

Resource Sheet 58 – Deacons in the Orthodox Church

Extracted from here ... <http://www.orthodoxdeacons.org/node/12>

GROUP 1

Diakonia: Service in Humility

In all its glory and mystery, the precious Body of Christ has been manifested for two thousand years in the faithful who comprise the church (i.e. what Orthodox theology refers to as the “Church Militant”). These faithful constitute the royal priesthood of laity, deacons, priests and bishops who are called to serve their God and each other for the life of the world. The Greek word for service, diakonia (from which the words deacon and diaconate are derived), has rich connotations in the Orthodox Church, referring first and foremost to the service at the Last Supper by Christ himself in answer to his disciples who wanted to know who among them should be considered the greatest. Christ answered: “he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs, as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the one who serves.” (Luke 22:26-27) In his humility, Christ then is the first deacon or minister, “one who serves.”

The First Deacons

Deacons began serving the church shortly after Pentecost. According to the Book of Acts in the New Testament, the first deacons in the church were selected by the Holy Apostles themselves to assist them with widows:

Now in those days when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the world of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business, but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, who they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6)

The seven chosen men became known as The Seven, and St. Stephen First Martyr is considered the prototype for the diaconate. With the Apostles’ recognition that they needed assistants to help with the growing church, the diaconate as a ministry in its own right was begun with the appointed Seven and continued to flourish and grow with the help of both dedicated men and women. St. Paul extolled the ministry of St. Phoebe Equal to the Apostles, the prototype for women deacons, in Romans 16:1: “I commend to you Phoebe, our sister who is a deacon of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saint, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many of myself also.”

GROUP 2

Qualifications and Duties

Qualifications for a deacon are first listed in 1 Timothy 3:8-13:

Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, women [deacons] must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

In St. John Chrysostom's commentary on these verses he points out that these same virtues apply to "women deacons as well, as this order is also in the highest degree necessary, useful and proper in the church." Homily 11 on 1 Timothy. (PG62,553 CD). These texts basically convey that the underlying premise to the diaconate ministry (and, by extension, to all Christians) is holiness and purity of life--spiritual, psychological as well as physical.

Other references in the New Testament reveal the variety of service deacons performed including assisting bishops, educating, and baptizing. Philip catechized and baptized the Ethiopian (Acts 8:5); the close relationship between bishops and deacons is related in Philipians 1:1: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." Author Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald in her definitive book, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, describes a number of early women deacon saints, including St. Tabitha the Merciful who did good deeds and giving to the poor and St. Lydia who converted many to Christianity through proselytizing. Although the word "deacon" is not used in the New Testament to describe these women, the Orthodox Church honors them with the title of deacon after each of their names.[fn] Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), 4.[fn]

GROUP 3

Deacon Saints

Because Christianity was illegal, many of the deacon saints of the Golden Age in the second and third centuries became martyrs, such as St. Stephen First Martyr and St. Apollonia of Alexandria Virgin Martyr. While the diaconate may not have been as robust in the fourth century and beyond, there are examples of outstanding men and women deacons through this time period whose lives exemplify the range of service deacons practiced (listed in order of deaths):

St. Athanasius the Great (d. 373). According to tradition, he participated in the First Ecumenical Council, using his gifts of intellect, persuasion and writing to influence beliefs about the nature of Christ that became part of the Nicene Creed. Later he was elevated to Patriarch of Alexandria.

St. Ephraim the Syrian (d. 373). A theologian and prolific writer, he composed many hymns and wrote prose and poetry that helped define the faith, such as "The Prayer of St. Ephraim," the most famous prayer of Great Lent.

St. Nonna (d.374). The mother of St. Gregory the Theologian and wife of Gregory of Nanzianzus is praised for both raising her son in a pious Christian household and also praying for and instructing her husband (who did not grow up in the church), but later became a bishop. Shortly after his ordination she was ordained a deaconess, engaging in charitable work while continuing to be a model mother and wife.

St. Macrina the Great Teacher and Abbess (d. 379). Elder sister of Ss. Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Peter Sebaste, she helped raise, educate and spiritually guide her siblings and then founded and directed a convent in Pontus.

St. Olympias (d. 408). The most famous woman deacon, known for her charitable giving, founded and headed a monastery, supervised women deacons at St. Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople, evangelized and taught newcomers, acted as a spiritual mother, and gave trusted advice to St. John Chrysostom.

St. Paschasius of Rome (d.512), St. Gregory the Great writes in his *Dialogos* that St. Paschasius wrote several books on the Holy Spirit and that he was a "man of sanctity" who was kind to the poor.

St. Romanos the Melodist (d.556) Ordained a deacon in Beirut, he travelled to St. Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople and by a miracle received the gift of composing hymns to become one of the greatest hymnographers in the Orthodox Church.

St. Irene Chrysovalantou (Ninth century). At an early age, she became a monastic at the Monastery of Chrysovalantou in Constantinople, and provided an example of extreme piety by praying all night with raised hands. She was ordained a deacon at St. Sophia, and became the abbess of the monastery where she was a spiritual mother who taught, healed, and blessed many of the faithful.

Perhaps the churches in Constantinople, the seat of the Byzantine Empire, best understood and utilized the diaconate ministry. The famous Third Novel (a collection of laws) of Emperor Justinian (482-565) specified that the great Hagia Sophia Cathedral should have 425 clergy, including 100 male and 40 female deacons. To this day, the Ecumenical Patriarchate located in Istanbul (Constantinople) is well known for its full use of deacons in many capacities.