



Who's Next?

The Orthodox Church Ordains a Deaconess

By Carrie Frederick Frost

Commonweal Magazine, July 2024

“Who do you think will go first: the Catholics or the Orthodox?” a colleague asked me a few years ago in reference to the movements in both traditions to ordain women to the diaconate. Given that the possibilities in my own Orthodox community were just as opaque to me as my knowledge of the Catholic situation, I could not say. But bound up with that question was another question: “Would the ordination of deaconesses in one apostolic lung of the church make it easier for the other?”

The Orthodox have now “gone first.” In Harare, Zimbabwe, Angelic Molen was ordained a deaconess on May 2, 2024, in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa. The Alexandrian Patriarchate is the autocephalous Orthodox Church in the continent of Africa, one of—depending on whom you ask—fourteen to sixteen autocephalous Orthodox churches in the world. With the approval and support of the Alexandrian Synod and His Beatitude Patriarch Theodoros II, His Eminence Metropolitan Serafim of Zimbabwe (Kykotis) laid hands on Deaconess Angelic (pronounced “angelic”) in St. Nektarios Mission Parish at Waterfall. The ordination was attended by about two hundred people, more than half of whom were children.

This historic occasion, which my oldest daughter and I had the blessing to witness and celebrate, was years in the making. The order of deaconess languished in the Church for centuries, falling out of use in the late Byzantine era for a variety of reasons, though it was never banned or prohibited. (There was a concurrent decline of the order of deacons.) There are examples of ordinations of deaconesses sprinkled throughout the centuries, but there was no concerted effort to revive the order until recently. For the past century, various parts and peoples of the Orthodox world have advocated for the renewal of the ordained order of deaconess, including discussion in the 1917–1918 council of the Russian Orthodox Church; the late-twentieth-century meetings convened by the World Council of Churches; the notable pan-Orthodox consultation in Rhodes, Greece, in 1988; various statements from Orthodox scholars and faithful; the founding of the nonprofit the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess (which I currently chair) in 2013; and recent statements from the Ecumenical Patriarchate (see paragraphs 29 and 82 of [*For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*](#)).

There is a common theme throughout these efforts: the Orthodox Church needs women serving in this capacity to best live out its mission. The ancient order of the diaconate was a service ministry of the church, directly involved in the care of local Christians and of the larger community. Both deacons and deaconesses assisted with the philanthropic work of the Church, while other roles were segregated by gender; deacons took communion to the sick and homebound men, deaconesses did the same for women, etc. Both deacons and deaconesses had (different) liturgical roles. The

current movement to ordain deaconesses focuses on the need for women to be vetted, trained, supported, and given the authority of the Orthodox Church to minister in a diaconal spirit.

The Alexandrian Patriarchate began discussing the issue in 2016 in the wake of the Holy and Great Council of Crete—an ultimately unsuccessful effort to bring together all the Orthodox churches in the world. This council affirmed the ability for the local church to minister to pastoral needs. Because there has never been a ban on deaconesses in the Christian East and because this is not a doctrinal issue (which would require a Pan-Orthodox decision), the Holy Synod of Alexandria voted unanimously to restore the order. It began the process of restoration in 2017 by *consecrating*—or “tonsuring”—several women in Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the Orthodox tradition, consecration is notably different from ordination. Consecration is a blessing that takes place outside the altar and designates the consecrated to a “minor order,” such as reader, chanter, or subdeacon/deaconess. Ordination is for the “major orders” of the diaconate, presbytery, or episcopate, and takes place at the altar with specific liturgical actions and accoutrements tying the ordinand to the Eucharistic life of the Church. The order of deaconess was an *ordained* order in the ancient world, so it was a departure from tradition to consecrate rather than ordain these women, making them essentially subdeaconess (though they were called “deaconesses”). But this concession was made because of financial threat to the Synod of Alexandria, which is heavily supported by the Orthodox Church of Greece.

Now, in 2024, an *ordination* of a deaconess has finally taken place. The Patriarch of Alexandria, Theodoros II, blessed and gave permission for the ordination of Deaconess Angelic, just as he would for any other ordinand. Metropolitan Serafim, who is based in Harare, vetted, trained, prepared, and ordained her. It was clear to me that Deaconess Angelic is a respected and beloved member of her parish, and she has been engaged in diaconal work for more than a decade, including running a program that provides chickens and eggs for members of the community in need, overseeing and teaching catechesis, and representing the Zimbabwean Orthodox Church at ecological and ecumenical events. Through ordination her ministries are deeply connected with the Eucharist, and she is given the authority and support of the Church.

The significance of this ordination for the Orthodox world cannot be overstated. The other autocephalous Orthodox churches around the world now have a contemporary precedent. This is very important for a community that values tradition and precedent and is generally averse to change even when that change is really a restoration, not an innovation. I have been told there are plans to ordain more women in Africa in the near future. But will Orthodox churches in other parts of the world follow suit? This is certainly my hope, and I applaud the Alexandrian Synod and Metropolitan Serafim for their courage in blazing the trail.

Courage was necessary because “going first” involves an enormous amount of scrutiny. Predictably, the naysayers have been apoplectic. Many of them wear their misogyny on their sleeves. It is striking to me that these people—mostly American men, many of them recent converts to Orthodoxy—feel comfortable quickly condemning the actions of a church a world away from theirs, different in race, culture, and socio-economic status.

Other naysayers are less vitriolic, but even they mischaracterize the ordination in Africa and spread misinformation about the movement for deaconesses in the Orthodox Church. They allege, for example, that this movement bears the banner of “Western feminism.” They typically rail against the infiltration of “Western” values in the Orthodox Church, seemingly unaware of the degree to which their ideas about women in the Church have been influenced by American political ideology. If the Catholics had “gone first,” it would have provided further ammunition to this crowd.

Of course, larger societal change has brought new questions to the Church—for example: If women have leadership positions in society, why not in the Church? Those of us working for deaconess in the Orthodox Church are looking to our own tradition—not “Western feminism” or secularism—to answer these questions. And for us, the answer is obvious: we once had a fully realized order of the clergy dedicated to *diakonia*, to service, and we continue to need this order; it is not something the modern world has outgrown.

Complicating the matter is the Russian Orthodox Church’s (ROC) incursion into Africa. The Patriarchate of Alexandria is, along with the Coptic Church, the ancient Orthodox Christian presence in Africa, attributing its origins to St. Mark and claiming the fourth-century Nicene apologist St. Athanasius of Alexandria as its patron. And yet the contemporary Russian Church has entered Africa, luring away priests and parishes with financial incentives, solidifying the world’s perception of the Russian Church as heedlessly fractious and self-serving. Russian Orthodox Church figures in Africa have criticized the ordination of Deaconess Angelic, which only deepens the division between it and the rest of the Orthodox world—to the great satisfaction of Russian ecclesia and governmental authorities.

Another common refrain, even among bishops who might otherwise support the ordination of deaconesses is, “We must preserve the unity of the church, and ordaining deaconesses might fracture the community.” My questions are: Do we actually care about unity? And, even if we do, should concerns about unity be the measure for whether to ordain deaconesses? My answer to both questions is a firm “No.”

To evaluate whether the Orthodox Church really cares about internal unity requires only a quick look of the status quo. The Orthodox Church could not convene a full council of autocephalous churches in 2016 despite decades of planning. In 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarchate granted autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine despite questions of its authority to do so, and the Russian Orthodox Church in turn broke communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and later aligned itself with the Russian government’s invasion of Ukraine. In recent years the effort to unify the utter mess of Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States has come to a standstill. All the while, many of the faithful are abandoning the Orthodox Church, some because of its lamentable dearth of roles for women. This community does not have unity as a central concern.

Those who cite concerns about unity in their criticism of the ordination in Africa are really concerned about, and fearful of, *change*—even restorative change. The Orthodox community has always been slow to change, and this is an asset in many ways. But in the Orthodox world, stasis for the sake of stasis has become a kind of idol, a false God.

Even if the Orthodox world did demonstrate a serious commitment to unity, should unity be the main measure of its decision-making? I don’t think so. The first question should always be how best to live out the Church’s mission of service for all, both inside and outside the church walls. One way to better live out our mission is to fully restore the order of the diaconate, for both men and women, since the central concern of this order is service and transfiguration.

Louder and larger than the naysayers are the voices of joy from Orthodox around the world. One Russian scholar wrote to me, “Alleluia! Pascha came a few days earlier this year as far as I am concerned!” The St. Phoebe Center has been inundated with positive responses and requests for statements and interviews. The reaction on the ground in Zimbabwe was one of delight and enthusiasm. Personally, I came home from Africa more hopeful about the future of the Orthodox Church than I have been in a long time, because in Zimbabwe I saw what the Church can be in its fullness.

I returned hopeful that the Orthodox Church will reorient itself to its mission of service and love. The fearmongering of those who cry “division!” is not the path to transfiguring the world. The

naysayers have it wrong. We ought to prioritize living our mission as Christians, seeing Christ in everyone and treating them accordingly. Unity is less important than mission—and more likely to follow mission than to precede it.

Will the Orthodox ordination of a deaconess help our Catholic sisters and brothers who wish to do the same? I hope so but, at the risk of disappointing the reader, I must answer that I really do not know. Clearly, there is interest in the Zimbabwean ordination on the part of Catholics; in fact, I have received more interview requests about it from Catholic publications than from Orthodox ones. Perhaps, as both apostolic churches move toward deaconesses, there will be new possibilities for unity between our churches *through* this expression of our shared mission. Imagine a world in which both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches have an active diaconate, which reaches out into the world with the Church's mission of love and service. That would bring the Orthodox churches closer to each other *and* closer to our Catholic sisters and brothers. This is the story I hope we will be able to tell.

Carrie Frederick Frost *is an Orthodox Christian theologian who teaches at Western Washington University. She is the author of the recent book on women in the Orthodox Church, Church of Our Granddaughters (Cascade 2023), Book Reviews Editor for Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies, and Chair of St. Phoebe Center of the Deaconesses. She lives in the Pacific Northwest and is the mother of five and the grandmother of one.*