

Female Diaconal Service in the Coptic Orthodox Church Today

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Introduction

In Church history, deaconesses are mentioned in the New Testament and since the Early Church. The word “deaconess” comes from a Greek word, *diakonos* (διάκονος), for “deacon” which means a servant or helper¹. The topic of deaconesses is currently under discussion in a number of Churches. In some, a female diaconate has been recently organized, usually in a local and ad hoc manner. Nowadays one can say that the most developed, organized and recognized form of female diaconal service, as well as the most active with the largest number of women, is in the Coptic Orthodox Church. This recognized service within the Coptic Orthodox Church has particular rules stipulated by the Holy Synod that are applicable for all Coptic deaconesses throughout Egypt and even in the diaspora.

During an interview on Coptic deaconesses which I conducted in 1988 with Pope Shenuda III (1971-2012), the patriarch explained that the historic deaconesses who inspired the modern Coptic experience were Phoebe (*Rom 16:1-2*), Olympias, who worked with St. John Chrysostom, and Anastasia who is named in the writings of St. Severus of Antioch. During the time of the interview in 1988, there were more than 150 “consecrated women” (*mukarrasat* in Arabic, singular *mukarrasa*) with active services in dioceses across Egypt². Although there are no exact

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1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deaconess> (accessed 10 March 2021).

2. Interview with Pope Shenuda on 20 February 1988 in his residence in the Monastery of St. Bishoy, Egypt, published in «Comment vit la femme copte aujourd'hui au sein

statistics, according to Church officials, there were over 400 *mukarrasat* in 2005; about 500 in 2013, and around 900 in 2019³. Deaconesses are to be found in most of the Coptic dioceses throughout Egypt, with the majority being in Cairo, and their numbers become less in towns and villages; for example, in Mallawi (Upper Egypt), there are only 26 consecrated women⁴, and in more rural areas there are only one or two⁵.

In this article I shall focus on the topic of the female diaconal service in the Coptic Orthodox Church as it exists today, providing an overview of its recent history and organization. It is noteworthy to mention that in the Coptic Orthodox Church there is also the recognized order of male “consecrated deacons”, who like the consecrated deaconesses, do not marry and lead a dedicated life of service to the Church. However, the topic of “consecrated deacons” is out of scope in this chapter⁶. A well-known unmarried deacon who dedicated his whole life to the service of the Coptic Orthodox Church is Habib Girgis (1876-1951), who organized the beginning of the Sunday school movement in his Church⁷.

de l'Église», *Le Monde copte (LMC)* 16 (Limoges, 1989), 66-73, here at 70 and 69, henceforth cited as *LMC* 16.

3. C. Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, Paris 2005, 39, henceforth cited as Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*; interview with Metropolitan Pachomius in Damanhur in February 2013. During meetings in Egypt in March 2019, I interviewed several *mukarrasat* who estimated that their number had grown to about 900.

4. Based on 2013 figures.

5. Interview with Bishop Dimitrios of Mallawi in February 2013.

6. Some laymen and deacons of the Coptic Orthodox Church have chosen to follow a similar consecrated life of serving the Church on both spiritual and social levels. Some become celibate priests serving in parishes. In 2004 there were at least 30 consecrated celibate deacons and priests in Egypt. See Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 39-40. Coptic celibate deacons and priests also exist in the diaspora, for example, in Los Angeles USA, where there is a house for consecrated deacons, known as *St. Paul's Brotherhood*. This way of life began in the House of Consecration (*Bayt a-takris*) established by Fr. Matta al-Maskin in 1958. The majority of those who lived in this House became priests and monks. Consecrated men who serve the Church are called *mukarrasin*, cf. Ugo Zanetti, “La vita monastica nell’Egitto di oggi,” in C. Alzati and L. Vaccaro (eds.), *Popoli, Religioni e Chiese lungo il corso del Nilo*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2015, 445, 447.

7. He was canonized in 2013. See Bishop Suriel, *Habib Girgis: Coptic Orthodox Educator and a Light in the Darkness*, : St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood – New York 2017.

Recent Historical Background⁸

During my interview in 1988 with Iris al Masri (1904-1994)⁹, a prominent Coptic historian, on the topic of deaconesses and female diaconal service, she recalled that in 1953 under Pope Joseph/Yousab II (1946-1956), there were celibate women serving in the Coptic Church who were called “deaconesses”, but the position was not official. This continued during the time of Pope Cyril VI (1959-1971), who encouraged a small group of women to consider a consecrated life of service. Once a week they would gather together at St. Stephen’s church that was adjacent to St. Mark’s cathedral in Cairo, situated in Azbakeya (Klot Bey) near Ramses Railway Station. And each one lived in their own homes nearby¹⁰. However, it was not long before Fr. Salib Surial (d. 1994) a parish priest of the church of St. Mark in Giza (Cairo) opened a house for consecrated women to live a communal life while serving families and young women, as well as teaching and giving spiritual meetings for them¹¹. Each week these consecrated women would give a report to the diocesan bishop on the news of their service. They

8. To my knowledge, there is no extant text documenting the history of deaconesses in the Coptic Church. See Chaillot, “Deaconesses in the Coptic Orthodox Church”, *Ecclesia Orans*, 35/2 (2018), 307-325.

9. Interview with Iris al Masri on March 16, 1988 in Cairo. In 1932 Iris al Masri received her Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Education from Maria Grey College, University of London. Between 1952 and 1954, she pursued her research at Dropsie College, Philadelphia. From 1955 to 1985 she continued to lecture in Coptic History at both the Seminaries in Cairo and Alexandria and at the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo. In 1979 she published the book *Women in the Church*, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iris_Habib_Elmasry (accessed 10 March 2021). For her book *The Story of the Copts* (two volumes, in English and ten volumes in Arabic), see <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/htli28v5jxppu0a/AADvuceDgtyEQgK2XoAFYsxpax?dl=0> (accessed 10 March 2021).

10. Interview with Iris al Masri on 16 March 1988 who reported that Pope Cyril VI was the only patriarch to give consecrated women the permission to clean the sanctuary (*haikal*), to wash the priests’ service vestments, as well as the altar coverings and the handkerchiefs used during Holy Communion in the Coptic Church.

11. There were then two women working with him: Mother Zakia, a kind of ‘nun-in-the world’ who served those with special needs; and Sister Aïda who was responsible for young women in the church and taught them home economy and needlework. She was married with five children and served the church all her life until she died.

were called “the eyes and ears of the bishop”. Some similar service was organized since 1954 by Fr. Bolos Bolos of the church of St. George in Damanhur (Delta) who designated an assigned area within the church premises for consecrated women to dwell in together¹².

This ecclesial service offered to the Church by women, although unofficial with no clearly defined guidelines, was replicated in other regions in Egypt. According to Iris al Masri: “The real work of deaconesses is not to chant but to take care of people: visiting families, reading the Bible and praying together.” In 1956 Pope Cyril VI gave Iris al Masri a letter appointing her “general moderator/leader of young women in the Coptic Church (المركسية الكرازة لشابات عامة رائدة)”¹³.

During the time of President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956-1970), Egypt went through enormous transitions on various levels. Rural education was improving, and education within the Coptic Orthodox Church, (that was initiated by the Sunday School Movement inspired by Habib Girgis in the early twentieth century), and social services (instigated in 1962 by Bishop Samuel who took responsibility for Public, Ecumenical and Social Services within the Church) were structured and well organized. In addition, a number of Coptic Orthodox women who desired to live a celibate consecrated life in service for their Church communicated their wish with their local priests and bishops.

In Beni Suef, Bishop Athanasios (1962-2000) began the work of organizing female diaconal work for “active nuns”¹⁴ in his diocese in 1965 and called the group “The Daughters of Mary” (*Banat Maryam*). The first nuns were initiated into this service in 1970¹⁵. They had their

12. Details about this period and these dates (1953 and 1954) need to be verified and recorded.

13. Interview with Iris al Masri on 16 March 1988. This was confirmed to me by email by her grandnephew Youhanna Elia (Cairo) who is now in charge of all her papers and documents.

14. “Active nuns” refer here to those who live a consecrated life of service to the Church and community “in the world” as opposed to “contemplative nuns” who live a consecrated life of prayer in the solitude of their convents.

15. U. Zanetti, «La vita monastica nell’Egitto di oggi» (see the section entitled «Altri tipi di vita religiosa femminile», 444-45); Pieternella Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, SC: University of South Carolina Press, Columbia 1995. On the *Daughters of Mary* see also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Daughters_of_St._Mary (accessed 10 March 2021).

own rules that stipulated their daily way of life that was similar to that of Catholic active nuns¹⁶. Interestingly, these women were referred to as “nuns”, which was a new concept in Coptic Orthodox Church tradition because generally nuns have always followed a specific vocation with a strict life of contemplation isolated in their convent, according to Orthodox tradition. However, in reality, in Beni Suef, the life, activities and service of these women were similar to those who are now recognized as consecrated women or deaconesses in the Coptic Church (*mukarrasat*). Since Bishop Athanasios’s death in 2000, the newcomers are considered by the new bishop Gabriel as being like the other consecrated women (*mukarrasat*) of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The new *tasonis*¹⁷ are blessed by a prayer as the other *tasonis* in Egypt, not as nuns, and their lifestyle and daily prayers are similar¹⁸.

In a short article by Iris al Masri, «Le service des diaconesses», we read that during a lecture by Pope Shenuda in London on January 28, 1979, she asked a question about deaconesses. His Holiness then

16. In my interview with Pope Shenuda III, he stated that deaconesses or “consecrated women” in the Coptic Orthodox Church have the same function as some of the active nuns in the Catholic Church. Although Coptic Orthodox nuns may offer help to needy people who come to their convents asking for it, the patriarch emphasized that in the Coptic Orthodox Church, nuns live a dedicated life of prayer in solitude, *LMC* 16 (1989): 70. In 2001 a Jesuit father living in Egypt, Jacques Masson, wrote that a new form of consecrated life for women was developing, with the foundation of the so called “Banât Maryam”, founded by the charismatic bishop of Beni Suef, Athanasios, that was based on the model of the female apostolic congregations in the Catholic Church. Masson also recorded that the “consecrated women” lived in groups and dedicated themselves to the service of the Church in the world. “They are gathered under the direction of a bishop, according to the eparchies. Their number does not cease to grow although we are not able to determine precisely their number.” See J. Masson, «Les coptes entre tradition et modernité», *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 51 (2001): 127.

17. Coptic for “my sister”.

18. Each year an annual conference bringing together all the *mukarrasat* across Egypt takes place at al Agami Conference Centre, located 30 km west of Alexandria. The yearly event is organised by the *mukarrasat* of the Bishopric of Youth under the leadership of Bishop Mousa. (Interview with Sister Catherine of the Bishopric of Youth in Cairo in February 2017. In an interview with Fr. Bolos Ramzi and a *tasoni*, both from Beni Suef, on 24 March 2019 in Cairo, they informed me that up until 2019 there still were some elderly nuns from the time of Bishop Athanasios living together with the *mukarrasat* in Beni Suef).

answered that this question was in the mind of many people, but no decision could be taken about it by the Coptic Orthodox Church before a serious study was made. He outlined some relevant themes and asked her to write studies on this topic. Following up on his request, she looked for some appropriate texts and prayers on deaconesses and gave them to Pope Shenuda¹⁹.

The First House for Consecrated Women in Giza

Following their own account²⁰, the first female diaconia group was *formally* established in Giza in 1960 under the spiritual guidance of Fr. Salib Surial (d. 1994), the parish priest of the church of St. Mark (Giza), and with the assistance of two young women, Fibi Ebeid²¹ and Jasmine²², both of whom desired to dedicate their lives to serving the Church and community, rather than living as cloistered nuns. They expressed their intention to Pope Cyril VI, whom they visited in November 1959 together with Fr. Surial, and accordingly, the patriarch gave his blessing for them to pursue such a life. They were consecrated on May 20, 1960 by Yoannes the metropolitan of Giza (d. 1963). By 2005 there were twenty-two consecrated women or deaconesses in Giza and Sister Fibi then was the superior²³.

19. I. al Masri, «Le service des diaconesses», *LMC* 8 (1979): 8-10. The article was translated into French and published by Pierre de Bogdanoff, the founder of *Le Monde copte*. Iris al Masri had informed me that she undertook extensive research in the British Library as well as other libraries for prayers and texts relating to deaconesses. It would be useful to compile a bibliography of everything written by Iris al Masri on deaconesses/female diaconia. Nagla Hamdy Boutros (IFAO, Cairo) is preparing an article about Iris al Masri.

20. During an interview in Giza (Cairo) when I was preparing my book *The Coptic Orthodox Church* (2005).

21. Fibi Ebeid was at the time 26 years old.

22. The community of sisters in Giza could not remember Jasmine's family name.

23. Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 38. A number of those who joined the community of sisters in Giza later became nuns, such as Mother Yuanna (d. 2000) who became the head of the Convent of St. George in Old Cairo.

When Sister Fibi died on 23 November 2010, the deaconesses published a booklet in her memory titled *The Seed of Wheat*²⁴. The information in this booklet is valuable for allowing us to trace the history and organization of the role of consecrated women in the contemporary Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt.

Sister Fibi Ebeid was born in Asiut in 1934. Her father, Archdeacon Ebeid Mikhail, was well-known as a preacher, Bible teacher and servant of the Church. In 1947 Bishop Mikhail of Asiut chose their home to be a place for conducting spiritual meetings. It was at that time that Fibi began contemplating a life of service to the Church. It was in 1953, during her time at university, that she expressed her desire to serve the church to Fr. Salib Surial, who was her spiritual father. Supporting the idea, Fr. Surial rented a flat in Giza for Fibi as well as her friend Jasmine who was likeminded. At the time, the two young women were studying English Literature at Giza University, and then both went on to become English teachers. They would work in the morning and serve the Church in spiritual and social services in the afternoon. Soon afterwards, other young women sought to join them and emulate their way of life. By 1960 they had formed their first group of “sisters” in Giza. In 1971 their number had grown to eight sisters and so they were relocated to a larger premises which was a villa located at 9 Ramzi Farag Street, opposite the Church of St. Demiana which was built in 1971. Their way of life was that they worked in their professional field during the day, and in the evening they would offer service to the sick and needy, and partake in communal prayers. It was only after 1981 that they became full-time servants of the Church.

After Bishop Yoannes of Giza died in 1963, his successor, Bishop Domatios (d. 2011), continued the vision of supporting the service of consecrated women in Giza, and accordingly proposed that Fr. Surial contact Bishop Shenuda who was then responsible for Christian Education in the Coptic Orthodox Church, to establish an official routine

24. The booklet was published in 2010 by the House of Deaconesses in Giza, Cairo. When I revisited the House in Giza in February 2017, I met Sister Irini who gave me this booklet and related some details about Sister Fibi’s life. See also Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 38.

that would govern the daily way of life for the sisters²⁵. As a result, from 1963 to 1971, Bishop Shenuda became the spiritual father of the group of consecrated women in Giza. Over time the sisterhood in Giza grew. In 2005 there were twenty-two sisters and in 2017 there were thirty sisters in the community who served the church in Giza and other places²⁶.

Similar stories may be told of other places in Egypt, particularly where diocesan bishops were the spiritual fathers of young women who wished to consecrate their life to serve the Church. Examples include Metropolitan Pachomius in Damanhur (Delta), Bishop Bimen (d. 1986) in Mallawi (Upper Egypt), Bishop Tadros in Port Said, Bishop Yohannes (d. 1987) in Tanta (Delta), and Bishop Benjamin in Shibin al Kom (Delta). They were strong advocates for service (*khidma* in Arabic) in the Church, and many had themselves been active servants in the Church before their monastic vocation. For example, the late Bishop Bimen of Mallawi, who was a celibate deacon before monasticism, served closely with women in his parish church in Giza for ten years, and so when he became a diocesan bishop, he well understood women's diaconal aspiration and accordingly was able to organize and structure their diaconical service within the diocese²⁷.

25. In 1962 Bishop Shenuda was ordained by Pope Cyril VI as the general bishop of Christian Education in the Church. Based in Cairo, he had this responsibility up until his ordination as patriarch (1971-2012). Pope Shenuda was frequently questioned about the position of women and women servants in his Church, and through officiating the role of deaconess, he raised the status of women serving in his Church. Interview with Pope Shenuda, *LMC* 16, at 71.

26. Interview with Sister Irini in Giza in February 2017. See also Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 38.

27. Bishop Bimen was one of the most outstanding personalities in the Coptic Orthodox Church. He was a pioneer in the field of socio-economic development and the emancipation of women, particularly the village women in his diocese and he worked hard to establish a role for women in church service. He even sent some of his consecrated women (*mukarrasat*) to study abroad. See S. S. Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, New York 2003, 155.

In an interview with Sister Esther in Cairo in March 1988, who was a *mukarrasa* under Bishop Bimen, she states: "Anba Bimen had tasted the fruit of social work when he was himself a celibate deacon. He prepared the congregations and the priests to accept the new order of deaconesses. He saw the necessity of helping and working for people in need and the necessity of doing it with love".

Although *mukarassat* are frequently found supporting the service of diocesan bishops, they quite often support “general” bishops responsible for various social services. One such example is Bishop Mousa who in 1980 was ordained by Pope Shenuda III as the Coptic Orthodox Church’s first general bishop for Youth Affairs. After studying medicine he became a celibate deacon serving the Church by offering medical and spiritual care to those in rural areas. He served closely with the late Bishop Athanasios in Beni Suef who gave him the responsibility of attending to the needs of the youth²⁸. Today the Bishopric of Youth has more than thirty-five *mukarassat* who support and serve in particular the needs of the youth under the leadership of Bishop Mousa.

What had started as an experiment with a handful of women who wanted to consecrate their lives for service during the time of Pope Cyril VI resulted in the creation of an official role for women to serve in the Church when in 1981 female diaconal work began to be organized and structured formally under Pope Shenuda III. On the day of Pentecost 1981, Pope Shenuda III officially consecrated the first group of women as “deaconesses” (a group of twenty-eight elderly women), in the cathedral of St. Mark in Cairo. The consecration ceremony took place during the liturgy in the presence of many bishops in which the women were given long grey robes and short veils that were blessed at the time of the consecration. As in the tradition of the early Church, these newly consecrated women, most of them widows, had already been serving in the Church and continued to do so as deaconesses. But it soon became obvious that their age hindered their ability to be active, as most of them were over the age of fifty. It was therefore decided to consecrate younger women for diaconal service where they would perform the same service as the elderly deaconesses. They also received a blessing through a prayer. It was at this time that the title “consecrated women” (*mukarrasat*) began to be used officially²⁹, and this formally recognized role that was given to women was a new concept in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

28. Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 70-1.

29. During my interview in English with Pope Shenuda in Cairo in 1988, he called them “consecrated girls” (probably translated from Arabic as ‘virgin’) which I render in this chapter as “consecrated women”.

In 1985 Pope Shenuda III formed a committee of bishops who had “consecrated women” within their service, and together they drafted a by-law of Regulations governing Coptic “consecrated women” working in Church service. Then in 1988 Pope Shenuda sought a process to recognize “consecrated women” as “deaconesses” through the advancement of levels. The first level being that of a “consecrated woman” (*mukarrasa*); the second level being sub-deaconess; and the highest level being (full) deaconess. This issue was discussed in the meeting of the Holy Synod on the day of Pentecost in 1988³⁰, and their decisions were published shortly after in the official magazine of the Coptic Orthodox Church, *Al Keraza*³¹. In the course of the following years the Holy Synod continued to study and discuss the matter in order to establish certain rites and conditions pertaining to the Order of Consecration for the Consecrated Deaconess.³² The formalized texts with a view to adjusting the status of the *mukarrasat* as well as the consecration vows and prayers were printed in Arabic in a booklet published in September 2013 by the Bishopric of Youth in Cairo. It is called *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’iḥa al-mukarrasât allatî aqarra-hâ al-majmâ’ al-muqaddas ma’a bâqî shu’ûn al-mukarrasât. Taqs takrîs al-mukarrasa musâ’idat al-shammâsa- al-shammâsa)*, with prefaces by Metropolitan Bishoy (d. 2018) and Bishop Moussa, the two bishops who were responsible for the committee of the service of Deaconesses in the Holy Synod. From this booklet we understand that the Holy Synod approved the status of women’s consecration and their consecration rites progressively: on 25 May 1991, the Synod approved the status and consecration rites of “consecrated woman” or *mukarrasa*; on 5 June 1993 approval was given for the rank of sub-deaconess; and on 6 June 1998 approval was given for the rank of (full) deaconess³³. These

30. *LMC* 16 (1989), 66.

31. For example, the topic was discussed already in *Al Keraza* no 2, 2 July 1985.

32. See under “deaconess” at http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html (accessed 10 March 2021).

33. See the booklet by Bishop Mettaous, *Deacons and Deaconesses*, St. Mina Monastery Press, Mariout 2005, 40-4. This is expanded in Bishop Mettaous, *The Sacraments of*

decisions are recorded in the Book of Canons of the Holy Synod. Copts call the *mukarrasat* and deaconesses “*tasoni*” (Coptic for “my sister”).

The following section addresses the rituals, worship and daily life of the *mukarrasat*.

Preparation for the Consecration of the ‘Mukarrasat’

Before they are consecrated, it is expected that the women have already had a number of years of experience in practical service in the Church, and should be recommended by their parish priest or diocesan bishop as being suitable for diaconal work. In addition, just as in the case of Coptic nuns, it is expected that any woman seeking a life of consecration must have first completed their tertiary education³⁴.

In Egypt, there are two major centres for training as novices to be a *mukarrasa*, and this training lasts for three years:³⁵ a house for deaconesses³⁶ next to the monastery of St. Demiana in Belkas, founded by the late Metropolitan Bishop of Damietta (Delta); and a house for deaconesses under the leadership of Bishop Mousa in Deir al Malak (Cairo). After their consecration, they are sent to the diocese or bishopric of their choice or to one that is in need of service. Other than the two houses mentioned above, women may also be trained directly in the diocese where they intend to serve.

Church, no 7, *Priesthood* with the section on “Deaconesses in Church” from 49, with the vow and prayer for consecrated women and deaconesses, 53-70, available at <https://stnoufer.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/the-sacrament-of-church-priesthood-bishop-mettaous.pdf> (accessed 10 March 2021). See also the section “consecrated sisters” (sisters, consecration, becoming consecrated, life of service, misconceptions) at <https://suscopts.org/coptic-reader/> (accessed 10 March 2021).

34. Many Coptic nuns and deaconesses are highly educated and have completed university studies in different faculties such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, psychology, law, commerce, mathematics, engineering, agriculture, languages, psychology and even philosophy. See *LMC* 16 (1989), 69.

35. The three years is the same number of years of training that a monastic novice in the Coptic Church undertakes before monastic consecration.

36. In March 2019 a nun from St. Demiana’s Monastery informed me that about 130 young novices were being trained to become *mukarrasat*.

There are several stages with first a preparatory trial time as novice, then as consecrated sister (*mukarrasa*), then as sub-deaconess and finally as deaconess (as mentioned above)³⁷. One must be over forty to become a deaconess. The time for passing from one stage to another is not systematic, at least five years between the two stages. In fact, most of the sisters remain consecrated women (*mukarrasat*) and only a few become deaconesses. Most of the candidates are young³⁸.

The Consecration Ceremony

The consecration ceremony (*takris*) is usually performed by the bishop in the diocese where the sister will serve. The prayer of consecration³⁹ with the vow now takes place before the prayer of the Morning Raising of Incense, which is the prayer just before the start of the liturgy. They stand before the door of the sanctuary. The consecration is done without laying on of hands as this is reserved 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 women⁴⁰. After the consecration they wear their habit every day, with a cross on the chest and a small veil/scarf on their head.

37. <http://sisters.suscopts.org/> (accessed 10 March 2021).

38. Most of them were about 23-25 years old when they began to live their vocation, according to Pope Shenuda in 1988, *LMC* 16 (1989), 69.

39. See the prayer for consecrated women (*mukarrasat*) in the annex to this chapter.

40. *LMC* 16 (1989), 67.

The Vows

Consecrated women take four vows: the three vows similar to those of cloistered nuns: poverty, celibacy, and obedience, as well as a fourth vow of service (*khidma*)⁴¹. A *mukarrasa* must be totally involved in the service for the Church. She must be a virgin and her age should be more than twenty-five⁴². 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 years⁴³.

1. Daily Life and Prayer Life

The first deaconesses, in 1981, were permitted to live at home, rather than in a communal setting. But today 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 rules for community life and prayer. Rules are necessary to answer all questions and events in the life of the deaconesses⁴⁴. Their timetable and prayer rules may differ a little from one diocese to another and also according to

41. The St. Mary and St. Phoebe consecrated sisters at <http://sisters.suscopts.org/> and http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html (accessed 10 March 2021).

42. The Regulations to become consecrated women approved by the Holy Synod (booklet published in 2013), 11.

43. If the widow has lost her husband for five years or more and if she is less than fifty. *LMC* 16 (1989): 68. Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 39. See also "Service of Deaconesses in the Church" at http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html (9 May 2019); C. Chaillot, *Orthodox Outlook*, vol. IV no 3 (1990), 15.

44. Rules include questions/problems which may arise after the consecration of the consecrated women/deaconesses about any vow they have made. If the life of the sisters is well organized and well-guarded by the bishop and clergy, this also reassures the parents about the safety of their daughters in a society, in Egypt, in which women rarely live by themselves, *LMC* 16 (1989), 70.

their work.⁴⁵ For their livelihood, they receive whatever they need from the churches or parishes where they serve, and they comply with the priest or the bishop with whom they work⁴⁶. The *mukarrasat* have fixed time for visits to their family on certain occasions and by permission. A sister may be transferred from one place to another at the discretion of the bishop.

Apart from their daily prayers in the morning and evening and sometimes at midday, the sisters have periodical retreats, for example one week in a monastery. Other spiritual retreats and communal meetings are also organized for them.

In church, during the liturgy, the *mukarrasat* 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 Church⁴⁷. The sisters sing together with the other women parishioners.

At the time of the baptism and chrismation of adult women deaconesses may help before and after baptism (although nowadays this happens very rarely in Egypt). However, deaconesses do not officiate any of the sacraments or have any priestly function in the liturgy, or serve at the altar as deacons⁴⁸. In fact it is not permitted for a woman to enter the sanctuary⁴⁹, or to read during the liturgy or even at public meetings, but only at special meetings for women⁵⁰.

45. Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 79.

46. *LMC* 16 (1989), 69.

47. http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html (accessed 10 March 2021).

48. Pope Shenuda III insisted that deaconesses cannot exercise any priestly function. *LMC* 16 (1989), 68.

49. See “Supervising the cleaning of the church and organizing its furniture, except for the sanctuary” at http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html, under “DEACONNESSES IN THE CHURCH” (accessed 10 March 2021).

50. *LMC* 16, 68. See also “Helping the priest during the Baptism of elderly adult women” at http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html (accessed 10 March 2021); and “Helping the priest during the Baptism of adult women” at <http://sisters.suscopts.org/life-of-service/> (accessed 10 March 2021).

Organization

1. Activities

In parishes and elsewhere the sisters serve mostly among women and young girls; they may also serve male children and aged men. They are entrusted with educational Christian work among young girls and children in Sunday schools and with religious meetings in church with women of all ages. Some take care of orphans, the handicapped (physically and mentally), thus developing the services and organization of the Coptic Orthodox Church for such people. They supervise student hostels for girls, kindergartens or childcare centres, nursing homes, homes for aged women, retreat houses and sometimes administrative departments in the church, such as the bishopric for youth. They visit and help young girls and women at home as well as widows, the poor, the sick and the aged. They help Christian families in poor villages and run-down quarters. A few work in medical care, including dentistry. Some are secretaries, selling spiritual books and other items in bookstores of the church (for example, in the bishopric for youth). A couple of deaconesses have studied theology and may teach this or other subjects⁵¹.

Their work is also adapted to the context of the place where they live. For example, in 2013, in Samalut, where the bishop built a large hospital, from the thirteen sisters some were nurses and worked in the hospital, while others were working with poor people in the villages giving spiritual service and also some medical help; yet others helped with the administrative work of the diocese. In Giza, the sisters serve the sick in the nearby hospital of St. Demiana, take care of a kindergarten and several orphanages in four places in Cairo, and look after women students in special hostels. Some sisters (eleven in 2013) work in the retreat house of Anafora, 75 km from Cairo on the Desert Road to Alexandria, a place which is visited especially by many young Copts⁵².

51. In 2017 no sister was teaching English or theology in the Coptic Orthodox theological seminary or in the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo, but one (under Bishop Mousa) was professor of English at the American University in Cairo (AUC).

52. In 2013 two sisters were working in the house called *Anamnese* to receive the groups

The consecrated women can help in counseling services for spiritual care and guidance. Their work is social, educational, pastoral, but above all spiritual⁵³. They assist the priest and bishop in this service. Along the years, their activities have diversified and expanded. Some are high level professionals. They run schools, clinics, publishing services, etc. Some of the sisters are close assistants of their bishops, organizers at different levels, editors, etc. The Service of Women by Consecrated Sisters is described on several websites of the Coptic Orthodox Church⁵⁴.

2. Female Diaconal Service in the Diaspora

Within the diaspora, there are Coptic *mukarrasat* in the United States, Australia, and Africa.

In the USA, *mukarrasat* are found in the two dioceses of Los Angeles and of the Southern United States. In 2017, one sister was working in the Coptic Centre in Staten Island (New York), under Bishop David. In Los Angeles, under Archbishop Serapion, since 2003, there have been two consecrated young women who serve Sunday school children and youth and care for individuals; their service is mainly for women and children⁵⁵. The Diocese of the Southern United States was the first Coptic Orthodox diocese to be established in the United States in 1993 for eleven southern states, with its seat in Dallas (Texas), under Bishop Youssef. Since 2006 there were consecrated sisters, with six sisters in 2018 living in different states: two in Dallas and two in Orlando, another one in Nashville, and one in Atlanta. They serve the women and female youth, working in a retreat centre, caring for the sick people, and doing counselling⁵⁶.

and other visitors.

53. LMC 16 (1989): 68; Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 39.

54. For example, on the website of the Diocese of the Southern United States “the service of consecrated sisters” at <http://sisters.suscpts.org/life-of-service/> or at http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html under “deaconesses in the church” (accessed 10 March 2021).

55. Email from Metropolitan Serapion on 8 July 2016.

56. Email from Bishop Youssef on 28 April 2018. On the website of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States you can find one section dedicated to consecrated

In Australia, since November 2002 there has been a House for Consecrated Sisters in Sydney, with two sisters in 2018. It was the first sisters' *mukarrasat*'s place to be established outside of Egypt⁵⁷. In 2013 they moved into a campus built specifically for them in the parish of Archangel Michael and St. Bishoy in Mount Druitt, on the top floor of the Coptic school on site. Apart from their prayer life, they serve in the Sunday School, Bible study, spiritual meetings, retreats for girls and conferences. They also help newly arrived Coptic immigrants settle in, and make sure the needs of families struggling financially are being met⁵⁸. The House has its own constitution/rules⁵⁹. The sisters are under the direct responsibility of the Bishop of Sydney, Daniel; but the person who actually looks after the sisters' needs day to day is Fr. Botros Morkos, who is a priest in the parish⁶⁰.

In Africa, under Bishop Antonios Marcos, from 1976 bishop for African Services with seat in Nairobi (Kenya) and then, since 1998, based in Johannesburg (South Africa), two sisters were sent from Egypt to Kenya. When I visited Kenya, I met two sisters. Sister Esther had studied medicine in Egypt and was then sent for further social studies to England by Bishop Bimen of Mallawi before going to work in Kenya. A local convert, Sister Naomi (from the Kamba tribe), was then working in Kisumu near Lake Victoria with girls and women in the field of social and spiritual life and vocational training⁶¹.

In 2017, under Bishop Boulos, Bishop of Mission Affairs for East Africa (with his seat in Nairobi), there were four consecrated sisters:

sisters (The St. Mary and St. Phoebe consecrated sisters) at <http://sisters.suscopts.org/> (accessed 10 March 2021).

57. Email from Sister Mary Kamel in Sydney on 28 November 2012; <https://www.facebook.com/theotokos.demiana?fref=ts> (accessed 10 March 2021).

58. Tasoni Mary is also the coordinator of a charity called Solace of the Lord that aims to get as many people as possible serving others, with a focus both within the Coptic community and in the wider Australian community. As such, groups visit prisons and help disadvantaged indigenous and refugee children with their studies.

59. It was based on the Constitution from St. Demiana's House in Damietta, under Metropolitan Bishoy, but was adapted for Australian conditions.

60. Email from Fr. Antonios Kaldas from Sydney on 27 November 2017.

61. Interview with Pope Shenuda, *LMC* 16, at 68. C. Chaillot, "Activités missionnaires de l'Eglise copte en Afrique", *LMC* 20 (1992), 99-103.

two in Kenya, one in Tanzania and one in Zambia doing service mainly with children and young women; they also helped with conferences and family meetings⁶². In 2018, however, there was no sister under Bishop Antonios Marcos in South Africa⁶³.

Conclusion

Coptic consecrated women work as certain active nuns do in the Catholic Church. But in the Coptic Orthodox Church nuns are devoted only to the life of prayer and contemplation in their monasteries, in solitude and apart from the world. For Copts, service (*khidma*) of the Church is important. As Pope Shenuda underlined, the service of the Coptic consecrated women/deaconesses is a dedicated life and a very vivid experience. In 1988, Pope Shenuda said that the service of *mukarrasat*/deaconesses was already well accepted and respected by the laity who understands that it is needed. Many parishes were at that time asking him to have some consecrated women for their social projects. 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. The deaconesses are assigned to services which are needed for the Church today. Their work is recognized as an official work of the Church⁶⁴. They mediate between the women and the priests and the bishop/s. As teachers of the spiritual life, they can also play the role of spiritual mothers, which is very important in the Coptic Orthodox tradition in which spirituality is highlighted and where, as in all the Oriental Churches, emphasis is placed upon attaining holiness during one's life in this world⁶⁵.

In this article, we have seen that the rules and consecration ceremonies for these women/*mukarrasat* show the desire to incorporate them into

62. Email from Bishop Paul on 27 November 2017.

63. Email from Bishop Antonios Marcos on 1 May 2018.

64. *LMC* 16 (1989): 70, 71.

65. Kyriaki Karidoyanes-FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*; Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, MA 1998, 185.

the Coptic Orthodox Church and its development. Such developments are important and needed for the present and the future life as well as an upheveled organization of the Church. Since 1988 and until today the work of the Coptic *mukarrasat*/deaconesses is well recognized by all the Coptic Orthodox Church, from the level of the bishops and Holy Synod who have organized and made official their rules, until the clergy and the laity/parishioners. They have been warmly embraced by the local Coptic communities in which they serve, by and large. Their services became accepted, not only inside but also outside Egypt, in the diaspora, where *mukarrasat* were called to come and serve. They play a prominent role in both the usual services of the Church (e.g. Sunday School) and in their own services (social services, spiritual meetings, retreats, etc). The role of these consecrated female servants in the Coptic Church raises a number of interesting questions. As legacy, they also inspire many women to partake more actively in the life of the Church. These deaconesses are providing a powerful role model for young girls, showing them that it is possible to be a woman and effective servant in the Church, even assuming some important positions. They embody the ideal of consecrated life within the community. They have engaged into a full and authentic life as active Coptic Orthodox Christian women contributing greatly to Church and to society more generally. This topic also engages in academic research relating to the role of women in the Coptic Orthodox Church and to female diaconate in the Oriental Churches today⁶⁶.

A prominent feature of the *tasoni*'s service is that, as the Gospel teaches, they seek out the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger and serve them, while engaging in "spiritual" services, a service with practical love. In their personal and spiritual life, the *tasonis* have to find the right balance between being out in the world on one hand, and not of the world on the other. While the Coptic Orthodox Church generally –and especially in Egypt, but also in the diaspora– has gradually developed

66. See C. Chaillot, «Le travail des femmes laïques dans l'Église copte orthodoxe», *Le Monde copte (LMC)* 16, 71-72; and C. Chaillot, "Female Diaconate in the Oriental Churches in the Past and Today", *Theologia* 91, 2 (Athens 2020), 33-63.

a strong ethic of social services, the advent of the work and life of the *tasonis* has given, and added, its powerful and unique expression⁶⁷.

Today the Coptic deaconesses (*mukarassat*) are dedicated members of a Church, and, as we have seen, they comply with certain rules. In fact, under Patriarchs Cyril IV and Shenuda, the Coptic Orthodox Church led a spiritual revival to strengthen faith. It is this spiritual trend that Coptic Orthodox women decided to follow by becoming deaconesses/*mukarrasat*, making a personal choice to dedicate themselves and their life to Christ and the Church in a dedicated active life based on spirituality, to fulfill a vocation.

This article allows to begin to create a genealogy of events about modern female diaconal service in the Coptic Orthodox Church and show how these can be placed within the context of the life and history of the Coptic Orthodox Church and accordingly of the Egyptian society at large.

This first organization is worthy of a detailed and fully documented history and dates. The writing of a detailed history of modern female diaconal service in the Coptic Orthodox Church, however, requires that all the information given in this chapter be developed not only for Giza but for all the groups around Egypt, with correct names and dates. This information needs to be sought in Coptic publications, which are mostly in Arabic, but also through recording interviews with witnesses while they are still alive.

This vivid and unique experience became possible in the Coptic Orthodox Church thanks to the collaboration of women who wanted to live this life as a vocation and service to their Church. With the support of the Holy Synod, they now have a full organization, which began in 1985 with a rule of life, a prayer of consecration, and so on. Might not this example also inspire the Eastern Orthodox Churches to take practical steps towards the restoration of deaconesses in their own Churches? For decades the Eastern Orthodox have spoken about this possibility and have written about it but have not hitherto taken any

67. Interview and email with Father Antonios Kaldas from Sydney, 30 July 2020. On 22 May 2021 Tasoni Erini in Sydney was elevated to the rank of full deaconess, see video of the ceremony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMCiwH07QbE>.

positive action. Is it not time now for them to embark on some kind of practical experiment?

APPENDIX

The Order of Consecration for Consecrated Women⁶⁸

After the Doxology of Matins but before Matins itself, the woman coming forward to be consecrated reads the appropriate pledge, which is one of three forms of pledge. She stands before the sanctuary, contritely and with bowed head.

The Consecrated Woman's Pledge

I, the weak *N.*, who seek to be admitted to the way of consecration in the Coptic Orthodox Church, pledge myself before God's altar and before our father His Holiness Pope Tawadros II⁶⁹/His Grace the Metropolitan or Bishop Father *N.*, to keep the commandments of the Bible, to adhere to the Coptic Orthodox beliefs, to go to confession and receive communion and to engage in the combat of the spiritual life. I also pledge myself to be faithful in responsibilities, to conduct myself well towards others and to obey the ecclesiastical authorities represented by His Holiness Pope Tawadros II/His Grace the Metropolitan or Bishop Father *N.*

And, as I receive the blessing of putting on the habit of ... on this day, [date in AD and AM], I pledge that my continued wearing of this habit is conditional upon my keeping to the way of consecration until the end, by the grace of God.

68. Source: The Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, *Lā'ihāt al-mukarrasāt allatī aqarrahā al-majma' al-muqaddas ma'a bāqī shu'ūn al-mukarrasāt* (Ordinance for consecrated women passed by the Holy Synod together with the other matters concerning consecrated women). (Maktabat usqufiyat al-shabāb, Cairo 2013), 28-36. Translated by Hilary Kilpatrick.

69. Rarely referred to by the English form of his name, Theodore.

I beseech you to pray for me. Accept my prostration. Grant me absolution and bless me, my master, Your Holiness the Pope and Your Grace the Metropolitan/ Bishop.

The Lord's Prayer follows and the Pope (if present) or Metropolitan/ Bishop then recites the Prayer of Thanksgiving.

Then the Bishop recites over her the following prayers:

† O Lord wise in counsel, who created mankind in His image and likeness, male and female He created them in His image and likeness, granting them blessing; we ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us. (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† O Lord, You who granted prophecy to Miryam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, to Deborah, Hulda and Anna, the daughter of Phaniel, and who granted Philip the Apostle to have virgin daughters who prophesied; we ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† O You who poured out the grace of Your Holy Spirit upon men and women alike, according them the gifts of the Spirit, we ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us. (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† O Lord, You who granted Mary Magdalene to be sent to announce Your Resurrection to Your holy apostles and granted Phoebe to be appointed a deaconess in Your holy Church, we ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† As You granted in the past, O Lord, grant now in Your presence to NN, to share in Your service, and make us worthy to accomplish this service without incurring condemnation before You, and pour out the grace of your Holy Spirit upon them, through grace and compassion, we ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† O Lord God, You who do not reject the women who offer themselves, in accordance with Your divine will, with a pure intention to accomplish Your service, but have granted that they should be called Your handmaids, grant the grace of the Holy Spirit to these Your handmaids, who desire to offer themselves to You that they may accomplish Your service; as You entrusted the grace of this service to Your handmaid Phoebe whom You had called to work in Your Church and who became

a helper to Your servant the Apostle Paul, pour out on them Your holy gifts, through grace and compassion, we ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† O Eternal Lord, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, look now upon these Your handmaids, who have been called to the service of consecration, grant them the grace of the Holy Spirit. Purify them from every defilement of body and soul, that they may worthily accomplish the work which You have entrusted to them. Yours is the glory and worship together with Your only begotten Son and the Holy Spirit, to the ages of ages. Amen.

† O Lord God, Holy and Almighty, who sanctified women through the birth of Your only-begotten Son of the holy Virgin Mary according to the flesh, we ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† O You who gave the grace of the Holy Spirit not only to men but also to women, look down now, O Lord, on these Your handmaids, call them to Your service, send down, O Lord, on them the gift of Your Holy Spirit, preserve them in the Orthodox faith, that they may always accomplish Your service without blame, according to Your good pleasure. For to You are due all glory, honor and worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† O Holy God, You who are most high and who look down upon the humble women, You who have chosen both weak and strong and honored the lowly, send down the grace of Your Holy Spirit on these Your handmaids. Affirm them in Your righteousness, so that when they follow your commandments and serve in the house of Your holiness, they may be honored vessels to glorify You. We ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† Grant them, O Lord, strength to walk joyfully in the way of Your teachings which You have set forth as a precept for their service. Grant them, O Lord, the spirit of humility, strength, praise, endurance, and patience, so that, bearing Your yoke with joy and persevering in combat, they may earn crowns of service. We ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† Yes, O Lord, You who know our weakness, make Your handmaids perfect, so that they may carry out the service of women, visiting sick women and those absent from church, caring for women who are poor and needy, assisting adult women on the day of their baptism, instructing women catechumens, and keeping order among the women in church. Give them strength to edify and set a good example, sanctify them, enlighten them, give them wisdom. For You are blessed and glorified, O Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

† Hear our prayers, O Lord, and send down on them blessing from the Holy Spirit, that they may accomplish Your service without occurring condemnation and offer an ideal of sanctified life. Bless them, O Lord, these women whom You have purchased with Your precious blood. We ask You, O Lord, hear us and have mercy on us (Response: *Lord, have mercy*).

The deacon says: We ask of the Lord.

The bishop completes the prayer, saying:

† For the peace of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, we ask of the Lord (Response: *Lord, have mercy*)

† For the service of women in the Church, for the poor and sick women and for the women who are catechumens, we ask of the Lord (Response: *Lord, have mercy*)

† For those coming forward to the service of consecration, recommended by those who have put them forward, that the Lord may grant them grace and strength and bless their service, as He blessed the service of Phoebe of old, we ask of the Lord (Response: *Lord, have mercy*)

And finally, make us worthy to say with thanksgiving: *Our Father, who art in Heaven...*

After that the Bishop makes the sign of the cross over the women being consecrated three times, as is customary (without laying his hand on them), saying each time:

N. is consecrated in the Holy Coptic Orthodox Church of God, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Then he blesses the habits set aside for the consecrated women, making

the sign of the cross over them three times, before they are placed upon them.

The following exhortation is then read:

The Special Exhortation for the Consecrated Woman

You should know, blessed daughter, that the Lord has chosen you for service as a consecrated woman in the Holy Church. Observe the commandments, take care to be without blame, preserve the garment of consecration from shame. Fill your mouth with the praise of God, remain always in fullness of grace through participation in the Holy Mysteries. Walk in obedience to your Father the Bishop and those who guide you in the path of God. Remain faithful to the doctrine and to the service which has been entrusted to you by the Church. And may the Lord grant you strength through His Grace and count you among the Wise Virgins, the blessed brides of Christ.

The service ends in the customary manner (“Amen. Alleluia...”), followed by the “Our Father” and the blessing. The consecrated women then proceed to attend the Divine Liturgy and receive the Holy Mysteries.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ἡ ὑπηρεσία τῶν διακονισσῶν
στὴν Κοπτική Ἐκκλησία σήμερα

Christine Chaillot
ἑρευνήτριας καὶ συγγραφέως

Αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος διακονήματος ἄρχισε νὰ ὑφίσταται ὑπὸ τὸν Πάπα Κύριλλο VI (1959-1971) στὴ Γκίζα (Κάιρο) μὲ μία ἀρχικὴ ὁμάδα ποὺ συγκροτήθηκε τὸ 1960. Ἐλαβε ἐπίσημη μορφή τὸ 1981 ὅταν ἄρχισε νὰ θεσμοθετεῖται ἡ γυναικεῖα διακονικὴ ὑπηρεσία ὑπὸ τὸν Πάπα Shenuda III (1971-2012), ὁ ὁποῖος, τὴν ἡμέρα τῆς Πεντηκοστῆς τοῦ 1981, χειροτόνησε τὶς πρῶτες διακόνισσες.

Σταδιακά νεαρές γυναίκες, που ήθελαν να υπηρετήσουν την εκκλησία, έθεταν έαυτές στη διάθεση όρισμένων επισκόπων, οι οποίοι ρύθμιζαν σε τοπικό επίπεδο την καθημερινή εργασία και τη ζωή τους. Με σκοπό να καταστήσει σαφή, ένεργό και επίσημη την ύπαρξη των διακονισσών αλλά και όρισει τους κανόνες τους οποίους θα έπρεπε να ακολουθούν οι «καθαγιασμένες γυναίκες» που τέθηκαν στην υπηρεσία της Κοπτικής Έκκλησίας, το 1985, ο Πάπας Shenuda συγκρότησε μία ομάδα από επισκόπους, οι οποίοι είχαν υπό την επίβλεψή τους «άγιασμένες γυναίκες». Η ομάδα αυτή συνέταξε στη συνέχεια διάφορα κανονιστικά κείμενα.

Η διακονική δραστηριότητα των γυναικών είναι κοινωνική αλλά και πνευματική. Η οργάνωση της γυναικείας διακονικής υπηρεσίας στην Κοπτική Ορθόδοξη Έκκλησία –μοναδική σήμερα– το 2019 αριθμούσε περίπου 900 μέλη στην Αίγυπτο αλλά και τη διασπορά. Η εύχρη χειροτονία των διακονισσών υπάρχει και χρησιμοποιείται. Είναι ωστόσο απαραίτητο να γραφεί και μια πλήρης ιστορία για την εξέλιξη του θεσμού.

Η αναγκαία αυτή υπηρεσία έχει γίνει άσμενως αποδεκτή από κληρικούς και λαϊκούς και η εμπειρία της Κοπτικής Έκκλησίας θα πρέπει να αποτελέσει πηγή έμπνευσης για μια ένεργό αποκατάσταση των διακονισσών στις Άνατολικές Ορθόδοξες Έκκλησίες.

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