

St Olympias, the Deaconess

By Fr. Ted Bobosh, August 20, 2022

While today there are those who actively oppose having women deacons in the Church, there was a time in Orthodox history when deaconesses were the norm. St John Chrysostom writes about them and sees them as a necessary office of the Church. The fact that he does not write much about what they did has been attributed to the fact that for Chrysostom the office of the deaconess was self-evident and normative and so needed little explanation or defense.

Orthodox Seminary Professor David Ford comments on the role of the deaconess in the time of St John Chrysostom, commenting particularly on St Deaconess Olympias, whom Chrysostom highly praised:



“We also see here an indication of the high esteem in which godly women were held in the Eastern Church as being exemplars and teachers of the highest degree of virtue. This helped lead to the institutionalizing of the ordained office of the deaconess in the Eastern Church. As Joan L. Roccasalvo writes, ‘For at least eleven centuries, ordained deaconesses fulfilled a vital ministerial role in the living tradition of the Eastern Churches.’

The ordination prayer for deaconesses, as recorded in the Apostolic Constitutions (late 4th century), conveys this esteem for the leadership capabilities of women:

O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah, who did not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of the holy gates,—do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant, who is to be ordained to the office of deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit, and ‘cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,’ that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Thy glory.

The Apostolic constitutions also exhort: ‘And let the deaconess be honored by you as an image of the Holy Spirit.’ (WOMEN AND MEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH, pp 35-36)

David Ford further writes:

“Besides these ways in which all women are called to participate in the ongoing life of the church, there were in Chrysostom’s time three specific offices or vowed states in which women could serve—deaconess, widow, and virgin. As we saw in the first chapter, the office of the deaconess was a fully ordained position in the church. Since there were sizable numbers of deaconesses in the church in Antioch and Constantinople, it is surprising that Chrysostom does not talk more in his sermons about the office itself. Apparently he saw no need to do so. His high esteem for deaconesses is vividly seen in his interpretation of 1 Timothy 3: 11 (‘The woman likewise must be serious...’ RSV)], a verse which he is convinced substantiates the existence of deaconesses in the Apostolic Church:

Some have thought that this is said of women generally, but it is not so, for why would he introduce anything about women in general to interfere with his subject [in this passage, i.e., the requirements for the offices of

bishop and deacon]? He is speaking of those who hold the rank of deaconess (diaconias). ... this order is greatly (sphodra) necessary (anangkiaon) and useful and honorable (kosmion) in the church.

In his biography of Chrysostom, in reference to Chrysostom's words of farewell to the deaconesses as he was being banished from the capital for the second and last time, Bauer says of them:

"They really belonged with the clergy of the cathedral, and the great services which they had rendered to him and to the Church, as well as the spiritual fellowship which bound him to these noblewomen, clearly justified this attention."

Bauer describes their duties in this way:

"For the service of women, ecclesiastical deaconesses were assigned. These were widows, or older single women, who were consecrated by the bishop, in a special ceremony involving the laying on of hands, and the donation of a stole or chalice for the liturgical service of the church. It was their special duty to keep order among the women at the divine service [i.e., the liturgy]; they gave them the kiss of peace, and also had to admonish the women who did not live as they should. They helped with the training of the women catechumens, anointed them at baptism, and also had the duty of bringing Holy Communion to the sick women.

St Olympias, the leading deaconess of Chrysostom's time in Constantinople, was considered by him to be the very embodiment of the ideal deaconess, as we see from his many accolades of her in his letters to her. Her activities are glowingly listed by the anonymous author of *The Life of Olympias*:

She lived faultlessly (anendeos) in unmeasured tears night and day, 'submitting to every human being for the sake of the Lord' (1 Peter 2:13), full of every reverence, bowing before the saints, venerating the bishops, honoring the presbyters, respecting the priests, welcoming the ascetics, being anxious for the virgins, supplying the widows, raising the orphans, shielding the elderly, looking after the weak, having compassion on sinners, guiding the lost, having pity on all, attending with all her heart to the poor, catechizing many unbelieving women and making provision for all their material necessities of life. Thus, she left a reputation for goodness throughout her whole life which is ever to be remembered. Having called from slavery to freedom her myriad household servants, she proclaimed them to be of equal honor (isotimon) as her own nobility (eugenias)." (WOMEN AND MEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH, pp 223-224)

[Note in the above icon of St Theodora, though a woman, she is carrying the chalice. Today many bishops would forbid any woman from touching the chalice, but at one time it was perfectly Orthodox to do so.]



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