



**Orthodox**  
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# Should Our Holy Orthodox Church Begin Ordaining Women to the Diaconate?

By **Dr. Mary Ford**,  
in collaboration with  
**Dr. David C. Ford**

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**SAINT CONSTANTINE**  
COLLEGE

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***Introduction***

First of all, in this context, we want to express much appreciation for all of the women in our Holy Orthodox Church who desire to serve our Church and Her people in more dedicated ways, as well as those who wish to encourage other women to take a more active role in church life. In addition, we presume that all those interested in this topic are in agreement that *all of the laity*, both female and male, should be greatly encouraged by our clergy to discern, develop, and exercise their ministerial gifts, whatever those may be—to devote their time, energy, and various talents to serving those in the parish, and those beyond the parish, in the Name of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit (see Eph. 4:11-13).

While we recognize that some Orthodox Christians believe that a female diaconate with a liturgical role similar to a male deacon's is needed in our Church today, we strongly disagree that there is such a need, or that it would be advisable, for the reasons outlined below. There are already a multitude of opportunities for lay ministry,<sup>1</sup> and sometimes Orthodox laity, both

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<sup>1</sup> Such lay ministerial/service opportunities, among others, for both men and women, which many women are already doing, include singing in the church choir; choir directing; being an iconographer; hospital visitation and/or chaplaincy, prison visitation and/or chaplaincy, nursing home visitation and/or chaplaincy; visitation to, or work in, crisis pregnancy centers, spousal abuse residences, etc.; Seminary teaching; church school teaching; catechists; holding positions in Orthodox jurisdictional administration; serving as members on Seminary and/or jurisdictional boards and committees; leading parish study groups of various sorts; engaging in one-to-one conversation/counseling to hurting individuals inside and outside the Church; writing books, such as on Orthodox theology and spiritual life; serving as editors and in other ways for Orthodox publishing houses; giving lectures in parishes and elsewhere; serving as members of women's service groups, such as Philoptochos and the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Women of North America; serving as parish council members, including holding any of the offices of parish council administration; as well as having the important role of godmother. An additional very special role for women is that of being female monastics, including abbesses. And especially important are the clergy wives, who often play a vital role in parish life in their own right, as well as supporting their husbands' role as priest. And of course, the most obvious, yet often overlooked, role for married women is that of mother and child-raiser, whose God-given commission is to have a crucial role in raising their children in

women and men, need to hear the message: “You don’t need to be ordained to serve Christ and His Holy Church!”

We also believe that respectful conversation about this topic, which includes so many aspects that touch on vitally important elements in the life of the faithful, can help us all to enter more deeply into the endless riches of our liturgical life and of Orthodox spiritual wisdom. From such discussions, prayerfully undertaken, we all may benefit in many unforeseen ways, as only our Lord knows.

As a step towards such conversations, we offer the following observations for general consideration, in a spirit of respect and Christian love.

### ***The St. Phoebe Center Statement***

At the Tenth Anniversary Conference of the St. Phoebe Center, held November 10-12, 2023, a statement was issued providing, apparently for the first time, suggested specific details regarding qualifications (background, education, training) for women to be considered for ordination to the diaconate, as well as details regarding the duties, both liturgical and pastoral, of hoped-for female deacons.<sup>2</sup> This specificity, which has been lacking up until now among those calling for “the restoration of the order of deaconess” in our Church, is very welcome and helpful, because people otherwise can be calling for the same thing in name, but meaning something quite different.

The statement by the St. Phoebe Center makes it clear that their desire is for deaconesses to have a major liturgical role in the divine services, doing all the same things that male deacons do. As they state:

With the ‘major orders’ ordination, or *cheirotomia*, a deaconess would meet the traditional criteria for fulfilling a variety of liturgical roles. These would include all of the liturgical functions in which male deacons serve. For example: a deaconess could offer petitions, cense during Vespers and Orthros, read the Gospel within the Liturgy, join in processions (Small Entrance, Great Entrance, Vespers entrances, etc.), help with preparing the Holy Gifts, give sermons during the Liturgy, helping with giving Communion to the faithful, and take the sacrament of Communion to those who are ill or confined to their homes. All of these liturgical duties are the extension and expression of the sacramental ministry of the deaconess conferred upon her in ordination.<sup>3</sup>

However, there is not any evidence that deaconesses ever did any of these things listed in the past in the Orthodox Church.<sup>4</sup> Just last month, even a member of their own Advisory

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the Church, abundantly and richly nurturing their spiritual lives.

<sup>2</sup> That statement can be found here: <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/proposed-guidelines/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Icons of St. Phoebe, or of any other deaconesses, such as St. Olympia the Deaconess, do not show them holding a censer (although nuns currently do cense in some monasteries). Yet, the official logo of the St. Phoebe

Board of the St. Phoebe Center—a scholarly specialist on such things—Dr. Valerie A. Karras, stated categorically, “There is no evidence that female deacons in the early of Byzantine church chanted petitions at liturgical services.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, given these specifics, along with the call in their statement for married women under 40 years of age to be eligible (also not the rule for deaconesses in the past), along with not specifying anything in the envisioned duties that *only* women can do, it seems clear to us that their desire is *not really* for the *restoration* of the ancient order of deaconess, but for *a new liturgical role for women* that would not be in alignment with the fundamental symbolism of Orthodox liturgical worship, which we discuss below.

Their statement also emphasizes the perceived need for “church-sanctioned” women to do many pastoral activities, all of which are included in the ones we’ve just listed in our first footnote. All of these ministries are already, or could easily and simply become, “church-sanctioned,” it would seem, by having a special blessing given by one’s bishop and/or priest. An individual could even request such a blessing. Parishes often have special prayers, and even blessing with holy water, or anointing with blessed oil, for parishioners who have important roles in the parish, such as Church School teachers and parish council members. Sometimes a bishop gives a special blessing to a priest’s wife at the end of her husband’s ordination. Some publishers request that the author have his/her priest’s blessing to submit a book for publication. This kind of blessing would be completely in line with long-standing traditions.

Furthermore, as Diana Grina has pointed out, the roles of the early deaconesses that are still applicable in modern times have already been undertaken by sisterhoods, nuns, and other lay ministries. The largest, and oldest, formal “church-sanctioned” organization for lay women’s ministries is Philoptochos in the Greek Archdiocese, with some 26,000 members in 400 chapters in local parishes. As she says, “Its official mission is to serve widows, orphans, the poor, and the sick. It includes a dedicated Social Services 'hotline' to address the very issues the St. Phoebe Center states are not [currently being] addressed.”<sup>6</sup> She says that this decades-old, “church-sanctioned” women’s ministry is basically being ignored as insignificant by the St. Phoebe Center because the women are not ordained. This would seem to be a rather extreme case of clericalism, in our view.

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Center depicts an icon of St. Phoebe showing her swinging a censer, even though at the time in which she lived, deacons were primarily tasked with “waiting on tables” (Act 6:2-3).

<sup>5</sup> Valerie A. Karras, “Regarding the Historical Female Diaconate,” on the blog of the online journal called *The Wheel*, for January 2, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> From Diana Grina, in a private e-mail (which we quote from with her permission). She also notes, “In 1956, for the first time, the Philoptochos held its annual meeting jointly with the National Clergy-Laity. That coordination launched the Philoptochos into a major ministry within the Archdiocese. Instead of deaconesses, women enrolled in St. Basil’s Academy to be trained as Orthodox teachers for the orphanage. Then males were added. The program was later moved to HCHC. Hence Philoptochos and the orphanage were the seed of theological study for females. The history of St. Basil’s is summarized in an anniversary youtube video. Over the years, as more parishes were established, Philoptochos grew—with every parish having a local chapter. Archbishop Michael’s call was answered in a way nobody expected, and this has been ignored.”

Clear reasons are not given in the St. Phoebe Center’s statement for why such “church-sanctioning” needs to be “enhanced” through formal ordination. If women don’t need to be ordained to perform the multitude of roles we’ve listed (including even being a hospital chaplain), then, we wonder, why should this change be made now? Why is the push for this change happening now? Is this something arising organically from within the Church, or from outside, non-Orthodox, even secular sources? Would it be wise to allow outside sources to override several thousand years of Tradition? These are questions that we feel need be explored and taken seriously. Our thoughts regarding these questions, and others, we respectfully offer in what follows.

Before we address other aspects of this statement from the St. Phoebe Center, we will consider the clearly interrelated, threefold ministry of deacon/priest/bishop, and the symbolism this assumes and always communicates, since how this is understood seems to be at the heart of the current differing views among Orthodox Christians about women’s ordination. Other ministries, such as counseling or teaching, which many women are already successfully doing in a wide variety of contexts, as we’ve mentioned above, and as the St. Phoebe Center’s statement acknowledges, are not under consideration in this article.

### *The Necessary Sacramental Worldview*

Any discussion about women serving as ordained deacons, or priests, we very much feel should start with a proper understanding of our Church services and architecture, including all the symbolism that’s involved, in order for us all to have a much deeper understanding of what’s involved in ritual, liturgical actions, and the different ways people know (beyond propositional knowledge). How do such actions impact us? What does our Lord intend for us to gain through rituals? Then we will be in a better position to discuss the symbolism itself.

But in this essay, we can only focus on some major features of the symbolism. When it’s constructed in a traditional manner, the church building itself, and all the liturgical actions within it, are one integrated whole—resulting in a flowering forth of our Orthodox theology, rooted as it is in Holy Scripture, and connected to it in a myriad of ways through powerful *symbolism and imagery*. And for a proper understanding of all of this to happen, one essential element is the necessity of having the *proper interpretive context*—something which is crucial for interpreting *anything* accurately. Hence, we must be aware of which interpretive context we are bringing to our consideration of the Church and what happens in its liturgical services.

The architecture of our churches, and the liturgical services, were developed in a time and place when biblical symbolism was generally well understood, when the largely Christianized culture embraced a sacramental understanding of the world that was already present in the Old Testament: that everything material—including human bodies—points in a meaningful and real way to spiritual realities. As St. Basil the Great (4<sup>th</sup> century) said, building on Scripture in a way characteristic of the Tradition as a whole, the world “is really a school where reasonable souls exercise themselves, the training ground where they learn to know God:

*since by the sight of visible and sensible things the mind is led, as by a hand, to the contemplation of invisible things.*<sup>7</sup>

To give one more of many possible examples, St. Maximus the Confessor (7<sup>th</sup> century) also conveys this understanding when he says, "To those who have eyes to see, all the invisible (spiritual) world is mysteriously presented in symbols of the visible world."<sup>8</sup> St. Maximus also says that "traces of God's own majesty are intermingled with sensible things . . . These traces of God's majesty are able to *transport the human mind*, which uses them as a vehicle."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, this symbolism of the visible world is not the result of arbitrary human imagination, nor is it only a collection of human projections, making God after our own image, or only reflecting some particular time period's culturally conditioned, flawed understanding of people. Rather, it's that God has *created* reality to be iconic, to participate in the transcendent,<sup>10</sup> so that through the visible creation, people not only can know *about* God, but we can also really *know Him experientially*. And we can know what are the foundational spiritual laws/patterns/realities that we should align ourselves with, and how they operate—in other words, how reality really works.

This sacramental worldview, and the symbolism that has been revealed within it which is used in our Church's architecture and liturgical services, is thus not merely decorative or arbitrary, an optional "add-on" that we can change, even if some might think there are reasons to do so in a particular time and place. For all the symbolism reflects and instructs us about true reality. Attempts to change it will result in a false picture of reality, of the cosmic order as it's been created to be, which we need to align ourselves with, to be in harmony with, if we wish to flourish as human beings, especially as Orthodox Christians.

It seems to us that this is largely why suggested changes such as ordaining women as deacons and priests are reacted against so strongly by so many Orthodox (and other) Christians. This includes many prayerful, highly educated and professionally successful women, who obviously do not have a problem with women taking leadership roles in secular arenas, even if perhaps they can't clearly articulate why they feel so strongly that in the Church women should not be leading the liturgical services. Indeed, all of this is so complex that it's difficult to articulate most of what's involved even in an article of this length.

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<sup>7</sup> Hexamaeron, Homily 1.6 (NPNF 2, vol. VIII, p. 55; my emphasis). As St. Ephrem the Syrian said, "because that Being is hidden, He has depicted it by means of what is visible" (quoted in Mary Ford, *The Soul's Longing: An Orthodox Christian Perspective on Biblical Interpretation* [South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2016], p. 84).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by St. Nikolai Velimirovich in *The Universe As Symbols and Signs: An Essay on Mysticism in the Eastern Church* (Libertyville, IL: Serbian St. Sava Monastery, 1950), pp. 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Quaestiones ad Thalassium 51; quoted by Paul M. Blowers, *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor: An Investigation of the Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, p. 110; our emphasis. This language is meant to indicate that real knowledge of God is possible in this way.

<sup>10</sup> For a cogent discussion of this topic, see, for instance, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (SVS Press, 1977), Appendix One; and Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Eerdmans, 2011).

However, in a culture like ours, which does not understand such symbolism, which is awash in worldviews alien to what Jesus Christ revealed, surely it's *more important than ever* for us to maintain these basic, divinely-given structures and ways of thinking—for they can help us recover and/or maintain the proper sacramental worldview. An increasing number of people, including non-Orthodox scholars such as Hans Boersma, are realizing the critical importance of recovering this sacramental/symbolical understanding of the world which is so fundamental to all traditional Christianity.

This doesn't mean that there is only one, specific way to express these symbols in this sacramental worldview. There are many, and perhaps there could be countless, very distinct ways all of this has been, or could be, appropriately expressed in a variety of cultures. For example, Greek, Russian, and Romanian architecture, iconography, and music are all distinctly different, in harmony with their own climates, landscapes, and history. Yet they are using the same grammar and the same basic vocabulary—they're speaking the same language within the same basic biblical, sacramental worldview, only with different, distinct dialects.

But just as in the case of material reality, our Church architecture and liturgical services can only teach us about spiritual realities *if* we know how to speak this language—if we know how to “read” it. We have to be able to read the “language” actually being used in *the proper interpretive context*. And it very much seems to us that nothing that is particular to our secular materialist culture can help us with that, because secular materialism denies the sacramental character of the world. It insists that material things, including human bodies, are just ends in themselves—they don't point to anything beyond themselves, except perhaps in a totally arbitrary, or decorative way.

Advocating that women should help lead liturgical services as a deacon or priest does, implies that the iconic function of male and female built into the traditional practices is merely decorative. This further implies that nothing will be lost by changing those practices to better reflect a contemporary—and in fact secular—understanding. One key fundamental difference between those in favor of women having such roles, and those opposed, is how they answer the following question: does this sacramental/symbolic/iconic character of male and female actually communicate important knowledge about reality, or is it merely decorative?

Of course, it's also true that all people will inescapably be influenced by their culture in various ways, and probably every culture has a mix of worldviews—ours certainly does. The older Christian understanding is not entirely lost, which in any case is based in reality. So for those with eyes to see, it's always at least to some degree accessible.

Addressing the needs of our current culture surely must include the need for this traditional way of understanding the world to be recovered. Indeed, many of the longings that people in our culture have (for instance, the longing for meaning—including for deeply meaningful worship and ritual participation—for hope, for a holistic, integrated way of understanding the world and our place in it, etc.) could be met if this sacramental/symbolic worldview were to spread on a wider scale.

Like many in our culture, however, all too frequently Orthodox Christians appear to be unaware of the interpretive “lenses” they are looking through. Many of our churches in the US are often not very traditional in terms of their architecture, for a variety of reasons. This no doubt adds to the temptation for some Orthodox in the US to think of the church building and what happens in our services through the lens of an alien worldview, with perhaps even the presuppositions of the anti-sacramental, secular and/or Protestant context so extensive in the US today.

Indeed, many people today, probably quite unconsciously, are using the very anti-sacramental lens of a Marxist-inspired, post-modernist worldview that’s so prevalent in the media and educational institutions. This worldview understands *the key inherent pattern of reality to be binaries in conflict*, as in a master/slave, oppressor/oppressed relationship, necessitating the struggle of the oppressed to get free from oppression (as, e.g., the only way to be authentic, to have justice, etc.).

This conviction about the inevitable conflict of binaries is the key inherent pattern for reality that’s picked up by everyone from Marx, to Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir, to Judith Butler (who wants to eliminate the male/female binary altogether as being inevitably oppressive). It would seem that this approach logically arises from, and resonates with, the thought of the Protestant Reformers, who saw so much in terms of conflicting binaries: Scripture alone, not Tradition; faith alone, not works; divine election alone, no cooperation of man through free-will; etc.

### *Hierarchy and Ways of Honoring*

Closely connected to this is the misunderstanding of hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> Because in this view hierarchies are understood to be *always* oppressive, and because differences always lead to a hierarchy of some kind, *differences* are therefore understood to always lead to oppression and conflict. Most people don’t want oppression or conflict; so in this view, we should try to eliminate oppression and conflict by either *eliminating differences*, or *neutralizing* the differences by claiming that everything is equally good, equally valued, existing without any hierarchical ranking or positioning. Hence the huge push in our day for *egalitarianism*.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, in this view, women *must* be allowed to do everything men do, or else they are “oppressed.” So not only the many natural differences between men and women, but also differences in general must be *neutralized* as much as possible, resulting in the current widespread endorsement of multi-culturalism (which at least in theory teaches that all cultures

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<sup>11</sup> Why that Marxist-aligned view is fundamentally wrong, as well as the proper understanding of hierarchy and a Christian understanding of the key inherent pattern of reality, is explained in some detail in the following articles by Mary Ford: “Hierarchy, Authority, and the Mystery of Male and Female,” in *Healing Humanity: Confronting Our Moral Crisis* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Publications, 2020); and “By Whose Authority? Sexual Ethics, Postmodernism, and Orthodox Christianity,” in *Christian Bioethics* (Oxford Univ. Press), volume 26, issue 3 (December, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> What author Richard Weaver called “equalitarianism” back in 1948.



are equally good), as well as the endorsement of the active homosexual lifestyle as being just as good as a heterosexual one.

However, minimizing differences easily leads to the belief that truth is relative—you have “your truth”; I have “my truth.” If there aren’t significant differences resulting from different beliefs, then it doesn’t really matter what people believe. And then, there’s no “judging” of others’ behaviors because there either are no differences, or all the differences are insignificant. Thus, all beliefs and lifestyles are held to be equally valid, and equally good.

In this current societal worldview, the goal above all, is to get rid of oppression. That’s why things are always framed in terms of oppression. For example, for some of those currently advocating for ordaining women, “patriarchal” male oppression is explicitly held to be the primary reason that women haven’t been “allowed” to serve liturgically in our Church, in spite of there being no historical evidence that that has ever been the reason. Because of the cultural underlying assumptions, it’s simply taken for granted that “patriarchal oppression” *must* be the reason if women aren’t doing something like leading liturgical services.<sup>13</sup> And this in spite of much evidence that it’s this same Christian Church from the early centuries that has pushed the surrounding culture to treat women more and more equally under the law, etc.—see below).

To repeat, wherever this post-modernist/Marxist view is at work, the goal is to get rid of oppression; and in order to do that you have to get rid of hierarchy; and in order to do that, you have to get rid of differences, because that’s the ultimate source of hierarchy, and thus—according to this view—the ultimate source of oppression. This results in an immense effort in our day to assure, as much as possible, that no person, or group, or culture, etc., will be considered to be in any sense higher, or better than, or simply ranking before any other. This includes the belief that no one “group,” such as men, should have the “right” to do something that others, like women, can’t do, such as lead liturgical services.

It’s also very important to understand, we believe, that in this view oppression doesn’t come from human sin, but from the way things are set up. This also goes back at least to Luther and the other Protestant Reformers, who believed that the problems in the Roman Church were not from human sin, but were embedded in the institution itself, in the way things were set up. In this view, something *external to people* is seen to be the problem; so the institution, the system, has to be changed, or even destroyed, and a new system set up.

Post-Modernists have the same basic thought: the problem is not human sin, to be solved by personal repentance and the ascetic and sacramental life of the Church. Rather, the problem, the cause of oppression, is considered to be the way things are set up. Only this time, it’s not just about how the Church as an institution is structured and run—it’s about how *all of reality* is set up, including that all humans are created either male or female, and that heterosexuality has

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost, the head of the St. Phoebe Center, states in her recent book *Church of Our Granddaughters* (Cascade Books, 2023): “a ‘woman problem’ in the Orthodox Church is well illustrated. Just because the Orthodox Church has positive connotations with ‘patriarchs’ in an ecclesial sense (the lead bishops), this does not preclude describing the Orthodox Church as patriarchal in the contemporary, descriptive [i.e. derogatory] sense of the word. We should not be tentative or afraid of calling it as it is: women have been far too often diminished, degraded, and disenfranchised in the Orthodox Church *because of its patriarchal ethos*” (p. 3; our emphasis).

always been normative.<sup>14</sup> Hence we see the current fierce attack in our society against these bedrock realities.

In stark contrast, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself never tried to eliminate hierarchy. Rather, He taught and lived that those in positions of authority are called to, and should, *serve* those in a lower rank in the hierarchy with a humble, self-sacrificial spirit. They are never to relate to those “below” them in an arrogant, domineering, oppressive way.

Certainly in the Church, hierarchy, and leadership within hierarchy, is not about having power and oppressing others. The pattern Christ demonstrates is the same pattern St. Paul has in mind when he speaks of male headship (Eph. 5:23; 1 Cor. 11:3).<sup>15</sup> Certainly this calling has not always been lived up to in the course of history—including by some of the clergy. But this does not invalidate the pattern which Jesus Christ Himself set forth to show us that *proper hierarchy* is the ideal, and to show us how proper hierarchy is intended to work.

It seems to us that bringing an inappropriate interpretive context—using the wrong lens—is often *the root cause* for people having misunderstandings of, and/or dissatisfaction with, the traditional ways and patterns. Indeed, it seems very clear to us that to claim that women can/should take a diaconal or priestly role in the liturgical services of the Church indicates, in part, a failure to adequately understand, appreciate, and accept the sacramental/symbolic worldview and theology that are fundamental to Scripture and Orthodox Tradition, the theology which our traditional church buildings and our liturgical services have been carefully crafted not only to convey, but also to give us a lived experience of. All of these show us, through symbols, the transcendent cosmic order ordained by God, our Creator.

Another key difference between those who want to see women ordained to the diaconate and priesthood and those who do not, is how those of each group answer this question: What is it that *demonstrates* the equality of honor and value that the Church’s dogma concerning the identity of nature of men and women surely implies?<sup>16</sup>

In the Church, this has always been indicated in a multitude of ways, beginning with the fact that unlike in Judaism, both women and men (and girls and boys) are fully initiated *in the same way*, through the same sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation. Thus, both sexes are fully part of the royal priesthood of all believers prophesied in Exodus (see below). In the Church, in addition to Baptism and Chrismation, women and men are both able to participate in the primary mysteries of the Church, such as Confession, Unction, and most significantly,

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<sup>14</sup> The tiny number of people who are born with some sex characteristics of both sexes does not invalidate this fact. Even for them, one sex is virtually always more dominant.

<sup>15</sup> We can add here that in the historic Christian understanding, the husband’s headship over his wife means that he is to serve her, even to give his life for her, in self-sacrificial servanthood—which indeed is how *all hierarchical leadership* is meant to be lived. This pattern of male headship naturally applies also to the Church, “the household of God,” with the priest being called “Father,” as the leader and shepherd of his flock, who “begets” the faithful in their baptism, their rebirth. This pattern parallels each household of married persons in the parish being a “little church,” led in love by the husband, the priest of his home, and father to his children. Since a woman can never be a father, this is another reason why women cannot be priests—or deacons, since each deacon is a potential priest.

<sup>16</sup> The idea that women have equality of nature with men, and therefore should have equality of honor with them, was largely unknown prior to Christianity. It’s widely attested that these principles clearly derive from Christianity.

reception of Holy Communion, the Lord's very Body and Blood. (Interestingly, in the Middle Ages, some Christians criticized the Jews for not treating women equally in that their primary initiation rite, circumcision, is only for men.)

Furthermore, both women and men have a crucial liturgical role in praying the liturgy, worshiping the one true God (the Orthodox priest cannot serve a liturgy by himself). Women, along with men, are also both able equally to attain to the highest possible goal for human beings—deification—no matter what their income, social status, degree of success in the world, etc. Both sexes are able to become formally recognized as canonized Saints, Saints whom both men and women appeal to for their help through their holy prayers.

Both women and men have experienced miraculous healings and other miracles through the prayers of these Saints—both female and male. It's also true that during their lifetimes, saintly people, both female and male, are sought out by both men and women for their wisdom/teaching, for guidance in how to live their lives, and for various kinds of healing. Their words were truly authoritative, not because of their ordination status in the Church, but because they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Their very presence was instructive and healing, because of their transparency to Christ.

Our impoverished secular culture has none of these ways of demonstrating *the equality of nature, honor, and value of women and men*: there are no initiation rites, no mysteries, no sacraments, no ultimate goal beyond being successful in your job/career, no formal recognition that this highest "status" has been achieved—other than maybe achieving a title like CEO. This means that virtually the *only* way to indicate, or even prove, the equality of honor and value of women and men in the secular culture dominating our country is *by allowing women to do the same jobs as men*, and to be equally successful in those jobs. (It seems that the other primary way of receiving honor in our culture today is by claiming a marginalized/victim status, something which is not really available to everyone—in contrast to life in the Church, whose primary ways of honoring/showing equality are available to all people.) When the secular culture is providing one's main interpretive context (at least on this issue), all the ways the Church has always honored and valued women as equal to men become difficult to see, because there are no parallels in the secular culture.

This belief that equality/sameness/identity of nature always necessitates equality/sameness/identity of function or role is completely without precedent in our Tradition, and it's a grave error. It leads to serious misunderstanding of the Tradition, such as that reflected in the statements of some proponents of female deacons, that *because* our Church is not ordaining women to the diaconate, She is failing to "live up" to Her own theology—Her bedrock understanding that women are absolutely equal to men in nature.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Dr. Frost makes this very mistake when she states about the lack of altar girls in our Orthodox Church, "The experience of the Orthodox community seeing only boys and not girls offered the honor of altar service and liturgical experience only perpetuates the misbegotten perception of girls (and therefore women) as unworthy and unfit for ministerial leadership in the local church, and as second-class citizens in the church at large" (*Church of Our Granddaughters*, p. 80). It seems to us that this sentiment is a clear example of this error—that if there is not sameness of role and function for women and men, then this proves that women must be being considered as not being equal in nature, honor, and importance with men.

So, even though it's probably not conscious, for those promoting women's ordination, it very much appears that this secular need is being overlaid upon, and being allowed to triumph over, the Church's much deeper, richer, and almost 2,000-year traditional ways of honoring and valuing women as equal. With this secular need as their interpretive context, it's no wonder they feel women are not being treated and honored as being fully equal to men, or "fully welcomed" in our Church, or even "fully human," as one Board member of the St. Phoebe Center has said recently.<sup>18</sup> They believe that will be the case unless, and until, women can have the same roles, and do the same "jobs," as men traditionally have done.

Our liturgical services are consciously and carefully intended to raise us above "everyday" fallen reality. When properly understood, the services reveal the many fundamental lies the secular worldview contains. The services are intended to give us the opportunity to experience a foretaste of our ultimate goal, the Kingdom of Heaven, a return to Paradise fulfilled, the future renewed world where God "fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23),<sup>19</sup> while at the same time recognizing that we are not yet in that Kingdom, and cannot live as if we are. There is a permanent and positive tension between the "already" and the "not yet."

Strengthened by the experience of the Divine Liturgy in our own spiritual lives, with God's grace, we can "depart in peace," so that we can also help bring the fallen world closer to what God originally intended it to be. Orthodox theology, and the way of worship it has inspired, safeguards the best, surest path to *theosis*, the ultimate and highest goal that human beings can have, as is evident by the many Saints—both women and men, both known and unknown—who have flowered forth through living in this traditional Orthodox way.

### ***The Proper Interpretive Context: Some Specifics***

What more precisely do we mean by all this? First, in order to understand the pattern of traditional Orthodox Church architecture and what takes place in the liturgical assembly, all of it must be considered as an integrated whole in the context of all of Holy Scripture—in particular, the Temples in Scripture—just as the New Testament itself must be considered in light of the Old, with both being held together in a permanent dialogue with each other. This is the proper context in which to understand what's happening, and should happen, in our Church services. Everything is organized to be both a continuation, and an appropriate transformation, of what was revealed in the Old Testament in terms of key symbols, images, and theology (including parts of pre-Christian Jewish theology), all *transformed* in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ and the inspired New Testament.

For example, considered in the appropriate context, we see that the nave of the Orthodox Church is, in part, the architectural equivalent of the Holy Place in the Jerusalem Temples. In Old Testament times, only the all-male priests, who were only from *one* of the 12 tribes (the

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. Carrie Frederick Frost, interview with Katherine Kaleidis, January 31, 2024, *The Wheel* blog, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxNyrpNDpUs> (beginning at about 24:50).

<sup>19</sup> Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 59.

tribe of Levi), could enter—or even look inside—the Holy Place.<sup>20</sup> But now, *all* Orthodox Christians—women and men, from every tribe, race, class, age, economic status, mental ability, etc.—simply by virtue of the grace they have received in their Baptism and Chrismation, are welcomed to stand and worship in this equivalent of the Holy Place—a very privileged place indeed.<sup>21</sup> For whoever they are, receiving these sacraments has made them part of the “royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

Thus, all baptized, chrismated Orthodox Christians, already being part of this royal priesthood, have received grace to become holy (of course, they each must activate this grace in their own lives). As is well known, becoming holy, acquiring the Holy Spirit more and more fully, so that we have Christ dwelling in us, so that we will “inherit eternal life,” is the ultimate goal of all of our lives as Christians—and simply as human beings. Acquiring more grace to help one better serve the Lord is thus possible for all Christians—it does not depend upon being ordained. That more grace will lead to more spiritual struggle/warfare is a basic principle of spiritual life. This additional grace, even of ordination, can grow less, and even be lost. Ordination is not a kind of “short-cut” simply to receive more grace, as some seem to think.

Helping to encourage and facilitate spiritual growth is also, naturally, the primary goal of the Liturgy. The main reasons we need to go to Church, then, are first of all, for us to worship God as *members of the Body of Christ*—not as separate individuals—being physically present in the community of the Church, an action which is an awesome privilege, as already the Prophet King David indicates when he says to God, “But who am I, and who are my people, that we may be able so willingly to make this offering to You?” (1 Chron. 29:14, in connection with the building of the first Jerusalem Temple). Secondly, and even more importantly, we also come to Church to prepare ourselves prayerfully to receive the most astonishing—and humbling—gift of the life-giving Body and Blood of our Lord—without which, as the Lord Himself teaches, we cannot have eternal life (John 6:53-54).

All baptized and prepared Orthodox Christians from every tribe, race, class, age, economic status, mental ability, etc.—both female and male—can participate as fully as they are capable of in this worship, prayer, and Eucharistic communion, the climax of liturgical worship. All are equally charged to do their best to achieve the highest possible goal for a human being—to become holy, and they all have the equal possibility to become holy in their current respective roles. And thus, by virtue of their Baptism and Chrismation, they also *already possess grace for ministry*—grace to serve and to *witness*, ideally through all aspects of their lives, to the reality of Jesus Christ and all that He has revealed through His life and words.

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<sup>20</sup> There’s much more going on than this, but it’s too involved to go into here, and not necessary for understanding what’s being said. This is discussed in more detail in two forthcoming publications by Mary Ford.

<sup>21</sup> It is surely in making *this very point* that St. Paul says, in the very often quoted and misinterpreted passage in Galatians 3:26-28, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Surely St. Paul is *not* saying here that once you are a baptized Christian you are no longer either male or female, slave or free, of Jewish or Gentile background! He certainly continued to claim his own Jewishness, and maleness for instance.

The liturgical/sacramental diaconate and priesthood is a separate, special kind of ministry with a very particular symbolism inseparable from it. The priest primarily stands in the altar area which is, in part, the equivalent of the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament Tabernacle and Temples, where only the High Priest could go only once a year—the High Priest, who was a type of Christ, THE True High Priest (Heb. 2:17-18, 4:14-16, 8:1-3, 9:11-14). Thus, every priest reflects, in part, this High Priestly role that Christ had. Thus, in part he reflects Jesus Christ Himself.

The three-part structure of the Church is also understood to reflect both the three-part structure of the cosmos (earth, the heavens, and above the heavens), and the three-part structure of the human being (body, soul, *nous*). One function of the worship space, then, is to help the believers internalize this interconnectedness—especially that Christ, THE High Priest, is called to dwell *at the altar of their hearts*. St. Paul speaks of the mystery of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27); and also “that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith” (Eph. 3:17).

This understanding further ties into the teachings on *prayer of the heart*, on perceiving the presence of God in the heart (one’s spiritual center) through the *nous*. And if it is Christ Who is dwelling in your heart, *at the altar of your heart*, as High Priest, it seems evident that He—Who became incarnate as a male human being—should be represented by a man in the physical three-part church building, which is the parallel model to the human person. All this imagery is intentionally profoundly interconnected.

In the liturgical drama of the Orthodox services, the priest represents Christ, THE High Priest *only sometimes*. Sometimes he is just himself, and sometimes he represents the people (the Church/the *ecclesia*). But we can also say that he *always* represents his bishop. Not only is the priest *not* an independent agent; he is precisely the *representative* of his bishop, symbolically *re-presenting* him. And the bishop, in the line of Apostolic Succession, represents/*re-presents* Christ Himself, Who became Incarnate as a male.

Hence, the Apostles were all males; and every bishop in our Church ever since has been a male. That the bishop is understood as representing/*re-presenting*, and hence imaging, the Lord Jesus Christ is also seen, when the bishop is absent, in the practice of having an icon of Christ depicted as the High Priest placed on the chair, or throne, where the bishop sits when he is present.

The liturgical diaconate has been understood historically as the third and initial “level” of the clerical orders. It has from very early times been the mandatory prerequisite for ordination to the priesthood—and also to the episcopacy. Though not identical, all three ranks of ministerial service are so closely linked that one *necessarily* precedes the other. So the basic symbolism for all three of these offices is essentially the same, even if some deacons never become priests. But because every deacon *has the potential* for being made a priest, and actually does some things liturgically that a priest does if there is no deacon, each one represents, and symbolizes, a future priest—just as every priest can possibly some day become a bishop, even though most priests never actually become bishops.

All of this means that the possibility of a liturgical female diaconate cannot seriously be discussed apart from its inevitable connection with possible female priesthood and female episcopacy (for, again, the priest represents his bishop). The St. Phoebe Center’s statement does include these words: “It should be noted that, unlike male deacons, women deacons are not potentially eligible for ordination to the priesthood.” However, because of the close interconnection of the clerical orders, a female diaconate would inevitably lead to calls for a female priesthood and eventually a female episcopate (as it has for every other Christian group that has the three-fold ministry of deacon/priest/bishop), and as certain prominent members of this group have indicated they hope will occur. Indeed, a prominent member of the St. Phoebe Center has written that an additional reason for having female deacons is that this would mean that female “voices” would have more authority *when* discussion of women being ordained as priests comes up.<sup>22</sup> This clearly indicates that, at least for those saying this, what they have in mind actually includes the eventual ordination of women to the priesthood (and then, inevitably, to the episcopacy).

Furthermore, the St. Phoebe Center, on their official website, lists as a recommended resource a book by John N. M. Wijndgaards, a Roman Catholic priest who is championing women as priests in his Church. He says in this book, “Catholic scholars generally see the question of women’s admission to the diaconate as linked to their admission to the priestly ministry. This is the opinion of the liturgist Hans Jorissen: ‘The possibility of women receiving the sacramental diaconate stands or falls with the possibility of women receiving the priesthood.’”<sup>23</sup>

In light of all of the above, one can reasonably say, we believe, that ordaining women as liturgical/sacramental deacons and priests would ultimately be *a denial of the reality of the Incarnation*, because Jesus Christ became incarnate *as a man*. Perhaps a rough analogy would be, if you’re going to perform a play about the life of George Washington, if you cast a woman as George, you’re not really doing a play about *his* life any more, but rather making some kind of ironic, post-modern statement.

### ***Male/Female Symbolism***

There is also tremendously important and profound symbolic significance in *our bodies*, including our God-given sexual differentiation. The two sexes of humanity—which do not divide human nature, but are two different, complementary expressions of that very same human nature—are “earthly icons” which powerfully reflect how God, our Father and Creator,

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<sup>22</sup> Please see Carrie Frederick Frost, “A Flourishing Diaconate Will Ground—Not Predetermine—Conversation about Women in the Priesthood,” in Gabrielle Thomas and Elena Narinskaya, *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), pp. 154-155.

<sup>23</sup> *No Women in Holy Orders? The Ancient Women Deacons*;  
[https://www.academia.edu/13610878/NO\\_WOMEN\\_IN\\_HOLY\\_ORDERS\\_The\\_Ancient\\_Women\\_Deacons?](https://www.academia.edu/13610878/NO_WOMEN_IN_HOLY_ORDERS_The_Ancient_Women_Deacons?email_work_card=view-paper)  
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fashions us out of nothing for the purpose of filling us with His Love, Joy, and Peace forever, in an eternal communion with Him. He is the *Giver*; while we, His creation, are the *receivers*.<sup>24</sup>

This relationship is reflected in our basic human biology: the husband and father is the “giver”—giving his seed to his wife—and she is the “receiver” of that gift which may initiate the creation of a new human being, a new eternal soul. This *primordial biological reality* thus symbolizes and reflects analogically the true Christian understanding of the relationship between the Creator and the created.

Hence, God is most appropriately imaged as male, as our Heavenly *Father*, even though He has no sex, because He is the Archetypal *Giver*. The soul of every person is thus “female” in relation to God, because, in the most primal way, in our relationship with God, He, the Creator, is *always the Giver*, and we human beings, as creatures, are always fundamentally *receivers*.

A powerful New Testament reference to this is when St. Paul says that the relationship between husband and wife is analogous to that of Christ and His Church—the Bridegroom and Bride—in a great “mystery” (Eph. 5:21-32). This is a direct continuation of the Old Testament’s divinely inspired references to God as the “husband” married to Israel (Is. 54:5-6; Hosea 2:2-23). Yet now this imagery is transformed in Christ, though in a way that is a recognizable continuation as well. For the sacramental understanding of Orthodox theology assumes that such fundamental analogies truly reveal what they are analogies of.

In any case, it’s *only by analogy* that human beings can understand *anything* about what is beyond our sense experience in this fallen world, such as anything about God. And only God Himself is in a position to know enough to give us, through Divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures, *appropriate analogies*, because He is so beyond us that He’s ultimately “incomprehensible” to us.

Thus, it’s essential to understand, we believe, that such key biblical symbols and analogies *are not arbitrary*. If one tries to change this imagery—and such change surely would occur by having female deacons and priests—you can only change it to something arbitrary, something not in continuity. And you would lose all the myriad connections to the symbols and analogies throughout both the Old and New Testaments and the whole Tradition which is a flowering forth of that Holy Scripture.

So, to sum this up, the priest is male because Christ is male; and Christ became incarnate as male because the male role best symbolizes God’s relationship to Creation as the ultimate Giver of it. This is simply how reality is set up. It’s something we can know experientially, as well as through our reason, due to this divinely-inspired analogy.

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<sup>24</sup> See Tim Patitsas, *The Ethics of Beauty*, for his very helpful development of this theme. See also his essay, “Theophany, Liturgy, and the Appearance of Marriage at Three Fractal Levels” (co-authored with Melissa Likiardopoulos), in *Glory and Honor: Orthodox Christian Resources on Marriage* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016).



The use of this analogy is not intended to be a judgment on anyone's value. Whether we like it or not, this is just the truth about reality. And our liturgical practices must reflect this reality if they are to reflect the truth.

Some have asked, since men must take a feminine role *as receivers* in relationship to God, why can't some women take a "masculine" imaging role, and hence be ordained as liturgical/sacramental deacons and priests? One reason they can't is that men have a feminine role *only* in relationship to God, *not to other people*; while women cannot possibly have a "masculine" relationship to God, since He is always the Giver. This "role switching" is, then, only in relationship to God, and not toward other people.

This is not to ignore the fact that occasionally "motherly," feminine imagery/similes are applied to God, probably to make it clear that none of the imagery should be pressed too far. And probably no one would disagree with the fact that men can sometimes have qualities more usually associated with women, and vice versa, without losing their basic, distinctive masculinity or femininity. But the unquestionably primary, and God-given, biblical *analogy* is of God as Father/Husband, and Jesus Christ as the Son/Bridegroom, in part for the reasons given above. In both Scripture and the Tradition, God is never *called* "mother," and Jesus is never called the "bride."

We can add that since basically *everything is symbolic*—and liturgical symbolism is especially deep and powerful—having women as liturgical deacons or priests would necessarily be *symbolizing* a different theology from that symbolized by the male-only liturgical diaconate, priesthood, and episcopacy. In other words, the claim that some women should be ordained as liturgical deacons and priests (and bishops, logically and inevitably) fundamentally *cannot reflect* the same theology as the male-only sacramental priesthood does, because men and women don't symbolize the same things. And because Orthodox theology reflects the way reality, the Creation, is actually "set up," perhaps we could even dare to say that this call for a female diaconate and priesthood can even be seen as ultimately a rejection of reality as it is.

Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) is often misleadingly cited as a well-known authority who has "changed his mind" about the ordination of women to the priesthood. However, first of all, what he meant by "changing his mind" is *not* that he started favoring women's ordination, but that he had come to begin considering it to be "an open question" needing further study. In the very same article, entitled "Why I Have Changed My Mind," he also states about the symbolism of Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church, "*We alter this symbolism at our peril.* For what we are altering will turn out to be not a piece of incidental imagery, but *the substance of the faith.*"<sup>25</sup> From what we've indicated above, this is just as true regarding all of the Church's liturgical symbolism related to Christ, and to God the Father, since all the dimensions of this symbolism are profoundly interwoven.

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<sup>25</sup> Kallistos Ware, Metropolitan of Diokleia, "Why I Have Changed My Mind: Revisiting the Ordination of Women," in *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church*, edited by Gabrielle Thomas and Elena Narinskaya (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), pp. 83-84 (our emphasis).

Advocating for women to fill these liturgical roles that image Christ also reflects *confusion about gender*. Thus it's not surprising—and not a coincidence—that many who believe that women should be ordained as liturgical deacons and priests often also accept other kinds of gender confusion, such as believing that a sexually active homosexual lifestyle is now no longer sinful, or that it's possible to reject the fundamental male-female binary.<sup>26</sup> The common linkage of these two things—ordained women in liturgical roles and the acceptance of homosexuality as something positive—is undeniable in our own time, since virtually every mainline Protestant denomination which has accepted women in a liturgical priestly, sacramental role has also come to accept, at the least, that an active homosexual lifestyle is no longer sinful, and often that it's not even an obstacle to ordination—which formerly required a higher degree of moral purity than that required of the laity.

One also often finds this linkage among Orthodox Christians who advocate for ordaining women to sacramental roles. It seems clear to us that such ideas could only come about in a culture that has lost the sacramental worldview, one that holds that things are “just themselves,” not symbolizing anything else. In such a culture, it's easy to think that analogies formerly recognized as *God-given*, reflecting reality and thus, being permanent, are actually only arbitrary or decorative, because it's now believed that all analogies are arbitrary, culturally conditioned, and/or merely decorative.

### ***Some Relevant Historical Aspects***

Such gender confusion was unheard-of until quite recently, so the early Church Fathers did not have to emphasize the many natural, basic differences between the two sexes, or the deep symbolism of the male/female binary. Rather, one of the greatest efforts they had to make in their day was to address *the general and extreme devaluation of women* that pervaded the pagan world in which they lived. In that world, women had virtually no rights, and were at the mercy of the *paterfamilias*, the head of the family, who had virtually full control over them. For instance, the *paterfamilias* could, at his whim, put to death, for any reason, a child newly born into his family, over against the pleas of the mother.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Lest we imagine that this is not a real possibility for the Orthodox, Fordham University Press has recently published a book advocating this very thing by an Orthodox scholar (*Gender Essentialism and Orthodoxy: Beyond Male and Female*, by Bryce E. Rich). And one of the articles listed as a resource by the St. Phoebe Center, written with primary dependence on the writings of “non-binary” Judith Butler, claims that a mistaken “ideology” of sex is the principal reason for opposition to the ordination of women in the Orthodox Church, and that females should be ordained to all church offices because there will be no sexual differentiation in the Eschaton (Spyridoula Athanasopoulou-Kypriou, “Women’s Ordination and the Eschatological Body: Towards an Orthodox Anthropology beyond Sexual Difference,” in *Deaconesses, the Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology*, edited by Petros Vassiliadis, Niki Papageorgiou, and Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

Yet back in 1993, Fr. John Breck, the highly regarded professor of ethics at St. Vladimir’s Seminary, labeled the blurring of sexual differences the *heresy of unisexism*, calling it “perhaps the Arianism of our day” (Fr. John Breck, Editorial, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, vol. 37 [1993], nos. 2 and 3, p. 108; our emphasis); quoted in the Introduction to *Glory and Honor: Orthodox Christian Resources on Marriage*, p. 12.

Hence, it was a tremendous boon to women for Christianity to declare the absolute equality of women with men in terms of sharing identically the same human nature, and in having implanted within them the same image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). And in order to bolster this truth, and to spread it across the Roman Empire, the Church Fathers emphasized Christ as having taken to Himself *all* of human nature, shared equally by both men and women. In this endeavor, it obviously would have been unhelpful to emphasize Christ's maleness.

This is what explains Paul Ladouceur's observation that "the ancient Fathers focused on the incarnation of the Son of God as *human* (*anthropos, homo*) and had only passing interest in the fact that He was male (*aner, vir*)."<sup>28</sup> In one particular example occurring within the Church, the Cappadocian Fathers, in the late fourth century, had to fight for the full humanity and dignity of women over against the false teachings of the highly influential Diodore, Bishop of Tarsus, who said that women did not fully share in the image and likeness of God.<sup>29</sup>

But now, in our own time, the situation is very different, in light of the current extremes of gender confusion, including the radical blurring of sexual differentiation, and even the challenging of the primordial, God-given male-female binary.<sup>30</sup> Hence, currently there is a vital need to emphasize Christ's maleness as an integral part of His full humanity, which He still retains.<sup>31</sup> The ordained threefold ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon being always fulfilled by men proclaims Christ's real incarnation as a *man*, and can thus be seen as an important corrective to the current culture's blurring of the primal sexual differentiation.

At the same time, we believe there's a compelling need to emphasize the God-given anatomical and psychological/emotional differences between the two sexes. It's so helpful, for example, for children's development, as many studies have shown, to be raised by both a father and a mother.<sup>32</sup> Surely this means that the Lord must have intended the two sexes to have differing roles, at least in some ways—perhaps most especially, the husband's role as self-

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<sup>27</sup> It's only under the influence of Christianity that laws were gradually changed to be more favorable and equally applicable to both men and women, such as laws against adultery, under which previously there was only punishment for the woman involved, and not for the man.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Ladouceur, "The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: A Theological Issue or a Pastoral Matter," in *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church*, p. 170. He refers here to a similar statement by Metr. Kallistos in the metropolitan's article entitled "Man, Woman, and the Priesthood of Christ" in the book, *Women and the Priesthood* (SVS Press, second edition, 1999), p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Rev. Gabrielle Thomas mentions this incident, which was previously pointed out by Sister Nonna (Verna) Harrison, in Thomas's article, "On Being a Priest: In Conversation with St. Gregory Nazianzen," in *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church*, p. 199.

<sup>30</sup> It's even becoming increasingly difficult for professors to teach the facts of basic sexual differences in our time, without being charged with sexism, bigotry, etc. See, for example, Carole K. Hooven, "Academic Freedom Is Social Justice: Sex, Gender, and Cancel Culture on Campus," National Library of Medicine—National Center for Biotechnology Information, January, 2023; <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36344790/>

<sup>31</sup> That He has His same body even after His Resurrection is evident from the post-Resurrection appearances, since He still has the wounds received when He was crucified. This is also indicated by the angels when Christ ascends into Glory, for they assert, "*This same Jesus*, who was taken up from you into Heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into Heaven" (Acts 1:11; our emphasis).

<sup>32</sup> For examples, see Mark Cherry, *Sex, Family, and the Culture Wars* (Transaction Publishers: 2016).

sacrificial head of his wife, protecting and providing for her especially in her vulnerable times of becoming and being a mother, a role which only women can fulfill. Indeed, historically, most women, until very recently, were pregnant, nursing, and/or caring for young children for the better part of their lives, especially since people did not live as long. Even the jobs women often had, such as spinning and weaving, were done at home while caring for babies and young children. So again, the male-only clergy serves as a valuable proclamation of the special, differing, but equally important roles of men and women—something so vital in this age of minimizing sexual differences and roles that has contributed significantly to so much confusion, anxiety, and depression among the youth in our culture.

We recognize that it may well be the case that some Orthodox Christians who support having female deacons and priests are not also in approval of alternative sexual “life-styles” which have been universally condemned by the Church in every time and place as being sinful and to be repented of. And many Orthodox Christians may not be rejecting the male-female binary. But it seems to us that many of the Orthodox faithful who are currently advocating for female clergy in our Church may well not be recognizing the deeper implications, the almost inevitable repercussions, of what they’re supporting, as well as the real, underlying sources of their ideas.

The fact that in the early centuries, in a few places, certain qualified, older women were ordained as deaconesses does not alter any of the above. Most telling, it seems, is the fact that the two primary roles which the deaconesses in the early centuries apparently had were roles that *only women* could fulfill—particularly, visiting women dwelling in the women’s quarters of the home, which were entirely off-limits to men, and anointing females for Baptism in that era of mostly adult, in-the-nude baptisms.<sup>33</sup> Once infant baptisms became the norm, and the custom of having women’s quarters became less common, the need for deaconesses gradually died out very naturally. Hence, very naturally, that office eventually died out as well.<sup>34</sup>

It’s also very telling that although the office of the female diaconate existed in earlier centuries, it was never widespread in the Church even during those times. It never existed in the West to any significant extent: canons passed at councils in the West in the fourth century even condemned the practice. Actually, there’s little to no evidence that there were more than perhaps a few deaconesses in the West after St. Phoebe of Rome, since deaconesses are not otherwise mentioned in the written historical record in the Western Church. And St. Phoebe

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<sup>33</sup> Also, though there’s a lot that’s not clear about their role, we do know that they had to be of a certain age (at least 40 [hence, post-menopausal], if not 50 or 60), celibate, and of spotless reputation and recognized sanctity. They were basically mature nuns. However, the St. Phoebe Center is calling for younger, married women to be eligible for ordination as female deacons.

<sup>34</sup> It’s true that there are rubrics for the ordination of a deaconess in a few 8th-9th century Byzantine manuscripts (apparently only in about a dozen, of about 2000 such manuscripts, which is quite a clear indication it was not actually being used, or only very rarely; see Protodeacon Brian Patrick Mitchell, *The Disappearing Deaconess* [Alexandria, VA: Eremia Publications, 2021], p. 26, n. 73). But even Presvytera Kyriaki Fitzgerald, an advocate of ordained deaconesses, acknowledges that “very few” women were actually ordained. It’s also quite possible that no women were being ordained as deaconesses by that time. The simple fact that rubrics are still in a few manuscripts is not proof that those services were being used at that time.

could not possibly have had a liturgical role, especially in the middle of the first century, when Christian liturgical worship was in the infancy of its development, and especially since the first deacons were ordained, not to serve liturgically, but to “wait on tables” (Acts 6).

In the East also, a female diaconate was not widespread. It existed most prominently in Constantinople—for example, in the time of St. John Chrysostom, who was the archbishop there from 398 to 404.<sup>35</sup> Yet even in its time of prominence, as we quoted Dr. Karras saying above, there is no solid evidence that the deaconesses ever led any prayers during the liturgical services, as male deacons did and still do. And it’s very clear that there never were any women priests, although Christ had many women disciples, who supported His work in a variety of ways. It’s also very clear from the Gospel accounts that Christ never was afraid to do something contrary to social conventions/expectations if it were His will to do so. So surely, if having women priests were the right thing to be done, He would have mandated that it be done, and the Church would have continued the practice.

In light of the above, it would seem that for such an office for women to be seriously considered again, there would at least need to be analogous Church-related functions that *only women* could perform. However, it seems to us that there are no such functions existing at this time.

In certain situations involving women needing special pastoral care and counseling relating to problems specific to women, it’s true that some women may very well feel more comfortable being in conversation with another woman, rather than with a man—even if he is the priest. But qualified Orthodox women are doing this kind of ministry already, especially as psychological counselors and hospital chaplains. Any bishop or priest could give a special blessing to such qualified women and make known their availability in the parish or diocese to help women with certain problems if that were deemed to be pastorally useful. Ordination, it seems clear to us, is not required.

### ***Considering Certain Other Claims, and Additional Reasons for Female Deacons***

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<sup>35</sup> It’s very interesting that in St. John Chrysostom’s 17 letters written to his spiritual daughter and closest confidante, the Deaconess St. Olympia, he never addresses her as “Deaconess”; and neither does he refer to her as being a deaconess. In all his rapturous praises for her, he never mentions her diaconal service, whatever that may have been. It would seem very likely in her case that her title of “deaconess” was mostly honorary, especially as she was also the abbess of a large women’s monastery adjoining the Great Church in Constantinople. She was probably given this title for another reason, it seems clear—in order to assure that her great fortune, which she gained by inheritance, would be kept safely in the care of the Church, which is what she desired, instead of its being vulnerable to being preyed upon by outside interests, especially since she was a young widow connected by blood to the imperial aristocracy (see Mitchell, *The Disappearing Deaconess*, pp. 20-21; Mitchell suggests here that St. Olympia was the first of such wealthy aristocratic women who were made deaconesses in Constantinople for this same reason over the next two centuries or so).

Although in our view the above reasons are some of the most fundamental, they are not the only reasons for keeping the traditional liturgical services to be performed only by men. There are a number of other common “claims” about why this should change, which all very much seem to echo assumptions common in our secular culture.

For example, some claim that not having ordained women indicates that our Church does not value or is not “fully welcoming” to women. In addition to what has been said above, this seems to us to be an astonishing claim in a Church in which *the ideal Christian*, the “highest” human being, is unquestionably a woman (the Theotokos). In addition, we have women Saints who are called “equal to the apostles,” as well as a great number of other women who have achieved the ultimate, highest goal of human life—becoming Saints, and who are recognized as such by the Church and held up to be honored and prayed to by all! We might add, in contrast, there have been very few priests who are canonized saints.

Some also claim that women have never had a “voice” in the Church because they weren’t ordained. However, this claim is false historically, and it seems to betray a real clericalism, as well as an overlooking of actual history. To give a few of the most striking examples, women were responsible for two of the Seven Ecumenical Councils taking place, the most important decision-making bodies in the history of the Church. Empress St. Pulcheria masterminded the calling of the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451, while Empress Irene called the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787. Then, in 843, Empress St. Theodora called the local council in Constantinople that led to the end of iconoclasm once and for all in our Church—a tremendously important event for Orthodoxy. Surely these three women had an incredibly powerful voice in the Church, from any perspective.

To give a few further examples of women’s voices being very much heard in the Church, we can begin with St. Nina, Equal to the Apostles and Enlightener of the nation of Georgia, who was the first to bring the Gospel to that land, converting the Georgian queen, and later, her husband, the king, when he was healed of blindness through St. Nina’s prayers. She continues to have an influence in the Georgian Church today. Another powerful evangelizer was Greatmartyr St. Katherine of Alexandria, who persuaded fifty pagan philosophers, the wisest men in Egypt, of the truth of the Gospel.

Numerous pious queens, such St. Clotilde and St. Bertha, were responsible for their royal husbands converting to Christianity, and for Christianity’s spread in France and Britain. The wife of St. Justinian the Great, another St. Theodora, who ruled with him as co-emperor, certainly had a major “voice” in what happened in the Church and in the empire—for instance, her husband entrusted her with dealing with the Non-Chalcedonians, and her efforts helped lead to the Fifth Ecumenical Council of 553. St. Helena, mother of St. Constantine the Great, and St. Olga, grandmother of St. Prince Vladimir of Kiev, Enlightener of the Rus in 988, also had extremely influential roles in the life of our Church.

There have been many other very holy, highly influential women throughout the history of our Church, such as St. Macrina the Elder, the grandmother of St. Basil the Great, who defended his Orthodoxy by simply saying he had been raised by her. St. Gregory of Nyssa

wrote an entire treatise quoting the words of his wise sister, St. Macrina the Younger, who has been called “the Fourth Cappadocian.” The Desert Mothers, like Amma Syncletica and Amma Sarah, had their wise words collected to be shared with the whole Church, just as was done with the words of the Desert Fathers. St. John Chrysostom—who is still at times slandered as being a “misogynist”—believed that women’s voices were so influential in the Church, in spite of their not being ordained, that he wrote a letter “To the Italian Women,” urging the women in the Roman Church to do all they could to assist him, since their clergy were not helping him as he thought they should have been doing.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to often influential holy women who were later canonized saints, there have always been women in our Church who have had a very important prophetic/charismatic role in Church life. Beginning in Old Testament times and continuing in the early Church, there were numbers of *prophetesses*. This kind of “spiritual apostolic succession,” as Metr. Kallistos calls it, continues to this day, though usually exceptionally holy women who function in a similar way are no longer given the title of prophetess.

Indeed, patriarchs, politicians, and others in prominent positions have consulted holy women throughout history. One outstanding example occurred at the Council of Chalcedon, when the gathered hierarchs asked Holy Martyr St. Euphemia, even from beyond the grave, about 150 years after her martyrdom, to help them discern the truth about Christology. They put two opposing doctrinal statements on her bosom as she lay in her coffin. After three days of intense prayer, they reopened her carefully guarded casket and found in her hand the statement conveying the essence of what would be soon declared as the Chalcedonian Definition, while the erroneous statement was lying at her feet.

In our own time, at least in Orthodox countries, holy women are often consulted by important leaders in Church and State. To give just one example, some years ago, two monks at Holy Trinity St. Sergius Monastery in Russia told us they were going to see a holy woman, who was like Blessed Xenia of St. Petersburg, whom the patriarch and other leaders also consulted.

Yet historically, this important prophetic/charismatic role did not lead anyone to suggest that those holy women should be ordained to the sacramental diaconate/priesthood, for that’s a very different calling and gift. Nor, as far we know, did even one of those holy women request ordination for herself, or for other women—including such holy women of our own time.

If some Orthodox women and girls feel “left out” because they don’t see women serving as deaconesses and priests (“I don’t see anyone who looks like me up there”), this is partly the result, we feel, of a failure to understand not only the profound symbolism of the liturgy, but also a lack of appreciation for the powerful role of the laity in the liturgy, due partly to the dominant culture’s widespread *extreme individualism*, a failure to understand *the oneness of humanity*, and especially *the oneness of everyone within the Body of Christ*—that we are

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<sup>36</sup> The text of this letter is given in David C. Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Vision of St. John Chrysostom* (St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2016), second edition, first appendix.

members of One Body, in which, as with the various parts of the human body, we have different functions.

In the Liturgy, the pronouns used are mostly *us* and *we*: “Let *us* pray to the Lord”; “will send down upon *us*,” “Let *us* attend, that *we* may offer the holy oblation in peace.” And the deacon is saying these things to *all* the laity, since we are *all* offering the Holy Gifts (Fr. Zacharias of St. Sophrony’s monastery in Essex, England, calls this “an exchange of gifts” that *all* the faithful make with Christ). We are all directly involved in the liturgical action, *communally*, through our combined prayer, with wonderful reciprocity between the clergy and the laity.

There aren’t supposed to be any spectators in the liturgical drama—there’s no audience. But often we laypeople, even though we are integrally part of the royal priesthood, don’t really understand and appreciate that we’re called to have a vital role in this drama, and so we act like an audience. We need to be reminded, therefore, that *the work of prayer* is the main work being done in the services, that the priest and deacon, rather like a choir director, are leading *all* the people in this work. Again, like the choir (who represent all the faithful in any case), we are *all* doing the work, so that our role is to devote our full attention, *our whole selves*, to this work of praying the liturgy and preparing to receive Holy Communion.

Some assert that women must be formally ordained in order to effectively fulfill their desire to serve the Church, that ordination would give them needed authority, so that their voices would be better heard,<sup>37</sup> and that otherwise women are not understood to be doing anything “important.” Wanting to have more “authority” is the wrong spirit for the kind of service Christ calls Christians to. Surely that reflects a kind of clericalism which, we would think, no one would want to promote.

The suggestion that deaconesses would be a helpful “bridge” between the laity and the clergy, it seems to us, is an even more extreme example of clericalism—as if there is such a gulf between the two that a novel third mediating order needs to be created. This is an unheard of idea in our Tradition, that, of course, has never been applied to male deacons.

Furthermore, an insistence on the ordination of women by some people in our Church today seems to us to reinforce our surrounding culture’s very unfortunate prevailing view that people are really only of value on the basis of *what they do*, what they accomplish, especially what official roles and positions they hold that bring *public recognition*. The traditional Christian understanding is rather that people are valued for *who they are*, for simply being made in the image and likeness of God, which automatically gives each person infinite worth and worthiness, even if their contributions are hidden from the public and not given monetary compensation by the Church or anyone else. Additionally, isn’t seeking prominence and recognition an indication of a loss of our Tradition’s insistence on humility as one of the two greatest virtues which Christians should strive for, along with love? In fact, it’s generally

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<sup>37</sup> For an example, please see Carrie Frederick Frost, “A Flourishing Diaconate Will Ground—Not Predetermine—Conversation about Women in the Priesthood,” in Thomas and Narinskaya, *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church*, pp. 154-155.



understood that the more public recognition one has, the more temptations to pride one will have, and thus, the harder it will be to have humility.

One often hears from those promoting the acceptance of women as deacons and/or priests that we must follow that path to keep our youth, especially our girls and young women, in the Church, to prove to them that our Church “fully welcomes” them. It’s curious, though, that such people seem to ignore the fact that in liturgical/sacramental denominations<sup>38</sup> where women have been made deaconesses, the result *has not been* an increase in their membership. Rather, these denominations have continued their downward trend, with ever-decreasing numbers of members, and with many fewer men entering the ministry.

These denominations have also all seen women made priests and bishops, sometimes despite assurances that this would never occur if women were only made deaconesses. None of the hoped for gains in membership from these radical changes have materialized for any of the groups involved. Instead, much tumult, along with many schisms, have resulted.

To imagine that this could not happen in the Orthodox Church because it’s the true Church seems very much like the ancient Jews thinking that their Temple could not be destroyed because it was the special dwelling place of the true God. However, Ezekiel saw the glory of God depart from that Temple, and it *was* destroyed, because so many of the people and their leaders were not faithful to the pattern of life which God had commanded. We are only the true Church if we continue to live and proclaim what’s true. If we begin to do and proclaim what is false in order to fit better into the culture, we will no longer be that true Church.

To those who are fearful that our daughters and granddaughters will not remain in our Orthodox Church unless there are at least female deacons, if not priests and bishops, we must first make clear to them, and to all the laity, *why* we attend church in the first place, and what a privileged position we all have in doing so. One might well ask, How is being a member of the Body of Christ the True God, and receiving His very Body and Blood, and being gifted with the same path to deification that even a patriarch has to follow—how is all this not enough for anyone? And actually, the layperson’s path towards our ultimate goal is easier and safer.

It’s so important for all members to realize that our Church is not simply another human institution, intended to operate in the same ways that secular institutions do. Rather, it’s a *Divine and human* institution. This is yet another reason why She does not operate in the same ways that a secular, worldly institution does. As St. Paul declares, “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God” (1 Cor. 2:12). We think our Orthodox spiritual wisdom makes it clear that concern for worldly advancement and official recognition—especially within the Church—while surely a temptation for many, is a spiritually unhealthy desire to have.

Rather, we all need to be centered upon the highest, ultimate goal of salvation and deification. If, instead, our main goal is *worldly advancement*, having power, public

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<sup>38</sup> The situation is different in very low church groups, where the clergy really only have a teaching role—a role that is open to women in our Church also.

acknowledgment, etc., rather than spiritual growth, this different goal will inevitably lead to different means being favored and utilized to reach it.

Sometimes it's stated that the impulse towards calling for deaconesses does not spring from the pressures of the surrounding society, but rather that it arises solely from the precepts of Orthodox theology itself, especially the understanding that women share human nature identically with men. But as we've noted above, *sameness of nature* **does not** demand, or require, or necessarily lead to *sameness of function*. We *already know* that women are fully equal to men in their humanity, in their equally being made in the image and likeness of God. So we don't need to ordain them as deaconesses, or female deacons, to prove or reinforce that fact!

Indeed, all of our Church's members need to understand the importance of *complementarity*, that equality of nature *does not necessarily imply* sameness of function. Rather, men and women are created to complement each other, not to be identical, as if they were interchangeable mechanical units. Since men and women symbolize different, complementary realities, it seems very obvious to us that it can never be the case that women and men should have exactly the same functions, especially in the highly symbolic liturgical assembly of the Church.<sup>39</sup>

Another related error in our culture has been the strong tendency only to really value what men have traditionally done. For example, being a mother and raising children is very much devalued in our time—women are so often told this is a waste of their talents and abilities. However, ironically, if the husband stays at home with the children while the mother works outside the home, he's often praised!

It seems to us that, in addition to what has been mentioned about using the wrong interpretive context, the main additional motivations of those Orthodox faithful who are supporting a female diaconate and priesthood also reflect strong currents in our secular culture—such as the desire to be “kind” by making everyone feel included in everything (even when that is not appropriate); by making everyone “win” (even when that is not helpful, because it's not a preparation for actual life); excessively trying to avoid hurting people's feelings (it is never effective leadership to take that approach); and avoiding the mere appearance of “discrimination” against women. As very well-meaning as these motivations may be, they do not usually reflect the most pastoral, helpful approach. In our view, they do not at all outweigh the powerful reasons we've given for not supporting the female diaconate and priesthood—especially at this time.

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<sup>39</sup> The idea of making women deacons and priests in order to prove that women are equal to men in nature, honor, and value—a fact the Church already declares and lives in countless ways—would seem to be analogous to the desire of the Council of Toledo, Spain, in 589, to reinforce the truth of Christ's full deity by adding to the Nicene Creed the phrase known as the Filioque, even though His full deity was already fully affirmed and declared *in that same Creed* with the phrase, the Son and Word of God is “*homoousios [of the same essence] with the Father.*” The Filioque, that unnecessary, superfluous addition to the Creed, as we know, helped lead to the radical deepening of the rift between the Western and Eastern Churches that led to the Great Schism of 1054, and has plagued reunion efforts between them to this day.

What is needed instead, it seems to us, is *better parish education*, so that all the faithful can understand *why* the Church is set up the way She is, so that they can learn how to more actively participate in the Liturgy as it is celebrated, so that they can come to be appreciative of and grateful for, and even humbled by, the incredible privilege of worshiping the true God, receiving His Body and Blood, and being able to live in real communion with Him. We need to *overcome clericalism*, in order to better understand the crucial role of the laity. And we need to emphasize the crucial role of prayer and other elements of the ascetical life, the true means of making spiritual progress, of attaining holiness, which is the basic reason for our worship, and even for our very existence. It's a mistake of the highest order, we believe, to imagine that the laity—especially the female laity—are not “doing” anything, or anything important; or that they are not “having a voice,” or not being “fully welcomed,” just because women aren't wearing vestments and/or leading liturgical prayers.

Properly understanding—and participating in—our traditional Orthodox liturgical worship can help those in our time relearn the crucial importance of the world as sacrament, and its *symbolism*, including why Christ the Creator, as the Giver of Life, is male, and why the clergy have to be males in order to re-present Christ. As one author has expressed it, “We must reeducate ourselves, destroy the hard shell around us, and come to understand that the world is a symbol and full of symbols, and that therefore our world-understanding must be symbolic.”<sup>40</sup>

We need to humbly relearn about *complementarity*, about how we as men and women need to live in harmonious unity with one another while fully appreciating our real differences, and rejoicing in those differences with thanksgiving to our All-Gracious Lord Who has made us this way! And we need to reaffirm the distinctive God-given gifts, callings, and glories of womanhood in all their rich variety, as well as those of manhood—the gifts of authentic femininity and authentic masculinity—in order to align ourselves with the way our beloved Creator and Savior has made us, so that we may follow the best path to holiness, and inherit eternal life.

Furthermore, we'd like to add that in our Church today we especially need young men to be thinking and praying about perhaps becoming priests one day; and serving in the altar is a tremendously important way for them to become more open to such a calling. This, of course, is the main reason boys, and only boys, are encouraged to serve in the altar; for every altar boy represents a potential future priest.

### ***Several other observations about the St. Phoebe Center statement***

In addition, we feel we need to question the veracity of the claim in this statement that “Calls to reinstate the ordained order of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church have been issued throughout the world over the past one hundred years with increasing urgency and frequency;

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<sup>40</sup> Cited by Dr. Bruce Seraphim Foltz in an unpublished talk entitled “The Symbol as the Cornerstone of an Orthodox Christian Worldview”; given at the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA) meeting in Volos, Greece, in January of 2023; quoting Pavel Florensky, *At the Crossroads of Science and Mysticism*, trans. Boris Jakim (Kettering, OH: Semantron Press), 2014, p. 148.

from conferences convened by patriarchs, from priests and deacons, from the general laity, and from the Church's esteemed scholars alike." We are aware of only two such incidents from "one hundred years ago." St. Nektarios of Aegina did ordain two of his nuns as deaconesses at the women's monastery where he lived and served, though they were not leading the prayers like a male deacon would. This was a special incidence, something he felt was needed at his women's monastery; and it's very telling, it seems, that no other monastic deaconesses have been ordained ever since.

Second, the Great and Holy Council of Moscow in 1917-1918 reportedly was planning to discuss the possibility of the restoration of the office of deaconess, but could not do so due to its premature closure in the midst of the Bolshevik takeover of Russia. But this was not "a call" *to make* such a restoration; it was only a call *to discuss the possibility* of such a restoration – a *restoration*, and *not* the creation of a new role, as the St. Phoebe Center is now proposing.

We also need to respond to the somewhat disingenuous claim in that statement that "The historical precedent of deaconesses within the Orthodox Church has been soundly documented." While it's true that the office of deaconess was occasionally present in some parts of the ancient Church, and that fact has indeed been well documented, the character of that office back then was very different from what's being called for at the present. For as we've said above, there's no solid evidence that those deaconesses ever served liturgically in the manner of a male deacon.<sup>41</sup>

And regarding their further assertion, that "the pressing pastoral need for a robust diaconate to serve the body of Christ today—both women and men—has been established," this may be the case for male deacons, but surely not for deaconesses. Across the Orthodox world, as far as we know, there has been little support for female deacons arising from the grassroots level. Rather, there has been strenuous, well-argued, and widespread objection within our Church to the idea of female deacons—sometimes objections even just to having *discussion* about the possibility of ordaining female deacons today. We believe that this is the case, at least partly, because there is a general perception that there is not presently any pressing pastoral need specifically for female deacons, as there was, in some times and places, in the early and Byzantine Church. It is also objected to because it is clear to many that this call for female deacons has arisen from, and is being driven by, non-Orthodox beliefs—such as the belief that if one truly honors and values women and men equally (because they have the same nature), then they must be allowed to have the same functions in the Church.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> One eighth-century manuscript, *Barberini 336*, does give rubrics for the ordination of a deaconess, which indicate she was ordained at the altar. As part of this, she was given the communion cup which she then put back on the altar. This manuscript doesn't say anything else that she did.

It's interesting that in Constantinople during the period that there were deaconesses, at least in St. John Chrysostom's cathedral, there was actually a physical barrier between the men and women, as St. John mentions. He says, with regret, that this barrier was apparently needed to prevent the men from being distracted by the women's beauty. This meant that all the women received communion in a separate part of the church from where the men received (as they still do in the Coptic Church).

<sup>42</sup> As an example of the very significant Orthodox opposition to the call for female deacons in our Church today, please see the statement signed by many prominent Orthodox figures at: <https://www.brianpatrickmitchell.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Public-Statement-on-Deaconesses-01-15-2018.pdf>

## *Conclusion*

In conclusion, as is evident from the unprecedented numbers of adults and children suffering from anxiety and depression, loss of meaning and purpose for their lives, we are living in a very troubled time. Increasing numbers of people are also confused about even such fundamentals as their own sex, and how to live as a member of that sex in a healthy way. All of these troubles and more have been fueled by the unChristian, secular materialism dominating the culture.

Thus, it seems clear to us that what those of us in the Church today should do to best help the most people in this troubled time and place is to “stand fast and hold to the traditions” (2 Thess. 2:15). The faithful should put their time, talents, and energy into finding ways of helping more of the thirsting people of our day be able to drink from the life-giving stream of our Church’s traditional theology and practices. We need more people to witness to the truth of our faith by educating, by clarifying what is often misunderstood, and by providing powerful examples of living life in Christ. All of this is what will really help our own people—and those in the surrounding culture—rather than trying to change our practices, such as the all-male three-fold ordained ministry, to better suit the troubled culture we live in, grounded as that culture is in a radically different worldview which in many ways leads people to misunderstand our Tradition.

Our Tradition, reflecting as it does the God-given patterns of living aligned with reality, enables those who live within it to come to know more and more profoundly Jesus Christ, the One Who said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink” (John 7:37). This is what fundamentally enables people to experience that the world is indeed full of meaning, that we all have an important purpose and goal for our lives. Furthermore, in Christ through the Holy Spirit, we can achieve that highest goal for human beings—*theosis*, becoming by grace what God is by nature—no matter what our status is in the Church, and no matter what our status is in the world—whatever our sex, ethnic background, race, level of education, income, or health, age, lack of public recognition, etc. This is truly good news to share with the whole world!