outlined its concerns which were determined through surveys, discussion and prayer, involving thousands of Orthodox faithful over a three-year period. Laypersons and clergy were assigned the seven issues that emerged from our conciliar process and the Project on Orthodox Renewal resulted. The issues outlined in this study continue to be our focus and our educational ministry is dedicated to the implementation of these recommendations.

The feasibility study on the Challenge of Outreach that we prepared for you has its beginnings in the essay on Outreach developed by Fr. Steven Vlahos and Fr. Mark Aery which is one of the seven issues developed by O.C.L. The Diaconate is another issue developed in Project on Renewal. We truly pray that these feasibility studies will help you and we are delighted that you share our concerns.

Page Two

Truly, O.C.L. was established to assist the hierarchy in the management and accountability of the Church and to assist the overwhelmed clergy who are our spiritual leaders in our home parishes. Thousands of laypersons throughout the United States have the managerial, administrative, accounting, legal background to assist you in administering the Church. In turn, the clergy and hierarchy could have more time for pastoral teaching and preaching duties if they utilize the talents of the laity. This is how co-ministry works.

Our ten years of experience reinforces our belief that the synodical and conciliar process works. This process fosters open, respectful, truthful, cooperative discourse and relationships. The work of the Church proceeds in love and obedience when all are involved in the decision making process. We have consistently insisted that process and the means that we employ to reach our goals must be obtained by conciliar and synodical methods which is the Orthodox way. Through the conciliar and synodical process which includes clergy, laity and hierarchy the Church is accountable to the people of God and we are all together accountable to Christ.

To summarize, the mission of O.C.L. is to strengthen the participation and role of the laity in the life of the Church. Our immigrant lay great-grandparents, who established this Church five generations ago, left us a unique and precious inheritance that is worthy of respect and protection. Their legacy is the realization that the local Church and the involved faithful in the local Church are the basis of strength of the national Church. The Parish Council system evolved so that the faithful could utilize their talents and accountability could be placed where there was local control. This system has built our parishes and Churches. They realized that financial strength lies in the participation of many rather than the few affluent. The many faithful participate when they see that constructive progress is being made and that there is accountability. This is our precious inheritance and it is our duty to preserve it for the eternal memory of our immigrant lay ancestors. The laity have built and remain the stalwarts of the American Church.

Thank you for your letter of April 18, 1997 in response to the Challenge of Outreach - we would like to know where we go from here in relationship to this important objective of your ministry.