

The Deaconess: Meeting Her in the 21st Century

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Let me begin with the second prayer of ordination of the female deacon in the Byzantine rite.

Master and Lord, You do not reject women who offer themselves, and by divine counsel, to minister as is fitting to your holy houses, but you accept them in the order of ministers. Give the grace of your Holy Spirit to this servant of Yours also, who wishes to offer herself to you, and to accomplish the grace of the diaconate, as You gave the grace of Your diaconate to Phoebe, whom you called to the work of the ministry. Grant her, O God, to persevere without condemnation in Your holy churches, to give careful attention to her way of life, to chastity in particular, and show her to be Your perfect servant, that when she stands before the judgment of Christ, she may also receive the fitting reward of her way of life.¹

The female diaconate is a part of our history. For over one thousand years, the Orthodox Church ordained women to serve as deaconesses. As the Orthodox theologian and author of *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, Dr. Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, writes,

According to Byzantine liturgical texts, the ordination of the woman deacon occurred as any other ordination to major orders. It took place during the celebration of the Eucharist and at the same point in the service that the male deacon was ordained. She was ordained at the altar by the bishop, and later in the service, received Holy Communion at the altar with the other clergy. Depending upon the need, location and situation in history, the deaconess ministered primarily to the women in the community in much the same way that the male deacon ministered to men....

[The order] was gradually de-emphasized sometime after the twelfth century. It should be noted, however, that there does not exist any canon or Church regulation that opposes or suppresses the order....²

¹ www.anastasis.org.uk/woman_deacon.htm. Original in the *Barberini Codex gr. 336*. Translated by Archimandrite Ephrem. Accessed 8/12/2004.

² FitzGerald, Kyriaki Karidoyanes, "Orthodox Women and Pastoral Praxis: Observations and Concerns for the Church in America," in *Orthodox Perspectives on Pastoral Praxis*, (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1988). Henceforth: FitzGerald, *Orthodox Perspectives on Pastoral Praxis*.

For over one hundred years, various voices within the Church have called for the restoration of the female diaconate. But what is the diaconate? What is its function in the life of the Church? How has it evolved over time? What did the female deacon do? We know some of the roles of the historical deaconess. Lay women today are filling many of these functions. Is it still necessary to have an *ordained* ministry? Is a permanent diaconate, especially a female diaconate, needed in the Church today? What could this ministry look like in the 21st century?

After a brief history of the diaconate, I will focus on the evolution of the diaconate in more modern times and within various traditions to show how a revitalized, permanent diaconate—including an ordained female diaconate—can benefit the Church as a whole.³ I will explore the questions above and share the experiences of a number of women already working in “diaconal” roles—pastoral assistants, ecclesiarchs, and chaplains.

The Diaconate

In Orthodox ecclesiology, the Church is known as the “Body of Christ.” We believe that because of Christ’s resurrection, the Kingdom of God is already accessible to us through Christ. The Church is called to proclaim and prefigure this reign of God. We also understand the Church to be the “Temple of the Holy Spirit” as well as (as Fr. Emmanuel Clapsis, Dean and Professor of Dogmatics at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology says) “a therapeutic, healing community.” Each of us is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). All persons are endowed with these gifts of the Holy Spirit in ways that uniquely express the fullness of their own humanity as well as contribute to the fullness of the entire community of believers.

There is only one ministry in the Church—Christ’s ministry. We are all “ordained” into the ministry of Christ—the Royal Priesthood—at our baptism. But in order to fulfill its mission in the world, the Church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible to “its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ, and thereby provide, within the multiplicity of gifts, a

³ For a comprehensive examination of the female diaconate including the Apostolic Constitutions rite and the Byzantine rite see FitzGerald, Kryiaki Karidoyanes, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998). This book also looks at reasons for the decline of the order and highlights the movement towards its restoration. Henceforth: FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*.

focus of its unity.”⁴ During the second and third centuries, within the Royal Priesthood, a three-fold pattern of bishop, presbyter, and deacon became established as the pattern of formal ordained ministry within the Church. In the succeeding centuries, the ministry of the bishop, presbyter, and deacon underwent considerable changes in its “practical exercise.” Although the functions of these offices still vary today, they can be summarized as follows:

Bishops preach the Word, preside at the sacraments, and administer discipline in such a way as to be representative pastoral ministers of oversight, continuity, and unity in the Church....
Presbyters serve as pastoral ministers of Word and sacraments in a local Eucharistic community.... [and]
Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ’s name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church’s life. They exercise the responsibility in the worship congregation: for example, by reading the scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer. They help in the teaching of the congregation. They exercise a ministry of love within the community. They fulfill certain administrative tasks and may be elected to responsibilities for governance.⁵

The Diaconate in History

A. Biblical Times

The Church’s ministry, modeled after Christ’s example, grew out of the needs of the community. In the early Church, the Greeks complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Apostles realized that they could not attend to both the word of God and serve tables so according to the account in Acts (Acts 6:1-6) they sought out “seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task.”⁶ As Mary Truesdell, a Deaconess in the Episcopal Church, states in her article, *The Office of the Deaconess*, “This marked the beginning of a differentiated ministry, and has always been taken by the Church as the embryonic beginning of the office of the deacon.”⁷

⁴ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper, No. 11 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), p. 21. Henceforth: *BEM*.

⁵ *BEM*, p. 26-7.

⁶ Acts 6:3, NRSV.

⁷ Truesdell, Mary P., *The Office of the Deaconess*. Accessed via www.philosophy-religion.org/diaconate/chapter_7.htm on 8/ 12/2004. Ms. Truesdell was ordered a Deaconess in the Episcopal Church in 1919. This article appeared as part of an anthology on the Diaconate in 1967. Henceforth: Truesdell, *The Office of the Deaconess*.

The first place where we find the word “deacon” used as a title is in Romans. St. Paul writing to the Romans says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon (*diakonon*) of the church at Cenchreae...”⁸ Although some have argued that this passage only refers to Phoebe as a “helper,” Dr. FitzGerald in her article, “The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess,” cites the works of Origen and Chrysostom to show that patristic tradition upholds Phoebe’s position as a deaconess.⁹ (One may recall that Phoebe is referenced in the second ordination prayer that we read at the beginning of the talk as well.)

B. Early Church

We have evidence of the existence of deaconesses and deacons in the early Church as well. In a secular text, one of the letters from Pliny, Governor of Bithynia, to Trajan (112AD), he asks for guidance on how to handle the Christian sect, writing that he had to place “two women called ‘deaconesses’ under torture.”¹⁰ In addition, we have evidence of the existence of the male and female deacon and a general understanding of the functions of each from early church documents. We know that each was answerable to the bishop. While the male deacons ministered to men, the female deacons ministered to women. Moreover, each also had a liturgical role, although there is disagreement as to their precise functions. This parallelism can be seen in the *Apostolic Constitutions* passage that outlines the character of the deacon (The *Apostolic Constitutions* is a 4th-5th century document of Syriac origin that outlines early Church ethics and liturgics),

Let the deacons be in all things unspotted, as the bishop himself is to be, only more active; ...that they may minister to the infirm.... And let the deaconess be diligent in taking care of the women; but both of them ready to carry messages, to travel about, to minister, and to serve...¹¹

This reflects an earlier understanding of the functions of the office found in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. (The *Didascalia Apostolorum* is a later 3rd century-early 4th century

⁸ Romans 16:1, NRSV.

⁹ FitzGerald, Dr. Kyriaki Karidoyanes, “The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess” in *Women and the The Priesthood*, Fr. Thomas Hopko, ed. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1983), p. 77-78. Henceforth: FitzGerald, “The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess.”

¹⁰ *Letters of Pliny and Trajan*. Accessed via www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pliny-trajan1.html on 9/05/2004.

¹¹ *Apostolic Constitutions*, Chapter III, no. 19.

document outlining pastoral and Church practice. The eight books of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* were subsequently incorporated into the Apostolic Constitutions with some minor variation.) The *Didascalia* contains sections on the character of the deaconess, and her ministry of assisting in the baptism of women and instruction of women converts. In addition, it contains sections for both the deacon and deaconess advising each to care for the people and to work closely with the Bishop.¹²

C. Byzantine Period

During the Byzantine period, the diaconal office in the east, especially that of women, flourished. This can be seen by the number of women deacon saints on the liturgical calendar, including Sts. Macrina, the sister of Sts. Gregory and Basil (July 19), Nonna, the wife of St. Gregory of Nazianzus (August 5), Olympias, close friend and confidant of John Chrysostom (July 25), Xenia “the merciful” (Jan 24-5th c.), and Irene of Chrysovalantou (July 28-late 9th/early 10th c.)¹³ In addition, we have descriptions of the makeup of the clergy serving during the Liturgy at Hagia Sophia which included “forty deaconesses.”¹⁴

During this time, the male diaconate in the East also grew in prominence. They held high positions in church governance, including participating in the Ecumenical councils (e.g. Athanasius of Alexandria, deacon and secretary for the bishop was at the Council of Nicaea in 325). They also served as emissaries and ambassadors of the episcopal seat in diplomatic matters. Moreover, they were administrators of church-run homes for the poor and widows, orphanages, and hospitals.¹⁵

In general, the diaconate in the West seems to have disappeared after the 5th century. Although I could find no stated reason for its decline, perhaps the ministry of the various monastic orders supplanted that of the deacon. The female diaconate, in particular, had not been as widely accepted in the West as in the East. Unlike the East where no canons have ever suppressed the order, local councils in the West actually prohibited the order. The First Council

¹² *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Chapter 16.

¹³ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, pp. 28-56 referencing the *Meterikon*.

¹⁴ Gryson, Roger, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. Jean Laporte and Mary Louise Hall, trans., (NY: Liturgical Press, 1980), p. 71 as referenced in Gvosdov, Matushka Ellen, *The Female Diaconate: An Historical Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing, 1991). Henceforth Gvosdov, *The Female Diaconate*.

¹⁵ Touloumes, Deacon Photios, *The Diaconate in the Orthodox Church*. Accessed via hocna.org/orthodox-worship/Diaconate.htm on 9/6/2004. Henceforth: Touloumes, *The Diaconate*.

of Orange (441 AD) stated that “deaconesses are absolutely not to be ordained...” and in 533 AD, the Council of Orleans virtually suppressed the order.¹⁶ David Alexander in his article on the ordination of women to the diaconate, *A Rose by Any other Name*, notes that “Curiously, at least one vestige of the office has survived in the West until modern times. In the Carthusian order of nuns, the traditional ceremony of profession includes the bestowal of the stole and maniple by the bishop.”¹⁷

D. Decline of the Order in the East

The order of the female diaconate began to decline sometime after the twelfth century. By this time, there were fewer adult baptisms so female deacons were no longer needed at initiation. In addition, in late Byzantium the rise of influence of Levitical rules, especially those regarding women, led to the perception that the shedding of blood made a woman “unclean” and therefore, unable to enter the sanctuary or participate in the liturgical life of the Church. It should be noted that this is in direct contradiction to the understanding of ‘uncleanness’ found in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*. Chapter 26 of the *Didascalia* admonishes Christians to abandon the rabbinical rules of ‘uncleanness.’

[Are they de-]void of the Holy Spirit.[?] For through baptism they receive the Holy Spirit, who is ever with those that work righteousness, and does **not** [emphasis mine] depart from them by reason of natural issues and the intercourse of marriage, but is ever and always with those who possess Him...¹⁸

It goes on to explicitly state that the Holy Spirit remains with a woman during her monthly period and that giving into Rabbinical taboos and rules opens the way for the *wrong spirit*.¹⁹ The *Apostolic Constitutions* extends this emphasis,

...For neither the lawful mixture [=intercourse], nor childbearing, nor the menstrual purgation, nor nocturnal pollution can defile the nature of a [person], or separate the Holy Spirit from him...but only impiety towards God, and transgression, and injustice towards one’s neighbor...²⁰

¹⁶ Alexander, David L, *A Rose by Any Other Name: The Ordination of Women to the Diaconate*. Accessed via www.ewtn.com/library/LITURGY/AROSEBY.TXT on 8/12/2004.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 4.

¹⁸ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Chapter 26.

¹⁹ Ibid, Chapter 26.

²⁰ *Apostolic Constitutions*, Chapter VI, no. 27.

With the rise of Islam and the subsequent fall of the Eastern part of the Roman empire to the Ottomans, the Church turned inward. It could no longer participate in many of the philanthropic aspects of its ministry. Moreover, many of the traditional duties of the male deacon were being assumed by the priest and by the growing number of those in the so-called “minor orders.” This led to the position of the diaconate being perceived as more of a “transitional” one, on the way to being ordained a presbyter. Although the male deacon retained his role in the liturgical assembly, the office had devolved greatly. Unfortunately, this is what typically remains of the order in the East today.

Modern Renewal of the Office

A. Western Churches

In modern times, the diaconate has experienced a renewal and rejuvenation, most notably (and somewhat ironically) in the Western Christian churches. While this movement is due mostly to the needs of the local churches, it is instructive to us, as Orthodox Christians, to realize that the theological reasoning and justification for a re-institution of the order came from careful study of the Early Church, primarily its expression in the East.

1) The Anglican/ Episcopal Church²¹

The development of the reinstatement of the office of the diaconate, in particular the female diaconate, in the Anglican and Episcopal Church is a juxtaposition of women filling the various ministerial needs of the Church and a growing understanding of the theological underpinnings of the order. This development spanned over three hundred years.

As far back as 1625, Vincent de Paul (recognized as a saint in the Western Church) founded a new type of religious order. This was not the kind of cloistered orders that were prevalent for women in the West at that time, but a religious order that would have the ideal of service—similar to that of the primitive diaconate—the Sisters of Charity. Over one hundred years later in 1734, Deaconess Mary Truesdell in her article, *The Office of the Deaconess*, relays that the “non-juring bishops in Scotland were led by their study of Christian antiquities to desire the revival of the office of the deaconess.”²² Nothing came of it at the time. Nearly one hundred

²¹ Material for this section of the paper from Truesdell, *The Office of the Deaconess and A Chronology of Events Concerning Women in Holy Orders*. Accessed via www.episcopalchurch.org/41685_3276_ENG_HTM.htm on 1/12/2005.

²² Truesdell, *The Office of the Deaconess*, p. 6.

years later, in the mid 1800s, an American bishop, Bishop Cobbs, the first Episcopal Bishop of Alabama, planned a house for deacons who, in Deaconess Truesdell's words "were to do missionary work and assist in pastoral ministrations, and a house for deaconesses who were to teach and take care of the sick and the poor. . . . The plan reminds us of St. John Chrysostom's cathedral."²³ Unfortunately, this plan never materialized due to the outbreak of the Civil War. Following the Civil war, the needs of the faithful and society at large were great. To meet these needs, in 1864 Bishop Richard Hooker Wilmer "instituted" as deaconesses three women "who offered themselves for whatever work the bishop assigned them."²⁴ In 1889 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church passed a canon authorizing the *setting apart* of the deaconess. The laying on of hands by the bishop would confer upon the woman a status akin to holy orders (although she could be married) but did not, as yet, represent a true ordination (*cheirotomia*) to the order of the diaconate. (Most scholars believe the ordination of the deaconess in the Early Church was a true ordination to the ranks of the higher clergy. See FitzGerald *Women Deacons in the Early Church*.) However, they were set aside for a particular ministry based on the model of diaconal work of the Early Church.

Questions arose as to what these women would do and how they would be trained for their ministry. Although women had been working in various diaconal capacities for over two hundred years by this point, they did not have any specific training for pastoral work. Training schools were set up to meet this need and as a result several hundred women were trained for diaconal work.

It took years of practical experience to develop a "job description." In 1964, the General Convention adopted canon 50, which sets the qualification for the office, including: attesting to the woman's character; the subjects that she should study; the age of admission; canonical exams to be passed, etc. Her duties were to

teach the unlearned, to instruct youth, to care for the sick, to
comfort the afflicted, to supply the wants of the poor and needy
and to labor in all ways for the extension of the Church of Christ.²⁵

Over time, the duties of the deaconess were further specified. It should be noted that many of the duties specified here parallel the duties performed by the ancient deaconess, including her close

²³ Ibid, p. 6.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 6.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 9.

association with the bishop. While there are some modifications to reflect the ministry needed at this time in the life of the Church, it has also retained a strong emphasis on the ministry of women to women. It is as follows:

Sec. 2 (a) The duty of a Deaconess is to assist in the work of the Parish, Mission, or institution to which she may be appointed, under the direction of the Rector or Priest in charge; or if there be no such, to perform such functions as may be directly entrusted to her by the bishop.

(b) The following are the chief functions which may be entrusted to a Deaconess:

- The care of the sick, afflicted, and the poor;
- To give instruction in the Christian faith;
- Under the Rector or Priest in charge, to prepare candidates for Baptism and Confirmation.
- To assist at the administration of Holy Baptism and in the absence of the Priest or Deacon to baptize infants;
- Under the Rector or Priest in charge to organize, superintend and carry out the Church's work among women and children;
- With the approval of the Bishop and the incumbent, to read Morning and Evening Prayer (except such portions as are reserved for the Priest) and the Litany in Church or Chapel in the absence of the Minister; and when licensed by the Bishop to give instruction or deliver addresses at such services;
- To organize and carry on social work; and in colleges and schools to have a responsible part in the education of women and children and to promote the welfare of women students.²⁶

The *ordained, permanent* diaconate in the Episcopal Church, for both women and men, was finally restored in 1968. The deaconess was now considered to be within the ranks of the higher clergy, specifically within the diaconate. In addition, the male diaconate was no longer solely a transitional office to the priesthood but, could be a permanent, vocational office. The intention was to restore “the ancient, full, and equal order of ministry based on the call to imitate Christ in service to the poor and the needy.”²⁷

In many ways, the years of ministry of the deaconess provided a model for the restoration of the fully ordained, permanent diaconate for men and women. The deacon's duties continue to

²⁶ Ibid, p. 9.

²⁷ *Lifting Up the Servants of God: The Deacon, Servant and Ministry and the Future of the Church*. Accessed via www.sfd.edu/LiftingUpServants.html on 11/22/04.

include serving directly under the bishop and helping to carry out the bishop's ministry. She or he also functions within the ministries of liturgy, word, and charity, particularly the ministries among the poor, sick, and oppressed.²⁸

Since its reinstatement, the number of deacons has nearly doubled. According to Dr. Thomas Ferguson, former faculty member at the Episcopal School for Deacons [who received his ThM from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology], "The current renaissance of the diaconate is part of the church's recovering its own sense of *diakonia*, of being called and sent into the world to serve."²⁹ This rejuvenation has been instrumental in helping all baptized Christians within the Episcopal Church to live out their "Baptismal Covenant," especially as reflected in the last two questions asked at the time of baptism:

- a) Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- b) Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?³⁰

In summary, according to the North American Association for the Diaconate, "The diaconate of the Anglican churches is an historic order, with roots in the ancient church, adapting to the needs of the church and the world in our own age. It is a gift from God for the nurture of God's people and the proclamation of God's gospel."³¹

2) The Roman Catholic Church

As I have noted earlier, the male diaconate in the Western Church declined sometime after the fifth century and by the seventh century it had become merely a transitional stage to the priesthood. According to the information I obtained on the restoration of the diaconate in the Catholic Church, the process of the restoration of this order began to take root during WWII. As Barbara Ballenger says in her article on the diaconate,

...the concept of a community of men committed to works of service and charity—*inspired by the imagery of the early church*

²⁸ *Deacons in the Anglican Churches*. Accessed via www.diakonoi.org/naadinfo.html on 1/12/2005. Henceforth *Deacons in the Anglican Churches*.

²⁹ Ferguson, Dr. Thomas, *Lifting Up the Servants of God: The Deacon, Servant Ministry, and the Future of the Church*. Accessed via www.sfd.edu/LiftingUpServants.html on 11/22/2004.

³⁰ *Book of Common Prayer* (revised 1979). Accessed via vidicon.dandello.net/bocp on 11/22/04. Henceforth *Book of Common Prayer*.

³¹ *Deacons in the Anglican Churches*.

deacons [emphasis mine]—began to gain momentum among priests in the Dachau concentration camp of Nazi Germany. [Subsequently] an informal ‘Community of the Diaconate’ was organized in Frieburg, Germany in 1951. By the Second Vatican Council the movement had caught the attention of Rome... Between 1967 and 1972 Pope Paul VI officially re-established the permanent diaconate as an ordained ministry. Conferences of bishops had to request permission from Rome to reinstitute the ministry in their countries.³²

In 1968, the U.S. bishops of the Catholic Church reinstated the ordained ministry of the permanent diaconate. According to Ms. Ballenger, they offered three basic reasons:

- 1) To restore the Church to the full complement of active apostolic ministers;
- 2) To integrate and strengthen with sacramental ordination and grace those who were, in fact, already exercising diaconal functions;
- 3) To provide ministers for the regions where functions vital to the Church’s life could not be carried out.³³

According to the official restoration document, *Sacrum Daiconatus Ordinem*, the duties of the deacons are as follows,

They may assist at liturgical celebrations, administer baptism, distribute the Eucharist, bless marriages in the absence of a priest, preside at funerals, read the Gospel and preach, and assume charitable and administrative tasks.³⁴

The permanent office is open to married and unmarried men over the age of thirty-five, while the transitional office is open only to unmarried men prior to entering the priesthood. One notes the parallels with the duties of ancient diaconate of the Church with an expanded understanding of the role of the order to meet the needs of the present-day Catholic Church. (One could also argue that the expanded role of the diaconate in this context is a result of Roman Church’s reluctance to open up the Presbytery to married men.)

³² Ballenger, Barbara, *A Call for National Dialogue on Women in Church Leadership*. Accessed via www.cta-usa.org/wicl/9whythechurch.html on 8/13/2004.

³³ Ibid, p.1.

³⁴ The statement of the *Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation*, St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, New Rochell, NY; June 9-10, 2003. Accessed via sor.cua.edu/Ecumenism/20030626OORCCConsultation.html on 8/12/2004. Henceforth: *Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation*.

According to a report presented at the Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation on the diaconate in June of 2003, the new ministry has spread rapidly in the Church with approximately 28,000 permanent deacons worldwide and 13,764 in the United States. The Church has set up a special training program for the candidates, the Permanent Diaconate Formation Program, which emphasizes the understanding of the diaconate as an order of service.³⁵

Once again, we see a renewal of the diaconate inspired by the model of the Early Church office. The Church recognized the value of a sacramental ordination for those already engaged in diaconal work. Moreover, by opening up the permanent diaconate to married men, more deacons are now available to minister to the flock in ways that are greatly needed in the Roman Catholic Church today.

B. Oriental Orthodox Churches

The Eastern Orthodox Church shares much in common with the Oriental Orthodox Churches—doctrine, a continuity within the Apostolic tradition, and *phronema*[mindset]. Over the years, theologians of our Churches have dialogued and found that any theological disagreements that we may have had in the past were ultimately just misunderstandings. Formal reunification remains elusive at this time, however.

The diaconate in these Churches is experiencing somewhat of a revival as well. What follows is a synopsis of reports presented at the Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation held at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary in New Rochelle, New York on June 9-10, 2003.³⁶

1) Armenian

Father Simeon Odabashian reported on behalf of the Armenian Church. He stated that the “*ancient social roles of the deacons* [emphasis mine—once again, we see a Church looking to the past to reclaim the future] is being revived in the Armenian Church in America.” In addition to the central role they play in the liturgical services of the Armenian Church, their duties include training children and altar servers [it should be noted that many Armenian Churches now allow

³⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

³⁶ Most information is taken from Consultation report. Ibid

girls to serve in this capacity as well], visiting the sick, and taking on responsibilities in parish administration.³⁷

The ordination of the female deacon is also part of the history of the Armenian Church and is also being revived. According to a report from the *Discerning the Signs of the Times* conference for Orthodox women held in Istanbul in 1997, His Beatitude Patriarch Karenkin II mentioned that the Armenian Apostolic Church had “taken the initiative in ordaining women to the order of the Diaconate, an order in which both men and women are ordained and perform similar duties.”³⁸ At this same meeting it is reported that Archbishop Mesrob Mutafyan, the Patriarchal Vicar for Ecumenical Relations, spoke of the traditional practice of the Armenian Church to ordain women to the diaconate. The consultation report goes on to say,

There is no difference between the ordination service for women and men and service. Women deacons care for orphans, assist women at baptism, serve liturgically at the altar, read the Gospel, and bring the host to the priest. While at this time women deacons come from the monastic tradition. (When queried about married women being ordained to the diaconate it is reported that he said “we think about it.”)³⁹

2) Coptic Orthodox Church

Although the deacon has an important role in the liturgical celebration, the male diaconate in the Coptic Church is still very much a transitional office. According to Fr. Shenouda Maher Ishak, there are very few full time permanent and professional deacons in the Coptic Church.⁴⁰

According to the report, however, the Coptic Church is in the process of restoring the female diaconate in three orders: the female reader for women (now called “the devoted one”), the sub-deaconess (now called “assistant deaconess”) and the deaconess. Reflecting the norms of Egyptian society, their ministry is to work exclusively with women and children. They assist at the baptism of women, visit sick women in hospitals, supervise women’s activities in parishes, and clean the church. They do not participate in service of the altar.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid, p. 2.

³⁸ FitzGerald, Kyriaki Karidoyanes, ed. , *Orthodox Women Speak Discerning the ‘Signs of the Times’* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Press, 1999), p. 29.

³⁹ Liveris, Leonie, *Consultation Report-MaryMartha editorial on Istanbul and Bossey*. Accessed via members.iinet.net.au/~mmjournal/Ma...d%20REPORTS/Istanbul%20%and%20Bossey.htm on 4/28/2003.

⁴⁰ *Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation*, p. 2.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 2

3) Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Fr. Michael Tekle Mariam Greene reported on the state of the diaconate in the Ethiopian Church. According to the report, deacons are numerous in Ethiopia and play a prominent role in the parishes in which they serve. This was especially true during the decades of Marxist rule. Their role is primarily liturgical, although they do have a role in the education of parishioners and training new candidates for the diaconate. According to the report, there is mention of women deacons in the ancient Ethiopian texts, but there are none in the Church today.⁴²

4) Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch

In the Syriac Orthodox Church there are five orders within the diaconate: archdeacon, deacon, subdeacon, lector, and chanter. According to the report, the male deacon serves a primarily liturgical role, although some teach and do charitable work. The ancient role of the deacon as someone who assists the bishop is also emphasized. According to the report, each archdiocese has one archdeacon who works closely with the bishop in administrative and liturgical duties.

The report also points out that deaconesses were well known in the ancient Syriac Church.

In the sixth century they poured the wine and water into the chalice, read the Gospel in gatherings of women, placed the incense, washed the sacred vessels, lit the candles and cleaned the sanctuary.... The ancient order for the ordinations of deaconesses is still used today with some adaptation in the Syriac Church, but women are ordained only to the order of chantress, the lowest of the diaconal orders.⁴³

C) Eastern Orthodox Church

Although the diaconate in the Eastern Orthodox Church has remained an active ministry since apostolic times, its scope and function has greatly diminished since the fall of Byzantium. The male diaconate generally functions solely in the liturgical realm and, oftentimes, has become

⁴² Ibid, p. 3.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 3.

a transitional stage to ordination to the priesthood. The female diaconate has virtually disappeared.

There have been numerous attempts for over one-hundred and fifty years to reinstitute the female diaconate. As early as 1855, the sister of Czar Nicholas I tried to restore the office.⁴⁴ Other prominent Russians also lobbied for its restoration, including Aleksandr Gumilevsky and Mother Catherine (Countess Efimovskiy). According to numerous sources, in 1905-06, several bishops, archbishops, and metropolitans of the Russian Orthodox Church encouraged the effort. According to a report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women in Agapia in 1976, this issue was to be a major topic at the Council of the Russian Church beginning in 1917, but due to the political turmoil in Russia at the time, the council's work was not addressed.⁴⁵ (It should be noted that other items on the agenda included adopting the use of the vernacular in the liturgical services and the reinstatement of the married episcopacy.)

Other efforts were made in Greece. On Pentecost Sunday in 1911, Archbishop (now, Saint) Nektarios ordained a nun to the diaconate to serve the needs of the monastery. A few years later, Archbishop Chrysostomos of Athens appointed "monastic 'deaconesses' who were nuns actually appointed to the subdiaconate."⁴⁶

More recently, the issue has been discussed at the international conferences for Orthodox women in Agapia, Romania (1976—at which its restoration was unanimously recommended), Sophia, Bulgaria (1987), Rhodes, Greece (1988), Crete (1990), Damascus, Syria (1996) and Istanbul (1997). (See thematic summary in conference packet). Furthermore, in July of 2000, after over a year of careful review of the subject, a formal letter was sent to the Ecumenical Patriarch by more than a dozen members of the Orthodox community in Paris, including such noted Orthodox theologians as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Fr. Boris Bobrinskoy, Olivier Clément, and Nicolas Lossky. (See handout/letter.) The letter traces the history of the female diaconate and notes that the Patriarch himself has stated that there is "no obstacle in canon law [that] stands in the way of the ordination of women to the diaconate. This institution of the early Church

⁴⁴ Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate*.

⁴⁵ Ibid, referencing Tarasar, Constance J. and Irina Kirillova, eds., *Orthodox Women: Their Role and Participation in the Orthodox Church* (Report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women, Sept. 11-17, 1976, Agapia, Romania) (New York: World Council of Churches Press), p.27.

⁴⁶ FitzGerald, "The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess," p. 90 referencing Theodorou, *Cheirotonia*.

deserves to be revitalized.”⁴⁷ It also states that the order should “involve more than a simple and archaeological reconstitution of the ancient ministry of the deaconesses ...it is a question of its revitalization, in other words of its realization in the context of the culture and requirements of the present day.”⁴⁸

What would the deaconess do in the Church today? The question is generally preceded by the acknowledgement that the ancient deaconess assisted in the baptism of women, etc. It is oftentimes assumed that since we no longer have many adult baptisms (infant baptism being the norm) that we no longer need deaconesses. (Although a simplistic analogy, it is interesting that the same question is not asked of the male diaconate. i.e. Since we no longer need ‘table servers’ at the Eucharist, a function of the biblical diaconate, why do we need male deacons?) Having previewed the female diaconate in other Churches, there would seem to be a long list of answers available. This issue has also been discussed within Orthodox circles as well. According to the report of the Crete consultation (1990), a deacon or deaconess could

lead people in prayer, give spiritual counsel, distribute Holy Communion where possible. [In addition] The renewal of the diaconate for both men and women would meet many of the needs of the Church in a changing world...catechetical work...pastoral relations...serving the same needs for monastic communities without a presbyter ...reading prayers for special occasions, ...performing social work ...pastoral care ...engaging in youth and college ministry ...counseling ...anointing the infirm ...carrying out missionary work ...ministering to the sick, ...assisting the bishop or presbyter in the liturgical services....⁴⁹

The report concludes that a creative restoration of the diaconate for women, could lead in turn to the renewal in the diaconate for men as well.⁵⁰

Considerations for a Reinstated Female Diaconate.

A) The Liturgical Role of the Female Deacon.

⁴⁷ *An Orthodox Diaconate for Women?* Reported in *Sobornost* 23:1 (2001), pp. 60-63.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Orthodox Women’s Consultation on Church and Culture*, Crete, January 1990. Accessed via <http://members.iinet.net.au/~mmjournal/MA...REPORTS/CRETE%20%Consultation%201990.htm> on 4/28/2003.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

When discussing the reinstatement of the female diaconate, the question of her liturgical role, including her service within the altar area, often arises. (It is my opinion, if this question were settled, we would currently have women deacons in the Orthodox Church.) According to the *Apology* of Justin the Martyr (~150 AD), the ministry of the deacon was expressed in the liturgical celebration of the gathered Eucharistic assembly,

...reading the gospel, leading the intercessions of the people, receiving the gifts of the people and 'setting the table' for the meal, serving the Eucharistic meal....[Moreover] the social service carried on by the deacons seems to be rooted in the liturgical celebration.⁵¹

The link between liturgy and service is crucial not only to the office of the diaconate, but to our understanding of what it means to gather as Church in worship. Our understanding of some of the fundamental principles for Christian worship is elucidated in a report on Orthodox Liturgical Renewal.

- Worship is eschatological. It points to the ultimate unity of all in Christ. [The reign of God, where all are *One in Christ* is anticipated.]
- Worship is instrumental. Its primary purpose is to bring Christians into communion with the Triune God and, in God, with one another and with all creation.
- Worship is formative. It is the primary way in which the Church's faith—the Church's theology *and* [emphasis mine] *praxis*—is passed on from one generation to the next. It builds faith and forms identity, both individual and corporate.
- Worship is inclusive. It is the work of the whole people of God. [The Body of Christ]⁵²

According to Deacon Photios Touloumes in his article, *The Diaconate in the Orthodox Church*, "Liturgically, it is the deacon's function to bring the people together and unite them in corporate prayer, and in their function of fulfilling their role as members of the Body of Christ, the Church."⁵³ It is in our service to the other that we are united with them. Our service to the

⁵¹ Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, (London: Anglican Communion Publications, 1996), p. 10 referencing *Apology* of Justin the Martyr.

⁵² Report of the Consultation on *Orthodox Liturgical Renewal and Visible Unity*. Held at New Skete Monastery, Cambridge, New York 26 May-1 June 1998. Accessed via www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/vilemov-07-e.html.

⁵³ Touloumes, *The Diaconate*, p. 5.

other brings them with us to worship. In my opinion, it is a distortion of the office to have the male deacon serve only during the liturgy, but not within the community, and conversely, to have a future female deacon serve within the community, but not during the liturgy. As Dr. FitzGerald says in her book, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*,

It is important to remember that in the past women deacons did have important responsibilities in the Eucharist assembly as well as in the administration of baptism, in praying with and for those in need, and in bringing Holy Communion to those unable to attend the Eucharist. ... Today, these expressions of ministry can certainly continue. At the same time, we also need to examine how women deacons can participate in the Eucharist and other liturgical services in a manner which is expressive of the living Tradition of the Church and which is not defined by cultural norms of another time.⁵⁴

B) The Need.

But do we really need a rejuvenated diaconate and in particular, a restored female diaconate? To help answer this question, it is instructive to understand the responsibilities of a typical parish priest. Fr. Alexander Garklavs outlined a number of functions expected of today's parish priest in his presentation at the 2004 Pastoral Conference held at St. Tikhon's Monastery in June of 2004. In addition to all the liturgical duties of the priest (Sunday and any daily liturgical services, baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.), he enumerates some of the priest's responsibilities in parish life in America:

Pastoral visitations, educational work, Bible study, adult study, youth work, teen work, working with choirs and choir directors, marriage preparation, marital counseling, visiting shut-ins, grief counseling, [hospital visits], office work, preparing and printing bulletins and schedules, parish mailing, aspects of parish administration: parish council meetings, budgets, agendas, PR, building committees, sunshine committees, yard work, etc.⁵⁵

As far back as 1953, Archbishop Michael of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America realized that there is so much to do in each community that the

⁵⁴ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 197.

⁵⁵ Garklavs, Rev. Alexander, *The Orthodox Pastor in the 21st century*. Talk presented at the 2004 Pastoral Conference (OCA) at St. Tikhon's Monastery, South Canaan, PA, June 2-4, 2004. Accessed via www.oca.org.

endeavors of these priests alone do not suffice. For should the priest wish to know, as he must his spiritual children by name, their problems, and their spiritual and moral needs, this would certainly be beyond his physical and spiritual resources.

These tremendous needs of the Greek Orthodox Church in America has urged us to make a fervent appeal such as this to our daughters-in-Christ, . . . With the future welfare of our Church and membership at heart, we are considering the establishment in this country of an order of deaconess.⁵⁶

Clearly, a rejuvenated diaconate, a ministry that has service as its primary focus, is necessary in our Church today. No one person can fill all the duties necessary for the building up of the Body of Christ, the Church. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “Each of us has been given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”⁵⁷ The diaconate is not merely a “stepping stone” to higher orders. It is, as Dr. FitzGerald explains, “a full and parallel order of ordained ministry to which both men and women are called by God.”⁵⁸

C) Is an *ordained* ministry necessary?

It is an unfortunate effect of clericalism that lay participation in our churches varies widely. This is especially true of the participation of women. The range of women’s participation in the life of the Church can vary from diocese to diocese and even from parish to parish within each diocese. Still, many laywomen are already doing diaconal work in our parishes. Is ordination, then, necessary? What does an “ordination” mean? To begin to answer these questions, it is important to remember that we are all called to ministry within the Body of Christ. Each of us is called to minister to others in our daily lives—we are all expected to teach others, especially those in our care; to be able to perform CPR on our neighbor, if necessary, for example. And yet, we set apart certain people to do such tasks on a professional basis. Unlike us, they must be trained in their profession and pass exams before we, as a society, confer a designation on them as “teacher” or “medical professional.” Likewise, throughout history the Church has “set apart” those “consecrated for service.” There are theological reasons for blessing someone in ministry.

⁵⁶ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 154-5.

⁵⁷ 1 Cor. 12:7, NRSV.

⁵⁸ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 165.

[First,] Those who are set aside are integrated and accountable to the Church. [This is a reciprocal relationship as the Church is also accountable to them by providing support and preparation for carrying out diaconal ministries in its name.]

[Second,] Setting aside a person by the Church is a way to affirm the fact that we, as a Church, are members of one another

[and Third,] We believe that it is by the grace of the Holy Spirit that spiritual and pastoral gifts are enlivened.⁵⁹

Moreover, an ordination by the bishop who is the guarantor of the unity of the faith, is *universal* in scope. The authority of the bishop is rooted in Jesus Christ and it is Christ who confers it by the Holy Spirit through the act of ordination.⁶⁰ As Dr. FitzGerald acknowledges, “Ordination is not a right or a possession of anyone. Rather, it is a profound acknowledgement, by the Church, of God’s action in the life of a particular person who is called to serve Him and His Church in a distinctive and public manner.”⁶¹ It is an action that is beyond temporality, connecting us with those that have gone before us and those that have yet to live. It is a connection to the Church—past, present, and future.

Meeting the Orthodox Deaconess in the 21st century.

The Church is blessed to have a number of laywomen working in diaconal roles already, including pastoral assistants, chaplains, ecclesiarchs, and monastics. Through conversations and reflection, I have collected some of their experiences. I would like to now share them with you now. (Most of the reflections below are verbatim accounts of their experiences. In some cases, I have contextualized their comments for clarity.)

Reflections of a Chaplain

The first time I was scheduled to serve over night as an on-call chaplain, I received a page at 5 am. I groggily called the Intensive Care Unit, and spoke to a nurse who requested that I visit an anxious, weeping patient who would be undergoing surgery later that morning. I was told that the patient, “Andrew” was Orthodox Jewish. The nurse said that Andrea had a tracheotomy, and therefore could not speak. I entered the small ICU, which was silent but for

⁵⁹ Francis, Sarah Byrne, *Orthodox Chaplaincy: Reflections and Recommendations* in *The St. Nina Quarterly* forthcoming.

⁶⁰ BEM, p. 22.

⁶¹ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 184.

the beeping ventilator and monitors. I introduced myself to Andrew, a 50-year old man with a scraggly beard and dark eyes. I told him that I would be happy to sit with him in this time of anxiety, and pray with him if he desired. “I understand you are Jewish,” I said, thinking that I might try to locate his rabbi if he had specific religious needs. He shook his head, and began awkwardly attempting to cross himself in an Orthodox manner. “Oh!”, I said, “You’re Orthodox!” Apparently, he had been misunderstood. “Actually, so am I!”, I said. His eyes registered surprise and joy, and he began crying calmer, gentler tears. He took a pad and wrote in large, shaky letters, “I am Orthodox. I am scared.” I put my hand on his shoulder and consoled him, and after a short conversation (via the notepad) about his surgery and his fears, I offered to pray for him. I taped an icon of the Resurrection on the wall across from his bed, and standing beside him, chanted the Trisagion prayers and a Psalm. Andrew became visibly calmer; a sense of peace came over his face. He left for surgery, trusting in God’s protection. I did not see Andrew again, but I believe that God led me to him on that early morning, to ease his fears and to refocus his heart on God’s loving presence in a time of suffering.

Reflections of a Chaplain and Pastoral Assistant

I go to visit a woman who is 97 years old. She tells me that she is originally from Ireland, though she has no discernible accent. No, she says, she came to the US when she was a young child. She was actually booked on the Titanic, she says, but became sick and her family’s journey had to be postponed. Now she is the only one of her generation alive, and she is bed bound in a nursing home. She is sharp as a tack, and remembers me each visit, asking about the activities she remembers I’ve had planned between visits.

One day, she smiles as I knock on her door. She wants to talk about heaven and hell, and about what it’s going to be like. She is becoming weaker and is not eating much; she thinks she will die soon. She is not afraid, but is uncertain. We talk about she believes, and reflect on what is told and promised, as well as what is unknown. We pray together the Our Father, after which she asks if I know any other prayers. I smile and assure her that I do, and we pray in an informal style as well, for strength and for God to prepare her for what is to come. As I leave, she smiles and waves to me. I walk down the hallway, aching as I consider that she may not be here on my next visit.

[Now, how much more complete would both of these stories have been if the “deaconess” could have brought communion to the afflicted and ailing?]

Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant

It is Pentecost and I am to give my sermon. I am nervous but excited to be speaking about the Descent of the Holy Spirit! When I preach or teach, I know I am doing what I love, doing what I am called to do. I get to use my passions and gifts in a way that benefits the community I love.

[There seems to be no better ministry than to be able to use one’s gifts (on a *universal* basis) for the community that one loves.]

Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant

I am tired. I have just finished a long day at work and am drained. I have to lead the adult Bible Study tonight. I go to the chapel to collect my thoughts. We are reading and studying a passage from Matthew today. I ask God to give me the words. I read the passage slowly aloud. During the bible study, I am surprised at the profoundness of the words that come out of my mouth. I am energized and enlivened as are those around me. It is getting late so we wrap it up. I am totally exhausted when I get home but filled with the Spirit.

[As “deaconess” she could read and preach not just for the small group in the Bible Study but for all in the liturgical assembly.]

Reflections of an Ecclesiarch

I am directing students in the preparation of the chapel. We are approaching Holy Week. I need to be aware of all the liturgical order of the services, the rubrics, the chanting... I put on my robe in the vestry and notice how the bishop is getting dressed, something I have never seen before. I explain part of the *Proskomedia* service to a young seminarian. I have always enjoyed the teaching part of this job. At first, some of the guys were “a little leary” of a woman doing this job. After all, I am not only a woman, but a convert. But, it has been a transformative process for all of us. Now, when challenged, they come to my defense, “of course she should do it, she knows what she is doing.”

[It is important in our ministry as “deaconesses” to not only earn the authority but have others recognize it.]

Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant.

I am helping Father with the Bridegroom services during Holy Week. At this particular service none of the altar servers are available. Father quickly motions for me to go into the altar and get one of the candles for the procession. I don’t know whether I wanted to be an altar server growing up or not. Now, here I was carrying the candle in the procession. Such a simple thing... Somehow, I knew exactly what to do. It was a great honor. To be able to serve and be more fully integrated into the worship service gave me a connection to the liturgy of the Church in a way that I had never experienced before. Everyone should have the opportunity to experience the liturgy this way.

[Perhaps, our daughters will get that opportunity. I remember that my sister wanted to be an altar server when she younger. They said that only boys could do it because they could be priests one day. But, if altar service led to the priesthood then our seminaries would be full of those boys. However, they are not. As a seminary student, I am always amazed at the things they know about the service of which I had (until recently) no idea. I certainly missed a great catechetical opportunity. They say that anyone who has business “back there” and has the blessing to do so can serve and that there is no reason why girls can’t and yet they don’t allow us. I have spent many years frustrated by the policy. I remember my younger brother and how proud he was to serve at the altar. I also remember other boys who could care less but felt entitled to their service. We are all called to build up the Body of Christ. Is the Church utilizing all of the talents of its members to do so?

Altar service is an important but misused service in the Church. Women serve in women's monasteries. And prior to the fall of communism, women served almost ubiquitously within the altar area in Russia. In addition, there are young women who serve in isolated parishes in England and in the US. Would ordaining women to the diaconate and allowing women and girls to serve within the altar area allow for a more authentic form of altar service?]

Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant.

Father always said that no one person can meet all the spiritual needs of the congregation. Lately, he has asked me to hear confessions. Although, I am trained in pastoral care, I am nervous as this is such an awesome responsibility...

[I remember reading that Paul Meyendorff (Professor of Liturgical Theology, St. Vladimir's Seminary) as a young child in France, would be taken to the monastery by his mother to go to confession with one of the nuns. It was only after he had been properly counseled that he would then approach the priest for absolution.⁶² This is an example of carrying on that tradition within the parish context. However, it is important that deaconesses and those giving spiritual counsel be trained to do so. In addition, by setting her aside to minister in this capacity, the deaconess is accountable to the Church. Likewise, the Church has the responsibility to support her in her ministry.]

Conclusion.

The diaconate most closely manifests our ministry to the world. It helps us bring all of creation into unity with God. Unfortunately, our lives are often fragmented. We are disconnected from those around us. A revitalized diaconate can help bridge this gap. He or she can "interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes for the world."⁶³

Moreover, the Church in America faces a great many challenges in order to minister to the needs of Her faithful. Certainly, a rejuvenated diaconate—a ministry dedicated to service—for and by both men and women can, in the words of Dr. FitzGerald, "bear witness to Christ the Servant as well as facilitate a creative and salutary response by the Church to so many of the spiritual challenges which face us today."⁶⁴

⁶² Meyendorff, Paul, "Penance in the Orthodox Church Today," *Studia Liturgical* 18 (1988), p. 105.

⁶³ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 543.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 195.