

# PUHEENVUOROT JA KATSAUKSET/ REVIEW ARTICLES

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## Women and Diakonia in the Orthodox Church

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### Introduction

As Christians we are all called to serve, not to be served. We understand this service – diakonia, to use the Greek word often found in the New Testament – as our vocation as individuals and the vocation of the collective church itself, both modelling the servant-leader role of Jesus Christ that he explained to his disciples (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, John 13:1–17). *Diakonia* is a delightfully general term; it encompasses serving and caring for our loved ones, as well as caring for those we don't love or who don't love us. It involves serving our church communities, as well as people and communities outside our church. *Diakonia* includes the service of laypeople, as well as the service of the clergy. *Diakonia* can even be said to involve the care of our broken world; our human responsibility to transfigure what is broken and can be fixed this side of the Kingdom.

The Christian call to *diakonia* is a universal call; it is not limited to status, class, race, or sex. However, the Orthodox Christian community does not honour this call when it comes to women. Women are often unable to fulfil their *diakonia* – unable fully to offer their loving service to others, the church, and the larger world.

I will discuss the status of women and *diakonia* in the Orthodox Church today, largely referring to the Orthodox spaces I know best in North America, but also referencing Europe and Africa. Let me begin by telling you about my own upbringing in the Orthodox Church.

My father's family immigrated from Belarus to the United States. I grew up in an immigrant parish of Slavs from various places in Eastern Europe. It was my good fortune that this parish was full of faithful Orthodox Christian women, including my own mother who converted to Orthodoxy after marrying my father. As a young child, I noticed more women were present than men at any given service. There were only men at the altar, but the men were substantially outnumbered by the women. My hometown parish is not unique in this regard; many Orthodox communities throughout the world reflect this gender imbalance, including the Orthodox Church of Finland, in which, at the end of 2017, 56 per cent of all members of the church were women.<sup>1</sup>

These women were not only abundantly present, they also cleaned and cooked. Every week a group of them cleaned the whole church building, and after every service they provided coffee and food. These actions were diaconal, and this sort of hospitality is holy and vital to the wellbeing of parish life. Of course, cleaning and cooking need not be exclusively women's tasks, and I would never argue that women ought to be confined only to these roles within parish life, but I wish to avoid any disparagement of this sort of domestic *diakonia*; instead, I wish to honour the loving care that is involved in the wiping down of tables and banisters or the washing out of coffee cups, or the buttering of English muffins.

In this example of women from my hometown parish, we see the *diakonia of hospitality*, a form of *diakonia* I suspect has always been part of the daily life of Orthodox women. We also see only men at the altar. Only men were on the parish council as well, and only men read the Epistle and performed other reader functions. This prompted questions for me: why were women so clearly vital for the life of the church in their pious attendance and care of our

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<sup>1</sup> See The Gender Gap in Religion around the World 2016; Kupari and Tiaynen-Qadir 2021, 210.

bodies and the church space, but seemingly not vital for the liturgy or leadership of parish life? Fortunately, I had a patient and reasonable parish priest who fielded my many questions, and he was the first person to tell me of the involvement of women in early Christianity, as well as of the existence of the ordained order of diaconess that was once part of church life.

Through my observations of life in my hometown parish, these conversations with my priest, and my own investigations of the church's history and theology, it became clear to me that certain paradoxes were at play in Orthodox life. On the one hand the women around me were more pious and present than the men, and the women offered their *diakonia of hospitality*. Like all Orthodox Christian women across time and space, they exercised their own agency in other ways too, I am sure.<sup>2</sup> But, on the other hand, their *diakonia* was circumscribed and limited to hospitality. The possibility of offering their *diakonia* through liturgy or leadership was unavailable to them.

This brings us to the heart of the situation of women in the Orthodox Church today. The teachings and the life of the Orthodox Church include women, and our churches are filled with images and stories of the Mother of God and female saints, but many of the Orthodox Church's practices circumscribe or prohibit women's *diakonia* at best or marginalise and diminish women at worst, all to the detriment of the Orthodox Church and the wider society.

All this takes place within the church of Jesus Christ, who included women among his closest friends, who appeared to them after the resurrection, and who radically affirmed women's parity with men. The early church – even within larger cultural constraints – heeded this call in many ways, including the leadership of women in house churches. The ordained order of deaconesses served communities liturgically and pastorally. The Christological orientation of the church sees women and men as both made in the image and likeness of God and both called to deification. Yet the institutional Orthodox Church has often strayed from and never fully realised this ideal.

However, we don't just live after the Fall, we live in *anno domini*; we live after the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. This should change how we view women's *diakonia*. We are not meant to complacently accept the brokenness of our reality and continue to impose pre-existing oppressive conditions, but instead to work as well as we can, this side of the Kingdom, to perfect and transfigure the world, including the church itself. We must evaluate when

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<sup>2</sup> For many such examples of women and agency in the Orthodox Church see Merdjanova (ed.) 2021.

and where the church has failed to live up to its own principles and swiftly work to remedy those situations so that Orthodox women are valued as much as men throughout their lifetimes and are therefore able to fully offer their *diakonia* to the Orthodox Church.

In this spirit I will speak today about women and *diakonia* as expressed in the leadership and liturgy of the Orthodox Church. I will first speak about women, leadership, and *diakonia*. I will then address women's *diakonia* as readers and chanters, and also as deaconesses. I will describe what I observe to be the status of women and *diakonia* on these points, and I will also offer some constructive comments about how the Orthodox Church ought more fully to integrate women's diaconal gifts.

## Women, *diakonia* and leadership

As I have said, women have always been vital to the existence and continuation of the Orthodox Church, even as the Orthodox Church has not lived up to its own ideals. What is new today is that women in significant numbers are stepping into roles of leadership and service in church life that were previously not held by women.

I will offer a few examples. Church governance: Women now broadly serve in parish and diocesan church governance structures. In my own hometown parish women are now on the parish council—something unthinkable in my childhood. Iconography: Previous to the past half-century, women iconographers were very rare, but today women are flooding the ranks of this important role in Orthodox life; here in Finland over “90 percent of the members of the Association of Finnish Icon Painters are women.”<sup>3</sup> Church diplomat: There are several Orthodox women who represent the Orthodox Church in intra-Orthodox or ecumenical spheres, such as the World Council of Churches. Finance: Orthodox women serve with frequency as treasurers of parish councils, dioceses, or as chief financial officers of Orthodox institutions. Within these examples, some women are taking on these roles as paid positions that constitute a career, and in other cases women are volunteering their time. In both cases, these women are engaged in *diakonia* for and in the name of the Orthodox Church.

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<sup>3</sup> Kupari and Tiaynen-Qadir 2021, 210.

The move of women in significant numbers into these positions is a new development. There have always been outliers and exceptions, but women's involvement in church leadership is now becoming a norm. There are many factors here, and one of them certainly is societal: because different types of education, training, funding, and professional opportunities are available to women outside of the Orthodox Church, women are bringing their skills and experience inside their church communities as well. Additionally, the Orthodox Church itself—clergy and laity alike—is becoming more accepting and encouraging of women taking on certain roles and tasks.

Never in history have so many Orthodox women been able to offer so much relevant expertise to the conciliar, synodal, jurisdictional, and parish life of the Orthodox Church. Continuing to integrate the competency, skills, and experiences of these women by bringing them into roles of leadership and governance would be consistent with the diaconal ethos of the church, as well as a great service to faithful the world over. There will be many and far-reaching effects of more and more women offering their *diakonia* by entering all manner of roles in the Orthodox Church, whether they be in Africa, Finland, Greece, the United States, or elsewhere.

## **Women, *diakonia*, and the minor orders**

Another aspect of women and *diakonia* in the Orthodox Church is what are often called the 'minor orders'. Essentially, a minor order is a specially sanctioned role in the church community that comes with particular responsibilities. Reader, chanter, and subdeacon are the most common minor orders in the contemporary Orthodox Church.

While the minor orders in the Orthodox context have been historically fluid, they are considered to stand apart from the major orders because reader, chanter, and subdeacon are *tonsured* into the minor orders, whereas deacon, priest, and bishop are *ordained* to the major orders. I use the word 'tonsure' here because it is often used in this context, and because it is appropriately descriptive: a piece of the hair is clipped as a symbol of the self-abnegating ethos of any clerical order. However, the words 'blessed' or 'consecrated' are sometimes used interchangeably with 'tonsure'. I will later elaborate on the distinction made between tonsure/blessing/consecration and ordination that is meaningful in Orthodox ecclesiology.

The precise duties or roles of the minor orders are generally known in practice, though they are not richly substantiated or defined in the Orthodox Church's theology or ecclesiology. A reader reads the variable passages of scripture within a service (Epistles, Psalms, but not the Gospel) and may be called on to lead a (non-Eucharistic) service in the absence of a priest. A chanter (or cantor) chants and sings the hymns particular to any day or service. A subdeacon assists during the Eucharistic liturgy and cares for the altar and vestments. All these orders have an aspect of *diakonia*; each in its own way is fundamentally about serving, supporting, and sustaining the church.

For all three of the minor orders there is no canonical, theological, or pastoral prohibition of women's participation. There are certainly past examples of women serving in these roles and recent affirmations in present times. But men still occupy the vast majority of these roles. Orthodox scholar Teva Regule suggests that the 'clericalisation' of these roles is one possible reason for the exclusion of women from the minor orders.<sup>4</sup> Although there is no theological, liturgical, or traditional ladder from reader to priesthood (or from any other minor order to the priesthood), the order of reader has in recent memory become understood as the 'first degree of Priesthood',<sup>5</sup> possibly due to Roman Catholic influence. This unwarranted connection with the priesthood may therefore have unnecessarily excluded women from serving in the minor orders of the Orthodox Church.

Within my lifetime there has been a visible increase in women serving in the roles of reader and chanter, but only a small percentage of them are formally blessed or tonsured. This is unjustifiable; public and expressed acknowledgement of women's ministerial leadership is critical. One real-life example: an Orthodox friend of mine described a situation that 'radicalised' her. In her parish a middle-aged, clear-voiced woman had functioned as a reader for decades and knew the cycles of services and the liturgy better than the priest himself. Yet this woman was passed over for the official, tonsured status of reader. Instead, during the bishop's visit to the parish, a young man who rarely came to services was publicly tonsured to much fanfare. Everyone accepted the tonsure of the man and ignored the woman's efforts without question, and the next week she was back serving (unacknowledged and un-tonsured) as reader, and the young man returned to rarely attending services.

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4 Regule 2008, 8.

5 Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church 1975, 308.

When Orthodox Christians see women performing the duties of the minor orders but not officially acknowledged for their service, the message is clear: women are less-than men, unworthy of liturgical roles, and their *diakonia* is not valued. This diminishment of women is damaging to everyone and prevents the Orthodox Church from benefiting from women's *diakonia* in the minor orders.

This story illustrates an important point: without church-sanctioned roles and ministries for women in the minor orders, a woman's participation in these roles is not only unappreciated and unacknowledged, it is also insecure. Women are often summarily supplanted when an officially tonsured man or a new priest comes to their parish. When women are not tonsured into the roles they are already doing, they are always subject to the caprice of those (men) in authority. This is minimised if a woman is officially acknowledged as a reader. Simply put, women's *diakonia* should not be contingent on men. new priest comes to their parish. When women are not tonsured into the roles they are already doing, they are always subject to the caprice of those (men) in authority. This is minimised if a woman is officially acknowledged as a reader. Simply put, women's *diakonia* should not be contingent on men.

## ***Diakonia* and deaconesses**

I will now turn our attention to the matter of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church. I have previously discussed the quality of *diakonia* present in other ministries of the church, including church leadership and the minor orders. The diaconate, however, is *diakonia* par excellence.

In the first few centuries of Christianity an ecclesiological understanding of the ordained clergy came into being in which the diaconate, the presbyterate (priesthood), and the episcopate were essential to the church. Ignatius of Antioch wrote less than a century after the death of Jesus Christ: 'So too let everyone respect the deacons like Jesus Christ, and also the bishop, who is the image of the Father; and let them respect the presbyters like the council of God and the rank of the apostles. Apart from these a gathering cannot be called a church.'<sup>6</sup> Each office had its own role, and the deacon's role was critical within the three, as described in Archdeacon John Chryssavgis's ideal of the three offices: 'A fuller vision of the ordained ministry should recognize the

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<sup>6</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to Trallians, 3.

role of *the bishop* as the bond of unity and spokesman for doctrine; likewise, it should respect the role of *the presbyter* for celebrating the presence of Christ in the local community. Yet it should also realize the role of *the deacon* as servant in *completing and complementing this circle of unity and community* in the local Church.<sup>7</sup> The diaconate ideally serves as the link between the clergy and the laity and thus expresses and encourages the whole church's diaconal ethos.

We have significantly strayed from this formative vision of the major orders. For most of us in the Orthodox West today a deacon remains an anomaly, either a rare bird who typically functions only as a liturgical assistant or an inconvenient twenty-four-hour layover on the way to the priesthood. The major orders today are also disproportionate in terms of ratio. For comparison, Justinian's legal code from the fifth century dictated that not more than these quantities of clergy be present in Hagia Sophia: '... not more than sixty priests, a hundred deacons, forty deaconesses...' With today's impoverished expression of the diaconate we suffer from this ecclesiological imbalance and are deprived of the diaconate's role in '*completing and complementing this circle of unity and community*'. We are also particularly deprived of deaconesses.

Many sources from the first thousand years of Christian history validate and illuminate the order of deaconess in the church, and this is important for a tradition like Orthodox Christianity that places a great deal of value on precedent. Deaconesses are witnessed in scripture, church canons, letters and writings of the saints, and in liturgical rites. I will briefly touch on a few of those sources.<sup>8</sup>

In his Epistle to the Romans St Paul tells of a deaconess, Phoebe, whom we celebrate as a saint in the Orthodox Church: 'I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon, 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). Although the orders of the clergy were not fully formed in the first century, the Orthodox Church understands Phoebe to be a prototype of what later developed into the ministry of the diaconate.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Chryssavgis 2017.

8 For more thorough histories of the order of deaconesses see Fitzgerald 1998; Karras, 2004; Madigan and Osiek (ed.) 2011; Θεοδώρου 1954; Vagaggaini 2013; Wijngaards 2011; Zagano 2000.

9 Note the language for Phoebe in Romans is 'deacon'. 'Deacon' and 'deaconess' were used interchangeably in the ancient church to refer to female members of the diaconate. Fitzgerald 1998, xiv; see also footnote one, xix. I typically use 'deaconess' in my own writing because I find it a more elegant term that quickly distinguishes between women and men in the diaconate.

The ordination rite for deaconesses is included in the earliest extant Book of Needs of the Orthodox Church from the eighth century (Barberini Codex Gr. 336). The roles of deaconesses appear to have been diverse, and our understanding of them comes from a variety of sources, including inscriptions, canon law, and conciliar and other church documents.<sup>10</sup> In the gender-divided ancient world women led private lives and only appeared in public in circumscribed situations. Deacons therefore typically ministered to men, and deaconesses ministered to women.<sup>11</sup> Deaconesses visited women in their homes, took the Eucharist to those women who were ill, helped with adult female baptism and catechesis, and escorted women when visiting a priest. But other roles fulfilled by deaconesses do not seem to have been gender-determined, such as participating in processions and serving as agents of the bishop in tasks of hospitality and philanthropy.<sup>12</sup>

The ordained order of deaconesses was never banned or officially discontinued. And yet deaconesses became scarce around the twelfth century.<sup>13</sup> There were probably several factors that contributed to this decline, including the monastic influence on parish liturgical life, which saw monastic ways of worship replacing 'cathedral' rites (meaning parish settings). Liturgical conventions from a male monastic context left no space, literally, for the participation of deaconesses. Other factors may have included the decrease in adult converts, which meant deaconesses were not in demand for their role in women's baptisms and catechesis (although, as noted above, these were certainly not the only roles of deaconesses), geopolitical pressure on the Byzantine empire (as the Ottomans invaded, their sensibilities around women, which did not allow engagement in worship and leadership, may have influenced the Orthodox Church), and the putative but incorrect connection between women's bodies and impurity.

Notably, the decline of ordained deaconesses was part of a larger decline of the diaconate as a whole. Although men are still ordained deacons today, the fullness of this order has never been recovered. Today deacons are often considered to be little more than a 'stepping stone' to the priesthood or a liturgical helper, rather than members of an important order in its own right, with a unique ministry.

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10 Such as 'Didascalia Apostolorum' (third century), 'Apostolic Constitutions' (fourth century), Canon 40 of the Council of Trullo (seventh century), and the canons of two Ecumenical Councils: First Council of Nicaea, Canon 19 and Council of Chalcedon, Canon 15 (fourth and fifth centuries).

11 Karras 2004.

12 Karras 2004, 277–287.

13 For a discussion of the fading presence of deaconesses see Karras 2004, 277.

Among the many reasons to reinstitute deaconesses today is that the Orthodox Church, through different bodies, continuously asks us to do so. Dozens of calls have been issued from church quarters, from inter-Orthodox groups and meetings, from scholarly settings, and from the growing number of supporters of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church today. The latest and most substantive call comes from the recent document commissioned and approved by the Ecumenical Patriarch, *For the Life and a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*:

The Church must also remain attentive to the promptings of the Spirit in regard to the ministry of women, especially in our time, when many of the most crucial offices of ecclesial life – theologians, seminary professors, canonists, readers, choir directors, and experts in any number of professions that benefit the community of faith – are occupied by women in increasingly great numbers; and the Church must continue to consider how women can best participate in building up the body of Christ, including a renewal of the order of the female diaconate for today.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the historical precedent and consistent calls, there is a real *need* of deaconesses today in the Orthodox Church. Orthodoxy needs the transformative outpouring of women’s gifts into the church and into the world that would result from the reinstitution of the order. It needs them by virtue of their baptism, simply on the basis of the unique gifts each human person has to offer. The Orthodox Church also needs women’s gifts because women have a different incarnational reality than men, which means they have different gifts to offer *as women*. By incarnational reality, I mean our lives and experiences as humans – and in this case specifically female humans – as understood through Jesus Christ’s Incarnation.<sup>15</sup>

Women need women’s gifts; they need woman-to-woman ministry. This is not an antiquated idea that we in enlightened America or Europe have outgrown. There is a reason I belong to an all-woman book group, and there is wisdom behind the decision of the hospice where I volunteered to pair fe-

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<sup>14</sup> *For the Life of the World* §29. Deaconesses are also called for at the very end of the document as part of a hopeful vision of the Orthodox Church moving into the future (§82). Full disclosure: I was on the special commission that composed the document.

<sup>15</sup> For an exposition of ‘incarnational reality’ and an ‘incarnational model’ see Frost 2023, especially chapter 1.

male respite caregivers with female patients. There are times when a woman needs to be ministered to by another woman. This sort of ministry happens informally in parishes (and book groups), but the good that could be done would be greatly magnified if theologically and pastorally trained women were ordained as deaconesses, ready to minister to other women, with the oversight, support, and authority of the Orthodox Church.

The whole Orthodox Church – not only women – needs women’s gifts. Because of their different incarnational realities, women have, for example, a different perspective on authority, its judicious use, its squandering, its misuse, its abuse, from which the whole church would benefit. Women have a different lived experience of – and have learned different lessons from – sexual abuse and assault, from which the whole church would benefit. Women have a different view of raising children, marriage, and family life, from which the whole church would benefit. Women have an understanding of the giving and sustaining of life, from which the whole church and the planet would benefit.

Some of these gifts are already being shared with the Orthodox Church in the twenty-first century – as previously discussed, women now serve on parish councils, teach in seminaries, and so on. This is wonderful, but it does not reflect the ways in which women’s gifts would be truly infused into the life of the church if women were ordained to the diaconate and thus had the sacramental blessing of this ministry, enlivening their gifts by the grace of the Holy Spirit and connecting them to the sacramental life of the church. The recognition of both the need for woman-to-woman ministry and the ways in which women’s gifts benefit the entire church were among the motivations for the Patriarchate of Alexandria to begin to reinstitute the order of deaconesses in Africa, which I will discuss in a few minutes.

The entire church would benefit from women entering the diaconate because of the fresh possibilities of men and women working together in ordained ministry. There will undoubtedly be a sacramental synergy when, for example, a deaconess and a priest go together to minister to a married couple grieving a miscarriage. There are very rich and very real possibilities for men and women to cooperate within ordained ministry, thus serving the church and the world.

A further benefit of the reinstitution of deaconesses is that it would inevitably prompt a revival of the entire diaconate through the attention and merit it would bring to the order, and this would be a most welcome deve-

lopment. Ordained deaconesses would be part of a reinvigorated and healthy diaconate as a whole which would foster a revival of the diaconal mission of the Orthodox Church. Indeed, the diaconal mission of the church, the *service ethos* of the church, is the authentic church and the fullest expression of the Kingdom here on Earth.

Women should be *ordained* to the diaconate, not only tonsured (or consecrated or blessed), because ordination offers – as we understand it in the Orthodox Church – the oversight, support, and authority of the church, and ordination connects the deaconess with the church’s sacramental life. The oversight and support of the church are linked; they both require deep relationships and mutual accountability between the ordained and the bishop, the ordained and the parish, and with the ordained and her peers. Authority is important because the authority of the Orthodox Church is bestowed upon the person being ordained, and this is experienced and sealed in the epiclesis, the invocation of the Holy Spirit. We understand the invocation of the Holy Spirit as central to the sacraments of the church. Once bestowed through ordination, the authority of the church is sustained through the service, the *diakonia*, of the ordained person.

Ordination connects the ordained and his or her ministry to the sacramental life of the church. Every sacrament depends on the sacrament of sacraments, the Eucharist. The centrality of the Eucharist in the ordination rites for deaconesses is clear. According to two manuscript traditions the deaconess was ‘ordained during the Eucharist, at exactly the same point during the liturgy as for the male deacon’.<sup>16</sup> A few minutes later the ‘newly ordained female deacon received Communion at the hand of the Archbishop, who then gave her the chalice, which she received and placed back on the altar’.<sup>17</sup> The ordination of the deaconess is bound up with the Eucharist. The connection with the sacrament of sacraments deepened when the deaconesses took communion to women who were ill or homebound. This practice was attested to as early as the third century, and there are also textual references to deaconesses taking communion to women in prison. In bearing the Eucharist to women in such situations, the deaconess became a means for the extension and expression of the sacramental life of the church.

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16 Karras 2004, 300. The deaconess’s ordination took place immediately following the end of the anaphora, after the royal doors were reopened.

17 Karras 2004, 301. This takes place after she is vested with the diaconal orarion.

We should ordain deaconesses in the Orthodox Church because the sacramental blessing of this ministry will allow women's gifts to be truly infused into the life of the Orthodox Church, which will be to the glory of God and the benefit of all. The gifts of women will be more fully given to the church and the world; these gifts will be honoured, celebrated, and realised in wonderful and unanticipated new ways; and that the presence of deaconesses will prompt an efflorescence of *diakonia*, healing, wellbeing, flourishing, and hope in the life of the Orthodox Church today.

Today the conversation about deaconesses in the Orthodox Church is increasing and spreading. The expressed mission of the American non-profit St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess is to 'educate and prayerfully advocate for the revival of the ordained female diaconate to help serve the ministerial needs of the Orthodox Church and the world today'. I am currently the chair of the board of the St. Phoebe Center, which is working to generate conversation about deaconesses among clergy and laity in North America.

The Orthodox Church in Africa is seeing the need for and potential benefits of deaconesses today and is in the process of recognising women as deaconesses within the Synod of Alexandria. The Synod understood the documents of the 2016 Holy and Great Council as affirming the ability of local churches to minister to local needs, including recognising deaconesses. Accordingly, Patriarch Theodoros II of Alexandria consecrated five women to the diaconate in February 2017 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

It is widely known that the original intention of the Patriarch Theodoros was to ordain these women to the diaconate. However, donors outside Africa threatened to cut off income streams to the African church if the Patriarch went ahead with the ordinations. The African church is not self-sufficient; it depends on outside funding. As a concession, the Patriarch 'consecrated' these women as deaconesses in 2017, rather than ordaining them. The perceived distinction between a 'tonsure', 'blessing', or 'consecration' (*cheirothesia*) and an 'ordination' (*cheirotomia*) is important. The language around this distinction is slippery; the terms are often used interchangeably or are even confused, as both mean 'the laying on of hands' in Greek. But the difference is important, given the resulting distinction in Orthodox ecclesiology and rites (the ancient rite for deaconesses was, significantly, an ordination, *cheirotomia*). This distinction is also important because, as the order of deaconess is renewed in the contemporary Orthodox Church, decisions will be made about whether to admit deaconesses as part of the major or minor clergy. Interestingly, the

deaconesses in Africa were consecrated deaconesses in a ritual that appears to occupy a liturgical space between a tonsure to the minor orders and an ordination to the major orders.

Patriarch Theodoros went on to consecrate several other women in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa before obliquely stating in 2020 that the Church of Alexandria would not continue with this experiment, that it was ‘suspended for the time being’, presumably because of ongoing financial pressure.<sup>18</sup> Many observers inside Africa and elsewhere were concerned that this was the end of the effort to restore deaconesses in Africa. Yet African theologians and clergy continue to publicly support the prospect of a continued reinstatement of deaconesses in the Alexandrian Patriarchate. Fr Ngorge John Ngige maintains that there is ‘no canonical or doctrinal opposition to deaconesses’, and that deaconesses ‘may be rightfully welcome in the church today for apostolic and missionary reasons’.<sup>19</sup>

I am pleased to report that, as of this writing, the Metropolitan of Zimbabwe Serafim (Kykkotis) has received a blessing from Patriarch Theodoros to ordain a woman to the diaconate later this year. The Orthodox Church in Africa has set a precedent of a synod of bishops restoring the order of deaconesses. May this effort be blessed, and may Africa continue to lead the way for the rest of the Orthodox world, with other autocephalous churches also restoring deaconesses.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

I could have titled this talk ‘Women and Leadership in the Orthodox Church’ or ‘Women’s Roles in the Orthodox Church’, but instead I chose ‘Women and *Diakonia* in the Orthodox Church’ to highlight service and *diakonia*. Increasing women’s roles in the Orthodox Church is less about the expansion of the ‘roles’ of women or the justness of women in leadership than it is about women being able to fully offer themselves to the church in diaconal love and service for the benefit of the church and the whole world.

In my own work I have encouraged the Orthodox community to engage in *diakonia* not just in the present but also in *diakonia* directed at the future.

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18 Vassiliadis 2020.

19 Ngige 2021.

20 Since the composition of this article, Deaconess Angelic Molen was ordained in Harare, Zimbabwe on May 2, 2024.

We ought to be considering the Orthodox Church of our grandchildren and making changes now to serve the future church's efforts to live out its diaconal ethos. There are many ways we might achieve this, and one is to increase the opportunities for women to engage in *diakonia* throughout the Orthodox Church, including as ordained deaconesses. This increase of opportunities is not only within our reach; it would allow the Orthodox Church itself to more fully express its diaconal mission.

A saying is attributed to the Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner: 'In the future the church will either become diaconal or will cease to exist.'<sup>21</sup> There is truth here because the church is only authentically itself, only truly *the church* if it is diaconal in nature. The expansion of women's diaconal ministries in the Orthodox Church and the revival of deaconesses will not instantly and magically produce a perfectly diaconal church; the earthly expression of the church will not achieve perfection until the Kingdom. But expanding the *diakonia* of women in the church, including deaconesses, will move the whole church in a diaconal direction. And a diaconal Orthodox Church will not just continue to exist but will be its authentic self. It will truly be the Body of Christ, oriented to its diaconal mission in the world.

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21 Theodorou 2017.

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