



DEACONESSES,  
THE ORDINATION  
OF WOMEN  
AND ORTHODOX  
THEOLOGY

EDITED BY

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## INTRODUCTION

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

PETROS VASSILIADIS

**Abstract:** The author analyzes the place of the conference within the 2-year-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 of this conference within the overall framework of the project.

He then refers 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. He also discusses the necessity of a review of the official Orthodox position, expressed in the Rhodes Consultation Statement in the early 1990s, taking into consideration the progress in recent biblical and theological scholarship.

He underlines the centrality of “Orthodox theology” in the title of the conference, with “deaconesses” as its next but parallel focus without, of course, neglecting the overall “ordination of women” issue. The various contributions to the conference are then enumerated. Most of these concentrate on the “theological” approach to the ordination of women, whereas others also cover the historical, pastoral, and sociological dimension of the issue. The concept of the conference, as announced after the completion of last year’s consultation with the same title, is then briefly explicated.

Brief reference is made to the profound meaning of “tradition” (as it is repeatedly stated in the so-called “argument from tradition”), reminding the reader of the distinction between the authentic apostolic “Tradition” (with an upper case T) and the historical “tradition” (with a lower case t), as well as the difference between latent and historical expression.

Finally, light is shone on 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 which ignores it when dealing with the rejuvenation of the order of deaconesses in the priestly and diaconal ministry of the Orthodox Church.

The conference, which was organized by the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies “Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou” (CEMES), in collaboration with the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) and the Theological School of the Holy Cross in Boston, U.S.A., was entitled: “Deaconesses, Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology.” It was dedicated (with gratitude) to Prof. Emeritus Evangelos Theodorou, former Rector of the University of Athens, and former Dean of the Theological School of AUTH, in recognition of the publication – more than 60 years ago – of his internationally recognized scientific contribution to the conference’s theme. It was the first part of a two-year international project of CEMES, as a small theological contribution toward the process of the ecumenical throne of 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 engaged with the theme of missiological concern (I refer to the international inter-faith symposium: “An Orthodox Approach to a Theology of Religions”, again with the same co-organizers) two academic years ago and, last year, with a subject of ecumenical concern (I refer to the seminar on “Deaconesses and Women’s Ordination”). It had originally planned that during this academic (and ecclesiastical) year it would deal with an environmental issue. However, last year’s decision by the Primates of the Orthodox Churches to convene the long-awaited Pan-Orthodox Synod in 2016, forced us to reconsider our priorities (see appendix I).

Although the issue of deaconesses (and indirectly the ordination of women) is not on 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, 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.

This forced us to first attempt a theological – and general scientific – approach to this issue. After all, the future of the witness of the Church (and of theology) primarily revolves around the treatment of women in the Church and in society at large.

More than 60 years ago, Prof. Emeritus Evangelos Theodorou, now 96 years old, 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 considering His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's personal remark when at a meeting with the CEMES Executive Committee informing him about its future research planning: "he really deserves it".

The conference's aim was not a communicative and partisan one (i.e. to promote one or another point of view in the ongoing discussion, either at an ecumenical level or, lately, in Orthodox theology), and nor was it a strictly objective and scientific treatment of the subject without ecclesial reference. It was rather a systematic analysis of all parameters of the problem and a submission of preliminary conclusions and recommendations to the appropriate committees and regional synods of all Autocephali Churches of Orthodoxy, especially their coordinating center, the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

For several decades, the Orthodox Church had, of course, taken a particular theological position on the question of women's ordination; not in a canonical conciliar way, but through the findings of the famous Inter-Orthodox Rhodes Conference of 1988. Recently, however, the views have been considered 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; the Orthodox Dogmatic Theologian of this institution (AUTH), the late Nikolaos Matsoukas; some recent doctoral dissertations and post-doctoral monographs by Orthodox researchers; and especially the enormous developments in biblical, systematic, historical, patristic, and even sociological studies. These reviews and considerations have resulted in better documentation of the official theological position of the Orthodox Church – a quite urgent need. And this is true not only for the Orthodox Church, but for other Christian churches (especially the Roman Catholic Church) and even for those that have already adopted female priesthood (such as the Anglican Church), as well as some conservative evangelicals who firmly deny it. The program of the conference included sober Orthodox theological views that are critical to the prevailing arguments, as well as those that support them, each on different theological and scientific grounds. It also included descriptive presentations of other churches and Christian denominations, as well as some scientific views by heterodox researchers who are friendly to Orthodoxy in their biblical and theological arguments.

Let us remind ourselves 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 attention to the fact that the solution to this thorny issue – which torments the Christian world and has divided various Christian denominations vertically and horizontally – can be found neither through arguments from sociology, nor exclusively via arguments from tradition. What the Christian community desperately needs is mainly theological arguments. This is precisely what the main concept of this conference is all about, while of course not ignoring other purely scientific approaches.

In the homonymous seminar during the academic year 2013-14 – mainly involving professors, doctoral and post-doctoral students, and researchers co-organizing this conference – all the theological arguments in favor and against the participation of women in the diaconal sacramental priesthood were thoroughly analyzed, with the intention of presenting to the Orthodox Church (but also the global Christian community) all authentic theological (and not merely sociological or traditional) arguments on the issue.

The international theological conference – all scientific papers of which are included in this volume – had Greek and English as its official languages, and was held in both conventional and electronic formats, thanks to modern technological services offered by AUTH. This parallel electronic format was chosen not only for economic reasons but also for environmental ones, sticking to the principles of CEMES, which is not only a centre of the "ecumenical" and "missiological," but of the "environmental", too. It is worth noting that the conference was a zero-budget one, and I take this opportunity to thank all the participants outside Thessaloniki, including some from abroad (speakers and attendees), who participated at their own expense.

The conference was launched symbolically on the feast of St. Mary Magdalene, "equal to the apostles" in the liturgical tradition (or "apostle of the apostles" according to certain Fathers of the Orthodox Church), on July 22, 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 would be broadcast by the electronic facilities offered by AUTH, and be published (in Greek) electronically on the conference and CEMES website ([cemes.weebly.com](http://cemes.weebly.com)). As stated in the program, the papers covered all areas of biblical, patristic, liturgical, and systematic theology, as well as some other areas related to the theme of the conference.

The main area of concern of the conference (and its basic concept) was the "Orthodox theology" of the title, with "deaconesses" being the next, but equally important, parameter. However, the conference also dealt with the "ordination of women", especially in terms of the theological dimensions of the thorny issue of the admission (or not) of women into the sacramental priesthood. This somewhat reversed the wording of patriarchal invitation of the similar conference in Rhodes in the late 1980s, with the emphasis shifting from "exclusion" to "admission".

This small but substantial change was prompted by the reflections of last year's international symposium, based mainly on the thoughts and proposals by the professor emeritus that we honored. This was, after all, the concept of the conference that we asked the speakers to reflect upon, based mainly on some of Prof. Theodorou's radical remarks, 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 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 God's 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 also put forward some of the additional concerns expressed in the aforementioned seminar:

Is historically the exclusion of women from the sacramental priesthood 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, the reinstatement (also liturgically) of the order of deaconesses:

How important for the Orthodox Church's theological arsenal 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 Theodorou 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 "hierourgie", a quantitative rather than qualitative distinction. Moreover, how can the clear wordings 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 also in the higher sacramental priesthood?



At this point I could remind us of another important observation made by Prof. Theodorou, 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 upgrade the status of women regarding the theological legitimacy of participation in the sacramental priesthood. Absolutely none of the Orthodox theologians 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 the conference, including Prof. Theodorou) 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” one.

The argument, therefore, “from tradition” (a concept so important in the history of the Eastern Orthodox Church and unfortunately for many, even today, even more so than the teachings of Jesus Christ) continues to be, despite the warning by Metropolitan Pergamon that I mentioned above, a powerful and largely non-negotiable criterion for a 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 officially the Orthodox Church has adopted – the pre-eminence of the apostolic Tradition – adding that it is its authentic bearer and custodian, modern theological scholarship has advanced an equally important distinction: that of authentic but latent tradition, and that which was historically formed. The institution of deaconesses is an example of this in a classical sense.

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 in these women and institutions? The most indisputable scientific existence in the New Testament and during the first Christian centuries of women bearing the solemn attribute of “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). Indeed, this is especially the case today when it is more urgently needed than ever, as the Ecumenical Patriarch has recently declared at a similar international meeting in Constantinople.

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

Notwithstanding what I have very briefly mentioned so far, out of scientific responsibility I have to say that there are also difficulties and problems in restoring the order of the sacramental priesthood of deaconesses. Recently, in the Orthodox diaspora (mainly among converts from the extreme conservative evangelical stream), the following argument has been developed: any rejuvenation of the order of deaconesses, although evidenced in the long Eastern Orthodox tradition and, despite its ecumenical, synodical and canonical validity, is undesirable for the simple reason that it may open a window for the further adoption of the ordination of women. Such novel views which, as it happens, in many issues have been imported into our tradition (especially among conservative circles) justify the inclusion of a theological approach to the general issue of women's ordination in the conference's title.

To return to the issue of deaconesses, our main theme, such arguments – fortunately not officially formulated by the Orthodox Church – create a feeling of unacceptable theological inconsistency which will irreparably damage the reliability of Orthodox theology. How can some theologians continue to basically rely on tradition for the general issue of the ordination of women, while at the same time ignoring or rejecting it in the case of the ordination of deaconesses?

This was the concept of the conference, and all these issues are dealt with in this volume, with scientific knowledge and fidelity to the authentic Christian tradition.