

Rejuvenating the Diaconate: Building up the Body of Christ

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Abstract: Since biblical times, women have participated in the diaconal ministry of the Church. Women continue to serve similarly today. This paper will highlight ways that women are serving Christ and His Church through diaconal work today, focusing primarily on the work women are doing in the western context (i.e. United States). I will begin by contextualizing this topic, exploring how the Church structures its participation in the one priesthood of Christ and how we understand the meaning of an “ordination” in that context. Then, I will address the need for a fully functioning diaconate in the Church. Lastly, I will explore what an ordained female diaconate could offer the Church by building on the ministries that women are doing today.

First of all, I would like to say how honored I am to be among you today, albeit remotely. I would also like to preface my remarks by saying that, in some instances, they speak to the ecclesial situation in America more particularly in which the Orthodox community is in a somewhat different milieu than our brothers and sisters in countries where the majority of the population identifies as Orthodox Christian. In the United States, we are a small minority of the population and, oftentimes, great distances separate us from one another.

Women have always participated in the diaconal ministry of the Church. In the early church, they participated in both ordained and non-ordained capacities—as consecrated virgins and widows, and as ordained deacons. In an ordained capacity, the deaconess ministered to women much as the male deacon ministered to men. She assisted with baptism, took the Eucharist to those unable to attend liturgy, mediated between the faithful and the clergy, and taught, counseled, and guided the faithful on their Christian journey, especially those new to the faith. Women continue to serve in many of these same ways today. In the United States, they serve as chaplains, spiritual directors, chanters, readers, homilists, philanthropic outreach coordinators and parish administrators. In addition, they are often missionaries and Christian educators, to name just a few of the many diaconal ministries in which they are actively participating. However, today they do so without an ordination.

There have been numerous calls for over one hundred and fifty years to reinstitute the ordained diaconate for women. [See Handout.] Still, when addressing the issue of the deaconess today, the response is often mixed. For those who recognize that the Church once had deaconesses, a common refrain is usually summarized as follows, “Well, all the deaconess really did was assist with the baptism of women and since most of us are baptized as infants, we really do not need that now.” Others may recognize that the deaconess did more than just assist in the baptism of women, but still ask, “If women are already doing diaconal work, do they *need* to be *ordained* in order to do so?” Still others usually ask, intoned with a sense of alarm, “Does that mean that they could be ordained to the priesthood?” (i.e. the presbytery). Or put more colloquially, “Does this mean that we would have women priests?”

First of all, I would suggest that if we had a clearer understanding of the diaconate as well as the presbytery as distinct ministries of “priesthood,” then this need not be a question, concern, or fear. Calls for the rejuvenation of the deaconess are not some type of slight of hand to step into the presbytery or episcopacy. Therefore, I would like to begin by reframing the debate, in particular by exploring what an ordained diaconal ministry could *offer* the Church. I will first explore how the Church structures its participation in the one priesthood of Christ and how we understand the meaning of an “ordination” in that context. Then, I will address the need for a fully functioning diaconate in the Church. Lastly, I will explore what an ordained female diaconate could offer the Church by building on the ministries that women are doing today.

Ordination

There is only one ministry in the Church—Christ’s ministry. We are all called to participate in it. In fact, we are all “ordained” into the ministry of Christ—the Royal Priesthood—at our baptism and chrismation. It is here that we are anointed as priest, prophet and king, participating in the life of *the* Priest, Prophet, and King. As John Chryssavgis says in his book, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia*, “As prophet, priest, and king, Christ invites [all in] the Church to participate in his ministry of reconciliation and redemption, of service and salvation.”¹ He explains further that, in the early church, ministry was understood as giving “form and embodiment to Christ in the world [and] in that respect, it was informed by and conformed to the life of Christ as servant.”² Those who exercised ministry in the nascent Church did so according to their various gifts and within the context of the community in order to build up the Body. Eventually, certain people were set aside for ministry through ordination.

What did it mean to be “ordained”? There is little reflection on this question, *per se*, in the first millennium of Christianity. There are treatises explaining the roles of various ministers (e.g. John Chrysostom’s advice to Episcopal candidates, “On the Priesthood,” as well as other early Church documents (e.g. Apostolic Constitutions)), and canons regulating age, marital status, and other attributes of the candidates, but none (to my knowledge) speak specifically to what an ordination actually means. Generally speaking, it was a setting apart of people for ministry in a particular community. Having been recognized by the community, their gifts were enlivened by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Those elevated to “priesthood” (i.e. bishop, priest, and deacon) were ordained in the context of the Eucharist, at the altar, and by the bishop. Their service was tied to the liturgy and the altar as the source and summit of their ministry.

Later, in the medieval Roman Catholic world under the influence of scholasticism, ordination came to be understood as a *power* that could be exercised within *any* community. Moreover, it was understood to change the candidate ontologically by conferring an “indelible character on the soul that marked [the ordained] as different from other Christians.”³ In present Roman practice, an ordination is still typically needed for appointment to office in the Church and for practical matters, such as preaching or participating in church governance.⁴ Reacting to this understanding in the Roman Catholic realm, the Protestant reformers insisted that ordination was primarily a functional category. In the Orthodox realm, Metropolitan John Zizioulas has explained the meaning of ordination in more personal and relational categories, emphasizing both its functional and communal attributes.⁵ An ordination sets one aside for service and changes one’s relationship in and with the community.

So, how are the three expressions of “priesthood”—bishop, presbyter, deacon—understood and how do they relate to one another? According to the understanding of the Church, the bishop (or episcopos) is the overseer of the community. He is the “center of the visible unity” of the Church and a “spokesman for traditional doctrine.”⁶ The priest or presbyter has a primarily

¹ John Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia: The Diaconate Yesterday and Today* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2009), p. 79. Henceforth: Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia*.

² Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia*, p. 30.

³ Gary Macy, “Women Deacons: History” in Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), p. 34.

⁴ Phyllis Zagano, “Women Deacons: Future” in Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), p. 79, 81.

⁵ See: John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), pp. 209–246.

⁶ Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia*, p. 6.

sacradotal function. It is through his hands that we offer our sacrifice of praise to God and from whose hands we encounter the peace of Christ in the Liturgy. According to Chryssavgis, he “manifest[s] and celebrate[s] the presence of Christ within the local community through the joyful sacrifice of the Eucharist.”⁷ And the deacon, Chryssavgis says, “complete[s] the circle of unity and community, dispensing the gifts of the Spirit and serving ‘the least member’ of the local church as the Body of Christ.”⁸ Historically, the diaconate has been a ministry that is focused on service and has included pastoral care and reconciliation (especially reconciling penitents or those who left the church during times of persecution), philanthropic outreach, ecclesial administration, the ministry of the Word, and liturgical service. In particular, it is grounded in the way the church meets the world.

There has always been a close connection between liturgy and service, between *leitourgia* and *diakonia*. For instance, in Deuteronomy, the Hebrew people not only worshipped and ate in the presence of the LORD, but were also were commanded to share their food with others in the community, including widows, orphans, and resident aliens (i.e. non-Hebrews.)⁹ In the Christian sphere, the liturgical and social ministry was continued by the deacon. From the assembly, the deacon brings the thoughts and prayers of the gathering, the energies of God in the Body of Christ embedded in the sacramental life of the Church, as well as material goods to the community outside of the gathered assembly, especially to those in need. Through their ministry of service, they then bring the concerns (and joys) of those they encounter in the world to the community at the gathered assembly, leading the assembly in prayer/petition on their behalf. They function as a vehicle for communion and reconciliation—a servant to the people of God. As one can see, the diaconate is a ministry with its own identity and charism; it is separate from the presbyterial office. Unfortunately, at present, the ordained diaconate in the Church has greatly de-evolved from this vision of ministry. In many quarters, the male diaconate is merely a stepping-stone to the presbytery or serves as only a liturgical functionary. The female diaconate has fallen into disuse.

Need?

So, does the Orthodox Church really need a rejuvenated diaconate and in particular, a restored female diaconate? To help answer this question, it is instructive to understand the responsibilities of a typical parish priest. Fr. Alexander Garklavs outlined a number of functions expected of today’s parish priest in his presentation at a Pastoral Conference held at St. Tikhon’s Monastery in June of 2004. In addition to all the liturgical duties of the priest (Sunday and any daily liturgical services, baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.), he enumerates some of the priest’s responsibilities in parish life in America:

Pastoral visitations, educational work, Bible study, adult study, youth work, teen work, working with choirs and choir directors, marriage preparation, marital counseling, visiting shut-ins, grief counseling, [hospital visits], office work, preparing and printing bulletins and schedules, parish mailings, aspects of parish administration: parish council meetings, budgets, agendas, PR, building committees, sunshine committees, yard work, etc.¹⁰

It is clear that the modern day “job description” of a priest is overly broad. In addition, it includes functions that have traditionally been the responsibility of the deacon. Priests who try to “do it all” will most likely not be able to do everything well or will soon suffer from severe burnout and not be able to help anyone.

⁷ Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia*, p. 6.

⁸ Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia*, p. 6.

⁹ Dt. 14: 26–29.

¹⁰ Rev. Alexander Garklavs, *The Orthodox Pastor in the 21st century*. Talk presented at the 2004 Pastoral Conference (OCA) at St. Tikhon’s Monastery, South Canaan, PA, June 2–4, 2004. Accessed via www.oca.org.

Moreover, as far back as 1953, Archbishop Michael of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America realized that there was so much to do in each community that the endeavors of these priests alone do not suffice. For should the priest wish to know, as he must his spiritual children by name, their problems, and their spiritual and moral needs, this would certainly be beyond his physical and spiritual resources.¹¹

Clearly, a rejuvenated diaconate, a ministry that has service as its primary focus, is necessary in the Orthodox Church today. No one person can fill all the duties necessary for the building up of the Body of Christ, the Church. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “Each of us has been given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”¹² In particular, I suggest that a female diaconate is needed to be able to serve fully *all* of the faithful. For instance, there is still a need for a ministry of women to women. Furthermore, the Church could and should avail itself to the talents and gifts of one-half of the faithful for the building up of the Body. The diaconate is not merely a “stepping stone” to higher orders. It is, as Dr. Kyriaki FitzGerald explains in her book, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, “a full and parallel order of ordained ministry to which both men and women are called by God.”¹³ Practically speaking, I think a reinstated ordained female diaconate could help to rejuvenate the entire diaconate in the Church since stepping into the presbytery is not an issue in this case (or, at least, is not assumed to be, since the Church has not had this practice in its history). Women can focus on modeling what a real diaconal ministry might look like in the church by building up the ministry that women are already doing (in some instances) and encouraging men to do likewise.

What could an ordained female diaconate offer the Church?

How can the diaconal work that women are already doing in the Church be enhanced by an ordination? What would this mean for the building up of the Church? I would like to offer four ways in which a fully functioning diaconate could benefit the Church. First, by strengthening the pastoral care of the faithful and enhancing this care through the sacramental life of the Church. Second, by recapturing the philanthropic dimension of liturgy. Third, by focusing on the Word of God more particularly. And fourth, by connecting the pastoral, social, and liturgical dimensions of the diaconate more fully.

Strengthening the Pastoral Care of the Faithful

As have mentioned earlier, women are serving today as chaplains in hospitals, hospices, and in other settings. They bring solace to the sick and dying through their prayers and words of comfort. However, their lay status prevents them from offering Holy Communion (or perhaps, Unction) to the faithful. As a deaconess, a chaplain could connect the ill or infirm to the power of sacramental life of the Church. As a representative of the Church, she could also bring the thoughts and prayers of the entire assembly to those in need. Furthermore, through petition in the gathered assembly, she could bring the concerns of those in need to the attention of the faithful for prayer. This connects the sick and dying to the community and the community to the ill in ways that are tangible and life affirming, strengthening the unity of the Body of Christ.

¹¹ Quoted in Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), p. 154–5. Henceforth: FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*. In this instance, he goes on to advocate for the reestablishment of the female diaconate. He continues, “These tremendous needs of the Greek Orthodox Church in America has urged us to make a fervent appeal such as this to our daughters-in-Christ, . . . With the future welfare of our Church and membership at heart, we are considering the establishment in this country of an order of deaconess.”

¹² 1 Cor. 12:7, NRSV.

¹³ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 165.

I have seen a need for this type of ministry in my own experience. When I was in seminary, I spent six weeks one summer at a nursing home with many Orthodox residents for my pastoral care residency. I had nine women and one man on my rounds. (As is typically the case, women outnumber men in large numbers in these facilities.) As a representative from the seminary, I had some authority for my visits; they were not just social visits, important as those visits may be. I got along well with the residents and as my visits continued, I found out that many of them wanted to TALK. They wanted to talk about important things in their lives and for many of the women, “women-type” things (e.g. reproductive issues, loss of a child, problems they may have had with their husbands, etc.). They also wanted to talk about more general concerns—if they had things that were unsettled in their lives, regrets that they might have had or what may lie ahead for them when they leave this world. Frankly, I took a lot of “confessions.” In general, I felt a bit “over my head,” not having received any training in this area. I also felt that our encounters would have been enhanced had I been able to bring to them the healing power of Christ through the sacraments of the Church. Likewise, I would suggest that they might have felt more comforted knowing that through my intercession, a community was praying and caring for them as well. Both of these actions would more concretely manifest to them that healing in Christ is the healing of mind, body, and soul, both personal and communal. Some residents had been in the nursing home for years, others for only a short time. However, I was quite saddened to learn that NONE of them had had a pastoral visit by their parish priest (or deacon) in all the time that they were there. Unfortunately, this was not the exception to the rule. Clearly, there is a need for women to engage in this type of ministry in the Church.

Similarly, a spiritual director can provide pastoral care to many in need of guidance in their lives. Although the faithful would still receive absolution for remission of their sins through the agency of a priest, those engaged in spiritual direction can benefit from a relationship with a trained director to help them reflect on their lives. This guidance can help us to understand ourselves better in order to be able to see our sins more clearly and open a path for repentance and growth. Additionally, it can help us to move forward with our lives and grow in our relationship with God, both individually and in community, in ways that are healthy and life affirming. In the ecclesial realm, many seek guidance in the monastic context. But, not all monastics are good spiritual directors by virtue of their monastic vows. To be honest, some advice they have given can be quite dubious and damaging to those who seek it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women particularly have been the recipient of such advice and on occasion, abuse. The Church could benefit from those women who are immersed in the spiritual life of the Church (inside or outside the monastic context) who are also trained in psychology and Orthodox anthropology in order to minister more fully to those in its care. An ordination would emphasize the reciprocal relationship of this ministry. Those trained and ordained in this ministry have the authority and support of the Church, but they also have a responsibility to the Church and are accountable to Her (in the person of the bishop.) In other words, there are no “loose wheels.”

Furthermore, an ordained deaconess could provide pastoral care as an intercessor between the clergy (or hierarchy) and laity for those in need of their efforts. She could be an official, but neutral observer or moderator for private conversation to guard against abuse or false charges of the same, protecting both parties in the conversation—both clergy and laity. In the wake of the sexual scandals that have affected various quarters of the Christian Church, to which the Orthodox Church has not been immune, such a person can protect all involved. Additionally, if the deaconess is someone to whom the faithful has looked for guidance, she could also be a qualified advocate in a spiritual court.

Recapturing the Philanthropic Dimension of the Liturgy

A rejuvenated diaconate can recapture this dimension of the liturgy more particularly by connecting our service to God with service to our neighbor. Justin the Martyr reports that in the early Church, all Christians contributed to the offering, each one depositing their contribution with the president of the assembly. The president would then use the offerings to take care of “the orphans and widows, and those who are needy because of sickness or other cause, and the captives, and the strangers who sojourn among us...”¹⁴ In the East, the gifts of the faithful were deposited in the *Skeuophylakion* (outer area) prior to the celebration of the liturgy. The deacons would then select the portion to be offered to God and carry it to the altar area at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Faithful, what we now know as the Great Entrance. The remaining gifts would be blessed and then be distributed to the poor, the orphans, widows—anyone in need. This was the responsibility of the bishop and usually done by the deacon or deaconess as the agent of the bishop. As the Orthodox Church in America transitions from an immigrant church struggling to survive to one that is more established in its local setting, it is beginning to serve those around Her. For instance, efforts such as the “FOCUS” initiative is ministering to the poor and needy by providing Food Occupation Clothing Understanding and Shelter. Many of these types of philanthropic initiatives are run by women. However, these efforts are not normally connected with our liturgical life. A fully functioning diaconate would help to connect our liturgy and service to the world.

Focusing on the Word of God

The diaconate is a ministry closely associated with the Word of God—proclaiming it in word and song. In particular, the Church could benefit greatly from those who study the Scripture more particularly and use their education to help to edify the lives of those assembled.

Although preaching is also an area of ministry in which some theologically trained laypersons participate, it can be controversial in some places, especially when a woman is doing so. Even in those contexts where an expansion of this ministry has been welcomed, the arrival of a new priest with a different understanding of who can and cannot participate in this ministry or a complaint from a disgruntled parishioner can often trump the wishes of the silent majority and cause the person who had been participating in this ministry to be disallowed from doing so. The congregation is then deprived of hearing their voice and the perspective they bring to the reading. As a deacon or deaconess, this would be an inherent part of their ministry. This does not mean that they would take on all preaching duties, but it would allow another voice and studied perspective to contribute more regularly to the edification of the faithful.

Connecting the pastoral, social, and liturgical dimensions of the diaconate more fully

As I have mentioned above, the ministry of the deacon is to connect more fully the pastoral and social dimensions Christ’s work in the world in and through the gathering of the assembly. I have intimated how a future deaconess could continue to strengthen this connection as well. However, a formal liturgical role is the least developed area of diaconal ministry for women as there is little historical precedent for this. As Chryssavgis reminds us, “The decision as to whether or not women deacons perform liturgical functions arguably remains the exclusive prerogative of bishops in synod, in order that the catholic mind of the Church may gradually mature in and collectively seal this critical aspect of the female diaconate.”¹⁵ In my opinion, it is a distortion of the office to have the male deacon serve only during the liturgy, but not within the community, and conversely, to

¹⁴ Justin the Martyr, *Apology 67* in Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 9.

¹⁵ Chryssavgis, *Remembering and Reclaiming Diakonia*, p. 19.

have a future female deacon serve within the community, but not during the liturgy. As Dr. FitzGerald reminds us,

It is important to remember that in the past women deacons did have important responsibilities in the Eucharist assembly as well as in the administration of baptism, in praying with and for those in need, and in bringing Holy Communion to those unable to attend the Eucharist. ...Today, these expressions of ministry can certainly continue. At the same time, we also need to examine how women deacons can participate in the Eucharist and other liturgical services in a manner which is expressive of the living Tradition of the Church and which is not defined by cultural norms of another time.¹⁶

In conclusion

The diaconate is a ministry of service that connects our communal gathering with the liturgy of our lives more particularly. In the Divine Liturgy, we offer our sacrifice of praise to God and encounter the joy and peace of the Trinity more fully. As we leave our communal gathering, we continue to share this joy with others, ministering to our neighbor. When we assemble again as the Body of Christ, we bring our encounter with our neighbor with us. Our task is to continue this dance, drawing all to Life in Christ. Equipping and recognizing the diaconal ministry of men and women can help to strengthen our mission for the Building up of the Body and the Life of the world.

¹⁶ FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 197.