

St Phoebe the Deaconess

Fr. Ted Bobosh, September 3, 2019

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchræe, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well. (Romans 16:1-2)

We commemorate St Phoebe the Deaconess on September 3. She is given the special title, “Equal to the Apostles,” a designation shared by only a very few saints in the Orthodox Church including three First Century Women: Mary Magdalene, Photini, and Thekla. Sadly, we know little about St Phoebe or about what the role of deaconess was in the 1st Century other than that the role existed.

“Furthermore, not only has the tradition of the Orthodox Church often referred to St Phoebe as ‘Equal to the Apostles,’ she is also considered as the prototype of the woman deacon, the first deaconess of the Church. The second of the ordination prayers for the female diaconate compares the woman being ordained to Phoebe. The prayer implores God to ‘fill her with the grace of the diaconate . . . , ‘just as you gave the grace of Your diaconate . . . to Phoebe, whom You called to the work of ministry...’ Like St Stephen for the male deacon, St Phoebe is seen as a prototype for all subsequent women deacons. She is often referred to as one who is ‘equal to the apostles.’ This title, which the Church has bestowed only on some saints, generally signifies their important role in the process of evangelization.” (Kyriake Karidoyanes FitzGerald in WOMEN AND THE PRESTHOOD, p 97-98)

Origen (d. 254AD) commenting in the 3rd Century on Romans 16:1-2 (cited above) writes:

And this passage teaches with apostolic authority that women are likewise appointed to the ministry of the Church. With great praise and commendation Paul honors Phoebe, who was placed in this service in the church in Cenchræe, as he enumerates as well her illustrious accomplishments and says: She has assisted everyone to such an extent, that is, in her being at hand for necessities, that she even gave assistance to me in my necessities and apostolic labors with the complete dedication of mind. I would call her work similar to the hospitality of Lot, who, while he received strangers at all times, one time even merited to receive angels in hospitality (Gen 19:1; Heb 13:2). In a similar way Abraham too, while he was always meeting strangers, merited even to have the Lord, together with angels, turn aside to his tent (Gen 18:1-2).

So also this devout Phoebe, while she stands near everyone and accommodates everyone, merited to assist and to accommodate the Apostle as well. And therefore, this passage teaches two things at the same time: As we have said, women are to be considered ministers in the Church, and the kind who have assisted many and who through good services have merited attaining unto apostolic praise ought to be received in the ministry. He exhorts even this, that those who look after good works in the churches should receive, in turn, recompense and honor from the brothers, so that in whatever things there is a need, whether in spiritual or even fleshly services, they should be held in honor.” (COMMENTARY ON THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS Books 6-10, pp 290-291)

Origen writing in the 3rd Century is still aware of the role of deaconess and considers women eligible to be official ministers in the church. He portrays ministry as being one of hospitality and assisting others. In the Fifth Century Bishop Theodoret [d. 457AD] commenting on 1 Timothy 3:11 still speaks about the role of women deacons in the church:

“The women likewise, in other words, the (women) deacons, ‘must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.’ What he prescribes for men, he also prescribes in the same or similar manner for women. Just as he says that deacons must be ‘serious,’ so he also says that women must be serious. Just as he forbids the men to be ‘double tongued,’ so too he forbids the women to be ‘slanders.’ And as he forbids the men to be ‘addicted to much wine,’ so also he commands the women to be ‘temperate.’” (Kyriake Karidoyanes FitzGerald in *WOMEN AND THE PREISTHOOD*, p 96)

For Theoderet, all of the virtuous requirements for a male Christian to become a deacon, apply to women seeking to become deaconesses. There is some level of equality of ministry between male and female deacons.

The order of the deaconess is still accepted a century later when the Emperor Justinian issues legislation about women deacons. Valerie Karras notes:

“The historical record makes clear that female deacons were considered part of the broader ‘priesthood’ (Greek hieroyne) – the ordained orders of bishop, presbyter (priest), and deacon – as evidenced by Justinian’s [d. 565AD] applying that term to them in his legislation. ... It is true that female deacon’s ministry was restricted almost exclusively to women in the Church, following society norms in general, was private as opposed to public in nature. However, the evidence is so overwhelming that most scholars – in particular virtually all scholars specializing in the are of liturgical theology – view Byzantine deaconesses as fully ordained to the diaconate.” (THINKING THROUGH FAITH, pp 144-145 + footnote 45).

Eventually through history the role of the deaconess disappeared almost completely from the Orthodox Church, though a few saints revived some form of the office from time to time including St. Elizabeth the New Martyr of Russia (d. 1918).

“Inspired by Mother Elizabeth, the sisters of the House of Mercy saw themselves as accomplishing the ancient diaconal way of service to the Lord:

‘Monasticism achieves salvation principally through the sinner transfiguration of the human person by means of an intensive prayer life, contemplation and the renunciation of the world. Deaconesses served God, saving the other and their souls by an active love, exercising mercy towards the poor, the sinner and the afflicted in the name of Christ. The Martha and Mary House wishes to restore the forgotten path of diaconal service of Christian love. The House does not reject monasteries, but rather places itself by their side, united with them in the service of God, the neighbor and their soul.’ (St Elizabeth)” (Paul Ladouceur, “In My Father’s House There are Many Mansions (Jn 14:2), SVTQ, Vol 55 #4 2011, p 454)

The spirit and ministry of St. Phoebe the Deaconess, Equal the Apostles, lives on in the Orthodox Church, for a church which relies on tradition should not forget its past.

St. Phoebe pray to God for us.