

on the girl's part earns her a violent beating from her husband or his father. If she has the courage to complain to the priest, she will be told that it is her duty to be obedient to her husband and his family.

While the misery of these women appears shocking to us, it is simply an extreme form of the patriarchy that is prevalent in our societies and affects us all. It appears in other, more subtle ways in the means by which women are marginalized and excluded from decision-making in the church and society.

Yet despite the violence manifested against the young girls of Mekkattam and the painful lives that await them, they are full of hope and faith. Seeing their enjoyment of the few gifts of life and their enthusiastic response to new opportunities has been a most rewarding experience to those of us who are privileged to work with them. Both we and they learn to define ourselves better and are empowered to remove what Mercy Oduyoye has called the "stone of fear of human sexuality, the stone of men's power over women and the stone of violence against women".

For how long will we allow the church and society to socialize boys for domination and girls for subjugation? Should we not – for the sake of every poor and oppressed woman – work together to challenge our churches to break the shackles of patriarchy and to help raise the prophetic voice of the gospel of justice and liberation? Should we not as women and men liberated by Christ work in partnership, each according to her or his God-given gifts, to free ourselves, our churches and our societies from the gender prejudices that are so rampant in our world?

NOTES

¹ Anca-Lucia Manolachi, in Jeanne Becher, ed., *Women, Religion and Sexuality*. Geneva, WCC Publications, 1986, p.176.

² Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, in *ibid.*, p.187.

³ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Did I Betray the Gospel?*, Geneva, WCC, 1998, p.47.

Women Deacons

A Brief Review of Ancient Evidence

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Biblical evidence

The earliest references to women deacons are found in the writings of St Paul. As with all the ancient orders of ministry, however, it is difficult to trace in a clear and comprehensive manner the historical development of the order of the woman deacon or "deaconess", especially during the first four centuries of the church.¹ The limited number of documents which mention this order are not comprehensive. Moreover, it is evident that in the early church practices regarding all orders of ministry differed from place to place and from one historical period to another.

We do know that by and large the order of the women deacons flourished in the Christian East until the Middle Ages. In Western Christianity, on the other hand, this order was generally discouraged (and so is even more difficult to trace). Evidence suggests that various aspects of the ministry performed by the ordained deaconess in the Christian East were taken up in the Christian West by other women, especially by widows and later by nuns. Nevertheless, there are noteworthy examples of this order surviving in some form in parts of Western Europe well into the Middle Ages. However, since references to the deaconess are largely absent from the Western fathers, historians have often identified this ministry as an "Eastern usage" which was accepted in certain parts of the church in Western Europe. Clearly there was no practice or understanding of the responsibilities, position and qualifications of women deacons which was universal throughout the early church.²

We do know that the order is traced to the apostolic period especially by the Eastern fathers. The New Testament provides us with some limited references to the ministry of women deacons. One is in the first letter to Timothy:

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the

faith with a clear conscience. And let them first be tested: then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons. Women [in this office] likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be married only once, and let them manage their children and their household well; for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

Because of differences in manuscripts and interpretations, not all commentators or translations recognize a reference to women deacons in this passage – in contrast to a number of early Christian commentators, including St John Chrysostom.

The other significant New Testament reference to a woman deacon is St Paul's commendation of Phoebe, to whom he clearly refers as a deacon (*diakonos*) of the church of Cenchreae:

I commend you to 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 (Rom. 16:1-2).

While some would argue that the Greek term *diakonos* here should be understood as a "helper" or "minister",³ the early commentators, especially in the Christian East, do not support this, clearly recognizing the significance of Paul's affirmation of the presence of women deacons and his reference to the ministry of Phoebe. As St Stephen became the prototype for male deacons, St Phoebe came to be seen as a prototype for female deacons.

Patristic evidence

Writing during the third century, Clement of Alexandria, one of the first commentators on Paul's letters, clearly recognizes the importance given by the apostle to Phoebe's ministry and to the order of the woman deacon. Speaking more generally about the women who accompanied the apostles, Clement says the apostles

took with them women, not as wives, but rather as sisters, so that they might serve as their co-ministers [*syndiakonous*], serving women who were confined to their homes. Through them the Lord's teaching was also able to enter the restricted domains of women, without causing ill will. We are also aware of all the things the noble Paul prescribed on the subject of women deacons [*peri diakonon gynaikon*] in one of the two epistles to Timothy.⁴

In his commentary on the letter to the Romans, Origen affirms even more forcefully the order of the woman deacon and the significance of the ministry of Phoebe. Romans 16:1-2, he says,

teaches with the authority of the apostle that even women are instituted deacons in the church. This was the function which was exercised in the church of Cenchreae by Phoebe, who was the object of high praise and recommendation by Paul. He enumerated her outstanding works; she assisted everyone, he said – that is, she helped them in their needs – she also helped me in my needs and my apostolic work with a perfect devotion...

Also this pious Phoebe, while giving assistance and rendering service to all, deserved to assist and to serve the apostle himself. And thus this text teaches at the same time two things: that there are, as we have already 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. He also exhorted that those [women] who are active in good works in the church receive likewise in return from their brothers consideration and be treated with honour, in whatever matter is necessary, even in material services.⁵

St John Chrysostom echoes these opinions, referring to Phoebe as a deacon of the church of Cenchreae and praising her for her goodness and sanctity. Moreover, St John affirms that both men and women should imitate her.⁶ His commentary on 1 Timothy again notes that women were called to be deacons and insists that 1 Timothy 3:11 is referring not simply to women in general:

Some have claimed that this was said of women generally, but this is not so, for why should he introduce anything about women to interfere with his subject? He is speaking, rather, of those women who have the dignity of the diaconate [*alla peri ton to axioma tes diakonias echouson legei*]. "Let deacons be the husband of one wife." This is fitting to say of women deacons [*peri gynaikon diakonon*] as well, as this order is also in the highest degree necessary, useful and proper in the church.⁷

It should be remembered that St John Chrysostom was writing at a time and in a place where the order of female deacons was flourishing. It is noteworthy that in this commentary he does not feel the need to prove or to justify the existence of the order of the woman deacon. His concern is rather straightforward. He is simply taking note of Paul's affirmation of the significance of the ministry of Phoebe and of the importance of the order of the woman deacon in the life of the church.

Theodoret, the bishop of Cyprus, born about forty years after St John Chrysostom, also makes an important reference to St Phoebe and her ministry:

Cenchreae is a prominent suburb of Corinth. The effectiveness of the preaching there is to be admired: in a very short period of time, not only were the cities filled with piety but the countryside around them as well. The church assembly at Cenchreae was already so considerable as to have a prominent and

noble woman deacon [*gynaika diakonon*]. She was so rich in rendering good works as to have merited the praise of Paul.⁸

In his commentary on 1 Timothy 3:11, Theodoret writes:

The women “likewise”, in other words, the [women] deacons, “must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things”. What he prescribes for men, he also prescribes in the same or similar manner for women. Just as he says that deacons must be “serious”, so he also says that the women must be “serious”. Just as he forbids the men to be “double-tongued”, so too he forbids the women to be “slanderers”. And, as he forbids the men to be “addicted to much wine”, so also he commands the women to be “temperate”.⁹

Because of the significance Paul and his subsequent commentators attached to the ministry of Phoebe, the church began to refer to her as being “equal to the apostles”. As we have already noted, St Phoebe came to be viewed as the first deaconess of the church and thus the prototype – the example of faith and service – of the woman deacon.

For this reason, early ordination prayers for women deacons refer to St Phoebe; for example, the second ordination prayer for the woman deacon in the Byzantine tradition implores God to “fill her with the grace of the diaconate just as you gave the grace of your diaconate to Phoebe whom you called to the work of ministry”.

Mounting evidence

In addition to the early commentators on St Paul and the subsequent liturgical tradition, inscriptions on tombstones offer additional evidence of the presence of women deacons in the early church. Numerous examples of this archaeological witness are scattered throughout the Christian East. One important example of the significance of Phoebe for the early church is found in the epitaph of a 5th-century Byzantine tombstone on the Mount of Olives: “Here lies the servant and bride of Christ, Sophia the deacon, the second Phoebe [*Sophia he diakonos, he deuteria Phoibe*], who fell asleep in peace on the 21st day of March.”¹⁰ From the same period, another well-preserved tombstone in Cappadocia commemorates a deacon named Mary who, “according to the text of the apostle, raised children, practised hospitality, washed the feet of the saints and distributed her bread to those in need”.¹¹

Another important reference to the ministry of early deaconesses comes from a non-Christian source of the second century, the *Letters of Pliny the Younger to Trajan*. Some time during A.D. 111-112, the emperor Trajan sent the lawyer Pliny on a fact-finding mission to the inadequately managed province of Bithynia. The poor state of temples in the region was being blamed on Christians; and Pliny found it expedient

to arrest, torture and even execute Christians in conjunction with his investigation of the situation. In *Letter 96*, he writes: “So I thought it... necessary to enquire into the real truth of the matter by subjecting to torture two female slaves, who were called deacons [*ministrae*]; but I found nothing more than a perverse superstition which went beyond all bounds.”

This letter attests to three important points. First, Pliny’s comments in the original Latin text reveal that the word *ministrae* is the title given to these women by their fellow Christians. While we would wish we knew more about the ministry of these women, it is important to bear in mind their ministry was distinct enough to be recognized by persons outside of the Christian community. Second, Pliny clearly believed that these women were important enough to be captured and tortured in order to extract from them “inside information” unknown to those outside the body of believers. Third, a number of scholars maintain that these women may have had particular responsibilities in worship, since Pliny was actually hoping to extract useful information regarding the practices of Christian worship.¹² It is also worth noting that the Latin *ministrae* used by Pliny to refer to the two captured women deacons is essentially the same word used to describe Phoebe in the Vulgate translations of the Bible.¹³

NOTES

¹ In what follows the older and more traditional term “woman deacon” is used interchangeably with the term “deaconess”.

² Cf. Evangelos Theodorou, *Herōides tēs Christianikēs Agapēs* (“Heroines of Christian Love”), Athens, 1949, p.37; *Hē Cheirotonia’ ē Cheirothesias’ tōn Diakonōn* (“The ‘Ordination’ or ‘Appointment’ of Deaconesses”), Athens, 1954, p.37; Janet Grierson, *The Deaconess*, London, CIO Publications, 1981, pp.12f.; Aime Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986, p.204.

³ In English, the King James Version (1611) translated *diakonos* here as “servant”; the Revised Standard Version and the New Jerusalem Bible use “deaconess”, the New Revised Standard Version (1989) substitutes “deacon”. A number of ancient manuscripts of the Greek refer to Phoebe as “being also” [*ousan kai*] a *diakonos*. On this see also Constantina Peppas, “Die Töchter der Kirche Christi und die frohe Botschaft des Sohnes Gottes” (Univ. of Bern dissertation, 1994), pp.22-30.

⁴ *Stromata*, 3.6, 53:3-4; cf. Theodorou, *Herōides*, p.31; Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, Collegeville MN, Liturgical Press, 1976, p.30; Martimort, *op. cit.*, p.77; Grierson, *op. cit.*, p.3.

⁵ *Commentary on Romans*, 10:17, cited in Gryson, *op. cit.*, p.31; cf. Theodorou, *Hē ‘Cheirotonia’*, pp.18f.

⁶ *Homilies on Romans*, 30,2.

⁷ *Homily 11 on 1 Timothy*; cf. Theodorou, *Herōides*, p.28; Gryson, *op. cit.*, p.80; Martimort, *op. cit.*, p.118.

⁸ *Interp. Epist. ad Rom.* 16:1-2; cf. Martimort, *op. cit.*, p.117; Gryson, *op. cit.*, p.87.

⁹ *Interp. Epist. 1 ad Tim.* 3:11; cf. Gryson, *op. cit.*, p.87; Martimort, *op. cit.*, p.118; Grierson, *op. cit.*, p.3.

¹⁰ Cited by Theodorou, *Herōides*, p.79.

The Priesthood of Women

A Look at Patristic Teaching

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¹¹ There is probably a reference here to 1 Tim. 5:10; cf. Martimort, *op. cit.*, pp.125f.; Theodorou, *Heróides*, pp.78f.; Gryson, *op. cit.*, pp.90f. Martimort includes citations from Greek monographs published in the first half of this century through 1957 (pp.143-45).

¹² Cf. Bonnie Bowan Thurston, *The Widows*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1989, p.73; cf. Theodorou, *Hé 'Cheirotonia'*, p.18; Gryson, *op. cit.*, pp.14f.; Grierson, *op. cit.*, p.4; Martimort, *op. cit.*, pp.25f.

¹³ On the nature of the ministry of the deaconess see also the introduction to this book. A fuller investigation of this order is found in Thomas Hopko, ed., *Women and the Priesthood*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999, and in my own study, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, Brookline MA, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999. The most extensive collection of primary source material translated into English on the topic of women deacons is perhaps the World Wide Website www.womenpriests.org, maintained by the Roman Catholic theologian John Wijngaards.

The ordination of women is certainly one of the most controversial issues in the Christian world today. The admission of women to the ordained ministry by more and more churches in the West has been the source of deepening ecumenical disagreement, particularly since the official decision of the Church of England in 1992 to ordain women.

When we try as Christians to resolve these disagreements, we immediately face the question of which criteria should be used to decide them. Do we appeal simply to the words of the Bible? Or to the authority of two millennia of Tradition embodied in the church? Or to the working of the Holy Spirit in the church today? Or to our God-given powers of reasoning about such matters? And if we appeal to more than one of these criteria, which if any are to have priority? For all Christians, these are theological questions.

The priesthood of women has had a long history. It arose as a serious issue in the Christian community for the first time during the period of Gnosticism and Montanism. It was revived in the divided Christian church eighteen hundred years later. A century after that, the question still has a dynamic in the life of the church which threatens to undermine all efforts to restore church unity.

During most of church history there has been little serious discussion of the admission of women to the ordained ministry. The debate is a contemporary one, raised by the decision of some Western communions to admit women to the priesthood. Although the Orthodox church has never faced the priesthood of women as an existential problem, this does not mean that the issue has been ignored. The Orthodox church wants "always to be ready to make its defence to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that is in us" (1 Pet. 3:15). Orthodox views on the subject have been articulated in special conferences, especially the inter-Orthodox meeting held in Rhodes in 1988.