



Major Conferences that have explored the Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church

Over the past fifty (50) years, there have been a number of conferences that have focused on the life of women in the Orthodox Church—their ministry and their concerns. Many of these have called for the revival of the female diaconate to address some of the concerns of women in the Church. Towards that end, there have also been major conferences that have explored the issue of the female diaconate more particularly—its history and the need for its revival—to meet the ministerial needs of the contemporary Orthodox Church and the world today.

Below are some examples of these conferences.

Major Academic Conferences:

2015 – A major international conference, “Deaconesses, Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology,” was sponsored by the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies (CEMES) in Thessaloniki, Greece, January 22–24. It explored the issue of the female diaconate thoroughly—from biblical, liturgical, patristic, systematic, canonical, and historical theology. A resulting volume, featuring 39 scholarly papers (covering approximately 600 pages) on the subject, was published in 2017.

2020 – A follow-on international symposium, “Deaconesses: Past, Present, and Future” was again sponsored by the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies (CEMES) in Thessaloniki, Greece, January 31– February 2, 2020. Once again, this issue was studied from scriptural, historical, ecumenical and spiritual perspectives. In addition it included a memorial to Deaconess Maria and a statement of support from noted Orthodox liturgists. The general conclusion and recommendation was for the immediate restoration of the deaconess. In an open letter to the churches, the report declared, “There is no biblical or theological, canonical or liturgical, patristic or pastoral reason for the contemporary church to delay or obstruct the full restoration of the historical institution of deaconess.” Furthermore, it emphasized the “urgent need to revive the diaconate, male and female, in response to the growing pastoral demands and missionary challenges facing parishes throughout the world.” A resulting volume, *Deaconesses: A Tradition for Today and Tomorrow*, was published in 2023 by Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Mass.

Conferences sponsored by the St. Phoebe Center

In addition, the St. Phoebe Center has sponsored or been integrally involved in exploring the issue at a number of conferences and symposia. Below are some of the notable gatherings.

2014 – “Women and Diaconal Ministry: Past, Present and Future.” This conference was held in New York City and summarized the history of women’s ministry in the church with particular attention to the history of the female diaconate. It also highlighted the diaconal work that women are currently doing (e.g. Chaplaincy, Spiritual Direction, Ministries of the Word, and Parish Administration and Outreach) and explored how an ordained diaconal ministry of and for women could be reclaimed for today.

2017 – “Renewing the Male and Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church.” This conference, held in Irvine, CA, focused on the present state of the diaconate and highlighted the ways that men and women are currently serving in diaconal ministry (e.g. Pastoral Counseling, Administration, Chaplaincy and Hospice care). In addition, it explored ways to engage the clergy and faithful on this issue and debated the difficulties and benefits of ordaining female deacons.

2018 – “The Call to Revive the Female Diaconate: Thirty Years after Rhodes.” This conference, held in Chicago, IL, summarized the history and need for a revival of this office and examined the “state of the question” in greater detail. It also emphasized that a revived male and female diaconate could help to build up the Body of Christ.

2019 – With the blessing of His Eminence Metropolitan Evangelos of New Jersey (GOA), a symposium, sponsored by the Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (NJ Metropolis), was held at the St. Sophia, Sts. Faith, Hope and Agape Greek Orthodox Church in Jeffersonville, PA. It focused on the historical, canonical and ecclesiastical status of the female diaconate, including a fresh look at the role of deacons in the Orthodox Church and an examination of whether the Church will lose young women if their questions, especially those around the female diaconate, are not addressed.

2023 – With the blessing of Archbishop Elpidophoros (GOA) and the support of Holy Cross Hellenic College, this conference, “Deaconesses for the Orthodox Church Today” is being held. Once again, it will not only present the history of this order and outline the need for it today, but it will address ways that the Church might go about ordaining women once again to this ministry.