

This statement, signed by 57 Orthodox clergymen and lay leaders, was published originally by Fr. Hans Jacobse's American Orthodox Institute, where it was posted at <https://www.aoiusa.org/a-public-statement-on-orthodox-deaconesses-by-concerned-clergy-and-laity-2/>. It was drafted by Protodeacon Brian Patrick Mitchell with the assistance of Fr. Alexander F.C. Webster and Fr. Peter Heers, and it garnered nearly 300 additional signatures while at the AOI address. The footnotes that follow were all in the statement when published.

“A Public Statement on Orthodox Deaconesses by Concerned Clergy and Laity” January 15, 2018

The Patriarchate of Alexandria's appointment of six “deaconesses” in the Congo in February 2017 has prompted calls in some corners for other local churches to follow suit. In particular, a group of Orthodox liturgical scholars has issued an open statement of support for Alexandria, declaring that the “restoration of the female diaconate is such that neither doctrinal issues nor authoritative precedents are at stake.”¹

We, the undersigned clergy and laity, beg to differ and are writing now with three purposes: to question what was accomplished in the Congo, to clarify the historical record on the place of deaconesses in Orthodox tradition, and to point out the serious doctrinal issues raised by the appointment of deaconesses.

First, as to what was accomplished in the Congo, we note that the Patriarch of Alexandria did not use the Byzantine rite of ordination for deaconesses.² He laid hands [*cheirothetisa*] on one woman making her “Deaconess of the Mission” and then prayed over five other women using a “prayer for one entering ecclesiastical ministry,” a generic blessing in the Greek-language *archieratikon* for a layman starting church work. He did not bestow an orarion upon any of the women yet had the five women assist in washing his hands, as subdeacons would. All this was done not during the Divine Liturgy, as with an ordination, but at its end. These facts, plus anecdotal reports from Africa that these new deaconesses have been assigned the duties of readers, call into question the claim that what happened in the Congo was truly a “restoration of the female diaconate,” for their manner of making and assigned duties bear only partial resemblance to those of ancient deaconesses.

¹ Evangelos Theodorou, et al., “Orthodox Liturgists Issued a Statement of Support for the Revival of the Order of Deaconess by the Patriarchate of Alexandria,” *Panorthodox Synod*, <https://panorthodoxcemes.blogspot.ca/2017/10/orthodox-liturgists-issued-statement-of.html?m=1>, Oct. 24, 2017.

² See “Το Πατριαρχείο Αλεξανδρείας για Διακόνισσες και Αγία Σύνοδο,” *Romfea*, <http://www.romfea.gr/epikairoitaxronika/11485-to-patriarxeio-alexandreias-gia-diakonisses-kai-agia-synodo>, Nov. 16, 2016; and, “Στην Αφρική εόρτασε τα ονομαστήρια του ο Πατριάρχης Θεόδωρος,” *Romfea*, <http://www.romfea.gr/patriarxeia-ts/patriarxeio-alexandreias/13147-stin-afriki-eortase-ta-onomastiria-tou-o-patriarxis-theodoros-foto>, Feb. 18, 2017.

Second, what can be said with certainty about the historical presence, role, and status of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church is that setting apart women as deaconesses was just one of several ways the early Church sought to protect the modesty of women by entrusting certain women with certain duties such as assisting in baptizing and anointing adult women and visiting women in their homes where and when men were not permitted, strictly within the limits specified for women by the Holy Apostles in Holy Scripture. The duties and status of deaconesses varied with time and place, as did the way deaconesses were appointed. The same duties were also assigned to widows, laywomen, male clergy, or nuns, so the need for deaconesses did not exist universally. Much of the ancient Church never had deaconesses. Outside Syria, Anatolia, Greece, and Palestine, deaconesses were rare to nonexistent.³

Deaconesses were also not without controversy. Several local councils prohibited their appointment (Nîmes in 396; Orange in 441; Epaone in 517; Orleans in 533), and many texts testify to the concern of Church Fathers to minimize their role, sometimes in favor of widows. The order appears to have peaked in the fifth or sixth century, surviving mainly in major eastern cities as an honorary office for pious noblewomen, the wives of men made bishops, and the heads of female monastic communities. The twelfth-century canonist Theodore Balsamon wrote that the “deaconesses” in Constantinople in his day were not true deaconesses. A century later, St. Athanasius, Patriarch of Constantinople, ordered that no new deaconesses were to be made. Scattered proposals and attempts to appoint deaconesses again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not receive enough support to cause a lasting revival of the order. Even now, other autocephalous Orthodox Churches have not rushed to follow the example of Alexandria.

Third, some blame resistance to deaconesses on a worldly, purely cultural prejudice against women, but that accusation treats the Church herself unfairly, even contemptuously, by ignoring legitimate prudential objections to the making of deaconesses motivated by genuine concern for the preservation of truly Christian and plainly Apostolic respect for the distinction of male and female, to which our post-Christian world is increasingly hostile.

The liturgists’ statement itself gives cause for such concern. Its argument for “reviving” the order of deaconess is not based on the needs of the women to be served by deaconesses—needs that somehow require ordination, needs that nuns, laywomen, laymen, or male clergy are not already meeting. Rather, the statement’s argument is based on the supposed need of women to be deaconesses. Making them deaconesses would be a “positive response” to the “contemporary world,” an “opportunity for qualified women to offer in our era their unique and special gifts,” and a “special way” to emphasize the “dignity of women and give

³ For the most in-depth study of the subject, see Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, trans. K.D. Whitehead (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986). For a thorough study of Orthodox deaconesses before their disappearance, see Brian Patrick Mitchell, “The Disappearing Deaconess: How the Hierarchical Ordering of the Church Doomed the Female Diaconate,” <http://www.brianpatrickmitchell.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Disappearing-Deaconess-2017-03-10.pdf>. [EDITOR’S NOTE: “The Disappearing Deaconess” is now included in this volume and no longer available at brianpatrickmitchell.com.]

recognition to her [sic] contribution to the work of the Church.”⁴ Such justifications denigrate the vocation of Orthodox laity, implying that only clerics serve the Church in meaningful ways, contrary to Orthodox belief that all Orthodox Christians receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and a personal calling to serve the Church at Holy Chrismation.

The liturgists’ statement also makes clear that they do not intend a true “restoration” of the ancient order of deaconesses; their aim is a new order of clergywomen authorized to do things never done by Orthodox deaconesses and in some cases explicitly forbidden by Apostolic ordinance and Church canons. They would have women preach, which the Apostles and Fathers never allowed in church. They leave open the question of other liturgical duties, admitting no limitation that bishops must respect. They question which “qualities and qualifications” truly matter, doubting whether deaconesses must be mature and unmarried, despite the ancient rule, most forcefully insisted upon in the sixth century by St. Justinian as emperor, that deaconesses be at least middle-aged and remain celibate as deaconesses.⁵

The liturgists’ most ominous assertion is their subtle note, in anticipation of popular opposition, that “adequate preparation and education” are needed not of the women to be appointed deaconesses but “of the people who will be called upon to receive, honor, and respect the deaconesses assigned to their parishes.” Clearly, they foresee the need to force clergy and laity to accept deaconesses, which is hardly trusting of the Holy Spirit or respectful of the Orthodox Church’s traditional regard for episcopal authority.

In sum, the statement’s emphasis on gratifying women, disregarding tradition, and resorting to force gives evidence of a feminist perspective and approach consistent with the faithless western world but not with the Orthodox Church. More evidence of the liturgists’ perspective is available elsewhere. For example, two of the liturgists have called for the removal of Ephesians 5 from the Rite of Crowning on the grounds that it is inconsistent with modern thinking and therefore likely to be misunderstood. They suggest a different epistle or perhaps a sanitized version of Ephesians 5 without verse 33 (“Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence [*phobētai*, fear] her husband.”).⁶

Given this state of faith, we believe the appointment of deaconesses in any form in the present era is likely to divide the Church and distress the faithful by challenging the Church’s basic understanding of human nature. God has made every one of us either male or female and ordained that we live accordingly as either a man or a woman. He has also provided us with many authoritative precepts distinguishing men and women, in the Law, in the Holy

⁴ The “positive response” and “special way” are from the report of the Inter-Orthodox Symposium in Rhodes in 1988 titled, “The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women” (Istanbul: The Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1988), which the liturgists quote approvingly.

⁵ The minimum age for deaconesses changed several times over the years: The emperor St. Theodosius the Great set it at 60 in 390, the age the Apostle Paul set for enrolled widows in 1 Timothy 5:9, which St. Theodosius’s legislation mentioned. Canon 15 of Chalcedon lowered it to 40 in 451. St. Justinian’s Novella 6 raised it to 50 in 535, making an exception for women living in hermitages and having no contact with men. His Novella 123 lowered it to 40 again in 546, which Canon 14 of III Constantinople (*in Trullo*) confirmed in 692.

⁶ Alkiviadis Calivas and Philip Zymaris, “Ephesians 5:20–33 as the Epistle Reading for the Rite of Marriage: Appropriate or Problematic?” *Public Orthodoxy*, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2017/09/08/ephesians-rite-of-marriage/>. Accessed Nov. 4, 2017.

Apostles, in the canons of the Church, and in the literature of our Holy Fathers, in passages too numerous to cite. But if laws and canons and precepts are not enough to turn us to repentance, God has given us two distinct models of perfected humanity, one male and one female: Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, and His Most Pure Mother, the Theotokos, whose icons stand always before us in worship as reminders of what we are meant to be as men and women.

Yet there are advocates of deaconesses who wish to see women treated the same as men in the Church as in the world and who therefore use the rite of “ordination” (*cheirotomia*) of deaconesses in a handful of Byzantine service books to argue that deaconesses were once “major clergy.” These advocates covet the rank, honor, and authority of the clergy. Some would have deaconesses be just like deacons, only female. They would up-end the natural and economical order of male and female to raise women over men in the hierarchy of the Church. They would “ordain” women who are young, married, and with children, and they would give them a vocal role in worship and all the authority a deacon might exercise over men as well as women. The liturgists do not go that far, but their statement leaves open that possibility by either ignoring or questioning traditional limits on deaconesses, while stressing the exclusive prerogative of bishops to make of deaconesses what they will.

We cannot, therefore, take seriously the liturgists’ claim that “restoration of the female diaconate is such that neither doctrinal issues nor authoritative precedents are at stake.” Neither can we accept their assurances that deaconesses today will not lead to priestesses tomorrow, knowing where similar incremental innovations have led in heterodox communions. We also ought not to think only of what we ourselves might tolerate today. We must think generationally. Just as children who grow up in parishes with female readers are more likely to believe as adults that women should be deacons or deaconesses, so children who grow up in parishes with deaconesses will be more likely to believe as adults that women should be priests and bishops.

We therefore entreat all Orthodox hierarchs, other clergy, and theologians to uphold the dogmatic teaching of the Church concerning the creation and calling of man as male and female by resisting the divisive call to appoint deaconesses.

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