



*St Phoebe Center*  
FOR THE DEACONESS

St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess Response to Ancient Faith Radio's Show: [“The Orthodox Deaconess: Examining the Call for Restoration”](#)

2/2/24

The Saint Phoebe Center for the Deaconess expresses its appreciation for the work that went into the preparation and production of the recent AFR presentation aired on January 30, 2024, “The Orthodox Deaconess: Examining the Call for Restoration,” with special thanks to John Maddex. Securing a number of scholars and other faithful Orthodox Christians from across the spectrum of perspectives about the female diaconate, gathering hours of primary interviews, and offering a serious look at a controversial topic was a monumental task, and we appreciate being asked to participate. While the presentation had some strengths and aimed to be an impartial offering of the multiplicity of views among Orthodox Christians, we noticed some serious flaws. We encourage those interested in a deeper exploration of this issue to listen to the longer interviews, in particular those offered by Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost, Dr. Valerie Karras, and Dr. Helen Theodoropoulos. [See link below with timestamps for their interviews.] We also encourage engagement with the St. Phoebe Center website, which contains a wealth of information on the topic.

Before briefly addressing a few points in each of the six segments of the presentation, we note these more general concerns.

1. One problem that persisted throughout the show was the commentary offered by Fr Tom Soroka during the intervals between the show segments. Fr Tom took the opportunity at every interval to edit, summarize, and reframe what was just heard so as to present the opposition to female deacons as the dominant and accurate voice. While Fr. Tom is of course entitled to his opinion, his comments significantly shifted the balance in the presentation.
2. We were surprised to hear more than one person speculate that the lack of significant movement toward the revival of a female diaconate was evidence that the Holy Spirit does not support this movement. This was said with the conviction that one indeed knows the plan of the Holy Spirit, and that the immediate historical record displays this plan. This argument ignores the multiple periods of the life of the Church when the path of true doctrine and faith was impeded by human sin—at times for a very extended period (such as the period of iconoclasm). The Holy Spirit is always working in the life of the Church, but we flawed humans are not always listening, or may be working against Him. In any case, we can point to ways in which there has been slow but steady movement on this issue.
3. In addition, we were stunned at the decision to devote any time—much less an entire segment—to the discussion of female priesthood. Orthodox doctrine and practice clearly distinguish between the diaconate and the priesthood, and our topic here was not priesthood, much less ordination of women to that order. At most, this segment should have been limited to the concern that the female diaconate might lead to female priesthood. However, as we have repeatedly declared and shown, the ordination of women to the

diaconate is not a move towards female priesthood, and we address this point in the longer interviews.

4. Finally, we must express dismay—a dismay clearly shared by the hosts—that the irenic and respectful tone of the actual presentation was marred by offensive responses, written and spoken, shared both throughout and after the end of the presentation. At times these descended to a level of insult unworthy of Christian dialogue. When proponents for the female diaconate are accused of being deceitful in a way akin to the lies a sexual predator whispers to achieve conquest, we cannot help but sorrow for what has been said. The comparison used that suggested malicious deceit on the part of proponents for the female diaconate was reprehensible and should have been immediately rebuked. We are thankful to learn that AFR has removed that comment from the current recording.

We also note briefly a few particular issues that arose in each of the six segments of the presentation.

**The first segment**, on the **history** of the deaconess, was fairly even handed, acknowledging the Biblical foundation and historical reality of deaconesses. However, we object to the false sense of equivalence given to the discussion of whether the female deacon was ordained to higher orders vs. being simply blessed for lower orders. Comments that have minimal scholarship and support, and focused on relatively insignificant points, suggesting that female deacons were not part of the major orders, were given equal weight to comments derived from the vast and conclusive scholarship supporting ordination to the major orders. No mention was made of the definitive work of Evangelos Theodorou (demonstrating that female deacons were ordained to the same order as male deacons, with “ordination” and not “blessing” or consecration”) or to the decades of scholarship that added to his conclusions; but much was made of minor studies.

**Segment Two** looked at the **calls** for the restoration of the female diaconate. This segment focused primarily on the call issued by the International Orthodox Consultation in Rhodes in 1988, but failed to report what Rhodes had said about reinstating the female diaconate and then mentioned only in passing some of the other calls, conferences and tentative steps that have been taken since. The result was the misleading impression that virtually nothing of note has occurred since that one call. For an accurate and complete treatment of the many calls and moves affirming the restoration of deaconesses, please refer to our [calls document on the SPC website](#) as well as St. Phoebe Center Board Member Dr. Teva Regule’s “Diaconal Ministry and the Calls to Revive the Female Diaconate” presentation from our November 2023 symposium ([document](#) and [video](#) available).

**The third segment** explored whether the movement for the female diaconate seeks a simple restoration or something new, whether we are speaking about something identical to what was operating in the past, or something new. It is disingenuous to pretend that any of the orders of ministry are identical to what they were in the ancient past. We have chosen the word “revive” as we recognize that our orders do evolve and we look for a female diaconate that meets the needs of the church and our world for today, not merely an archeological restoration of a diaconate reconstructed from fragments of the historical record. We would be better served with a segment examining how our orders evolve and how that would apply to the female diaconate, nuanced for the context of today.

We have already explained that **the fourth segment**, centered on the discussion of the female priesthood, was ill-conceived, with the entire segment off topic and ancillary to the discussion. While the concern that ordination of women to the diaconate might lead to the ordination of women to

the priesthood legitimately needs to be addressed, and was discussed in the longer interviews, this segment did not actually examine that concern, but instead assumed this fear is valid and spent its time repudiating the straw man of female priesthood, often using theological arguments impaired by Western Christian presuppositions. In the Orthodox Church the diaconate never was, and is not, a precursor or preparation for the presbyterate; rather, the diaconate is itself a complete and full ministry, considered absolutely essential and distinct. Furthermore, the historical record clearly and definitively establishes that in the Orthodox Church, the female diaconate did not and does not lead to female priesthood, even with the over one thousand years of an active female diaconate in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Finally, over the many decades of advocacy for the female diaconate, and throughout the ten years of the work of the Saint Phoebe Center, none of the official calls and none of our work has promoted or supported the ordination of women to the priesthood. We are focused solely on the diaconate.

In **Section Five** we heard questions about the **need** for deaconesses, especially given the expanded ministry of laywomen in the life of the Church today. While this section validly recognized the important work of laywomen, it was superficial in its treatment of the **value that diaconal ordination** would bring to the life of the Church, and this needed to be expanded. We continue to emphasize that we need BOTH the ministry of actively engaged lay people AND the ordained ministries recognized by our Church and part of our tradition. What each offers—deaconess and laywoman—is important but different. Ordination to the diaconate is transformative, changing the deaconess and her relationship to the community of faithful. She is accountable to the community and, in turn, vested with the gift of representing the Church. Her commitment is permanent—for the remainder of her life—and her diaconate now governs her behavior and guides her work. Furthermore, this diaconal ordination connects her work in the world—counseling, education, therapy, visitation, etc.—to the liturgical life, to what we are doing in Church. In this way, her work becomes the work of the Church, and she can bring the grace of the body of Christ to those she serves. This connection to the sacramental life of the Church is critical and is made possible because the deacon or deaconess is ordained, which authorizes the deacon to be the personal face of the Church present to the one in need. This person feels not only that a friend or a fellow Christian has come, but that the Church—my Church—has come to me, here in my need

**The final section** took up the concern that this topic would prove terribly divisive to the Church. Division grieves us all, as we are called to **unity** and love as one body in Christ, and this is why the Church has worked toward unity through a great many times of disagreement and disunity. In overcoming this fear of division, we understand that we need to provide education about the female diaconate, and foster a familiarity with women engaging actively in ministries in the Church. We also are aware of the silent division already felt within the body of the faithful, with women disengaging from Church life because they are dismissed, silenced or made to feel invisible. We must work to restore unity on both sides, then; to draw back those falling away, as well as to hold those who are present, by showing to both the blessing and soundness of having female deacons. Finally, while we have no statistics on either who might leave if we ordain female deacons, or who is leaving now because we don't, we can point to the thousand years of an active ordained female diaconate with no evidence that there was any division resulting from it. The St. Phoebe Center believes that ordaining women as deaconesses with good church order will not be a source of division, but will in fact be healing because of the blessings and benefits that will result.

**In conclusion**, we want to express a deep disappointment in the comments that appeared in the chat on YouTube and in the remarks on Facebook. This behavior was disgraceful, not worthy of

people who call themselves Christians, and not healthy for the Church. In addition, some members of our Board have suffered personal insults and verbal attacks even beyond the comments in the chat. This vitriol is manifestly driven by that spirit adversarial to the Spirit who enlivens the Church and must be called out and rejected by every person of faith.

You can listen to the **full recordings** of the interviews of our board and advisory board members here:

[https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/aftodaylive/the\\_orthodox\\_deaconess\\_combined\\_interviews](https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/aftodaylive/the_orthodox_deaconess_combined_interviews)

- i) Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost - 1:08:05
- ii) Dr. Valerie Karras - 3:16:20
- iii) Dr. Helen Theodoropoulos - 7:48:47