"Orthodox Deaconesses: When History Is Not Tradition"

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For all of the research done on ancient deaconesses, we still know very little about them. There are two main reasons for that. One is that their role was always very limited, so there's just not much said about them in ancient texts, compared to what's said about bishops, priests, or deacons. The other reason is that their presence was also always very limited: There weren't many of them anywhere except in some of the larger cities of the eastern empire like Constantinople. In many places, there weren't any at all, and for a long time, there weren't any anywhere in the Orthodox Church.

That's something to keep in mind when we think about the place of deaconesses in Orthodox tradition: The whole Church has never had a tradition of having deaconesses, but the whole Church has had a tradition of not having them—even after having had them, in some places.

The question is, why? There are two reasons, both rather obvious: One is infant baptism, which explains why churches that had deaconesses stopped having them. But it doesn't explain why other churches never had them. The obvious answer to that question is that the office of deaconess was inherently problematic, because it appeared to elevate women over men in the hierarchy of the Church, contrary to Christian conceptions about both the natural order and the divine economy.

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This explains not only why some churches never had deaconesses, but also (a) why deaconesses were so few in numbers in the churches that had them, (b) why their duties were always greatly limited, (c) why they eventually disappeared from churches that had them, and (d) why they were not revived for so many centuries thereafter.

One could still argue that the fact that great churches of the East did have deaconesses, and the fact that great saints of those churches like St. John Chrysostom did seem to have no problem with them, prove that early Christians were more accepting of women in leadership roles than later Christians came to be.

The problem with that argument—and it's an especially big problem for the Orthodox—is that it takes a fundamentally Protestant approach to Christian tradition. It asks us to believe that the first Christians were really quite progressive in their thinking, but, along the way, things went horribly wrong, and we're only now getting back to real Christianity.

Daphne Hampson, a feminist critic of Christian feminism, calls this the "golden thread" approach to Christian tradition: You pick a favorite part of tradition and seize on it as the key to everything else. For Martin Luther, it was "justification by faith." For Christian feminists, it's "neither male nor female." Everything in line with "neither male nor female"—deaconesses, empresses, Equals to the Apostles—is held up as part of the golden thread of true faith, and whatever is not in line is dismissed as historical clutter. It's an approach that pits scripture against scripture and tradition against tradition, privileging supposedly egalitarian scriptures and traditions over patriarchal scriptures and traditions, which are blamed on alien influence.

Of course, once you take that approach, it's Katy-bar-the-door, because everything but the golden thread is expendable. We've seen where that approach has gotten Protestants generally, and we've seen where it has gotten Protestant feminists. Not content with female deacons, they went on to demand female priests and female bishops—and they got gay priests and gay bishops, and now transgenders, because, of course, if gender doesn't matter, then gender doesn't matter. That's what you get when you understand "neither male nor female" absolutely.

A saner, more Orthodox, more plainly Christian approach would be to seek not conflict but consistency in scripture and not corruption but continuity in tradition. Not that

nothing ever changes in the Church. There will always be adjustments to historical circumstances, as well as mistakes made and lessons learned. But the principles will remain the same at all times.

Now I will state and explain a principle and then briefly explain the Church's experience with deaconesses according to that principle. The principle is: "The head of the woman is the man, and the head of the man is Christ, and the head of Christ is God."

That's 1 Corinthians 11:3. I could talk at length about what it means. (It's the subject of my dissertation.) But the key thing to know about this verse is that it's not about inequality. Just the opposite: It's about equality. That's how Theodoret of Cyrus understood this verse. In fact, he used the verse to argue that the Son is equal to the Father because the Father is the source of the Son. Ancient Greek speakers did much more often used the word *kephalē* ("head") to mean "source" than to mean "ruling power." In fact, the Septuagint uses *kephalē* interchangeably with the word *archē* to translate the Hebrew word *rosh*, meaning "head" or "beginning," as in *Rosh Hashanah*, the beginning of the new year. (We have a similar usage in English of *head* in the words *headwater* and *fountainhead*, the former meaning the source of a river and the latter meaning a spring that is the source of a stream.)

So we have an equality based on sourceness, so to speak, and what this means for God and Christ in 1 Cor 11:3 is that, although equal, they relate to each other in distinct ways—through *self-giving* by the source and *thanksgiving* by the other. In the Gospels, between the Father and the Son, all of the giving is done by the Father and all the thanking is done by the Son. Not once is the Father said to thank the Son, and not once is the Son said to give anything to the Father except thanks. This is also the way Christ and the Church relate, Christ being the "head" of the Church, as we are repeatedly told (Eph 1:22, Eph 5:23, Col 1:18).

It is furthermore how the man and the woman are mean to relate, the woman be created from and for the man (Gen. 2, 1 Cor 11:9). The Holy Apostle Paul, in fact, analogizes the man and the woman to both God and Christ (1 Cor 11:3) and Christ and the Church (Eph 5:23). The man, he writes, is to give his life for the woman as Christ gave His life for the Church; the woman is therefore to submit to the man as the Church submits to Christ.

Between the Father and the Son, this relationship of self-giving and thanksgiving involves no subjection and no obedience as we think of it. This is because the one divine will is shared by the Father and the Son, who are therefore in perfect agreement about everything. It is only the Son's human will that must be brought under subjection and made to submit to the one divine will.

But among mere humans since the Fall, there is little unity of will, and the only way we can be brought back into true unity—the only way "that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11, 17:22)—is for one to submit to the other. And this is thus decreed by God for our own good, as St. John Chrysostom says when preaching on 1 Corinthians:

> And from the beginning He made one sovereignty only, setting the man over the woman [Gen 3:16]. But after our race ran headlong into extreme disorder, He appointed other sovereignties also, those of Masters, and those of Governors, and this too for love's sake. [Homily 34]

This is not what many Westerners believe today. Whether they know it or not, they are followers of Marx and Rousseau and others who despised humility and obedience and condemned subjection itself as tyranny, teaching people to take offense at being cast in the role of Christ—as the one to obey, the one to submit. Truly, if Marx and Rousseau are our apostles, then we are in the wrong religion, because the Church of Christ has always taught humble acceptance of both our subjection to others and our archic and eucharistic responsibilities to others.

Now, what does this mean for deaconesses?

In the apostolic Church, as still today, both men and women used their spiritual gifts and worldly resources to advance the Gospel through various forms of trusted service or *diakonia*. Some such people were especially helpful and effective, becoming what we today might call the "go-to person" for particular services. Some were also especially pious, forgoing marriage to dedicate themselves solely to Christian service, with or without formal recognition of their status. St. Phoebe of Cenchrea was such a person—faithful, able, trustworthy, and of course respectful of all of the rules of behavior governing the assembly, including the prohibitions on women speaking publicly and exercising authority over men.

There were also, in the apostolic Church, certain men chosen to manage the Church's finances and given the authority to say who got what out of the Church's treasury, so the Apostles didn't have to. These men came to be called deacons, from the common Greek word *diakonos* meaning a trusted servant acting on behalf of his master. The word *diakonos* is applied to half a dozen named men in the New Testament, including Christ and St. Paul. It is also used of the men who served the wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1–11) and of civil rulers "who beareth not the sword in vain" (Rom 13:4), and it is used of St. Phoebe (Rom 16:1).

Whether St. Phoebe was a "deacon" in any sense is unknown to us. All that is known is that Greek-speaking Christians did later assume that she was, and it was in the Greek-speaking East that deaconesses first appeared. The order was very slow to catch on. We know of none by name until the fourth century. Before then, the evidence for actual deaconesses among the Orthodox is extremely slight.

The Christian West had no such tradition of their own. The word *diakonos* was never transliterated as *diacona* in Latin versions of Romans 16, so Westerners had no reason to believe that St. Phoebe as a deacon. Western Christians were surprised to learn that there were deaconesses in the East, and several early Western councils forbade their appointment. Even in the East, deaconesses remained very rare. Already in the sixth century, Severus of Antioch was telling the priests under him that the order was largely honorary, there being little real need for them.

At some point, a rite of ordination was composed resembling that of deacons. It is essentially a monastic rite and appears in only about a dozen Byzantine service books, out of an estimated 2,000 still in existence. The rite certainly makes deaconesses look a lot like deacons, but it may actually have contributed to the order's demise by bringing women too close to the altar for the clergy's comfort. If ordaining a deaconess meant giving her an orar and handing her the Chalice, many bishops may have opted against ordaining them.

That's certainly what more and more bishops did, for whatever reason. They couldn't easily argue against the order of deaconesses because of the presumption in the East that the order was apostolic, but they weren't required to ordain any, and so they didn't.

All along, it's clear that deacons and deaconesses were never the same order. They always existed on a very different basis on account of the fundamental difference of male and female. One order was ecumenical; the other order was regional. One was accepted everywhere without question; the other was resisted throughout much of the Church and eventually abandoned by the whole Church.

We can only wonder whether the order of deaconess would have evolved differently and lasted longer if it had not shared the name of "deacon." The name was both a blessing and a curse for the order, adding to the prestige of being a deaconess but also raising questions about the standing of deaconesses vis-à-vis other clergy. Treating deaconesses like deacons exalted them above subdeacons, readers, chanters, and laymen, which brought them into conflict with the Church's fundamental beliefs about the man and the woman. This accounts for both the outright resistance to deaconesses in the West and the waning enthusiasm for deaconesses in the East.

This also explains the current controversy over applying the name once again to women. Feminists covet the title of "deacon," preferring it to the title of "deaconess," because it no longer believes in the subjection of women and wants to see women treated equally with men, in the Church as in the world. The Faithful haven't given up on the natural order or the divine economy and know that if they give in to women deacons they will be hard pressed to invent a reason not to also give in to women priests and women bishops.

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