



St. Phoebe Conference — Deaconesses for the Orthodox Church Today  
Presentation — *Diaconal Ministry and the Calls to Revive the Female Diaconate*  
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Teva Regule, M. Div., Ph. D.

Women have always participated in the diaconal ministry of the Church. In the early church, they participated in both ordained and non-ordained capacities. In an ordained capacity, the deaconess ministered to women much as the male deacon ministered to men. She assisted with baptism, took the Eucharist to those unable to attend liturgy, mediated between the faithful and the clergy, and taught, counseled, and guided the faithful on their Christian journey, especially those new to the faith. Women continue to serve in many of these same ways as chaplains, spiritual directors, chanters, readers, homilists, philanthropic outreach coordinators and parish administrators. In addition, they are often missionaries and Christian educators, to name just a few of the many diaconal ministries in which they are actively participating. However, today they do so without an ordination. In our work, we are sometimes asked, “Why, then, do women have to be ordained to do diaconal work?” First of all, I want to emphasize that the work of the laity is important and we should not minimize it. Still, we are a church that ordains people. This presentation will focus on how we understand our ordained orders and in particular, how the diaconate fits into the three-fold ministry of Christ. I will then highlight the numerous calls for revival of the female diaconate in the Orthodox Church and the need for this ministry today.

## Ordination and the Diaconate

Let me begin with a fundamental assertion that there is only one ministry in the Church—Christ’s ministry. We are all—clergy and laity alike—called to participate in it. In fact, we are all “ordained” into the ministry of Christ—the Royal Priesthood—at our baptism and chrismation. It is here that we are anointed as priest, prophet and king, participating in the life of *the* Priest, Prophet, and King. During the second and third centuries, within this Royal Priesthood, a three-fold pattern of bishop, presbyter, and deacon emerges as the pattern of formal ordained ministry within the Church.

What does it mean to be “ordained”? Although there is little reflection on this question, *per se*, in the first millennium of Christianity,[1] it was a setting apart of people for ministry in a particular community. Having been recognized by the community, their gifts were enlivened by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Those elevated to “priesthood” (i.e. bishop, priest, and deacon) or what we sometimes call, “major orders,” were ordained in the context of the Eucharist, at the altar, and by the bishop. The Eucharist was the foundation of ordination. Their service was tied to the liturgy and the altar as the source and summit of their ministry. The deacon, in particular, connected the liturgy of our lives to the sacramental life of the Church.

In practical terms, ordination sets up a reciprocal relationship between the Church and the ordained. The ordained carry the authority to serve and the credibility to do so as well as the support of the Church. But, they are then held accountable to Her. (One cannot just say anything or give their own opinions on matters. The ordained are representatives of the Church. In other words, there are no “loose canons.”) Ordination requires obedience to the Church through Her bishops. In addition, the ordained are also trained and vetted for ministry (in ways that the laity are not.)

So, how are the three expressions of “priesthood”—bishop, presbyter, deacon—understood and how do they relate to one another? According to the understanding of the Church, the bishop (or *episcopos*) is the overseer of the community. He is the “center of the visible unity” of the Church and a “spokesman for traditional doctrine.”[2] The priest or presbyter serves the local community. He is the minister of Word and Sacrament. It is through his hands that we offer our sacrifice of praise to God and from whose hands we encounter the peace of Christ in the Liturgy. The deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church’s life. Historically, the diaconate has been a ministry that is focused on service and has included pastoral care of the faithful, philanthropic outreach, reading the Scriptures (and preaching), and other forms of liturgical service (e.g. preparing the offering of the people, leading the petitions of the concerns of people, taking communion to the sick, etc.), as well as ecclesial administration. In particular, it is grounded in the way the church meets the world.

For nearly one thousand years, the Orthodox Church ordained women to higher or major orders (i.e. *cheirotomia*), specifically to serve as deaconesses. The 1954 landmark study of Evangelos Theodorou (Greece)—*H Cheirotomia 'H Cheirothesia tw'n Diakonismwn [The "Ordination" or "Appointment" of Deaconesses]*—showed that her ordination took place during the Eucharist/Divine Liturgy (not before the service as in the minor orders) and at the same place in the service as the male deacon was ordained. It included two prayers (as for a major order) instead of one (as would be the case for the “minor orders”), one of which calls upon God’s “divine grace” (which is only done only for major orders). She was ordained at the altar by the bishop, received the orarion [stole], and later in the service, received Holy Communion at the altar with the other clergy. All of these are marks of the higher order of clergy.

## Modern Renewal and Calls to Renew the Office

In modern times, the entire diaconate is experiencing a renewal and rejuvenation. According to a report from the Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation held at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary in 2003, Fr. Simeon Odabashian of the Armenian Church stated that the “ancient social role of the deacons is being revived [in the Armenian tradition].” In addition to the central role they play in the liturgical services of the Armenian Church, their duties include training children and altar servers [it should be noted that some Armenian Churches now allow girls to serve in this capacity as well], visiting the sick, and taking on responsibilities in parish administration.[3]

The ordination of the female deacon is also part of the history of the Armenian Church and is also being revived. According to a report from the *Discerning the Signs of the Times* conference for Orthodox women held in Istanbul in 1997, His Beatitude Patriarch Karenkin II mentioned that the Armenian Apostolic Church had “taken the initiative in ordaining women to the order of the Diaconate, an order in which both men and women are ordained and perform similar duties.”[4] At this same meeting it is reported that Archbishop Mesrob Mutafyan, the Patriarchal Vicar for Ecumenical Relations, spoke of the traditional practice of the Armenian Church to ordain women to the diaconate. The consultation report goes on to say,

There is no difference between the ordination service for women and men. Women deacons care for orphans, assist women at baptism, serve liturgically at the altar, read the Gospel, and bring the host to the priest. At this time, women deacons come from the monastic tradition.[5]

(\*\*It should be noted that the Armenian church ordained a non-monastic woman in Iran in 2017 with the understanding that she could get married in the future, if she so desired, as is the custom of the Armenian church.[6])

In the Byzantine East (especially in the United States), the male diaconate is growing. Training programs have been established to train candidates and in some places male

deacons are assuming more responsibility for the pastoral care and philanthropic work of the community. However, in other places the ministry is still exercised either as an interim step prior to ordination to the presbyterate or solely as a liturgical functionary. The female diaconate has not, as yet, been revived.

There have been numerous attempts for over one hundred years to reinstitute the female diaconate in the Orthodox Church. As early as 1855, the sister of Czar Nicholas I tried to restore the office.[7] Other prominent Russians also lobbied for its restoration, including Alexandr Gumilevsky and Mother Catherine (Countess Efimovsky). According to numerous sources, in 1905-06, several bishops, archbishops, and metropolitans of the Russian Orthodox Church encouraged the effort. According to a report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women in Agapia in 1976, this issue was to be a major topic at the Council of the Russian Church beginning in 1917, but due to the political turmoil in Russia at the time, the council's work was not addressed.[8]

Other efforts were made in Greece. On Pentecost Sunday in 1911, Archbishop (now, Saint) Nektarios ordained a nun to the diaconate to serve the needs of the monastery (in particular to serve in the liturgy by reading the Gospel, saying petitions, and distributing communion.)

In 1953, Archbishop Michael of the (then) Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America called for the reinstatement of the order to help meet the ministerial needs of the fledgling Greek Orthodox Church in this country. I quote,

...There is so much to be done in each community that the endeavors of these priests alone do not suffice. For should the priest wish to know, as he must his spiritual children by name, their problems, and their spiritual and moral needs, this would certainly be beyond his physical and spiritual resources.

These tremendous needs of our Greek Orthodox Church in America have urged us to make a fervent appeal such as this to our daughters-in-Christ... With the future welfare of our Church and membership at heart, we are considering the establishment in this country of an order of deaconess.[9]

In the 1960s, his successor, Archbishop Iakovos, expressed the same desire in two keynote addresses to the Clergy-Laity Congresses of the Greek archdiocese.[10]

More recently, the issue has been discussed at a number of international conferences. The first of these conferences was held primarily for Orthodox women in Agapia, Romania in 1976 where the restoration of the female diaconate was unanimously recommended. This was followed by a meeting in Sophia, Bulgaria (in 1987) that continued to urge serious consideration of this issue[11]. Then in 1988, the most substantive gathering to discuss the “ordination of women” was held in Rhodes, Greece. This conference was called by the Ecumenical Patriarch (Demetrios I) as part of the pre-conciliar work of what was to have been the “Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church” at the time. It was attended by approximately seventy people and included official church delegates (including many bishops and priests) and expert advisors from the Eastern Orthodox Churches from all over the world (with the exception of the Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem.) It was originally organized in response to the challenge posed to the Orthodox churches by our ecumenical partners who had begun ordaining women to ministry and strove to articulate an Orthodox answer to this question. While the consultation was not in favor of ordaining women to the presbyterate (or episcopacy), it did state that the “order of deaconesses should be revived.”[12] The 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...”[13] Furthermore, the report suggested the possibility of opening up the so-called “lower orders” to women (e.g. sub-deacon, tonsured reader, cantor, [altar server], etc.) The consultation at Rhodes was a pivotal event. It represents the first international Orthodox consensus on the revival of the female diaconate in the modern period and it is from this consensus upon which all subsequent moves and conferences examining the issue have been based.

As Dr. Frost mentioned last night, many people thought that the Church would immediately move in this direction. I remember that in the OCA there was serious talk of doing so. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the reception among the laity was positive. In 1990, (Matushka) Ellen Gvosdev (OCA) conducted a small survey among the laity to qualify this reception.[14] Among her respondents were men and women of various ages and ethnic backgrounds as well as both cradle Orthodox and those who joined the faith later in life. Notably, they all saw the need for a revival of the female diaconate, especially for pastoral care and spiritual guidance of the faithful. However, the OCA was concerned that such a move would set back their hoped-for recognition from Constantinople as an autocephalous Church so no move was made.

In Russia at this time, women were already acting as *de facto* deacons. They assisted the priest in liturgy and provided pastoral care to the people. However, once communism fell and it became fashionable to attend church again, they were essentially ignored by the many (often, young) men flooding into the church ready to reclaim their positions in it. What could have been an opportunity for formal recognition of their service was not the order of the day in the midst of the fervor of the time.

Another international consultation was held in 1990—in Crete. Here, the participants emphasized the need for a fully functioning diaconate of and for both men and women. Furthermore, it fleshed out the ways in which such a ministry could benefit the Church. According to the concluding report, the delegates emphasized

...[there is an] urgent need for a renewal of women's ministries, particularly the diaconate...the presence of the deacon or deaconess [could] lead the people in prayer, give spiritual counsel, and distribute Holy Communion where possible....The renewal of the diaconate for both men and women would meet many of the needs of the Church in a changing world...catechetical work...pastoral relations...serving the same needs for monastic communities without a presbyter, ...reading prayers for special occasions,...performing social work...pastoral care, ...engaging in youth and college ministry,... counseling, ... anointing the infirm, ...carrying out missionary work,

...ministering to the sick,...assisting the bishop or presbyter in the liturgical services....[a] creative restoration of the diaconate for women, we hope will lead in turn to the renewal in the diaconate for men.[15]

Since that time, additional conferences have been held in Damascus, Syria (1996) and Istanbul (1997) in which this issue was both discussed and affirmed. The delegates to the Istanbul meeting, in particular, emphasized that “the incorporation of deaconesses in the life of the church [would] help contribute to the atmosphere of love and learning in the church.” They stated further, “Deaconesses are able to work as helpers to the priests and counselors to the people, providing an important link and thereby strengthening relationships within the body of the church.”[16]

Furthermore, in July of 2000, after over a year of careful review of the subject, a formal letter was sent to the Ecumenical Patriarch (Bartholomew) by more than a dozen members of the Orthodox community in Paris, including such noted Orthodox theologians as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Fr. Boris Bobrinskoy, Olivier Clément, and Nicolas Lossky. The letter traces the history of the female diaconate and notes that the Patriarch himself has stated that there is “no obstacle in canon law [that] stands in the way of the ordination of women to the diaconate. This institution of the early Church deserves to be revitalized.”[17] It also states that the order should “involve more than a simple and archaeological reconstitution of the ancient ministry of the deaconesses ...it is a question of its revitalization, in other words of its realization in the context of the culture and requirements of the present day.”[18]

To meet the ministerial needs of the faithful in his diocese, another step towards a reinstitution of this ministry was taken in Greece. In 1986, Metropolitan Christodoulos, while serving as Metropolitan of Demetriados, now the region of Volos, ordained a nun. Then, in 2004, the Church of Greece under his leadership announced that it would restore the diaconate for



women.[19] However, (then Archbishop) Christodoulos died soon after and the initiative did not move forward.

Around this time, the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America also entertained the possibility of reviving this order. In 1987, Metropolitan Philip (Saliba) had accepted (en masse) members of what was known as the Evangelical Orthodox Church. This was a group founded by former members of the Campus Crusade of Christ who had been looking for the ancient church. As in the early church, they had ordained married men to the episcopacy as well as women to the diaconate. However, when they were received into canonical Orthodoxy, their bishops were ordained as priests and their female deacons were laicized. Although there was a hope that the former deaconesses would be ordained into canonical Orthodoxy in the future, the Patriarch of Antioch at the time, Ignatios IV, was not in favor of such a move and the initiative died.

The possibility of the revival of the female diaconate began to attract interest again in the lead up to the Great and Holy Council that was eventually held in Crete in 2016. In November of 2014, an international, pan-Orthodox Christian Fellowship of women theologians and other lay servant-leaders called St. Catherine's Vision published a "Call for the Rejuvenation of the Ministry of the Ordained Deaconess." [20] It was addressed to His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew I and the Secretariat of the Great and Holy Council. Building upon the consensus of the Rhodes consultation, the twenty-page proposal summarized the history of the order, confirmed that the deaconess was actually ordained to higher orders (e.g. *cheriotonia*) by highlighting various aspects of the Byzantine ordination rite, emphasized a need for such a ministry, and outlined the possible duties of a future female deacon. The document also pointed to the need to revive the entire diaconate in the life of the church. Lastly, it outlined the parameters of a pilot program to begin the process.

A major conference, “Deaconesses, Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology” sponsored by the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies (CEMES) was held in January 2015 in Thessaloniki Greece to study the issue further. It explored the question of reviving the female diaconate thoroughly—from biblical, liturgical, patristic, systematic, canonical, and historical theology.[21]

Then, in February of 2016, Patriarch Theodoros of Alexandria took steps to revive the female diaconate, consecrating five women as “deaconesses” to help meet the ministerial needs of his diocese.[22] In some quarters of the United States, this announcement was met with support and hope. In other quarters, it was met with confusion. And in still other quarters, it was met with vocal opposition. As an example of the former, in October of 2017 a group of renowned Orthodox liturgists (i.e. seminary and theological school professors) from the US and Greece expressed their support for the Patriarchate of Alexandria to “restore in a timely fashion the order of deaconess within the borders of the Patriarchate.”[23] They emphasized that the reinstatement of the female diaconate does “not constitute an innovation... but the revitalization of a once functioning, vibrant, and effectual ministry.”[24] They also clarified that the “restoration of the female diaconate is such that neither doctrinal issues nor authoritative precedents are at stake.”[25] They concluded by applauding the Patriarchate of Alexandria for “giving flesh to an idea that has been discussed and studied by pastors and theologians for decades.”[26]

In 2020, a follow-on international symposium, “Deaconesses: Past, Present, and Future” was again sponsored by 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 memoriam to Deaconess Maria and a statement of support from the 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.”[27] 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.”[28]

So, this brings us to today. The St. Phoebe Center continues to (as our mission states) educate and prayerfully advocate for the revival of the ordained female diaconate to help meet the ministerial needs of the Orthodox Church and our world today. We have held a number of conferences as well as webinars and other online fora to help educate the faithful about and build support for this ministry, articulating the need for its revival and emphasizing the ways that it could benefit the life of the Church today. This work continues... In the meantime, we also want to acknowledge and support the work that women are already doing in the church. For that, I will turn to my esteemed colleagues.

Thank you.

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[1] There are treatises explaining the roles of various ministers (e.g. John Chrysostom’s advice to Episcopal candidates —“On the Priesthood,” as well as other early Church documents (e.g. Apostolic Constitutions)), and canons regulating age, marital status, and other attributes of the candidates, but none (to my knowledge) speak specifically to what an ordination actually means.

[2] John Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia: The Diaconate Yesterday and Today* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2009), 6.

[3] “Consultation Report,” <https://www.usccb.org/news/2003/deacons-focus-oriental-orthodox-roman-catholic-consultation-june-9-10-new-rochelle-new>. Accessed 19 January 2024.

[4] FitzGerald, Kyriaki Karidoyanes, ed., *Orthodox Women Speak Discerning the ‘Signs of the Times* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Press, 1999), 29. Henceforth: FitzGerald, *Orthodox Women Speak*.

[5] Liveris, Leonie, “Consultation Report-MaryMartha editorial on Istanbul and Bossey,” [members.iinet.net.au/~mmjournal/Ma...d%20REPORTS/Istanbul%20%and%20Bossey.htm](http://members.iinet.net.au/~mmjournal/Ma...d%20REPORTS/Istanbul%20%and%20Bossey.htm). Accessed 28 April 2003.

[6] “Historic Ordination: Tehran Prelacy of the Armenian Church Ordains Deaconess,” <https://armenianweekly.com/2018/01/16/historic-ordination-tehran-diocese-armenian-church-ordains-deaconess/> Accessed 19 January 2024.

[7] Matushka Ellen Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate: An Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Light and Life Publishing), 49. Henceforth: Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate*.

- [8] Ibid, 50, referencing Tarasar, Constance J. and Irina Kirillova, eds., *Orthodox Women: Their Role and Participation in the Orthodox Church* (Report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women, Sept. 11-17, 1976, Agapia, Romania) (New York: World Council of Churches Press), 27.
- [9] Quoted in Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), 154–5.
- [10] Archbishop Iakovos (Koukouzis), *Visions and Expectations for a Living Church: Addresses to Clergy Laity Congresses, 1960–1966*, ed. Demetrios J. Constantelos (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), 20–21 in St. Catherine’s Vision, “A Call for the Rejuvenation of the Ministry of the Ordained Deaconess,” (2014), 5.
- [11] “Orthodox Perspectives on Creation” ¶ III.40, in *MaryMartha*, vol. 2, no. 3, (December 1992), 10.
- [12] Limouris, Gennadios, ed., “Conclusions of the Consultation,” in *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women* (Katerini: “Tertios” Publications, 1990), 31. Henceforth, “Conclusions.”
- [13] “Conclusions,” 31.
- [14] For a description of the survey and a summary the results see: Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate*, 40–44.
- [15] “Consultation Report: Church and Culture,” International Orthodox Women’s Consultation, Orthodox Academy of Crete, January 1990.
- [16] “Report from the Istanbul Meeting,” in FitzGerald, *Orthodox Women Speak*, 31.
- [17] “An Orthodox Diaconate for Women?” Reported in *Sobornost* 23:1 (2001), 60-63.
- [18] Ibid, 62.
- [19] <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/contemporary-orthodox-deaconesses/church-of-greece-restores-diaconate-for-women/>. Accessed 29 March 2020.
- [20] “Call for the Rejuvenation of the Ministry of the Ordained Deaconess,” <http://saintcatherinesvision.org/assets/files/December%20SCV%20Call.pdf>. Accessed 30 January 2020.
- [21] The papers and proceedings of the conference can be found in Petros Vassiliadis, Niki Papageorgiou, and Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi eds., *Deaconesses, the Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology* (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).
- [22] “Patriarch Theodoros of Alexandria performs first consecration of deaconesses,” <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/contemporary-orthodox-deaconesses/patriarch-theodoros-of-alexandria-performs-first-consecration-of-deaconesses/>. Accessed 30 January 2020,
- [23] “Documentation: Orthodox Liturgists Support Ordination of Women Deacons,” <https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2017/10/25/documentation-orthodox-liturgists-support-ordination-of-women-deacons/>. Accessed 30 January 2020. Henceforth: “Orthodox Liturgists Support Ordination of Women Deacons.”
- [24] “Orthodox Liturgists Support Ordination of Women Deacons.”
- [25] “Orthodox Liturgists Support Ordination of Women Deacons.”
- [26] “Orthodox Liturgists Support Ordination of Women Deacons.”
- [27] John Chryssavgis, Niki Papageorgiou, Marilyn Rouvelas, Petros Vassiliadis, eds., *Deaconess: A Tradition for Today and Tomorrow* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press), xvi.
- [28] Ibid. xvii.