

Reflections on the Ordination of Deaconess Angelic

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On Holy Thursday, May 2, 2024, Angelic Molen (pronounced “angelic”) was ordained to the diaconate in Harare, Zimbabwe. The Orthodox Church in Zimbabwe is part of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa (the Orthodox Church in the continent of Africa). With the approval and support of the Alexandrian Synod and His Beatitude Patriarch Theodoros, His Eminence Metropolitan Serafim of Zimbabwe (Kykotis) laid hands on Deaconess Angelic in St. Nektarios Mission Parish at Waterfall.

It was my blessing and honor to witness and celebrate the ordination along with my oldest daughter and join in the shouts of “Axia!” (“She is worthy!” or, in Shona, “Akakodzera!”). Here, I will offer the details of the ordination known to me as well as my own reflections.

Deaconess Angelic’s Preparation and Ministry

Deaconess Angelic is a respected, central, and beloved member of the Orthodox community of St. Nektarios Mission Parish, and she has been doing diaconal ministry for over a decade prior to this ordination. She first came to the Orthodox Church with a friend when she was eleven, and shortly thereafter her entire family converted. From that early age, Deaconess Angelic has been deeply involved in the pastoral care of the people of St. Nektarios. She oversees many initiatives including organizing and maintaining a chicken-raising program that provides chickens and eggs for members of the community in need, overseeing and teaching catechesis, organizing mother’s groups, and representing the Zimbabwean Orthodox Church at ecological and ecumenical events including the World Council of Churches and Faith Leaders Environmental Advocacy Training. She is working towards a degree in Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Zimbabwe. Prior to the ordination, she went through a training and preparation process with formal prayers and instruction from Metropolitan Serafim.

Ordination

The ordination took place on May 2, 2024, at St. Nektarios Mission Parish. St. Nektarios is a growing parish of more than 200 souls, more than half of which are children. The parish property includes a church, a school, a church office and kitchen, and ample playground equipment and room for the children. Men, women, and children attended the ordination, but fewer men because the morning service conflicted with the workday. The service began with the choir in the front of the church alongside the reader's stand. Throughout the service little children trickled up to the front, to lean on and hold hands with their mothers in the choir. The children throughout the church laughed, keened, sang, and shuffled through the service. These are the mellifluous noises of a vibrant parish. Both altar boys and altar girls served that morning.

Just before the Divine Liturgy on May 2, Metropolitan Serafim tonsured Deaconess Angelic as a reader and a subdeaconess, immediately after which the ordination itself took place, as ordinations do, during the Liturgy at the altar. The ordination service was the rite used for deacons from the *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church* published by the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America in 1983, based on the Isabel Florence Hapgood translation from 1906 of mostly Church-Slavonic sources. This English service book is widely used across Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States. Metropolitan Serafim chose to use this rite instead of an extant rite for the ordination of a deaconess from the ancient world (for example, Barberini Codex Gr. 336) because this is the rite used for deacons today; this was the natural choice. The only changes made were the masculine pronouns to feminine and an addition of a reference to St. Phoebe (the woman in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans that the Church understands to be a prototype for the office of deaconess).

During the Divine Liturgy on May 2, Deaconess Angelic read petitions, read the Gospel, and distributed communion to the faithful—men, women, and children—all liturgical roles shared with the deacon. In fact, she participated in these liturgical actions alongside her own brother, who is the recently ordained Deacon Spiridon. Having spent time with Deaconess Angelic prior to the ordination, I found her to be humble and soft spoken, so I wondered how she would sound in the church. When it came time for her to read the diaconal petitions, her beautiful voice rang loud, clear, and true.

Deaconess Angelic wore the same vestments as a deacon, modified to fit her smaller frame. At the end of the Divine Liturgy, Metropolitan Serafim spoke to the importance of Deaconess Angelic's ministry and stressed that she must be an upright example for all, living life in the light of Christ. He invited everyone to come forward and congratulate the new deaconess. The sense of contained excitement that had been growing during the ordination now burst forth; the women of St. Nektarios sang, danced, clapped, and ululated while everyone swarmed Deaconess Angelic with affection, pride, and affirmation. I will never forget the unalloyed and collective jubilation of that moment.

Deaconess Angelic was in demand after the service. Every friend and family member, in every possible combination, wanted their photo taken with her. A meal was served, and everyone spread across the church courtyard balancing plates of vegetables, beans, and rice in their laps.

Because Deaconess Angelic is the first deaconess of our own time, Metropolitan Serafim elevated her to the rank of “Archdeaconess” on May 4 at the Temporal Parish of Panagia of Kykkos on the outskirts of Harare, using the relevant prayers in *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*. She was given the name “Phoebe” in honor of the first-century saint, and thus has the title of “Archdeaconess Angelic-Phoebe,” but it seems that she will be called “Deaconess Angelic” or “Sister Angelic.” After the prayers for her elevation, she assisted Metropolitan Serafim with baptism of the parish children, a traditional role of the ancient world deaconess. At this Temporal Parish Deaconess Angelic was treated with respect and admiration, and again many sought to have their photo taken with her.

Restoration Process

The ordination of Deaconess Angelic was the culmination of worldwide efforts to renew the ancient order of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church, bolstered by specific efforts within the Alexandrian Patriarchate. Ample evidence testifies to the deaconess in the ancient world, including scripture, canon law, correspondence, and archaeological epithets, and ordination rites. The office of deaconess in the Christian East fell out of use in the late Byzantine era for a variety of reasons; as did the office of deacon, who became little more than liturgical assistants. The Orthodox Church worldwide has been asking for the restoration of deaconesses for years, including the [Inter-Orthodox Rhodes Consultation in 1988](#) and statements from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2020 (see *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* §29 and §82). Many conferences and events dedicated to the restoration of deaconess have taken place, including those sponsored by a nonprofit formed in 2013 to educate and advocate for deaconess, the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, of which I am currently chair.

The Holy Synod of Alexandria followed an orderly process of discernment on the restoration of this ordained order, inspired by the many calls for deaconesses including the Rhodes Consultation. In 2016, the Synod unanimously voted to begin the process, partly motivated by the affirmation in documents from the Holy and Great Council of Crete in 2016 of the ability of autocephalous or local Orthodox churches (such as the Alexandrian Patriarchate) to minister to local needs. This is an important point—because the office of deaconess is part of the Orthodox tradition, has never been banned, and is not a doctrinal issue but instead a pastoral one, it is well within the purview of a local Orthodox Church to ordain deaconesses based on the needs of its flock.

Initially, and under threat of financial consequences for the Orthodox Church in Africa, women were consecrated(not ordained)by Patriarch Theodoros II in Democratic Republic of Congo in 2017 and elsewhere. This was seen as a compromise, as the historical order itself was clearly an ordained role. The ordination of Deaconess Angelic took place with the explicit blessing of Patriarch Theodoros II and with the full support of the St. Nektarios Mission’s clergy and faithful, and with the faith and confidence of Metropolitan Serafim. Because Deaconess Angelic’s ordination is first, it will likely prompt the clergy in Africa to consider standardizing the vetting and training of future deaconesses. There are already plans in place to ordain other women to the diaconate in Harare, to serve at St. Nektarios and at nearby missions.

Significance of St. Nektarios and Holy Thursday

The significance of the location and the day were clear. St. Nektarios of Aegina, Greece ordained two nuns as deaconesses in the early twentieth century, and Metropolitan Serafim said that this was an important example for him. The Divine Liturgy on Holy Thursday commemorates the institution of the Holy Eucharist. Holy Thursday is also the day of two consecrations: of Chrism, the oil used for the sacrament of Chrismation of new members of the Orthodox Church, and of the Reserved Sacrament, the Eucharist set aside for communing the sick or the homebound throughout the year. With these connections, the ordination of Deaconess Angelic on Holy Thursday underscores the integral sacramental and Eucharistic work of the diaconate. Perhaps there will someday be a festal commemoration of this event; just as we commemorate the restoration of icons each year on the first Sunday of Great Lent, perhaps a day will be designated to commemorate the restoration of the office of deaconess.

Future for Deaconess Angelic and the Movement to Ordain Women to the Diaconate

Deaconess Angelic will naturally continue the ministries in which she is already engaged; catechesis, chicken raising, etc. She will also continue in her ministry of improving the environment and will oversee ecological initiatives for the network of parishes in Zimbabwe. She said, “The Earth is a sacred gift from God. We must protect it from harm and live in harmony with the plants, animals, and every living thing.” Deaconess Angelic will continue these projects now with the support and authority of the Church and the sacramental connections that will allow her to more fully live out her *diakonia*.

What effect will Deaconess Angelic’s ordination have on other parts of Africa or the Orthodox Church around the world? It remains to be seen, but a powerful precedent has been established with the courage of Metropolitan Serafim and the Alexandrian Patriarchate. Not only was a deaconess ordained, but the process happened in an impeccable manner. The ordination of Deaconess Angelic offers a sound precedent of good church order for other bishops in Africa to emulate, as well for other Orthodox synods around the world to consider.

A bishop in America recently told me that, “Someone needs to break the ice,” meaning that if one synod went ahead and bore the brunt of being the first group to take action on this issue then other synods could and would follow. The ice has been broken in Zimbabwe! It is my prayer that other synods will gather the courage and the will to ordain deaconesses in their own local churches. Metropolitan Serafim said, “The revival of the Apostolic Tradition of the institution of Deaconesses in the missionary ministry of our Church—no one can stop it because it has as its source the Holy Spirit itself who healed the sick and found the missing.”

Another important precedent is that Deaconess Angelic is thirty-three years old, married, and has two children. Deaconesses in the ancient world were generally (but not always) unmarried and older, and there are canons that state the deaconess ought to be older than forty or, in some cases, sixty. These and other canons relating to age of ordination have always been understood as guidelines; the canons also state that men should be at least thirty to be ordained as priests, though examples abound of younger priests. When asked about the issue of age, Metropolitan Serafim stressed the ordination is less about the letter of the law and more about the spirit; Deaconess Angelic already has a diaconal ministry and is deemed spiritually prepared and well-suited for ordination so the Church ought to ordain her now rather than waiting for her to turn forty. I rejoice in this detail because there are those who wish to see deaconesses in the Orthodox Church but believe they

should only be older women and possibly only monastic women. Many of the women doing similar diaconal work elsewhere in the world are also younger and often have families. It makes good sense to ordain these women, rather than wait for an arbitrary age.

As noted, Deaconess Angelic was ordained with the same prayers on the books as for a deacon, and she already is serving liturgically in the same capacity as her male counterparts. Even as this is the case, there is no erasure of gender going on; it is very much expected that Deaconess Angelic will bring her feminine perspectives and gifts to this ministry, and it should be noted that Zimbabwean culture is highly gender-bound. Her dignity as a woman is being honored through ordination, not compromised.

I am reminded of a story recently related to me about the addition of women to the police force in the United Kingdom. When policewomen were allowed to answer the same calls as men, it became quickly apparent that policewomen were more effective than men in certain situations. Policewomen were better able to, for example, diffuse domestic violence which produced better outcomes for all involved. Now it is internationally considered a best practice to, when possible, send a policewoman on domestic violence calls. The fact that women had the special ability to assist with domestic violence only became clear when policewomen were given the same jobs as men. In the case of Deaconess Angelic, she will have the same liturgical roles as a deacon, but her pastoral ministry, which is deeply tied to her liturgical role, will play out differently because she is a woman.

Reactions

As one might imagine there have been a variety of reactions in the wake of the ordination of Deaconess Angelic. Most reactions are positive if not overjoyed; in the days after the ordination, I received notes from around the world of people celebrating the Holy Spirit at work and proclaiming a renewal of hope. A common refrain was that people (women and men) cried when they heard the news. For many Orthodox Christians this news comes with joy but also some relief; relief that our community is finally coming to its senses. Other Orthodox seem surprised but interested; there are still a lot of people who do not know about the history of the order of deaconess or the possibilities for deaconesses today.

There are also naysayers. Many of them are vitriolic and aggressive. This is unfortunate, but not surprising and the only thing to be done is to pray for their souls. Some naysayers are more respectful but spread downright incorrect information and opinions, for example, the false claim that women were never “ordained” to the diaconate in the ancient world, only “consecrated.” The fact that deaconesses were ordained has been clearly established by such scholars and Dr. Valerie Karras and the late Dr. Evangelos Theodorou.

Another false claim is that the movement for deaconesses around the world is motivated by the concerns of secular feminism. While there is no doubt that the cultural changes of our own era bring questions to the Church about the role of women, the movement for deaconesses is coming from faithful Orthodox Christians, women and men, who wish to build a better future for the Orthodox Church and see hope in the possibility of renewing the entire order of the diaconate—women and men—in order for the Church to serve its people and the world.

Personal Observations

One of the greatest gifts of my time in Zimbabwe was a new perspective on the antagonists. With Deaconess Angelic and those around here, there was a clear focus on the ministry of the Church. When you have watched your neighbor's children die from cholera, cranks on the internet really do not rank as important. When your country is on the front line of climate change and is being decimated by drought, your attention is rightfully elsewhere other than the keyboard warriors. Deaconess Angelic and the community members of St. Nektarios know that they have better things to do with their time than to pay attention to the naysayers. So do we all!

The evening after the ordination, my daughter Annie and I, our faces hurting from smiling all day, struggled to put into words our thoughts and feelings about the ordination. For me it ranked among the most joyful days of my life including my marriage and the birth of my children and my grandson. We talked about hearing Deaconess Angelic read the Gospel and watching her distribute the Eucharist. Neither of us had ever witnessed a woman read the Gospel in church or distribute communion. Annie said there was a sense of something that had been missing falling into exactly the right place. We agreed that we were, for the first time, witnessing the Church in its fullness.