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## Fallacious Argumentation and the Restoration of the Women's Diaconate

Paul Ladouceur

123thabor@gmail.com

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Opponents of the restoration of the women's diaconate in the Orthodox Church appeal to a range of arguments, few of which are legitimate theological arguments. Most objections to the women's diaconate, and to the ordination of women in general, may have the appearance of legitimate arguments, but are in fact inherently fallacious. They are a type of argument known as logical fallacies. Logical fallacies contain invalid or otherwise faulty reasoning in the construction of an argument, undermining the validity of the argument. Logical fallacies may appear convincing but they are actually flawed, leading to unsupported affirmations or conclusions.

Opponents of women's ordination to the diaconate or the priesthood often appeal to logical fallacies to buttress their position. I will deal with five logical fallacies here. The examples are drawn mainly from the writings of Fr. Lawrence Farley, especially his book *Feminism and Tradition: Quiet Reflections on Ordination and Communion* (2012).

One of the principal arguments used by Fr. Lawrence and other opponents of the restoration of the women's diaconate is that it will lead inevitably to a whole series of other changes in the Orthodox Church. These changes are all equally unwanted because, so it is argued, they are contrary to the history and tradition of the Orthodox Church. Farley writes:

The Churches (such as the Anglican) which practise the ordination of women, also allow abortion and allow homosexual unions. It is all of a piece. And let us be clear: the demands will not stop once the Orthodox Church has ordained priestesses and women bishops, for the demands have not stopped there for the Anglicans.<sup>1</sup>

Fr. Lawrence and others argue against the reinstatement of women deacons because it will inevitably lead to calls for women priests, then women bishops – and a whole host of other undesirable changes. In addition to approval of abortion and same-sex unions which Farley mentions, one could no doubt extend the list of undesirable effects to add other unwanted changes such as LGBTQ2+ clergy, changes in the readings in the marriage service, in gender designations for God, the use of inclusive language in services etc. This in turn would result in schism, catastrophic loss of membership, defection of clergy, and erosion of tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Farley, *Feminism and Tradition: Quiet Reflections on Ordination and Communion* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012), 183.

This line of argumentation is the common logical fallacy called the “slippery slope,” or “the thin edge of the wedge” and, more imaginatively, the “camel’s nose” (the camel pokes his nose inside the Bedouin’s tent, doing no harm, but soon the whole camel enters, causing the tent to collapse).

The slippery slope argument asserts that a relatively small first step leads to a chain of related events culminating in some significant, usually negative and catastrophic effect. The core of the slippery slope argument is that a specific decision under debate is likely to result in unintended consequences. The strength of such an argument depends on whether the initial small step really is likely to lead to the predicted catastrophic effect. This type of argument is sometimes used as a form of fearmongering in which the likelihood of negative consequences of a given action are exaggerated to frighten the audience away from the initial step.

There two levels of consideration of this type of argument: one logical, the other historical. To be logically valid, such an argument would have to prove beyond any doubt that the downstream consequences will *inevitably and invariably* occur, as in linked chemical reactions or nuclear physics. Logically it is necessary to demonstrate that the subsequent consequences of one act are indeed inevitable and not just simply postulated, as Farley does. The argument is fallacious because the link between the premise – the first step - and the final outcome is not shown or not necessary or imperative. Even if a catastrophic sequence of events has occurred in the past, the sequence of events is not therefore inevitable, like chain chemical or nuclear reaction.

Since there is no logical reason why the restoration of women’s diaconate should lead inevitably to women priests or any other changes in the Orthodox Church, the argument advanced is the historical one: it happened to other Christian Churches (such as the Anglican Church, which Farley mentions), therefore it will happen to the Orthodox Church too.

Only one contrary example destroys the argument, and that one example is the Orthodox Church itself. Historically, for centuries there were women deacons in the Orthodox Church – yet no women priests or bishops. However much Fr. Lawrence and others attempt to downgrade or denigrate the historical experience of women deacons in Orthodoxy, they cannot interpret away altogether the historicity of the women’s diaconate in Orthodox Church, and of course, there have never been women priests in the Orthodox Church. Certain titles accorded to prominent women in the history of the Orthodox Church, notably “equal to the apostles,” suggest prominent roles in the Church, often related to evangelization or the defense of the faith, but not clerical status.

This historical evidence is from the Orthodox Byzantine rite churches. Another counter example are women deacons in the Armenian Church. The Armenian Church long had women deacons, mostly confined to superiors of women’s monasteries. But in September 2017, Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian, the head of the Armenian Apostolic Archdiocese of Tehran, ordained as deaconess Ani-Kristi Manvelian, a 24 year-old lay woman.<sup>2</sup> And again, there are no women priests in the Armenian Church. The history and status of deacons in the Church of Armenia, and indeed in the Coptic Church, needs more study in the current context.

In short, those who advance this argument typically refer to the experience in other Christian churches, the Anglican Church and a number of Protestant churches, but they overlook the experience of the Orthodox Church itself: there were deaconesses in Orthodoxy for many centuries

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<sup>2</sup> “Historic Ordination of a Deaconess in the Tehran Prelacy” (16 Jan 2018). <https://asbarez.com/historic-ordination-of-a-deaconess-in-the-tehran-prelacy/> (10 Dec 2023).

without this having led to women priests. Is the experience of non-Orthodox churches more valid than that of the Orthodox Church itself?

“Slippery slope” argumentation has little or no philosophical or theological content. It is rather a rhetorical device or a psychological argument which appeals to the listeners’ or readers’ emotions, especially fear. In the first instance, fear of invoked but unproven distasteful downstream consequences of women deacons. Perhaps too, fear that women deacons may prove as effective as men deacons in exercising liturgical functions, and indeed that they may be more effective than men in social service functions, long neglected or ignored entirely by men deacons.

In theology, propositions must be considered on their intrinsic merits, not on fear; fear is not a basis for sound theology.

Another logical fallacy that Fr. Lawrence employs against the ordination of women is the *non sequitur* – “it does not follow” - that is, the conclusion drawn from the evidence presented is simply not supported by the evidence itself. Farley writes:

The complementary themes in Genesis of equality and subordination [of women to men] find an echo in Christ’s dealing with women: He accepted as disciples all who approached in humility regardless of gender (showing that he recognized the equality of women), but did not chose women for inclusion in the authority-laden Twelve (showing that he recognized their subordination).<sup>3</sup>

Clearly it is a historical fact that Jesus did not chose women apostles, either among the twelve apostles or the seventy disciples (Lk 10:1)<sup>4</sup>. But Farley slides very quickly from these historical facts recorded in the Gospel to a broad theological conclusion “showing that he [Jesus] recognized their [women’s] subordination [to men].” This is not, as Fr. Lawrence affirms, a simple “restatement” or paraphrase of the biblical record; it is an interpretation, his own interpretation. Farley is attempting to discern the reason *why* Jesus did not choose a woman apostle; he wants to “read” the mind of Jesus. I would not be so bold as to do this.

Other motives can be advanced, for example, perhaps Jesus did not think that there were any suitable women candidates. Or perhaps that he considered that choosing a woman apostle would undermine the credibility of his teachings in conservative, masochistic Jewish society, and even discourage his male apostles. None of these motives is more valid than any other. We are in the realm of speculation about what Jesus thought, why he acted as he did, not in the domain of fact or logical deduction. Nowhere does Jesus say that women are subordinate to men, as Farley concludes. Nor does he, as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel points out, send his women followers back to their husbands, children, and pots and pans.<sup>5</sup> What Jesus *really* intended by not selecting a woman as an apostle remains a mystery.

Another argument that Fr. Lawrence advances against the ordination of women in general is also a logical fallacy. He writes:

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<sup>3</sup> Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 66.

<sup>4</sup> The names of the Seventy are not contained in the New Testament, but are recollected in tradition; none are women.

<sup>5</sup> See Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “Jesus and Women,” in *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 97.

The priest is the father to the church family, an image (or better, an icon) of God the Father, manifesting to the divine authority and love in the church even as a father does in his family. ... Women have many gifts but are incapable of imaging the divine Fatherhood through their earthly fatherhood... In a word, women cannot be priests, because priests are fathers.<sup>6</sup>

Leaving aside the very questionable theology of the priest as an image of God the Father,<sup>7</sup> Farley advances a circular argument, where the conclusion is in reality identical to the major premise. Logically it can be defeated by pointing to its circular nature. Fr. Thomas Hopko expresses the circular nature of this argument even more clearly. After enumerating general characteristics for a priest, such as “a sound Christian, whole in body and soul, without scandal and of good reputation” (applicable equally to men and women), he adds an exclusively masculine criterion: “a once-married or celibate man.”<sup>8</sup> The argument is circular: a woman cannot be a priest because only men can be priests. There is no other content to this argument.

Farley’s argument is similar, but he appeals to yet another logical fallacy. In summary, the argument runs like this:

Priests are fathers.

Women cannot be fathers because only men can be fathers.

Therefore women cannot be priests.

From the first to the second enunciation, there is a shift in the meaning of “father,” from spiritual father to biological father. The use of a double meaning of a word in argumentation is the logical fallacy called *equivocation*. The argument breaks down by exposing the double meaning: first, while priests are called to be spiritual fathers for their spiritual children, many priests (especially priestmonks) are not biological fathers, only spiritual fathers. Secondly, while women cannot be biological fathers, they can be both biological mothers and spiritual mothers. In the Orthodox tradition, spiritual motherhood is recognized as much as spiritual fatherhood, and neither is necessarily contingent on clerical ordination. For example, some of the non-ordained “desert fathers” of early monasticism turn out to be women, spiritual mothers. Throughout all ages, holy women have been spiritual mothers not only to women, but to men as well, even clergy.

In his attempt to deprecate anyone who advocates a more equitable place and role for women in the Orthodox Church, and especially the ordination of women to clerical office, Fr. Lawrence assimilates any such positions with “feminism,” construed as a non-Christian secular movement bent on upsetting Church tradition, especially the “natural order” of male supremacy and female subordination, with corresponding ecclesial, social, political and economic roles of men and women. In his zeal to discredit advocacy of a revision of the role of women in the Orthodox Church, Farley goes even further, attempting to place Orthodox “feminism” in the same basket as the ancient heresy of Arianism (denial of the divinity of Christ): “The Church’s task, then, is to articulate a full and comprehensive response to all the complex and varied questions raised by feminism. In

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<sup>6</sup> Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 98.

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion of this theology in Paul Ladouceur, “The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: A Theological Issue or a Pastoral Matter?” In *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church*, eds. Gabrielle Thomas and Elena Narinskaya (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 175-177.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hopko, “Reflections on the Debate – 1983,” *Women and the Priesthood* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), 243.

this, our situation resembles that of the fourth century, when the Church strove to articulate a full and comprehensive response to Arianism.”<sup>9</sup> Farley goes on to discuss how the Church dealt with Arianism, which he incorrectly extends to the Christological controversies of the fifth to the seventh centuries.<sup>10</sup> Muddling the issue further, Farley broadens the scope of the issues involved to include just about everything:

The response to the demands for women’s ordination may take some time to be formulated. That is because the issue involves not just the question, “May a woman be ordained to the priesthood?”, but also, “What is a man? What is a woman? What is a priest? Who is God? What is the authority of Scripture? What is the authority of the Fathers? What is the significance of our collective experience of history?”<sup>11</sup>

He goes on to reinforce the association of feminism with Arianism: “Arianism involved all the questions, and so does feminism.”<sup>12</sup>

Fr. Lawrence’s line of argumentation here is the logical fallacy known as “guilt by association”: an opponent of a person or idea seeks to discredit the person or idea by stating or merely implying an association with a clearly unsavory idea, event or person, whether this association has any basis in reality or not. Politicians are very good at this; it is good rhetoric, appealing to emotion (*pathos* in rhetoric; fear and anger). But it is poor argumentation (whether in theology or other domains, notably politics), since it does not deal with the issues at stake. Here, Farley associates feminism (defined to include anything to improve the status of women in the Orthodox Church) with Arianism, implying that “feminism” is a heresy, an equally great threat to Christianity as was the fourth-century heresy, which attacked a core Christian dogma, the divinity of Christ.

Farley has also compounded the original issue by insisting that a whole host of related issues must be considered in addition to the original issue, making it impossible to deal with the original issue. Farley has added the nature of the priesthood, the place of Scripture and the Fathers, and even divine existence to the original issue of the role of women in the Orthodox Church.

Finally, Fr. Lawrence states in his book that “The ordination of women involves a complete denial of our Tradition and of our experience of Christian salvation.”<sup>13</sup> Again, this is good rhetoric – a hyperbole – but it is poor theology. Are fundamental aspects of the Orthodox faith at stake in the restoration of the women’s diaconate or the ordination of women more generally? Would women deacons or even women priests in Orthodoxy compromise belief in the Trinity, Christ as true God and true Man, the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Eucharist, the path to theosis? Would salvation be threatened if there were women deacons? Are the gates of heaven closed to Anglicans, Lutherans etc. solely because their churches have women deacons and priests? No.

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<sup>9</sup> Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> Arianism is considered a Trinitarian heresy because it denied the divinity of Christ, and by implication, that of the Holy Spirit. Opponents in the later Christological controversies accepted the divinity of Christ, and issues revolved around the relationship of Christ’s humanity and his divinity. Farley fuses the Trinitarian and Christological controversies. See Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 182.

<sup>11</sup> Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 183-184.

<sup>12</sup> Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 184.

<sup>13</sup> Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 181.

Perhaps the gates of heaven would be even wider open because women's clerical ministry could be more effective than a strictly male clergy in enabling the Orthodox Church to accomplish its mission of evangelization.

To conclude, the Church is not making full use of all its resources in bringing Christ's message to this secular age. The restoration of women's diaconate must be considered on its own merits. While fear is a psychological factor often covertly motivating human behavior and thinking, *it is not a theological argument*. Opponents to the restoration of the women's diaconate and the ordination of women both advance theological arguments which merit consideration and refutation in their own right, and seek to convince their audiences by employing rhetorical devices, emotional appeals and logical fallacies. Logical fallacies must be exposed for what they are, and, while rhetorical devices and emotional appeals may assist to sustain theological argumentation, theology itself must first be firmly grounded on scripture and the Orthodox dogmatic tradition.