



St Phoebe Center
FOR THE DEACONESS

Myth-busting: The Truth about Deaconesses in the Orthodox Church

Myth: The order of deaconess was only an honorary position in the ancient Church; it was not a “real” order of clergy and deaconesses were not ordained.

Truth: Women’s historical ordination to the diaconate is well-documented.

The ordination rite for a deaconess is included in the earliest extant service books of the Church which along with other evidence make clear that a deaconess was ordained to higher orders. She was ordained by the bishop, during the Liturgy, at the altar, and at the same place in the service that a male deacon was ordained. In addition, she was presented with the stole and chalice, and received communion with the other clergy.

Myth: Women are not allowed in the sanctuary/ altar area.

Truth: No one without a blessing and purpose is allowed in the sanctuary/altar. Women were not only allowed in the sanctuary as deaconesses in the Early Church, they were welcomed as communicants of the Eucharist in the sanctuary.

Myth: Women are “impure” or “unclean” because of menstruation and thus they cannot be in the sanctuary/altar and cannot serve as deaconesses.

Truth: Jesus Christ taught that purity is determined by sin, not circumstance, thus women are in no way impure, unclean, or otherwise marred by their periods or by childbirth.

Certain un-Christian ideas and practices around women’s bodies have entered the Church from the larger society, but these are theologically incorrect because they contradict the truth of the Incarnation, and they are being eliminated today.

Myth: There is a “slippery slope”: if we ordain deaconesses once again, this will inevitably lead to women priests, to a rejection of the church’s views on abortion, gender confusion, and to an unexamined embrace of larger cultural trends regarding transgenderism and LGBTQ matters.

Truth: There is no inevitable link between deaconesses and women priests, nor change regarding any other issues.

Each of the ordained orders—diaconate, presbyterate, episcopate—has its own, distinct expression; the diaconate is not merely a stepping stone to the priesthood, and, therefore, we cannot draw foregone conclusions about any progression from deaconess to priest. (Much less to changes regarding abortion, transgenderism, and LGBTQ matters, which are unrelated and red herrings.) Furthermore, the Orthodox Church has ample historical precedent for deaconesses, but none for female priests. To ordain women as deaconesses once again would be a *restoration*, much like the restoration of icons we celebrate each year. In contrast, to ordain women as priests or bishops would be an *innovation*.

Myth: The St. Phoebe Center has a “secret agenda” of women priests.

Truth: The St. Phoebe Center is entirely focused on renewing the historical order of deaconesses.

The Center’s exclusive focus on the diaconate is abundantly evidenced by every event held and article issued. Accusations of a “secret agenda” are an attempt to discredit the St. Phoebe Center’s impeccable record of advocacy for deaconesses.

Myth: Any need in the early Church for deaconesses has died out because their only role was aiding in women’s baptism so there’s no need for deaconesses today.

Truth: The role of Deaconesses in the Early Church—though varied across time and space—was larger than baptism, and there are many needed roles for women as deaconesses today based in historical precedents (e.g. catechetical instruction, pastoral care, taking communion to the infirm, serving as agents of the bishop entrusted with carrying out philanthropic and hospitality tasks), and expanding out from these historical tasks. Furthermore, many adult women who join the church in our own era express their discomfort in their baptism by male hands and wish that women assisted with this sacrament once more; even this need has not gone away!

Myth: Women are doing plenty of work in the Church today and there’s no need for deaconesses.

Truth: Women are doing—and have always done and always will—do—plenty of work in the Church, but there is a real need for deaconesses.

Many needs are being unmet in the Church today. Our priests are overburdened and need support providing pastoral care. Women need woman-to-woman ministry. Both women and men need the unique experiences and knowledge of women. There is currently no church-sanctioned process for women to minister in these ways with the support and authority of the Church. The whole Church, including the women who are already doing plenty of work, would benefit from deaconesses.

Myth: Sure, we could have deaconesses today, but there’s no need to ordain them.

Truth: Ordination is important, and deaconesses should be ordained today.

The Early Church clearly ordained women as deaconesses so it is faithful to tradition to ordain deaconesses again today. Furthermore, the Orthodox Church is a community that ordains people; through ordination the Church sets up a reciprocal relationship between the Church and the ordained. The Church offers its authority, credibility, recognition, support, and protection, but also expects the obedience and accountability of the ordained to Her. Ordination is a divinely instituted way of setting aside a person within his/her community and thus changing their relationship with the community. It is profoundly transformative, sealing the ministry of the ordained with the gift of grace for a lifetime of service. Lay ministry is very important, but it does not function in a sacramental capacity in the way that an ordained ministry does. Ordained ministry connects us to the sacramental life of the Church. Given the precedent and the need, deaconesses should be ordained again in the Church today.

Myth: The move to ordain women as deaconesses once again is an example of “clericalism,” meaning the inappropriate concentration of power in the clergy.

Truth: Men and women advocate for the revival of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church not to gain “power,” but to restore service of women in this unique capacity as deaconesses.

Furthermore, when rightly understood, the orders of the clergy are not based in power, but in God and community-given authority.

Myth: Women are naturally and rightfully subordinate to men and this is why there ought not be deaconesses in the Church again.

Truth: Jesus Christ offered the good news of liberation, understanding women and men as equal in dignity and respect, although not equivalent.

The Orthodox Church has not always lived up to this truth and teaching of the faith; it has often allowed the patriarchal and oppressive trappings of the larger societies around it to seep into its thinking and practices. But the ideal is not diminished, and we seek to align Orthodox practice with theological truth. Furthermore, diaconal ministry is not the exercise of personal authority, but of service, authorized by the Church through the oversight of the Bishop.

Myth: To ordain deaconesses today would be to capitulate to societal trends, including contemporary feminism.

Truth: The movement to have deaconesses in the Church again is grounded in the standards of the Orthodox Church, not the standards of contemporary society nor any social movement.

Ordaining deaconesses once again is not about conformity with, or capitulation to, societal trends. It is about doing what is right, good, and true. Those who repudiate any alteration of the current practices of the Orthodox Church for fear of the massive change happening in the world are actually advocating a particular form of capitulation to societal trends: “Let’s not change the Church because the world around us is changing so fast.” Instead, the metric ought to be: “What practices and expressions of the faith should the Church modify and what should stay the same to best live out the fullness of our faith and the way, the truth, and the life offered to us by Jesus Christ?”

Myth: Ordaining deaconesses today will divide the church.

Truth: The Orthodox Church will be strengthened by ordained deaconesses today. The Church has a robust ecclesiology; it is not a fragile house of cards. It will not be weakened by deaconesses. Many women and men are leaving the Orthodox Church today because of issues around women; there is already a “silent schism” going on. Ultimately, the Church’s primary concern is aligning its practices with its teachings. When this alignment happens, the church will be a truer version of itself, and this is an unquestionable good. Division will always be present due to the ways we fall short of perfection, and our path to wholeness is to more perfectly fulfill Christ’s will for the salvation of the world.

Myth: The historical order of deaconesses faded away because the Orthodox Church “came to its senses.”

Truth: The historical decline of deaconesses (although there are one-off examples from every era) happened within the context of the decline of the diaconate more broadly, and there are many reasons for this.

In the Early Church, the two main ministerial orders were the episcopacy (bishops) and the diaconate. As Christianity grew and spread, the presbyter (priest), a delegate of the bishop to the local community, assumed more responsibility for its ministerial and pastoral needs and, to some degree, eclipsed both bishop and deacon. Later, with the attacks against and eventual collapse of many of the centers of Christianity, the social and philanthropic outreach of the Church—an important diaconal function—as well as its public presence, were limited. Over time, the male deacon came to function almost exclusively in the liturgical realm and, oftentimes, the diaconate has become merely a transitional stage to the ordination to the priesthood/presbytery.

In addition to the overall decline of the diaconate, the female diaconate declined, too, but there is not one distinct reason for this decline and there was never any official church ban or order that prohibited deaconesses. Historians understand many factors, including a rise in un-Christian concerns about women's bodily impurity, and the replacement of the local "cathedral" liturgy (practiced in parishes) by the male monastic liturgy, which literally had no place for deaconesses.

Myth: The Orthodox Church has been just fine over the past 1000 years without deaconesses, so there's no reason to have them now.

Truth: Things are NOT fine in the church, and there is real and enormous need for deaconesses today.

Orthodox women today live their entire lives without the benefits of church-sanctioned woman-to-woman ministry. The entire Church community lacks the unique gifts, knowledge, and experience that women can bring to the diaconate.

Myth: The universe will fall apart if the Orthodox Church ordains women as deaconesses today.

Truth: The Universe will not fall apart when women are ordained as deaconesses today; in fact, the Universe—Church and world included—will benefit, strengthen, and come closer to living out the Kingdom of God here on Earth.