



St Phoebe Center
FOR THE DEACONESS

Testimonials shared with the St. Phoebe Center for the Zoom event:
“Exploring the Need for Diaconal Ministry and the Female Diaconate”

Note: the St. Phoebe Center was permitted to publish the responses by the following women anonymously.

Is there a moment where you felt the need for a female deacon in your life? (i.e. through a pastoral conversation, spiritual-learning, etc.)

There were times when I felt like I couldn't tell certain things to a priest in confession. But I did anyway. It felt awkward and inappropriate. And sometimes, the advice he gave me did more harm than good. I wish there was a designated woman to talk to - a woman who is an official representative of the Church and someone who would have the capacity to provide absolution. This would bring about so much healing to me and other women I know, who tell me the same thing. I also now think about my daughter, who is maturing and will be going to confession soon. I worry that she won't have such a woman to talk to and that one day, she may find herself spiritually wounded due to a lack of female-oriented care.

Yes. I struggled for years with infertility due to reproductive issues. My priest was very understanding and provided counsel appropriately, but I would have felt more comfortable discussing the issue with another female. If I could have had an ordained female deacon, I would have felt very comfortable talking about how the infertility affected both my body and my soul. It was the hardest season of my life, and I wish I could have had a female deacon to minister to me.

I would have loved to have a female to talk to about my 1st husband's behavior and subsequent divorce.

"I came into Orthodoxy at the age of 18 with many wounds, both spiritual and psychological. These had been perpetrated by a man who had preyed on me throughout my teenage years, beginning when I was a very young teenager. I had sought help and relief from this man, starting in another Protestant environment, to no avail. Instead, the dynamics of religious environments actually provided shelter for this predator. He was many years older than me. He had committed crimes in perpetrating abuse of a teenage girl. We came into the Orthodox Church and were

chrismated on the same day, after an abbreviated catechism of just a few months. Later, when I reported this man to a police detective, she had many questions about the Orthodox priest who did not ask any questions at all about my history, my age, or about this man's place in my life. The "relationship" was very obviously predatory and had started when I was a very young teenager. Just one or two questions- How old was I? How did we meet? Would have been all that was needed to form some understanding, and then my feet potentially set on the path to help and healing. She was angry on my behalf that an Orthodox priest had not spoken to me privately at all during this time period that included my catechumenate. When I extricated myself from this predatory 'relationship', I absolutely needed a woman to provide care. I recall sitting in confession with a priest and asking him about a woman, any woman, to provide informal counseling to help me understand the faith and my spiritual life. I was seeing a therapist, but I also was seeking spiritual care, especially since the predator had twisted scripture and used religion as part of his grooming and abuse. I have deeply mourned this time period in my life. For one, I did not understand Orthodoxy when I was chrismated, and yet I had been ushered into the Church with haste. I did not understand many concepts, including spiritual fatherhood, but the idea of a spiritual father sounded like the balm to my wounds.... making anyone stepping forward to fill this role for me especially dangerous. Indeed, I was greatly harmed when another priest did see the predatorial 'relationship' I was in... he saw it very clearly! And he did indeed proffer himself to me as my 'spiritual father,' causing devastation. "

"I experienced something shockingly common for women. I was blamed and shamed for having been abused. * The first Orthodox priest I ever encountered, who never should have chrismated me after only a few months of a 'catechism', never acknowledged that his haste may have set me up as a victim of an errant priest. 'Thrown into the church prematurely, I would not have been able to recognize an unorthodox approach to spiritual care.' The second priest, who offered himself as 'spiritual father' to me, was defrocked. I learned that he had transgressed boundaries with other women over the years. Sadly, he had even used drugs as a priest. He was not a shepherd. My faith was ravaged, and I left the church for years. I returned when an Orthodox deacon with training in psychotherapy was placed in my path, and this deacon offered spiritual care. I never would have dared to approach a third priest on my own."

"My story is unique in that I did eventually receive spiritual care from a deacon. This care was not perfect, since there were things I did not feel comfortable discussing with a male, but which I felt that I needed to talk about in order to fully heal. These were not therapy concepts, but questions about the priesthood. What is the role of a priest? Why is the pain so acute when a priest violates boundaries with a parishioner? I would not have been able to read my way into healing, or

necessarily been able to have my spiritual needs met with secular therapy. My therapist cautioned me against going to church. I did require a person to provide care. I would have preferred a female.”

“Abuse will always impact someone in all areas, including spiritually, and healing for this core area cannot be neglected. My healing would have been much faster had I been able to access female caregivers within the Church who also had training. Instead, when I returned, I did eventually speak with a priest, who didn't entirely understand or seem to feel comfortable with my experiences of sexual abuse. Not understanding abuse dynamics, he barred me from communion for six months. I didn't realize at the time how harmful this was for me and how much it hindered healing for me; however, I can now see the harm with aching clarity. I would compare this to returning to a hospital for care, a hospital where malpractice had occurred, and then receiving a hospital-acquired infection.”

“Reflecting on all of my experiences, I think that women are more likely to hear stories of abuse or to have experienced it themselves, and with the correct training will be able to better care for other female abuse survivors. Most priests are simply ill-equipped to handle the complex spiritual needs of female survivors and I think when pressed would readily admit to this. We need a trained female diaconate. ”

“About a decade ago, I sat with my (former) parish priest following confession. We were talking about my work on college campuses to prevent and respond to sexual assault, which we know empirically is far too common. The priest was incredulous. Even in the face of evidence, which I explained right down to the level of measurement, he was steadfast in his belief there was no way sexual assault could be so common. He had a theory, in which he was confident, that women who had engaged in consensual sex, had regrets, and made accusations of rape to cope with their regret (as if this would be an easier way out of their predicament). It was startlingly easy for him to imagine ‘loose’, conniving women who would lie to avoid facing the reality of their sexual choices. But it was impossible for him to imagine that men, in a patriarchal society that gives men permission to dominate women in relationships (limiting choices and freedoms, sometimes using threats of violence and violence), treat women as sexual objects (widespread in media), and ‘acquire’ women as sexual trophies (part of social messaging to young men), could force themselves onto women. I want to be clear that I didn’t use any of this language about patriarchy or feminist theory (although these are defensible claims, they certainly do not describe all men and can be alienating for some), but rather tried to engage in mutual and shared understanding of the reality of assault and what we could do about it. This was not achievable because this priest could not relate on the most fundamental level to the realities of women. So many women are raped or assaulted in their lifetimes, including in the Orthodox Church. Women need educated and informed women to hear their stories and believe them, not dismiss them as lying to save face. And it is worth noting here

that women who do report assaults go through a very difficult and trying process because of the victim blaming they encounter - including from clergy. Lying about assault does occur, but it is the exception not the rule. We cannot progress as a society until we are able to look clearly at the experiences of women and gently and lovingly hold men to account within our communities. I fear that far too often our priests enable the behavior they find abhorrent because they refuse to believe it could occur in their midst and especially because they refuse to believe women.”

“I minister to women in the church who have experienced clergy abuse and domestic violence. I cannot tell you how many times there were situations where victims wanted a female church representative to talk to in their parish but didn't have anyone to turn to. Many of the women I know tell me that they wish there was an official, vetted, group of women who would be able to investigate and ensure that these abuses do not get enabled or covered up. But most importantly, there is risk for more abuse when there are no visible female representatives in the Church. Many victims open up about the abuse they experience to male clergy, but they often become vulnerable to secondary abuse by way of being dismissed, not believed, and even blamed. Some of these women go to monasteries for help but also have bad experiences if the female monastics are not properly educated in these topics. We need well-educated female deacons who would be accountable to the church hierarchy and who would be a visible point of safety for women and girls in parishes.”

"Yes, during one's lifetime as an Orthodox Christian or in any marriage, it would have been very helpful to have another woman (trained in the diaconate) to discuss problems with. A female deacon trained in Orthodox teachings, scripture, as well as life experience would have been very helpful and still could be. Also, the discussions with other women on painful issues of abortion (past, current, undecided) could help many women, especially younger ones, get support rather than shame or blame in these areas. And the last most painful area is the reality of physical/sexual assault past or present.”

“Most difficult are those suffering from clergy sexual assault and even worse, is the cover up and blame of the victim about this issue. Having an educated deacon (female or male) in these areas of difficulty could make the difference in so many ways. Healing being the first part, then, keeping people in the Orthodox church (not leaving from the cover up and slander and hypocrisy etc.) I include male deacons in the area of needed training as they too could offer better support to church members who have or are suffering abuse. Men, too, get assaulted and or abused in the Orthodox Church.”

“The bottom line is the church is supposed to be a ‘safe haven’ from the ‘world.’ She is not perfect, however her current direction is in great need of tools ‘not conforming’ to assist those who live daily in this difficult life.”

"A survivor has given me permission to share this story:

This woman went to confession, and in confession, told the priest that she was raped. She has then experienced secondary sexual abuse by the priest, who continued to ask her intimate questions about the details of the rape, making her feel responsible. Additionally, she recounted that the way he was asking her these explicit and inappropriate details was for his own pleasure and satisfaction. She froze. But then continued to recount the details of the rape. It was traumatizing. She did not know whom to go to after this experience and was scared to tell anyone.

If we had female deaconesses, who would be a point of contact for women, and who would be trained to care pastorally and spiritually for other women in parishes, the likelihood of these types of abuses in the Church would decrease substantially. "

"When I was about 12 years old, I had an interest in learning more about the faith and what went on in the altar. I wanted to grow spiritually, I knew that weekly the priest had a session for kids my age to learn more about the faith and explain weekly services. I was asked to join the weekly group of spiritual learning. The priest told me to go to a monastery and speak with a nun. The sessions were only for young boys. I thought, what about Christ's faith were women not worthy of hearing. I was an aggressive and very independent child. I at that point decided this was not a welcoming place for girls. I stopped attending services regularly, only went for the Friday and Saturday night Holy Week services twice a year. This went on until I turned 33 years old when I started attending services more regularly as I decided I had to expose my young child to the faith. Since social media exploded, I have become a go-to by many women who have sensitive issues. I have many confidential stories that don't apply to me where I have guided women through difficult situations in life: domestic violence, rape, abortion, sex, low self-esteem, etc. When I asked, 'Did you go to your priest?' they said they could not speak with a man about these topics. I even had a male friend who was raped by his uncle who said he went to the priest and the priest passed it off as not a big deal and sent him off. He then came to me because he heard I had helped a few females who were raped. I was able to calm him down and get him to go on living his life. He told me that I saved him, that he felt more comfortable talking to me a female about it because he did not feel embarrassed and I was more empathetic and acknowledged that his uncle was the issue, not him. The Church today is not set up properly to serve all of God's children. You need all the gifts granted to both sexes to be available for those in need. "

*When a woman seeks spiritual counseling for sexual abuse, rape, or domestic violence, and it is suggested that she may in some way or completely be at fault for the incident(s) this is known as

‘secondary abuse.’ The response to a woman’s allegations should never be met with doubt or a suggestion that she is at fault in some way. The trauma and pain that she alleges having experienced should be met with compassion, comfort, and understanding.