

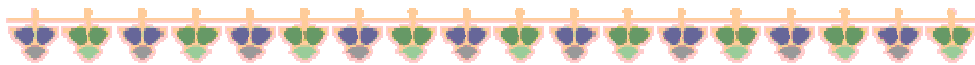
Female Diaconate restored by Greek Holy Synod



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'Grant Her Your Spirit'

By Phyllis Zagano



The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece voted in Athens on Oct. 8, 2004, to restore the female diaconate. All the members of the Holy Synod - 125 metropolitans and bishops and Archbishop Christodoulos, the head of the church of Greece-had considered the topic. The decision does not directly affect the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, which is an eparchy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Greek ecclesiastical provinces of the Ecumenical Patriarchate received their independence from Constantinople in 1850 and were proclaimed the Autocephalous Church of Greece.

While women deacons had virtually disappeared by the ninth century, discussion of the restoration of women in the diaconate in Orthodoxy began in the latter half of the 20th century. Two books on the topic by Evangelos Theodorou, *Heroines of Love: Deaconesses Through the Ages* (1949) and *The "Ordination" or "Appointment" of Deaconesses* (1954), documented the sacramental ordination of women in the early church. His work was complemented in the Catholic Church by an article published by Cipriano Vagaggini, a Camaldolese monk, in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* in 1974.

The most significant scholarship on the topic agrees that women were sacramentally ordained to the diaconate, inside the iconostasis at the altar, by bishops in the early church. Women deacons received the diaconal stole and Communion at their ordinations, which shared the same Pentecostal quality as the ordination of a bishop, priest or male deacon.

Despite the decline of the order of deaconesses in the early Middle Ages, Orthodoxy never prohibited it. In 1907 a Russian Orthodox Church commission reported the presence of deaconesses in every Georgian parish; the popular 20th-century Orthodox saint Nektarios (1846-1920) ordained two women as deacons in 1911; and up to the 1950's a few Greek Orthodox nuns became monastic deaconesses. In 1986 Christodoulos, then metropolitan of Demetrias and now archbishop of Athens and all of Greece, ordained a woman deacon

according to the "ritual of St. Nektarios"-the ancient Byzantine text St. Nektarios used.

Multiple inter-Orthodox conferences called for the restoration of the order, including the Interorthodox Symposium at Rhodes, Greece, in 1988, which plainly stated, "The apostolic order of deaconess should be revived." The symposium noted that "the revival of this ancient order should be envisaged on the basis of the ancient prototypes testified to in many sources and with the prayers found in the Apostolic Constitutions and the ancient Byzantine liturgical books."

At the Holy Synod meeting in Athens in 2004, Metropolitan Chrysostom of Chalkidos initiated discussion on the subject of the role of women in the Church of Greece and the rejuvenation of the order of female deacons. In the ensuing discussion, some older bishops apparently disagreed with the complete restoration of the order. Anthimos, bishop of Thessaloniki, later remarked to the Kathimerini English Daily, "As far as I know, the induction of women into the police and the army was a failure, and we want to return to this old matter?"

While the social-service aspect of the female diaconate is well known, the Holy Synod decided that women could be promoted to the diaconate only in remote monasteries and at the discretion of individual bishops. The limiting decision to restore only the monastic female diaconate did not please some synod members. The Athens News Agency reported that Chrysostomos, bishop of Peristeri, said, "The role of female deacons must be in society and not in the monasteries." Other members of the Holy Synod agreed and stressed that the role of women deacons should be social-for example, the care of the sick.

The vote of the Holy Synod to restore ordination of women to the diaconate under limited circumstances may be the most progressive idea the Orthodox Church can bring to the world. The document only gives bishops the option, if they wish, to ordain senior nuns in monasteries of their eparchies. Bishops who choose to promote women to the diaconate will use the ancient Byzantine liturgy that performs the same cheirotonia -- laying on of hands -- for deaconesses as in each major order: bishop, priest and deacon. Even so, some (mostly Western) scholars have argued that the historical ordination of women deacons was not a cheirotonia, or ordination to major orders, but a cheirothesia, a blessing that signifies installation to a minor order. The confusion is understandable, since the two terms were sometimes used interchangeably, but other scholars are equally convinced that women were ordained to the major order of the diaconate. The proof will be in the liturgy the bishops actually use. At present there is only one liturgy and one tradition by which to create a woman deacon in the Byzantine rite, and it is demonstrably a ritual of ordination for the "servant who is to be ordained to the office of a deacon."

Even the document on the diaconate issued by the Vatican's International

Theological Commission in 2002 admits that "Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon (451) seems to confirm the fact that deaconesses really were 'ordained' by the imposition of hands (cheirotonia)." Despite the pejorative use of quotation marks here and elsewhere in the document when historical ordinations of women deacons are mentioned, this Vatican commission seems unwilling to deny the history to which the Church of Greece has now newly returned. Further, the Vatican document points out that the practice of ordaining women deacons according to the Byzantine liturgy lasted at least into the eighth century. It does not review Orthodox practice after 1054.

The rejuvenation of the order of deaconess in the Church of Greece is expected to begin during the winter of 2004-5. The contemporary ordination (cheirotonia) of women provides even more evidence and support for the restoration of the female diaconate in the Catholic Church, which has acknowledged the validity of Orthodox sacraments and orders. Despite the distinction in Canon 1024-"A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly"-one can presume the possibility of a derogation from the law, as suggested by the Canon Law Society of America in 1995, to allow for diaconal ordination of women. (The history of Canon 1024 is clearly one of attempts to restrict women from priesthood, not from the diaconate.)

In fact, the Catholic Church has already indirectly acknowledged valid ordinations of women by the Armenian Apostolic Church, one of the churches of the East that ordains women deacons. There are two recent declarations of unity-agreements of mutual recognition of the validity of sacraments and of orders-between Rome and the Armenian Church, one signed by Paul VI and Catholicos Vasken I in 1970, another between John Paul II and Catholicos Karekin I in 1996.

These agreements are significant, for the Armenian Apostolic Church has retained the female diaconate into modern times. The Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia has at least four ordained women. One, Sister Hrip'sime, who lives in Istanbul, is listed in the official church calendar published by the Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey as follows: "Mother Hrip'sime Proto-deacon Sasunian, born in Soghukoluk, Antioch, in 1928; became a nun in 1953; Proto-deacon in 1984; Mother Superior in 1998. Member of the Kalfayian Order." Mother Hrip'sime has worked to restore the female diaconate as an active social ministry, and for many years was the general director of Bird' s Nest, a combined orphanage, school and social service center near Beirut, Lebanon. Her diaconate, and that of the three other women deacons, is far from monastic.

The future Catholic response to the documented past and the changing present promises to be interesting. The tone of the International Theological Commission document reveals an attempt to rule out women deacons, but the question is left remarkably open: "It pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his church to pronounce authoritatively on this question."

It is becoming increasingly clear that despite the Catholic Church's unwillingness to say yes to the restoration of the female diaconate as an ordained ministry of the Catholic Church, it cannot say no.

Prayer for the Ordination of a Woman Deacon

O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who replenished with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; who did not disdain that your only-begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, did ordain women to be keepers of your holy gates - look down now upon this your servant who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her your Holy Spirit, that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to your glory, and the praise of your Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to you and the Holy Spirit for ever. Amen."

-Apostolic Constitutions, No. 8 (late fourth century)

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