

# Female diaconate in the Oriental Churches in the past and today

Christine Chaillot\*

## Introduction

The topic of deaconesses and female diaconate is being debated today in different Churches, a reflection based on the fact that deaconesses are mentioned in the New Testament and in other documents of the Early Church.

In the Protestant Churches, Th. Fliedner (Germany) created Protestant deaconesses in 1836, as a social function; this service has been updated and is found in groups of deaconesses, women devoted to charity who take care of the sick and the poor, teach and perform other services<sup>1</sup>.

In the Anglican Church, a Report on the Ministry of Women was published in 1919. In 1912 head-deaconesses wrote that more than fifty years had passed (from 1860) since the modern deaconess order was revived in the English Church. A jubilee was celebrated to mark its revival. In 1891 the Upper House of the Canterbury Convocation passed certain Resolutions stating that deaconesses formed an order of ministry in the Early Church and should be admitted in solemn form by the bishop, with benediction, by the laying on of hands<sup>2</sup>.

In the Catholic Church, the question of restoring women to the ordained diaconate surfaced during the Second Vatican Council (1962-

---

\* Ἡ Christine Chaillot εἶναι ἐρευνήτρια τῶν Ὀρθοδόξων Ἀνατολικῶν Ἐκκλησιῶν καὶ συγγραφέας.

1. J. Forget, "Deaconesses", *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique (DTC)*, Paris, col. 685-703, at col. 698.

2. *The Ministry of Women. A Report by a Committee appointed by His Grace the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury* (by various authors who are not named), London 1919, 202, 136.

65): the restoration of the permanent diaconate for men then stimulated the theological reflection on the women's diaconate<sup>3</sup>. Important studies have been written by various Catholics on the female diaconate<sup>4</sup>. In 1995, the Roman Catholic Canon Law Society of America released a *Report on Canonical Implications of Ordaining Women to the Permanent Diaconate*. In 1997, an international conference on the Diaconate for Women took place in Stuttgart after which an official appeal was made to the Holy See of Rome to allow deaconesses<sup>5</sup>. In May 2016, Pope Francis said that he would be favorable to the creation of a Commission to study the opening of this function. He then created a Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate, with its first meeting on November 25-26, 2016<sup>6</sup>. He named twelve experts — six men and six women<sup>7</sup>.

In the Eastern Orthodox Churches<sup>8</sup> several Consultations about the ministry of women have taken place, notably in 1976 (in Agapia in

3. <<http://www.la-croix.com/Urbi-et-Orbi/Vatican/Le-pape-Francois-veut-creer-commission-pour-reflechir-diaconat-feminin-2016-05-12-1200759622>> May 16, 2018; <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2016/05/12/97001-20160512FILWWW00211-le-pape-francois-ouvre-la-voie-a-des-femmes-diacres-dans-l-eglise.php>> May 16, 2018.

4. E.g. by Monsignor A. Martimort, in particular his book *Les diaconesses*, Rome 1982 (= Martimort *Les Diaconesses*), in English: *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, San Francisco 1982; or Marie-Josèphe Aubert with her book *Des femmes diaeres* published in 1986 in favor of the restoration of the female diaconate, without accession to priesthood.

5. Dorothea Reininger (Germany) has completed a doctoral dissertation on the topic of deaconesses, cf. K. FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts 1998, XXVI.

6. Laurie Goodstein, "Pope Francis Appoints Panel to Study Women Deacons: Q&A With a Member", *New York Times* (August 2, 2016); "Vatican commission on female diaconate holds first meeting", Vatican Radio, November 25, 2016.

7. Among them Phyllis Zagano, a professor of religion at Hofstra University (NY, USA) and an advocate of the ordination of women as deacons; see P. Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future*, with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig, 2011; P. Zagano, *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate*, 2012; M. Metzger, "Le diaconat féminin dans l'histoire" in *Kanon XVI*, Mother, Nun, Deaconess, Images of Women According to Eastern Canon Law, Egling, 2000, 144-166.

8. In this article I shall call "Eastern Orthodox" the Churches which accepted the Council of Chalcedon in 451; and Oriental Orthodox the Churches which did not and include the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Ethiopian Church, the Armenian Church (with two catholicoses with seats in Etchmiadzin (Armenia) and Antelias (Lebanon) as well as two patriarchs in Jerusalem and Istanbul) as well as related Churches in Eritrea, India and around the world.

Romania), in 1988 (in Rhodes), in 1996 (in Damascus in Syria), in 1997 (in Istanbul, Turkey), and in 1998 (Nairobi in Kenya)<sup>9</sup>. Some Oriental Orthodox women took part in some of these conferences. Among the Eastern Orthodox, Professor Evangelos Theodorou has been a pioneer advocating the rejuvenation of the ministry of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church of Greece today; he has examined closely the historical development of deaconesses from the early period until today, the conditions and liturgical rite for the ordination (*cheirotonia* or *cheirothesia*) of deaconesses, their canonical status and the spheres in which they have carried out their ministry. His writings remain a point of reference<sup>10</sup>.

Today the topic of deaconesses is studied, discussed and experienced in the Oriental Churches. In this article we shall concentrate on the history of deaconesses in the Oriental Churches (Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Church of the East), and on their existence/activities today.

## History

In the New Testament the apostle Saint Paul refers to “our sister Phoebe, who is a servant (“deacon”, *diakonos* in Greek) of the Church” (Romans 16:1-2). There are references to deaconesses in other early Church writings.

---

9. K. Karidoyanes-FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church* (= FitzGerald), Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts 1998, XXIV.

10. E. Theodorou, “Prologue”, in FitzGerald, XXI-XXVIII; “The Ministry of Deaconesses in the Greek Orthodox Church”, in *Orthodox Women, their Role and Participation in the Orthodox Church* (conference in Agapia, 1976) in *The Deaconess, World Council of Churches Studies* no 4 (= Theodorou 1976), 37-43; and also, both in Greek, *Heroines of Love: Deaconesses through the Ages*, Athens 1949, and *The ‘Ordination’ or Appointment’ of Deaconesses*, Athens 1954 (translation into German in Graz, 2008); see also V. Karras, “Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church”, in *Church History*, vol. 73, no. 2 (June 2004), 272–316. See also E. Theodorou, “Deaconesses, the Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology Response”, 37-46; and Kyriaki Karydoyanes-FitzGerald, “Laudatum: Praising the Life and Witness of Prof. Evangelos Theodorou, Principle Proponent for the Rejuvenation of the Ordination of Deaconesses”, 27-36, both articles in *Deaconesses, the Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology* edited by Petros Vassiliadis, Niki Papageorgiou and Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017 (=Vassiliadis, *Deaconesses*).

In the East, the periods in which there was an active female diaconate differ in the various Church traditions, and so one has to distinguish between the Greek Byzantine, Syriac and Armenian rites.

### In the Greek Byzantine tradition

Both the *Didascalia* and the *Constitutions* agree that the deaconess assisted the bishop in the baptism of women and in their catechetical formation. During the third and fourth centuries, adult, including female, baptism was still the norm.<sup>11</sup> In the Greek Byzantine Church some of the best known deaconesses include Olympias (who helped John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople), or Makrina the sister of Saint Basil the Great, both of the fourth century. In the sixth century, the *Third Novel* of the emperor Justinian I (d. 565) mentions that there were forty deaconesses active in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (today Istanbul). In the tenth century the emperor Constantine Porphyrogennitos speaks of the presence of deaconesses in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. In the twelfth century the famous canonist Theodore Balsamon testifies that deaconesses were still being ordained at that time in Constantinople. In the Greek Byzantine tradition, the ministry of deaconesses was alive until at least the eleventh century and perhaps until the end of the Byzantine empire (1453).<sup>12</sup>

Some deaconesses became heads of houses where a large number of deaconesses lived. They also became abbesses of convents; for example Olympias, in addition to her social work in the congregation, was abbess of the convent near the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

---

11. FitzGerald, 21.

12. Karmiris and Theodorou agree that by the eleventh century deaconesses were to be found primarily in convents, but with certain exceptions to this, even up to the end of the Byzantine era (mid 15th c.) according to Theodorou, FitzGerald, 135, 147. See also FitzGerald, chapter 7, “The Decline of the Woman Deacon”, 134-148; and P. Skaltsis, “The Ordination of Deaconesses in the Orthodox Liturgical Tradition”, in Vassiliadis, *Deaconesses*, 171-178.

In the later Byzantine age certain eminent nuns were also ordained as deaconesses. Deaconesses carried out regular functions at church services, for example being doorkeepers at the entrance reserved for women; or maintaining order, decency and cleanliness in the places for women. At baptisms, deaconesses had the task of undressing the women, anointing them, immersing them, and then leading them to the bishop clothed in a white robe. They were allowed to take communion from the church to the homes of women who were sick. At funerals, they also had the function of dressing and adorning the bodies of deceased women. They did not do only social work but also educational, missionary and catechetical work, for example leading women from paganism to christianity while teaching women before and after baptism. Thus they carried out work of spiritual care. The service of deaconesse was entirely and directly bound up with the Church and the congregation. They were at the disposal of the Church and under the direct jurisdiction of the bishop. They did not necessarily live in a “mother house”. They could live in houses attached to the church or in a convent, or even with their relatives. They received from the Church the wherewithal needed for their maintenance, education and training. The Church saw to it that they had good living conditions. A large number of cultured women (widows, virgins and married women) wanted to become deaconesses in order to devote their lives to the service of God and to the service (*diakonia*) of the Church.

Among documentary testimonies, the prayers of the ordination rites of the Byzantine period are characteristic, for example that of the Codex Barberinus (9th c.) and of the Codex Coislinus (11th c.). The texts of these rites describe the ordination of deaconesses as “*cheirotomia*” (in Greek) and not as “appointment” or “blessing” (*cherothesia*)<sup>13</sup>.

Deaconesses were chosen and consecrated by the bishop. This ordination took place within the holy sanctuary and during the Liturgy. The deaconesses received the orarium (a specific liturgical emblem of deaconship) and holy communion at the altar with the sacramental cup, which they then replaced on the altar themselves. In the *Apostolic Constitutions* it is written that the the bishop shall lay his hands on

---

13. FitzGerald, chapter 6, “On the dispute of the ordination issue”, 111-133.

them<sup>14</sup>. They were thus like a branch of the ministry of deacons with special responsibility for service (*diakonia*) among women. Ordained deaconesses could not marry and made a vow of lifelong celibacy<sup>15</sup>.

### In the Syriac traditions<sup>16</sup>

In the Syriac traditions similar texts on deaconesses are mentioned. One of the most important sources on deaconesses to survive is a Syriac translation (probably of the first half of the third century) of the *Didascalia*, a collection of canonical precepts originally written in Greek. There the bishop is to appoint a woman ‘for the ministry to women’, for example to visit women in non-Christian houses, to assist at baptism with anointing of women, and then to instruct them spiritually. In the *Apostolic Constitutions* (end of the 4th c.), another canonical collection, it is said that the bishop lays hands on deaconesses (VIII, 19-20), with a prayer following. From a set of Syriac canons on ordination of the fifth or sixth century, we learn that the ordination of deaconess takes place by the imposition of hands by the bishop in front of the altar. Canon no 18 specifies her role: to anoint women at baptism, to stand at the door of the women’s section during the Liturgy to prevent those not yet baptized from entering and to instruct and teach women. Another set of Syriac canons, *Questions from the Oriental Fathers* (c.6th c.), mentions a certain number of regional variations in the ordination of deaconesses: for example, Canon 11 instructs that “in the Orient” (that is probably the area east of the Euphrates River), the bishop puts “a stole on her shoulder, as in the case of a deacon”. Canon 9 says that “in the Orient” the superiors of convents are also deaconesses and they distribute the Divine Mysteries to those under their authority. The canons by the Syrian Orthodox Johannan (John) bar Qursos (early sixth century) tell

---

14. See the text of the Prayer, FitzGerald, 202-4.

15. Theodorou 1976, 38-41.

16. In this article we speak of two traditions of Syriac language: the West Syriac affiliated with the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch; and the East Syriac tradition, affiliated with the Church of the East which did not accept the Council of Ephesus in 431.

that, with the permission of the bishop, a deaconess can pour the wine and the water into the chalice; she can read the Gospel and other biblical books in gatherings of women; she can place the incense in the censer but may not say aloud (but only silently) the prayer over it; and she can wash the sacred vessels, light the candles and clean the sanctuary.

Towards the end of the seventh century, the Syrian Orthodox Jacob of Edessa ruled that the deaconess does not have religious authority in the use of the altar “because she has not become the deaconess of the altar but of sick women”. His canons give a much more restricted role to deaconesses. This is typical of all the later canonical texts, some asserting that the ordination of deaconesses is of a different nature from that of deacons.

In the East Syriac tradition, in the Church of the East, we find the first explicit mention of deaconesses only in the late seventh century (Synod of 676) in a collection of canons, the *Synodicon Orientale* in which canon 9 specifies that in communities of consecrated women (*bnath qyama*, literally “daughters of the covenant”) the most virtuous are made deaconesses, carrying out the anointing of adult women at baptism. This role reappears in several later canon law sources of the Church of the East. On chrismation after baptism, Catholicos Isho’yahb (582-95) gives precise instructions: the deaconess is to guide the priest’s fingers dipped in the oil through a little window in the wall to make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the baptized woman, and she is to place her hand on the forehead of the woman submerged in the font, though it is the priest who invokes the Holy Trinity over her.

In the Syriac Churches the almost total disappearance of adult baptisms took place in the seventh century onward (in the period of Islamic rule), that somehow led to the general demise of the deaconesses. But in the Syrian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Michael I (d. 1199) does not rule out the possibility that deaconesses might be needed again some day.

In the Church of the East deaconesses survived for many more centuries. We do not know when a deaconess was ordained for the last time in the East Syriac tradition, but it was at least as late as 1739 as evidenced by the fact that a deaconess belonging to the famous monastery of Mar Awgen near Nisibis (today in southeastern Turkey) commissioned a priest to copy out a manuscript in that year.

Now let us give some references to non canonical Syriac texts in which deaconesses are also mentioned, often in hagiography. In his *Life*, we learn from the bishop of Edessa, Rabbula (d. 435), that he appointed a deaconess to supervise a hostel for women which he founded; at his funeral there were no fewer than twelve groups of deaconesses in the church. The Acts of the second Council of Ephesus (449) mention deaconesses.

In the sixth century, Severus, the patriarch of Antioch from 512 to 518, had several deaconesses among his correspondants, including women of considerable education. In the *Life* (probably written centuries later) of Febronia, martyred in Nisibis under Diocletian (284-305), there is a mention of superiors of convents being ordained as deaconesses.

### What about the prayers for deaconesses in the Syriac tradition?

In the Church of the East a group of five sixteenth-century manuscripts (between 1556 and 1569) mention the ordination rite for deaconesses. The oldest one, written by Mar Joseph metropolitan of Malabar (India), explains that the bishop lays his hand on her head, not after the manner of an ordination, but gives her a blessing, and prays over her a prayer of his own, according to his ability, that is making a sharp separation between the ordination of deacons and that of deaconesses.<sup>17</sup> The text of the prayer still retain a faint echo of the prayer in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

In the Syrian Orthodox tradition, after the twelfth century, a small number of more recent manuscripts contain the service for deaconesses. One from Tur Abdin glosses the deaconess as “singer” or “cantor” in the initial rubric and speaks of the ordination (*cheirotonia*) of the deaconess chanter outside the threshold of the altar area with her head covered and inclined. At the end the bishop places upon her the proper vestment for chanters, saying “To the glory and honour of the holy and consubstantial

---

17. See a text in English in C. Robinson, *The Ministry of Deaconesses*, London 1898, 222-224.



Trinity, and for the peace and edification of the holy Church of God”; then he gives her communion. According to Sebastian Brock, at least parts of this service are of considerable antiquity<sup>18</sup>.

The prayers/services for the ordination of deaconesses continue to be copied in both the western and eastern Syriac churches into the modern period, whether or not these were actually used<sup>19</sup>.

### The Armenian Church

In the Armenian Church, the development of the history of the female diaconate may be presented with the help of the following examples<sup>20</sup>.

Before the ninth/tenth century we know nothing about deaconesses (*sarkavaguhi*, and *sarkawag* for deacon) or women deacons in the Armenian Church. In 1184 Mkhitar Gosh describes women deacons who can read the Gospel and preach in the convent, and are present at the time of baptisms of women (*Commentary on the Liturgy*, chapter 225). In 1216 a *Book of Rituals (Mashtots)* contains the prayer for the ordination of a woman deacon/deaconess. In 1299 Bishop Stepanos Orbelian (d. 1304), in his *History of the Province of Sisakan* (chapter 27, on the orders of the

---

18. S. Brock, “Deaconesses in the Syriac Tradition”, in *Women in Prism and Focus*, ed. Sr. Prasanna Vazheeparampil, Mar Thoma Yogam, Rome 1996, 205-217, here at 206-13; S. Ashbrook Harvey, “Women’s Service in Ancient Syriac Christianity”, in *Mother, Nun, Deaconess. Images of Women according to Eastern Canon Law, Kanon XVI* (= Ashbrook Kanon), Egling (2000), 226-40, here at 226-30; S. Ashbrook Harvey, “Women in Syriac Christian Tradition”, *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies*, 3 (2003), 44-58, here at 45-6. See also Martimort, *Les Diaconesses*, 48-54 (East Syriac tradition) and 166-170 (West Syriac Tradition).

19. Ashbrook 2003, 230. In the service of ordination translated by Brock, the terms “deaconess” and “chantress” are used interchangeably, Ashbrook 2003, 238.

20. R. Ervine, “The Armenian Church’s Women Deacons”, *Saint Nerses Theological Review* (New Rochelle) 12 (2007), 17-56 here at 19, 22, 25-7, 29-30, 36 (=Ervine 2017); M. K. Arat, “The Deaconess in the Armenian Church”, in *Voices of Armenian Women*, eds. B. Mergueriana and J. Renjilian-Burgy, Belmont 2000, 86-118, here at 27, 29-30, 33-34, 37- 39 (= Arat 2000): her article gives more precisions than Father A. Oghlukian, *The Deaconess in the Armenian Church. A Brief Survey*, Saint Nerses Armenian Seminary, New Rochelle, New York 1994 (=Oghlukian 1994), who has copied from her, but it is better to go back to their quoted sources; Martimort *Les diaconesses*, 178-184.

Church), speaks of the deaconess as Gospel reader and preacher, but her function at baptism is not mentioned; she served on the altar and not only in convent churches albeit she stood apart from the male deacon and she did not touch the Holy Gifts; she then wore a stole on the right side.

With regard to manuscripts which contain the ordination rite for deaconesses we find at least seven manuscripts of the *Mashtots* in the Library of the Matenadaran in Erevan, from the period between the fall of the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia (1375) to the end of the sixteenth century.

What about the modern period,  
seventeenth to twenty-first centuries?

In the seventeenth century, a period of cultural, spiritual and monastic revival in the Armenian Church, deaconesses appear outside Armenia, in Persia (today Iran). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries deaconesses are to be found in nunneries. A fully organized setting of deaconesses can be observed at Saint Catherine's convent at New Julfa<sup>21</sup> (today, Isphahan, Iran), founded in 1623 with three nuns coming from the previous convent in Julfa (now in Azerbaijan). In 1839 there were sixteen nuns. Archbishop Tadeos Begnazarian instituted the custom of ordaining nuns as deaconesses; he ordained the first deaconess in 1851. The nuns opened a school for girls in 1858, a carpet-knotting factory in 1901 and an orphanage in 1907. In 1937 an attempt at revival was a failure. The last nun died in 1954 and the doors of the convent were closed.

At least three other Armenian convents are mentioned where deaconesses were ordained: in Tiflis (today Tbilisi in Georgia), Shushi (today in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus) and Constantinople (today Istanbul in Turkey).

In Tiflis, in 1724, a nunnery dedicated to Saint Stephen was established,

---

21. New Julfa was established in 1606 as an Armenian quarter by the edict of Shah Abbas I, with about 150,000 Armenians who were moved there from the older Julfa in today Nakhchavan.

with two nuns brought from the nunnery in Isphahan. It was a traditional convent although it had a school since 1877. Here Archbishop Tadeos Peknazarean also introduced ordained deaconesses. The Abbess had the rank of “protodeaconess” and bore one or two pectoral crosses and a ring on her finger<sup>22</sup>. The nuns/deaconesses took care of the needs and necessities of orphaned and indigent girls in school by assisting with their education. In 1933, the community comprised eighteen nuns, twelve of whom were ordained deaconesses. The Tiflis community ceased to exist before 1939. We know that when the last abbess of Tiflis, Hripsime Tahiriants, went to Jerusalem, where her brother was Patriarch Kiwrel I (1944-1949), she served on the main altar of the cathedral of Saint James.

In Constantinople/Istanbul, the Kalfayan convent was founded in 1866 by Srбуhi Nshan-Galfayean, with main purpose to be an orphanage for Armenians. In 1932 Patriarch Mesrop I Naroyan ordained the third abbess, Aghavni Keoseian (1919-1955) as the first deaconess. There, normally the head of the convent was an archdeaconess and the other sisters were subdeaconesses. The ordination was made according to the prayer found in the Ritual Book (*Mashtots*) of Vagharshapat (1876, 5-14). These deaconesses served during the Liturgy within their own community and also outside. When one Kalfayan deaconess went to Jerusalem in the 1960s as a pilgrim, she was invited to serve on the altar by patriarch Elishe Terterian.

Nuns earned some money from their handicraft: producing candles at Saint Stephen’s and carpets at Saint Catherine’s. With regard to their dress, we have pictures from the nineteenth century, showing them wearing the dress of a deacon (*shabik*), with a stole<sup>23</sup>.

The duties of the Armenian deaconesses were written down for the first time in the statutes of the convent in Persia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The main duty was to conduct the Prayers of the daily Seven Hours in their convent. In Saint Catherine’s convent (in New Julfa), the deaconesses could proclaim the Gospel, sing and bring the chalice in procession to the priest, and use incense during

---

22. Read the monastery’s canons in Oghlukian 1994, 31-38.

23. See some pictures in the articles quoted above (Oghlukian, Dum-Tragut and Ervine).

the Liturgy. Their life was strictly regulated and they could leave the convent only on great religious feast days. In Saint Stephen's Convent (in Tiflis) the statutes were similar: they could perform the ministry of the deacon, lector and cantor<sup>24</sup>; they also held one part of the funeral service performed in the house of the deceased, from which a good portion of their income derived.

As to the prayer used, chronologically, it goes from a prayer of benediction without ordination to the ordination prayer with the same rite used as that for a male deacon, except for the passage concerning the future priesthood of the candidate. The early Armenian prayer for deaconesses is probably taken from the Georgian/Byzantine prayer possibly based on the Apostolic Constitutions<sup>25</sup>.

We also hear of Armenian deaconesses outside the context of a convent community. In the seventeenth century we hear of a deaconess, Hripsime, in Jazlowiec (Poland/now Ukraine). Also in the seventeenth century, a deaconess, Yustiane, was producing manuscripts. We hear of a deaconess (d. 1877) in the village of Seoleoz (diocese of Bursa, today Turkey). Two stoles of deaconesses of the nineteenth century in the cathedral of the Holy Theotokos in Astrakhan are kept in the Etchmiadzin museum.

In the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which was under the jurisdiction of the Coptic patriarchate until 1959, we do not have ancient texts/references about deaconesses<sup>26</sup>.

24. In a Letter send to K. Arat on December 23, 1985 by Patriarch Shenork I Kalustyan of Constantinople (1963-1990), (= Letter to Arat), he wrote that there were no differences between male and female deacons in the performance of duties, Arat, 111.

25. Letter to Arat, 112-3; Arat 100-1.

26. See Martimort, *Les diaconesses*, 1982, chap. IV (73-97) "Il n'y a pas eu de diaconesses en Egypte et en Ethiopie"; in fact, no ancient text, prayer, canon or reference is known to date the documents and monuments of the Egyptian Church. If we have a couple of references, it is through canonical treatises/texts composed in the East but outside Egypt (probably in Syria) and which entered the Alexandrian collections through translations. See also C. Chaillot, "Deaconesses in the Coptic Orthodox Church", *Ecclesia Orans* 35/2 (2018), 307-325 (= *Ecclesia Orans*).

In the twentieth century, we can find the female diaconate in the Oriental Churches, under different forms, doing social and spiritual service, including nuns in some Churches; and with the service at the altar only in the Armenian Church.

### The Churches of the Syriac tradition

In the Church of the East, there are nuns only in India, where a convent was begun in 1998 in Trichur (Kerala). In 2014 there were three nuns working in the orphanage; one also helped the archbishop.

In the Syrian Orthodox Church, some young lay women are called “deaconesses” but their role is not as in the past. They serve in the local churches, as laywomen, at specific times, teaching in Sunday schools and singing in the choir in church during the liturgy; sometimes they help people for specific needs. But they have their private life and work (in the world), live in their family and can get married. They come voluntarily to serve the church in a flexible way, not completely dedicated like the nuns. Concerning nuns Patriarch Zakka told me that today they also teach, especially young people, and spread the Gospel for the general renewal of spiritual life in the Church in what patriarch Zakka called “a new monastic life” which is part of the active renewal of monastic life in the Syrian Orthodox Church<sup>27</sup>.

In Aleppo, under Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim (abducted in 2013), there was a laywoman then considered a kind of deaconess, Farida Boulos, who was very active in Sunday school teaching and other duties in the archbishopric including works with the archbishop<sup>28</sup>.

---

27. C. Chaillot, *Vie et spiritualité des Eglises orthodoxes orientales* Paris, 2011, 95-6 (= Chaillot 2011). Patriarch Zakka thought that this is necessary today as “it is the responsibility of the nuns to spread the Gospel, to live it, to be good examples and to reflect spiritual life”.

28. The archbishop sent her to Bossey Institute (under the WCC in Geneva) where she wrote a paper for the graduate school 1995-95 about “Women in the Orthodox Church” in which she mentions an Oriental Orthodox lady from India present at the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948, Sarah Chakko, who then had presented a report on the role and status of women.

In 2018 the nuns do some social work in a house for elderly people at Atchaneh (Lebanon) and in an orphanage at Maarrat Saydnaya (near Damascus, Syria); they also teach catechism, including in Baghdad (Iraq). Six have studied theology in Greece and one has a doctorate; two are teaching at Saint Ephrem Theological Seminary at Maarrat Saydnaya and all teach at theological sessions (also at Maarrat Saydnaya)<sup>29</sup>.

Thus in the Syrian Orthodox Church the life of the so-called “deaconesses” is not fully dedicated to the service of the Church as is the case in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt today. Patriarch Zakka also told me that perhaps this teaching and preaching of nuns would be developed in the future in the Syrian Orthodox Church and that perhaps the coming age would require other means of sharing spiritual life with lay people, in order to respond to new needs to help people for their salvation<sup>30</sup>.

In India, in the autocephalous Syrian Orthodox Church (the so-called “Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church”), there are some convents with nuns involved in social service, for example in their Church schools, hospitals and orphanages, with work also in houses for elderly and handicapped people. Their monastic life has been adapted to the social situation of India. In 2008 the Malankara Church had eleven convents, the first being founded in 1925, with about 200 nuns<sup>31</sup>.

In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOTC) has its own social programs mainly administered through the Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (DICAC), but there is no specific female diaconate/service organized as such by the Church. This is also done through women very active in the parish associations (*maheber*), numerous around the country, who also help the needy; and also in other associations such as *Mahebere Kidusan*.

Some nuns living in convents recognized by the EOTC patriarchate may follow alongside their prayer life a “new” type of monastic life with social projects. The best example is found in the nunnery of Sabata, twenty-five km from Addis Ababa, the House of the Wise Virgins, with

29. Email from Father Roger-Youssef Akhrass, May 3, 2018.

30. Chaillot 2011, 95-96.

31. Chaillot 2011, 113-114.

seventy-five nuns in 2002. Some nuns work in the kindergarten and in the elementary school opened for boys and girls of the surrounding villages. They also take care of about two hundreds orphan girls (in 2002) living near the monastery. There is also a small clinic. In the monastery of Abuna Garima at Bar Dar, the nuns have a small clinic and a primary school<sup>32</sup>.

With regard to the female diaconate and deaconesses, I shall now concentrate on the situation and on some cases in the Coptic and Armenian Churches which have very different experiences and attitudes.

## The Coptic Church

Nowadays one can say that the most developed form of female diaconal service and the most active, with the largest number of women - more than five hundreds in 2018- is organized by the Coptic Orthodox Church, throughout Egypt and even abroad in the USA, Australia and Africa.

It was in 1981, under Pope Shenuda (1971-2012), that female diaconal work began to be organized at the official level. On the day of Pentecost 1981 Pope Shenuda III consecrated a group of twenty-eight elderly women as “deaconesses”, in the cathedral of Saint Mark in Cairo, during the liturgy, in the presence of many bishops. These women, most of them widows, had already served in the church and continued to do so as deaconesses. But it soon became obvious that their age hindered their ability to be very active as most of them were fifty or more. It was therefore decided to accept young women called “consecrated women” (*mukarrasat* in Arabic) for this diaconal work. They performed the same service as the elderly deaconesses; they also received a blessing through a prayer.

In 1985 Pope Shenuda gathered together a group of bishops who had “consecrated women” under their supervision. They drafted a by-law

---

32. Chaillot, C, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church. A Brief Introduction to its Life and Spirituality*, Paris 2002, 46, 141, 68, 170, 177; Chaillot 2011, 401, 406.

for their Regulations. The final texts with a view to adjusting their status as well as their consecration vows and prayers were printed in Arabic in a booklet published in September 2013 by the Bishopric of Youth in Cairo: *The Regulations for consecrated women approved by the Holy Synod with other matters concerning consecrated women. Ritual of Consecration of the consecrated woman - of the subdeaconess - of the deaconess (Lâ'iha al-mukarrasât allatî aqarra-hâ al-majma' al-muqaddas ma'a bâqî shu'ûn al-mukarrasât. Taqs takrîs al-mukarrasa - musâ'idat al-shammâsa- al-shammâsa)*, with prefaces by Metropolitan Bishoy and Bishop Moussa, the two bishops responsible for the section of deaconesses at the level of the Holy Synod. From this booklet we understand that the Holy Synod approved several texts on the status, rules and prayers for their consecration: on May 25, 1991 for the consecrated woman or *mukarrasa*, on June 5, 1993 for the subdeaconess and on June 6, 1998 for the deaconess.

These sisters serve mostly among women and young girls, in parishes and elsewhere, in multiple services among which for Christian education in Sunday schools, religious meetings, retreats; as well as for social service for orphans, kindergartens, the handicapped, student girls' hostels, medical care, administrative work. Their work is social, educational, pastoral, but above all spiritual.

There are several stages with first a preparatory time of trial as novice, then as consecrated sister (*mukarrasa*), then as subdeaconess and finally as deaconess. One must be over forty to become a deaconess. The time for passing from one stage to another is not systematic, but at least five years are required between the main stages. In fact most of the sisters remain consecrated women (*mukarrasat*) and only a few become deaconesses. Most of the candidates are young.

With regard to the educational background of the sisters, many have completed university studies in different faculties.

The consecration (*takris*) is performed by the bishop of the diocese where the sister will serve. The prayer of consecration with the vow now takes place before the morning raising of incense prayer, i.e. just before they begin the liturgy, outside the altar, in front of it. It is done without laying on of hands as this is only for deacons and priests in the Coptic Orthodox Church. At the time of consecration, the young women are



given new names and receive new garments (a special dress and a small veil for the head) which are blessed during the consecration and which they put on in the church after the prayer said by the bishop. The sister also reads a pledge of commitment. At the end of the Liturgy the sisters receive communion together with other women. After the consecration they wear their habit every day, with a cross and a small veil on their head.

Consecrated women make four vows: the three vows like those of nuns –poverty, celibacy and obedience–, as well as a fourth vow of service (*khidma*). A *mukarrasa* must be totally involved in the service for the Church. She has to be a virgin and her age should be more than twenty-five. The sisters make a lifelong vow of celibacy and cannot marry after being consecrated. But elderly widows may be accepted as deaconesses, if more than fifty and widowed for at least five years.

The consecrated women live together in one place, in groups, in houses or flats set aside for them, with an organized life, and meals and prayers in common. In this way they can share their daily experiences. They have their own daily and general rules for community life and prayer. Rules are necessary to answer all questions relating to the life of the deaconesses/sisters. Their timetable and prayer rules may differ a little from one diocese to another and also according to their work. For their livelihood, they receive whatever they need from the churches/parishes where they serve. They obey the priest or the bishop with whom they work, accordingly.

In church, during the Liturgy, the sisters sing together with the other women parishioners. They also keep discipline among women, for instance organizing the women coming for communion by checking that each woman covers her head and holds a linen veil in her hand to be put in front of her mouth after receiving communion as is done in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

At the time of the baptism and chrismation of adult women (although nowadays this happens very rarely), the sisters may help before and after baptism; but they do not assist the priest, as this is the duty of the priesthood. Pope Shenuda made a point of insisting that these sisters have no liturgical/sacerdotal role at all, as this is the specific duty of the deacons

and priests. The consecrated women/deaconess will not and cannot do any work of the priest in the Liturgy and the sacramental life, or perform any function of the deacons and subdeacons in serving at the altar. No woman may enter the sanctuary. Consecrated women/deaconesses are not regarded as clergy. They cannot read during the Liturgy or even at public meetings, but only at special meetings for women.

During my interview in 1988, Pope Shenuda told me that the service of *mukarrasat*/deaconesses was already well accepted and respected by the laity who understand that it is needed. Many parishes were at that time asking him to have some consecrated women for their social projects; this is still the case today. The deaconesses are assigned to services which are currently needed for the Church.

The sisters mediate between the women and the priests and also the bishop. As the parishes need these women serving the Church, and *at the same time* these young women want to devote themselves entirely to the service of the Church, this proved to be a very fitting and fruitful combination. Their work is recognized as an official work of the Church. This experience of organizing a female diaconia in the Coptic Orthodox Church is unique and successful<sup>33</sup>.

## The Armenian Church

In the Armenian Haykazian Dictionary, the word deaconess is defined as a “female worshipper or virgin servant active in the church and superior or head of a nunnery”.

In the Armenian Church, in the twentieth century, Sister Hripsime Sasunian (d. 2007) was the last ordained deaconess who was also active

33. Interview with Pope Shenuda on February 20, 1988 in his residence in the monastery of Saint Bishoy, published in “Comment vit la femme copte aujourd’hui au sein de l’Eglise”, *Le Monde copte (LMC)* 16, Limoges 1989, 66-73; C. Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, Paris 2005, 39; C. Chaillot *Ecclesia Orans*.

See details on some Coptic websites such as the website of the diocese of the Southern United States “the service of consecrated sisters” <<http://sisters.suscopts.org/life-of-service/>> May 16, 2018 or <[http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7\\_priesthood.html](http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html)> under “deaconesses in the church” May 16, 2018.

in social work. In Istanbul, she functioned as head of the Kalfayan Orphanage, and served the Patriarchate as an accountant, in addition to serving the Sunday liturgy in various parishes in the capital<sup>34</sup>. First she was ordained subdeaconess in 1966 and then deaconess in 1982 by Patriarch Shnork Galustyan in Istanbul, who used the canon for the ordination of a male deacon.

In 1986 she was invited by Archbishop Vatche Hovsepien to go to California (Armenian Western Diocese of America). On each Sunday of her visit she served as deaconess in a different parish of the diocese, including in Los Angeles and Pasadena<sup>35</sup>.

In 1990 the then Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia, Karekin I (1983-94), invited Sister Hripsime to Lebanon to found a new sisterhood; there the first sister made her vows in 1991, in the cathedral at Antelias. In 2007 there were three nuns/sisters serving at the Bird's Nest orphanage at Jibeyl (Lebanon), under the Catholicos of Cilicia. These sisters did not have the rank of deaconesses. This sisterhood, called of the Followers of Saint Gayane<sup>36</sup>, was created thanks to the efforts of Sister Hripsime and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In 2018, there were three nuns living at Bird's Nest. They are not ordained as deaconesses but were engaged in service (*diakonia*) in several ways: helping the orphans, providing administrative assistance to the orphanage, visiting people in old people's houses and

---

34. She was also the last nun of the convent in Istanbul. She was born in Damascus (Syria) in 1928, entered the Kalfayan Sisterhood Convent/community in Istanbul in 1953. She was fifty-four years old when she became a deaconess.

In 1996 Fr Mesrob Vahan Semerjian mentioned the nuns in charge of the Kalfayan Girls' School in Istanbul as "professed virgins"; he was insisting that a woman deacon should be a virgin, Semerjian Letter to C. Chaillot, May 16, 1996.

In 2000 see M. Krikorian, "An Almost Lost Tradition. The Deaconess in the Armenian Church", in *Kanon* XVI, Egling, Kovar 2000, 213-225. K. Meneshian, "A Nearly Forgotten History: Women Deacons in the Armenian Church", June 9, 2013, in *The Armenian Weekly*, <<https://armenianweekly.com/2013/07/06/a-nearly-forgotten-history-women-deacons-in-the-armenian-church/>> May 16, 2018.

35. In his letter to C. Chaillot, Father Mesrob Vahan Semerjian mentioned that, as for the service in church, when Sister Hripsime Susanian visited the USA in 1986, she served at several liturgies (*badarak*), doing incensation (*poorvarr*), reading the Gospel and bringing up the Holy Gifts (*veraperoom*) to the celebrant at the altar.

36. The place is situated next to the Birds' Nest Orphanage at Jibeyl (north of Antelias, near the catholicosate of Cilicia) founded to welcome orphans after the 1915 genocide.

hospitals, organizing Bible studies and teaching Christian education<sup>37</sup>.

In her article, Dr. K. Arat mentions the introduction of a female acolyte, a rank lower than deaconess, in the western diocese of the Armenian Church in the United States of America, without any detail or reference, which I then found on Internet<sup>38</sup>.

In the USA, it is in 1984 that the first Armenian adult woman was ordained as an acolyte, Seta Simonian Atamian, at St. Andrew Armenian Church, in Cupertino (California) by Archbishop Vatche Hovsepian, the Primate of the Western Diocese (under Etchmiadzin ). However, when she moved in 1986 to the East Coast of the United States, she was not allowed by the local diocese to serve on the altar in the Armenian Church. Let us detail this story.

During a religious retreat at the parish of Cupertino, in response to a question about the tradition of having deaconesses in the Armenian Church, scriptural and canonical references to women in the Church were cited and the Armenian deaconesses in Turkey, Iran and Georgia were remembered. After that, a young college student named Seta Simonian asked if she could join the deacon's training program which was going to take place soon after at the same parish<sup>39</sup>. Both priests of the parish, Father Vazken Movsesian and Father Vartan Kasparian, agreed that there was no "official" reason why women could not participate in the divine liturgy at the altar. Seta was welcomed without resentment to the group of six young male future deacons and was trained for eight months with them. At the same time, Father V. Movsesian slowly educated the congregation and the community with articles and talks about women's role in the Church. On December 9, 1984, the seven of them in all received the sacrament of ordination from the Archbishop

---

37. Information given to me though the Catholicosate of Antelias, by email in 2018.

38. Father V. Movsesian, *Voices of Armenian Women*, 115., "Women in the Armenian Church: The First Acolyte. On the Ordination of a Woman Acolyte" and "Seta in her own words - at the AIWW conference 1996", <<https://armodoxy.blogspot.ch/1988/06/ordination-of-woman-acolyte-in-armenian.html?q=seta>> May 16, 2018, Posted June 29, 1988 by Fr. Vazken Movsesian.

39. Before that she had been active in church, attending weekly, singing in the choir, serving in the Armenian Church Youth Organization (ACYO), and in other church related activities, as other young Armenian women.

Vatche Hovsepien. He ordained Seta as an acolyte of the Church as he found her worthy. Following her ordination she carried out her duties along with her male counterparts at the Holy Altar.

In the summer of 1986 Seta graduated from Santa Clara University and moved to the East Coast of the USA (Boston area). But the Archbishop of the Eastern Diocese at that time, the late Archbishop Torkom Manoogian (d. 2012)<sup>40</sup>, did not share the views of the Archbishop of the Western Diocese, even though both were of the same Church and ordained by the same Catholicos (under Etchmiadzin). At the time of the Liturgy she was then sent back to the choir. At the first church where she went to she was invited to sing in the choir. At the second church the priest invited her to participate in the morning service litanies and allowed her to hold candles at special off-the-altar processions or ceremonies. The comments of Seta Simonian are as follows: she felt the penetrating gaze of the people and the resentment of long-time morning service servers; then she slowly stopped attending church because, she says, “it felt empty”. She thought that her church was patriarchal and inconsistent. On his side the parish priest Father Vazken Movsesian wrote that : “It is the Church who benefits, which means we all do”. In his view, “Seta’s ordination was a special event not only in her life but in the life of our entire community as well. We thank our Primate Archbishop Vatché Hovsepien for giving our community this opportunity to grow. It is a step toward one day realizing a woman deacon”<sup>41</sup>.

---

40. From 1966 to 1990, Archbishop Manoogian was primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church in America, the larger of two dioceses in this country, where most of about 700,000 church members live. The Western Diocese comprises Arizona and California. He arrived in the United States for the first of several church assignments in 1946, serving in California and Pennsylvania. He was primate of the Western Diocese in 1962 and named a bishop the same year. He became an archbishop in 1966, soon after he arrived in New York. In 1990, Archbishop Manoogian was appointed patriarch of Jerusalem, a primarily diplomatic post that he held until his death <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/19/nyregion/torkom-manoogian-archbishop-of-armenian-orthodox-church-dies-at-93.html>> May 16, 2018.

41. <<https://armodoxy.blogspot.co.uk/1988/06/ordination-of-woman-acolyte-in-armenian.html?q=seta>> May 16, 2018.

In the US, in 1986, the Armenian Eastern Diocesan Assembly in Racine (Wisconsin) called for the ordination of qualified women to the diaconate<sup>42</sup>.

In 2002, Archbishop Kisak Mouradian, Primate of Argentina (under Etchmiadzin), ordained a deaconess, Maria Ozkul. She used to help the clergy until she married; since then she comes to church to pray as a normal faithful<sup>43</sup>.

In 2010, in the conclusion of her historic article, Dr. J. Dum-Tragut wrote that the Armenian female diaconate was not yet extinct and yet was awaiting a future<sup>44</sup>. This is what happened, but not in the direction of any social service. In fact, on September 25, 2017, Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian, the Primate of Iran<sup>45</sup>, ordained in Saint Sarkis cathedral in Tehran a deaconess to assist the clergy. At the same time he ordained a young male deacon, Mayis Mateosian. The young woman, twenty-four years old, Ani-Kristi Manvelian<sup>46</sup>, is an anesthesiologist by profession. They then claimed that it is the first time that a laywoman, not a nun, was ordained a “parish deacon” in the Armenian Church.

The archbishop said that he had done this in conformity with the Tradition of the Church. He explained that this was his personal initiative as a diocesan primate in order “to revitalise the participation of women also in our church’s liturgical life,” and added that people should not be surprised, as a woman could also become a servant of the Holy Altar.<sup>47</sup> Like

42. Irvine, 39.

43. Irvine, 39; Email with Archbishop Mouradian on August 5, 2018.

44. J. Dum-Tragut, “Diakoninnen in der Armenisch-Apostolischen Kirche”, in D. Winkler (ed.), *Diakonat der Frau*, Lit Verlag, Münster 2010, 85.

45. There are three Armenian Apostolic dioceses in Iran.

46. Before that Deaconess Ani-Kristi had been involved in the life of the church in Tehran since she was very young. She used to perform the duties of an acolyte during church services, such as reading the psalms and carrying the ceremonial candle <<http://oxbridgepartners.com/hratch/index.php/lectures-conference-papers-2/528-female-diaconate>> May 16, 2018.

47. In explaining the purpose of the ordination, Archbishop Sarkissian said: “Today, our Church is confronting the imperative of self-examination and self-critique. It is imperative to rejuvenate the participation of the people in the social, educational and service spheres of the Church. It is our deep conviction that the active participation of women in the life of our Church would allow Armenian women to be involved more enthusiastically and vigorously, and would allow them to be connected and engaged. They would provide dedicated and loving service [to the people]. The

her male counterparts in the Armenian Church, if and when Deaconess Ani-Kristi marries, she will continue to serve as a deaconess. According to the Primate, parish priests in Tehran are watchful and keen to recruit more women who fit the profile of prospective deaconesses. Even as this step was welcomed by Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian and the Diocese of Tehran (under the jurisdiction of the Catholicosate of Cilicia), the Armenian Apostolic Church has yet to *formally* restore the office of the female diaconate.

Today the question is how to revive the female diaconate for the pastoral life of local parishes rather than in monastic settings or convents, which, according to some Armenians in Iran, are virtually nonexistent as viable institutions<sup>48</sup>.

During an interview in 2015, Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia discussed the role of women and deaconesses in the Armenian Church. He said that tradition is very important, but tradition should keep pace with the rhythm of changing times and realities : “We need to renew and change our traditions – keep the core and essence, but change the form to become more and more relevant to the new realities and expectations of our peoples”. According to Catholicos Aram, the only issue is women’s ordination into the priesthood and this matter needs to be discussed, at the theological and socio-cultural levels<sup>49</sup>.

In the Armenian Church, today, there are very few nuns<sup>50</sup>. In Armenia itself, there is a very small number of nuns residing at the site of the Sourp Hripsime Church in Etchmiadzin (about 20 km from Erevan),

---

deaconess, no doubt, would also be a spiritual and church-dedicated mother, educator, and why not, a model woman through her example. It is with this deep conviction that we are performing this ordination, with the hope that we are neither the first nor the last to do it”.

48. <<http://oxbridgepartners.com/hratch/index.php/publications/articles/530-ordination-of-deaconess>> May 16, 2018.

49. N. Barsoumian, “On Justice, Syria, and Women’s Rights: An Interview with Catholicos Aram I”, June 2, 2015, <<https://armenianweekly.com/2015/06/11/interview-aram-i/>> May 16, 2018.

50. In 1996 Father Mesrob Vahan Semerjian thought that there was certainly a need for the renaissance of women’s monastic life in the Armenian Church, which would be a tremendous asset for the revitalization of the Church, Semerjian Letter, May 16, 1996.

with five nuns in 2003.<sup>51</sup> In May 2001, in a interview with the Armenian International Magazine, Catholicos Karekin II envisioned the community of nuns then forming in Etchmiadzin as a potential source of deaconesses<sup>52</sup>.

In Istanbul, in 2018, there was a young woman, Gayane Dulkadir, who was taking care spiritually of young children in an Armenian school in Uskudar. She was expected to become a nun, but no decision was taken in March 2019. She was not ordained a deaconess<sup>53</sup>.

## The Eastern Orthodox Churches

And finally, what about the female diaconate in the Eastern Orthodox Churches in the twentieth century?

In Russia, efforts were made to revive the order of deaconesses since the nineteenth century, especially by Grand Duchess Elizabeth Fedorovna who founded the Convent of Saints Martha and Mary in Moscow in 1908 and was its abbess. Her vision was to begin a religious community that would merge the ideals of saints Martha and Mary of the Gospel, dedicated both to prayer and to serving the needs of the poor. She constructed a hospital, an orphanage for girls, and quarters for the nuns. She worked in conjunction with Church authorities. At its peak, the convent housed ninety-seven sisters and served three hundred meals daily to the poor. This community is still alive and active today<sup>54</sup>.

In Moscow, in 1991, Father Arkadi Chatov (Bishop Panteleimon since 2010) founded the Sisterhood of Saint Dimitri (Sviato-Dimitrievskoe Sestretchestvo), and then the Institute for their formation (Sviato-Dimitrievskoe outchilichtche sestior milioserdiïa). The “sisters” do diaconal

---

51. Chaillot 2011, 189; K. Meneshian, “The Sisters At The Church of Saint Hripsime”, *The Armenian Weekly* (July 10, 2004); their duties involve praying, serving the monastery’s abbot, visiting neighborhood families, cleaning the church and its property, and preparing meals <<https://armenianweekly.com/2012/04/21/meneshian-shepherds-of-the-nation/>> May 16, 2018.

52. Ervine, 39.

53. Email with the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul in 2018 and on 18 March 2019.

54. FitzGerald, 151; <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marfo-Mariinsky\\_Convent](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marfo-Mariinsky_Convent)> May 16, 2018.



work in a huge state hospital called the First Hospital; they do no liturgical work. Many are nurses. They are paid for their work though some are voluntary. There is no vow of celibacy: some are celibate but can marry and others are married. There are statutes. Bishop Panteleimon is still the spiritual father of this sisterhood<sup>55</sup>.

In Belarus, one must mention the very various social activities of the nuns of the convent of Saint Elisabeth in Minsk, a sisterhood founded in honour of the martyr Grand Duchess Elisabeth Fedorovna in 1994, with over three hundred sisters in 2018. Inspired by the example of their patroness, the sisters serve people in especially high demand - hospitals and residential facilities for children and adults. They also care for mentally handicapped youth and people isolated from the society/social cases; they comfort and support them spiritually and help the patients and visitors to understand about Orthodox church life<sup>56</sup>.

Today other nuns also have social activities in other Eastern Orthodox convents, in various countries.

In Greece, regarding the rejuvenation of deaconesses, Bishop Nectarios of Aigina (d. 1920 and recognized as a saint in 1961) appears as a forerunner in the convent on the Island of Aigina when he ordained a nun (who later became the abbess) into the diaconate in 1911, during the Liturgy, with the laying on of hands and following the prayer of the ordination of the deacon. She wore an alb (*sticharion*) to about the waist, with the diaconal stole (*orarion*) and diaconal cuffs (*epimanikia*). This was not well received by other Church leaders at the time. Bishop Nectarios explained to the Archbishop of Athens, Theoklitos, that this appointment was more characteristic of that of the subdeacon (which was certainly true in a number of places from the early Middle Ages) and that this ministry was needed by the convent, especially during the absence of ordained clergymen. Saint Nectarios made it clear that this event was *not* an ordination to the officiating priesthood<sup>57</sup>.

---

55. See I. Semenoff-Tian-Chansky, *Printemps de la foi en Russie*, Versailles, Ed. Saint-Paul, 2000, 200-207. <<https://stdimitry.ru/sisterhood.html>> May 16, 2018; and <<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/1143001.html>> (in Russian, May 16, 2018).

56. < <http://obitel-minsk.ru/en/convent/>> May 16, 2018.

57. FitzGerald, 151-152; on 153 other examples of “deaconesses” are given in Greece.

Later efforts have been made in the Church of Greece to revive the ministry of deaconesses. In 1952 the Church of Greece established a school for “lay” deaconesses in Athens, which prepared the way for the founding in 1953 of a College for deaconesses and women social workers in Athens, by a Church organisation called “Apostolic Diakonia”. There deaconesses and social workers were trained to become direct assistants to priests in carrying out their pastoral service in families and undertaking social welfare work. After training they worked in the parishes of the archbishopric of Athens as lay deaconesses as they had not been ordained and did not wear uniforms. By 1990 the College became absorbed into the School of Social Work in Athens<sup>58</sup>.

In North America, in 1953, Archbishop Michael (born Thucydides Constantinides) of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America (1949-58), tried to recruit candidates for an order of deaconesses to serve within the archdiocese and wrote an Open Letter of appeal, with the project of their accommodation at the Saint Basil Academy at Garrison (New York), asking the candidates to write him back. He then exclaimed that it was high time for his Church to act. Eight young women responded, but the project was hindered by two factors: no education or preparation of the faithful in the archdiocese, that is lack of information, and the parental non consent; thus the proposal never materialized. Archbishop Michael’s successor, Archbishop Iakovos (1959-96), also referred to the need for deaconesses<sup>59</sup>.

In Africa, in Kolwezi (Congo), on February 17, 2017, the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, Theodoros, consecrated at the end of the liturgy one deaconess, the catechist elder Theano, one of the first members of the Missionary staff in Kolwezi, to “deaconess of the missions”<sup>60</sup> of the metropolis of Katanga; and he also read the prayer for one entering the “ecclesiastical ministry” for three nuns and two catechists, in order for them to assist the missionary effort of the metropolis, particularly

58. Theodorou 1976, 41-2; FitzGerald, 153, 157-8.

59. FitzGerald, 154-157.

60. In 1833 the Russian missionary to China, Father Makari Glukharev, introduced the idea of “missionary deaconesses”; Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow too was an advocate of the restoration of deaconesses and made the abbess of the Spaso-Borodinskaya convent a deaconess in 1840, FitzGerald, 149-50.

in the sacraments of baptisms of adults and marriages, as well as in the catechetical department of the local Church. The Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa had decided to restore the deaconess ministry during its working session held in November 2016<sup>61</sup>, in order to better serve the pastoral needs of the Patriarchate, which is present in the entire continent of Africa. The reason behind this was that the reinstatement of the female diaconate does not constitute an innovation, as some believe, but is the revitalisation of a once functional, vibrant, and effectual ministry in order to provide the opportunity for qualified women to offer there their unique and specific gifts in the service of God's people. A group of nine prominent Greek Orthodox liturgists – who describe themselves as active and emeriti professors of liturgics and liturgical theology at various theological schools and seminaries in Greece and the US – has since issued a statement in support of the move to point out that the restoration process requires that the role and functions of the deaconess be “identified, properly defined, and clearly stated”. They also suggest that the public attire and the method of assignment and removal of the deaconess must be addressed at large<sup>62</sup>. This new step has been criticized by some Eastern Orthodox<sup>63</sup>.

## Concluding Remarks

In this article I have given a short description with a few examples of the deaconesses and female diaconate in the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Churches and we have seen something of the complexity of this topic in the past and today, also with regard to

---

61. <<http://basilica.ro/en/patriarch-theodoros-of-alexandria-performs-first-consecration-of-deaconesses/>> May 16, 2018.

62. <<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/7968/greek-orthodox-patriarch-of-alexandria-and-all-africa-will-reinstate-order-of-women-deacons>> May 16, 2018.

63. Press Release: Orthodox Clergy and Laity Take Stand against Deaconesses January 15, 2018 <http://www.aoiusa.org/a-public-statement-on-orthodox-deaconesses-by-concerned-clergy-and-laity/> May 16, 2018; Dimitra A. Koukoura, “Problems in the Rejuvenation of the Ministry of Deaconesses”, in Vassiliadis, *Deaconesses*, 421-430.

particular Church traditions. I have also discussed the social service and pastoral care offered by deaconesses and also nuns in the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Churches today. In fulfilling these functions, deaconesses have assisted and continue to assist priests and bishops. In an article<sup>64</sup>, Dr Arat writes that the Armenian Apostolic Church is “the only one among the Oriental Churches to have a female deaconate totally equal to that of the male”; and “the Armenian Church is now unique in having a real female deaconate”.

We have also seen that today the service of deaconesses is needed by these different Churches, for different purposes, including in missionary activities, and first of all for spiritual teaching.

It would be of value if all these Oriental Churches met and shared their experiences and discussed together the renewal of the female diaconate today, taking into consideration their proper local spiritual and pastoral needs which are many in all these Churches, and in many parts of the world where the Oriental Churches are present today, that is also in the so-called “diaspora”.

There is still much work to be done in order to come to a fuller understanding of this female service (*diakonia*). The first step is for all to study the historical reality of deaconesses in an objective way, that is, by reading all the texts and prayers of all the Oriental Church traditions; this is what I have tried to do here, as a very short introduction.

Today the main fear in Orthodox circles is that the consecration/ordination of deaconesses could lead to the consecration of women as priests/bishops.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Consultation organized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in Rhodes in 1988 was the most authoritative call for the restoration of deaconesses, in the presence of delegates of fourteen Eastern Orthodox Churches and about fifty theologians including eighteen women theologians. The Consultation expressed the view that the Orthodox Church *cannot* envision the possibility of the ordination of women as priests/presbyters or bishops, not so much because of cultural and social factors and also other factors

---

64. Arat 2000, 153-89.

which will not be detailed here, but rather because women were not ordained as presbyters or bishops in the past. On the other side, the case of deaconesses is very different and should not be problematic as we are very well informed about them by all kinds of texts. They were ordained in the past as is shown by some prayers for deaconesses to be found, for example, in the Apostolic Constitutions, the ancient Byzantine liturgical books and liturgical books of other traditions<sup>65</sup>.

As regards the issue of the position of women in the Church and also not allowing them to be ordained as priests, the attitude of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches is the same<sup>66</sup>. Female diaconal ordination is *not* sacerdotal ordination (as for deacons, priests and bishops) as they are different functions and orders<sup>67</sup>.

The confusion regarding ordination (*cheirotomia*) and “appointment” or “blessing” (*cheirothesia*) must also be clarified and explained<sup>68</sup>.

According to the Amenian Father Oghlukian, it is above all through a sincere desire for voluntary Christian service that it would be possible for deaconesses to re-enter the ranks of the clergy, and not by insisting on the principle of equality between women and men. On the question of bestowing the priesthood (and episcopacy) on the women, in contrast to many Protestant denominations this *is* problematic for the traditional and apostolic Churches (Oriental and Roman Catholic). As for the need to re-establish the female diaconate, it is felt to be imperative. In the Armenian Church, this is no innovation, but rather an ancient tradition. What sort of character the female diaconate would now have – celibate or married, monastic or lay – is not an essential, but an administrative question. That is the task of an episcopal synod, which would examine

---

65. *The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*, Ecumenical Patriarchate, Istanbul, 1988, monograph, 10.

66. Report of the Joint Pastoral Sub-Committee about the Pastoral Problems, 31 January-4 February 1990, Amba Bishoy monastery, Egypt.

67. *Cheirotomia* is literally ‘stretching forth of the hand’; in ecclesiastical use *cheirotomia* means ‘ordination’ (especially ordination of the bishop, but also of the priest and deacon). *Cheirothesia* is ‘imposition of the hand’. *Cheirothesia* is related to *cheirotomia* as a part to a whole. There is an act of *cheirothesia* during ordination. But *cheirothesia* also applies to any blessing by the laying on of hands, as, for example, in baptism, see *sub voce*, Lampe’s *Patristic Greek Lexicon*’.

68. FitzGerald, 165.

these issues without prejudice and in accordance with the Church's current needs, and come to a decision. Father Oghlukian concludes that different opinions will arise, for sure<sup>69</sup>.

The question of when, why and where women should be ordained as deaconesses is a matter of ecclesiastical policy best left to bishops whose responsibility it is to provide for the changing needs of the faithful by whatever means are available to them. This was the opinion of late Catholicos Vazgen I of Etchmiadzin (1955-1994)<sup>70</sup>. This ordination could be at the discretion of diocesan bishops with the blessing of the Patriarch/Catholicos and Holy Synod, as a precedent for such ordination already existed in some Churches, as demonstrated in this article<sup>71</sup>. In other cases the Holy Synods should study what should be done.

## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Γυναίκες διάκονοι στις Ανατολικές Ἐκκλησίες  
στο παρελθόν και τὸ σήμερα

Christine Chaillot  
ἑρευνήτριας και συγγραφέως

Στις ἡμέρες μας τὸ θέμα τῶν διακονισσῶν μελετᾶται, συζητεῖται και βιώνεται στις Ἀνατολικές και τις ἄλλες Ἐκκλησίες. Στὸ ἄρθρο αὐτὸ ἐπικεντρωνόμαστε στὴν ἱστορία τοῦ παρελθόντος τοῦ θεσμοῦ τῶν διακονισσῶν καθὼς και στὴν ὕπαρξη και τις δραστηριότητές τους σήμερα στις Ἀνατολικές Ἐκκλησίες τῶν ἀκόλουθων παραδόσεων: Ἀνατολική Βυζαντινὴ Ὁρθόδοξη, Ἀνατολικὴ Ὁρθόδοξη (Ἀρμενική, Συρορθόδοξη, Κοπτική και Αἰθιοπική) και (Νεστοριανή) Ἐκκλησία τῆς Ἀνατολῆς. Παραδείγματα ἐντοπίζονται και στὸ παρελθόν και στὸ σήμερα.

69. Oghlukian 41, 42, 44.

70. Ervine, 17.

71. See also N. Kouremenos, "The Order of Deaconesses in the Ancient Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches: Sources, Historical Processes and the Modern Situation" in Vassiliadis, *Deaconesses*.

Ἡ ἀνάγκη νὰ ἀποκατασταθεῖ ἡ διακονία τῶν γυναικῶν θεωρεῖται ἐπιτακτικὴ ἀπὸ ὀρισμένους Χριστιανούς, τόσο στὴν ὀρθόδοξη Ἐκκλησία ὅσο καὶ σὲ ἄλλες Ἐκκλησίες. Τὸ ζήτημα τῆς ἀποκατάστασης τῶν διακονισσῶν δὲν πρέπει νὰ θεωρεῖται προβληματικό, καθὼς ἔχουμε πολὺ ἐπαρκῶς πληροφορηθεῖ σχετικὰ μὲ αὐτὲς ἀπὸ ὅλα τὰ εἶδη κειμένων, τῶν λειτουργικῶν συμπεριλαμβανομένων.

Γιὰ νὰ κατανοήσουμε πληρέστερα τὴ γυναικεία αὐτὴ διακονία, πρέπει νὰ γίνουν ἀκόμη πολλὰ. Τὸ πρῶτο βῆμα εἶναι νὰ μελετήσουμε ὅλοι τὴν ἱστορικὴ πραγματικότητα τοῦ θεσμοῦ τῶν διακονισσῶν μὲ ἕναν ἀντικειμενικὸ τρόπο, μελετώντας ὅλα τὰ κείμενα καὶ τὶς προσευχὲς ὅλων τῶν παραδόσεων τῶν Ἀνατολικῶν Ἐκκλησιῶν. Αὐτὸ προσπαθήσαμε νὰ παρουσιάσουμε στὸ ἄρθρο αὐτό, ὡς μία πολὺ σύντομη εἰσαγωγή.

Θὰ εἶχε κάποια ἀξία ἂν ὅλες αὐτὲς οἱ Ἀνατολικὲς Ἐκκλησίες θὰ μπορούσαν νὰ συναντηθοῦν, νὰ μοιρασθοῦν τὶς ἐμπειρίες τους καὶ νὰ συζητήσουν μαζὶ τὴν ἀναβίωση τοῦ θεσμοῦ τῶν διακονισσῶν σήμερα, λαμβάνοντας ὑπ' ὄψιν τὶς ἰδιαίτερες τοπικὲς πνευματικὲς καὶ ποιμαντικὲς τους ἀνάγκες, οἱ ὁποῖες εἶναι πολλὲς σὲ ὅλες αὐτὲς τὶς Ἐκκλησίες, καθὼς καὶ σὲ πολλὰ μέρη τοῦ κόσμου ὅπου οἱ Ἀνατολικὲς Ἐκκλησίες εἶναι παροῦσες σήμερα, στὴν ἀποκαλούμενη ἐπίσης «διασπορά».