

# Proposed Guidelines for the Revival of the Ordained Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church Today

*Prepared by the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess*



*St Phoebe Center*  
FOR THE DEACONESS

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## I. Introduction and Purpose

Calls to reinstate the ordained order of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church have been issued throughout the world over the past one hundred years with increasing urgency and frequency; from conferences convened by patriarchs, from priests and deacons, from the general laity, and from the Church's esteemed scholars alike.<sup>1</sup> The historical precedent of deaconesses within the Orthodox Church has been soundly documented,<sup>2</sup> and the pressing pastoral need for a robust diaconate to serve the body of Christ today—both women and men—has been established.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the calls and conversation around deaconesses have not yet produced a picture of what the female diaconate might look like today, or of the process for selecting, preparing, and evaluating deaconesses within the Orthodox Church.

As our organization's mission states, "*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.*" We have lived out our mission thus far by holding conferences and webinars, creating and disseminating educational materials, and building relationships with laity and clergy around the broader topic of building up the major order of the ordained diaconate. We understand the specific mission of reviving the order of deaconess as being an integral part of diaconal ministry as a whole.

We offer these "Guidelines" to address the existing need for a clear vision of how the order of ordained deaconesses might look today, along with a possible process for its revival. The purpose of this text is to advance the topic, to outline several concrete steps, and to invite further constructive reflection in key areas. This document does not claim to be comprehensive, nor does it intend to be the final word; instead, what follows aims to spark our God-given creativity as a community and to facilitate conversation and action regarding this urgently needed ministry.

In articulating the guidelines which follow, we have benefited greatly from the document "Introductory Parameters for the Ministry of Ordained Deaconesses in the Orthodox Church" published in March 2019 by Saint Catherine's Vision, whose work we commend.<sup>4</sup> We offer our own

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<sup>1</sup> See St. Phoebe Center's Resources section of our website for a list of calls and other documentation: <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/resources/>.

<sup>2</sup> For the most thorough documentation of the history of the ordained order of deaconesses in English see both Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999) and Valerie A. Karras, "Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church," *Church History*, 73:2 (June 2004), 272–316. For the pastoral and theological case for deaconesses today, see: [cite 1-2 articles and webinars. [determine what to include].

<sup>3</sup> For a full exposition of the diaconal order as a whole, see the definitive text John Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia: The Diaconate Yesterday and Today* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> The full text is found at: <http://saintcatherinesvision.org/collaborative-work/rejuvenation-of-deaconesses>

proposal in the shared spirit of assisting the Church in its ongoing process of discernment and renewal regarding the female diaconate.

## **II. Eligibility, Formation, and Training**

A candidate for the diaconate must be a canonically baptized and chrismated Orthodox Christian in good standing with the Church. She ought to obtain a sound Orthodox Christian theological education in order to prepare herself for the pastoral conversations and questions that arise for any member of the clergy. A typical candidate would complete a bachelor's degree and a diaconal training program, though a Master of Divinity degree would be ideal.

As is the case with male deacons, the decision to ordain or not ordain lies with the local hierarchy. Just as important as formal educational credentials are the candidate's spiritual qualities, maturity, and pastoral capacity. Thus, it is crucial that the local bishop has full confidence in her fitness for ordination.

Both monastic women and lay women would be eligible as candidates for ordination. Like married male deacons, married deaconesses must be married prior to their ordination and must be in a Christ-centered marriage. Worthy single or widowed women of the requisite age who are not called to marry or remarry may also be considered. The holy canons state that a male deacon must be twenty-five, a priest thirty, and a deaconess at least forty years old. In contemporary practice, however, the Orthodox Church sometimes ordains men younger than the holy canons state. The Church may thus wish to respectively ordain younger eligible women as deaconesses. It should be noted that, unlike male deacons, women deacons are not potentially eligible for ordination to the priesthood.

## **III. Screening and Recommendation**

As is our current practice with male deacons, a female candidate for ordination would complete a rigorous set of psychological and medical screening evaluations and would provide letters of recommendation from her spiritual father/mother, parish priest (if different from her spiritual father/mother) and, if a monastic, from her abbess/*gerondissa* (if different from her spiritual mother). Additional letters from others who can speak to her character, spiritual maturity, and overall fitness may also be requested. Like a deacon's wife, a deaconess's husband must be supportive, understanding the nature and sacrifices accompanying her ordained role.

## **IV. Possible Ministries of Deaconesses**

An especially strong case exists for the revival of deaconess in order for ordained women to serve the needs of the Church in a variety of ways. The Orthodox Church today is in need of church-sanctioned woman-to-woman ministry as well the ministry of women to the entire Church and the Church's outreach beyond its members.

Such ministries include but are not limited to pastoral counseling, chaplaincy, spiritual companionship, teaching religious subjects /catechesis, missionary outreach, interfaith witness, philanthropy, nursing and social work, parish administration, family ministry, and youth and young adult ministry. The aim of all efforts of deaconesses would be to contribute positively to the

salvation and spiritual care of the Church's members and the larger society. The ministry which each deaconess offers within her particular parish or setting will be clearly established as part of her discernment and placement process with her hierarch and will be clearly articulated within her community. It may be an extension of her natural gifts and her theological education; e.g., taking on a leadership role of catechesis or compassionate care in the parish community. It may also relate to her professional training outside the Church; e.g., perhaps she is a board certified chaplain and will serve the Church community from this capacity, or is a registered nurse and can serve the faithful as a parish nurse.

## **V. Possible Liturgical Duties**

With the “major orders” ordination, or *cheirotonia*, a deaconess would meet the traditional criteria for fulfilling a variety of liturgical roles. These would include all of the liturgical functions in which male deacons serve. For example: a deaconess could offer petitions, cense during Vespers and Orthros, read the Gospel within the Liturgy, join in processions (Small Entrance, Great Entrance, Vespereal entrances, etc.), help with preparing the Holy Gifts, give sermons during the Liturgy, help with giving Communion to the faithful, and take the sacrament of Communion to those who are ill or confined to their homes. All of these liturgical duties are the extension and expression of the sacramental ministry of the deaconess conferred upon her in ordination, connecting the church and the world in the traditional expression of diaconal ministry.

## **VI. Accountability and Evaluation**

Deaconesses would be expected to follow canonical guidelines for all areas of ministry, as is expected for male clergy. In addition, ecclesiastical protocols that apply to male deacons in terms of receiving permission to serve, to travel, to enter another metropolis/diocese, etc., would be followed. This is a crucial responsibility of all serving in diaconal ministry to the maintenance of good Church order.

As the Church more fully discerns the ways women can best contribute through ordained ministry, regular constructive evaluations should be conducted, with participation of the deaconess, her parish priest/spiritual father or mother or abbess/gerondissa (if monastic), and her local hierarch. This will give both the deaconess and those responsible for overseeing her *diakonia* the opportunity to reflect on her life and ministry within the Church, identifying ways to strengthen the Body of Christ. Likewise, after a constructive evaluation of her contribution to the community (after a given period, to be determined), the entity she serves might prayerfully consider compensation according to the means of the parish, just as it would for any other clergy.

## **VII. Presence in the Parish**

Although many of the faithful are aware of the historical order of deaconess and actively support its revival, introducing an ordained deaconess into the visible life of the Church will require pastoral sensitivity to the varying levels of understanding and enthusiasm for such ministry. A supportive and mutually life-giving relationship between all the distinct members of one body is the norm for our faith. Likewise, a prayerfully supportive and mutually encouraging atmosphere is ideal in the parish,

among both laity and clergy. This provides an environment which welcomes the Holy Spirit's presence and action to nurture peace within the communal body of the faithful.

Initially it is important for the local clergy and hierarch to set the example of hospitality toward an expanded role of the ordained diaconate by publicly blessing, endorsing and reinforcing the authority of the diaconal pastoral identity. For the longer term, it is also important that the deaconess and the clergy who directly oversee her maintain frequent consistent consultation to help her carry out her ministerial responsibilities harmoniously. Working together they can generate enthusiasm and engagement for the roles of deaconesses and plan educational opportunities for parishioners to more fully experience and understand how active diaconal parish ministry is inherent to fullness of life in the Church.

### **VIII. Proposed Pilot Program**

We propose that reinstatement of the female diaconate might begin with a “pilot program” as follows.

- A local church, likely a synod of bishops, appoints a Deaconess Revival Commission consisting of clergy and laity, men and women, to identify and evaluate five to eight Orthodox Christian women of excellent diaconal character who have the theological training and eligibility as outlined in this document, and who are within parishes that are understood to be ready to receive the gifts of these women in ordained ministry.
- If the identified women do not have a theological degree or if additional training is deemed necessary, they enter diaconate training in approved and accredited Orthodox programs/institutions of theological education.
- These women form a peer group for mutual support and encouragement.
- The parishes of these future deaconesses receive continuous education, training, and support in order to best support and develop their work over time.
- The deaconesses wear the same liturgical vestments as deacons, which is faithful to the history of the order. The Deaconess Revival Commission will present options for the non-monastic deaconess' public, non-liturgical attire to the local church for approval.
- Each bishop reviews and evaluates the candidates for ordination.
- Worthy candidates are ordained to the order of deaconesses, all within the same time frame.
- Each deaconess works with her local clergy in partnership to best minister to the needs of the faithful.
- A channel of communication is established between deaconesses and their bishops, for accountability and concerns.
- The fruits of their work are then examined after a three-year time period by their bishops, priests, parishioners, women and men to whom they ministered, and the Deaconesses Revival Commission through a process designed by that Commission, in order to improve upon the ministry both of the pilot group and of future generations of deaconesses in the Church.

## IX. Conclusion

With gratitude for the pioneering work of many others over the past one hundred years, the St. Phoebe Center offers with humility these “Proposed Guidelines for the Revival of the Ordained Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church Today.” We pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us to inspire each other in serving the Church and through such service to grow closer to our Lord, God and Savior, Jesus Christ. By God’s grace, may we explore and envision a process to revive the ordained order of deaconess so that the sacramental blessing of this ministry will allow women’s gifts to be truly infused throughout the life of the Church. As we invite the spirit of *diakonia*—of service—to renew and rekindle the flame of Christ’s love among the entire diaconate and, indeed, in the entire Church, may it be to the glory of God and for the benefit of all God’s people.

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### ST. PHOEBE CENTER MISSION STATEMENT

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.

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### ST. PHOEBE CENTER VISION STATEMENT

We live out our mission by:

Sharing the history of the female diaconate, the importance of the broader order of the diaconate male and female, the service ministries of women in the Church, and the deep need for deaconesses today, through conferences, presentations, person-to-person connections, and the creation and dissemination of online and print resources.

Building relationships with our hierarchs and all clergy, seminaries, parishes and the faithful of all ages through clarity about our mission, cultivation of personal relationships, and our commitment to work of the highest caliber.

Acknowledging in humility that the Holy Spirit is at work and we are not alone in our efforts, and keeping at the forefront of our work the belief that the revival of the female diaconate will benefit the health and spiritual well-being of Christ’s Church and His people.

For more about the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess see: <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/>

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