

Forgotten Sisters: Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church

“God created man in his image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them” (Genesis: 1:27. NSRV).

In recent decades, the role of women within the early church has been the subject of much interest and debate. In 1976, a congress of the Sacred Congregation for the doctrine of the faith reiterated the official position of the Catholic Church against the admission of women into the priesthood and the episcopate.¹ Traditional opposition to the ordination of women has been rooted in the argument that Christ did not appoint a woman to be a part of the twelve; “the entire tradition of the church has kept faith in this fact and has interpreted it as the explicit will of the Savior to confer upon man alone the sacerdotal power of governing, teaching, and sanctifying.”²

Over the years feminist scholars have pointed to the hatred and disparagement of women throughout the history of the church. Much has been written on the subject of the persistent sexist bias among church officials and the exclusion of women from positions of authority and power. Those against the ordination of women rely on “the pretext of a lack of precedent.”³ However a number of ancient sources attest to the ordination of female deacons in the early Christian period, particularly in the East.⁴

Although no one is certain of when the office of deaconess began in the church, it seems probable to many that it had its origins in the Apostolic Age.⁵ The earliest reference to a female deacon occurs in the Epistles of Paul.⁶ In Romans. 16:1-2, Paul writes:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon (diakonos) of the church at Cenchreae,

so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well (Romans. 16:1-2. NSRV).

The early diaconate of women is also referred to in Timothy. 3:8-11:

Deacons must be men of grave behavior; they must be examined and if found blameless may afterwards serve as deacons. The women must be of grave behavior, not slanderers, temperate, in every respect faithful (Timothy. 3:8-11. NSRV).

The fact that both male and female deacons are mentioned in the same breath could be taken to mean that they were considered equal, though this is not a view held by most scholars. According to the second century Alexandrian Christian scholar and theologian, Origen, the passage (translated into Latin by Rufinus) legitimates the role of women in the early church:

¹ Mary Ann Rossi and Giorgio Otranto, “Precedent, and Prejudice: On Recovering the Women Priests of Early Christianity,” in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Vol 7.1 (1991): 73-94.

² *Ibid.*, 79.

³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴ Valerie A Karras, “Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church,” in the *American Society of Church History* Vol 73.2 (2004): 272-316.

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Church*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁶ Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, eds, *Ordained Women in the early Church: A Documentary History*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

The text [1 Timothy 3:11. NSRV.] teaches with the authority of the Apostle that even women are established as deacons in the Church. This was the function that was exercised in the community of Cenchreae by Phoebe... This pious Phoebe, while offering help and service to all, deserved to assist and serve the Apostle himself. And thus this text teaches at the same time two things: that there are, I have said, women deacons in the Church, and that women, who have given assistance to so many people and who by their good works deserve to be praised by the Apostle, ought to be accepted in the diaconate.⁷

However, reactions to women's ordination have not always been so positive.

By the late second and early third century, the role of the deaconess had developed in the East. A number of ancient sources agree that this special office was ministered mostly to women.⁸ Pelagius, a fourth century ascetic Christian, stated: "even now in the East, deaconesses (*diaconissae*) are seen to minister in baptism to those of their sex, or in the ministry of the word."⁹ Most accounts concur that female deacons visited the sick, brought them Communion, and participated in the laying of hands in prayer.¹⁰ Furthermore, they went beyond merely exercising liturgical roles; they "supervised the life of women faithful, provided ongoing care for women baptizands, and were seen going on pilgrimage and interacting with their own families and the general population in a variety of ways."¹¹ In numerous accounts, authors stress the good deeds or good works of women of service in their communities.

Moreover, it is evident from literature as well as archaeological material that the office of female deacon was much more pervasive in the East than in the West. Both literary and material sources attest to the fact that by the third

century women were involved in the apostolate which certainly included:

...looking after the physical and material welfare of women, instructing catechumens, welcoming strangers, placing orphaned children with foster parents, visiting the sick, mediating quarrels, advising bishops and priests on the needs of their parishioners.¹²

At present, at least thirty-two unique inscriptions concerning deaconesses survive from countries belonging to the Byzantine Empire between the years 200 and 800 CE.¹³ What is perhaps just as interesting as their content is their position, as they stand among tombstones dedicated to bishops, priests and male deacons. This, some scholars argue, is not surprising since in the early years of the church, both male and female clerics were inseparably joined as they both shared charitable, catechetical, and liturgical duties.¹⁴ A votary inscription in mosaic from Patras, Greece, dating to the early Byzantine period reads: "The deacon Aggrippiane, most beloved of God, made the mosaic in fulfillment of her vow."¹⁵ Much of the epigraphical evidence that survives comes from Bithynia, Cappadocia, Cilicia, Syria, Judea, Thrace, Macedonia, Achaia, Sicily

⁷ John Wijngaards, *Women Deacons in the Early Church: Historical Tests and Contemporary Debates*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002).

⁸ Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, eds, *Ordained Women in the early Church: A Documentary History*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁰ Anne Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

¹¹ Madigan & Osiek, 204.

¹² Wijngaards, 16.

¹³ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁴ Jensen, 61.

¹⁵ Madigan & Osiek, 70.

and Cyprus.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the majority of deaconess inscriptions and other references come from Asia Minor.¹⁷ Although these ministries must have varied from place to place, mentions of female deacons appear in numerous contexts:

*funerary, dedicatory, as recipients of letters and the subjects of letters, guardians of shrines, heroines of ecclesiastical conflicts, monastic superiors and followers, choir leaders, those who take care of others' concerns and those who cause concerns to others.*¹⁸

Various Byzantine historians record the names of some of the most celebrated female clerics of their time. For example, the deaconess Olympias is mentioned in a number of sources. The anonymous *Life of Olympias* speaks of her ministry: "... by divine will she was ordained deacon (*diakonos*) of the holy and great church of God and built a monastery at the south corner of it."¹⁹ The historian Sozomen, a contemporary of both Olympias and her good friend John Chrysostom, describes the turbulent events surrounding John's exile from Constantinople in his *Ecclesiastical History*.²⁰ In Book 8 chapter 9, Sozomen describes her ordination:

*Olympias, who hailed from an elevated noble family, became a widow as a young woman. Because she was admirably educated in accordance with ecclesiastical law, [Archbishop] Nektarios had ordained her a deacon. John noticed that she liberally shared of her wealth with anyone who approached her. He also saw that she despised everything but the service of God...*²¹

Sozomen also reports that after John was expelled from Constantinople, he addressed no less than seventeen letters to her while in exile as the two shared a very special friendship.²²

Between the third and sixth century, female deacons were objects of regulation much like their male counterparts. Structures within the church evolved "in answer to changing needs, and the structures of the diaconate was part of that evolution."²³ Much like all other ecclesiastical functions, the female diaconate developed as a result of an ongoing process of institutionalization within Christianity.²⁴ In the Byzantine East, female deacons held authority from the third century. By the fourth century many of them were equated with their male counterparts since "like male clerics, women received ordination by the laying of the hands, according to precise ritual, with precise obligations and juridical conditions."²⁵

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (c 350-400 CE) is the earliest church order text to describe the office of female deacons.²⁶ Although it survives only in translation from its original Greek, it would seem that it would have used the masculine form of *diakonos* with the feminine article to designate the deaconess.²⁷ Later, in the fourth century, the term was occasionally feminized into *diakonissa* which was later brought into Latin as *diaconissa*.²⁸ Moreover, the *Apostolic Constitutions* contain a prayer the bishop was to recite after laying hands on the deaconess:

O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who

¹⁶ Wijngaards, 97.

¹⁷ Madigan & Osiek, 204.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁰ Wijngaards, 165.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

²² Jensen, 63.

²³ Madigan & Osiek, 130.

²⁴ Jensen, 68.

²⁵ Rossi & Otranto, 84.

²⁶ Madigan & Osiek, 108.

²⁷ Jensen, 60.

²⁸ Jensen, 60.

*didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; who didst not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of Thy holy gates, do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant. Who is to be ordained to the office of the deaconess, and grant Thy Holy Spirit, and 'cleans her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,' that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Thy glory, and praise of Thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration to be Thee and Holy Spirit forever. Amen.*²⁹

Although the prayer does point to the appointment of women by the bishop, it is evident that they are not entirely free from the 'filthiness of flesh and spirit'. This same text also makes the difference between men and women explicitly clear in another passage:

*The man is the head of the woman, and it is the man who is chosen to be ordained for the priesthood. Therefore it is not correct to subvert the order of creation, and reduce the origin to the derived parts of the body. In fact, the woman is the body of the man, taken from his side, and subject to him.*³⁰

It is clear that this statement builds on the creation story from Genesis 2, selectively disregarding the creation of man and woman on equal terms in Genesis 1 (as quoted above). In the East, deaconesses remained numerically significant during the fourth century even though they were gradually subjected to greater restrictions than their male colleagues.³¹

With time, a number of influential Church Fathers became increasingly misogynistic and disparaging of women's clerical authority. Tertullian, a prolific second century Christian

author, sought the abasement of women and the covering of the shameful female nature early on since women reflected the guilty nature of Eve.³² In the second book of his *De Cultu Feminarum* he fiercely exclaims:

*Do you not know that you are Eve?... You are the devil's gateway... How easily you destroyed man, the image of God. Because of the death which you brought upon us, even the Son of God had to die.*³³

Others, such as Augustine, taught that the natural order of things subjugates woman to man.³⁴ Thus for many traditional Christians, especially in the West, it was "unthinkable for a woman to preside over the eucharist because no woman could have authority over men."³⁵ It was feared the authority of women in the church would offend the natural hierarchy of things since women were a 'feeble race, untrustworthy and of mediocre intelligence' (Epiphanius) and not created in *imago dei* (Tertullian and Ambrosiaster).³⁶

During the fifth and sixth centuries women's ordination became less frequent. The councils of Orange (441 CE), Epaon (517 CE) and Orleans (533 CE) even mandated that the practice of electing women in the role of deacon be stopped entirely.³⁷ Although it is impossible to pinpoint one specific factor that led to the decline of women's ministry in the church, a number of contributing elements have to be considered.

²⁹ Witherington, 200.

³⁰ Ibid, 62.

³¹ Jensen, 62.

³² Rossi & Otranto, 76.

³³ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

³⁴ Ibid, 87.

³⁵ Wijngaards, 61.

³⁶ Ibid., 61.

³⁷ Witherington, 200.

The rise of Gnosticism may have had an impact on the way the church perceived women. One major difference between the Gnostics and orthodox Christians was their perception of God. Gnostic theologians described God in both masculine and feminine terms and supported their views with the androgynous creation of humankind of Genesis 1. This reading of Genesis is devoid of any hierarchy based on sex and may have encouraged equality between the men and women.³⁸ Within Valentinian Gnosticism, “there is no antithesis of male and female principles; rather, they are seen as complementary, making the universe whole.”³⁹ In certain Gnostic circles women may have enjoyed more freedom than their orthodox Christian counterparts since both principles, male and female, were united originally. This has led a number of scholars to argue that the reaction to Gnosticism might have influenced the church to turn towards a more patriarchal orientation.⁴⁰ Conversely, the orthodox theologians described God in masculine terms and pointed to Genesis 2 as the source of women’s submission to men since Eve was created from Adam and for his fulfillment.⁴¹ This view dramatically shaped the social order; with time, “orthodox Christians came to accept the domination of men over women as the natural order for human society and for the Christian churches.”⁴²

Gnosticism was not the only heretical sect that may have had an influence of the church’s reaction to women in positions of power. The distinctive features of Montanism, the enthusiasm for male and female prophets (Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla) and the ministry of women and the expectation of immediate parousia (return of Jesus), all resulted in criticism and repudiation by the orthodox churches. One of the things that most disturbed the Church Fathers was the fact that women were granted leadership roles. In both Gnostic

and Montanist communities women functioned as presbyters and bishops.⁴³ Epiphanius of Salamis condemned seven Phrygian Montanists for permitting women access to the priesthood and the episcopate.⁴⁴ These types of objections “no doubt intensified once Montanus died and Maximilla became the *de facto* leader.”⁴⁵

Another major factor often cited as contributing to the decline of women’s offices in the church is the fact that the female diaconate was instituted primarily because of the custom of adult baptism by immersion. This form of baptism required total nudity and the anointing of the entire body by the baptizing clerical official; “when infant baptism became more the norm and when adult baptism by immersion ceased, there was no further need for deaconesses.”⁴⁶ The decline of women’s role in the ministry, the increasing admiration of asceticism and the disdain of human sexuality led many devout women to withdraw into the desert or join convents and devote their lives to prayer.

Although traces of women in clerical positions continued in some parts of the Eastern world well into the medieval period, the level of church offices for women declined steadily from the end of the sixth century. Various reasons are suggested by scholars. Many have proposed that the “the rise of cultic sacramentalism that highlighted cultic purity as requisite for approaching the increasingly sacred sacramental celebration was a key factor.”⁴⁷

³⁸ Rossi & Otranto, 75.

³⁹ Witherington, 191.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁴¹ Rossi & Otranto, 76.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁴ Rossi & Otranto, 85.

⁴⁵ Witherington, 197.

⁴⁶ Madigan & Osiek, 205.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

Anthropological data rather consistently demonstrates that in a wide variety of cultures in which norms of cultic purity have been controlled by males, females are excluded from the sacred because of the overwhelming fear of contamination associated with the blood of menstruation and childbirth.⁴⁸ In opposition, feminist theologians have pointed to numerous passages from scripture which preach inclusiveness and equality among the sexes such as Galatians. 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians. 3:28. NSRV).

This perceived physical and moral impurity in women has been one of the biggest arguments against the ordination of women throughout church history. Thus, the recovery of women's "full participation in early Christianity may be one means of confronting the persistent perception of women as subordinate" in the Roman Catholic Church today.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid, 205.

⁴⁹ Rossi & Otranto, 93.

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