



St Phoebe Center
FOR THE DEACONESS

Calls for the Revival of the Orthodox Christian Ordained Order of Deaconess in the Modern Era

Many calls to renew the ordained order of deaconesses have come from different places and people within the Orthodox Church in the past one-hundred seventy years. These calls are in addition to the many scholarly articles written and conferences held on the topic, and they have increased in frequency and urgency in recent years. A sampling of these calls is listed here.

2023 — [The St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess](#) celebrates its 10th year anniversary with a series of Zoom events culminating in an in-person symposium held at Holy Cross Hellenic College with the support of His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America and encouragement of the [Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate](#). [Deaconesses for the Orthodox Church Today](#) calls the Church to revive this order and proposes ways to move towards ordaining deaconesses once more again

2020 — [For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church](#), a groundbreaking document on social ethics, is published by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It endorses the modern call for renewal of the female diaconate:

The Church must also remain attentive to the promptings of the Spirit in regard to the ministry of women, especially in our time, when many of the most crucial offices of ecclesial life— theologians, seminary professors, canonists, readers, choir directors, and experts in any number of professions that benefit the community of faith—are occupied by women in increasingly great numbers; and the Church must continue to consider how women can best participate in building up the body of Christ, including a renewal of the order of the female diaconate for today.
(Para.29)

The document concludes “...the revitalization of the order of the diaconate, male and female, may serve as an instructive way of assimilating and applying the principles and guidelines proposed in this statement.” (Para.82)

2017 — A group of Orthodox liturgical scholars [wrote a letter affirming](#) the Patriarchate of Alexandria’s move to renew the order of deaconesses, stating that this “does not constitute an innovation . . . but the revitalization of a once functioning, vibrant, and effectual ministry.”

2016-2017 — The Holy Synod of the Alexandrian Patriarchate (the Orthodox Church in Africa) voted to renew the order of deaconesses in 2016 and then Patriarch Theodoros II [consecrated five women as deaconesses](#) in Democratic Republic of Congo in 2017 and subsequently consecrated others in Sierra Leone in order to meet the local pastoral needs of women and men.

2014 — [St. Catherine’s Vision](#) publishes a call for the [Rejuvenation of the Ministry of the Ordained Deaconess](#) addressed to His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and the Secretariat of the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church. The proposal reviews the history of the deaconess,

emphasizes that it was never disallowed, points to various calls for its rejuvenation, highlights the ordination prayers of the Byzantine rite, and illustrates the need for the ministry today.

2013 — St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess was founded, a Pan-Orthodox group of women and men, laity and clergy, dedicated to educating and prayerfully advocating for the revival of the ordained female diaconate to help serve the ministerial needs of the Church and the world today.

2006 — In July of 2006, the Fellowship of St. John the Baptist held their annual conference focusing on “Women and Men in the Church” and resolved to write to the different Orthodox Bishops with pastoral responsibilities in the British Isles, urging them to work actively for the restoration of the diaconate for women in the Orthodox Church.

2000 — In July of 2000, after over a year of careful review of the subject, a formal letter was sent to the Ecumenical Patriarch 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.” 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.”

1993—Orthodox Christian Laity calls for restoration of deaconesses as part of its Project for Spiritual Renewal.

1988 — In 1988, Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I convened an International Orthodox consultation in Rhodes, Greece to explore the ministry and ordination of women in the Orthodox Church. **This historic event marks the first expression in the modern era of an international consensus among Orthodox thinkers and leaders to revive this ministry, and provides a substantial foundation for all subsequent conferences.** According to the concluding document from the consultation, “The apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived. It was never altogether abandoned in the Orthodox Church though it has tended to fall into disuse....The deaconess was ordained by the bishop in the sanctuary during the Divine Liturgy with two prayers, she received the *Orarion* (the deacon’s stole) and received Holy Communion at the Altar.”

1976-2008 — The call to re-establish the female diaconate was made at almost all International Conferences of Orthodox Women including: Agapia, Sophia, Crete, Kerala, Levadia, Vendee, Damascus, and Istanbul.

•**Agapia, 1976** — “In the early centuries of the Church and in Byzantine times, the deaconess played a significant role in fulfilling the service, i.e., the true ‘diakonia’ of the Church. In some churches—in Egypt for example, where there are over 150 women fulfilling a diaconal function, this important form of service has been restored to the life of the Church, and in others, a need is felt for providing women with a responsible and full-time vocation in the service of the Church.”

•**Sophia, Bulgaria, 1987** — “Serious consideration must be given to the re-introduction of the ancient order of Deaconess by the hierarchies of the local churches.”

•**Crete, 1990** — “...the urgent need for a renewal of women’s ministries, particularly the diaconate...the presence of the deacon or deaconess to lead the people in prayer, to give spiritual counsel, and to 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....creative restoration of the diaconate for women , which we hope will lead in turn to the renewal in the diaconate for men.”

•**Damascus, 1996** — “This Conference also recognizes the important ministry of deaconess as a response to the Holy Spirit for various needs of this present age.”

•**Istanbul, 1997** — “His Beatitude [Patriarch Karekin II] mentioned the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church has 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. ...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. Many of us believe the incorporation of female deacons in the life of the Church will help contribute to the atmosphere of love and learning, and to the life of the Church.”

•**Volos, 2008** — “Many of the concerns of women have not yet been fully addressed within the life of the Church and are still relevant today. For instance: ...a holy desire for the restoration of the order of Deaconess and a rejuvenation of all diaconal work.”

1953 — In 1953, Archbishop Michael of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America called for the re-establishment of deaconesses in the United States. He realized that there is so much to do in each community that the endeavors of these priests alone do not suffice. In the 1960s, his successor, Archbishop Iakovos (Koukouzis) expressed the same desire in two keynote addresses to the Clergy-Laity Congresses of the Greek Archdiocese.

1905-1917 — According to numerous sources, several bishops, archbishops, and metropolitans of the Russian Orthodox Church supported deaconesses. 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.

c. 1855 — Sister of Czar Nicholas I tried to restore the Office. Other prominent Russians also lobbied for its restoration, including Aleksandr Gumilevsky and Mother Catherine (Countess Efimovsky).