

# Women's Access to Diaconal Ministry and Prospects of Revival in the Orthodox Church

*By Ann Marie Mecera, Founder and Chair, The St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess*

## **Introduction**

This article will address the basic history of the female diaconate by referring to Scripture, ancient texts, prayers, and practices in the early Church. A look at history, culture, and the varied duties of the deaconess will help explain the importance and function of the order, offer theories for its decline, and provide information regarding the numerous calls and efforts made for revival, as well as the current real and perceived obstacles for women's access to ministry in the Orthodox Church. This paper will examine statistics that reveal the unmet needs in the contemporary world, and consider how they are not currently being addressed by the Church. Examples of contemporary deaconesses around the world will be brought forth. Finally, this paper will provide considerations for readying women to enter the diaconate once again, and additional possibilities for an enlivened Church in the world today.

## **Christ as our Guiding Source**

Women's access to diaconal ministry can be examined through the examples Christ bestowed on us when He interacted with women. The culture in which Christ carried out His three years of ministry was one in which women were second-class citizens and held no authority. Men and women did not interact or speak to each other outside of family; yet Christ traversed these boundaries and can be considered most radical in a number of ways! He was radical when He had the intimate conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-25); He was radical when he permitted the sinful woman to wash His feet (Luke 7:36-50); He was radical when he healed the woman with the flow of blood (Matthew 9:20-22). Most radical was the

announcement of the Good News—Christ’s resurrection which offered salvation to the human race—to women first, (Luke 24:1-8) and who were then instructed to proclaim this message not only to other women, but to men as well.

### **Diaconal Ministry: Early Origins and Women’s Access**

We know from Acts 6:2-4 that the diaconate was intended to be one of ministry, to relieve the Apostles of certain duties so they could preach, and help those in need:

*“Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.”*

The Orthodox Study Bible explains this passage in the following way: “While the ministries of the word and of serving widows are both important, **they cannot be performed by the same people and still receive the proper attention.**”<sup>1</sup>(my bold) Thus, the Church develops diversified ministries... In the Orthodox Church to this day, the bishops and presbyters are called to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word, **with the other ministries being accomplished by the deacons and the laity.**”<sup>2</sup> (my bold).

Stephen the Protomartyr was one of the first seven deacons assigned to distribute food and charitable aid to poorer members of the community (Acts 6:5) but Paul also extols Phoebe and her work in Romans 16:1-2, specifically calling her “diakonos”- servant or deacon:

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<sup>1</sup> The Orthodox Study Bible, (St. Athanasius Orthodox Academy of Orthodox Theology, 2008), p1478

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

*“I commend to you, Phoebe our sister, who is a servant [διακονον] of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also. “*

As a result, the Orthodox Church considers her to be the first female deacon and commemorates her on September 3 with the following troparion:

*Enlightened by grace*

*And taught the Faith by the chosen vessel of Christ,*

*You were found worthy of the diaconate;*

*And you carried Paul’s words to Rome.*

*O Deaconess Phoebe, pray to Christ God that his Spirit may enlighten our souls!*<sup>3</sup>

Numerous icons have been written for St. Phoebe, with one depicting her holding a censer.<sup>4</sup> St. John Chrysostom praised St. Phoebe’s work for the Church as an inspiration and model for both men and women to imitate. He calls her a saint – a holy person and a woman who served the Church through the office of deacon.<sup>5</sup>

One of the prayers of ordination of the deaconess from the Byzantine rite specifically references her, along with support for women in liturgical service. The ordaining bishop prays:

*‘Master and Lord, You do not reject women who offer themselves and desire to minister as is fitting in your holy houses, but you accept them in the order of ministers (λειτουργων). Bestow*

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<sup>3</sup><http://ww1.antiochian.org/node/16699>

<sup>4</sup> <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/the-deaconess/>

<sup>5</sup> St. John Chrysostom, Homily on Romans, <https://stanmelkitechurch.org/2020/09/03/st-phoebe-the-deaconess/>

*the grace of your Holy Spirit to this servant of Yours who wishes to offer herself to you, and fill her with the grace of the diaconate, as You gave the grace of Your diaconate to Phoebe, whom you called to the work of ministry (εργον της λειτουργιας). Grant her, O God, to persevere blamelessly in Your holy churches, to give careful attention to her way of life, to prudence(σωφοσυνης) in particular, and show her to be Your perfect servant, that when she stands before the judgment of Christ, she may also receive the fitting reward of her way of life.”<sup>6</sup>*

### **Diaconal Authority Given to Women in the Early Church**

The first mention of deaconesses after the New Testament is in a letter of Pliny the Younger to the Roman Emperor Trajan, when Pliny the Younger relates how he had two deaconesses tortured. He refers to these women as ‘ministrae,’ which is the Latin word for ‘deaconess.’<sup>7</sup> Numerous inscriptions on tombstones from the first centuries through the Byzantine period, especially throughout the Christian East, also testify to the presence and importance of female deacons.<sup>8</sup> The third century document, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*<sup>9</sup> outlines pastoral duties, and states that “suitable women should be ordained as deaconesses.” More specifically, the *Didascalia* states:

“Wherefore, O bishop, appoint thee workers of righteousness as helpers who may cooperate with thee unto salvation. Those that please thee out of all the people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacons: a man for the performance of the most things that are

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<sup>6</sup> Barberini 336 codex, 164.10 (8th c.)

<sup>7</sup> Protopresbyter Lawrence R. Barriger, *Insights into the Orthodox Faith*, (Christ the Saviour Seminary Press, Johnstown, PA, 2006), p136.

<sup>8</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), pp10-11.

<sup>9</sup> The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, or just *Didascalia*, is a document written around the 3rd century, and focuses on Church practices. The author is thought to be a bishop, and the original was written in Greek. <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didascalia.html>

required, but a woman for the ministry of women. For there are houses whither thou canst not send a deacon to the women, on account of the heathen, but mayest send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required. In the first place, when women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men: but with the imposition of hand do thou anoint the head only..."<sup>10</sup>

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* also provided that deaconesses had the role of instructing women converts and caring for people, and stated that "The deaconess shall be honored by you in the place of the Holy Spirit."<sup>11</sup>

Depending on the need and circumstances, the deaconess carried out the following duties as well:<sup>12</sup>

- assisting the bishop
- catechetical formation
- education of children
- greeting and welcoming visitors
- charitable outreach
- spiritual formation of laity
- visiting the sick and suffering
- ministering to the lonely and homebound
- supporting those in mourning
- taking the Eucharist to the sick
- assisting with administrative duties

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<sup>10</sup> Didascalia Apostolorum, <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didascalia.html>, chapter XVI

<sup>11</sup> Carl Volz, *Pastoral Life & Practice in the Early Church*, (Augsburg, 1990), p196

<sup>12</sup> Didascalia Apostolorum, <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didascalia.html>, chapter XVI; Carl Volz, *Pastoral Life & Practice in the Early Church*, (Augsburg, 1990), pp193-194, 197

- chanting

Beyond visiting the sick, deaconesses were also known to serve in administrative roles. Volz says, “As the fourth century wears on we find the deaconess enjoying a position of high distinction in the churches of the Eastern empire.<sup>13</sup> In sixth century Constantinople, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian directed in the *Novellae Constitutiones*,<sup>14</sup> that there was to be assigned one hundred deacons, forty deaconesses, and ninety subdeacons to the Hagia Sophia,<sup>15</sup> which proves the large number of deaconesses that existed in the early Church.

We know from eighth century Byzantine liturgical texts that women deacons in the early Church were ranked with the higher clergy, and their ordination was similar in many ways to that of the male deacon. They were ordained at the altar during the Divine Liturgy, with the bishop laying on his hands and two prayers. The deaconess was vested with an orarion, and received the Eucharist from the Bishop at the altar.<sup>16</sup>

Although it may be tempting to think women’s leadership as deaconesses was fully employed, Carl Volz suggests something different due to cultural influences. “It seems plausible to assume,” Volz writes, “that the church, in trying to avoid the appearance of being socially disruptive, requested that women not assume roles that were at variance with accepted norms in pagan life.”<sup>17</sup> Volz continues to say that this was in an effort to conform to Roman norms as the church moved into the second century and the church wanted to present itself as

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<sup>13</sup> Volz, Carl, *Pastoral Life and Practice in the Early Church* (Augsburg 1990), p197

<sup>14</sup> Neil K. Moran, “Narthex of the Deaconesses in the Hagia Sophia”, p.1, <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/deaconesses-nmoran.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Valerie Karras, Ph.D., “Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church,” an article based in part on “The Liturgical Participation of Women in the Byzantine Church” (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2002,), chapter 6, p299. (The ordination rite for the deaconess is found in secs. 163-164, in Barberini, 185-88. See footnote #128 in this article.)

<sup>17</sup> Volz, Carl, *Pastoral Life and Practice in the Early Church* (Augsburg 1990), p184-185

a “respectable institution.”<sup>18</sup> Volz makes a critical point here: the church did not develop in a vacuum; it was affected by society and culture and responded with societal and cultural practices in mind for the overall preservation and good of the church and its people. We can ponder this today as we consider what practices are not only based on outdated science, technology and societal norms, but distort theology and harm its faithful.

### **The Decline of the Female Diaconate and Effect on Contemporary Orthodoxy**

The female diaconate flourished in the first one thousand years of Christianity as described above. In fact, thirty-four deaconesses are commemorated on the church calendar.<sup>19</sup> But what of today? Why do we not see deaconesses serving our parishes and communities? How did her role fall out of use? Unfortunately, little documentation exists that points specifically to reasons for the female diaconate falling out of use. Theologians and scholars have looked at history to offer theories that hold significant weight. Theologian Valerie Karras, among others, suggest that part of the decline could have been that fewer adult female baptisms took place as the church evolved in the early Byzantine period.<sup>20</sup> Duties of the male deacon were known to increase, as well as those of the male clerics, which could have adversely affected the responsibilities of the deaconesses.<sup>21</sup> In the third century, the teaching of ritual impurity developed in the Church of Alexandria. Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria stated that women who were menstruating should not even consider entering the church during this time, let

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<sup>18</sup> Volz, Carl, *Pastoral Life and Practice in the Early Church* (Augsburg 1990), p185

<sup>19</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005), p201; and *Calendar of Women Saints, Featuring Deaconesses of the Early Church*, Saints Mary and Martha Orthodox Monastery, Wagoner, SC, USA

<sup>20</sup> Valerie A. Karras., *Female Deacons in the Early Church*, ©2004, The American Society of Church History

<sup>21</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), p135.

alone receive the Eucharist. Dr. Karras believes that when Bishop Dionysius' view was adopted it could have contributed to the decline in the female diaconate.<sup>22</sup> Dr. Karras concludes that "the continued practice of ritual impurity for menstruants by Jewish and Judaizing Christians received approval by Alexandrian bishops of the third and fourth centuries and so made its way into the canonical legislation of the Eastern Church (where it continues to be debated to this day)."<sup>23</sup>

Another possible contribution to the decline was that some Gnostic sects welcomed females into the priesthood and episcopacy. In an effort to do away with this practice as well as Gnostic heresies in general, early Church communities may have done away not only with female priests and bishops, but deaconesses as well.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Empire, and the end of the Byzantine Empire, had to have greatly affected the Orthodox Church and the role of the deaconess. It was impossible for the culture of Constantinople not to be influenced over the centuries that it was under Muslim rule and the practices of the newly formed Islamic political-religious state. This was the case both religiously and culturally as "...the Islamic faith grew and advanced in a phenomenal way."<sup>25</sup> Not only were the Greek people forced into slavery, but they were "not allowed to build monasteries or churches, nor could they repair or restore any which had fallen into disrepair".<sup>26</sup> Dr. FitzGerald points out that as a result of the fall of the Byzantine

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<sup>22</sup> Valerie A. Karras "Menstruation and Ritual Impurity in Alexandria and Antioch", a paper presented at the annual meeting of the North American Patristics Society, Chicago, Illinois, USA, 2006, p5

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p11.

<sup>24</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999,) p138

<sup>25</sup> Metropolitan Isaiah, of the Metropolis of Denver in the U.S., "The Influence of Islam on Orthodox Christianity." <https://www.denver.goarch.org/influence-of-islam-on-orthodox-christianity>, 2005

<sup>26</sup> Ibid



Empire the role of women greatly changed. “The role of women in a Muslim society was by and large more restricted than in the Byzantine world. Christian women who were active in a visible and public ministry may have proved to be a potential source of vulnerability in those societies which were under Muslim political and religious authority...”<sup>27</sup> Although monasticism somehow continued to survive, FitzGerald notes that the male diaconate was adversely affected as well. The limitations put on the Church meant that the ministerial aspect of the diaconate was diminished. This left only the liturgical role, which is what continues to be practiced to this day, and which encourages a misunderstanding of the full diaconate role.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Deaconess in Contemporary Times**

In spite of the decline and virtual disappearance of the female diaconate, there are a few instances in which deaconesses have been ordained in contemporary times. Saint (Archbishop) Nektarios of Aegina ordained a woman in 1911 to serve as a deaconess in her monastery.<sup>29</sup> In 1986, the late Archbishop of Athens, His Beatitude Christodoulos ordained a nun as a deaconess.<sup>30</sup> In 2004, the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece restored the order of the diaconate for women. Unfortunately, there have been no ordinations yet.<sup>31</sup> In the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow ordained his spiritual daughter a

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<sup>27</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005), p138

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Saint Nektarios of Aegina, November 10, 2018, <https://theholyprotection.org/saint-nektarios-of-aegina/>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>31</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, “Church of Greece Restores Diaconate for Women,” *The Orthodox Christian News Service*, January 25, 2005, [https://www.stmaryorthodoxchurch.org/orthodoxy/articles/women\\_diaconate\\_greece](https://www.stmaryorthodoxchurch.org/orthodoxy/articles/women_diaconate_greece)

deaconess when she was appointed abbess of a monastery.<sup>32</sup> In 2019, in the Syrian Orthodox Church, (closely related historically to the Eastern Orthodox Churches) His Eminence Archbishop Mor Dionysius John Kawak ordained eleven women to the diaconate in the state of Michigan in the United States.<sup>33</sup> It has also been documented that deaconesses were ordained in the Syrian Church in Belgium in 2019.<sup>34</sup> The Armenian Apostolic Church continues to ordain women as deaconesses, where they serve in the altar and read the Gospel.<sup>35</sup> Then in 2016, Patriarch Theodoros of Alexandria boldly took a first-ever step in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and consecrated (rather than ordained) the Catechist elder Theano, a member of the missionary staff in Kolwezi, to “Deaconess of the Missions” of the Holy Metropolis of Katanga. He also read the prayer for one entering the “ecclesiastic ministry” for three Nuns and two Catechists.<sup>36</sup> Their duties were to assist the missionary effort, particularly in the Sacraments of Baptisms of adults and marriages, but also in Catechetical training. This step was taken due to a specific need in a particular culture, as was the case in the early Church when women were first ordained. The outcome of this particular effort is discussed later in this paper.

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<sup>32</sup> Kyriki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005), p150

<sup>33</sup> “Deaconess (Mzamronyotho) Ordination at Sts Peter and Paul Church in Michigan,” <https://syrianorthodoxchurch.org/2019/07/deaconess-mzamronyotho-ordination-at-sts-peter-and-paul-church-in-michigan/>

<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, the website on which this information appeared is no longer available

<sup>35</sup> Knarik O. Meneshian, *The Armenian Weekly*, “A Nearly Forgotten History: Women Deacons in the Armenian Church”, 2013, <https://armenianweekly.com/2013/07/06/a-nearly-forgotten-history-women-deacons-in-the-armenian-church/>

<sup>36</sup> News Agency BASILICA.RO, Published by Aurelian Iftimiu, <https://basilica.ro/en/patriarch-theodoros-of-alexandria-performs-first-consecration-of-deaconesses/>, February 22, 2017.

## Numerous Calls for Revival Remain Unanswered

Some may believe the call for revival of the female diaconate is a contemporary issue, but the first official appeal was in 1855 in Russia and initiated by the sister of Czar Nicholas I.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Archbishop Michael [Konstantinides] of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America, understanding that priests could not adequately care for their flock single-handedly, called for re-establishing the female diaconate in the United States in 1953.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, no action was taken. The plea has also been made at nearly every international conference beginning in 1976.<sup>39</sup> In total, there have been seventeen calls, with the last being in 2020.<sup>40</sup> However, the most important call occurred in 1988 when the Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I [Papadopoulos] convened an International Orthodox consultation in Rhodes, Greece to explore the ministry and ordination of women in the Orthodox Church. This was an historic event demonstrating an international consensus in the modern era among Orthodox theologians and Church leaders for revival of the female diaconate.<sup>41</sup>

## Resistance and Response

Part of the resistance to the revival of the female diaconate today can be related to the long period of time that has elapsed in which there has not been an active female diaconate. Today, the faithful see the male diaconate primarily limited to its liturgical function, which further confuses the issue. As a result, the faithful picture a female in a liturgical role with the

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<sup>37</sup> Ellen Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate: An Historical Perspective*, (Light and Life Publishing), p49

<sup>38</sup> Kyriaki K. FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, (Holy Cross Orthodox Press), p154–5

<sup>39</sup> St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, "Calls for Revival," <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/the-deaconess/calls-for-revival/>

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

<sup>41</sup> Conclusions of the Inter-Orthodox Consultation: "The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women", (Rhodes, Greece, October 30, 1988), <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Rhodes-88-10-3.pdf>

ministerial aspect completely missing, when in reality it was the other way around in the early Church: the greater part of the diaconal role was that of ministry rather than that of liturgical functionary.<sup>42</sup> This misunderstanding unfortunately encourages accusations that women seeking the restoration of the female diaconate hide an agenda seeking power and equality within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Regarding the many calls for restoration, Protopresbyter Lawrence R. Barriger says, “It is perhaps tragic that such calls are often greeted with fear and misunderstanding. This is most likely because the office of deacon itself has come to be seen as a stepping stone to the priesthood and the deacon as some sort of inferior priest.”<sup>43</sup>

Over the years that the St. Phoebe Center has been in existence, its board has heard vehement opposition to women having access to the altar. The St. Phoebe Center was fortunate enough to have an exhibit table at the Orthodox Church in America All-American Council. We were visited by many people—women, men, clergy and laity. While most visitors were greatly supportive or curious about our work, there were those who were courageous enough to voice their concerns with our mission. We entered into polite conversation, but more than once the main concern of questioners was the issue of women entering the altar. At one point in the five-day Council, a clergyman approached the table, bent down to be face-to-face with me and directly asked, “Are you a feminist?” I was taken off guard, but responded that the St. Phoebe Center’s purpose as well as my own was to educate and advocate for revival of the

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<sup>42</sup> Protopresbyter Lawrence R. Barriger, *Insights into the Orthodox Faith*, (Christ the Saviour Seminary Press, 2006), p135

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p137

female diaconate. He seemed to accept this, and proceeded to openly converse with me about our work.

Another reason for the confusion and suspicion of the work of the St. Phoebe Center could be that not all Orthodox seminaries teach the full history of the female diaconate; rather they focus only on the assistance of the deaconess in adult female baptisms while overlooking the many other duties she fulfilled.<sup>44</sup> Seeing the pervasiveness of these misconceptions and false assumptions, and recognizing the possibilities that technology could offer in reaching people, the St. Phoebe Center chose education of the faithful as one of its main purposes when it was established in 2013.<sup>45</sup>

Those who misunderstand the full ministry of the deaconess will often focus on visiting the sick as the extent of their ministry, and then assert that ordination is not necessary for visiting the sick or shut-ins. This argument does not take into consideration the full meaning of ordination in the Orthodox Church. An ordination recognizes these gifts and training and confers the authority of the Church on the ordained (and expects accountability to Her) to minister to the needs of the faithful. It also connects this ministry to the healing power of the sacramental life of the Church.<sup>46</sup> In concrete terms, they connect the liturgy of our lives to the sacramental life of the Church.<sup>47</sup> If this were not true, there would be no need to ordain our deacons, priests, and bishops. Ordination also provides accountability to the bishop and the

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<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, I do not have access to every Orthodox theological seminary syllabus. Rather this argument uses the comments I have heard from a handful of seminary graduates to make this assumption. Further investigation is needed.

<sup>45</sup> The St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess mission statement is: "The St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess educates and prayerfully advocates for the revival of the ordained female diaconate in the Orthodox Church to meet the ministerial needs of the Church and the world today." <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/mission-vision/>

<sup>46</sup> Teva Regule, Ph.D., board member of the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, in an email to me

<sup>47</sup> <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/faqs/>

authority to act, granted by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Church, which is then recognized by those to whom the deaconess ministers. I have heard that the idea of a woman having authority within the community is somehow not an Orthodox belief. This is an unfortunate understanding of authority as power instead of 'holy *permission*' to carry out a particular work. In Christ, authority has been transfigured into service. The problem, however, may not be a misunderstanding of the sacrament of ordination, but the resistance to a female being ordained.

There is also a fear of the 'slippery slope': if women are ordained to the diaconate, detractors say, it will ultimately lead to their ordination to the priesthood and episcopacy. This argument does not take into consideration that the diaconate is not a 'stepping stone' to the priesthood, although contemporary practices reinforce the confusion. The diaconate, in fact, is a permanent order. Fr. Steven Tsichlis, former President of the Archdiocesan Presbyters Council of the Greek Orthodox Church of America, clarifies the position of the diaconate by saying, "...the diaconate is not merely a stepping stone to the priesthood but a ministry with its own *taxis* [order or arrangement] that the Father often connected to Christ Himself."<sup>48</sup>

Regarding the women who were consecrated for ministry in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, their consecrations were met with mixed and adverse reactions within the international Orthodox community that caused the Alexandrian Patriarchate to put the ordination of deaconesses "on hold" in 2020.<sup>49</sup> Yet the statement authored by the 2016 Holy and Great Council held in Crete said: "Each local Church as she offers the holy Eucharist is the

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<sup>48</sup> Archpriest Steven Tsichlis, Reclaiming the Tradition of the Church," St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess Conference, Union Theological Seminary, New York City, December 6, 2014, <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Reclaiming-the-Tradition-of-the-Church-Handout.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> "Carrie Frederick Frost, Ecumenical Trends," Volume 51, no. 3, May/June, 2022, p8/68

local presence and manifestation of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.”<sup>50</sup> Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost believes that this was seen as approval for the local church to consecrate these women to minister to the local and unique needs.<sup>51</sup> Fr. Njorge John Ngige, along with other African clergy and theologians support ordination of women to the diaconate. Fr. Ngige maintains that there is “no canonical or doctrinal opposition to deaconesses,” explaining that “...the Church does not discriminate based on color, race, nationality, thus women are fully included in the mission of the church including deaconesses.”<sup>52</sup>

Vocal opposition to the consecrations in Africa came in part from a group of clergy and laity in the United States, who issued a statement against ordination of women to the diaconate.<sup>53</sup> To that end, the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess wrote a response to address aspects of the statement that were erroneous, misleading, and based on poor scholarship and theology.<sup>54</sup> In an article about the actions taken in Africa, Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost said the opposers “... see [the female diaconate] as a slippery slope....It's a fear about capitulating to what is perceived to be the secular world at large, in that doing things differently in the Orthodox Church, even if it were a return to something that was historically the case, like the female diaconate, that that would be a capitulation to secular pressures about modernity and change.”<sup>55</sup> This fear

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<sup>50</sup> “Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church,” 1, Holy and Great Council.  
<https://www.holycouncil.org/message>, #1

<sup>51</sup> Carrie Frederick Frost, *Ecumenical Trends*, (Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, May/June 2022), p8/68

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*

<sup>53</sup> Orthodox Clergy and Laity, “Orthodox Clergy and Laity Take Stand Against Deaconesses,” posted on the St. Tikhon’s Seminary website: [https://hts.edu/news\\_180115\\_1](https://hts.edu/news_180115_1), January 16th, 2018 *Note: The website on which the original statement appeared is no longer available.*

<sup>54</sup> St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess Board, Ann Marie Mecera, President; Caren Stayer, Ph.D.; Gust Mecera; Teva Regule, Ph.D.; Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D.; Helen Theodoropoulos, Ph.D., “Towards a Reasoned and Respectful Conversation About Deaconesses,” *Public Orthodoxy*, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/?s=Towards+a+Reasoned>, April 17, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> James Dearie, “Orthodox move for women deacons is 'revitalization' not 'innovation'”, *National Catholic Reporter*, Nov 30, 2017

might be a natural human reaction, but it is also one that can be alleviated through sound theology. The board of the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess refutes the accusation that what fuels the move for revival of the female diaconate is the desire by feminists in the Church for control when it states: “Although there is not room here for a full treatment of authority with regard to men and women, we must clarify a critical point about the diaconate and authority: while all ordained orders bear the authority of the Church by their very nature, the work of the diaconate is service, and its characterization as one wherein one group exercises authority over another misconstrues and subverts this truth.”<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, nothing more is known about the status of the women originally consecrated and blessed as deaconesses and helpers; nor do we know if their ministry work has been hampered by the inability to be recognized by the faithful as women with credibility, authority, and accountability. Attempts to contact leaders in Africa have failed.

Nevertheless, support for the consecrations that occurred in Africa, and for actual ordinations of women to the diaconate, is present in the statements of multiple important Orthodox consultations and conferences. At the Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation convened in Rhodes, Greece in 1988, (and previously mentioned as the most significant of the many calls for revival of the female diaconate,) the following statements were made regarding ministry and ordination of women in the Orthodox Church:

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<sup>56</sup> St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess Board, Ann Marie Mecera, President; Caren Stayer, Ph.D.; Gust Mecera; Teva Regule, Ph.D.; Carrie Frederick Frost, Ph.D.; Helen Theodoropoulos, Ph.D., “Towards a Reasoned and Respectful Conversation About Deaconesses,” Public Orthodoxy, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2018/04/17/conversation-about-deaconesses/>



*“...it is necessary to confess in honesty and with humility, that, owing to **human weakness and sinfulness**, the Christian communities have not always and in all places been able to suppress effectively ideas, manner and customs, historical developments and social conditions which have resulted in practical discrimination against women. Human sinfulness has thus led to practices which do not reflect the true nature of the Church of Jesus Christ.”<sup>57</sup>(bold mine)*

What’s more, the Statement implores us to take specific steps by stating, *“The Church should re-examine potential data, views and actions, **which do not agree with her unshakable theological and ecclesiological principles, but have intruded from outside and, being in fact perpetuated, may be interpreted as demeaning towards women.**”<sup>58</sup>(bold mine)* and:

*“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”<sup>59</sup> and **“The restoration and re-establishment of the institution of deaconesses** in the whole of the Orthodox Church **in no way can violate the canons**, because this institution remains potentially in force to this day, since it is recognized by three Ecumenical Councils and has not been abolished by any later authoritative ecclesial decision.”<sup>60</sup>(bold mine)*

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<sup>57</sup> Inter-Orthodox Symposium convened in Rhodes, Greece in 1988 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate Demetrios, “The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women,” Section VII, number 24

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, Section VII, number 26

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, Section VIII, number 32

<sup>60</sup> Prof. Evangelos Theodorou, “The Institution of Deaconess in the Orthodox Church and the Possibility of Its Restoration,” in Gennadios Limouris, ed, *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Ordination of Women: InterOrthodox Symposium, Rhodes, Greece, 30 October–7 November 1988* (Katerini Greece: Tertios Publications, 1992), pp225–226

The Statement also points out that revival could positively address “many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world in many spheres”<sup>61</sup> as well as mentioning how a revival of the entire diaconate could be of service to the world.

What’s more, women are more educated than in the early centuries of Christianity; they hold distinctive positions in the secular world; they have proven that they bring a unique insight and experience that is valuable and necessary. Yet, the Church uses their gifts, talents and experiences far less and rarely in an official manner than in the early Church. Perhaps Behr-Sigel said it best by stating, “The woman deacon would take her appropriate place as a living sacramental presence in the life of the Church. This act in itself would serve as a powerful reminder that the fullness of the life of *the Church is not meant to be solely expressed by what may appear to be a monolithic, male clerical presence at the Eucharist*. Rather, this invitation of striving to share this fullness of the life of the Church (i.e. holiness) is at the very heart of the vocation of every baptized Christian.”<sup>62</sup> (italics mine)

### **Opportunities for the Female Diaconate Supported by Statistics**

Conservative statistics show a troubling reality that the Church, being a hospital, has a responsibility to address: approximately 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men were sexually abused in their childhood<sup>63</sup>; thus, many of the men and women with whom we attend church are

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, number 33

<sup>62</sup> International Orthodox consultation convened in Rhodes, Greece in 1988 by Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios, “Fuller Participation of Women in the Life of the Church,” <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Rhodes-88-10-3.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> Boz Tchividjian, “Startling Statistics: Child sexual abuse and what the church can begin doing about it, Religion News Service, 20,14 <http://religionnews.com/2014/01/09/startling-statistics/>,

survivors of sexual abuse. To make it clearer, at least 41 people in a parish with 200 members (half men and half women) were sexually abused as children.

Additionally, miscarriages occur in 15-25% of recognized pregnancies,<sup>64</sup> 61% of unintended pregnancies end in abortion worldwide,<sup>65</sup> an estimated 65 million people are care-givers to family members, with 66% of these estimated to be women,<sup>66</sup> and “1 in 3 women aged 15 and over, around 736 million, are subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner.”<sup>67</sup> If we are shocked, we should be, and if we are truthful with ourselves, we know that those percentages include Orthodox Christian men and women.”

Data from the Barna Group show that over one in four U.S. adults (28%) has personally experienced a trauma,<sup>68</sup> which Barna defines as an act of extreme violence, abuse or a near-death experience that produces a response of intense fear, helplessness or horror.

The World Health Organization<sup>69</sup> tells us that COVID-19 has contributed to:

- a 25% increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide
- affected the mental health of young people and that they are disproportionately at risk of suicidal and self-harming behaviors.

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<sup>64</sup> “Pregnancy and Miscarriage,” WebMD, <http://www.webmd.com/baby/guide/pregnancy-miscarriage#1>

<sup>65</sup> “Unintended Pregnancies and Abortion Worldwide”, Guttmacher Institute Fact Sheet, <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-worldwide>

<sup>66</sup> Caregiver Action Network, <http://caregiveraction.org/resources/caregiver-statistics>

<sup>67</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), <https://www.who.int/news/item/25-11-2021-fifa-supports-world-health-organization-16-day-campaign-to-raise-awareness-on-domestic-violence>

<sup>68</sup> Dr. Thema Bryant (president-elect of the American Psychological Association), “On Collective Trauma and the Church,” ChurchPulse Weekly episode, State of the church, <https://www.barna.com/research/cpw-bryant/> 2022

<sup>69</sup> World Health Organization, “COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide,” <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>

- women have been more severely impacted than men
- people with pre-existing physical health conditions, such as asthma, cancer and heart disease, were more likely to develop symptoms of mental disorders.

These sobering statistics point to the varied list of unmet needs that present themselves, and the opportunities that are possible through the Church as hospital—the first place our faithful should go for help and healing. As Carl Volz points out, visiting the sick or shut-ins could involve a plethora of additional tasks humbly carried out, including “a host of activities— anointing with oil, washing linens, food preparation and feeding, running errands, prayer and Scripture reading, serving as confidant, relieving anxieties, and whatever else may have been required to be of assistance.”<sup>70</sup> Volz also says that the deaconess took on a ministry “that today is often carried out by full-time clergy or staff in larger congregations.”<sup>71</sup> Perhaps more accurately, however, today’s clergy are *not* carrying out the majority of these ministerial duties because they are burdened with other roles as the parish priest. Fr. Alexander Garklavs outlined a number of functions expected of today’s parish priest in his presentation at the 2004 Pastoral Conference held at St. Tikhon’s Monastery in June of 2004. In addition to all the liturgical duties of the priest (Sunday and any daily liturgical services, baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.), he enumerates some of the priest’s responsibilities in parish life in America: pastoral visitations, educational work, Bible study, adult study, youth work, teen work, working with choirs and choir directors, marriage preparation, marital counseling, visiting shut-ins, grief counseling, [hospital visits], office work, preparing and printing bulletins and

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<sup>70</sup> Carl A. Volz, *The Pastoral Role of Women, Pastoral Life and Practice in the Early Church*, (Augsburg, 1990), p190

<sup>71</sup> *ibid*

schedules, parish mailing, aspects of parish administration: parish council meetings, budgets, agendas, PR, building committees, sunshine committees, yard work, etc.<sup>72</sup>

Theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel succinctly summarizes our dilemma today when she states, “We need only look around us and see the spiritual needs that exist within the parishes and in the larger society. Even with the assistance of the most devoted laypersons, our priests cannot be expected to meet the many demands of parish life.”<sup>73</sup>

Trained deaconesses could provide sound counseling to those women (and, in many cases, men who have difficulty speaking to other men) who have been sexually abused, suffered trauma or are victims of domestic abuse. They could comfort and help heal those who have experienced miscarriages or abortions. We must realize that these sensitive issues can be awkward, traumatic, or even inappropriate for a woman to discuss with her priest, and a deaconess could be available as a more proper and suitable alternative. What’s more, as our elderly continue to live longer, caregiver burnout is experienced by more and more adult children who are senior citizens as well. The deaconess could offer support and respite to these caregivers as well as visiting the elderly, helping with chores, and bringing the Eucharist to them. Deaconesses could assist in the education of catechumens and mentor new converts. Marriage classes could be taught by deaconesses, and young families and single parents could benefit from their support as well. Deaconesses could also minister to young people (including those at local colleges and universities), the disabled, the imprisoned, and those

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<sup>72</sup> Garklavs, Rev. Alexander, “The Orthodox Pastor in the 21st century”, talk presented at the 2004 Pastoral Conference (OCA) at St. Tikhon’s Monastery, South Canaan, PA, June 2-4, 2004. Accessed via [www.oca.org](http://www.oca.org).

<sup>73</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “The Ordination of Women: An Ecumenical Problem,” paper given at a colloquium on ‘Women and Ministry’ at Palermo, November 1989; reworked for delivery at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, January 1990; additional revision by the author, December 1990, p35.

dealing with poverty or addictions. Today's deaconesses could also provide religious education classes to adults, serve those who are in mourning, take on certain administrative duties of the parish, chant or read in services, and help keep the sanctuary and altar in good order. Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost says, "The Church needs its women's gifts. It needs them by virtue of their baptism; simply on the basis of the unique gifts each human person has to offer. It also needs them because women have a different lived experience than men, a different incarnational reality than men, and therefore have different gifts to offer the Church as *women*."<sup>74</sup>

### **Proposed Steps Towards Access to Ministry for the Female Orthodox Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The year is 2022, and the first call for revival was 167 years ago. We have made strides in the education, awareness, additional calls, and support. We have a plethora of research including articles, books, websites, and publications. There have been dozens of conferences, symposiums, and presentations. The St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess website is the largest online resource for education and revival of the female diaconate, and includes answers to common questions, a list of calls for revival, webinars, articles and letters, papers, talks, the prayers for ordination, and more. Yet can we really be proud of our accomplishments in the past 167 years? There is the excuse that the Orthodox Church doesn't move fast, but this is no longer something to chuckle about. We must do more, and the answer is not in more calls, talks, presentations, articles and letters, or webinars. Thus, this paper will

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<sup>74</sup> Carrie Frederick Frost, "Women's Gifts and the Diaconate," *Public Orthodoxy*, March, 2018, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2018/03/06/womens-gifts-and-the-diaconate/>

conclude with suggestions for some possible next steps. I boldly yet humbly challenge myself, Church leaders, and the faithful to begin addressing the following:

1. Determine how to carry out Elizabeth Behr-Sigel's statement that "...a specific responsibility for this creative work falls on pastors, as well as on those men and women who have had the benefit of a theological education."<sup>75</sup>
2. Bring to the attention of seminaries that a limited teaching of the female diaconate is misleading and damages the full theology of the Orthodox Church.
3. Prepare a course syllabus or abbreviated course that seminaries can teach on the authentic and full history of the diaconate, both male and female.
4. Encourage worthy women to gain theological training, become certified as clinical pastoral chaplains, and/or attend diaconal programs so that an adequate number of candidates can be available for ordination.
5. Explore what the female deacon role would look like in the Church today, including eligibility, liturgical and non-liturgical duties, accountability, and parish presence.
6. Make appeals to our hierarchs to host conversations with theologians, academics and lay leaders regarding the full revival of the diaconate—both male and female.
7. Begin to admit females into the minor orders including acolytes and lectors, a suggestion made at the Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation.<sup>76</sup> as well as welcome young females to serve as acolytes. (Some parishes have already embraced this

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<sup>75</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, "The Ordination of Women: An Ecumenical Problem," paper given at a colloquium on 'Women and ministry' at Palermo, November 1989; reworked for delivery at the Orthodox Academy of Crete, January 1990; additional revision by the author, December 1990, p35

<sup>76</sup> The Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation, "The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women," Section VIII, number 36, Rhodes, Greece, November 1988

practice, with the girls remaining outside of the altar and joining the male acolytes in processions during the Divine Liturgy.)

## **Conclusion**

In addition to my conversation with the clergyman at the All-American Council, dozens of people visited our exhibit table. Their comments included joy for our work, curiosity about what we did, and of course, skepticism. I was grateful that those who were uncertain were courageous enough to enter into polite conversation. Understanding the concerns will help make transparent and honest dialogue possible in official settings.

Protopresbyter Lawrence R. Barriger tells a story of when Christians were persecuted by the Romans. Deacons were known to be in charge of the money set aside to help the poor. One of the deacons, St. Lawrence of Rome, was ordered to hand over the 'treasure of the Roman Church'. St. Lawrence asked to have three days to collect it all. When he returned to the rulers after three days, he had a large group of the poor and needy with him. He gestured to the people and told the rulers that this was the Church's 'treasure.'<sup>77</sup> Protopresbyter Lawrence asks us to ponder the following: "Imagine how the magistrates would have reacted if St. Lawrence would have answered the question, 'Show us the treasure of the Roman Church,' by putting on a demonstration of the proper way to swing a censer, the correct intonation of petitions and gave an explanation of how the orarion is to be arranged at different points of the Liturgy."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Protopresbyter Lawrence R. Barriger, *Insights into the Orthodox Faith*, (Christ the Saviour Seminary Press, 2006), p138.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*



By bringing the gifts, talents, and lived experiences of women into the Church, it would more fully reflect what Christ intended; the Church could more fully demonstrate its true theology; it could more fully become a hospital where its faithful first come for healing. Marriages and families could be healthier; the lonely and suffering could find hope; the faithful could more fully experience the joy of the Church; and we all could be more fully set on our path to salvation and being reunited with the glorious and loving Jesus Christ our Savior.

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