

***Laudatum for Professor Evangelos Theodorou:  
Principle Proponent for the Rejuvenation of the Ordination of Deaconesses***

Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, Ph.D.  
Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology

*Παναγιώτατε, Σεβασμιώτατοι,*

*Reverend Clergy,*

*Distinguished Rector, Deans, Esteemed Colleagues,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*Good evening! It is a unique life honor for me to be invited to offer this Laudatum tonight here in Thessaloniki honoring Professor-Emeritus, Evangelos Theodorou. It is a singular privilege for my husband and I to be with all of you this evening....I wish especially to thank Professor Petros Vasiliadis and the Center for Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies “Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou”, as well as the rest of the Scientific Committee for extending the invitation and affording me an opportunity to offer a few remarks regarding the person, work and witness of Professor Theodorou on behalf of this esteemed gathering. . . again, thank-you.*

*I will begin the honored task you set before me now:*

Beloved of God and Highly Distinguished Professor-Emeritus, Evangelos Theodorou; I bid you salutations on behalf of all the organizers, participants, attendees, internet viewers and listeners. Allow me to indulge myself to offer an extra warm and special greeting from my faculty: Hellenic College and Holy Cross

Greek Orthodox School of Theology, a co-organizer of this event, whom you honored by coming to Boston to receive an Honorary Doctorate not too many years ago. On behalf of the School, we greet you with profound appreciation and esteem.

You also have additional greetings steeped in deep gratitude from Saint Catherine's Vision (SCV), a Pan-Orthodox organization of women theologians, and other lay servant-leaders blessed by the Canonical Assembly of Orthodox Bishops of the USA. Since June, you had been advising us with writing an international "*Call for the Rejuvenation of the Ministry of the Ordained Deaconess in the Orthodox Church*" which was launched last November on the Saint Catherine's Vision website and Facebook pages. This document is addressed to His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and the Secretariat of the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church. This "*Call for the Rejuvenation of the Ministry of the Ordained Deaconess in the Orthodox Church*" is dedicated to you, dear Professor. In this text, we cite your fervent prayers, which are being echoed by many others around the world, who as you have stated, sincerely "desire to experience the witness and ministry of the *ierosyni* of the deaconess".<sup>1</sup>

...All of us together, offer thanks to God for you and praise Him for the service you have been offering for many, many years.

The purpose of our gathering these days as I understand it, is to cultivate more deeply and to bear witness to the Orthodox theological understanding of the ministry of women, especially as it concerns the ordination of women. At the heart

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor Theodorou, October 9, 2014 telephone interview.

of this conference is special attention for discerning more fully various considerations related to the ministry of women ordained to serve in the diaconate. ..and I think for the majority of us attending...to advocate for its rejuvenation!

From the human side of the equation, we would not be meeting together here these days if it were not for you! ...and by the Providential grace of God.... Most of us here are scholars, academics and educators in the service of Orthodox theology. We are gathered to engage in this effort in the presence of the loving God and all the saints, in a manner that also honors you as a person, your work and your witness.

Through your many activities both inside and outside of Greece, beloved Professor, you are a cherished mentor and father in the holy discipline of theological study to many, many clergy and laypersons alike; persons who are now serving as bishops, pastors, monastics, professors, academicians, educators and other vocations. As part of you academic responsibilities, you have been frequently invited to represent the Church of Greece at international theological meetings, consultations and conferences. You and I met for the first time during the mid - 1980's , while we were serving as appointed representatives to Faith and Order Commission meetings for the World Council of Churches. Even from our first encounter, you surprised me with your familiarity of my small contribution on the topic of deaconesses published in Father Thomas Hopko's 1983 volume titled *Women and the Priesthood*. I believe that my chapter contribution may be the first public Orthodox effort to intentionally and aggressively make your work better known to the English-speaking world.

As the years progressed, you were very encouraging of me, a Greek Orthodox Christian of Greek decent from outside of Greece. At one point, you encouraged me to continue on with this research, telling me in a somber tone that Greek Orthodox theologians in Greece were under an “embargo” and were prohibited from publically writing on the topic. You did not say more than this, despite my questions. Instead, you encouraged me to not back down from studying and disseminating information concerning this important treasure of the Church. I am sure you also encouraged many other persons like me. The result is not only this gathering, but the education and spiritual awakening of many faithful Orthodox Christians to the importance of this ministry.

By the grace of God, there is a resurgence of interest in recent years expressing publically the desire for the rejuvenation of the ministry of deaconesses, despite some very loud and misinformed opposition. All over the world, within the context of exploring more deeply various aspects of ministry in the life of the Church, groups of faithful Orthodox clergy, laywomen and laymen have begun to prayerfully meet privately, semi-privately and even organize conferences that also include in their conclusions, a “call” for the rejuvenation of this ministry. These persons have been carefully attending to many of your scholarly findings that bear witness to the conscience and practice of the Church.

You have kept your eyes on the prize, who is Christ himself, you have not allowed the noise of detractors impede your witness.... even when there were years when theologians were discouraged from addressing this topic in public. You have faithfully served your entire adult life as a servant of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Today, a devoted man of prayer, you are also an advisor, mentor and guide to younger colleagues, a respectful and straightforward theological collaborator, a true friend,

loving grandfather, delighted great-grandfather, appreciative father and devoted husband to your unforgettable and precious wife, Harikleia, of blessed memory, whom you married January 27, 1946...sixty-nine years ago!

Harikleia, also a dedicated and skilled theologian, served and witnessed to the Lord by your side for many blessed and fruitful decades, as your *syzygos*, your faithful friend, the mother of your children and colleague. Through our Lord's loving grace, she is present with us today. While delighting in Him in heaven, tonight at the very sight of you, her beloved Evangelos, she rejoices.

Perhaps most of all, she rejoices how you have persevered over these many years, *en ypomone*, maintaining your peace, integrity and humility in the Lord. *En ypomone*, you have been advocating for the rejuvenation of this ministry. *En ypomone*, you have been persevering through countless hurdles, many quite visibly large, and even far more, quite invisibly small and subtle-. Up until this very moment, she is a witness to your fighting the "good fight" *en ypomone*, and by the love of the merciful Lord, she never leaves your side.

Those of us who knew her, even a little bit, know that she was always there by your side .....even when you had to be physically set apart temporarily. Last week, you shared with me on the telephone how in 1952 and 1953 while you were studying in Germany, conducting research on the ordination of deaconesses which resulted in your now famous 1954 doctoral dissertation, "*The "Ordination" or "Appointment" of Deaconess* (in Greek), she remained behind in Athens. She remained behind in order to raise your two cherished sons..... What a sacrifice for all of you! During those years, technology and the economy being what it was, you had no other recourse for communication but letter-writing. No emails, no instant

text messages, ...not even fax machines...just letters etched in ink on paper. These letters of love were written perhaps during some of the quietest moments of the day. I could sense even over the telephone that you were smiling as you were sharing this. In actuality, you were honoring me and now all of us gathered together...you were letting us in on a lovers' secret...and as a result of this living, growing love between Harikleia and you, you now have four large containers of love-letters. These are the letters written between the two of you that you exchanged during those many months of separation. In my imagination, perhaps not unlike over sixty years ago, I see you sitting once more during the quietest moments of the day savoring the potent sweetness released that is contained in these letters, merely by reading a few. They carry with them a Love that has traveled through the course of time---unscathed. This is a gift of Love that keeps on giving. What a source of consolation for you, praise, God!

The love exchanged and demonstrated between the two of you, is a witness to the thrice-holy God of love whom you both have been serving. At some point, maturing Love impels us to take risks, . . . to make sacrifices. Repeatedly, you both demonstrated a willingness to take sacrificial risks and reach outside fallen-human-defined parameters, seeking instead to “hear the word of God and do it (Luke 8:21).” During these earlier years of your married life, before and after your studies abroad, you both were instrumental, together with the help of Archimandrite, later Metropolitan Barnabas, to begin a School for “lay” deaconesses sponsored by the Church of Greece in Athens, where you both served as faculty. This set the stage for the establishment of a graduate level college. Although this program was completely absorbed by the School of Social work by 1990, this bold and noble effort offered a witness that we honor today...it inspires us even now to continue

moving forward, treasuring their memory and trusting the compassionate thrice-holy God.

During this same telephone conversation you also offered other examples of your willingness to take risks beyond the expected. You revealed the delightful manner by which you became interested in deaconesses. You befriended a couple of strangers in Athens who happened to be German protestant deaconesses. I wonder if your sensitivity to reach out in this manner is founded at least in large part in your early life's journey. Born in Asia Minor in 1921, your family and you were forced to become refugees due to the "Exchange of Populations" in 1922. In a profoundly exquisite and personal manner, you know from deep experience what it is like to be alone and a stranger. You know what it is like to be invisible to the dominant society. You know what it is like to have petitions repeatedly ignored, even mocked, by "the powers that be". ....Instead of hardening your heart, as it is so very easy to do; you cultivated an open-eyed compassion for the other, while trusting the loving Providence of God.

Instead of shunning these foreigners, you took the risk and opened yourself, allowing yourself to come to know them a little bit better. By so doing, you were inspired by them as unique persons and by their ministry. They gave you literature and documentation that described their order and their work. After studying their protestant literature, you were moved to explore and study Orthodox sources, so as to examine closely the witness of Orthodox Christian tradition regarding deaconesses.

In large part of this unexpected meeting, not too long after these encounters, you published your first articles on the topic of protestant deaconess sisterhoods, as

well as the care giving-diaconal activities of the Roman Catholic Church in the periodical *Anagenisis* in 1945-46. Let us, the audience step back a moment and take note that it is now seventy years since you first published on the issue of the ordination of deaconesses.....

Even from these, the earliest years of your academic vocation, you were inspired to “cultivate the idea of the rejuvenation of the order of women deacons in the Orthodox Church.” This led to the publishing of your first book regarding deaconesses in 1949, titled: *Heroines of Love: Deaconesses through the Ages*.

The younger members of your audience today may not appreciate how these early post-war years during which you were conducting your research regarding deaconesses, came during another very difficult time in Greek, as well as world history. World War II was just ended, yet this ending initiated the beginning of a new wave of civil strife that continued for years. This served as another face of oppression, a face that resulted in a national famine. It seemed as if this face was intent on breaking the Greek people...as well as the surrounding Balkan countries.

While you responded to the needs of your own family and community, you nevertheless, did not waver from exploring the riches of the Orthodox Church regarding this grossly underappreciated expression of ministry. When I asked you last week how you were able to do this during such turbulent political times in the midst of famine, you replied in a simple and unassuming manner, “Of course, we had to keep working while we were hungry”. Nevertheless, you share ...perhaps unknowingly...with your readership some of the depths of your unwavering commitment to this issue in your thoughtful, extensive “Prologue” for my first



book: *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*.<sup>2</sup> In my book you conveyed that it was because of you writing your first book published in 1949 by the *Apostoliki Diakonia* of the Church of Greece that sparked your service as a scholar and educator to becoming also an advocate on behalf of this ministry, which is something you apparently did not expect would happen. You referred to your first book as marking, “the realization of the first step in the endeavor of developing the ministry of women deacons in the Orthodox Church of Greece.” You go on to say that “I was the first among my colleagues to advocate for this.”<sup>3</sup>

You continue by identifying other instances of this, all the while also pointing out examples of your contemporaries, including Professor Basil Vellas from the School of Theology of the University of Athens, who also served as the General Director of the *Apostoliki Diakonia* of the Church of Greece. Professor Vellas openly supported the evidence you brought forward and your conclusions, regarding the rejuvenation of this order of ministry.

Dear Professor and Father, your efforts have withstood the ravages of time. Your work and *you* have endured much, much testing. Nevertheless, over these decades, your efforts have inspired others to follow suit. This success has not happened quickly, nor are the detractors completely silenced. Nevertheless, the Providence of God was working through your efforts. Your efforts helped promote the unanimous recommendations from the Statement resulting the historic “*Inter-Orthodox Symposium on the Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the*

---

<sup>2</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press) 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. xxi.

*Question of the Ordination of Women*” held October 30 through November 7, 1988 on the island of Rhodes, Greece.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit and informed -very much- by the veracity of your research, the Rhodes Statement correctly says: “The revival of this ancient order... would represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world. This would be all the more true if the diaconate in general (male as well as female) were restored in all places in its original, manifold services (diakoniai) with extension into the social sphere, in the spirit of the ancient tradition and in response to the increasing specific needs of our time. It should not be solely restricted to a purely liturgical role or considered to be a mere step on the way to higher “ranks” of clergy.”<sup>4</sup>

We remember with great reverence that this event was convened by His All-Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I of blessed memory, and the Symposium brought together hierarchs and theologians from the Autocephalous Churches. You were invited as a theological consultant and featured as one of the main presenters.

Since then, in various ways, it has been a steady uphill climb bearing witness to the depth and breathe of Tradition regarding the nature and scope of this ministry. The years since the “Fall” of the so-called “Iron Curtain” have also brought their own challenges and opportunities. It is clear that many Orthodox are unfamiliar or misinformed about this expression of ministry. Some have been influenced by opportunistic fear-mongers, alleging that Orthodox men and women in favor of the ordination of deaconesses are the very same as “post-Christian” liberal westerners.

---

<sup>4</sup> Gennadios Limouris, (ed.), *Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*, (“Tertios” Publications: Katerini, Greece) 1992, p. 31-32.

Like addicts who are “high” on their drugs of choice, these persons are inebriated with their own self-serving disdain. Much like the self-righteous bullies they often tend to be, they aggressively seek to intimidate faithful, open minded seekers; threatening them with accusations of “innovation” and ”heresy” and with fears that women will begin clamoring for becoming presbyters and bishops, once the diaconate is rejuvenated for our day.

Your research, as well as many others now who are coming after you who have been inspired by your work, documents that the Church, enlivened by the Holy Spirit Who always points to Christ, has her own living, embodied memory. This is an important dimension of Christian *phronema*. It is embedded in the liturgical witness and scriptures of the Church, the *lex orandi est lex credendi*. It is likewise, embedded in the living testimony of our hagiographical, patristic, canonical and historical sources; sources which your research has helped bring to light and be offered to the Church, “for the life of the world” (cf. John 6:51).

Your scholarship witnesses that the ministry of deaconesses is not new. We have ample evidence through the centuries that women have been received into the diaconate. It is a joy to anticipate some of the presentations that will be offered in the coming days of this important conference that will shed more light on this issue.

Professor, this is an issue that has not gone away, nor will it. I believe that the loving Lord has blessed you to see the desire for the rejuvenation of the ministry of female deacons or deaconesses begin to reach a blessed “critical mass” of awareness within the life of the Church. By the grace of God, your prayers, your scholarly research and your advocacy has helped the Church come to this moment. This

highlights the female side of the coin regarding the need for the rejuvenation of the entire diaconate, male and female. We all look forward to the coming presentations, many of which will be cultivating the treasure you have given us.

I am sure that I am speaking for many others as I end by expressing my gratefulness of heart to the thrice-holy, compassionate God for you, and to you for your unquestioning, bold consent to “hear the word of God and do it”. You have been courageously and with great faith, bearing witness to the Scriptures, the Fathers, the ancient liturgical texts, the canons and other important sources in the life of the Church regarding the ministry of women who have been “filled” with “the grace of the diaconate”.<sup>5</sup> Together, these and more-- all echo in their way the same affirmation by our Father among the saints, St. John Chrysostom, who was apparently very familiar with the third century document, the *Syriac Didascalia* asserting that: “*the ministry of a woman deacon is especially important and necessary*”<sup>6</sup> he, the great Patriarch of Constantinople himself declared that “*this order is also in the highest degree necessary, useful and proper in the Church*”.<sup>7</sup>

*Thank you, Dearest Professor, . . . Axios!*

---

<sup>5</sup> From the second prayer of invocation (*epiclesis*) for the deaconess from the Byzantine ordination rite; See: Evangelos Theodorou, “*The “Ordination” or “Appointment” of Deaconess* (Athens: 1954) pp. 55-56; See also: *Women Deacons*, FitzGerald, pp. 202-04.

<sup>6</sup> *Syriac Didascalia*, III: 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Homily 11 on Timothy*.