

MEN AND WOMEN “IN THE SERVICE OF CHRIST”

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Abstract: The principal focus of this presentation is not merely the historical and theological, or even the liturgical and canonical dimensions of women and the diaconate or women and ordination, but rather the pastoral and practical concept of authority and ministry in the church. There can be no clear understanding of the priesthood or even of the episcopate unless we first properly appreciate the diaconate. Out of his experience as a deacon of over thirty years, Fr. John Chryssavgis claims that the theology of the priesthood should not begin from the top down, but rather from the notion of humble service and *diakonia*, without which none of the priestly ministries make any sense at all. Fr. John concludes that a creative revival of the diaconate could become the source of resurrection for the ordained ministry in general, thereby playing a crucial role in the mission of the church. In this respect, the restoration of the diaconate may well prove both timely and vital.

Let me open by saying how delighted I am to be a part of this conference and to be invited by Prof. Vasileiadis to deliver an address. I should preface my words by noting that my principal interest in this subject is not merely the historical and theological, or even the liturgical and canonical dimensions of women and the diaconate (or women and ordination), but rather the spiritual and pastoral concept of authority and hierarchy in the church. It is my conviction that there can be no clear understanding of either the priesthood or even the episcopate unless we first properly appreciate the diaconate. Having served as a deacon for over thirty years, I believe that our theology of the priesthood should not begin from the top down, but rather from the notion of humble service and *diakonia*, without which none of the priestly ministries make any sense whatsoever.

Introduction: Re-Learning to Serve

I learned from a young age, at the feet of my presbyter-father, that our noblest task is to *bear the cross* of Christ, to imitate Christ, who “came to serve and not to be served.” (Mark 10.45) This means that the noblest thing is to be a Christian – not a bishop, a priest, or a deacon. It also means that this noblest vocation of all is open equally and unequivocally to both men and women.

Over time, of course, the Church established the three ordained orders. Among these, the diaconate [derived from the word *diakonia* (service), which itself implies an absence of institutional or hierarchal structure] is the first order of priestly ministry. The mere fact that no one can become a priest or a bishop without first being ordained to deacon underscores the reality that the diaconate cannot be overlooked in our understanding of the ordained ministry. Regrettably, however, the diaconate has been disregarded – or reduced – to the detriment of the priesthood overall. It is time, then, for a revitalization of the diaconate in general. Reclaimed in its historical and sacramental dimensions, a revived diaconate could provide a crucial and timely response to contemporary needs.

A Reorientation of the Ordained Ministries

In a meeting of Orthodox bishops several years ago in Chicago, one prominent hierarch touched on the heart of the problem, when he asked: “Is someone *called to the diaconate*? Do we not say people are *called to the priesthood*?” Again, perhaps the proper response to this question is the reminder that we are called primarily to bear the cross of Christ; we are called first and foremost to the priesthood of all believers. Unfortunately, however, such questions reveal the confusion surrounding the sacrament of ordination. For one is not called to the diaconate any more than one is called to the episcopate; in fact, one is not even called to the priesthood at all – at least, the priesthood as a distinct order. Rather, one is called to *the priestly ministry of the Church, a ministry with three distinct orders*. After all, each of the specific terms applied to ordained ministers – ἐπίσκοπος, ἱερεὺς or πρεσβύτερος, and διάκονος – are properly and solely reserved for Christ, not us.

In recent centuries, the diaconate has enjoyed a symbolical status or transitional role in our Church. Parish clergy are ordained to the priesthood after serving very briefly as deacons. It is as if they are *expected* to “move on!” or “move up!” The diaconate itself has been diminished to little more than a preparation or stepping-stone for the (“more important”) priesthood or episcopate; indeed, the diaconate resembles a kind of sub-priesthood, rarely perceived as a lifelong vocation or permanent office. For me, this again is clearly part of the problem surrounding the caution or suspicion of a bishop – and, to a lesser degree, perhaps also congregations – with regard to the ordination of women deacons, who are preconceived as seeking promotion to “higher” clerical orders.

In some of our churches, the diaconate has been further reduced, relegated to a purely aesthetic duty or exclusively liturgical responsibility. While not insignificant, these functions do not – indeed, have never been intended to – fully express the potential of the diaconate. Indeed, many purely liturgical obligations were traditionally delegated to sub-deacons, who were neither ordained nor consecrated but simply “named” or “appointed.” Deacons were always responsible for *more than* liturgical order; deacons functioned as an essential aspect of the Christian community and its diverse expressions.

So my first argument is that there is something seriously missing from the ordained ministry if deacons are undervalued or omitted in the overall picture. A fuller, more comprehensive vision of the ordained ministry should recognize the role of *the bishop* as the bond of unity and spokesman for doctrine; it should likewise respect the role of *the presbyter* in celebrating the presence of Christ in the local community. Yet it should also realize the role of *the deacon* as servant in *completing and complementing this circle of unity and community* in the local Church. And this role may be fulfilled by men and women alike.

The authentic image of the Church that we should be seeking – in our minds and hearts as in our ministry – is that of *a dinner table*, and not that of a corporate ladder. The Church is not a pyramid, where all attention and authority are turned toward and look to the summit. We are to imagine the Church as comprising a sacrament, where the principal and essential focus is the celebration of the

eucharistic feast, in which “the least is greatest” (Matt. 23.11), “the last is first” (Matt. 20.16), and “the leader is servant.” (Matt. 20.26)

Accordingly, if the image of the table – the model of *church-as-eucharist* – is our formative and normative icon of the Church, then we might imagine deacons as waiting at festive tables or serving community needs, rather than as pawns at the bottom of some powerful or political organization; and certainly not as apprentices or interns awaiting promotion or self-fulfillment. In this perspective, we can appreciate the invaluable importance of deacons, male and female alike. After all, what greater gift could anyone ever ask for than to serve? I certainly know of no other, nothing better or more sublime.

We are all quite familiar with this approach to *diakonia* and the diaconate. So let me address what this actually implies for deacons in our Church.

A Practical Revitalization

In the Orthodox Church, the diaconate has never fallen into complete disuse, even if it is merely a shadow of its shining prestige in earlier centuries. However, the potential of the diaconate (for both men and women) has not been adequately fulfilled. So *what we do (or can do)* with deacons in our Church is the question we must now address.

In my humble opinion, the diaconate could express the *diversity* of gifts found among the laity, which should be embraced and enlisted in a sacramental (*vis.*, in an ordained) manner by the Church. Thus, ministerial dignity may be conferred on certain members of the laity, male and female, whose particular qualifications would be formally integrated within the community. Such persons should be commissioned through the laying of hands, their various charismata officially recognized by the community and intimately bound with the altar. In this way, they would be seen to support – and not substitute – the ordained ministry of priests and bishops in the Church.

Thus, matters of pastoral care and practical administration, as well as financial concern and even theological education could quite easily be delegated to deacons. Here is my vision: Someone whose administrative gifts are welcomed for the organization of a parish might be “ordained” to perform this task in the community. He (or she) could be a deacon that serves (part-time or full-time) in that capacity. The same could occur in cases where someone (male or female) has certain unique gifts in specific areas: for instance, as youth minister or even financial comptroller (just as monasteries have a novice master and a steward [*oikonomos*]), as catechetical instructor or hospital chaplain, as pastoral assistant or social worker, and so on. Deacons may also be called, commissioned and ordained to preach or counsel, perform functions of parish or public service, as well as assist in liturgical and community affairs, such as administering the sacraments to those in need. We should (or could) have more deacons than priests.

I would dare go a step further and venture to claim that there is no reason whatsoever for educators in theological schools and seminaries to be ordained presbyters unless their principal ministry lies in parish ministry. There is, after all, a long tradition of this in our church. Otherwise, we are once again surrendering to

the deleterious temptation of clericalism in our Church! Here is the fundamental and essential question for me: *Does someone have to be a priest in order to do what he is doing?* “Ordained” is one thing; “ordained priest” is another!

So let’s try to shed some of our institutionalism! The rebalancing of our hierarchy – the reorientation of our ordained ministries – through the restoration and reinvigoration of the diaconate (male and female) could invariably have profound theological significance, spiritual influence, and especially pastoral consequence.

Lessons Learned: Two Personal Observations

1. I learned over a number of years in church administration, parish ministry and theological education that the priesthood is the cause of much confusion resulting from a misunderstanding of authority both by those ordained as well as by the laity. This has proved deeply hurtful alike for those ordained as for those aspiring to ordination.

If we properly understand the diaconate, then we will better understand the other orders of the priesthood. We will also understand why women can quite naturally participate in the diaconate. Candid and objective conversation about the priesthood can only enrich our appreciation of the ordained ministry and the royal priesthood.

2. I have also come to appreciate that part of the challenge lies in the unrealistic expectations that we have of the priesthood, upholding the priest as a perfect icon or infallible model. One glance at the current situation of our Church should be sufficient to awaken us. Contemporary theologians cite patristic sources about priests manifesting the priesthood of Christ or realizing the priesthood of all believers. This perception is encountered alike among conservative and enlightened theologians.

Yet, it is *romantically idealistic, if not spiritually perilous* to claim that a priest *represents* Christ or even all people; it is far more humble to believe that the priesthood *presents* God to the people (as in the Old Testament) and the community to Christ (as in the New Testament). And there are innumerable “ordained” ways of doing this! One of them is the diaconate. It is similarly arrogant to claim that the priesthood is “not simply *one* of the ministries or vocations” and that the priest somehow embraces “*all* vocation.” In my humble opinion, such claims are presumptuous and lead to the abuse of the ministry.

Conclusion: Fulfilling a Vital Role

So a creative revival of the diaconate in our age could become the source of resurrection for the ordained ministry in general, thereby playing a crucial role in the mission of the church. In this respect, the restoration of the diaconate may well prove both timely and vital.