



St Phoebe Center  
FOR THE DEACONESS

## Leading Liturgists Reaffirm the Ordination of Women to the Diaconate

*[Preface of the Signatories]: The diaconate is one of the higher orders of ordained ministry in the Orthodox Church. Unlike the episcopacy or presbyterate, it is not a sacerdotal ministry, but one focused primarily on service. It seeks to meet the faithful where they are in this world and draw them into the Body of Christ more fully. In short, it connects the liturgy of our lives to the liturgy of the Church. The diaconate has always been part of the life of the Church and, in the Orthodox tradition, both men and women have been ordained to this ministry to serve the pastoral needs of the faithful and our mission to the world. Over time, however, the order de-evolved and, for women, it fell into disuse. For over one hundred years in the modern era, hierarchs, theologians, and conferences of clergy and laity have urged the Church to revive this ministry for both women and men. The Patriarchate of Alexandria is now moving to bring the diaconate for women particularly to fruition and renew it for today. We realize that any movement in this direction will be met by resistance (especially from those outside of Africa), but we think that it is the best path to meet the ministerial needs of the Church in Africa. We applaud your courage and hope that this movement continues.*

May 2025

We write to reaffirm our support for Deaconess Angelic Molen's ordination on Holy Thursday of last year (2 May 2024) through the hands of His Eminence Metropolitan Serafim (Kykotis) of Zimbabwe.

As active and emeriti professors of liturgics and liturgical theology at various theological schools and seminaries in Greece and North America, we reaffirm our support for reviving this ministry, which is included in our letter of 25 October 2017. We now also express our support that the Patriarchate of Alexandria has continued the process of reviving and renewing the female diaconate to help meet the pastoral needs of its flock with the ordination of Deaconess Angelic Molen.

We understand that two main concerns have arisen as a result of this ordination: the status of the deaconess's ordination in antiquity and her liturgical role today.

The ordination of women to the diaconate is part of the Tradition of the Orthodox Church. Although terms such as *cheirotomia* and *cheirothesia* were sometimes used interchangeably in early church documents, the scholarship of Evangelos Theodorou (Greece) more definitively concluded that she was, in fact, ordained to the higher orders of clergy (what we now understand as *cheirotomia*) and not just appointed as minor clergy (*cheirothesia*). The 1954 landmark study of Evangelos Theodorou, Ἡ «χειροτονία» ἢ «χειροθεσία» τῶν Διακονισσῶν [*The "Ordination" or*

*“Appointment” of Deaconesses]*—showed that her ordination took place during the Eucharist/Divine Liturgy (not before the service, as in the minor orders) and at the same place in the service as the male deacon was ordained. It included two prayers (as for a major order) instead of one (as would be the case for the minor orders), one of which calls upon God’s “divine grace” (which is only done for major orders). She was ordained at the altar by the bishop, received the orarion [stole], and later in the service, received Holy Communion at the altar with the other clergy. All of these are marks of the higher order of clergy. We believe that any revival of this ministry in the modern era should be an ordination (*cheirotomia*) in keeping with the Tradition of the Orthodox Church.

We understand that Deaconess Angelic was initially assigned the liturgical duties of the diaconate and that this has been controversial in some places (although apparently not in her parish, which we understand supports her fully). To address this issue, it is helpful to understand the role of the deacon as one who connects the liturgy of our lives (e.g., our concerns and prayers) to the sacramental life of the Church in particular ways. However, it is not a sacerdotal office like the episcopate and presbyterate. Historically, the diaconate has been a ministry that is focused on service and has included pastoral care of the faithful, philanthropic outreach, reading the Scriptures (and preaching), and other forms of liturgical service (e.g., preparing the offering of the people, leading the petitions of the concerns of people, taking communion to the sick, assisting in baptism, etc.), as well as ecclesial administration. In particular, it is grounded in how the Church meets the world.

We know that in antiquity, the liturgical duties of the female deacon were more circumscribed than those of the male deacon due to the cultural understanding and segregation of women within Byzantine society. Still, the deaconesses ministered to women much as male deacons ministered to men. In addition to assisting at baptism, other responsibilities mentioned in Church texts include: catechetical instruction, pastoral care, taking communion to the infirm, supervision at liturgy, participating in processions, and serving as agents of the bishop entrusted with philanthropic and hospitality tasks.[1] However, we believe that the liturgical role of the female deacon can be expanded for our time to help meet the needs of the particular community for today. For instance, there is no functional distinction between distributing communion in women’s homes and distributing it to them in the liturgical assembly. It should also be noted that in the early 20th century, ordinations of women to the diaconate in the Russian Empire and Greece were done so that they could help serve at the altar. Furthermore, in the Armenian Church today, both male and female deacons serve liturgically and in a similar fashion.

We hope that this provides some helpful background to the ongoing revival of the ministry of the female diaconate for the Church of Africa as it strives to meet the ministerial needs of its people. Again, we conclude that we respectfully support the decision of the Patriarchate of Alexandria to restore the female diaconate.

With deep reverence and respect,

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