



St Phoebe Center
FOR THE DEACONESS

St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Deaconesses for the Orthodox Church Today: A Symposium” Held at the Maliotis Center of Hellenic College Holy Cross, Brookline, Mass.

Brookline, Massachusetts—In honor of its tenth anniversary, the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess held a symposium at the Maliotis Cultural Center of [Hellenic College Holy Cross](#) on November 10-12, 2023. The event drew a large and diverse crowd with clergy and laity coming from not only the New England area, but from across the country, with representation from Florida, Kentucky, California, Texas, Virginia, and elsewhere.

The symposium reviewed the history of and need for the revival of the female diaconate, but primarily considered the pragmatics of how the Orthodox Church might welcome women—who comprise more than half of the Church—into the diaconate once again to meet the unmet ministerial needs of the Church and world today.

The opening prayer and welcome were given by [His Eminence Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago](#) followed by a keynote from Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost, Chair of the St. Phoebe Center. She noted that, “There are times when a woman needs to be ministered to by another woman. This sort of ministry happens informally in parishes, but the good that could be done would be greatly magnified if there were theologically and pastorally trained women ordained as deaconesses, ready to minister to other women, with the oversight, support, and authority of the Orthodox Church.” She concluded: “May those of us gathered here this weekend, as well as the many people around the world who support the work of the St. Phoebe Center and wish to see deaconesses in the Church today, may we use our God-given imagination to explore, envision, and implement a process to revive the ordained order of deaconess to renew and rekindle the flame of Christ’s love in all of us.”

[Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis, Archdeacon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate](#), and chair of the symposium’s opening session, agreed with Dr. Frost’s keynote statements that “we’ve been waiting far too long” and that there is a “need to take action.” He encouraged the faithful to “focus on the pragmatic and realistic—discernible and digestible within the body of Christ—

functions and roles that can be tested within the church at large and submitted to the church as synod.” Fr. Chryssavgis also encouraged “dialogue and process,” going on to say that the recent “destructive and even divisive consequences of the narrow-mindedness or fundamentalist mindset within many of our parishes is the refusal or unwillingness to engage in authentic, respectful dialogue among parishioners, deacons, priests, and bishops.” Fr. Chryssavgis presented the challenge “to address the question of tangible steps toward restoring women deacons in our churches.”

Recognizing the scores of calls, papers, presentations, and theological discussions that have amply demonstrated the need to revive the female diaconate, the St. Phoebe Center found the symposium the ideal opportunity to present the document [“How to Restore the Ordained Order of Deaconesses Today: Proposed Guidelines”](#) as a “possible process for initiating dialogue for its revival.” The document addresses topics including candidate eligibility, formation, training, education, recommendations, possible ministries, possible liturgical duties, accountability and more. Finally, the “Proposed Guidelines” asserts that parishes exist today that are ready to welcome a deaconess into their fold. Thus, a pilot program could be implemented in these parishes as a way to begin the revival of the female diaconate. Statements in the document emphasize that it “does not claim to be comprehensive, nor does it intend to be the final word; instead... aims to spark . . . and facilitate conversation and action regarding this urgently needed ministry.”

Additional sessions summarized the work of previous conferences that have explored this issue and the many calls for revival of this order over the course of the last one-hundred and fifty plus years; answered the question ‘can women go into the altar?’; and spoke of other myths regarding the role of women in the Church. Workshop sessions offered practical ways for attendees to advocate for female deaconesses in their respective communities and discussed many of the issues that still surround this question.

The Center’s tenth anniversary was celebrated at the symposium with a champagne toast and by presenting the St. Phoebe Award to long-time supporter, Ms. Marilyn Rouvelas. A debrief among participants was held following the Divine Liturgy the next day.

The mission of the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess is to educate and prayerfully advocate for the revival of the ordained female diaconate to help serve the ministerial needs of the Orthodox Church and the world today. The St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess is the largest online resource on the female diaconate and its revival.

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