



AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CHURCHES

“There is no biblical or theological, canonical or liturgical, patristic or pastoral reason for the contemporary Church to delay or obstruct the full restoration of the historical institution of deaconesses.”

This was the general conclusion and recommendation of an international symposium on “Deaconesses: Past, Present, and Future” organized in Thessaloniki from January 31st to February 2nd, 2020. An initiative of the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological, and Environmental Studies (CEMES), the symposium was jointly organized by the International Hellenic University’s Inter-Orthodox Postgraduate Program in Orthodox Ecumenical Theology, as well as the Orthodox Christian Studies Center of the University of Fordham, St. Philaret’s Christian Orthodox Institute of Moscow, the Orthodox Academy of Crete, and Saint Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, with wider ecumenical participation.

The symposium addressed from an academic and ecclesiastical perspective the order of deaconesses in the early and later centuries of the Church, as well as the contemporary response and reaction of Orthodox Churches and other Christian traditions. The logo of the symposium was the twelfth-century mosaic of Virgin Mary in St. Sophia Cathedral of Kiev, depicting the Mother of God with liturgical (diaconal) vestments.

Official messages were conveyed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate (which organized the historical meeting on this subject in 1988 on the island of Rhodes, Greece), the Patriarchate of Alexandria (which recently reestablished deaconesses in parts of its jurisdiction), and the Church of Greece (the host Church with practical experience in deaconesses during the twentieth century).

The symposium focused clearly on the diaconal nature of the Christian vocation and the priesthood, which has been overlooked by centuries of patriarchal bias and institutional clericalism. The Church is a sacrament of Eucharist, and not a pyramid of authority.

The symposium humbly addresses an appeal to the Churches for the immediate restoration of the deaconess and specifically:

- (1) The urgent need to revive the diaconate, male and female, in response to the growing pastoral demands and missionary challenges facing parishes throughout the world at this critical time.
- (2) The emphatic reminder that the Church never eliminated the order of deaconess, even in times of turmoil and persecution, when it fell into disuse.
- (3) The great importance of restoring the order of deaconess, which is clearly distinguished from ordination to the priesthood and not simply a matter of surrender to modern practice.
- (4) The appropriate moment, or *kairos*, to implement the decisions of the Inter-Orthodox Consultation in Rhodes is today and now, when the Church is called to address unprecedented challenges.
- (5) The initiative undertaken by the Patriarchate of Alexandria some years ago are prophetic and should be supported or emulated by other Orthodox Churches throughout the world.
- (6) The theological and scholarly evidence in support of the (male and female) diaconate should be pursued respectfully and fearlessly in order to define the principles and parameters for the restoration of the order of deaconess.

An analytical report with the official Messages of the Primates Messages and the papers of the participants is available at academia.edu/41940677/