

**THE LITURGICAL ROLE OF
THE DEACONESS IN
THE *APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS***

BY
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INTRODUCTION (Concerning the *Apostolic Constitutions* and the Deaconesses in the Early Church)

This essay has given me the opportunity to examine in some detail and analyse the liturgical role of the deaconess in a very interesting text of the Early Church, that of the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

This text is the longest written work of the Early Church on Canon Law¹. It was edited probably in Antioch at about 380 A.D. and has no thematic unity. It contains 8 books. The source material for the contents of the Books I - VI is the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, of the Book VII is the *Didache* and of the Book VIII is the *Apostolic Tradition* and other -unknown to us- sources. The various parts of the text are offered as commandments of the Apostles. These commandments are presented as being conveyed through Clement, Bishop of Rome (1st century A.D.).

The deaconess is well known to the Early Church. To start with, she was known as «female deacon». Later on, at the Council of Nicaea (canon 19²), she is given the name (or the title of) «*deaconess*» («*διάκονισσα*»).

1. Papadopoulos S. G., *Patrology*, vol. II, Athens 1990, p. 438.

2. *The Rudder of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, Athens 1982, p. 147.

3. Rom. 16, 1; I Tim. 3, 11.

From the very beginning, from the Apostolic years³, she played some kind of a role in the life of the Church. The deaconess and her role became more evident and significant (or, according to some scholars, it came into existence), from the first half⁴ of the third century A.D.

She was greatly honoured as being a type of the Holy Spirit⁵. The deaconess had various duties in the Early Church. She offered pastoral *diakonia* and charity work and she also had distinctive liturgical functions. These functions, in the *Apostolic Constitutions* in particular, will be examined in the following chapters.

I. DEACONESSES IN THE APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS

The *Apostolic Constitutions* is a very interesting text of the Early Church, which contains many and very significant references to the Christian clergy, both to those of the higher ranks (bishop, presbyter, deacon) and also to those of the lower ones (deaconess, sub-deacon, reader, widows, virgins, etc.).

Deaconesses are clearly mentioned in the *Apostolic Constitutions* on many occasions and for different reasons. They are called «deaconesses», or «female deacons». There is no difference between the deaconesses and the female deacons; they are virtually the same officers.

The first reference to the deaconesses in the *Apostolic Constitutions* is found in Book II, ch. 26, par. 3. It is as follows:

*«For these are your high priests;
the presbyters are your priests,
and the present diakonoi are your levites
and those reading to you*

It is worth noting that in both of the above references the terms used do not necessarily have a technical sense and meaning. In regard to the second one (I Tim.), St., John Chrysostom is certain that it refers to «women who hold the office of deacon» (In *Epist. I ad Timoth.*, Hom. XI).

4. Davies J.G., «Deacons, Deaconesses and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period», in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14 (1963), 6.

Ecclesiastical History 14 (1963), 6.

5. *Apostolic Constitutions* II, 26. This is so because the Holy Spirit is feminine in the Semitic languages.

*and the chanters and the gate-keepers,
your female diakonoi and the widows
and the virgins and your orphans»¹.*

In this reference, the editor of the text names (probably) every officer of the Church, as they were known to him at that time. The deaconess (named as «female *diakonos*» in the text) appears to be one of them. She is mentioned in the group of the lower clergy, although such a group is not defined in this part of the text.

The *diakonissa* is selected among the virgins («παρθένος ἀγνή»²). If that was not practical she could have been a monogamous widow («χήρα μονόγαμος»³), faithful or loyal («πιστή»⁴) and honest or virtuous («τιμία»⁵). The same tradition (or custom) appears in Tertullian⁶ and in Epiphanius⁷ also.

The deaconesses have, according to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a prominent position within the Church and in particular in her liturgical life. In regard to the place that is occupied by the deaconess, the *Apostolic Constitutions* repeat the references found in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (3rd century A.D.).

In book II, ch. 26, par. 4-8, of the *Apostolic Constitutions* we read:

*«The episkopos... God on earth after God...
the diakonos stands by him as Christ stands by His Father...
The female diakonos should be honoured
like the Holy Spirit,
doing or saying nothing without the diakonos,
as the Paraclete does or says nothing on his own,
but glorifying Christ awaits His will,
and as it is not possible to believe in Christ
without the teaching of the Spirit,*

1. All translations of extracts from the *Apostolic Constitutions* are mine.

2. *Ap. Const.* VI, 17, 4.

3. *Ap. Const.* VI, 17, 4.

4. *Ap. Const.* VI, 17, 4.

5. *Ap. Const.* VI, 17, 4.

6. "De Virginibus Velandis" IX, in S. Thelwall, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, vol. 18, 1870.

7. *Expositio Fidei* 21, in *P.G.* 42, 821-826.

*likewise no woman approaches the diakonos
or the episkopos
without (going through) the female deacon.
And the presbyters are regarded by you
as being the type of our Apostles...
And the widows and the orphans in the type of the sanctuary...
And the virgins shall be honoured
like being the type of the censer and the incense».*

In this extract the female *diakonos* is placed even higher than the presbyters. The hierarchy of the Church mentioned here is not strictly canonical or hierarchical; it only signifies the clerical relationships in regard to the pastoral ministry offered by the clergy to the lay members of the Church.

From the above extract it is clear that the *diakonos* and *diakonissa* are mentioned straight after the *episkopos* for they have been closely related to him, as they are particularly appointed to serve him⁸.

The expression «*serving the bishop*» could have various meanings. Apart from actually assisting in the pastoral work of the Church, it is certain (we shall be able to prove it more clearly later on) that the deaconesses should have had an important liturgical role to play as well. This is why they are mentioned within the higher ranks of the Christian Priesthood.

In the above extract we read that:

«*The female diakonos... doing or saying nothing without the diakonos».*

A possible interpretation of this phrase (and of the two underlined participles in particular) could be that:

«The deaconess is not doing any pastoral work, without consulting the diakonos first, and she is not saying or praying, or singing, anything during Church Services, without referring to the diakonos».

It seems to me that this participle «saying» («φθεγγομένη»⁹ in Greek) may refer to a liturgical function of the deaconess.

8. Fouyas M., «Deacons and Deaconesses in the Early Church», in *Theological and Historical Studies*, vol. III, Athens 1983, p. 115.

9. The main meaning of the Greek verb «φθέγγομαι» is «to utter a sound» or «to speak loud and clear».

The duties of the *diakonissa*, as they appear in the above mentioned extract and in all the other relevant references in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (some of these will be examined in the following chapters in detail), are certainly fewer and of lesser importance than those of the *episkopos*, presbyter and *diakonos*, but they are obviously higher (in value) and wider (in variety and purpose) than those of the *sub-diakonos*¹⁰ and the reader¹¹.

II. WHICH «διακονία» AND «ἔργον»?

One of the most significant parts of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, from a liturgical point of view, is that part of Book VIII, where the editor of the text describes the ordination services of all those clerical officers he has mentioned in Book II (ch. 26, par. 3). The ordination prayers –in particular– are of great value. The ordination prayer for the deaconess is one the them. It is placed in the text after the ordination prayer for the *diakonos* and before the one for the *sub-diakonos*.

The *episkopos* lays hands¹ upon the candidate, who comes to be appointed² as a *diakonissa*, in the presence of the presbytery³, the deacons and the deaconesses⁴.

The actual ordination prayer, which according to the *Apostolic Constitutions* is said by the *episkopos*, reads as follows:

«“God” eternal, “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”⁵,
the creator of man and woman, who fulfilled Miriam
and Deborah and Anna and Huldah with (the) Spirit,
who did not disdain for your only-begotten Son

10. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 21.

11. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 22.

1. «ἐπιθέσεις αὐτῇ τὰς χεῖρας» (*Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 19,2).

2. The Greek word here is «προχειριζομένην», which is found in the actual ordination prayer, and means «the one who is being appointed». The noun ordination («χειροτονία» in Greek), which is clearly used in the *Apostolic Constitutions* for the *episkopos*, presbyter and *diakonos*, is not used in connection with the deaconess. The participle «ordaining» («χειροτονῶν») though is strangely used at the blessing of the *sub-diakonos* (*Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 21, 2).

3. The council of the presbyters.

4. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 19, 1-2.

5. II Cor. 1, 3.

*to be born of a woman,
 who appointed the guards of your holy gates
 in the Tent of Meeting and the Temple.
 And now the same (God) mark your servant so and so
 the one who is being appointed upon diakonia (“διακονία”),
 and grant to her the Holy Spirit
 and “cleanse her from all that can defile flesh and spirit”⁶,
 for her to accomplish worthily
 the work (“ἔργον”) entrusted to her
 to your glory and (to the) praise of your Christ,
 with whom (...) to you (belong) glory and worship
 and to the Holy Spirit
 to the ages. Amen”⁷.*

To start with, it is interesting to note that the above ordination prayer has been influenced, in regard to terminology used in it, by the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians. This influence is found in two parts of the prayer, one at the very beginning (referring to II Cor. 1, 3) and the other towards the end of it (referring to II Cor. 7, 1). This influence doesn't seem to have (in my opinion) any great significance, either for the prayer itself, or for the office of deaconess.

The really important elements in this prayer, which are certainly relevant to our research, are the two terms «διακονία» and «ἔργον». Both of them apply to the actual work that is entrusted to the deaconess. This refers to the expectations that the Church had from a person who was appointed and blessed as deaconess. From the actual terms it is suggested that the Church was expecting from a *diakonissa* «*diakonia*» and «work».

It is an ancient custom of the Church to bless (or ordain, in the case of higher clergy) someone (both male or female) in the Church (building), when that person is appointed to a particular service of the Church (building and not only). Thus, applying this rule, or practice, to the deaconess, it could be suggested that she was expected to play some kind of a liturgical role in the Church. Her *diakonia* and work could

6. II Cor. 7, 1.

7. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 20, 1-2.

certainly have had that dimension too.

The term «*diakonia*» is a Greek word which is used almost exclusively in ecclesiastical contexts⁸. It signifies the service, ministry or office of *diakonos* and *diakonissa*. These officers are regarded as servants or agents, in both secular and Christian contexts⁹. The term «*diakonia*» is derived from the term «*diakonos*», which is of an uncertain etymology, though it is probably a compound word with two possible explanations¹⁰. These are as follows:

1. The first word is the preposition «*dia*», which has various meanings in English, including «for», «by», «with», «about» and «through». The second word is the verb «*egkoneo*», which comes from the verb «*koneo*», which means either «I fill or cover with dust» or «I am in a hurry». In this case, the word «*diakonos*» means the servant or the attendant¹¹.

2. The first word is again the preposition «*dia*». The second is the noun «*konis*», which means «dust». The obvious meaning then of the word «*diakonos*» is «he who is full of dust because of his diligence for his work», a work which might have involved some real dust¹².

Whatever the precise etymology, the meaning of the actual word «*diakonia*» is certainly very significant for Christian Theology and also for the life of the Church. The Eastern Orthodox Church maintains the view that:

8. A.D. Salapatas, «The Diaconate in the Eastern Orthodox Church», in *Diaconal Ministry, Past, Present & Future, Essays from the Philadelphian Symposium*, 1992, edited by P.G. Craighill, Rhode Island 1994, p. 39.

9. J. B. Hofmann, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Griechischen*, (München 1950), Athens 1974, p. 66; W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago and Cambridge 1952, p. 183; G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1991, p. 352f.

10. I. Stamatakos, *Lexicon of the Ancient Greek Language*, Athens 1972, p. 261.

11. Hofmann, *Etymologisches*, p. 77. See also S. M. Jackson, «Deacon», in *The New Schaff - Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*, New York, Funk and Wagnalls Company 1909, vol. 3, p. 369f.

12. Stamatakos, *Lexicon*, p. 261. Modern Greek Theologians believe that this could probably mean an involvement of the «*diakonos*» with the actual cleaning of the tables (when full of dust), as was indirectly mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 6, 2), or even the cleaning of the Holy Table (Altar) in the later developments of the Church building. The tradition of the *diakonikon* (part of the Sanctuary) supports the idea of a direct diaconal involvement in the actual cleaning (and also preparing for the Services) of the Sanctuary.

«Christian “diakonia” is rooted in the Gospel teaching according to which the love of God and the neighbour are a direct consequence of faith...

Christian “diakonia” also flows from the divine liturgy in which our offerings are sanctified by Christ’s offering...

“Diakonia” is therefore an expression of the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ»¹³.

Therefore, «*diakonia*» in the language of the Church, and in this ordination prayer of the deaconess specifically, most probably means the whole ministry of the deaconess in the Church, the liturgical dimension or aspect of it included; although it seems to be a bit difficult to prove it conclusively, looking at the ordination prayer alone.

The next term «*ergon*» («work») is again a Greek word. It is not used in ecclesiastical contexts only, but it is a word widely used in all aspects of life, both secular and ecclesiastical, and it has a great variety of meanings.

When it is used in a secular context the meaning would be just «work», or even «hard work», or «a man’s business», or «employment». In the classical Greek dialects¹⁴ «*ergon*» is the opposite to «*epos*» and «*logos*» («word»).

The bible uses this word «*ergon*» in order to signify first of all the work of God in the creation process and then the works (of the faith) of the people¹⁵. In St. Paul’s First Letter to Timothy the word «*ergon*» («work») appears in various sentences connected to clerics and their ministry, e.g. «If a man is eager to be a Church leader (*episkopos*), he desires an excellent work»¹⁶ and (the widow) «must have gained a reputation for good deeds... by doing good work at every opportunity»¹⁷.

13. See page 11 of «An Orthodox Approach to Diakonia», from the *Consultation on Church and Service*, Orthodox Academy of Crete, November 20-25, 1978. Published by the World Council of Churches, 1980.

14. Especially in the Homeric and in Attica. See *A Lexicon...*, p. 269.

15. Amiot F. & Léon-Dufour X., «Works», in *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, Athens 1980, cols. 391-395.

16. I. Tim. 3, 1. The Father of the Church Isidorus of Pilusium (4th-5th cent.), commenting on this sentence, and in particular on the word «*ergon*», states that: «*Ergon* is the deed (or fact), not relaxation; care, not softness; responsible ministry, not an element without inquiry».

17. I. Tim. 5, 10.

The same word «*ergon*», appearing in an ecclesiastical and patristic context, refers to the «work of God» (regarding the creation, man's salvation, as well as Christ's miracles), to the «work of man» (often appearing in plural, as «works»), to the «work of angels» and also to the «work of the devil»¹⁸. Sometimes it appears in a transferred sense¹⁹.

However, although the term «*ergon*» is used extensively in ecclesiastical literature, it does not seem to have either a specific connection with the deaconesses or any clear liturgical meaning. It rather refers to a general work (or even hard work) performed by the deaconess (on indeed anyone else).

III. THE ROLE OF DEACONESS IN BAPTISM

The most important liturgical services (at least of those recorded) were offered by the deaconesses during the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism. In particular the deaconesses were assisting at the baptism of women.

The main reason why the deaconesses were involved at this specific *diakonia* was «διὰ τὸ εὐπρεπές»¹ (for the sake of propriety), because that was how it should have been, in order to avoid scandals². It is well known that the women had at the time a particular place in society, which didn't allow them to be seen naked, or even half naked, in public (and most importantly by men).

The presbyters (who were only men) were responsible for performing the baptism of women. The Church then had realised that there was a great need for serving those women in an appropriate way. Getting into the baptistery naked was an important part of the baptism, but men's eyes shouldn't see the naked body of the women. Thus, a female *diakonos* was needed to assist in this process of the Christianisation of women candidates.

18. G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, pp. 546-7.

19. G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 547.

1. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 28, 6.

2. *Apostolic Constitutions* III, 16, 1.

The specific role of the deaconess during the baptism of women is described in the *Apostolic Constitutions* in detail. The relevant reference³ reads as follows:

- «1. ...*O bishop, ...appoint a faithful and holy female deacon for the ministrations to women...*
2. *For we need a woman (female) deacon for many functions. To start with, during the enlightenment of women, the diakonos will anoint, with the holy oil, only their forehead, and after him the female deacon will anoint them; for there is no need for the women to be seen by men.*
3. *But the bishop will anoint her⁴ (their?)⁵ head only during the laying on of hands, in the same way that the priests and kings were anointed before...*
4. *You then, O bishop, according to that type, anoint the head of those to be baptised, whether they are men or women, with the holy oil, in type of the spiritual baptism; then, either you the bishop, or the presbyter under you, saying over them and pronouncing the holy epiclesis, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, will baptise them in the water; and let the diakonos receive the man, and the female diakonos the woman, that the conferring of this inviolable seal may take place with becoming dignity; and after this let the bishop anoint the baptised with the chrism».*

From the above text it becomes very obvious how important a deaconess was, especially for the assistance she was offering during the baptism of women. In other texts of around the same time as the

3. *Ap. Const.* III, 16, 1-4.

4. M. Metzger, *Les Constitutions Apostoliques*, tome II, Paris 1986, p. 157.

5. W. Jardine Grisbrooke, *The Liturgical Portions of the Apostolic Constitutions: A Text for Students*, Nottingham 1990, p. 64.

Apostolic Constitutions (3rd and 4th century A.D.), it is reported that the deaconesses were offering «private ministry»⁶ (which in actual fact means «instructions», or «catechism») to those women who were candidates for baptism. This ministry (which couldn't obviously be regarded as strictly «liturgical») was probably taking place in the houses of those women, before their baptism, which was performed at the Church. However, such a ministry is not clearly mentioned in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

Examining in some detail the above text, one may find many interesting elements in regard to the actual involvement of the deaconesses in the baptism of women. Such elements are as follows:

1. «...appoint a faithful and holy female deacon, for the ministrations to women». It is interesting that for the *diakonia* of women is required not any deaconess, but a «faithful and holy one». This could be either a general positive expression applying to all deaconesses, of a specific requirement for those of the deaconesses who were particularly appointed to the sacramental (referring to the baptismal) *diakonia* to women.

2. «...the enlightenment of women». Many Holy Fathers of the Church⁷ (St. Clement of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, and others) call the baptism enlightenment (enlightening, illumination). This is still one of the names that the Eastern Orthodox Church gives to this sacrament.

3. «...the female deacon will anoint them». The male *diakonos* had anointed only the forehead of the candidate and then the female, after all male clergymen had withdrawn⁸, anointed the entire body of the women with the holy oil, «for there is no need for the women to be seen

6. Jerome, *Com. in Rom.* (?) 16, 1: «Sicut etiam nunc in orientalibus diaconissae in suo seculo ministrare videntur in baptismo, sive in ministerio verbi, quia privatim docuisse feminas invenimus...», in Fouyas M. *Deacons and Deaconesses...*, p. 124. The 4th Council of Carthage also requires this particular «private ministry» from the deaconesses: «Viduae, vel sanctimoniales, quae ad ministerium baptizantium mulierum eliguntur, tam instructae sint ad officium, ut possint apto et sano sermone docere impertitas et rusticas mulieres, tempore quo baptizandae sunt, qualiter baptizatori interrogatae respondeant, et qualiter, accepto baptismo, vivant» (Canon 12). See also the term «Deaconess», at *The Liturgical Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*, by Peter Day, Burns & Oates 1993, p. 66.

7. Anthony M. Coniaris, *These are the Sacraments*, Light and Life, Minneapolis 1981, p. 44.

8. Leonel L. Mitchell, *Baptismal Anointing*, S.P.C.K., London 1966, p. 32.

by men». Baptism of adult women was a common practice in the ancient Church. But their naked body couldn't be seen by men. The anointing of their naked body was a very important act, during baptism, and it seems that it was one of the main reasons, if not the only one, why this office of deaconesses was instituted in the Church⁹, in the first place. It is worth noting that after infant baptism had been well established in the Church this order of deaconesses had eventually declined¹⁰.

4. «*let... the female diakonos (receive) the woman*». When the woman had been baptised in the water, as was specifically described in the text, the female *diakonos* received her from the water, for the sake of dignity and propriety. It seems that after the anointing of the entire body by the deaconess, the woman (or women) had been anointed by the bishop on the head with the holy oil; then the candidates were lead to the water; it is quite probable that at this point the deaconesses had gone into the water with the women and the deacons with the men¹¹, while the bishop or the presbyter, standing close to the baptistery, pronounced the holy *epiclesis*.

Therefore, the (faithful and holy) deaconesses were not simply actively involved in the baptism of adult women, but their role was necessary and very significant, according to the *Apostolic Constitutions*. Without them being present and fully participating the Sacrament of Baptism for adult women could not be performed.

IV. «Φυλάττειν τὰς θύρας»

Another important liturgical function of the deaconess, according to *Apostolic Constitutions*, is «φυλάττειν τὰς θύρας» («*guarding the doors*»). The relevant references read as follows:

1. «*Let the doorkeepers stand at the entrances of men guarding them,*

9. Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, «The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess», in *Women and the Priesthood*, ed. Thomas Hopko, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1983, p. 81.

10. Constantine Kallinikos, *The Christian Temple*, Athens 1969, p. 457.

11. L.L. Mitchell, *Baptismal Anointing*, p. 32.

and the female deacons at those (entrances) of women, like the ship's stewards¹»².

2. «A deaconess does not give a blessing, nor even performs anything of those (things) performed by the presbyters or the deacons, apart from (the function of) guarding the doors and offering service to the presbyters in the baptism of women, for the sake of propriety»³.

Prof. Theodorou⁴ regards this particular function of the *diakonissa* as the first among the principal liturgical duties, attributed to her by the *Apostolic Constitutions*. This function was obviously important for the Church at the time, but it seems unlikely to have been regarded at that time as more important than the involvement of the deaconess in baptism.

In the first of the above references we are told that the Churches (or at least some of them) had a separate door for the women, leading to the women's part of the nave⁵. The deaconesses were in charge of those doors, standing there, guarding them, making sure that those entering were only those who should enter, and no one else who was not part of the Christian Community.

In this particular extract we are also told something else, quite important, that, although the entrances of women were guarded by female deacons, the entrances of men were guarded not by male deacons, but by especially appointed «doorkeepers».

Those doorkeepers might have been deacons or even subdeacons⁶

1. According to G.W.H. Lampe (*A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, p. 899) this expression is metaphorically used here, reminding us of the symbolism of the Church being a ship. The ship's stewards are the catechists who help people to find their place in the Church and direct them in the spiritual life.

2. *Apostolic Constitutions* II, 57, 10.

3. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 28, 6.

4. E.D. Theodorou, «Women's Ministry according to the *Apostolic Constitutions*», in *The Vicar* 11 (1983), 155.

5. Peter Day, *The Liturgical Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*, p. 66 & 72.

6. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 11, 11.

(as it is specifically mentioned in another part of the *Apostolic Constitutions*), but the doorkeepers themselves) «πυλωγοί» in Greek), were clergymen of a minor order and they are mentioned individually in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.⁷

In addition to the above mentioned service, offered by the deaconess, they even had to arrange the women's places within the Church. It seems like the deaconesses had a great responsibility for their fellow-women. And although the women were separated from the men during the Church Services, at least they had the female deacons, especially appointed by the Church, to look after them well.

The relevant and very interesting reference reads as follows:

*«If a poor, or a local man, or a stranger
come suddenly (or unexpectedly),
old man or young in age,
and there is no place (for him),
even for them
the deacon wholeheartedly
will make place,
in order not to be partial towards a man,
but for the diakonia to be acceptable to God.
And let the female diakonos do the same
for the women who come suddenly (or unexpectedly)
either poor or rich»*⁸.

These two functions of the deaconess, first guarding the doors and then arranging the places of women in the Church, are certainly important liturgical functions with a special significance for the women of the Early Church.

CONCLUSIONS

The diaconal references are spread out throughout the text of the *Apostolic Constitutions*. Many of them are relevant to the role of the female *diakonos*, or *diakonissa* (deaconess) in the Early Church. This role contains a variety of functions (pastoral, liturgical, charity work),

7. *Apostolic Constitutions* III, 1 & 3; II, 28, 5; VI, 17, 2.

8. *Apostolic Constitutions* II, 58, 6.

which signify an important service to the female members of the Church. In our present study we were specifically interested in the liturgical role of the deaconess, as it is presented through the text of the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

From what we have seen so far the deaconess has a distinctive role at the baptism of women. She is certainly regarded as an important and even irreplaceable figure for the completion of the baptism of women, were she is fully involved «for the sake of propriety»¹.

It has been suggested that this order of deaconesses was established especially for this; in order to assist at the baptism of women. This is why the order had fallen in disuse, after the general spreading of infant baptism throughout Christianity.

Deaconesses were also guarding the doors of the Church, especially at that part of the nave which was kept for the women. They even arranged the female comers to their places, before the Church Service began.

The deaconess was in close contact with the bishop, whom she served, and also with the male deacon, with whom she co-operated in the pastoral and liturgical duties («The female diakonos... doing or saying nothing without the diakonos»²).

Therefore, the female diakonos, who «should be honoured like the Holy Spirit»³, had actually played a very distinctive and significant liturgical (and other) role, in the years of the Early Church, as the *Apostolic Constitutions* specifically indicates.

However, it should be clearly noted that there is no role for the deaconess at the Eucharist. The deaconess does not perform anything of those things «performed by the presbyters or the deacons»⁴. This means that she was not allowed to play a role at the celebration of the Eucharist; and because of that, she could not even give a blessing⁵.

Finally, if we are to summarise the liturgical role of the deaconess, as it is presented in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, we should state that the

1. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 28, 6.

2. *Apostolic Constitutions* II, 26, 6.

3. *Apostolic Constitutions* II, 26, 6.

6. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 28, 6.

5. *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 28, 6.

deaconess is concerned exclusively with the women members of the congregation and her valuable *diakonia* (liturgical or other) is directed towards them alone.

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