

*FEMALE DIACONATE IN THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES
IN THE PAST AND TODAY*

christine chaillot

The topic of deaconesses and female diaconate is being debated today in different Churches, Protestant, Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. It is a reflection based on the fact that deaconesses are mentioned in the New Testament and in other documents of the Early Church. Today the topic of deaconesses is also studied, discussed and experienced in the Eastern Orthodox of Byzantine tradition which accepted the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and the Oriental Orthodox Churches which include the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Ethiopian Church, the Armenian Church (with two catholicoses with seats in Etchmiadzin (Armenia) and Antelias (Lebanon) as well as two patriarchs in Jerusalem and Istanbul), the Syrian Orthodox Church as well as related Churches in Eritrea, India and around the world. In the Eastern Orthodox Churches several Consultations about the ministry of women have taken place: in 1976 (in Agapia in Romania), in 1988 (in Rhodes), in 1996 (in Damascus in Syria), in 1997 (in Istanbul, Turkey, and in 1998 (Nairobi in Kenya). In a recent article¹, I wrote about the deaconesses in these Oriental Churches, including the Assyrian Church of the East of Eastern Syriac rite, on their history and gave examples of activities in the past and today, including at the canonical, hagiographical and liturgical levels.

In the Byzantine tradition, both the Didascalia and the Constitutions agree that the deaconess assisted the bishop in the baptism of women and in their catechetical formation. In the Byzantine Church some of the best-known deaconesses include Olympias, who helped John Chrysostom, or Makrina, the sister of Saint Basil the Great, both of the 4th century. Some deaconesses became heads of houses where a large number of deaconesses lived. They also became abbesses of convents. The ministry of deaconesses remained alive until at least the 11th century and perhaps until the end of the Byzantine empire (1453). As evidence, the prayers of the ordination rites of the Byzantine period are characteristic, for example that of

the Codex Barberinus (8th c.) and of the Codex Coislinus (11th c.). The texts of these rites describe the ordination of deaconesses as cheirotonia (in Greek) and not as appointment or blessing (cheirothesia).

In the Syriac tradition similar texts on deaconesses are mentioned. One of the most important sources on deaconesses to survive is a Syriac translation (probably of the first half of the 3rd century) of the Didascalia, a collection of canonical precepts originally written in Greek. There the bishop is to appoint a woman “for the ministry to women”, for example to visit women in non-Christian houses, to assist at baptism with anointing of women, and then to instruct them spiritually. Syriac canons such as Questions from the Oriental Fathers (c. 6th c.), mention a certain number of regional variations in the ordination of deaconesses. Towards the end of the 7th century, the Syrian Orthodox Jacob of Edessa ruled that the deaconess does not have religious authority in the use of the altar “because she has not become the deaconess of the altar but of sick women”. Some canonical texts assert that the ordination of deaconesses is of a different nature from that of deacons. In the 6th century, Severus, the patriarch of Antioch from 512 to 518, had several deaconesses among his correspondents, including women of considerable education. In the Syrian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Michael I (d. 1199) does not rule out the possibility that deaconesses might be needed again some day.

In the Eastern Syriac tradition, in the Church of the East, we find the first explicit mention of deaconesses only in the late 7th century (Synod of 676) in a collection of canons, the Synodicon Orientale in which canon 9 specifies that in communities of consecrated women (bnath qyama, literally “daughters of the covenant”) the most virtuous are made deaconesses, carrying out the anointing of adult women at baptism. This role reappears in several later canon law sources of the Church of the East. We do not know when a deaconess was ordained for the last time in the Eastern Syrian tradition, but it was at least as late as 1739.

In the Churches of Syriac rites, manuscripts mention the ordination rite for deaconesses. The prayers for the ordination of deaconesses continue to be copied in both the western and eastern Syriac Churches into the modern period, whether or not these were actually used. This is also the case in the Armenian Church tradition.

In the Armenian Church, we know nothing about deaconesses (sarkavaguhi, and sarkawag for deacon) or women deacons before the 9th-10th century. In 1184 Mkhitar Gosh describes women deacons who can read the Gospel and preach in the convent, and are present at the time of baptisms of women (Commentary on the Liturgy, chapter 225). In 1299, Bishop Stepanos Orbelian (d. 1304), in his History of the Province of Sisakan (chapter 27, on the orders of the Church), speaks of the deaconess as Gospel reader and preacher, but her function at baptism is not mentioned; she served on the altar and not only in convent churches albeit she stood apart from the male deacon and she did not touch the Holy Gifts; she then wore a stole on the

right side.

In the 17th century, a period of cultural, spiritual and monastic revival in the Armenian Church, deaconesses appear outside Armenia, in Persia (today Iran). In the 17th and 18th centuries deaconesses are to be found in nunneries. A fully organized setting of deaconesses can be observed at Saint Catherine's convent at New Julfa (today, Isphahan, Iran), founded in 1623 with three nuns coming from the previous convent in Julfa (now in Azerbaijan). In 1839 there were sixteen nuns. At least three other Armenian convents are mentioned where Armenian deaconesses were ordained: in Tiflis (today Tbilisi in Georgia), Shushi (today in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus) and Constantinople (today Istanbul in Turkey).

As to the Armenian prayer used, chronologically, it goes from a prayer of benediction without ordination to the ordination prayer with the same rite used as that for a male deacon, except for the passage concerning the future priesthood of the candidate. The early Armenian prayer for deaconesses is probably taken from the Byzantine prayer in Georgian translation, possibly based on the Apostolic Constitutions.

In the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which was under the jurisdiction of the Coptic patriarchate until 1959, we do not have ancient evidence about deaconesses.

In the 20th century, we can find the female diaconate in the Oriental Churches, under different forms, doing social and spiritual service, including by nuns in some Churches; and with the service at the altar only in the Armenian Church.

In the Syrian Orthodox Church, some young lay women are called "deaconesses" but their role is not as in the past. They serve in the local churches, as laywomen, at specific times, teaching in Sunday schools and singing in the choir in church during the liturgy; sometimes they help people for specific needs. But they have their private life and work (in the world), live in their family and can get married.

Nowadays one can say that the most developed form of female diaconal service and the most active, with the largest number of women – more than five hundreds in 2018 – is organized by the Coptic Orthodox Church, throughout Egypt and even abroad in the USA and Australia. It was in 1981, under Pope Shenuda (1971-2012), that female diaconal work began to be organized at the official level. These deaconesses (called mukarrasat) serve mostly among women and young girls, in parishes and elsewhere, in multiple services among which for Christian education in Sunday schools, religious meetings, retreats; as well as for social service for orphans, kindergartens, the handicapped, student girls' hostels, medical care, administrative work. Their work is social, educational, pastoral, but above all spiritual. With regard to the educational background of the sisters, many have completed university studies

in different faculties. The prayer of consecration is done without laying on of hands as this is only for deacons and priests in the Coptic Orthodox Church. Consecrated women make four vows: the three vows like those of nuns – poverty, celibacy and obedience, – as well as a fourth vow of service (khidma). During my interview in 1988, Pope Shenuda told me that the service of mukarrasat (deaconesses) was already well accepted and respected by the laity who understand that it is needed.

In the Armenian Church, in the 20th century, Sister Hripsime Sasunian (d. 2007) was the last ordained deaconess who was also active in social work. In Istanbul, she functioned as head of the Kalfayan Orphanage, and served the Patriarchate as an accountant, in addition to serving the Sunday liturgy in various parishes in Istanbul. In 2017, Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian, the Armenian Primate of Iran, ordained in Saint Sarkis cathedral in Tehran a deaconess to assist the clergy, a young woman anesthesiologist by profession. During an interview in 2015, Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia discussed the role of women and deaconesses in the Armenian Church. He said that tradition is very important, but tradition should keep pace with the rhythm of changing times and realities, and expectations of the Church's peoples.

What about deaconesses in the Eastern Orthodox Churches in the 20th century? In Russia, efforts were made to revive the order of deaconesses since the 19th century, especially by Grand Duchess Elizabeth Fedorovna who founded the Convent of Saints Martha and Mary in Moscow in 1908. In Belarus, one must mention the very various social activities of the nuns of the convent of Saint Elisabeth in Minsk. In Greece, Bishop Nektarios of Aigina (d. 1920 and recognized as a saint in 1961) appears as a forerunner in the convent on the Island of Aigina when he ordained the first nun to become a deaconess in 1911. In Africa, in Kolwezi (Congo), in 2017, the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, Theodoros, consecrated one deaconess, the catechist elder Theano, one of the first members of the Missionary staff in Kolwezi, to “deaconess of the missions” of the metropolis of Katanga; and he also read the prayer for one entering the “ecclesiastical ministry” for three nuns and two catechists, in order for them to assist the missionary effort of the metropolis, particularly in the sacraments of baptisms of adults and marriages, as well as in the catechetical department of the local Church.

In fulfilling their functions, deaconesses assist priests and bishops. The service of deaconesses is needed by these different Oriental Churches, for different purposes, including in missionary activities, and first of all for spiritual teaching. It would be of value if all these Oriental Churches met and shared their experiences and discussed together the renewal of the female diaconate today, taking into consideration their proper local spiritual and pastoral needs which are many in all these Churches, and in many parts of the world where the Oriental Churches are present today, that is also in the so-called diaspora. There is still much work to be done in order to come to a fuller understanding of this female service (diakonia). The

first step is for all to study the historical reality of deaconesses in an objective way, that is, by reading all the texts and prayers of all the Oriental Church traditions. Today the main fear in Orthodox circles is that the ordination of deaconesses could lead to the ordination of women as priests or bishops. As regards the issue of the position of women in the Church and also not allowing them to be ordained as priests, the attitude of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches is the same. Female diaconal ordination is not sacerdotal ordination (as for deacons, priests and bishops) as they are different functions and orders. As for the need to re-establish the female diaconate, it is felt to be imperative. Such a question is the task of an episcopal synod, which would examine these issues without prejudice and in accordance with the Church's current needs, and come to a decision. Today the question is how to revive the female diaconate for the pastoral life of local parishes.