



Feast Day of Saint Catherine – November 25, 2016

SCV EXCLUSIVE:

**Distinguished Theologian Responds to Patriarchate of Alexandria's
Decision to Restore the Ministry of Deaconesses for the
Orthodox Church in Africa**

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Earlier this month the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria decided to proceed with the restoration of the ministry of deaconesses as an aid in the Orthodox mission field. In a November 23, 2016 telephone interview, theologian and Emeritus Professor Evangelos Theodorou of the University of Athens School of Theology, a respected authority of liturgical theology and the historiography of the ordination of deaconesses, stated:

This is a timely and wonderful development. No doubt, the Orthodox Church in Africa has been growing and making profound inroads in many places. We have much to learn from them. Growth also implies new challenges and opportunities. We know through the Church's history how unforeseen pastoral, educational and other needs, naturally arise as the Church grows. Inspired by the grace of the Holy Spirit, through this, as well as other pastoral decisions, the hierarchs of the Church in Africa are wisely acknowledging and responding to the needs of the Church.

When asked about various dissenting opinions that followed this announcement, the professor stressed that:

The ordination of deaconesses has been witnessed to in three Ecumenical Councils. There has never been an Ecumenical Council to abolish them. Furthermore, every bishop has the right to ordain clergy and appoint ministers for his diocese as he discerns. This has always been the case through history. We know that in recent memory, Saint Nektarios of Aegina ordained two nuns as deaconesses and the late Archbishop of Athens, His Beatitude Christodoulos, ordained a nun as a deaconess in his metropolis while he was serving as the Metropolitan of Demetrias (Volos).

Over the past decades, Professor Theodorou spoke on the history, ministry and ordination of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church in many venues, including a major presentation at the 1988 Rhodes Inter-Orthodox Consultation on the topic, *The Place of Women in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*. This consultation unanimously advocated for the rejuvenation of the ministry of female deacons.

In 2015, tribute was paid to Professor Theodorou's academic career at a conference organized in his honor at the School of Theology of the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, Greece. This conference also focused particularly on the ordination of deaconesses.

Professor Theodorou has also served as an advisor for the Saint Catherine's Vision 2014 publication: Call for the Rejuvenation of the Ministry of the Ordained Deaconess (saintcatherinesvision.org). In this document and throughout his academic career, he emphasized:

The need for the ministry of deaconesses is not new. The Scriptures, the Fathers and the ancient liturgical texts in the life of the Church affirm in various ways how 'the ministry of a woman deacon is especially important and necessary.' Certainly, this ministry may be needed more in some places than in others. This has always been the case in history.

...Today, the ministry of women ordained to the diaconate can be of great benefit in many places within the life of the Church. The deaconess can serve the ever-expanding needs of the local church under the direction of the bishop. She can assist in areas such as pastoral care, education, mission, and philanthropy. She can expand the outreach of the church particularly through evangelism and witness as well as care for the sick, destitute and unchurched. She can bear witness to the values of the Gospel in the wider society.

In reflecting on the Patriarchate of Alexandria's decision, Professor Theodorou also reminds us of a statement by Metropolitan Chrysostom of Chalkidos at the 2004 meeting of the Synod of Bishops of the Church of Greece on *The Role of Women in the Overall Structure of the Church: Rejuvenating the Order of Deaconesses*. Metropolitan Chrysostom affirms:

It is certainly possible to rejuvenate this praiseworthy order, with its many diverse and blessed activities, as long as the Church decides this is necessary after careful study and weighing the Church's needs, being illumined by the Holy Spirit concerning the "signs of the times".

Saint Catherine's Vision invites everyone to join us in prayer that God reveal His holy will on this important issue for the Church.

For further information about Saint Catherine's Vision, please visit our website: www.saintcatherinesvision.org

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