



*St Phoebe Center*  
FOR THE DEACONESS

## St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconesses Hosts Online Event on the Legacy of the Rhodes Consultation

On Tuesday, May 9, 2023, the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess held the first in a series of events celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Center: “The Legacy of Rhodes, Featuring *Deaconesses: A Tradition for Today and Tomorrow*.”

The lively Zoom meeting was moderated by St. Phoebe Center Chair Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost and co-hosted with [Holy Cross Orthodox Press](#), represented by Press Director Very Rev. Dr. Anton C. Vrame, who spoke to the press’s ongoing commitment to publish high quality scholarship on the topic of deaconesses—both the volume featured in this event and the seminal work by Dr. Pres. Kyriaki Fitzgerald’s “Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church” (1998). A diverse and enthusiastic audience attended the event, including women, men, priests, deacons, laity, young and old.

The evening focused on the legacy of the “Rhodes Consultation,” a week-long inter-Orthodox consultation in 1988 convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I in Rhodes, Greece on “The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women.” It was part of the planning of a church-wide council, which ultimately happened in 2016 as the Holy and Great Council of Crete (though in a different form than originally envisioned and without addressing the issue of women in the church).

Another reason for the Rhodes Consultation was that many other Christian traditions around the world were beginning to welcome women into their clergy, and the Rhodes Consultation was an effort to address the question of women in the ordained orders from the Orthodox perspective. The consultation included delegates from twelve of the autocephalous churches and speakers from various Orthodox jurisdictions. It was attended by clergy as well as laity, including just a few women.

The Consultation produced a document: “The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women,” that included statements on theological anthropology about the meaning of women and men. It generally recommended an increase in the roles of women in the Orthodox Church, but not as priests or bishops. And it specifically affirmed the legitimacy of and need for the restoration of deaconesses (VII.32), stating unequivocally, “The apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived.”

The Rhodes Consultation concluded that there was ample evidence for this ministry from apostolic times well into the Byzantine period, that the deaconess was ordained (*cheriotonia*) to higher orders, and that such a revival would “represent a positive response to the many needs and demands of the contemporary world...” (VII.34)]. The consultation at Rhodes was a pivotal event. It was the first international Orthodox consensus on the restoration of deaconesses in the modern period, and it is from this consensus that all subsequent conferences examining the issue have been based.

The St. Phoebe Center organized this event on the 35th anniversary of the Rhodes Consultation in order to consider its legacy and impact on women in the Orthodox Church. The event featured a new book on deaconesses dedicated to the legacy of the Rhodes Consultation,

*Deaconesses: A Tradition for Today and Tomorrow* (edited by Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis, Dr. Niki Papageorgiou, Ms. Marilyn Rouvelas, and Dr. Petros Vassiliadis and published by Holy Cross Orthodox Press), and many of the volume's editors and contributors were present.

*Deaconess: A Tradition for Today and Tomorrow* includes twenty-one essays, most of which were originally presented at an international symposium, "Deaconesses: Past-Present-Future," organized by the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies and the International Hellenic University in Greece in 2020. The collection begins with the hierarchal imprimatur of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who endorses both the book and the effort to rekindle the order of deaconesses in the foreword. The volume brings together in print and in English the work of contemporary scholars on the topic of deaconesses. Previously, much of this scholarship was untranslated from Greek or other languages and scattered across various journals and conference proceedings, so the volume is a success on the basis of its collation of scholarship alone.

The esteemed panelists each engaged with the Rhodes Consultation in different ways. Dr. Valerie Karras, professor, author, and lecturer in historical theology; member of St. Phoebe Center Advisory Board; and a contributor to *Deaconesses: A Tradition for Today and Tomorrow*, was one of the panelists. Dr. Karras, rightfully called a "living legend," by one of the members of the audience, discussed the history of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church, emphasizing that she was unequivocally ordained, but noting, among other things, that the early church, that the early church seemed uncomfortable ordaining women as deacons, as seen in the more rigorous requirements and regulations for deaconesses than deacons in the canons. A comment was made that "The Church understands that what's right and true is not always comfortable."

A scholar who was present at the Rhodes Consultation was a panelist: Rev. Dr. Alkiviadis Calivas, Emeritus Professor of Liturgics of Holy Cross Hellenic College. Rev. Dr. Calivas shared his experience and noted that the Rhodes Consultation has a "mixed legacy," in that it unequivocally endorsed greater participation of women in the life of the Church and specifically as deaconesses, but also perpetuated some poor theological understandings of the sexes. He also lamented that the hierarchs of the church have lacked the will to implement the advice of Rhodes but affirmed that the restoration of deaconesses is still very possible, thanks to Rhodes. All participants responded with "Axios!" when it came to light that Rev. Dr. Calivas is soon to receive an honorary doctorate from the Faculty of Theology at the University of Athens, Greece.

Dr. Patricia Fann Bouteneff, President of Axia Women, "a network by, for, and about Orthodox women, in the service of Christ," described the rich diversity of "diaconal ministries" performed by Orthodox women all around the world. However, she also acknowledged that the Rhodes Consultation's legacy has been "in word and not in deed" in terms of deaconesses; meaning that although the document affirmed and encouraged the ordination of deaconesses, the Orthodox Church has not acted (the one exception being the consecration of deaconesses in the Patriarchate of Alexandria in the past few years).

The event concluded with an enthusiastic discussion in which many participants affirmed their need and desire for ordained deaconesses in the Orthodox Church today. This is the hope and the mission of the St. Phoebe Center, and our board and supporters will continue to prayerfully and diligently work towards this goal.