

***SCOBA Bishops' Conference***  
***October 3-6, 2006***  
***Chicago, Il.***

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

*Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, M.Div., Ph.D.*

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.

Tracing the historical development of the diaconate is particularly difficult during the early centuries of the Church's existence. The sources that are available bear witness to sometimes 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 Cencrea, as his emissary, probably bearing his letter to them. A few centuries later, reflecting the consciousness of the Eastern Church, St. John Chrysostom (fourth century) 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 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 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

---

<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.

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” 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 liturgical celebrations, especially Baptism and the Eucharist; and keeping order within the worshipping congregation.<sup>4</sup>

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. First, 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

---

<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. Liturgical practices differed according to practical circumstances and pastoral need. We must be also particularly mindful of the fact that Christian “public” worship took place in “private” even “secret” locations during periods of pagan Roman persecution.

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.

Second, 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.

Third, 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, these women deacons 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 ecclesiology.

- 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 does the male 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 male deacon, presbyter and bishop require).
- The female deacon receives the diaconal stole ("*orarion*") at the conclusion of the ordination rite. The diaconal stole is the traditional symbol of the order of deacon.
- The woman deacon receives Holy Communion at the Altar, as is 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, 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

---

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

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

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 162-163.

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 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.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 168.

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).



## Suggested Further Reading

### Selected Orthodox Resources (*articles*):

- Archbishop Chrysostomos, “Women in the Orthodox Church: Brief Comments from a Spiritual Perspective”, *Orthodox Life*, January-February, 1981, cited in: <http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/women.aspx>, accessed February 18, 2006.
- “Gender and the Image of Christ”, in *Anglican Theological Review*, 2002, 84 (3) Urs von Arx and Anastasios Kallis, eds., Duncan Reid, trans., 485-755.
- Joseph Allen, “Diaconate”, *Word Magazine*, September 1972, cited in: [http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/liturgics/allen\\_diaconate.htm](http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/liturgics/allen_diaconate.htm), accessed: February 18, 2006.
- Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, “Women Deacons? An Eastern Orthodox Perspective,” in *Origins*, Feb. 16, 2006, 581-587.
- Georges Florovsky, “The Problem of the Diaconate”, [http://www.philosophy-religion.org/diaconate/chapter\\_4.htm](http://www.philosophy-religion.org/diaconate/chapter_4.htm), accessed: Feb. 18, 2006.
- “Church of Greece Restores Diaconate for Women”, in *OrthodoxNews*, 7:6, Feb. 8, 2005 (<http://www.orthodoxnews.netfirms.com/158/Women.htm>.) accessed: February 18, 2006.

### Selected Orthodox Resources (*books*):

Elisabeth Behr-Siegel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publishing, 1991). An Orthodox “classic”, this book discusses theological issues pertaining to the ministry of women.

Elisabeth Behr-Siegel and Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2000). More recent discussions on women’s ordination by two highly respected Orthodox theologians, now available in English.

Deborah Malacky Belonick, *Feminism in Christianity: An Orthodox Christian Response*, (Syosett, NY: Orthodox Church in America, 1983). This is the first book published in English responding to feminist theology from an Orthodox perspective. This study is a “must read” for those who desire to more deeply appreciate Orthodox theological concerns.

Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald (ed)., *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the ‘Signs of the Times’*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999). This book offers a rich tapestry of concerns and views regarding women in the life of the Orthodox Church. The majority of contributions in this volume are by Orthodox women.

Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999). This study offers an in depth analysis of the ancient (and beautiful) ordination rites of women deacons. Praised as an “important” work by Orthodox and Roman Catholic scholars, this book also provides the most extensive discussion and information on the theology of women’s ordination from an Orthodox perspective to date.

Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald (ed.), *Encountering Women of Faith: St. Catherine’s Vision Collection, vol. 1* (Berkeley: CA: InterOrthodox Press, December 2005). This book presents a unique collection of studies written collaboratively by Orthodox women. It offers a written “icon” inviting readers to engage the saints for themselves. Several of the women studied were deacons or sought to rejuvenate this expression of ministry. The website address for St. Catherine’s Vision is: [orthodoxwomen.org](http://orthodoxwomen.org).

Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Persons in Communion: A Theology of Authentic Relationships*, (Berkeley, CA: Inter-Orthodox Press, August 2006). One section of this new book includes an in-depth discussion of contemporary concerns related to the rejuvenation of the ministry of women deacons and the ministries of women and men, generally.

Thomas Hopko, ed., *Women and the Priesthood*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999). This highly respected and popular volume contains a number of essays engaging the “pros” and “cons” relating to the ordination of women from an Orthodox perspective.

Michael Roshak, *The Place and Restoration of the Diaconate within the Orthodox Church*, (M.Div. thesis: St. Vladimir’s Theological Seminary, 1977). This study has become a “standard reference” in numerous Orthodox theological circles regarding the diaconate.

Evangelos Theodorou, “The Ministry of the Deaconess in the Greek Orthodox Church,” *The Deaconess*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1966). The results of Professor Theodorou’s in depth investigation have been published in Greek in his history making study: “*On the ‘Ordination’ or ‘Appointment’ of Deaconesses*,” (Athens, 1954).

#### **Selected Ecumenical Resources:**

- John Collins, *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources*, (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press) 1990.
- Christine Hall, (ed.), *The Deacon’s Ministry*, (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing Publ.) 1991.
- Hanover Report of the Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, published for the Anglican Consultative Council and the World Lutheran Federation, 1996.
- Ormande Plater, *Many Servants: An Introduction to Deacons* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publ.) 1991.

## Thoughts to consider:

*The nature of Christian ministry is always defined in the Orthodox tradition in close relation to the sacraments: especially to the holy Eucharist. The theological key to the problem of the diaconate lies in the doctrine of the diaconate, and actually the whole problem of ministry is a eucharistic problem: the Eucharist is the heart and the center –and indeed the foundation- of the Church, which is herself the Body of Christ. The diaconate, as a distinct ministerial order, can be understood adequately only in this eucharistic setting.*

*Fr. Georges Florovsky*

*. . . any order of the clergy, the gift, the charisma is basically the same and therefore each order, according to its function, bears part of that responsibility for the total welfare of the Church. . . .What I have been trying to show is that the deacon's ministry can bring life to the Church for it brings together the spiritual, social and economic activities of the Church. But this must be founded in love in order to transform it all into something "offerable" to God. Perhaps it is the lack of such love that has caused the decay of the diaconate . I can offer no solutions to restore the diaconate as it was meant to be, but one thing seems certain, this same lack of love in the Church has caused the disunity between clergy and laity, the loss of the social dimension of the Church, and finally, the lack of a real liturgical understanding as one of concelebration, as oneness in mind.*

*Fr. Joseph Allen*

### A Few Note-worthy Deacons:

St. Stephen the Proto-martyr

St. Laurence of Rome

St. Ephraim the Syrian

St. Athanasios the Great (who as a Deacon and Secretary to his Bishop, was instrumental at the Council of Niceae (325) later replaced him. (as was the custom of the time, he was ordained directly to the episcopate).

St. Phoebe

St. Olympia of Constantinople

St. Melania the Younger

St. Irene of Chrysovalanton