

DEACONESSSES, ORDINATION OF WOMEN AND ORTHODOX THEOLOGY: INTRODUCTION TO THE CONFERENCE THEME

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Abstract: The author analyzed the place of the Conference within the 2-years-project of CEMES: "Humble Theological Contribution to our Orthodox Church on Her Way to the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council", by referring to the official intervention of the Primate of the Church of Cyprus on the issue, which prompted the inclusion this conference within the overall framework of the project.

He then referred to the importance of Prof. Emeritus Evangelos Theodorou's scholarly contribution, 60 years ago, on the ordination of Deaconesses into the Sacramental Priesthood in the Orthodox Church.

Next he mention the necessity of a review of the official position of the Orthodox, expressed in the Rhodos Consultation Statement early in the '90s, taking into consideration the progress in recent scholarship, biblical and theological.

He underlined the centrality of "Orthodox Theology" in the title of the conference, with the "Deaconesses" as its next but parallel focus, of course without neglecting the overall "ordination of women" issue. He then enumerated the focus of the various contributions to the conference, most of which will concentrate on the "theological" approach to the ordination of women, whereas others will also cover the historical, pastoral, sociological etc dimension of the issue.

He then elaborated the concept of the conference as announced after the completion of last year's consultation with the same title.

A quick reference to the profound meaning of "tradition" (as it is repeatedly stated in the so-called "argument from tradition") was made, reminding the distinction between the authentic Apostolic (with T) and historical one (with t), as well as between latent and historically expressed.

Finally he reminded the inconsistency in the general traditional Orthodox view, which is based on "tradition" with regard to the overall "ordination of women into the sacramental priesthood", but ignores it when dealing with the rejuvenation of the order of Deaconesses in the priestly and diaconal ministry of the Orthodox Church.

Your Grace,
Reverend Fathers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends from all over the world, more than 200 registered attendees plus many others who have been informed through the social media, and are able to watch our conference live.

The conference which begins tonight, in collaboration with the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) and the Theological School of the Holy Cross in Boston, USA, on "Deaconesses, Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology" is dedicated with gratitude to Professor Emeritus Evangelos Theodorou, former Rector of the University of Athens, and former Dean of the Theological School of AUTH, on the occasion of the publication– more than 60 years ago – of his internationally recognized scientific contribution on the conference theme. It is the first part of a two-year international project of the Centre of Ecumenical, Missiological and

Environmental Studies "Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou" (CEMES) as small theological contribution to the process of the Ecumenical Throne toward the Pan-Orthodox Synod of 2016, under the general title: "Humble Theological Contribution to our Orthodox Church on its Way towards the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council".

CEMES having engaged two academic years ago with a theme of missiological concern (and I refer to the international Inter-Faith symposium: "An Orthodox Approach to a Theology of Religions", again with the same co-organizers), and last year with a subject of ecumenical concern (I refer to the seminar on the same title), had originally planned this academic (and ecclesiastical) year to deal with an environmental issue. However, the Primates of the Orthodox Churches' decision last year to convene at last the long-awaited Pan-Orthodox Synod in 2016, forced us to reconsider our priorities.

Although the issue of deaconesses (and indirectly the ordination of women) are not in the agenda of this vital Pan-Orthodox Synod, the official position of the Archbishop of Cyprus, Mgr. Chrysostomos at that meeting of the Primates last March, who stated that "we should ask ourselves the question of the status of women in the Church. Great Christian Denominations, like Anglicanism, have introduced the ordination of women. With biblical and Patristic arguments we should consolidate our position, and study seriously and proceed to the restoration of the order of deaconesses in the Church, taking of course into account all aspects of the issue", forced us to attempt a first theological - and general scientific - approach to this issue. After all, the future of the witness of the Church, and of theology, primarily revolves on the treatment of women in the Church and the society at large.

60 years ago Professor Emeritus Evangelos Theodorou, 94 years old now, opened the discussion within the Orthodox theological circles on the thorny issue of the ordination of women to the sacramental priesthood with his doctoral dissertation on deaconesses. Honoring this pioneer in modern Greek-Orthodox theology CEMES decided to dedicate this conference to him, especially when His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch. Bartholomew's personal remark - when at a meeting with CEMES Executive Committee informing him about its future research planning - that "he really deserves it."

+The Conference aim is not a communicative and partisan one, i.e. to promote one or another point of view in the ongoing discussion, both at an ecumenical level and lately also in Orthodox theology; nor is it a strictly objective and scientific treatment of the subject without ecclesiastical reference; it is rather a systematic analysis of all parameters of the problem and the submission of the preliminary conclusions and recommendations to the appropriate committees and Regional Synods of all Autocephali Churches

of Orthodoxy, especially their coordinating center, the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The Orthodox Church, of course, for several decades now has taken a particular theological position on the question of women's ordination - not of course in a canonical conciliar way, but through the findings of the famous Inter-Orthodox Rhodes Conference of 1988. Recently, however, the review of the views by His Eminence Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), the first modern Orthodox theologian who systematically formulated theological views on this issue, the studies by the late Elizabeth Behr-Sigel, or by the Orthodox Dogmatic Theologian of this institution (AUTH), the late Nikolaos Matsoukas, as well as some recent doctoral dissertations and postdoctoral monographs by Orthodox, and especially the enormous developments in Biblical, Systematic, Historical, Patristic, and even Sociological studies, have made a better documentation of the official theological position of the Orthodox Church an quite urgent need. And this is true not only for the Orthodox but for other Christian churches, especially the Roman Catholic; even the other Christian confessions that have already adopted the female priesthood, as the Anglican, or some conservative evangelicals who firmly deny it. The program of the conference includes both sober Orthodox theological views, critical to the prevailing arguments, but also supporting them, but on different theological and scientific grounds. It also includes descriptive presentations of other Churches and Christian denominations, as well as some scientific views by friendly to Orthodoxy heterodox researchers, with biblical and theological arguments.

Let me remind you at this point that several years ago His Eminence Metropolitan of Pergamon John (Zizioulas), representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and addressing the Anglican communion during their regular conference at Lambeth, drew the attention of all, that the solution to this thorny issue, which torments the Christian world, and has divided vertically and horizontally the various Christian denominations, can be found neither by arguments from *sociology*, nor neither exclusively by arguments from *tradition*. What the Christian community desperately need is mainly *theological* arguments. This is precisely what the main concept this conference is all about, while of course ignoring other purely scientific approaches.

In the homonymous seminar last academic year – involving mainly professors and doctoral and post-doctoral students and researchers of the co-organizing this conference Theological School of AUTH – we thoroughly analyzed all the theological arguments, both in favor and against, the participation of women mainly in the diaconal sacramental priesthood, with the intention to present to the Orthodox Church, but also the global Christian community, all authentic *theological* (and not merely sociological or traditional) arguments on the issue.

This international theological conference, with Greek and English as its official languages, will be held in both the conventional and the electronic form, thanks to modern technological services, offers us by AUTH, which we warmly thank. This parallel electronic form was chosen not only for economic reasons – and here I would like to remind you that the conference is a zero budget one, and I take this opportunity to thank all the participants outside Thessaloniki, and some from abroad, both speakers and attendees, who participate on their own expenses – but also for environmental ones, sticking to the principles of CEMES, which is not only a Centre of “Ecumenical” and “Missiological” but also of “Environmental” Studies.

The conference was launched last July, symbolically on the feast of Mary Magdalene, the "Equal to the Apostles" in the liturgical tradition - or "apostle of the apostles" by certain Fathers – of the Orthodox Church (22 of July 2014). It was an open invitation to all interested theologians, scholars and clergy, from all over the Christian community, with the promise that all contributions will be broadcast simulcast by electronic facilities of AUTH, and be published electronically on the conference website. As you can see in the Program the papers cover all areas of Biblical, Patristic, Liturgical, and Systematic theology, and also some other areas related to the theme of the conference.

The main area of concern in the conference, and its basic concept, lies on the “Orthodox theology” of the title, with the “Deaconesses” being the next, but equally important, parameter. The conference will also - secondarily of course – deal with the “Ordination of Women”, especially with the theological dimension of the thorny issue of the admission or not of women into the sacramental priesthood, reversing somewhat the wording of Patriarchal invitation of the similar conference in Rhodes late in the 80s (with the emphasis shifting from “*exclusion*” to the “*admission*”).

This small but substantial change was prompted by the reflections of the last year's international symposium, based mainly on the thoughts and proposals by the Professor Emeritus we honour today. This was after all the concept paper of the conference we asked the speakers to reflect upon, mainly based on Prof. Theodorou's radical remarks. Just quote his words, also published last year in the electronic ecclesiastical media (<http://www.amen.gr/article17226>): “In the debate on the general ordination of women the Orthodox theology should not resort to inappropriate use of human, biological concepts about the and reported the alleged male or female sex of each of the persons of the Holy Trinity, thus destroying the apophatic and inaccessible to human intellect character of the Trinitarian doctrine. Ecclesiological rather criteria must be used aimed at building the Church of Christ. We must also use the Christological theology, which teaches about a *Theanthropic* God and in His salvific work which incorporated and received the whole human nature, male and female. And so we must seek the division

of responsibilities of the Church's ministers according to the variety of their charisms. This variety of charisms has particularly brought forward the ancient Church".

Allow me to glean some of the additional concerns expressed in last year's seminar: "Is historically, the exclusion of women from the sacramental priesthood is superior based on human law (*de jure humano*) or on divine law (*de jure divino*)? In selecting theological criteria, should priority be given – and if so how much – to the long-standing "primary" liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church over the various doctrinal expressions that were subsequently formulated? How and to what extent the basic theological position that in the *eschaton* there will be no discrimination based on biological sex may influence the debate about the ordination of women? Does the invocation of elements of ontological reduction and the division of humans into two hierarchically superimposed sexes negates the doctrine of the Divine Incarnation and annul its objectives? Can the exclusive "male priesthood" – derived from the historically indisputable male form of the Incarnate God – be a binding element of divine grace, and how strong is this argument? If, according to the Orthodox Christian anthropology, the archetype of the human being is Christ, does the invocation of male sex of the Word of God (and not his perfect human nature) provide theological, canonical, historical-critical, and liturgical grounds for the exclusion of women from sacramental priesthood? Great theologian saints, such as St. Gregory the Theologian and St. John Chrysostom, speak about the priesthood with metaphors based not on male parental models, but rather on examples of virtue for the community. Additionally, both hierarchs use both masculine and feminine metaphors to describe the method and the ministry of the priesthood. What theological arguments, therefore, can justify the exclusion of women from this priesthood?

And to come now to the central theme of the conference, namely reinstatement also liturgically the order of deaconesses: How important for the Orthodox Church's theological arsenal of is the fact that this institution of deaconesses has conciliar ecumenical and canonical foundation, which in fact has never been repealed by subsequent synodal decision? If the deaconesses, as our beloved professor said, were installed into their ministry through ordination (*χειροτονία*) which was the same as that of the major orders of clergy, and not by simple laying on of hands (*χειροθεσία*), and their ordination had an absolute likeness in form and content with the ordinations of the major orders of clergy, what does that this mean for the general issue of women's ordination? The same is true with the proposed distinction of higher ordination and sacramental priesthood to "diaconal" and "hierourgic", a quantitative rather than qualitative distinction by the honoured professor. Moreover, how can the clear wording in the ancient prayers, that Christ did

not ban women also from having liturgical duties in the Churches («ὁ μηδὲ γυναῖκας...λειτουργεῖν τοῖς ἁγίοις οἴκοις σου ἀποβαλλόμενος»), affect the theological argument of the Orthodox Church regarding the ordination of women and in the higher sacramental priesthood?

At this point I could remind you another important observation Prof. Theodorou made, namely that the interpretation in our canonical sources, that the deaconess as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, had a higher position than that of the presbyters, who were considered as symbols of the Apostles, should at least to upgrade the status of women regarding the theological legitimacy of participation in the sacramental priesthood. None, but none, of the Orthodox theologians who have been involved or engaged in theological investigation of the matter (Metropolitan of Diokleia Kallistus, Metropolitan Anthony of Souroz of blessed memory, and all the speakers of this conference, including our honoured our revered teacher) dispute, that on the basis of "tradition" and the current canonical order of the Orthodox Church ("τό γε νυν ἔχον", as Prof. Theodorou brilliantly underlined) women are excluded from the sacramental "hierourgic" priesthood, but not from the "diaconal".

The argument, therefore, "from tradition" (a concept so important in history of the Eastern Orthodox Church - for many unfortunately, even nowadays, over and above the teaching of Jesus Christ ") continues to be, despite the warning by Metropolitan. Pergamon I mentioned above, a powerful and largely non-negotiable criterion for reopening of the theological debate on the issue. In many cases even without the necessary distinction between the Apostolic "T"radition and the various subsequent "t"raditions.

But beyond this necessary distinction, which even officially the Orthodox Church proclaims that, this – namely the Apostolic Tradition – accepts, just adding that is its authentic carrier and custodian, modern theological science has advanced an equally important distinction: that of authentic but *latent* tradition, and that which was historically formed. Classical example is the institution of deaconesses.

Taking also into account this historical Orthodox tradition) should we not consider the gradual degradation of women in the Western Christian world on three issues: the position of Mary Magdalene, St. Junia the Apostle, and the order of deaconesses, when the long tradition of the East, as it is now widely accepted scientifically, took pride of these women and institutions? The most indisputable scientific existence in the New Testament and the first Christian centuries, women baring the solemn attribute "apostle" (e.g. Junia) should not affect the Orthodox theological arguments on the issue of restoring the order of deaconesses (i.e. of the admission of women to the sacramental "diaconal" priesthood), especially today when it is indeed more urgently needed than ever, as the Ecumenical Patriarch has recently declared at a similar international meeting in Istanbul?

Before concluding this brief introduction to the theme, character and the theological rationale of this conference, allow me to make a brief reference to what revealing Patriarch Gregory of Antioch wrote in a speech on the Myrrh-bearers, as late as the 6th century AD, which connects women with both the “apostolic” office, and the “ordination” (*Μαθέτω Πέτρος ὁ ἀρνησάμενός με, ὅτι δύναμαι καὶ γυναῖκας ἀποστόλους χειροτονεῖν*, "Let Peter who has denied me learn that I am able to ordain also women as Apostles" PG 88 f. 1864b). This textual evidence, an indirect reference to the *latent authentic tradition*, perhaps proves that it is not completely without evidence in the Eastern Christian tradition a different attitude of the Orthodox theology regarding the liturgical status of women, at least different from the conventional one.

Notwithstanding what I very briefly mentioned so far, out of scientific responsibility I have to say, that there are also difficulties and problems in the restoration of the order of the sacramental priesthood of deaconesses. Recently in the Orthodox diaspora, mainly among the converts from the extreme conservative Evangelical stream, the following argument is being developed: Any rejuvenation of the order of deaconesses, although it is testified in the long Eastern Orthodox tradition and despite its ecumenically, synodically and canonically valid, is undesirable for the simple reason – the argument goes on – that it may open a wide window for the adoption also of the ordination of women. Such novel views, which as it happens in many issues have been imported our country, especially among conservative circles, justifies the inclusion in the title of the conference of a theological approach also to the general issue of women's ordination.

And I return to our main theme, the deaconesses. Such arguments, fortunately not officially formulated by our Church, create a feeling of unacceptable theological inconsistency, which irreparably injures the reliability of Orthodox theology, if of course they are adopted. How can some theologians continue to rely basically on tradition to the general issue of the ordination of women and at the same time ignore or reject it in the case of the ordination of deaconesses?

This is the concept of the conference, and some of these issues are the speakers invited, with scientific knowledge and fidelity to our Orthodox Church tradition, to engage in the next two days of this conference.

Thank you