

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, overwhelmingly 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.

⁷Ibid.

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

³⁸ Theodorou, *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.

⁴² Theodorou, *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.

⁴³ Martimort, *Deaconesses*, 147-164.

⁴⁴ Theodorou, *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.

⁴⁵ Theodorou, *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.

Books for Further Study

- Behr-Sigel, Elisabeth. "The Meaning of Ministry." In *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the "Signs of the Times,"* ed. Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, 93-97. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.
- Behr-Sigel, Elisabeth. *The Ministry of Women in the Church.* Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publ., 1991.
- Behr-Sigel, Elisabeth and Kallistos Ware. *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church.* Geneva WCC Publ., 2000.
- Breck, John. *Scripture in Tradition.* Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001.
- Bria, Ion. *The Liturgy after the Liturgy.* Geneva: WCC Publ., 1996.
- Bria, Ion. "The Liturgy after the Liturgy." In *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism,* ed. Gennadios Limouris, 216-220. Geneva: WCC Publ., 1994.
- Castro, Emilio. "Ethical Reflections among the Churches: A Free Church Perspective." In *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Costly Commitment,* ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra, 43-52. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995.
- Chryssavgis, John. *Beyond the Shattered Image.* Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publ., 1999.
- Clapsis, Emmanuel. "Ecclesiology and Ethics." In *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Costly Commitment,* ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra, 28-42. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995.
- Clapsis, Emmanuel. *Orthodoxy in Conversation.* Geneva: WCC Publ., 2000.
- Constantelos, Demetrios J. *Byzantine Philosophy and Social Welfare.* 2nd revised ed., New Rochelle, NY: A. D. Caratzas, 1991.
- Eftychiadis, Eftychios Phil. "Building an Orthodox Contextual and Liberative Social Ethic: Based on the Liberative and Salvific Theological Values of Deaconesses' Ordination." Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2004.
- FitzGerald, Kyriaki Karidoyanes. "The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconesses." In *Women and the Priesthood,* ed. Thomas Hopko, 75-93. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983.

- FitzGerald, Kyriaki Karidoyanes. "The Nature and Characteristics of the Order of the Deaconess." In *Women and the Priesthood*, ed. Thomas Hopko, 93-138. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999.
- FitzGerald, Kyriaki Karidoyanes. *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998.
- FitzGerald, Kyriaki Karidoyanes, ed. *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the "Signs of the Times."* Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.
- Gryson, Roger. *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976.
- Gryson, Roger. *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics*. Pt. 1. *Patristic Ethics*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.
- Gryson, Roger. *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics*. Pt. 2. *Church Life Ethics*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.
- Gryson, Roger. *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics*. Pt. 3. *Orthodox Social Ethics*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.
- Guroian, Vigen. *Ethics After Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethic*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994.
- Guroian, Vigen. *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics*. Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1987.
- Harakas, Stanley S. *Living the Faith: The Praxis of Eastern Orthodox Ethics*. Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1992.
- Harakas, Stanley S. *Toward a Transfigured Life: The Theoria of Eastern Orthodox Ethics*. Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1983.
- Harakas, Stanley S. *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics*. Pt. 1. *Patristic Ethics*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.
- Harakas, Stanley S. *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics*. Pt. 2. *Church Life Ethics*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.
- Harakas, Stanley S. *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian*

- Ethics. Pt. 3. Orthodox Social Ethics. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.
- Hopko, Thomas. "The Debate Continues—1998." Chap. in *Women and the Priesthood*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999.
- Hopko, Thomas. *Women and the Priesthood*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999.
- Ide, Arthur Frederick. *Woman as Priest, Bishop and Laity in the Early Catholic Church to 440 A.D.* Mesquite, TX: Ide House, 1984.
- Kallistos of Diokleia, Bishop. "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ." In *Women and the Priesthood*, ed. Thomas Hopko, 5-54. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999.
- Limouris, Gennadios. "Editor's Introduction." In *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*, ed., Gennadios Limouris, 9-16. Katerini: Tertios Publ., 1992.
- Limouris, Gennadios. "Orthodox Reactions to Non-Orthodox Positions in Support of the Ordination of Women." In *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*, ed., Gennadios Limouris, 265-285. Katerini: Tertios Publ., 1992.
- Limouris, Gennadios. *Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism*. Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications, 1994.
- Limouris, Gennadios. *The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women: InterOrthodox Symposium*, Rhodes, Greece, 1988.
- Liveris, Leonie B. "Orthodox Women as Writers." In *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the "Signs of the Times,"* ed. Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, 126-134. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.
- Manfred Hauke, David. *Women in the Priesthood?* San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- McGuckin, John A. *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub. Ltd., 2008
- Patsavos, Lewis. "The Canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church." In

- A Companion to the Greek Orthodox Church, ed. Fotios K. Litsas, 137-147. New York: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, 1984.
- Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. "Word, Spirit, and Power: Women in Early Christian Communities." In *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, 29-70. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1979.
- Theodorou, Evangelou D. *History and Theory of the Ecclesial Social Service* [In Greek]. Athens: Univ. of Athens Press, 1985.
- Theodorou, Evangelou D. The "Cherotonia" or "Cherotheresia" of Deaconesses [The "Ordination" or the "Simple Gesture of Laying-on of Hands" of Deaconesses]. [In Greek]. Athens: Univ. of Athens Press, 1954.
- Thurston, Bonnie Bowman. *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Torjesen, Karen Jo. *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.