

## The Letter on the Ordination of the Deaconess

Deacon Nicholas Denysenko

PrayTell readers might notice my signature included in the letter of support sent to the Patriarch of Alexandria in the ancient church's mission to restore the ancient order of deaconess to active ministry in the Church. I want to reflect briefly on the letter and my own intentions in offering my support to the ministry of the deaconess. There is no need for me to repeat the historical arguments, as there is plenty of literature available that details the history of the deaconess and her ministry in the Church.

Students of Church history know that resolving differences and maintaining unity have always been challenges for Christians. Following the bloodshed and exploitation of human beings in the revolutions and wars of the twentieth century, and buoyed by the Cold War and the fear of nuclear armageddon, participants in the ecumenical movement captured the spirit of urgency to bring divided Christians together again. The current state of Orthodox Christianity in the world is unstable, as the nations emerging from the rubble of the Soviet bloc seek to reclaim their Christian heritage and right the wrongs committed in the past. For many Orthodox Christians, the West is to blame for everything that went wrong, a convenient enemy in a process of applying dangerous memory to the foundations of empire, nation, and Church. One of these perceived wrongs was the ordination of women to deaconess, presbyter, and bishop in Protestant Churches of the West. The Roman Church's liturgical reform functioned as a portal for Western influences to permeate the East, especially trends of liturgical performance and presidency in the West. For Orthodox Churches to reclaim their true heritage, they must close and permanently seal this portal of Western influence and recover authentically Eastern modes of Church life. Liturgical celebration and presidency are the primary bearers of authentic identity, so the only way forward for authentic Orthodox ecclesial life is to continue the practice of ordaining men to all the Church's orders, major and minor. Obviously, not all Orthodox pastors, theologians, and people adhere to this description of Orthodoxy's position on the West, but it has gained momentum in the post-Soviet period, and we can call it the anti-ecumenical turn.

Orthodoxy is no stranger to the West: there are Orthodox communities throughout the Americas, and in West and Central Europe. Orthodox in America are a minority, but many of our theologians have inherited the legacy of the intellectual tradition originating before the Soviet period, which migrated to the West. As part of its adjustment to the needs posed by cultural and environmental factors, the Church has always drawn from the entirety of its tradition to address those needs. I cannot speak for the other liturgists who signed the letter to the patriarch, but I signed it because I view the decision of a local, autocephalous Church to restore a major order of the Church for an urgent pastoral ministry to be a brilliant and Spirit-inspired method of engaging Tradition. The Alexandrian patriarchate did not invent something new with this decision: they essentially revived a proposal that had never sustained momentum through the tribulations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and acted on it. The order of deaconess was never abolished; it fell out of use, as did

the order of deacon, which remains somewhat rare in most of the parishes of the Orthodox Church. The vast majority of deacons are temporary, a necessary step on the path to presbyteral ordination. Ask Orthodox priests: many of them were deacons for a few months, some only for one day. My own selfish hope is that the publicity surrounding the revival of the order of deaconess might evolve into a broader discussion on the renewal of all the Church orders: episcopal, presbyteral, and diaconal, since all are grounded in the high priesthood of Christ himself.

There is formidable opposition to the restoration of the order of deaconess among Orthodox throughout the world: some of the most vocal opponents of female deacons are among converts to Orthodoxy in the West. They can, and should, speak for themselves, because they are part of the Church. I will report the primary argument in opposition to the ordination of deaconess I have heard from my fellow Orthodox who belonged to Western Christian Churches at some point in time. They testify univocally that secular feminism is the impetus for restoring the order of deaconess, and that this movement will thread its way through all of the orders of the Church in an attempt to establish an ecclesial egalitarianism that reflects contemporary social values. These opponents to the ordination of deaconess have insisted to me that the ordination of women inaugurated the collapse of their native Western Churches, and that the movement for restoring the deaconess is a Trojan Horse for secularizing the Orthodox Church. There are many Orthodox people and leaders who share their opinion: opposition to the ordination of women is threaded throughout Orthodoxy, and not confined to a particular regional cohort.

How should the Church proceed in this situation? Carefully, and with prayer. I belong to a cohort of Orthodox Christians who view the Alexandrian Patriarchate's decision as a long-delayed and much-needed decision to "reboot" the order of deaconess. I believe that their ministry will result in the preaching of the Gospel to the nations and is an initial step in a process of renewing all the Church's orders. I believe that it is also their right as an autocephalous Church to ordain deaconesses, as it is part of the Orthodox tradition. This is the reason I signed the letter. While I support the patriarchate's decision, I also believe that the cohorts of supporters and opponents must find a way to hear one another on this matter as the process unfolds, as we are all children of God and members of Christ's body, regardless of our opinions on the order of deaconess.

But there is also the thorny matter of the anti-ecumenical turn in Orthodoxy. The controversy on the ordination of the deaconess is but one issue belonging to the larger issue of reconstructing empires, nations, and Churches on the identities associated with particular historical periods. I would hope that all Christians could hear the sound of the archangel's voice and the trumpet of God over and above the cacophony of angry monologues reverberating throughout our homes, neighborhoods, and Churches. If we truly seek reconciliation, we must meet our neighbors in the flesh, and truly engage them in discussion. Orthodox who hold grievances against the Western Churches have the freedom to seek reconciliation, but this is possible only through real encounters where people come to know one another. Only then can strangers and enemies become not only friends, but also brothers and sisters in Christ.

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