

A Public Statement on Orthodox Deaconesses by Concerned Clergy and Laity

FEBRUARY 18, 2019 POSTED BY: **FR. JOHANNES JACOBSE**

Originally this petition was a response to the ostensible ordaining of Deaconesses by the Patriarch of Alexandria. Subsequent investigation revealed it was not an ordination at all but a kind of provisional blessing of women who served the Church. Nevertheless, despite the misinformation (or perhaps because of it), many concerned clergy and laity opposed the movement because it is poorly informed and politically driven.

Another attempt to resuscitate the question is being made by the [Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarch](#), the same organization that gave a [human rights award](#) to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, the notorious abortion activist who advocates the killing of the unborn up to the moment of birth.

The moral illiteracy exhibited in giving Governor Cuomo a human rights award should give anyone pause about this most recent effort by the Archons. We should also remember that all other Christian communions that have ordained deaconesses and priestesses have for the most part collapsed.

The question asked about ordaining women to the office of deacon is “Has the time come?” The answer according to over 230 signers below is “No.” Feel free to add your signature if you agree.



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If you would like to be included as a signatory please scroll to the bottom of the page.

From the site: <http://www.aoiusa.org/a-public-statement-on-orthodox-deaconesses-by-concerned-clergy-and-laity-2/> accessed 3/7/19.

Press Release: Orthodox Clergy and Laity Take Stand against Deaconesses

January 15, 2018

WASHINGTON — Fifty-seven Orthodox Christian clergymen and lay leaders, including the heads of two leading Orthodox seminaries in the U.S., have issued a public statement calling on church leaders to defend Orthodox teaching on the creation and calling of man as male and female by opposing the appointment of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church.

The statement comes in response to a public statement issued in October by nine Orthodox liturgical scholars in the U.S. and Greece, expressing support for the Patriarchate of Alexandria's November 2016 decision to "restore" the ancient order of deaconesses and its February 2017 appointment of deaconesses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Roman Catholic Church has also taken the first step toward the appointment of deaconesses with Pope Francis's 2016 establishment of a commission to study the issue. That commission is headed by Archbishop Luis Francisco Ladaria Ferrer, Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Half of the commission's members are women. One of them, Phyllis Zagano, professor of religion at Hofstra University, is a well-known advocate of deaconesses.

Several Protestant churches, including Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians, began appointing women as deaconesses in the nineteenth century. Most have since ordained women to all higher orders such as priest and bishop.

The statement by the Orthodox opponents of deaconesses takes issue with the liturgists' representation of the place of deaconesses in Orthodox tradition and raises serious doctrinal issues relating to the appointment of deaconesses. It also questions whether Alexandria's appointment of deaconess in the Congo revived an ancient order or instituted a new order with an old name.

The signers include 35 priests and seven deacons, as well as 15 laity (including four women) who are college professors or journal editors. They belong to seven Orthodox jurisdictions: the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America (AOCANA), the Ecumenical Patriarchate (in the United Kingdom), the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOAA), the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria (Africa), the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), and Mt. Athos in Greece.

For more information, contact Protodeacon Brian Patrick Mitchell at protodeaconpatrick@gmail.com.

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A Public Statement on Orthodox Deaconesses by Concerned Clergy and Laity

The Patriarchate of Alexandria's appointment of six "deaconesses" in the Congo in February 2017 has prompted calls in some corners for other local churches to follow suit. In particular, a group of Orthodox liturgical scholars has issued an open statement of support for Alexandria, declaring that the "restoration of the female diaconate is such that neither doctrinal issues nor authoritative precedents are at stake."¹ We, the undersigned clergy and laity, beg to differ and are writing now with three purposes: to question what was accomplished in the Congo, to clarify the historical record on the place of deaconesses in Orthodox tradition, and to point out the serious doctrinal issues raised by the appointment of deaconesses.

First, as to what was accomplished in the Congo, we note that the Patriarch of Alexandria did not use the Byzantine rite of ordination for deaconesses.² He laid hands [*cheirothetisa*] on one woman making her "Deaconess of the Mission" and then prayed over five other women using a "prayer for one entering ecclesiastical ministry," a generic blessing in the Greek-language *archieratikon* for a layman starting church work. He did not bestow an orarion upon any of the women yet had the five women assist in washing his hands, as subdeacons would. All this was done not during the Divine Liturgy, as with an ordination, but at its end. These facts, plus anecdotal reports from Africa that these new deaconesses have been assigned the duties of readers, call into question the claim that what happened in the Congo was truly a "restoration of the female diaconate," for their manner of making and assigned duties bear only partial resemblance to those of ancient deaconesses.

Second, what can be said with certainty about the historical presence, role, and status of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church is that setting apart women as deaconesses was just one of several ways the early Church sought to protect the modesty of women by entrusting certain women with certain duties such as assisting in baptizing and anointing adult women and visiting women in their homes where and when men were not permitted, strictly within the limits specified for women by the Holy Apostles in Holy Scripture. The duties and status of deaconesses varied with time and place, as did the way deaconesses were appointed. The same duties were also assigned to widows, laywomen, male clergy, or nuns, so the need for deaconesses did not exist universally. Much of the ancient Church never had deaconesses. Outside Syria, Anatolia, Greece, and Palestine, deaconesses were rare to nonexistent.³

Deaconesses were also not without controversy. Several local councils prohibited their appointment (Nîmes in 396; Orange in 441; Epaone in 517; Orleans in 533), and many texts testify to the concern of Church Fathers to minimize their role, sometimes in favor

of widows. The order appears to have peaked in the fifth or sixth century, surviving mainly in major eastern cities as an honorary office for pious noblewomen, the wives of men made bishops, and the heads of female monastic communities. The twelfth-century canonist Theodore Balsamon wrote that the “deaconesses” in Constantinople in his day were not true deaconesses. A century later, St. Athanasius, Patriarch of Constantinople, ordered that no new deaconesses were to be made. Scattered proposals and attempts to appoint deaconesses again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not receive enough support to cause a lasting revival of the order. Even now, other autocephalous Orthodox Churches have not rushed to follow the example of Alexandria.

Third, some blame resistance to deaconesses on a worldly, purely cultural prejudice against women, but that accusation treats the Church herself unfairly, even contemptuously, by ignoring legitimate prudential objections to the making of deaconesses motivated by genuine concern for the preservation of truly Christian and plainly Apostolic respect for the distinction of male and female, to which our post-Christian world is increasingly hostile.

The liturgists’ statement itself gives cause for such concern. Its argument for “reviving” the order of deaconess is not based on the needs of the women to be served by deaconesses—needs that somehow require ordination, needs that nuns, laywomen, laymen, or male clergy are not already meeting. Rather, the statement’s argument is based on the supposed need of women to be deaconesses. Making them deaconesses would be a “positive response” to the “contemporary world,” an “opportunity for qualified women to offer in our era their unique and special gifts,” and a “special way” to emphasize the “dignity of women and give recognition to her [sic] contribution to the work of the Church.”⁴ Such justifications denigrate the vocation of Orthodox laity, implying that only clerics serve the Church in meaningful ways, contrary to Orthodox belief that all Orthodox Christians receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and a personal calling to serve the Church at Holy Chrismation.

The liturgists’ statement also makes clear that they do not intend a true “restoration” of the ancient order of deaconesses; their aim is a new order of clergywomen authorized to do things never done by Orthodox deaconesses and in some cases explicitly forbidden by Apostolic ordinance and Church canons. They would have women preach, which the Apostles and Fathers never allowed in church. They leave open the question of other liturgical duties, admitting no limitation that bishops must respect. They question which “qualities and qualifications” truly matter, doubting whether deaconesses must be mature and unmarried, despite the ancient rule, most forcefully insisted upon in the sixth century by St. Justinian as emperor, that deaconesses be at least middle-aged and remain celibate as deaconesses.⁵

The liturgists’ most ominous assertion is their subtle note, in anticipation of popular opposition, that “adequate preparation and education” are needed not of the women to be appointed deaconesses but “of the people who will be called upon to receive, honor, and respect the deaconesses assigned to their parishes.” Clearly, they foresee the need to

force clergy and laity to accept deaconesses, which is hardly trusting of the Holy Spirit or respectful of the Orthodox Church's traditional regard for episcopal authority.

In sum, the statement's emphasis on gratifying women, disregarding tradition, and resorting to force gives evidence of a feminist perspective and approach consistent with the faithless western world but not with the Orthodox Church. More evidence of the liturgists' perspective is available elsewhere. For example, two of the liturgists have called for the removal of Ephesians 5 from the Rite of Crowning on the grounds that it is inconsistent with modern thinking and therefore likely to be misunderstood. They suggest a different epistle or perhaps a sanitized version of Ephesians 5 without verse 33 ("Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence [*phobetai*, fear] her husband.").⁶

Given this state of faith, we believe the appointment of deaconesses in any form in the present era is likely to divide the Church and distress the faithful by challenging the Church's basic understanding of human nature. God has made every one of us either male or female and ordained that we live accordingly as either a man or a woman. He has also provided us with many authoritative precepts distinguishing men and women, in the Law, in the Holy Apostles, in the canons of the Church, and in the literature of our Holy Fathers, in passages too numerous to cite. But if laws and canons and precepts are not enough to turn us to repentance, God has given us two distinct models of perfected humanity, one male and one female: Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, and His Most Pure Mother, the Theotokos, whose icons stand always before us in worship as reminders of what we are meant to be as men and women.

Yet there are advocates of deaconesses who wish to see women treated the same as men in the Church as in the world and who therefore use the rite of "ordination" (*cheirotonia*) of deaconesses in a handful of Byzantine service books to argue that deaconesses were once "major clergy." These advocates covet the rank, honor, and authority of the clergy. Some would have deaconesses be just like deacons, only female. They would up-end the natural and economical order of male and female to raise women over men in the hierarchy of the Church. They would "ordain" women who are young, married, and with children, and they would give them a vocal role in worship and all the authority a deacon might exercise over men as well as women. The liturgists do not go that far, but their statement leaves open that possibility by either ignoring or questioning traditional limits on deaconesses, while stressing the exclusive prerogative of bishops to make of deaconesses what they will.

We cannot, therefore, take seriously the liturgists' claim that "restoration of the female diaconate is such that neither doctrinal issues nor authoritative precedents are at stake." Neither can we accept their assurances that deaconesses today will not lead to priestesses tomorrow, knowing where similar incremental innovations have led in heterodox communions. We also ought not to think only of what we ourselves might tolerate today. We must think generationally. Just as children who grow up in parishes with female readers are more likely to believe as adults that women should be deacons

or deaconesses, so children who grow up in parishes with deaconesses will be more likely to believe as adults that women should be priests and bishops.

We therefore entreat all Orthodox hierarchs, other clergy, and theologians to uphold the dogmatic teaching of the Church concerning the creation and calling of man as male and female by resisting the divisive call to appoint deaconesses.

FOOTNOTES

1. Evangelos Theodorou, et al., “Orthodox Liturgists Issued a Statement of Support for the Revival of the Order of Deaconess by the Patriarchate of Alexandria,” Panorthodox Synod, <https://panorthodoxcemes.blogspot.ca/2017/10/orthodox-liturgists-issued-statement-of.html?m=1>, Oct. 24, 2017.

2. See “Το Πατριαρχείο Αλεξανδρείας για Διακόνισσες και Αγία Σύνοδο,” Romfea, <http://www.romfea.gr/epikairoτητα-xronika/11485-to-patriarxeio-alexandrias-gia-diakonisses-kai-agia-sunodo>, Nov. 16, 2016; and, “Στην Αφρική εόρτασε τα ονομαστήρια του ο Πατριάρχης Θεόδωρος,” Romfea, <http://www.romfea.gr/patriarxeia-ts/patriarxeio-alexandrias/13147-stin-afriki-eortase-ta-onomastiria-tou-o-patriarxis-theodoros-foto>, Feb. 18, 2017.

3. For the most in-depth study of the subject, see Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, trans. K.D. Whitehead (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986). For a thorough study of Orthodox deaconesses before their disappearance, see Brian Patrick Mitchell, “The Disappearing Deaconess: How the Hierarchical Ordering of the Church Doomed the Female Diaconate,” <http://www.brianpatrickmitchell.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Disappearing-Deaconess-2017-03-10.pdf>.

4. The “positive response” and “special way” are from the report of the Inter-Orthodox Symposium in Rhodes in 1988 titled, “The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women” (Istanbul: The Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1988), which the liturgists quote approvingly.

5. The minimum age for deaconesses changed several times over the years: The emperor St. Theodosius the Great set it at 60 in 390, the age the Apostle Paul set for enrolled widows in 1 Timothy 5:9, which St. Theodosius’s legislation mentioned. Canon 15 of Chalcedon lowered it to 40 in 451. St. Justinian’s Novella 6 raised it to 50 in 535, making an exception for women living in hermitages and having no contact with men. His Novella 123 lowered it to 40 again in 546, which Canon 14 of III Constantinople (in Trullo) confirmed in 692.

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6. Alkiviadis Calivas and Philip Zymaris, “Ephesians 5:20-33 as the Epistle Reading for the Rite of Marriage: Appropriate or Problematic?” Public Orthodoxy, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2017/09/08/ephesians-rite-of-marriage/>, accessed Nov. 4, 2017.

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