



Proposed Guidelines for the Revival of the
Ordained Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church Today
Prepared by the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess

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I. Purpose and Introduction

The St. Phoebe Center intends with this document, “Proposed Guidelines for the Revival of the Ordained Female Diaconate in the Orthodox Church Today,” to offer a vision of what the female diaconate might look like in our own era. It includes a process for selecting, preparing, ordaining, and evaluating deaconesses. The “Proposed Guidelines” are the culmination of a five-year collective effort involving solicitation and integration of feedback from hierarchs, clergy, and laity of all ages and backgrounds. The “Proposed Guidelines” are inspired by the history of the Orthodox Church, the current pastoral need for deaconesses, and the recent calls for the renewal of this order.

The essential and apostolic order of the diaconate is part of the three-fold ordained orders of the clergy. The diaconate is dedicated to *diakonia*, to service, including ministry to the laity and philanthropic outreach to the larger community. Orthodox Christians around the world are realizing the pastoral need for a robust diaconate—of both men and women—to serve the body of Christ.ⁱ The historical precedent of the female diaconate within the Orthodox Church has been soundly documented through sources such as ordination rites, canons, deaconess saints, and archeological evidence.ⁱⁱ Renewing the order of deaconess as an integral part of our larger diaconal ministry will connect the Church’s sacramental and liturgical life to pastoral needs today.

For more than one hundred years, calls to reinstate the ordained order of deaconess in the Orthodox Church have been issued throughout the world by clergy and laity with increasing urgency and frequency. The definitive *1988 Inter-Orthodox Consultation of Rhodes, Greece*, convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I and attended by official representatives of twelve autocephalous churches concluded that “The apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived . . . Such a revival would represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world in many spheres.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The St. Phoebe Center offers these “Proposed 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, it aims to spark our God-given creativity as a community and to facilitate conversation and action regarding this urgently needed ministry. The history of the deaconess rightly informs the Church, but it does not determine the Church; the diaconate of today should serve the needs of today.

Women always have been, are now, and always will be integral to the life of the Orthodox Church. In recent decades, women have entered Church roles in significant numbers for the first time as parish council leaders, seminary professors, historians, theologians, readers, and chanters. This expansion of women’s roles is apt because the Orthodox Church understands women and men as equally created in the image and called to the likeness of God. At the same time, the Orthodox Church does not understand women and men as identical. The St. Phoebe Center therefore envisions deacons and deaconesses as sharing the same roles and functions,

knowing that they will express those roles and functions differently, based on their sex, to the benefit of the entire Church.

In articulating the “Proposed Guidelines,” the St. Phoebe Center has 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.^{iv} We have also benefited from, and are grateful for, the generous feedback offered from bishops, priests, deacons, laymen, and laywomen around the world. We offer this 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. Ideally, she will 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. Such training might include a Master of Divinity degree or a diaconal training program. There may be exceptional and rare candidates whose pastoral skills, life experience, and personal spiritual development are deemed sufficient without prior formal theological training.

As is the case with male deacons, the decision to ordain or not ordain lies with the local hierarch. 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.

Several canons exist that guide the order of deaconess. Canons are not intended as rigid dictates, but as guidelines to promote deification within the Church according to local circumstances. Historically, the order of deaconess was reserved by the canons for unmarried or widowed women according to the social mores of the time, although there were exceptions. Today, in addition to considering worthy single or widowed women of the requisite age who are not called to marry or remarry, the St. Phoebe Center also recommends that married women be eligible as candidates for ordination. Like a male deacon, a deaconess must be married prior to her ordination and must be in a Christ-centered marriage that carries no impediments to her ordination. The canons state that a male deacon must be twenty-five, a priest thirty, and a deaconess at least forty years old. In contemporary practice the Orthodox Church in its wisdom sometimes ordains men younger than the holy canons state. The Church may thus wish to ordain younger eligible women as deaconesses. It should be noted that, unlike male deacons, female deacons are not eligible for ordination as presbyters or bishops.

III. Screening and Recommendation

As is current practice with male deacons, a female candidate for ordination will complete a rigorous set of psychological and medical screening evaluations, background checks, and will provide letters of recommendation from her spiritual father or mother, parish priest (if different from her spiritual father/mother) and, if a monastic, from her abbess (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 (if applicable) must be supportive, understanding the nature and sacrifices accompanying her ordained role.

IV. Possible Ministries of Deaconesses

The possible ministries of deaconesses today are various. The Orthodox Church needs deaconesses to provide ordained woman-to-woman ministry, such as the care a deaconess might provide for women’s particular life experiences including those relating to sexual or spousal abuse, fertility and childbearing, rearing children, and women’s health and aging. This woman-to-woman ministry is particularly needed in contemporary society where the sexes live integrated lives and women rarely have opportunities for women-to-women support. While some Orthodox women today have access to peer support on these and other issues, all Orthodox women lack the ability to seek the support of a deaconess who has been vetted, trained,

given the authority and support of the Church, and the sacramental blessing of the Holy Spirit, to do this work.

The Orthodox Church also needs the ministry of deaconesses to the entire Church and the Church's outreach beyond its members. Such ministries might include the work of women who offer their professional training or education to the Church, such as chaplaincy, nursing, social work, and religious catechesis. Other ministries might include the work of women who are pastorally gifted in ways that do not require professional training, such as teaching religious subjects, missionary outreach, interfaith witness, philanthropy, parish administration, family ministry, and youth and young adult ministry. All ministries will be tied to and supportive of the sacramental life of the Church in the role of an ordained deaconess.

The aim of all the efforts of deaconesses will be to contribute positively to the deification and spiritual care of the Church's members and the larger society. The ministry that each deaconess offers within her particular parish or setting will be clearly established as part of her discernment and placement process with her hierarchy and will be clearly articulated within her community. Her ministry may be an extension of her natural gifts and her theological education; for example, she may take on a leadership role of catechesis or compassionate care in the parish community. It may also relate to her professional training outside the Church; for example, perhaps she is a board-certified chaplain and will serve the Church community in this capacity or is a registered nurse and can serve the faithful as a parish nurse.

V. Possible Liturgical Duties

The diaconate is the ordained role in the Church that particularly connects the liturgy of our lives to the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. The liturgical roles of the diaconate include censing the liturgical space, offering the petitions for the concerns of the people, proclaiming the Gospel, offering sermons for the edification of the people, joining in processions, helping with preparing the Offering of the people (the Holy Gifts), distributing Communion to the faithful, and taking the sacrament of Communion to those who are ill or confined to their homes.

With the "major orders" ordination, or *cheirotomia*, a deaconess meets the traditional criteria for fulfilling liturgical roles. While deaconesses in the Byzantine world had public liturgical roles that were more circumscribed than the roles of male deacons, reflecting social customs of the time, today such liturgical roles ought to be shared across the diaconate, reflecting our own times. These liturgical duties are the extension and expression of the sacramental ministry of the diaconate conferred upon her in ordination, connecting the Church and the world in the traditional expression of diaconal ministry. At the same time, the liturgical roles of deaconesses may vary from place to place, according to local custom, and the direction and oversight of the bishop. Through both their ministries and liturgical roles, deaconesses today will bring a needed feminine insight and presence to the Church.

VI. Accountability and Evaluation

Deaconesses will follow ecclesiastical protocols that apply to male deacons in terms of receiving permission to serve, to travel, and to enter another metropolis/diocese, etc. This is a crucial responsibility of all serving in diaconal ministry to the maintenance of good Church order.

As the Orthodox Church more fully discerns the ways women can best contribute through ordained ministry, regular constructive evaluations will be conducted, with participation of the deaconess, her parish priest/spiritual father or mother or abbess (if monastic), her local hierarchy, and her local parish(es). 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, the parish she serves might prayerfully consider compensation according to its means, just as it might for any other clergy.

VII. Presence in the Parish

Although a growing number 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 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 experience and understand how active diaconal parish ministry is inherent to the fullness of life in the Church.

VIII. Proposed Process

We propose that reinstatement of the female diaconate begin as follows.

- A local Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church appoints a Deaconess Revival Commission (DRC) consisting of an inter-generational group of clergy and lay men and women, drawing from those active in the ministries of the Church. The DRC identifies and evaluates a cohort of perhaps five to eight Orthodox Christian women of excellent diaconal character who have the eligibility as outlined in this document and are within parishes ready to receive the service of these women in ordained ministry. Members of this cohort may be nominated by the DRC or other faithful Orthodox Christians. Qualified women who feel called to be deaconesses will also be considered through application.
- As the DRC determines it necessary and applicable, the cohort receives theological training, perhaps within existing diaconal programs.
- The cohort forms 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 the deaconess's work over time.
- The Synod of Bishops, in consultation with the DRC, reviews and evaluates the candidates for ordination.
- The bishops and deaconesses maintain a channel of communication for accountability and concerns.
- The women in the cohort who are found worthy are ordained to the order of deaconesses, all within the same time frame.
- The deaconesses wear equivalent liturgical vestments as deacons, which is faithful to the history of the order. The vestments may vary based on culture and location.
- Each deaconess works with her local clergy and parish(es) in partnership to best minister to the needs of the faithful.
- The deaconess is referred to as "Deaconess *Name*" or "Mother Deaconess *Name*," based on local custom.
- The DRC serves as a resource for receiving and addressing any concerns expressed by deaconesses themselves or the larger community.
- The fruits of their work are examined after a three-year time period by their bishops, priests, parishioners, women and men to whom they minister, and the DRC, in order to improve upon the ministry both of the initial cohort and of future cohorts of deaconesses in the Church.

- Considering all that is learned from the first cohort, the DRC and the Synod refine the guidelines. These refined guidelines are incorporated into the process of vetting, training, and ordaining subsequent cohorts of deaconesses.

IX. Conclusion

With gratitude for the pioneering work of many others over the past one hundred years, and particularly for the work of the Holy Synod of Alexandria in renewing this order, 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 continue to 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 the presence, perspectives, and talents of women 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, the Church will be strengthened in ministry and message. May the renewal of the order of deaconess be to the glory of God and for the benefit of all God’s people!

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

ⁱⁱ 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.

ⁱⁱⁱ See the [Resources](#) section of the St. Phoebe Center’s website for the text of the Conclusions of the Rhodes Inter-Orthodox Consultation, “*The Place of the Woman*” and other calls and documentation.

^{iv} The full text is found at [St. Catherine Vision’s website](#).