

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Hosts International Conference for Orthodox Women

His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew was the host of a conference for Orthodox women entitled "Discerning the 'Signs of the Times' (Mt. 16:3): Women in the Life of the Orthodox Church" held in Constantinople, May 10-17, 1997.

Sponsored by World Council of Churches, the conference brought together about fifty women who were the official delegates of the Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, representing the concerns of Orthodox women from Eastern and Western Europe, Russia, North and South America.

The focus of the conference included a number of topics related to women in the Orthodox Church. Among those discussed were: "The Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church," "Discerning the Tradition Today," "Growing Up Orthodox and Female," "Women and Contemporary Pastoral Praxis," "Orthodox Women in Monastic Life," "Orthodox Theological Education and Women," "The Ministry of Wives of Priests," "Women as Young Adults," "Women and Aging," "Women and the Body," "The Diaconal Ministries and the Diaconate," and "The Ordination Issue."

Serving as the theological coordinator of the conference, Dr. Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald reminded the delegates that they were present with the blessing of their Church leaders. "Our conference," she said, "is taking place with the full encouragement and

blessings of our Patriarchs, Archbishops, and Metropolitans. We are representatives of our churches. Our primates have already affirmed that our meeting is an important one for our churches and for Orthodox Christian witness in the societies in which we live."

Conference participants recommended that the churches take more positive actions in affirming and supporting the vocations of women. The delegates, for example, stressed the need for more women to have the opportunity to study Orthodox theology.

As there were a number of participants from war-torn areas of Eastern Europe, delegates spoke of women as "peacemakers" and called upon the churches to make "a greater commitment to support our sister Orthodox churches in crisis situations. Often in these situations, women and children suffer most."

A number of other concerns which relate to the ministry of women were also discussed. Many of the delegates expressed concern regarding certain liturgical practices regarding the presentation of infants, certain prayers associated with miscarriage, abortion, postpartum mothers, and the assumptions which in some places prohibit

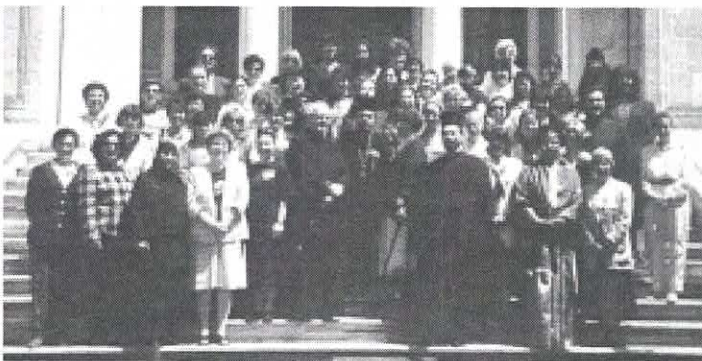
women from receiving communion for biological reasons. These concerns were discussed by the participants openly, yet with great sensitivity. The delegates recognized the need to examine more thoughtfully the present relationship between theology and praxis (practice).



Prof. S. Deicha, Ms. K. Zorba, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Prof. K. FitzGerald, Ms. D. Prassas

There were also discussions regarding the rejuvenation of the female diaconate. The delegates were encouraged to reflect deeply upon this tradition. In his welcoming address of Patriarch Bartholomew reminded the participants that "Here, at the Great Church of Hagia Sophia, a number of devoted women such as St. Olympias, served as deaconesses . . . To both women and men, to both clergy and laity, these women saints continue to be a source of inspiration, for it is written, 'God is revealed in His saints!'" His Holiness also noted the "call for the full restoration of the order of women deacons . . . The order of women deacons is an undeniable part of tradition coming from the early Church. Now, in many of our Churches, there is a growing desire to restore this order so that the spiritual needs of the people of God may be better served. There are already a number of women who appear to be called to this ministry."

"Perhaps one of the most remarkable results of these two international Orthodox conferences, [the other conference was "Discerning the Signs of the Times" held in Damascus Syria, October, 1996]" stated FitzGerald, "is that, now, at least at a symbolic level, we have for the first time a global consensus regarding a number of the important concerns that affect Orthodox women. This indeed, may prove to be of immediate and future service to the Church." ❖



Attendees at the International Conference "Discerning the Signs of the Times" (Mt. 16:3)