

COMMUNIQUÉ

AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CONFERENCE: “DEACONESSES, ORDINATION OF WOMEN AND ORTHODOX THEOLOGY”

“The Church is called to articulate its prophetic word . . . Our heart is set on the long-awaited Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church in order to witness to its unity as well as to its responsibility and care for the contemporary world . . . The Church does not live for itself but is obliged to witness to and share God’s gifts with those near and afar.” Bearing in mind this message from the 2014 Synod of the Primate of the Orthodox Church, as well as the recommendation by His Beatitude Archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus on the same occasion that the Orthodox Church “should be also concerned with the role of women in the Church and strengthen her position on the issue of the ordination of women, while after a serious study and consideration of all parameters, restoring the order of deaconesses in the Church,” the Centre for Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies “Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou” (CEMES), together with the Theological Schools of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, and Holy Cross of Boston USA, jointly organized an international theological conference on “Deaconesses, ordination of women and Orthodox theology.”

The conference was convened in Thessaloniki (22-24 January, 2015) at the premises of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, which graciously provided all electronic facilities for a live coverage, and at the Amphitheater “Panteleimon Papageorgiou” of the Holy Monastery of St. Theodora of Thessaloniki, which hosts the offices of CEMES, inaugurated in 2013 by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. It was dedicated to 94-year-old Professor Emeritus Evangelos Theodorou, who sixty years ago was the first among Orthodox theologians to initiate scholarly discussion on the ordination of Deaconesses to the Sacramental Priesthood in the Orthodox Church. Conscious that a thorough theological examination of all aspects of this issue, which have over the years been discussed widely and ecumenically, constitutes a primary responsibility of the Orthodox academic community to the Orthodox Church in general, the above academic institutions organized this conference along the same lines with the conference held two years ago by CEMES on the theme: “An Orthodox approach for a theology of religions” (14-15 June, 2013).

The Conference was initially placed within the context of a two-year-project of CEMES, entitled: “Humble Theological Contribution to the Orthodox Church on its Way to the 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council” Although the issues debated during the conference are not included in the official agenda of this long-anticipated Pan-Orthodox Synod, the intervention of the Primate of the Church of Cyprus prompted the inclusion of this conference within the overall framework of the project. It was symbolically launched on the day that the Orthodox Churches commemorate St. Mary Magdalene, equal to the Apostles, with an open invitation to all interested

theologians.

The **concept** of the conference was an in-depth examination of the *theological* argumentation by Orthodox scholars, one generation after the Rhodes Consultation, in view of exploring the progress in recent biblical and theological scholarship. In other words, the centrality of “Orthodox Theology” in the title of the conference was stressed, alongside reference to “Deaconesses” as a central and parallel focus, without neglecting the overall question of the “ordination of women,” inasmuch as it nowadays poses a challenge not only from outside the canonical boundaries of the Orthodox Church but also from its ecclesiastical dignitaries and theological scholars.

The theological perspective of the conference was prompted by Metropolitan John [Zizioulas] of Pergamon, who has argued for a purely *theological* conversation of this subject, and especially of the thorny question of the ordination of women, which has divided Churches and Christian denomination both vertically and horizontally. As the official representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate addressing the Anglican Communion during its Lambeth Conference two decades ago, Metropolitan John warned all concerned that this problem cannot be solved by using either the *argument from sociology* or the *argument from tradition*. What is desperately needed is to address this delicate issue, which has resulted in painful divisions within and among almost all Christian traditions, *on a theological basis*.

Most of the papers focused on the **Order of Deaconesses** (or women deacons), the restoration of which was adopted by all speakers, participants and attendees. An institution so deeply, theologically and historically rooted in our Orthodox tradition and, most importantly, with conciliar and canonically validity, despite falling for the time being into disuse, must be urgently revived in order to support and strengthen the authentic witness of our Church in society and the world. This, of course, does not mean that the role of lay women in the Orthodox Church’s witness should not be vigorously encouraged.

All participants agreed that, in accordance with the current canonical restrictions, women are forbidden to enter into the sacramental or “hieratic” priesthood, except the “diaconal” one. For over a generation, the Orthodox Church holds a clear and concrete position on this matter, as explicitly expressed in the final document of the Rhodes Conference, which also patently recommends that “the apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived” (§ 32). Quite recently, however, a number of Orthodox theologians have expressed reservations concerning the theological validity of some arguments proposed against the ordination of women. The reformulation by Metropolitan Kallistos [Ware] of Diokleia of his seminal argumentation on the ordination of women; the tireless approach to the issue by the late Dr. Elizabeth Behr-Sigel, as well as her titanic struggle to upgrade the role of women in the Orthodox Church and its liturgy; and the theological views formulated by the late Prof. Nikos Matsoukas, one of the greatest Orthodox dogmatic theologians of our time; but also a number of Orthodox theological dissertations and post-doctoral studies as well as other scholarly contributions – all of these seem to have challenged the opposition to the ordination of women on the basis of Orthodox theology and tradition.

Apart from recommending that the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council consider the restoration of the Order of Deaconesses, our conference did not come to other conclusions, choosing to leave any final decision to the appropriate ecclesiastical authorities in the hope that they will also consider other relevant parameters. Speakers simply raised some serious theological concerns on all issues discussed (see Appendix I) and underlined the inconsistency in the conventional Orthodox view that appeals to

“tradition” with regard to the overall question of the “ordination of women,” but ignores the same tradition in relation to the revival of the Order of Deaconesses and the participation of women in the sacramental diaconal priesthood of the Orthodox Church.

The nearly forty papers presented at the conference – in addition to the insightful messages from ecclesiastical (namely, the Ecumenical Patriarch) and academic authorities (from various theological schools) – covered almost all areas of biblical, liturgical, patristic, systematic, canonical, and historical theology. Although most papers focused on the issues from an Orthodox perspective, their sober analysis can provide theological argumentation for the wider Christian community, both to the Churches and Christian denominations that exclude women from the sacramental priesthood (such as Roman Catholics and some Evangelicals) and to those that have already adopted their ordination (such as Anglicans and mainstream Protestants). Other papers provided an objective and critical study of the history, experience and theological arguments of other Christian traditions from an Orthodox perspective. Finally, the conference did not omit to address the perspective of other non-Orthodox Christians (see Appendix II).

With regard to the issue of women’s ordination it was humbly suggested that from an Orthodox point of view the theological arguments used so far in the inter-Christian dialogue need to be reformulated; this is possible, feasible and legitimate, even if this requires further scholarly research.

All the papers delivered at this international theological conference will be published electronically on the official website of CEMES (cemes.weebly.com), and in printed form as part of the series of CEMES editions. Finally, all of our scholarly endeavor will be humbly submitted to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and all other Orthodox Churches.

From the Scientific Committee