

St. John Chrysostom's Teaching on Neighborly Love

Theodor Damian

Introduction

For the 4th century C.E., St. John Chrysostom was like a flowing of heaven on earth and a source of God's mercy upon people. A powerful representative of this century, he contributed substantially to the intensification of Christian faith by raising the cultural awareness of his contemporaries. Thus, Chrysostom contributed to the special brilliance of his century, the so-called golden century of Christianity.

Even during his lifetime, Chrysostom was well known and highly regarded. This is explained by the fact that St. John Chrysostom, maybe more than the other preachers of the Christian faith, combined harmoniously the principles of Christ's Gospel consistently with his own lifestyle. Hence, his unwavering exigency regarding the observance of the norms of the moral life, and, as Palladios pointed out, his courage to speak frankly in the Church reprimanding publicly both sins and sinners,¹ led to his enemies diligently preparing his tragic end.

St. John had an infinite love for those who came under his pastoral guidance. This love, manifested in numerous charitable works, constituted the golden rule of his life. He considered the Christian dogma to be only the crowning of a superior lifestyle based on the practice of Evangelical virtues.

St. John called himself an "ambassador of the poor," and he was considered "the preacher of alms" as he lived in a society full of beggars and slaves.² Saint John suffered together with the mendicants,

¹ Palladios, *Dialogue sur la vie de Jean Chrysostome*, I, Introduction, text critique, traduction et notes, par Anne-Marie Malingrey, "Sources Chrétiennes," Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 1988, 377.

² Ph. Rancillac, *L'Eglise, manifestation de l'Esprit chez Saint Jean Chrysostome*, Dar Al-Kalima, Beyrouth, 1970, 45.

with the jobless, the unfortunate, and with all those in want and in suffering. He tried to get closer to them as if drawing nearer to the Lord Jesus Christ. For St. John, the poor and the oppressed were the altar on which he brought both his sacrifice and grateful thanksgiving to God. Good works and charity, the vehicles of one's expression of love, represented for St. John, the essential elements of neighborly love. The works we have in view here are in particular St. John's homilies. As it is reflected in this study, these sermons are not theological treatises; rather, they represent accessible addresses for a wide public audience. Yet his homilies clearly convey the biblical message of the Gospel in a very pastoral manner. Figures of speech such as metaphors, epithets and comparisons, intended repetitions and other such literary tools and strategies are meant to strengthen the message, impress the auditor and create a lasting effect in people's hearts.

Love of the Neighbor

Giving a practical example, St. John Chrysostom asks us to consider the following scenario, where we have a friend that loves a certain person. We know that our friend will consider a good deed towards the loved person as if the deed was made towards the friend. Furthermore, we will try to be helpful towards the person loved by our friend in order to please our friend. All the more, Chrysostom concludes, we should be helpful towards our neighbor, in which we see Jesus Christ, in order to please God.³

The love for neighbor is inseparable from the love of God. When one has an authentic love for their neighbor, one does all one can in order to get the neighbor's attention and affection. Likewise, when we love God we are compelled to do the same. In his paraphrasing of the words of Christ, St. John concludes, "The one who will love his neighbor for Me, will have Me with him and I will take care that he get other necessary virtues."⁴

³ St. John Chrysostom, cf. J. Bareille, *Oeuvres complètes de S. Jean Chrysostome*, (twenty volumes plus index), Ed. L. Vivès, Paris, 1865-1873, tom. IX, 141.

⁴ *Idem, Homélie sur Saint Matthieu*, LX, Bareille, tom. XII, 490.

Usually, people love their neighbors as a response to another feeling of love, or because their neighbor might be useful in one's temporal dealings. In fact, personal interest is at the basis of most social relationships. The one who loves in order to be loved diminishes or loses his love as soon as he notices the loved one's insensitivity or instability. People are more inclined to love others if they consider Christ's teaching. The one who loves according to Christ's teaching will not consider race, nobility, country, possessions, and will not even expect the friendship of the loved one. Even when the loved one hates the one who loves or wants him dead, the lover has a strong reason not to renounce his love, for Christ loved those who hated and crucified Him with the highest love.⁵

Love confers nobility on us even when we decide freely to become somebody else's slave. If one wants to be a good master over somebody, one needs to become first his slave based on love. Stability is an important characteristic in a loving relationship. Since brotherly love is a fulfillment of the divine will, the stability in such a love will also exist in one's relation to God. When Jesus Christ teaches that we love one another, and not in whichever manner but "the way I loved you" (John 15:12), He gives us the characteristics of love; love must be constant, profound, engaged, evident, concrete, sacrificial.

One of the objectives of neighborly love is participation in the loving communion of Christ. Thus, since neighborly love leads to love of God, it offers us a double and magnificent compensation. This double aspect is indicated by the great commandment of love, "You shall love your God, the Lord, with all your heart, with all your soul and your mind and your neighbor as you love yourself (Matthew 22, 37-39)."

In his or her transient existence, one has to confront many evil temptations. These are overcome by Christ's love for us culminating in His blood offered for us, which is a source and model for our love

⁵ *Ibidem*, 495.

towards people. Even though the distance between God and humanity is infinite, God asks us to love one another with a mutual love similar to that which exists between the persons of the Holy Trinity. When you love somebody, St. John writes, his or her name will constantly be on your lips. This is the expression of a sentiment started from a sincere and burning heart, a heart that becomes a pleasant shelter for the loved one. Love for the enemy is part of this teaching too. An enemy must be loved the way one would feel great love for a spouse, and for that reason be ready to forgive all offences she might commit against her closest partner. ⁶ This is true love, when the human being, friend or enemy, is understood as God's creature and must be looked at with love.⁷

In his treatise *On Priesthood*, St. John affirms strongly that, "I don't believe that one can be saved without having done something for my neighbor's salvation."⁸ When someone is loved and loves at the same time he or she will get from the loved one an even greater love. Sin consists of not loving the one who loves you. Here one can see the pride, which causes the person, who does not love their neighbor and only loves God a little, into thinking that he or she is worthy of a greater love from their neighbor and from God. In fact, it is when one intensely loves someone else that their desire to be loved by the other, and even as much as the lover loves the beloved, appears in the lover's soul. Consequently, God wants humanity to love the Trinity so intensely because that is how much God loves humanity.

Yet when one loves somebody, who has defects or mistakes, with the purpose of correcting them, then their love receives more value and is worthy of more praise. Love is the primary principle of existence and the main condition of salvation. Just as God loves humanity in their present condition, so too, the faithful need to love other people in their

⁶ *Idem, Homélie sur l'épître aux Ephésiens*, VII, Bareille, tom. XVIII, 241.

⁷ Prof. Constantin Cornitescu, *Umanismul la Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur* (teza de doctorat), Institutul Teologic de grad universitar, 1971, Bucuresti, 85.

⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *On Priesthood*, II, 10, cf. Ierom. Prof. N. Mladin, "Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur despre desavarsirea crestina," in *Ortodoxia*, an IX, nr. 4, 1957, Bucuresti, 581.

present state in order to be like God “who causes His sun to rise over the good and the bad ones and sends the rain over the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45).” The one who offers love in this life, in the Kingdom of God will receive love as a crowning of his victory.

The identity between those who love each other is so great that even death cannot separate them,⁹ as they are bound together in Christ’s body, the Church,¹⁰ where the Holy Spirit is given to all at once. At the same time, the identity between the love for God and the love for the neighbor leads to the identity between Christ and His followers. St. John does not precisely define what kind of identity he is referencing in his discussion of the relationship between Christ and His followers. Yet, this identity between Christ and His followers is grounded in love that ensures the unity of the Church as the body of Christ,¹¹ a love that André Scrima calls “ecclesiology in act.”¹²

On the other hand, the act of an exaggerated self-love is a sin against the authentic sentiment of love. This sinful love makes one think only of one’s own interest, thus generating greed, arrogance and other vices that chase away the enthusiasm for charity.¹³ The truth is that whoever loves themselves in an over exaggerated manner does not have true love, but cheats himself, since true love needs to be communicated to someone, as this is part of love’s nature. Here again St. John seems to be rhetorical and pastoral since a distinction between the nature of self-love and the love for someone else is not made.

Yet he does suggest such a distinction when he writes that love was designed by God to be in several kinds: that of the parents for children and vice versa, of the husband for wife and vice versa, that

⁹ Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur, *Cuvant inainte de exil*, P.G. LII, 430, apud, Prof. C-tin Voicu, “Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur si unitatea Bisericii,” in *Studii Teologice*, seria II, an XXVIII, nr. 1-2, 1976, Bucuresti, 76.

¹⁰ Prof. N. Chitescu, “Aspecte ale eclesiologiei la Sfantii Trei Ierarhi,” in *Studii Teologice*, seria II-a, an XIV, nr. 7-8, 1968, Bucuresti, 403-404.

¹¹ Ph. Rancillac, *op. cit.*, 81.

¹² *Ibidem*, 12.

¹³ St. John Chrysostom, *Homélie sur la II-ème épître à Timothée*, VII, Bareille, tom. XIX, 593.

among friends, love of enemy. God made these types of love in order to introduce in human relationships such features as virtue, rule of law and reward, and through them to determine the education of the will towards action. Nothing makes one more like Christ, according to the Patriarch of Constantinople, than caring for their neighbor. Between Christ and the poor, who are in pain, there is a mystical and indissoluble link. The neglect of one single person in need is the neglecting of one part of Christ's body. In this context, where the need to sing thanksgiving praises to God emerges from having the privilege to be part of Christ's body, St. John advises, "If you don't know how to compose a thanksgiving song to the Lord, call together the poor, employ their tongues and bring them to your service. God will, for sure, listen to the song they sing on your behalf."¹⁴ This kind of caring love, which leads from one's isolation to communion, is the way to perfection since the essential element of the divine perfection is also love.

St. John Chrysostom has imagined a society where rich and poor or mine and yours no longer exist, where everyone is part of a great family and where everyone contributes to the salvation of someone else. In fact, St. John argues that the "failure to share one's goods with others is equal to theft, swindle and fraud."¹⁵ Charity, according to Saint John, is contagious and embraces all parts of Christ's body.¹⁶

Examples of Authentic Love

When it comes to illustrating his speeches on love, St. John Chrysostom is also very biblical as he uses all kinds of examples from both the Old and New Testament alike. One has to notice also that all these examples lead to Christ and culminate in His sacrificial love for humanity and salvation. At the same time, Saint John is well rooted in psychology. For example, Saint John often explains different aspects of love that reflect a psychological tone, such as the love of the people or

¹⁴ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, I, Translated and with an introduction by Robert Charles Hill, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Mass, 1998, 229.

¹⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*, Translated and introduced by Catharine Roth, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1984, 49.

¹⁶ Ierom. Prof. N. Mladin, *op. cit.*, 568-569.

in his application of those aspects to the loving inter-personal relations that ideally we would develop and cultivate.

For the Patriarch of Constantinople, God is a good example of authentic love as God creates the world and provides for it out of love. This love is then prolonged in the Son's sacrifice on the cross, where He gives His life for His friends, the highest proof of authentic love. Moreover, He gave His life for His enemies. St. John wonders how can such a love be equalled? In sacrificing His life for humanity, Christ gave to us what is His own, whereas we do not give to others even that which was entrusted to us temporarily.¹⁷ Consequently, on account of what Christ did for us, our love to Christ becomes a dutiful obligation. When he examines the Old Testament examples of love, St. John refers to Jacob's love for Rachel and the way he endured all kinds of hardship while in Laban's service, as well the love for his brother which conquered the fear he had on his way back home.

Now, St. John provides a theoretical interpretation, whereby he asserts that love indeed makes time shorter and diminishes the difficulties because Jacob experienced the seven years of service as if it was merely seven days. Also Jacob's love for Rachel adorned him with other virtues such as modesty. In return for his years of labor, Jacob asked Laban for nothing, except for what he had asked for at the beginning. The greatest dangers and the harshest deprivations are endured with joy by the one who loves because they aim to satisfy their own needs and desires.¹⁸ Out of a similar authentic love, Moses chose to stay with his people through all circumstances of life, no matter how difficult. In other examples from the Old Testament, Job did not stumble throughout all the days of his troubles, but remained stable in his faithfulness because of his profound love for God, while David, out of the same deep love wrote that his soul longs for God "as a deserted land, dry and without water."

¹⁷ St. John Chrysostom, *Homélie sur l'épître aux Romains*, VII, Bareille, tom. XV, 540.

¹⁸ *Idem*, *Homélie sur la Genèse*, IV, Bareille, tom. VIII, 160.

When it comes to the New Testament, St. John uses St. Peter's example, whose soul burned with love for Christ; also, he refers to St. Paul, who in his love for the Lord did not care about either glory or defamation. The Patriarch of Constantinople writes that Paul endured any barrier and hardship, mistreatment and captivity, as if from a foreign body in a body of diamond.¹⁹ Love not only excludes evil, but according to St. John, love does the good, transforms fear into courage, wildness into calm, petrification into tenderness, disdain into respect.

In order to make his listeners more aware of the value in love for Christ, Chrysostom, asks the rhetorical question: if out of love for the neighbor one is able to even go to death, so how much more will do one's love for Christ? This love gives force throughout all of life's circumstances; furthermore, this love makes one feel as if they live with the angels in God's kingdom, and as if they have already reached the happiness contemplated as if before God face to face.²⁰

Conclusions

St. John Chrysostom modeled an ideal example of authentic neighborly love. He insisted that there could be no love without it being materialized in good deeds. It is morally right to share one's goods and this sharing leads to a "philosophic life" in the ascetic sense of the term,²¹ which implies choosing the way of wisdom. In order to be consistent with this principle of love, St. John risked the peace of his daily life, his social status and ecclesial rank, and even his very life.²² In his position as Patriarch of Constantinople, Saint John suppressed all useless expenditures at the Patriarchate and whatever remained as surplus was distributed to the existing hospitals, or offered for the construction of new hospitals. St. John appointed pious priests as leaders of these new hospitals. Also, St. John offered help to the needy in many other ways.

¹⁹ *Idem, Homélies sur les Actes des Apôtres*, LII, Bareille, tom. XV, 399.

²⁰ *Idem, Premier discours sur la componction*, Bareille, tom. I, 235.

²¹ St. John Chrysostom, *The Cult of the Saints*, Select homilies and letters introduced, translated and annotated by Wendy Mayer (with Bronwen Neil), St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 2006, 22.

²² Theodor Damian, "Virtutea dragostei la Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur," in *Biserica Ortodoxa Romana*, An XXXI, nr. 5-6, 1979, Bucuresti, 685.

St. John's way of being created powerful and redoubtable enemies all the more since bishop Nectarius, his predecessor, used to live in brilliant luxury. In fact here is a list with some of the accusations raised against him when he was condemned before he died in exile in 407:

He sold the precious stones from the Church treasury; He sold the marble that Patriarch Nectarius destined to decorate the Church of the Resurrection; He sold the dowry, left by a rich person named Teckla; He used the Church's income to endow establishments unrecognized by anybody else.²³

St. John took all these risks in order to help the poor and the sick even though he himself came from a rich family. He was so dedicated to charity that he created charitable institutions in Antioch and Constantinople and contained lists with the numbers and names of the poor, which in Antioch totaled approximately 3000 (in particular widows and virgins)²⁴ and in Constantinople and its surrounding area, about 50,000. Even if many of these were not Christians, St. John still offered assistance, clothing and food.²⁵ On account of his actions, St. John proved to be a person who incorporated within his life the principle of loving the neighbor, a moral imperative that he so emphatically preached and practiced.

²³ Pr. Prof. Ioan G. Coman, "Personalitatea Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur," in *Studii Teologice*, seria a II-a, an IX, nr. 9-10, 1957, Bucuresti, 599.

²⁴ David Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. John Chrysostom*, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, South Canaan, PA, 1996, 39.

²⁵ Pr. Magistrand Marin M. Braniste, "Conceptia Sf. Ioan Gura de Aur despre prietenie si dragoste," in *Studii Teologice*, seria a II-a, an IX, nr. 9-10, 1957, Bucuresti, 669.

The Ordination of Deaconesses as a Reconciliatory and Liberating Praxis

Eftychios Phil Eftychiadis

“An example of this [critical thinking] would be the debate among the Orthodox churches concerning women’s ordination and the rediscovery of the existence of the order of deaconesses in the early history of the church.”¹

Emilio Castro

The main purpose of this article ² is to analyze the event of female diaconal ordination in the Eastern Early Church in response to very important needs. The hypothesis of this work is to retrieve and also analyze contextual elements in relation to needs in the praxes of the early church and its great Fathers, in ordaining women to the diaconate, and to identify significant theoethical values that are derived from those praxes in the early Tradition of the church.

Theo-ethical values are those that are derived from the praxes of the church manifesting its sacred Tradition. Moreover, these values are derived from theological truths that always guided the church in defining praxes in its ministry in the Tradition. The theological truths of the Trinity and the Eucharist, for instance, support the theoethical values of community and participation. The important theoethical values that are derived from the praxes of the Eastern Early Church and

¹ Castro, ‘Ethical Reflections among the Churches,’ (1995) p. 45.

² This article is developed from the author’s Ph.D. dissertation: “Building an Orthodox Contextual and Liberative Social Ethic: Based on the Liberative and Salvific Theoethical Values of Deaconesses’ Ordination.”, by Eftychios Phil Eftychiadis. See: <http://disexpress.umi.com/dxweb>. Comments to philef@usa.net.

its great Fathers in ordaining women to the diaconate are participatory, community strengthening, reconciling and liberating, along with the goal of salvation.

The analysis of the fact that deaconesses were accepted in the ministry of the Eastern Early Church through ordination is another important objective of this work. With regard to the contemporary posing of the question of women's ordination, the Orthodox Church is strongly influenced by guidance from its ecclesial Tradition. The participatory, community-strengthening, reconciliatory and liberative symbols that are manifested in the acceptance of deaconesses in the ministry of the Eastern Early Church take on specific significance and depth, when we recognize that this acceptance was through the fact of ordination. Through this analysis of Tradition, in the end, the nature of the Tradition of the church in accepting change could be further clarified through its own praxes regarding female diaconal ordination.

The chief findings of this article are: that the Eastern Early Church did ordain women to the first level of the major order of priesthood, the diaconate; that the initiation of deaconesses was an ordination to the diaconate is supported by major similarities between the ordination ceremony of the order of deaconesses and the ordination rite of male deacons, and by the analogous responsibilities of the deaconesses. This event of the ordination of deaconesses reveals important theoethical values and methodological praxes, which grew out of specific attention the early Church was paying to social needs. The above are reflected in the decision of the Eastern Early Church formally to accept women in this ordained ministry; the actual functions of deaconesses in the church and society; and the teaching and actions of the Fathers of the church of the era in question. These theoethical values, when analyzed in the social and cultural context of our own time, can stand as important bases upon which the ordination of contemporary Orthodox women to the diaconate could be accepted and the functions of modern-day deaconesses could be re-defined in order to make them both effective and relevant, and in full accord with the Eastern Tradition.

The Eastern Early Church's choices on the position of female diaconal ordination and the functions of the deaconesses have been developed, to be sure, within the scope of certain limitations, for we can note that androcentric and patriarchal attitudes prevailed in society and the church in the centuries in question. This article will concentrate mostly on the liberating aspects of the event of deaconesses' ordination, which took place in the midst of what was, for women at that time, overarchingly oppressive social and cultural conditions.

The main historical periods related to the life of the order of deaconesses were two in number: the first was from the end of the third century until the seventh, while the second covered the period of the seventh century to the eleventh. During the first period, we have the development and the maturity of the order of deaconesses. During the second, we have the gradual lapse of this order. Let us consider some of the pertinent facts.

The Nature of the Order of Deaconesses

The order of deaconesses was developed from the last part of the third to the seventh century C.E. From its origin, the members of this order lived mostly in groups, just as the widows did before them. However, instead of being mostly an office of prayer, deaconesses were required to be more active in the service (*diakonia*) of the church.³ Deaconesses were accepted through ordination as an order of women dedicated to the ministry of the church. They were the first women accepted as an official type of ministry in the Eastern Early Church.

The required age for deaconesses was at least forty years of age. Deaconesses were single women or widows who had been previously married once. Once selected, deaconesses had to promise to live a

³ The order of widows was an order of women who were very active in the life of the church from the third until the fifth century C.E. The order consisted of older widowed women, around sixty years of age, who devoted themselves to God with prayers and contemplation. Widows were not involved in ministry work. Only in very rare cases, they were involved in certain ministry activities; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 79-81, 112-113; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 146; Theodorou, *The "Ordination,"* 1, 5-11, 38; FitzGerald, "The Characteristics," 88; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 202-204; Thurston, *The Widows*, 104-105, 114-117.

life of celibacy.⁴ Celibacy for ancient deaconesses was an absolute requirement. There were no exceptions. All the original sources agree on the absolute nature of this requirement. This fact alone, however, does not mean that the order of present deaconesses would have to follow this requirement. Despite the above, the Eastern Early Church was accepting married deaconesses, but without emphasizing it. It is a matter of continuing uncertainty as to the extent of married deaconesses in antiquity (despite the generic rule for celibacy): one suspects that there were deaconesses holding that function while married, especially to priests and bishops in the rural regions before the 5th century. Such a case is represented in Nonna, who was the mother of Gorgonia and Gregory the Theologian, wife of the Bishop Gregory the Elder of Nazianzus.⁵

Moreover, deaconesses had to be well educated in the faith in order to teach women who were catechumens and women who had just been baptized. Deaconesses were required to show certain virtues; to be caring for others, eager to get involved in actions of philanthropy, patient and dedicated to a life of simplicity.⁶ These qualifications were inspired by the qualifications of women mentioned in 1 Tim 3:11. The age requirement of forty years for deaconesses, however, was much less than the one of sixty required for the initiation of the widows.⁷

It is obvious here that the objective for the order of deaconesses was to have younger women at the forefront who were healthy and strong and who could meet the demanding functions of their ministry. Moreover, other women younger than forty were also admitted to the order in exceptional cases. Special qualifications of character, virtue, education and proven dedication to the church were the main reasons for these exceptions.

⁴Theodorou, *The "Ordination,"* 73; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 246-248.

⁵Tsame, *Miterikon*, Vol. A, 226-281; Tsame, *Miterikon*, Vol. B, 168-175; Migne, PG 46. 960A-1000B; See also FitzGerald, *Women Deacons*, 28-58.

⁶Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 79-81, 112-113; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, , 134-137; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 146-147; *Didascalia* 16:3:12; *Apostolic Constitutions* 2:7:57-8, 3:2:15-6; FitzGerald, "The Characteristics," 80-81; Theodorou, *History*, 132-146.

⁷*Ibid.*

The official insistence on forty years of age for deaconesses also stemmed from the belief of the Fathers of the church that older women could be trusted more than younger ones to follow the requirement of celibacy in their life. Deaconesses were not allowed to remarry if they were widows before their ordination.⁸ The order of deaconesses spread to almost all the areas of the Eastern regions of the early church. There were only a few areas in these regions that did not have this order. These areas, (one of which was Egypt) retained the order of widows instead, with special ministerial responsibilities bestowed upon them.⁹

The notion presented by certain contemporary scholars that deaconesses influenced the lapse of the order of the widows¹⁰ may or may not be correct. The functions of deaconesses were certainly different from those of the widows. The widows' emphasis was on spirituality, while deaconesses were mostly involved in the official ministries of the church. That is why the order of widows continued to endure long after the introduction of the order of deaconesses in the church. Both of these orders coexisted for over a century. In my judgment, both of these orders, the widows and the deaconesses, with their overlapping responsibilities and their own different types of spirituality, were needed in the church. The church needed women's charismatic groups with certain ministry responsibilities, such as those the widows carried out. The church, however, also needed ordained women to the diaconate with full-time pastoral responsibilities, who would also have liturgical and sacramental ministries with a rich spiritual life, such as the deaconesses represented.

The Liturgical and Sacramental Functions of the Deaconesses

In the Eastern Early Church, the ministry of deaconesses included the three types of functions relevant to all the major orders of priesthood: sacramental responsibilities, teaching, and pastoral work. In their

⁸ Theodorou, *History*, 97-99, 122; Theodorou, *The "Ordination,"* 73; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 246-248.

⁹ Theodorou, *The "Ordination,"* 1, 5-11, 38; FitzGerald, "The Characteristics," 88; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 202-204; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 111.

¹⁰ Thurston, *The Widows*, 104-105, 114-117.

sacramental function, deaconesses had the responsibility of offering sacramental service to the ecclesial community under the supervision of the bishop, just as deacons did.¹¹ In comparison to deacons, however, deaconesses had a slightly more limited participation in the sacramental and liturgical service. That primarily was due to the androcentric context of the society of the Eastern Early Church, which was generally excluding of women. Female deacons did not offer the litanies in the public (male dominated) section of the Church nave. They did however take up station in the female sections in the great cathedral at Constantinople, and supervise prayers there. At the altar during the Eucharist the deaconesses stood in silent prayer, along with the presbyters and the male deacons surrounding the bishop. The deaconesses stood at the altar, along with all the other clergy, to receive the Holy Mysteries immediately after the consecration of the Holy Eucharist.¹² Afterwards, the deacons would administer Holy Communion to all the faithful in the church. The deaconesses were not allowed to do this during the Divine Liturgy. It is most likely, that they did administer the Eucharist to women who were sick at home. These visits by deaconesses were necessary, because it was not considered proper for the deacons to enter the quarters of women. Deaconesses offered the sick, housebound and pregnant physical and spiritual assistance.¹³ They also were known to handle the sacred vessels, a function reserved solely to the ordained.

¹¹ Theodorou, "The Ordination," 61-63; Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood?*, 425-427; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 60-65.

¹² Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 173; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 171-172; Theodorou, *History*, 136-142, 192-194.

¹³ Gryson, *The Ministry*, 61-63; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 60-64, 118, 159-166; Theodorou, "The Ordination," 25-28, 32-34, 49-51; Theodorou, *History*, 114-119, 141-145; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 246-248. Other documents and historians of the Eastern Early Church and the church of the middle ages added the information that deaconesses who lived in the monasteries could offer Presanctified Holy Communion to the nuns, other deaconesses and women visiting the monasteries, when a priest was not available to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. In addition, deaconesses who lived in these isolated monasteries could read pericopes of the Scripture and certain prayers in the church of the monastery, again when a priest was not available. These actions of deaconesses were defined in accord with the principle of substitution. The Fathers of the Church allowed certain exceptional activities to be performed in place of traditionally accepted practices under special circumstances. Theodorou, *History*, 136-137, 140-146; Blastares, *Syntagma*, Migne, PG 144; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 60-63, 171-173; Balsamon, *Scholia in Concilium Chalcedonense*, Migne, PG 134. 441; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 174.

This intimate and sacred participation of the deaconesses at the altar, along with other deacons, presbyters and the bishop, is a clear indication that they were indeed ordained to one of the three major orders of the priesthood.¹⁴ Deaconesses, therefore, were never presbyters but as consecrated deacons they were indeed priests: along with the other two orders of the ordained priesthood, the presbyters and bishops.

During the Divine Liturgy, deaconesses welcomed women at the entrance of the church. This was in accord with the Old Testament saying that women guarded the entrances of the Tabernacle.¹⁵ In my view, this connection of the work of deaconesses during the liturgy to women's responsibilities at the Tabernacle in Exodus 38:8 gave particular importance to the liturgical character of this greeting responsibility of deaconesses. In connection with this latter duty, deaconesses also exercised particular supervision over all women in the church who were attending the Divine Liturgy.¹⁶

Deaconesses thus had many analogous responsibilities to those of the deacons during the Divine Liturgy.¹⁷ But there were difference apart from those noted above. Deaconesses were not allowed to perform baptisms, for example, even in emergencies. The teaching of the church at that time stated that, if God allowed women to baptize, then Mary, the mother of Jesus, rather than John the Baptist, would have baptized Jesus.¹⁸ Scholars such as Gryson and Theodorou even so, state that deaconesses may well have served 'By economy' to perform emergency (or 'clinic') baptisms in specially straightened circumstances.¹⁹

¹⁴ Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 146, 173; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 171-172; Theodorou, *History* 136-142, 192-194; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 79-81.

¹⁵ Gryson, *The Ministry*, 60-62, 144-146.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.; Theodorou, *History*, 136-137, 140-146; Blastares, *Syntagma*, Migne, PG 144; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 60-63, 171-73; Balsamon, *Scholia*. Migne, PG 134. 441; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 174.

¹⁸ Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 246-248; *Didascalia* 16:3:12; *Apostolic Constitutions* 2:7:57-8, 3:2:15-6; FitzGerald, "The Characteristics," 80-81; Theodorou, *History*, 76-79, 86-90, 94-95, 105-108, 114, 116, 119, 119.

¹⁹ Ibid.; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 60-63; Theodorou, *History*, 142-144.

Deaconesses would always participate in the sacrament of the baptism of women under the coordination of the bishop who performed the baptism. Since it was not proper for the bishop to face the naked body of the woman, the presence of the deaconess was needed.²⁰ After the baptism, the deaconess would guide the newly baptized woman out of the baptisterion, the area where the baptism took place. The function of the deaconess was then to instruct this woman on her responsibilities as a new member of the church and on her spiritual life as a Christian.²¹

It was not until later medieval centuries, when the androcentric ethos of ancient society actually became strengthened, not relaxed, in comparison to Late Antiquity, that a common reason for prohibiting women from service on the altar first begins to gain currency (an argument when it first appeared which was rejected by the earliest Christian sources as ‘Judaizing’) and that was the elevation of the Levitical purity rules.²² The purity provisions from Leviticus, focused on blood issues, gained an increasing acceptance in the Medieval Eastern Church from the eighth century onward. These provisions have been quite unjustifiably dominating views about women and their position in the church and society even until the present time.²³

Excessively ‘monastic’ gynophobic aspects of the spirit of the eastern church of the middle ages may have contributed a great deal to the acceptance of these purity provisions, along with the overarching androcentric cultural conditions of that era. The provisions became a major factor that decisively influenced the lapse of the order of deaconesses. While the Levitical prescriptions were from ancient times accepted symbolically in Christian culture, at this time chiefly with

²⁰ Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 246-248; *Didascalia* 16:3:12; *Apostolic Constitutions* 2:7:57-8, 3:2:15-6; FitzGerald, “The Characteristics,” 80-81; Theodorou, *History*, 76-79, 86-90, 94-95, 105-108, 114, 116, 119, 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Theodorou, *The “Ordination,”* 67-70, 78-80, 92-94; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 34-38, 54-63, 79-81; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 172-178, 246-248.

²³ Lev 15: 19-30; Theodorou, *The “Ordination,”* 51-69, 78-94; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 61-63, 79-81; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 172-178; FitzGerald, *Women Deacons*, 65-77.

regard to the female diaconate, they began to be held up literally.²⁴ Even though the androcentric and patriarchal spirit of those centuries contributed to this literal appropriation, nevertheless, despite all of those negative factors, the Eastern Early Church did define important liturgical and sacramental duties for the deaconesses, along with very rich pastoral responsibilities.

The Fathers of the church, in general, did not question these ecclesiological notions about Christian women. There were, however, exceptions. Among those fathers who questioned this unevenness of approach in relation to female roles and offices were St. Gregory the Theologian and St. John Chrysostom. Chrysostom emphasized the importance of the purity of a person's heart rather than such purity provisions.²⁵ Chrysostom's position, along with similar positions in the Didascalia, and by Pope Gregory the Great,²⁶ can be important sources for setting aside these economically limiting canons about blood purity, and for supporting women's greater liturgical participation in the present church,

The Teaching Function of the Deaconesses

Deaconesses were well educated in matters related to the teaching of the church,²⁷ even though they were expected to teach women only. During the early centuries, the position of the church on this issue of the prohibition of women's preaching during liturgy and teaching men was that if Jesus wanted women to teach men, he would have officially selected them to be part of his group of Apostles.²⁸ This prohibition was also based on the church's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34—"Women should be silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says."

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 79-81, 112-113; Theodorou, *The "Ordination,"* 49-50; FitzGerald, *Women deacons*, 66-75.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 79-81, 112-113; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 134-137; Theodorou, *The "Ordination,"* 49-50; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 116-118, 146.

²⁸ Ibid.

The Fathers of the church interpreted this verse to mean that women should not preach during the liturgy and men should have authority over women.²⁹ All those positions were strongly influenced by the androcentric context of those centuries. Even so, deaconesses could teach women catechumens and who had to prepare for their baptism; deaconesses could also continue to educate these women after their baptism. They could also teach the basics of the faith to groups of children and youth.³⁰ Deaconesses were not allowed to read pericopes from the Scripture to the congregation during the Divine Liturgy.³¹ But they were allowed to read pericopes in women's monasteries during prayer meetings in the church when a priest was not available.³² the home ministry of deaconesses also offered many opportunities for theological catechesis to others,³³ so too did the regular movement of women to important monasteries where they could find female Elders. Historically, certain deaconesses became very influential and famous for their teaching and spiritual counseling abilities that attracted not only important women visitors from all the areas of the empire, but also officials of the state and other powerful men. We know of such leading deaconesses as, for instance, Domnica, Melania, Macrina, Xenia and Irene Chrysovalantou.³⁴ This symbolic role of the female teacher offered among Christians a very powerful witness to the dignity of all believers in Christ.

An indication of this important liberating influence of deaconesses on other women was the increase of the number of women living and studying in monasteries during these early centuries. These women studied the word of God and many other areas of learning that were

²⁹ 1 Cor 14:34; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 79-81, 112-113; Theodorou, *The "Ordination,"* 49-50; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 116-118, 146.

³⁰ Theodorou, *History*, 133-137.

³¹ Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 79-81, 112-113; Theodorou, *The "Ordination,"* 49-50; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 116-118, 146.

³² Theodorou, *History*, 133-135, 142-146.

³³ Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 146, 246-248; Theodorou, *History*, 133-140; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 79-81.

³⁴ Tsame, *Miterikon*, Vol. A, 146-153, 221-280; Tsame, *Miterikon*, Vol. B, 202-238; FitzGerald, *Women Deacons*, 28-58.

available to them in those centuries.³⁵ After the completion of their studies, they could, in turn, become new vehicles for the transmission to other women of the participatory and liberating values they had received from the teaching of the deaconesses.

Pastoral Functions of the Deaconesses

Deaconesses were required to participate extensively in pastoral work. When deaconesses visited sick women in their houses, for example, they not only prayed for the women's recovery, as the Widows did, but also were expected to offer these women physical assistance. They bathed and helped them in any way that might have contributed to their recovery. In addition, as representatives of the bishop and the liturgical and Eucharistic community, deaconesses showed great devotion in their extensive participation in and coordination of multiple efforts for helping needy persons. Deaconesses cared for the poor, the sick in hospitals, people returning from captivity, refugees in prison camps, widows and orphans who needed help, people in jail, and people who needed food.³⁶ The work of the deaconesses in all of these areas of charity was invaluable to the church at large, and to the needs of the society of the day. Deaconesses, who mostly lived and worked in monasteries, developed large-scale philanthropic works and managed large benevolent institutions, which had considerable influence on society and its needs. Common people and powerful officials, even from faraway places, admired the work of these deaconesses, during those early centuries of the church and throughout history.³⁷ Deaconesses were also instrumental in building very important social institutions for the needs of individuals and the church in the churches acting in society and in the monasteries. Certain of these benevolent social institutions were built for the first time in history. From all of this we can clearly see that even if the ministerial functions of the deaconesses were limited

³⁵ Liveris, "Orthodox Women as Writers," 132-133.

³⁶ Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 146, 246-248; Theodorou, *History*, 133-134; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 79-81; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 126, 134-137; Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy*, 84-87.

³⁷ Ibid.; Tsame, *Miterikon*, Vol. A, 146-153, 221-280; Tsame, *Miterikon*, Vol. B, 202-238; See also FitzGerald, *Women Deacons*, 28-58.

slightly in comparison to their male counterparts, they made of their ordained ministerial work a witness that was favorably comparable to their male colleagues in every respect. Within the whole experience of the Divine Liturgy, of course, we need to remember that deacons and deaconesses received the offerings of the congregation and carried them to the bishop, in order that the offerings would be sanctified during the consecration of the Holy Eucharist. In this way, by this whole process, both deacons and deaconesses were important iconic representations of the whole congregation to the bishop. The distinct point here is that not only an ordained male member of the diaconate but also an ordained female member of this order represented the congregation, consisting of both men and women, during this important liturgical event.

Notes on the Ordination Rite of Deaconesses

The oldest document describing the ordination ceremony for deaconesses is the Apostolic Constitutions which dates from the last part of the fourth century.³⁸ The ceremony here is a simple one. It involves the laying-on of hands [*cheirotomia*] by the bishop, the calling upon the Grace of God, and one main short prayer. After the fourth century, this ordination rite was gradually enriched to include in its final form, in addition to a number of short prayers, the laying-on of hands, the calling upon the Grace of God, and two main long prayers. The above ceremony was fundamentally similar to that of the deacon.

There are certain visual characteristics of the deaconesses' ordination ceremony that also strongly suggest that this rite has to be seen as paralleled theological to the ordination ritual to order of the deacons. These basic elements, included in the ordination rites of all three major orders of priesthood (bishops, presbyters, deacons), were the laying-on of hands by the bishop within the altar during the Eucharistic mystery itself, the calling upon the Grace of God to empower the candidate to fulfill the functions of the order, and the two main prayers. Other bishops, presbyters, deacons and deaconesses participated in this ceremony, as they did in the ordination of the other

³⁸Theodorou, *The "Ordination,"* 1-2, 32-33; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 61-63; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 60-63, 152-54, 160-166.

major orders.³⁹ There is no serious evidence to underpin the (late) argument that a distinction needs to be drawn between ordination (*Cheirotonia*) of men, and blessing (*Cheirothesia*) of women deacons. All the evidence suggests, to the contrary, that female deacons were not appointed to a minor order, but ordained to the major order.

Beside the fundamental similarities of the male and female ritual, there were also certain differences. A deaconess, in her ordination rite, responded through certain symbolic actions differently from the way a deacon responded during his ordination. These actions of the deaconess were mainly because the deaconess was a woman and in Byzantine society she was accustomed to express herself differently (the differences relate to public and private ‘respectability’ issues prevalent in that society. None of these differences, however, were part of the essential visual elements of ordination common to the rites of all the major orders of priesthood.⁴⁰ The different actions of the deaconess in her ordination ceremony were as follows: After receiving the Holy Mysteries, she did not lay her forehead on the altar as the deacon did. This might have been symbolic of the idea that the deaconess could not fully serve during the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist (no cutting up of the Lamb) . We note, however, that the bishop gave the stole to the deaconess, as the essential symbol of the order, exactly as he did to the male deacons. More specifically, the stole was tied crosswise for both the deaconess and the deacon.⁴¹ This stole was also an important symbol indicating same status, a status of equality among these two expressions of the diaconate. It indicates the very essence of equality in order, just as that vestment (*Epitrachelion*) does among the presbyters. When the deacon was sent out to lead the litanies and public prayers, he had one part of the stole hanging to his right. This was not the case

³⁹ Gryson, *The Ministry*, 61-63; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 60-63, 152-54, 160-166; Theodorou, *The “Ordination,”* 25-28, 32-34, 49-52; FitzGerald, “The Characteristics,” 75-77, 85-87, 90-93.

⁴⁰ Theodorou, *The “Ordination,”* 78-80, 92-94; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 54-56, 61-63, 79-81; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 172-174, 246-248.

⁴¹ *Apostolic Constitutions* 2:4:26, 8:3:20, 8:3:28; Theodorou, *The “Ordination,”* 67-70; FitzGerald, “The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the deaconesses,” 82-84; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 34-38; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 146-150, 244-247.

with the deaconess who did not lead public elements in the liturgy.⁴² This difference in the functions of deaconesses of not leading public elements can be interpreted in ways that may or may not indicate inferiority for deaconesses. As an example, sometimes ‘junior’ priests were sent out to distribute Holy Communion, while no argument was raised because of this about their ‘inferior status’ among the rank of presbyters. After the Eucharist, although the bishop would offer the Holy Mysteries to the deaconess and give her the Holy Chalice, the deaconess would place this Chalice on the altar. She would not use it to offer Holy Communion to the attending Christians, as the deacon did.⁴³ Theodorou offers another interpretation of the event concerning the Chalice. He hypothesizes that, in earlier times, the bishop also offered the deaconess the Chalice, but she responded differently from the way she did in the time of the Eastern Early Church. In these earlier times, she proceeded to offer Holy Communion to the clergy. The offering of the Chalice to the deaconess in the Eastern Early Church, therefore, might have been a truncated event of this previous practice: which was rejected by the presbyterate in due course.⁴⁴

Both on ethical terms and theological terms the ministry of the Orthodox deaconess shows a radiant sense of empowerment, even if in social terms the androcentric culture of antiquity did not rise to the sense of female equality of status. Rich participatory, community-strengthening, reconciliatory and liberative values were reflected in the praxis of the Eastern Early Church of ordaining deaconesses and from those praxes, accomplishments, that the deaconesses’ worked out among themselves.⁴⁵ Differences in Female Diaconal Ordination from the Initiation Ceremony of the Minor Orders.

⁴²Theodorou, *The “Ordination,”* 25-34, 49-71; Gryson, *The Ministry*, 34-38, 60-65; Ide, *Women as Priests*, 45-52; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 146-150, 244-247.

⁴³Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 147-164.

⁴⁴Theodorou, *The “Ordination,”* 67-70, 78-80, 92-94; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 64-67, 172-174, 246-248, Gryson, *The Ministry*, 34-38, 54-56, 61-63, 79-81.

⁴⁵Theodorou, *History*, 109-115; Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 148-150; FitzGerald, *Women Deacons*, 78-87.

Another indication that deaconesses' ordination was an indeed ordination rite, and not a simple blessing to a minor order, is supported by the many liturgical and other essential differences that existed between the deaconesses' ordination rite and the initiation ceremony of the minor orders in the early church. The Eastern Early Church also developed ministries of non-ordained persons. The initiation ceremony of the non-ordained ministries took place at the entrance of the church, never in the altar before the Holy Table, where the deaconesses' ordination took place. Moreover, the minor ceremonies took place after the Divine Liturgy, never in its course. The minor orders were conferred by a simple laying-on of hands by the bishop [*cheirothesia*], and only one simple prayer, through which the bishop asked the blessing of God's Charis on the candidate's efforts to perform the work assigned to this candidate by the church.

Other bishops, presbyters, deacons and deaconesses were not officially invited to attend the initiation ceremony of these minor orders. This initiation ceremony of the minor orders, therefore, was not an ordination to priesthood, but a simple appointment [*cheirothesia—benedictio*] to a specific ministerial function.⁴⁶

Our conclusion is strongly this: the text of the Byzantine rite of the ordination of deaconesses itself argues most strongly that women cannot be denied ordination to the major order of diaconate, simply on the grounds that they are women. Moreover, it strongly suggests that, in our own time and condition, deaconesses can and should be fully accepted in the ministerial work of their order with all the essential functions of the diaconate: including eucharistic and catechetical and charitable service in the name of the Church.⁴⁷ To state this simply, and strongly, is of enormous importance in the Orthodox Church today because the unarguable facts of the ancient church (denied and slighted by many in more recent times) offer a theological and theoethical basis for the

⁴⁶ *Didascalia* 9:2:28; *Apostolic Constitutions* 2:4:25, 3:2:15-6; FitzGerald, "The Characteristics," 80-81; Theodorou, *History*, 94-95, 105-117.

⁴⁷ Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 147-164; Theodorou, *History*, 104-110; FitzGerald, *Women Deacons*, 82-83, 87.

support of the restoration of a full sense of deaconesses' ordination. Even patriarchal prejudicial attitudes in the church and society of the ancient centuries did not stop the Eastern Early Church from accepting women to the order of deaconesses through ordination. We who are in a position to know better in relation to the capacities and dignities of women, must not continue the androcentric limitations. We ought to learn from the sacred ritual itself which ways most clearly: "Oh Lord, you who do not reject women who are consecrated to you in order to serve in your holy places . . . [grant] the Grace of your Holy Spirit, just as you gave the gift of your diaconate to Phoebe" ⁴⁸

The early Fathers of the church seriously considered need and context in defining deaconesses' functions in realistic and practical terms. Need and context, determined what the early deaconesses should, and could do. Similarly practical considerations, under the general principles of diaconal service, can no less determine how a restored female diaconate might work in the Orthodox Church today. The Fathers of the church did not elaborate on the exact use of the contextual elements in defining their praxes. In those social and cultural conditions, these contextual and theoethical approaches in defining praxes were part of the praxes of the Eastern Early Church and its Fathers in their ministries, rather than of a theoretical reflection on those approaches. The Father and the church did not formulate a methodological process as the contemporary world contextual theologies and their social ethics, which are part of the ecumenical movement, have done, while also using liberating and other directives that are derived from their Tradition and the Scripture. Today, the ministry of the deaconess should be defined both realistically and holistically on the basis of our new prevailing conditions (and the condition of modern womanhood) specifically to really confront needs, that is to care for the pressing and real material and spiritual needs of others. In its attitude to women deacons in spite of many negative cultural conditions and attitudes of the andro-centric ancient society the Early Eastern Church was clearly guided by participatory criteria, driven by its evangelical liberative and prophetic values: values that

⁴⁸ Ibid.

constituted its sacred Tradition. It is the same principles that will guide us today in reassessing the role of female deacons.

In the later medieval period when the Byzantine cities and their great cathedrals were in decline, and a more repressive spirit applied throughout Greek and Slavic societies in relation to women's public appearances, the hierarchs unfortunately allowed the whole order of deaconesses gradually to fall into disuse. The hierarchs made this lamentable choice by ignoring the multiple needs of the women and young girls in church and society, the needs of the church as a healthy diverse institution, and of society in general (the Church's social outreach). Influenced by many factors that narrowed social understanding in this period, the hierarchs, gradually made deaconesses of churches still acting in society turn away from involvement and live and serve only in churches of isolated monasteries. As the next step, the hierarchs ceased ordaining active city deaconesses and, finally, also ceased ordaining any deaconesses even in the churches of the female monasteries. In this way, by the end of the eleventh century, the whole order of deaconesses fell into disuse.⁴⁹

This decision of the lapse was not only against the needs of the faithful, the church and society, and against the church's mission to respond to needs, but frankly, was also unjust to the deaconesses themselves, an unwarranted intrusion into the sacred tradition regarding the full diversity of the ordained priesthood. The deaconesses were excluded only, so it seems to me, because of their gender. But that was precisely what the text of the Byzantine ordination ritual for women deacons sets out to warn us about. It emphasized that women should not be excluded from this order of deaconesses because of their gender. It gives us God's own view of the matter: "Oh Lord, you do not reject women who are consecrated to you in order to serve in your holy places . . . [grant] the Grace of your Holy Spirit, just as you gave the gift of your diaconate to Phoebe" ⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 147-164; Theodorou, *History*, 104-110; FitzGerald, *Women Deacons*, 82-83, 87.

Even so, we must remember that the order of deaconesses was never canonically abolished in the Orthodox Church. No ecumenical synod has ever decided to set this order aside.⁵¹ This means that the hierarchies of the regional churches and even individual bishops of the church, thereafter, could ordain women to the diaconate, in response to very important needs in the ministry of the church and in society. It is an urgent question for the Church at large to discuss, and for the hierarchy to take a lead in arranging: above all for women Orthodox to have their voice heard. It is not only a highly practical matter of ministry and mission. It is an important symbol concerning the proper role of women in the ministry of the Church of Christ.

For the Church of our own day, there is another pressing reason to consider the restoration of the female diaconate. This is the witness that the Sacred Tradition itself gives to the presence of ordained women in the major orders. If Sacred Tradition elevated this in the early centuries, are we not in danger of departing from Tradition, by setting aside the patristic witness in the light of what looks like simple androcentric prejudice of the later medieval period? That action of the early Tradition, in the Eastern Early Church, in ordaining women to the diaconate can thus be a very influential factor in the acceptance of this ordination of women to the diaconate in the ministry of our contemporary church seeking to be faithful to the ancient Tradition itself. The Orthodox Church today, particularly in a new era of the widespread recognition of female gifts and charisms, has a renewed opportunity and responsibility to use these more sensitive contextual approaches and theoethical values of Tradition in its life and ministry. There can be no question other than that the ancient Orthodox Tradition was once accepting of the liberative and energetic ministry of ordained women; to restore the office in our own time would be a major reaffirmation of authentic Orthodox Christian values: important both symbolically, as well as ethically and practically.

⁵¹ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 292-294; Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women*, 174-178, 194-195; FitzGerald, *Women Deacons*, 146-147.

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