

*Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the Americas*  
(SCOBA),  
*Orthodox Bishops' Conference*  
October 5, 2006  
Chicago, IL

**Toward a Complete Expression of the Diaconate:  
Discerning the Ministry of Women Deacons**

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Discerning how God is calling men and women to serve Him within the life of the Church in our time and place, is vital in our on-going responsibility for “building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). This on-going responsibility also calls us all today to examine the scriptures, holy tradition, pastoral needs, as well as our own selves regarding the expression of every ministry, including the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate. This contemporary discussion is not a recent phenomenon created in the latter twentieth century, rather, it reaches back to the early nineteenth century, as far back as the early 1800's.

Historically, tracing the development of the diaconate is particularly difficult during the early centuries of the Church's existence. Furthermore, the sources that are available sometimes bear witness to differing traditions that existed throughout the Church. This is all the more true for discerning the history of women deacons especially through the first four centuries of the church's development. Practices differed from place to place and from one historical period to another. To one degree or other, this may also be said about every order of ministry in the early Church.

The Greek word for deacon, “*diakonos*” literally means “one who ministers” or “one who serves.” “*Diakonos*” appears in various forms over seventy-five times in the New Testament. As the well-known story from the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles indicates, the first deacons were called to assist in the social and charitable work of the apostolic community. Those chosen for this ministry were to be “filled with the Spirit and with wisdom” (Acts 6:3), as this spiritual foundation was vital for the “building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12).

From the very beginning of the Church's foundation, it has not been within the charism of the diaconate for deacons to preside at the Eucharist (as do the bishop and presbyter). Rather, deacons are called to *diakonia*, ministry or service. Their presence and efforts make present in a mysterious way: Christ, the Servant (*diakonos*) (“*I have come among you as one who serves*”). Deacons are ordained to “sacred” or “priestly” ministry (*iera diakonia*). The essential focus of their servant-leadership is ministry on behalf of the Church.

The first mention of a woman deacon comes from St. Paul. In his letter to the Christians at Rome, he commends Phoebe, a deacon (*diakonon*) of the Church of Cenchrea, as his emissary, probably bearing his letter to them. A few centuries later, reflecting the consciousness of the Eastern Church, St. John Chrysostom also recognizes St. Phoebe's “station” (*axioma*) as a deacon (*diakonon*) and while praising her, bids both men and women in his flock to imitate her example.<sup>1</sup>

In the first letter to Timothy, Paul speaks about the qualifications of those called to ministry in the Church. After reviewing the essential prerequisites necessary for bishops and male deacons, he then says that “the women, likewise, must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things” (I Tim 3:11). As early commentators, such as John Chrysostom (fourth century), indicate, Paul includes in his discussion those women “who have the dignity of the diaconate” (*alla peri ton to axioma tis diakonias ehouson legei*), Chrysostom was sure to stress in the same commentary that the order of women deacons (*peri gynaikon diakonon*) “is also in the highest degree necessary, useful and proper in the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

By the early third century, as noted in the document known as the *Syriac Didascalia*, the ministry of male and female deacons appears to be more or less reciprocal. The text says: “Let a woman (deacon) rather be devoted to the ministry of women, and a male deacon to the ministry of men.” Written toward the end of the era of persecution of the Church, the *Didascalia* holds the female deacon in high esteem. The *Didascalia* states that the “(male) deacon stands in the place of Christ...and the

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<sup>1</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999) pp. 6-10. Other third and fourth century teachers share Chrysostom's perspective and these are identified within this study as well.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

woman deacon shall be honored by you in the place of the Holy Spirit . . .” A little over a century later, the document known as the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which draws heavily from the *Didascalia*, continues to affirm the ministry of male and female deacons even stating that “both must be ready to carry messages, to travel about, to minister and to serve”. Both of these documents bear a powerful witness to the exquisite spiritual inter-relationship between the bishop and his deacons (both male and female) that was a necessary foundation for ministry. The *Didascalia*, while addressing the bishop reminds him “that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially needful and important . . . and you also have the need of the ministry of a deaconess for many things”.<sup>3</sup>

During the post-Apostolic period, the three-fold pattern of ordained ministry had clearly emerged throughout the Church. This pattern distinguished the bishop, the deacon and the presbyter by their vocation, their relationships and their responsibility within the local, Eucharistic community. While bishops and, by delegation, presbyters presided at the local celebrations of the Eucharist, there is no evidence that deacons, either male or female, were called to this. Likewise, there is no convincing evidence that women deacons in the Orthodox Church were ever ordained to the episcopacy or presbyterate. Building upon the witness of the apostolic age, the deacon’s ministry essentially rested upon a spiritual foundation, that of “the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12) through,

- pastoral care: serving as the “eyes, ears and hands” of the bishop;
- ministry to persons in need
- witness and education
- liturgical assistance: assisting the presiding bishop (and later, presbyters) at the celebrations of Baptism and the Eucharist and keeping order within the worshipping congregation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 16:3:12; cf. *Women Deacons*, pp. 21-24.

<sup>4</sup> The famous fourteenth century Byzantine canonist, Matthew Blastares, complains at the lack of documentation from the early Church regarding female deacons. Nevertheless, he states that there are some ancient sources asserting that women deacons “were permitted to approach the altar and to share in a role with male deacons on a comparatively equal basis with them.” In (perhaps begrudging) support of this, he cites the example of St. Gorgonia, sister of St. Gregory of Nyssa, who was known to approach the altar. *Women Deacons*, p. 16, n.14. We must bear in mind here that most likely, liturgical practices differed according pastoral circumstances and need.

Limited, yet significant, historical evidence from the first Christian millennium indicates that the ministerial activities of women ordained to the diaconate can be described as fitting into four distinct but inter-related categories. Firstly, they frequently are engaged in a dynamic, evangelical ministry of teaching the Christian faith to others. Female deacons are responsible for instructing believers in the faith before and after baptism, and in guiding persons in their growth in holiness. Through their witness and their teaching, female deacons are frequently responsible for guiding pagan and heretical women and men into the Church, and preparing them for the rite of Baptism. Because of their gift of discernment, many are renowned as spiritual mothers. Their intercession, advice and guidance are sought by both women and men, even ranking members of the clergy and government officials.

Secondly, the early sources show women deacons engaged in an expression of ministry in the areas of what would be called today pastoral care and social work. Among their responsibilities, some female deacons provide food and shelter for the poor. Others attend to the physically ill and disabled. A number of female deacons engage in a ministry of providing a safe haven to foreign travelers. Women deacons are active in a ministry both to Christians and non-Christians who were to be found homeless, or in hospitals, hospices, orphanages, and even in prisons. People from all walks of life frequently came to these holy women seeking hope, inspiration and assurance of the love of God during times of trouble and need. Some female deacons, who are deeply respected for their mature relationship with God, are able to facilitate the spiritual and physical healing of Christians and other pilgrims who come to them for assistance and counsel.

Thirdly, while the evidence is limited, there are indications that women deacons are involved in some expressions of liturgical service. They have a responsibility for assisting the Bishop with the baptism of adult women and children. They have a role in directing women during the Eucharistic celebration and in facilitating their choir responses. And, there is evidence that women deacons in the early church bring Holy Communion to those members of the community who are unable to participate in the Eucharist and would offer prayer for those in need. In some monasteries during the early middle ages, a number of the responsibilities of the female deacon parallel the male deacon in a more limited manner, particularly when a male member of the higher clergy was absent. Acting as the ambassador of the bishop, women deacons express the Church's care for the needy and those who are on the outskirts

of society. They serve in a manner that was both direct and personal. They minister to those who need the presence of Christ and His Church.

Finally, we have the example of numerous female deacons who exercise a dynamic, evangelical ministry directly related to the life of monastic community. As the primary focus of monastic vocation in the Orthodox tradition is identical to the Christian vocation to holiness, it is easy to appreciate how the order of women deacons becomes associated with monasticism, especially during the middle ages. In some cases, deaconesses are the founders of monastic communities. While in other cases, they are elected as the abbess of an established community.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Significance of the Ordination Rite**

Dating from the eighth century, the prayers and rites used by the Church of Constantinople, the center of Eastern Christianity, for the ordination of the female deacon have been preserved. The ceremony itself clearly expresses all the essential features of ordinations to "major orders" as understood by Orthodox theology

- The ordination takes place within the context of the celebration of the Eucharist, at the same point in the liturgy as the male deacon is to be ordained.
- The ordination takes place before the Altar and follows the same rubrics (except she stands throughout the service and does not kneel as the deacon. Women kneeling in this public manner was deemed improper)
- The ordination begins with the proclamation "Divine Grace" (*E Theia Haris*) and requires two prayers of epiclesis (just as ordinations for the deacon, presbyter and bishop require)
- The woman deacon receives the diaconal stole at the conclusion of the ordination rite. The diaconal stole is the traditional symbol of the order of deacon.

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<sup>5</sup> *Women Deacons*, pp.18-58.

- The woman deacon receives Holy Communion at the Altar as was the case with other members of the clergy.

The deliberate Eucharistic context of this and every ordination, affirms a vital ancient Christian conviction still firmly asserted by the Orthodox. This conviction is grounded in the belief that all ordinations are events of joy for the Christian community as they are a gift to the Church, by the Holy Spirit who sustains the Church. Like the mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation (Confirmation), which mark the process of Christian initiation, ordinations are “pentecostal” events. For this reason, ordinations are not to be hidden from the Christian community. The ordination of bishops, in particular, presbyters and male and female deacons are to be received and honored in a jubilant manner by the worshipping community during the Eucharistic liturgy.

***Rhodes, Greece 1988 Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation: “The Place of Women in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women”***

The most authoritative contemporary Orthodox response articulating the various ministries to which women are called is a Consultation convened by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which took place in 1988 on the island of Rhodes in Greece. The Consultation invited hierarchical representatives together from all of the various Eastern Orthodox Churches to study the topic “the Place of Women in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women.” In addition to this, over a third of the consultant theologians invited to collaborate in the discussions were women theologians from various parts of the world. This Consultation deliberated seriously the rejuvenation of the ministry of women deacons.

The Consultation firmly expresses the view that women had never been ordained as presbyters or bishops in the early church and does not envision this as a future possibility. At the same time, the Consultation recognizes that women had been ordained as deacons in the past and recommends the restoration of this ministry. The delegates affirmed that: “The apostolic order of the deaconess should be revived. It was never altogether abandoned in the Orthodox Church though it has tended to fall into disuse. There is ample evidence from apostolic times, from the patristic, canonical and liturgical tradition, well into the Byzantine period (and even in our own day) that this order was held in high honor. The revival of this ancient order

should be envisaged on the basis of the ancient prototype testified to in many sources.” Furthermore, according to the delegates of this historic Consultation, the rejuvenation of the ministry of the order of women deacons would "represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world in many spheres. This would be all the more true if the diaconate in general (male as well as female) were restored in all places in its original manifold services . . . in response to the increasing specific needs of our time." <sup>6</sup>

Since this historic Consultation there has been a strengthening of support for the rejuvenation of this expression of ministry in numerous situations. A key witness of this may include His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, Himself. During an interview in 1995 he also recalled the above cited Consultation recalling its “unanimous and pan-Orthodox” conclusions, which also stated that only men be ordained to the priesthood and episcopacy. Still, he added that this “is, moreover, the reason why we can certainly revive the ancient tradition of calling women to minister as deacons . . . In any case, several of our bishops have already reestablished, in their diocese the ancient tradition of female deacons. At this stage, I do not know if it is a real ordination or a simple benediction, but one of our great Greek theologians [Prof. Evangelos Theodorou] teaches, backed by [historical evidence], that in the past, women did receive ordination as deacons. That is the point we are at now.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Most Recently:**

Under the presidency of His Beatitude Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens and All Greece, the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece during their Friday October 8, 2004 meeting in Athens engaged the topic of rejuvenating of the ministry of the ancient order of deaconesses. According to the official Statement of the Holy Synod, His Beatitude, Archbishop Christodoulos invited His Eminence Metropolitan Chrysostom of Chalkidos “to the floor in order to present his *‘Introduction’* of the

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<sup>6</sup> Gennadios Limouris, (ed.), *Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*, ("Tertios" Publications: Katerini, Greece) 1992, pp. 31-32; See also: Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, “The Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation on Women in the Church,” *Ecumenical Trends*, 18:3 (1989) pp. 33-36 and *Women Deacons*, pp. 162-163.

<sup>7</sup> *Women Deacons*, p.168.

theme, titled: *'The Role of Women in the Entire Structure of the Church: Rejuvenating the Order of Deaconesses.'*"

Metropolitan Chrysostom offered a well documented and precisely detailed presentation. He stressed among other things: "It is certainly possible to rejuvenate this praiseworthy order, with its many diversified and blessed activities, as long as the Church decides this is necessary, after carefully weighing her needs and study, being illumined by the Holy Spirit concerning the 'signs of the times'". His Beatitude, Archbishop Christodoulos continued with warm praise advocating for this order's coming to fulfillment.

Both of these highly regarded bishops, as well as a great number of the hierarchs in attendance openly supported the conclusions of the historic 1988 Rhodes, Greece Inter-Orthodox Consultation which advocated for the rejuvenation of the ministry female deacons. His Beatitude, Archbishop Christodoulos ended the discussion by affirming the missionary, catechetical, philanthropic and social efforts of women today in Greece.

According to the Church of Greece, *Statement of the Holy Synod* dated 8 October 2004 "the Holy Synod confirmed by a majority vote that: a) the institution (*thesmos*) of deaconesses established in antiquity and rooted in the Holy Canons was never abolished and b) depended upon presenting discriminating opportunities, the regional Bishop may consecrate (*kathosiosi*) senior nuns of Holy Monasteries of their Eparchy; in order to address the needs of their Holy Monasteries, and only with the understanding that the deaconess is not appointed to the rank (*bathmos*) of priesthood..."<sup>8</sup>

While calling attention to what may be an important moment of "discerning the signs of the times" (cf. Mt. 16:3), I wish to conclude this overview with some of the words of welcome expressed by His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew to the delegates of the 1997 Inter-national Orthodox Women's Conference in his city. He reminded the participants that:

"Since the earliest days of the Church, faithful Christian women and men have lived in this city . . . Here, at the Great Church of Aghia Sophia a number of devoted women, such as St. Olympias, served as deaconesses . . . To both women and men,

to both clergy and laity, these women saints continue to be a source of inspiration, for it is written: ‘God is revealed in His saints.’”

After stressing the importance of the 1996 Orthodox Women’s Conference in Damascus, His All Holiness also recognized the “call for the full restoration of the order of deaconesses. This recommendation echoes a similar one coming from the Inter-Orthodox Consultation in Rhodes in 1988. The order of ordained deaconesses is an undeniable part of tradition coming from the Early Church. Now, in many of our Churches, there is a growing desire to restore this order so that the spiritual needs of the People of God may be better served. There are already a number of women who appear to be called to this ministry.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> “Church of Greece Restores Diaconate for Women”, in *OrthodoxNews*, 7:6, Feb. 8, 2005 (<http://www.orthodoxnews.net/firms.com/158/Women.htm>), accessed: February 18, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> *Address of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Inter-Orthodox Conference for Women*, (Phanar, Istanbul: May 12, 1997).