

On the Order of Deaconesses

A Concise Overview

Today there are calls for the restoration of the office of deaconess in the ancient Churches. In order to do this without scandalous aberrations, it is necessary that clergy and faithful become familiar with the historic order and how it functioned throughout Church history. Only in reference to this background can we legitimately speak of a restoration of an authentic, orthodox female diaconate in today's Church. As the Apostle St. James is quoted in the *Ecclesiastical Canons of the Apostles*, "How then can we establish a diaconate regarding women, unless it is a diaconate in order to serve women who are in need of such a service?"¹

I. The Existence of the Deaconess

The first deaconess is traditionally believed to be St. Phoebe who is mentioned in the New Testament by St. Paul the Apostle. There he refers to her as a "deaconess of the Church of Cenchrea."² As early as the first century, during the era of the Apostles, congregations of virgins and widows began to form. Their ministry was that of charitable service unto the Church.³ From among these consecrated virgins and widows emerged deaconesses to perform a unique service in the Church.⁴ Whereas the ministry of Virgins and Widows was primarily that of prayer and charitable deeds, the Deaconess served in a ministerial and somewhat pastoral capacity to women and children.⁵

Although deaconesses underwent a rite of ordination, scholars differ on the nature of that ordination.⁶ Traditional Latin Church⁷ scholars, like Martimort, reject the claim that deaconesses received Major Orders while liberal scholars of the Latin Church, like Wijngaards, argue that deaconesses were indeed ordained to the full diaconate. The latter base their argument primarily on the ground of the similarity of the ordination rite of the male and female deacon.⁸ They do this ignoring the fact that some would say it is not the *rite* but rather the *intention* of the bishop which actually makes the ordination real and

¹ Wignards, John, *Women Deacons in the Early Church*, Crossroad Publishing, 2007, p. 150

² *Epistle to the Romans* 16:1

³ Cf. St. Paul's *First Epistle to St. Timothy* 5:9

⁴ Oghlukian, Fr. Abel, *The Deaconess in the Armenian Church*, St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 1994, p. 7

⁵ It was established from the earliest times that a woman was not to have authority over a man (cf. *St. Paul's 1st Epistle to St. Timothy* 2:12). Hence the Deaconesses ministry unto women and children.

⁶ Two principal works on the topic are, *Deaconesses, An Historical Study*, by Aime Georges Martimort (Ignatius Press), and *Women Deacons in the Early Church*, by John Wijngaards (referenced above). While both works provide ample evidence for the existence of the historic order, they represent opposite ends of the spectrum in the debate over the nature of the deaconess' ordination.

⁷ Commonly known in the West, as the "Roman Catholic Church." Since the Church of the Eastern Roman Empire was also historically known as "Roman," it is more accurate to speak of Church of the West as the "Latin (Roman) Catholic Church" and the Church of the Eastern Empire as the "Eastern (Roman) Orthodox Church." The Latin Church refers to herself as the "Catholic Church." Since the Orthodox Church too considers herself "catholic," we think it inappropriate to use this title exclusively for the Latin Church. Therefore, I refer to the historic Church of the West as the "Latin Church."

⁸ Some writers make a distinction between the titles "deaconess" and "women deacons." Many others use these titles interchangeably as I do in this essay.

effective.⁹ Still liberal scholars, like Wijngaards, argue that the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine)¹⁰ *Rite of Ordination of a Deaconess* has all the hallmarks of a major ordination.¹¹ The most important of these is that it took place within the Bema.¹²

On the other hand, scholars who argue that the Eastern female deacon was not ordained to Major Orders, do so primarily because they realize such an admission would pave the way for a female presbyters and bishops. Indeed, liberal Latin Church writers who argue that the Eastern female diaconate was an ordination to major orders, cite the unity of the priestly orders, also to justify their call for a female priesthood.¹³ This development necessitated the Latin Church's official teaching office, *the Magisterium*, to definitively reject the possibility of female ordination to Major Orders.¹⁴ The Latin Church, citing the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, historically taught that only men can be ordained as bishops, priests or deacons.¹⁵

Orthodox writers approach the question of the deaconess' ordination slightly differently than those of the Latin Church. Some Orthodox point out that in Orthodoxy the diaconate is not view simply a prelude to the presbyterate.¹⁶ Rather, in Orthodoxy the ministry of the diaconate retains its own unique integrity and meaning. The Latin Church went so far from this understanding of the diaconate that for centuries she had no permanent diaconate at all. During this time, all deacons in the Latin Church were understood as *transitional* and eventually ordained priests. Hence her close association and identification of the diaconate with that of the presbyterate.¹⁷

⁹ E.g., if a bishop were forced against his will to perform an ordination at gun point, this ordination would be not be effective because although he said the words of the ritual, he did not really intend them. Similarly a bishop could borrow the words and actions from the ordination rite of a male deacon in order to bestow the rank of deaconess on a woman without ever intending to confer on her the same ordination as that of male diaconate.

¹⁰ The title *Byzantine*, coined in the 18th century by French historians, is rejected today by many Orthodox writers. As alluded to above, historically, they were known as *Romans* belonging to *the Eastern Roman Empire* (cf. the article: *What, if anything, is a Byzantine?*, Clifton R. Fox, on the world wide web). Hence, I refer to them as *Eastern Roman* which is more in accord with the traditional terminology of Eastern peoples. Historically those of the Imperial East were known as *Romans* and those of the West were known as *Latins* or *Franks*.

¹¹ Wijngaards, pp. 42-49.

¹² Later we will look at how these deaconesses were viewed historically in the Church in relation to male deacons and the rest of the hierarchy. This will demonstrate how the Church actually understood their ordination.

¹³ Wijngaards, p. 8

¹⁴ Although this decision was understood to be definitive, Pope Francis has reopened this question in his pontificate.

¹⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph #1577; cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* 26-27; CDF declaration, *Inter insigniores: Acta Apostolicae Sedi* 69 (1977) 98-116; St. John 20:19-23, St. Matthew 28:18-20.

¹⁶ The word *priest* derives directly from the New Testament Greek word, *presbuteros*, meaning *elder*. This word, either in its longer form, *presbyter*, or its shortened one, *priest*, has always been used for leaders of the Orthodox and Catholic Church. Protestants in the 15th century were the first to reject the use of the word *priest*. For more information see the essay *Presbyters And Priests Are The Same Office* on my *Looy's Kreesdosee* website.

¹⁷ Commendably, in the last half century, the Latin Church has restored what it titled *the Permanent Diaconate* to differentiate it from what had become her norm of having only *transitional deacons*. Today the diaconate in the Latin Church, while having very little liturgical function or significance, has assumed great pastoral responsibilities, even administering baptisms and officiating at weddings.

Orthodox writers who support the re-establishment of the female diaconate maintain that this in no way touches upon the question of female priestly ordination.¹⁸ The reason for this is twofold. First, the Eastern Churches had deaconesses for at least a millennia and yet never had a controversy involving a call for female priests or priestesses. Indeed the very idea of having priestesses has always been strongly rejected in Eastern Tradition as something essentially pagan in origin.¹⁹ Secondly, although in some Churches they shared nearly an identical ordination rite with that of deacons, deaconesses were clearly recognized as partakers of an altogether different ministry.²⁰

Deaconesses have never been considered a part of the Church's hierarchical orders. They were, more or less, specially consecrated nuns. To understand this, one must take into consideration the theological basis of Church's Holy Orders and their dependency upon, and connection with, the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ.²¹ The Church's orders have a unity and priestly nature rooted in Christ the High Priest. Fr. Thomas Hopko, Dean Emeritus of St. Vladimir Orthodox Seminary, explains how those in Holy Orders are rooted in and manifest our Lord Christ. He writes,

“The sacrament of holy orders in the Christian Church is the objective guarantee of the perpetual presence of Christ with his people. The bishops, priests, and deacons of the Church have no other function or service than to manifest the presence and action of Christ to his people. The sacramental ministry of the Church -- the bishops, priests, and deacons -- receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to manifest Christ in the Spirit to mankind. Thus, through his chosen ministers, Christ exercises and realizes his unique and exclusive function as priest, perpetually offering himself as the perfect sacrifice to the Father on behalf of his human brothers and sisters. Through his ministers in the Church, Christ also acts as teacher, himself proclaiming the divine words of the Father to men. He acts as the good shepherd, the one pastor who guides his flock. He acts as the forgiver and healer, remitting sins and curing the ills of men physical, mental and spiritual. He acts as bishop, overseeing the community which he has gathered for

¹⁸ E.g., Bp. Kallistos Ware, cf. Wijngaards, p. 8. This is notwithstanding some more recent comments of Metropolitan Kallistos that were confusing to the point sounding supportive of women priests.

¹⁹ Cf. Azkoul, Fr. Michael, *Order of Creation, Order of Redemption*, Orthodox Research Institute, 2007

²⁰ “Hippolytus of Rome says they were *appointed* not *ordained* because the Deaconess did not offer the oblation (*prosphora*), nor celebrate the Liturgy. Although St. John Chrysostom considered the *female deacons* to be deacons, he understood that position to have its peculiar duties and not an order within the priestly hierarchy. Others vigorously maintained that under no condition, may the deaconess be equated with the male deacon and, under no circumstance, was she to insinuate herself into sacerdotal functions.” Azkoul, p. 40

²¹ Fr. Alexander Schmemmann explains: “This priesthood is Christ's, not ours. None of us, man or woman, has any ‘right’ to it; it is emphatically not one of human vocations, analogous, even if superior, to all others. The priest in the Church is not ‘another’ priest, and the sacrifice he offers is not ‘another’ sacrifice. It is forever and only Christ's priesthood and Christ's sacrifice -- for, in the words of our Prayers of Offertory, it is ‘Thou who offerest and Thou who art offered, it is Thou who receivest and Thou who distributest...’ And thus the ‘institutional’ priest in the Church has no ‘ontology’ of his own. It exists only to make Christ himself present, to make this unique Priesthood and this unique Sacrifice the source of the Church's life and the ‘acquisition’ by men of the Holy Spirit. And if the bearer, the icon and the fulfiller of that unique priesthood, is man and not woman, it is because Christ is man and not woman.” Cf. *Epistle to the Hebrews* 4:14

himself (1 Pet 2:25). He acts as deacon (which means servant or minister) for He alone is the suffering servant of the Father who has come ‘not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (Matthew 20:28).²²

Thus the Church has thus always viewed Holy Orders as manifesting Christ’s ministerial priesthood in a way that precludes women from the hierarchical orders.²³

The nature of the deaconess’ ordination has been addressed in the Latin Church at her highest level. The Vatican International Theological Commission, after engaging in a lengthy study, ruled that the order of deaconess was not equivalent to the hierarchical diaconate of men.²⁴ Orthodox Tradition, as attested to by the Holy Fathers and historic Church councils and canons, offers the same conclusion in unequivocal terms.²⁵

²² Hopko, Fr. Thomas, *The Orthodox Faith* (a.k.a. *Rainbow Series*) Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, 1972, p. 46.

²³ A distinction can be made between Major, Holy Orders and Orders in general, cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1537-38. Major Orders consist of the three historic ranks of bishop, priest and deacon). From the thirteenth century on, the Latin Church also considered sub-deacons as partakers of major orders until the rank was suppressed in 1972 (cf. Subdeacons: *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Robert Appleton Company, 1910 and *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Our Sunday Visitor, 1991, pp. 645, 907). Some Armenian writers also consider sub-deacons as partakers of Major Orders, cf. *Welcome to the Armenian Church*, p. 54. Orders in general, encompass all of the various offices in the Church, including the minor orders, monastics and those offices historically bestowed on women (e.g. consecrated virgins, widows, nuns and deaconesses. Orthodox consider all ordinations as holy and grace-bestowing, but the priestly or hierarchical orders have always been reserved to men.

²⁴ Wijngaards, p. 10

²⁵ Fr. Azkoul writes, “Until just a few generations ago, it was universally assumed throughout the Orthodox world that the example of the Lord in choosing only men to be His Apostles, the emphatic language of St. Paul in prohibiting women to preach or teach the Church, constituted overwhelming proof against their female ordination.” *Order of Creation, Order of Redemption*, p. 38.

II. The Historic Ministry of the Deaconess

Thus it is apparent that there were deaconesses from the earliest times of the Church. Although deaconesses existed in the Latin Church, they never flourished in the Latin West as they did in the Christian East.²⁶ The order of deaconess lasted a millennia in the Eastern Roman Empire.²⁷ Nearly all Eastern Churches had deaconesses and some of the Eastern Churches outside of the Roman Empire²⁸ have, in a very limited degree, maintained their office to this day.²⁹

The historic order of deaconess was closely tied with female monasticism. As one writer notes, “The one great characteristic of the deaconess was that she was vowed to perpetual chastity.”³⁰ This is as true for the Armenian Church as it is for the other ancient Churches. In the Armenian Church, the female diaconate existed specifically to serve the needs of nuns in monasteries. For instance, we read in the medieval judicial manual of Mukhitar Gosh, “There are also women ordained deacon who are styled *deaconess* to preach to women and read the gospel to obviate a man entering the convent and the nun leaving it.... Do not consider this new and unprecedented, as we learn it from the tradition of the Holy Apostles; for it says, “I entrust you our sister Phoebe who is a servant [or *deaconess*] of the Church.”³¹

While the fact that there were deaconesses in the early Church is well attested to, what we have no evidence for is the idea that deaconesses were of the same office, ministry or rank as that of male deacons. On the contrary, the evidence from Church history contradicts this notion. Church writers and canons go to great lengths to make this clear. For instance, although the deaconess assisted in preparing the female candidate for Holy Baptism, the 16th Canon of the Catholicos-Patriarch St. Sahag states, “Baptism should be performed with reverence and women should not venture to stand near the priests during baptism as some have been accustomed to do audaciously and baptize with them, but let them pray in their own place.”³² Also, the second Synod of D’vin states, “Women should not venture to stand by the priests... but let the deacons assist them and let the women pray at their own places and not participate with the priests, as we hear that they occupy the place of deacons.”³³ In addition, it was firmly established that deaconesses did not serve in the Divine Liturgy. As St. Stepanos Archbishop Oberlean of Siunik writes, “There are some women who become deaconesses to preach in nunneries... she preaches and reads the gospel not in the throng on the bema, but on her own in some corner. But let her not approach the service of the Holy Sacrament in any

²⁶ Wijngaards, p. 96

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 97

²⁸ The non-Eastern Roman (or non-Byzantine) Churches, i.e., the Assyrian / Chaldean, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Indian and Syrian Churches.

²⁹ E.g., Armenian nunneries up until the end of the 19th century had deaconesses (cf. *The Deaconess in the Armenian Church*) and both the Armenian and the Coptic Churches continue to have deaconesses today.

³⁰ “The *Apostolical Constitutions* (4:17) say that she must be a chaste virgin or else a widow... the ordination of deaconesses included a vow of celibacy.” *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, p. 41, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Hendrickson Publishers.

³¹ Oghlukian, p. 15; cf. Romans 16:1

³² *ibid.*, p. 13

³³ *ibid.*, p. 13

way like a male deacon.”³⁴ In other words, it was established from the earliest days of the Church that there was no confusion between the hierarchical order of deacon and that of a deaconess. The deaconess served the educational and charitable needs of women and children in the parish or performed certain duties in female monasteries, but they did not serve in the Divine Liturgy nor fulfill the functions of a male deacon.

That the role of the deaconess was altogether different from that of the deacon is also attested to by St. Nerses of Lambron. St. Nerses indicated that women were not partakers of the diaconate when he writes, “Monasticism is not only lower than the priesthood, but also the diaconate, since the former is also open to women, as St. Basil writes, yet the diaconate in no way.”³⁵ Thus in the Armenian Church as well as the other ancient Churches, deaconesses were not considered of the same rank or ministry as that of the diaconate.³⁶

This difference between the deacon and the deaconess was evident from the very moment of their ordination in the Eastern Roman Rite. Upon ordination the deacon was given the fan to symbolize his role of liturgical minister in the Sanctuary.³⁷ He then remained in the Sanctuary for the remainder of the Divine Liturgy and distributed Holy Communion.³⁸ The deaconess, during her ordination, was given the chalice which she then placed upon the Altar. The deaconess’ reception of the chalice symbolized that she was authorized to distribute Holy Communion, outside of the Liturgy, to women and to the sick; an important aspect of her ministry. Since the deaconess did not serve in the Sanctuary,³⁹ once ordained, she departed to her place in the nave with the rest of the faithful. This demonstrated that hers was not a ministry of liturgical service at the Holy Altar, but rather of charitable service and teaching. To further underline the difference of ministry, the deacon’s ordination rite cited the example of St. Stephen the First Deacon, himself ordained to “serve tables” (i.e. the Altar).⁴⁰ The deaconess ordination rite cited the example of St. Phoebe, who’s ministry included evangelization and charity to the poor but not liturgical service.⁴¹ In addition to ministering to women and children, the deaconess assisted at Baptisms and Chrismations of women where Christian modesty and

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 15

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 14

³⁶ “The deaconess gives no blessing, she fulfills no function of a priest or deacon.” *Apostolic Constitutions*, 8:27

³⁷ As a result of the influence of Protestantism, the meaning of the word “Sanctuary” has been distorted to now connote the entire house of God. This misunderstanding must be corrected by Orthodox and Catholic clergy in order to make our liturgical texts and ecclesiastical writings intelligible. Properly and historically the *Sanctuary* refers to the area immediately encompassing the Holy Altar. In the Armenian Church this is on the raised Bema. Thus the *Sanctuary* is the *holy place* in God’s house or *Temple* (Arm., *Dajar*), as Orthodox Christians commonly refer to the Church’s building of worship.

³⁸ Many Eastern Churches, based on an erroneous interpretation of Canon 18 of the Council of Nicea, later denied deacons their long established ministry of distributing Holy Communion in the Divine Liturgy. The canon only forbade deacons from giving Holy Communion *to priests* in the context of a Divine Liturgy. It was later misinterpreted to mean they could not give Communion at all. Many of the ancient Churches are now allowing deacons to resume their historic role of distributing Holy Communion both in and out of the Divine Liturgy.

³⁹ Cf. Canon 44 of the Council of Laodicea

⁴⁰ Cf. *Acts of the Apostles*, Chapter 6.

⁴¹ Wijngaards, p. 46

propriety necessitated.⁴² The deaconess also acted as a liaison between male clergy and women faithful during the Divine Liturgy and helped maintain proper order. Deaconesses were ranked below deacons and minor clergy.⁴³

Considering that the deaconess did not serve in the Holy Altar, it is inexplicable that some Churches in the West have begun to allow girls to serve in the Sanctuary. This is a clear contradiction of two millennia of Orthodox Tradition and praxis. Most Orthodox Churches have resisted Western influences and maintained the historic, canonical practice of only men serving in the Altar.⁴⁴ The Latin Church was the first to deviate from the rule and allow girls to serve in the Sanctuary. Armenian Churches in the West have begun to follow suit and have gone one step further by also ordaining girls to the Four Minor Orders. This is an unprecedented development which now raises many questions about female ordination within the priestly ranks.

One may wonder how this occurred in the Armenian Church. Originally allowing girls to serve as candlebearers was not as problematic. This was because candlebearers formerly were not allowed to serve in the Sanctuary but rather remained in the chancel.⁴⁵ Thus in a small village, if there were not enough boys on a given Sunday, it was thought harmless if a young girl filled this role. Now the exception has become the rule. In addition to this, influenced by the West, Armenian Churches deviated from their long established practice and began having candlebearers serve as if they were “altar boys” of the Latin Church in the Sanctuary. Since girls were sometimes allowed to fulfill the role of candlebearer, they likewise began to serve in the Sanctuary. This, in clear violation of Tradition, is taking place at the precise age they are to become young women. This is a significant departure from historic Church practice and has put the Armenian Church in disharmony with the other Orthodox Churches and her own historic Tradition. No other ancient Church of East or West confers the minor orders on women or girls.

In order to avoid scandal and confusion, the Orthodox Church must ensure that what she is restoring is the authentic, historic deaconess order. As seen above, the Church has always clearly differentiated between the role of deacon and deaconess. In order for a restored female diaconate to be authentic, these lines of differentiation must not be blurred. The deaconess was not a liturgical minister. Hence the error of allowing girls and even women to become altar servers. This new practice introduces false ideas

⁴² In ancient times people were Baptized with little or no clothing on and Chrismation involved the anointing of the whole body. Hence the need for the deaconess to assist the Bishop or Priest with the Baptism of women.

⁴³ This is revealed by the very order of those listed in this passage: “A deaconess does not bless, but neither does she perform anything else that is done by presbyters and deacons; but she guards the doors, and greatly assists the presbyter, for the sake of decorum, when they are baptizing women. A deacon excommunicates a sub-deacon, a lector, a cantor, and a deaconess, if there be necessity of such action and there be no presbyter present. A sub-deacon is not permitted to excommunicate, and certainly it is not permitted to a lector, nor a cantor, nor a deaconess, to excommunicate, whether cleric or layman; for they are the inferior of deacons. *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.28.2

⁴⁴ Cf. Canon 44 of the Council of Laodicea

⁴⁵ Cf. *Acolyte Training Program of the Armenian Apostolic Church*, p. 7, by V. Rev. Haigazoun Vartabed Melkonian, A.A., ED. Fr. Melkonian explains that in the Sanctuary, candlebearers assumed the role of candlebearer.

into the minds of the faithful.⁴⁶ Church canons and the force of two thousand years of Christian Tradition forbid female liturgical service in the Holy Sanctuary of a parish Church.⁴⁷ One of the reasons for this is that it does violence to the typological imagery of Christ gathered around the table of the Last Supper with His Apostles.⁴⁸

This Orthodox Tradition explained above makes perfect sense when we consider the Biblical texts relating to women and the order of deaconess. There is a harmony and direct relationship between the Biblical record and historic Church practice as seen above. The Catholic Priest and scholar, Fr. Regis Scanlon, underlines this connection between Biblical teaching and historic Church practice regarding deaconesses:

“St. Paul does mention the woman, ‘Phoebe who is a deaconess of the church of Cenchreae’ (Rom. 16:1). He also mentions ‘women’ when he discusses the qualifications of a deacon in 1 Tim. 3:8-13. Because St. Paul discusses ‘women’ in this paragraph entirely devoted to deacons, one should assume that, at the time of St. Paul, the Church did have women who were called deaconesses. But, since the words of St. Paul, ‘I do not allow a woman to teach, or to exercise authority over men’ (1 Tim. 2:12) occurs only two paragraphs earlier in the very same letter to Timothy (when St. Paul is speaking about the conduct of women in public assemblies), one must also assume that it is these very women deaconesses that St. Paul does not allow ‘to teach, or to exercise authority over men.’ So, these deaconesses did not function the same as the men deacons who could teach and preach, and who were given authority in the Church. Obviously, since St. Paul recognized that women can prophesy during public worship with head covered (1 Cor. 11:5) and since women were able to teach doctrine *unofficially* in the early Church (Acts 18:26), St. Paul's statement, that ‘I do not allow a woman to teach, or to exercise authority over men,’ referred to *official* teaching in the Church and to *official* Church leadership.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ The Church must guard against such misunderstandings. Radical feminism in the West has sown so much confusion among the faithful many now think it is possible to ordain priestesses and female bishops.

⁴⁷ In an attempt to remain faithful to Tradition, some Armenian Churches (like the Eastern Diocese in the USA), only allow girls to serve as acolytes until they reach the age of thirteen -the approximate age of transition to womanhood.

⁴⁸ For a full discussion of why the Church ordains only men see Fr. Azkoul's: *Order of Creation, Order of Redemption*.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Women Deacons: at What Price?* by Rev. Regis Scanlon, O.F.M. Cap., Homiletic and Pastoral Review, Ignatius Press, July 1996

III. Conclusion

It is unquestionable that there were deaconesses throughout the history of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. A restored female diaconate could include many of the duties of historic deaconesses and could help restore female monasticism in the Church. Deaconesses could assist parishes with the catechesis of women and children, including those preparing for Holy Baptism. Today's deaconess could also assist women, children and the elderly as they come forward to receive Holy Communion. They could resume their historic role of bringing Holy Communion to the sick and elderly who cannot attend the Divine Liturgy. Deaconesses should continue to live consecrated lives governed by canonical discipline, including the rule of celibacy. If their ministry did not continue this, there would be little difference between a deaconess and a Sunday school teacher. Likewise, deacons should also have their ministry and lives governed by historic canons of the Church.⁵⁰

As we have seen, the Church has always ensured that there was no confusion between the order of deacon and deaconess. If such a confusion would appear today, this would be a clear departure from Holy Tradition and a deviation of significant proportion. Such a dramatic departure from Holy Orthodox Tradition would almost certainly result in new ruptures of Orthodox communions across the board. It would also likely be another substantial blow to ecumenical progress between the ancient, historic, apostolic Churches. Orthodox hierarchs, therefore, do well to prayerfully contemplate this question and disallow innovations that could lead the Church down a confused, dangerous and uncharted path. On the other hand, the re-establishment and flourishing of an authentic female diaconate could be a great ministry for women in the Church. It could help with the re-evangelization of her lapsed members and point women to the historic calling of the consecrated life to Christ and His Church. May the Lord Jesus Christ guide His Church in the Orthodox Faith through the Grace of the Holy Spirit, through the prayers of St. Stephen the Protodeacon and St. Phoebe the Protodeaconess. Amen.

On the Feast of St. Stephen the Protodeacon and Protomartyr,
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Sub-Dn. Lazarus Der-Ghazarian

⁵⁰ Despite recent abuse or neglect of Church canons by some clergy, they have never been revoked and remain enforce. Of course a bishop, in some cases, may grant *economia* (or dispensation) from certain canons which are unrelated to faith and morals.