

Between the sacerdotal or mystical and the ministerial: Deaconesses in the Orthodox Church

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Recent archaeological discoveries in Israel of what appear to be tombs of deaconesses, as well as the ordination of a woman deacon in Africa, have coincided with a renewed reflection in the Orthodox Church on the nature of the communion/parish in Christ. This reflection necessarily implies a reassessment of the relationship between the sacral and ministerial in its visible and non-visible aspects. In the Orthodox tradition and contemporary Orthodox theology, the priestly function or character is directly related to the communion understood as a gathering of love in Christ.

Contribution: The study offers some brief suggestions to relieve the possible tension regarding the existence of deaconesses in the church by demonstrating that there is interaction between the sacral and ministerial without necessarily merging the two, and that this is the way forward for further reflection on deaconesses.

Keywords: deaconess; Orthodox tradition; sacral; ministerial; Ashdod Yam.

Introduction

Recently, there were two interesting events which touched on the issue of women deacons or deaconesses in relation to the Orthodox Church. The first event was the discovery of a church in Israel in Ashdod Yam, in which there were multiple burials of what appear to have been deaconesses. Rather surprisingly, given other ecclesial contexts in the Holy Land and elsewhere, the deaconesses in this church were buried inside the building, their tombs covering practically all that may be termed as 'sacral' areas of the church. The second event was the ordination of a deaconess in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria, where the 'ordained' deaconess was dressed in what would be considered the sacral vestments of a contemporary Orthodox male deacon.

These events, as well as other theological trends in the Orthodox Church, have reopened a basic question, which relates to the functions, ordination and other features of the female diaconate. What is becoming apparent, especially in comparison to other ecclesial contexts, is that the issue of women deaconesses in the Orthodox setting hinges on our understanding of what is 'sacred', 'sacral' or mystical and its relation to 'service' or 'communal ministry'.

Here, the ministerial is something which builds the ecclesial communion of Christ, and includes the clergy, but also anybody in the service of others. The sacred or mystical aspect is that which cannot be defined or easily classified in relation to the communion and its external expression, and is characterised by the work of the Holy Spirit in love and freedom. Both aspects, the ministerial and sacral, are mutually interdependent, because without this broader sacral meaning (which can never be defined because the community of God is essentially beyond characterisation), the community is an ordinary gathering, while without the ministerial, the communion is simply an expression of magic ritualism.

The discussions in the recent past have basically analysed all the surviving literary sources regarding deaconesses, but there are significant gaps in an analysis of the archaeological record, which is still producing new information.

However, in terms of Orthodox reflection on the evidence and its own tradition, it is becoming more than obvious that the overall attitude to deaconesses must be carried out in a more inclusive all-encompassing theological reflection, which is not based on one or other source but stems from the general experience and life of the Orthodox Church. This is conditioned by the evidence itself, which does not allow clear-cut and easy conclusions and definitions.

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Function and ministry

It is clear that in discussing the diaconate of women, we must consider regional differences and traditions, historical contexts and the contemporary developments. The Orthodox Christian tradition, because of various historical and other reasons, had a complex trajectory of development marked by a strong monastic component but also a strong involvement of the laity or generally the *Sensus fidei*. Even if at first glance, the Orthodox Church is a hierarchical structure, in fact, as shown especially in difficult historical contexts, it was primarily the laity and the monastic environment who were the reason for its survival and continued presence.

Already in the period of the New Testament Church, we see an interesting interaction between what may be termed the sacral or mystical elements and the everyday practicalities of a life in communion, that is, the *ecclesia* or Church. The ordinary everyday experience, here we stress the 'community', was a kind of natural check on the possible otherworldly theologies or tendencies. But also vice versa, the ordinary was transformed into something special, something mystical. Perhaps Jesus Christ and his life would be a prime example of this harmonious duality between the practical and the spiritual.

After Constantine the Great, the Church became a more administrative and well-defined organisation. As we already see in the early Church Fathers, who also have a bearing on the issue of the diaconate, there was a growing theological rupture between how the Church could be interpreted theologically or spiritually and how the Church functioned in everyday life and under the guidance of the state. Thus, we have a pleiad of Fathers emphasising the spiritual or other elements in theology (Dionysius the Areopagite, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom and so on) together with other more practical concerns facing the 'recognised' Church.

The historical captivity of many of the Orthodox Churches, especially those in the Balkans, has produced a state of theological solidification, where a previously more vibrant exegetical attitude to the liturgical context was largely forgotten. However, at the same time, there were multiple unexposed practical developments testifying to a developing dynamic liturgical tradition, which included a crucial role for women in the Church.

We must also note that the role and function of the male deacon itself changed both in the history of the Eastern and Western parts of Christendom. The literary sources are also clear that in the Early Church, at least, the strategic role of the deacon in the community and for the community was crucial. The deacon's role in the liturgical life was paralleled by his philanthropic responsibilities in the community. As the *Didascalia Apostolorum* states: 'It is required of you deacons therefore that you visit all who are in need, and inform the bishop of those who are in distress' (Chapter XVI, Connolly 2010:151).

The sources also imply that women deaconesses were important very early on in the ministry of the Church. In the correspondence with Trajan, Pliny mentions the term *ministrae* in reference to women, but it is subject to debate whether this is a reference to deaconesses (Cook 2018:136). In any case, the reference is to women ministers.

The sources indicate that the role of the deaconess also changed. Here, there is an obvious trap for the historical theologian who tends to compartmentalise various elements and falls into the danger of a myopic conditioned view. For example, just because deaconesses assisted during baptism in the Early Church does not necessarily mean that they are reduced or limited to this role only. Here, the traditional emphasis on pneumatology in the Orthodox tradition can offer a more profound holistic reflection treating the clerical roles in a general communal theology.

The rather inconsistent information we have about deaconesses is also complicated by the simple fact that, as has been stressed and shown in archaeological settings, the male form of the Greek term 'deacon' can be used to designate female deacons. This makes the identification of separate functions of women or male deacons even more difficult to establish. Whether this was also an important feature in the Latin linguistic tradition is beyond the scope of our article (The Gallic Synods of the 5th and 6th centuries would seem to suggest that there was a clear linguistic difference between female and male deacons) (see Merovingian and Gallic Councils 1989).

The example of the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, which was the most representative church of the Orthodox tradition in Byzantine history, shows that each person or groups of people inside the church had an assigned position, including the emperor. This position was, however, not static or hierarchically entrenched, but changed according to one's interaction with the Divine and the gathered communion, symbolised by processions and the movements in and out of the screen separating the altar and the rest of the church. The status in the community was further delineated by ordinations or defrocking of priests, elevations to various governmental or liturgical positions, penitential states and other aspects.

There was an interaction between Christ and the people which had the potential to change positions and possibilities according to one's preparedness in approaching the Eucharist. In the end, everyone could have been united in the Eucharistic communion, and thereby all the differences were resolved in Christ.

In this context, the altar represents the meeting ground between God and the human being and from this derives its 'sacredness'. It is sacred because you need to be prepared for this encounter with Christ; one needs a change of heart. Even in the Judaic setting, the same dynamic principle is seen in the Temple theology. God interacts with his people, and the

Holy of Holies is the focal point of this interaction. Chapter 44 in Ezechiel shows a continuity with later Christian communal thinking, understanding the priesthood through the prism of the community (Gordon 1983). That is, the necessity of building up the Israelite community and the consequential distinction between sacred or pure and the unholy and impure. 'And they shall teach My people *the difference* between the holy and the unholy, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean' (Ezek 44 23NKJV).

Ordination into and for the communion

Without going into the question regarding the ordination rites for the male and female deacons, which has been often commented on, we may state that ordination of any kind is carried on through the Holy Spirit, who is the key element for determining one's role in the community. In the Orthodox understanding, the Holy Spirit is invoked during the ordination because the Holy Spirit, as the spirit of freedom, is the building block of the community. The community drawing on the Holy Spirit chooses the candidate for the ministry and asks the Holy Spirit to anchor him or her in the community.

In the ordination rites, not only of the Orthodox Churches, but also of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the primary aspects which appear are the role of the Holy Spirit, the laying on of hands and the assent of the community. It is the community through the bishop that, in a way, ordains one for ministry within it.

The Barberini codex for the Byzantine deaconess ordination states: '... and send down her the abundant gift of your Holy Spirit'... 'that our loving God will bestow on her a spotless and inapproachable diaconate'. Further the Georgian benediction for deaconesses states:

[G]ive grace to her to utter all things in your name; to the end that serving worthily, and without sin she may found herself emboldened to intercede in the appointed hour, of your Christ, with whom you are blessed, with the all-holy Spirit, now and henceforth and for ever. (Bradshaw 1990:168–169)

Similarly, according to the East Syrian tradition, 'Give to her through your mercy the grace of your Holy Spirit, so that without stain she may minister' (Bradshaw 1990:133–156).

The prayers of the Coptic Church and Armenian Church emphasise the communal role of the deacon. In the ordination prayers for the male deacon, the Coptic rites stress:

Make your face shine on your servant N., who has been given the diaconate by a vote, and judgement of those, who have brought him into the midst. Fill him with the Holy Spirit and wisdom and power. (Bradshaw 1990:129–140)

And the Armenian (Bradshaw 1990):

[B]ut because of your love for humanity, looked upon humanity, and chose yourself a Church from among us, a temple of dwelling for your Holy, and Glorious Trinity. And you have

appointed in it deacons to minister to your Holy Church. (pp. 127–140)

That the Holy Spirit is a primary element of ordination in and through the community is exemplified by the 'laying of hands'. The 'laying of hands' was not always exclusively limited to the bishop. But it was also a general expression of the will of the people. Here, the Holy Spirit is not the possession of any individual who hands it out, but something working through the community and in its activity is conditioned by the interaction with the community and the unification between God and humans offered in Christ. And vice versa, he or she who works through the Holy Spirit works automatically for the community. The sacral here is the freedom of the Holy Spirit and the ministerial its concrete expression. As, for example, shown by the *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua* (5th century), the laying of hands was even associated with laity during exorcisms (Canon 62), or fasting priests laying hands on penitents (Canon 80).

The laying of hands encapsulates the reception by the 'other', that is, the members of the community. In terms of ordination rites in the Orthodox tradition, here there is a distinction between *cheirotesia* χειροθεσία and *cheirotomia* χειροτομία. *Cheirotesia* can be associated with the 'lower orders' (subdeacons, readers etc.) and was usually carried out outside of the liturgy and outside the altar area. *Cheirotomia* could be associated with the liturgy and performed in the proximity of the altar (ordinations of bishops and priests).

Cheirotesia was also associated with deaconesses. In some traditions such as those of the East Syrian, the ordination of a deaconess is associated more with a blessing than ordination. 'The bishop prays laying his hands on her head, not in the manner of ordination but of blessing' (Bradshaw 1990:156).

The difference in ordination could imply a hierarchical exclusivism projected onto the area of the church. But this is qualified by the fact that all these ordinations bear aspects of a communal character, symbolised by the bishop, who affirms the ecclesial body as 'communion'. Here, the entire space of the church is an expression of the living communion, where the possible sacral areas or 'borders' are not restrictive since the liturgical service entails movement between them reflecting also the kenotic descent of Christ and his uplifting of creation to the Father. Each member brings in his own sacrifice of love, that is, of ministry to the other and consequently reveals his sacral identity.

Canon 19 of the Council of Nicaea implies that a cheirothesia could have been carried out without the laying of hands. However, Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon assumes the laying of hands on a deaconess (here *cheirotomia*). The tradition related to Hippolytus of Rome would also seem to suggest that there was no laying of hands on the deaconess. However, at the same time, it testifies to the bishop laying his hands during baptism. If laying of hands symbolises entry into the communion through the Holy Spirit, this brings into

the question the more reductive use of this act in other circumstances. Other works, such as the *Testamentum Domini* (*Testamentum* of our Lord), also disallow the laying of hands on the deaconess, but again, at the same time, the same work allows deaconesses to carry the Eucharist to the sick.

The question here is, what is the sanctuary or altar area? The meeting ground between God and humans, the centre where the Eucharist, as a primary sacrament of Communion, takes place. In the Orthodox tradition, there is further the belief that it is the place where the offer of *Theosis* is given – a theosis or in other words divinisation offered to all by Christ. If ordination is related to a theology of Communion, then perhaps the conclusions of some scholars, such as Martimort, are too limited. He concludes: 'It is not possible to find a theological reason for conducting the ordination of deaconess in the Byzantine rite within the sanctuary' (Martimort 1986:32).

The ministerial aspect is also associated with the possibility of the deaconess holding the Eucharistic 'chalice'. Similar to ordination, there are various traditions regarding the possibility of the deacon and deaconess manipulating with the Eucharistic chalice. In some canon law traditions, because of a different emphasis on priesthood, there are canons limiting the role of the deacon in distributing the Eucharist. The *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiqua* (5th century) limits the distribution of the Eucharist by a deacon without a priest (Canon 58) (Basdevant & Gaudemet 1989:353). The same work in Canon 92 implies that one bishop consecrates the deacon who is not received into the *sacerdotium* but into the ministry [*diaconus cum ordinatur, solus episcopus, qui eum benedicit, manum super caput illius ponat, quia non ad sacerdotium sed ad ministerium consecrator*] (Basdevant & Gaudemet 1989:353).

If, in line with some of this logic, the deacon is merely a minister not belonging to the sacred order, there would be no difference with the deaconess. There is a tension if we state that a deacon is both a minister and a representative of the sacral order in relation to the deaconess. If the deaconess is merely a minister (ordained outside of the altar area), this would mean a rupture between the sacral and ministerial, which in the Orthodox mindset is not possible at least on the ontological level, because, for example, the Mother of God is a minister and intercessor and at the same time her role is 'more' than sacral. In any event, the people who are priests of God are all belonging to both categories. The topography of ordination does not disrupt a connection between the ministerial and the sacral, because the entire church symbolizes both.

As we have seen in the ordination rites of the deacons or deaconesses, the invocation of the Holy Spirit also runs parallel with the request that the candidates are pure, holy and moral. These attributes are not automatic, and no human person is sinless. Rather, the Holy Spirit, just as the other Persons of the Trinity, represents here also the community which helps any person in his or her journey to holiness.

The holiness of the clerical candidate or the holiness of any individual is always at least partly the work of the community also, because any person or cleric lives in some kind of community with which he or she interacts.

In the Oriental Orthodox tradition as well as in other Eastern Orthodox areas, the tradition often emphasises the moral purity of the clerical order in broader categories (this can include widows, virgins and so on). This was not something necessarily related to a later ritualistic or hierarchical development because this emphasis appears already in the early Church.

Furthermore, this does not necessarily mean an opposite emphasis in contrast to a broader theology of communion, but simply underscores this communal theology from a different perspective. Those who are pure and flawless in the purely liturgical setting necessarily reflect the purity and sacredness of the community at large. For example, Volker, commenting on the so-called *Regula ad Diaconos* of John of Tella (written around 520), mentions that deacons were required to keep the altar in purity and that their role was limited to these acts (Volker 2006:62). But we may add that this purity of the altar was related to the purity of the community.

Both in the Old Testament and in the later Christian tradition, purity could have been associated with a struggle against sin. Cyril of Jerusalem nicely connects the idea of 'sacral' purity with the Christian emphasis on sinlessness in his fifth Mystagogical Catechesis. The clergy form the community cooperating in an overall effort to sanctify and purify. He writes:

[Y]ou saw the deacon who gives to the priest [*this could be translated the bishop*] [*water*] to wash, and to the presbyters who surround the altar of God. By no means did he give it because of bodily defilement; it is not that. For we did not enter the Church at first with defilement of the body. But the washing is a symbol that we ought to be clean from all sins and transgressions of the law. For since the hands are a symbol of action, by washing them, it is evident, we hint at the purity and blamelessness of [*our*] actions. (Huovinen 2020)

We can also remark in this context that if the priesthood takes on a 'life of its own', the various clerical orders can simply merge, while at the same time the community loses its focal community building blocks (See here Heb 13:17). The predominance of the bishop in contemporary Orthodox practice is one such example.

Deaconess from Zimbabwe and Ashdod yam

That an overt dualistic separation between the ministerial and the sacral or mystical can cause theological challenges has been observed in the aftermath of the occasion when a lady from Zimbabwe was 'ordained' as a deaconess in the confines of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria (Frost 2024:17). Often the sight of this newly ordained deaconess provoked discussions not because of her ministerial 'function'

but because of her apparent vestments and the setting of the ordination which seemed to touch on the overall notions of sacrality of the priesthood.

A similar issue has been brought to light during the recent excavations in Israel where it appears that sacred space could have been also strongly defined by 'ministerial service'. In 2017, excavations conducted under the supervision of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin from the Tel Aviv University, in which the author of this article participated, revealed remnants of a basilica-style church in the northern part of the site of the coastal city of Ashdod Yam in Israel (Byzantine Azotus Paralias), 350 m to the east inland from the Islamic fortress (labelled area L) (Di Segni, Bouzaglou & Fantalkin 2022:402). The church has been dated to the late 4th or the beginning of the 5th century. The terminus ante quem has been set as the year 416 (inscription number two – southern aisle).

What makes this find unique is the number of tombs found inside the church belonging to deaconesses and deacons. The church was not only covered with graves of these deacons, but there was a tomb of possibly a husband and wife found in the church, as well as a grave of a secular administrative officer, perhaps also tombs of bishops. In the altar area, there was a tomb of what may have been a martyr saint. There was also a mass grave including children and many individuals (perhaps because of the bubonic plague or war). There was also a reliquary possibly belonging to a woman since it was found in the northern aisle. In this context, Taft argues, basing himself on sources, that the deaconesses perhaps occupied the northern aisle from the 6th century (Taft 1998:70).

As suggested by this church, the sacred topography corresponds with its communal function. The laity and the clergy who were buried here, the women and men, but also children demonstrate that the church's sacred structure corresponded with the community and its life. The evidence of this communal 'chaos' exemplified by the various tombs runs parallel with other prescriptions on where women or men or the clergy should stand in the church.

The church could have been a monastic church. Even monasteries in this period served the wider community, and monastic churches could have been frequented by believers. As Goldfus observes, the mass graves and monastic churches can be evidence of wider notions of community and of wider conception of family ties, either symbolic or real. That is, a family based on monastic brotherhood or ecclesiastic kinship (Goldfus 2006:412). The example of Ashdod reminds us of the primary function of the Church, which was being the centre of the community in many ways, and obviously, this corresponded to its 'sacral' identity.

Priesthood and communion

In the Orthodox tradition, being part of the clergy does not imply a unique and eternally distinguished sacral role on its own but depends on service. In terms of Eucharistic theology, the priest in the Orthodox tradition is not the one who is sacrificing because it is Christ who did this sacrifice once and

for all. The priest's role in 'blessing' relates to this Christological aspect as well as to the Judaic tradition. Blessing is a way of renewing reality to its original purity and sanctity, and this entails sacrifice for and in the community.

Furthermore, most importantly, the sacral or mystical element of the priesthood is not linked with an inherent magical power or *potestas* but is linked with the 'unpredictability' (hence the freedom of the Holy Spirit) of the community and its life and needs. Love is indefinable, that is sacred. This is just like someone jumping into a lake to save a drowning person cannot rationally explain why he or she decided to act in this way, apart from a feeling of love or intention to help.

Thus, for John Chrysostom, priesthood is dependent on its function in the community and from here stems its authority and ultimate worthiness. Thus, Chrysostom observes about himself:

For I fear lest if I took the flock in hand when it was in good condition and well nourished, and then wasted it through my unskillfulness, I should provoke against myself the God who so love the flock as to give Himself up for their salvation and ransom. (Chrysostom 1889:4)

Chrysostom's qualification comes about after an exclamation of love: 'Yea, I love Him, and shall never cease loving Him; but I fear lest I should provoke Him whom I love' (Chrysostom 1889:4).

Other early church authorities built on the intimate link between service, ministry and community. The service to the community changes conventional roles and 'sanctifies them'. Clement of Alexandria, in his *Stromata*, argues that Paul did not take his consort with him because it would be an inconvenience to his ministry (Clement of Alexandria 1885, book III).

But the latter (here apostles are meant), in accordance with their particular ministry, devoted themselves to preaching without any distraction, and took their wives with them not as women with whom they had marriage relations, but as sisters, that they might be their fellow-ministers in dealing with housewives. (p. 63)

Here, even the prescriptions against deaconesses can be more related to communal pastoral sensitivities than to an attachment to a particular canonical tradition. An often quoted letter of Epiphanius of Salamis (who lived around 315–403) to John, bishop of Jerusalem (letter 51) and his exclamation that he does not ordain deaconesses can be viewed in the context of his own communal experience and pastoral requirements (or even issues of heresy). Here, the various ordinations of the priests mentioned in his account disrupt the 'communion'. In his treatise against the Collyridians, he exclaimed: 'women had never been allowed to offer sacrifice, as the Collyridians presumed to do, but were only allowed to minister' (Panarion 79, 4:637). Interestingly enough, it appears that the Collyridians derived their heresy apparently through a theology of the Mother of God, perhaps understood in the role of a ministerial and sacral priestess.

Deacon, priest and the community

While there were efforts in the Orthodox Church to reach a more clear-cut standardisation of the priesthood (Bulgakov 1900:682–685), this could not have escaped the traditional Orthodox theology which underlines the clerical order in terms of communion. As we have implied, the priest does not sacrifice Christ, who sacrificed Himself. The Eucharistic service is a service of all, the priest presiding over it.

Defining priesthood on its own in a reductionist manner can fall into the temptation to remove the priesthood from the category of service and communion, of which the Eucharist is the embodiment and expression. This tension can be seen in the argumentation of the Russian Orthodox Council in 1917–1918 regarding deaconesses, which started with the premise of the Laodicea Council Canon 11 (forbidding admission of the *presbytides*) and Canon 44 (women may not go to the altar).

At the same time, the Council stressed communion [*Sobornost*], which meant that the Council struggled with finding the strict demarcation line between ministry and the sacerdotal. In the end, not admitting women *into the clergy*. However, at the same time, it allowed for a greater role for women in the general ministry.

During the deliberations, a certain Professor I. M. Gromoglasov argued that the 69th canon of the sixth Ecumenical Synod (3rd Synod of Constantinople, 681) forbade the entrance of the laity into the altar generally and not women exclusively. Therefore, this does not preclude the entrance to the altar of women in our period, as non-ordained men can nowadays approach the altar. He also mentioned the ordination of deaconesses referring to the canonist Mathew Blastares and to the fact that after communion, deaconesses placed the chalice on the altar (Moscow Council proceedings 2008:704). The issues raised the need to define the difference between the deacon, deaconess, and the priest or bishop.

Early works, such as the *Apostolic constitutions* (book II, XXX), do not view the various clerical positions independently but stress their mutual interdependence, which means the necessity of their cooperation. The hierarchical tone of some of these works is completely obliterated by a message of complete interdependence of all people in the clerical ranks and the laity. What is very important here is to stress how this theology of interdependence immediately leads to the argument of sacrality. If the bishop behaves like 'he should', he is like a God, and so with the deacon, who is like a prophet (Apostolic Constitutions 1886).

For as Christ does nothing without his Father, so neither does the deacon do anything without his bishop; and as the Son without His Father is nothing, so the deacon nothing without his bishop; and as the Son is subject to His Father, so is every deacon subject to his bishop; and as the Son is the messenger and prophet of the Father, so is the deacon the messenger and prophet of his bishop. (p. XXX)

The argumentation is similar in the Syriac version of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* with the stress that deaconesses should be honoured like the Holy Spirit (Vööbus 1979:99). Or here we can mention Ignatius of Antioch who had written to the Magnesians:

Have a care to accomplish all things with a divine concord, under the leadership of the bishop, who stands in the place of God, for you [εις τόπον Θεοῦ]; under the priests who stand in the place of the college of the apostles [εις τόπον συνεδρίου τῶν ἀποστόλων] and under the deacons who are so dear to me and to whom has been confided the service of Jesus Christ [πεπιστευμένων διακονίαν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ] (Ignatius of Antioch-Ignac d Antioch, Aux Magnésiens, 6, ed. P. T. Camelot, Sources Chrétiennes, 10, pp. 98–99, cited from Connolly, 2010:37).

In other words, the correct order of the communion is reflected in its sacral character, which can be defined by the use of Old Testament examples or New Testament examples.

Further here, returning to the *Apostolic constitutions*, we read (book VIII, Section 1): 'Moreover, let not a bishop be exalted against his deacons and presbyters, nor the presbyters against the people: for the subsistence of the congregation depends on each other' (Apostolic constitutions 1886).

Diakonia-service

Generally, the term 'deacon' has a long history, generally meaning work 'through the community' (from the Greek *dia* and *koinonia*). In the period of Christ, the term deacon could have meant a very general form of activity inside the community. This is fully implied in the word *diakonevo* [διακονέω]. The term (Διακονία) appears in the Septuagint (I Macc 11:58), linked with service of vessels. In Plutarch's Philopoemen, a Megarian hostess prepared supper in great confusion, upon learning that the general of the Achaeans was coming to her (Plutarch 2:1). In Josephus, there is another reference about preparing a meal (Jos. Ant, 2, 65; 163).

It seems that even the references in the New Testament, which are well known, dwell primarily on the service or ministry to the community or Christ (Mt 27:55; Lk 8:3, 10:40; Jn 12:2). Importantly, perhaps a more concrete ministry linked with a particular setting relates to Phoebe (Rm 16:1). Origen, commenting on this passage, observes (Origenes 2002):

And this passage teaches with apostolic authority that women are likewise appointed to the ministry of the Church, ... As we have said, women are to be considered ministers in the Church, and the kind who have assisted many and who through good services have merited attaining unto apostolic praise ought to be received in the ministry. (p. 291)

In any event, it is almost certain that Christian deaconesses and other women with functions in the church must have continued in the tradition of existing powerful women in the Judaic tradition (see status of women in relation to the Altar in the Mishnah tractate Kiddushin) (Mishnah Kiddushin I n.d.). This is confirmed by the inscriptions. Here we may mention the inscription mentioning: 'Sophia,

of Gortyna, a presbytera and archisynagogissa of Kisamos [lies] within. May the memory of the just woman be for ever. Amen' [Σοφία Γορτυνί α πρεσβυτέρα κέ αρχισυναγωγισσα Κισάμου ένθα. Μνήμη δικέας ις έώνα. Άμήν]. Obviously from a synagogue in Crete, Gortyna (Bandy 1963:228, 1.PL.64).

The theology of the deaconess

An unbalanced theology of the laity and the clergy can lead to an overemphasis on one of these groups. Just like in the Orthodox setting, so in the Latin tradition, the temptation to overemphasise the sacerdotal, here represented by especially the Bishop of Rome, appeared early on and for various reasons. This could have also led to a paradoxical idea that the liturgy is limited in scope and meaning in relation to the laity. The consequence could also have been that the deaconess was relegated to a position outside of this limited view of liturgy. This way of thinking can lead to some sweeping conclusions. For example, Bider concludes: '... it seems perfectly justified to emphasise that the diaconate of women, especially in the West as opposed to the East, had hardly any liturgical implications' (Bider 2017:84).

The emphasis on Communion in Orthodox theology has perhaps helped to preserve a broader understanding of who is a member of the wider 'clergy' (and therefore also of the liturgical setting), which could have included widows, nuns, abbesses, virgins, singers and others. Limiting or associating deaconesses with these categories, as has been often done in contemporary reflection, is not necessarily useful, just as overemphasising one of these categories in relation to others. The archaeological evidence, as well as literary evidence, suggest that deaconesses stemmed from all walks of life, including wealthy and educated women. We can mention Olympias, a friend of John Chrysostom who described her as a deaconess with a 'philosophical soul' and who is contrasted with the low moral standards of male priests (John Chrysostom Letter to Olympias 1889). Olympias and the activities of other deaconesses of Chrysostom's period fit into the theology of Chrysostom himself who saw an intrinsic link between the altar and communal work (see here also Mt 5:23). Chrysostom (1889) wrote elsewhere:

You venerate the altar of the church when the body of Christ descends there. But you neglect the other who is the body of Christ, and remain indifferent to him when he dies of hunger. (p. 1956)

The archaeological record mentions wealthy deaconesses sponsoring works of art and other things reminding us of the ancient godfearing women of the Mediterranean synagogues. Thus, wealthy female deaconesses, as sponsors, appear as far as Nubia as testified from an inscription dated perhaps to the 13th or 14th centuries (Ochała 2023:351). Even if the Early Christian sources seem to suggest the assistance at baptism as the primary role for the deaconess (already mentioned by the *Didascalia Apostolorum* 16, 78), this does not entail that they were limited to this role.

As we have implied, the sacral or mystical aspect of the priesthood or the deaconess simply means that we cannot reduce our understanding of the communion and its members to preconceived static categories, but we must be open to the freedom offered in love by the Holy Spirit. Just as with Christ, whose life was more than a life of ethical teaching or simple social work.

In other contexts, there can be an overemphasis only on the ministerial aspect. Thus, in the Methodist tradition, we observe a comment (Hartley 2014):

First, in the United Methodist Church today there may be a danger of reducing ministry (diakonia!) to an ethical commitment to service which downplays the rich spiritual depth the gathered church community provides in its corporate celebrations of Word and Sacrament where Jesus ministry is portrayed and mysteriously made present. Jesus ministry involves far more than moral earnestness. (p. 6)

What Christ did can also be narrowed or expanded, as it is in the Apostolic letter of John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: 'Pope Paul VI ... reminded the Anglicans of the position of the Catholic Church:

"She holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church". (John Paul II 1994)

Further importantly a sentence appears: 'As Paul VI later explained: "The real reason is that, in giving the Church her fundamental constitution, her theological anthropology – thereafter always followed by the Churches Tradition – Christ established things in this way"'. Here, the sacrality of Christ defines what is the ministerial aspect.

In any event, the sources imply that the ministry of deaconesses continued much longer in the East than in the West. Some, as Karas suggests, believe that in the East they continued till the early 12th century (Karras 2004:277).

Deaconess as a community builder

The role of the deaconess can be reassessed in broader communal categories. We cannot, for example, argue that if she primarily assisted at baptism, assisted the needs of the poor or, as we have implied, carried the Eucharist to the sick women (Testamentum Domini 1889:2:20), that this limits her activities or, at the other extreme, divides activities as less important or more important.

The distribution of the Eucharist, which today is limited to the male priest or deacon, also symbolises growth and unity of the communion in Christ. But basically, any role in the community is part of this process, because basic

activities such as singing and teaching are essential parts of this community building in Christ. All activities in the Church derive their source from the Eucharist and are therefore obviously sacred, not only ministerial. This paradoxically builds on ancient Greek civilisation, where philanthropy was a theocentric concept, meaning that love for the human person transforms reality into a different mode.

As has been shown by the sources, the deaconesses were often associated with monasteries, also in the capacity of abbots, which were, however, prime centres of Christian communion (Elm 1994:180). The 12th-century Byzantine canonist Balsamon (see here his works in *Patrologiae Migne* vol. 137–138) testifies to the fact that the women deaconesses were relegated either to an assistant role to other women or were associated with monasticism.

Here, for later periods, we can mention the work of the Grand Duchess Elizabeth who renounced her aristocratic lifestyle to form the Martha and Mary convent in 1909. She had a vision of women or men from various contexts of society helping the needy. Her work and other similar activities partly influenced the idea of the renewal of deaconess in Russia (Elizabeth 1991:49). In other words, the service itself formulated the possible role of a deaconess.

The Orthodox Church in its theology has traditionally had a wider notion of who constitutes the community or the ecclesial community, a fact that was realised by many modern theologians who understood that, especially in the West, the Orthodox notion of liturgy and life was being reduced to a Sunday service or to a limited vision of the liturgy. The existence of married priests resulted in a very important role not only for the priest but also for his wife.

This tradition existed also in the Latin church, and Macy indicates importantly that (Macy 2008):

[A] ccording to a Roman Ordinal from ca. 900, *presbyterae* and deaconesses received their commissioning at the same time and as part of the same ceremony as the priests and deacons who were their spouses. (p. 494)

The role of the wife of the priest or here we may state her diaconal role (as work for the community) cannot be underestimated in the Orthodox Church. The wife of the priest was so important, especially in later history, that, for example, at a certain Uniate council of 1764, it was said that the wife of the priest fully sustains and supports her priest husband and without her he would not be able to do anything (Sokolov 2020:26).

Work for the community, however, entailed sacrifice and self-control, which distinguished this service from other ordinary forms of employment. This sacrifice is the sacred aspect of ministry since it imitates Christ. The Council of Trullo formulates how deaconesses should behave to fulfil their function just as other sources do (For example, canon 48, Council of Trullo Canon 48, 1900).

The community and its unity and growth

From an Orthodox perspective, it is also important to protect the unity of the ecclesial communion. Perhaps a concern for this unity and growth of the community in Christ had resulted in many developments also in relation to the role of the deaconess. The unity of the true community of Christ can be symbolised by the 'altar area'. Thus, it had to be pure as is the purity of Christ and his unity with the human beings. In any event, for example, these notions are reflected in the canonical tradition in relation to menstruation (Viscuso 2005:322), a fact also related to the age restrictions on women deaconesses.

The dynamic of safeguarding the unity of the Church or the Communion, also in its post-Constantine institutional development, meant protecting it more against heresy or something which endangered its unity. There is a paradox here. The more the Church became expansive and greater, the smaller it at the same time became, since it constantly had to define and limit the definition of who is a member of the 'Orthodox Church'. This contrasts with the period of persecution when the Church was restricted in its activities but had a more universal missionary appeal including potentially all in its community.

The prescriptions of the Councils, such as of Laodicea, emphasise the necessity to strictly define what the community is and who serves it and who are the heretics who endanger it. Here Canon V of this Council stipulates that ordinations should not take place in front of hearers. The participation of the community in the ordination is delineated. This continues in Canon XIII, where the priesthood should not be elected by the 'multitude'. Canon XII links the ordination of bishops to a flawless life. Canon XV stipulates that only professional singers are to sing. Canon XX continues with the hierarchical understanding of the church forbidding deacons to sit in the presence of presbyters unless told to do so. Canon XXI forbids subdeacons from being in the Diaconicum or from touching the Lord's vessels. Canon XXIV forbids the clergy to enter taverns. Canon XXV forbids a subdeacon from giving the bread and blessing the cup. Canon XLIV forbids women from going to the altar. Here specifically Canon XI of the Council of Laodicea (Council of Laodicea 1900).

The sources suggest that the Church struggled to find a balance between the laity and clergy, which could have paradoxically resulted in a more systematic definition of the clergy, but at the same time, its separation from its basis, that is, the community. For example, the XIV letter of Pope Leo the Great to Anastasius, bishop of Thessaloniki, stipulates that people should choose their bishop, and if there is disagreement, the final decision should rest with the bishops (Leo the Great 1895:VI.42 and Thiel 1868:367).

Further, for example, the Quinisext or Trullo Council (692) continues by forbidding the entrance of laymen to the sanctuary (canon 69), except for 'imperial authority'. Canon 70 forbids women to speak during the Divine Liturgy or Canon 4, for example, forbids intercourse with a woman dedicated to God.

As shown by the legislation of Justinian the Great (483–565), which coincided with the period of the above-mentioned church found in Ashdod Yam, the state concept could have built its idea on the sacral on previous pagan traditions. In his famous Novel six the Emperor Justinian specifies: 'For if, by the ancient laws, capital punishment was inflicted upon virgins who permitted themselves to be corrupted, how much more reason is there for Us to impose the same penalty upon those who are dedicated to God; and why should We not wish that modesty, which is the greatest ornament of the sex, should be preserved, and be diligently practiced by deaconesses, in accordance with what is becoming to Nature and due to the priesthood?' (Corpus iuris civilis, ed. Novel six Scott 1932). Fascinatingly enough, Justinian does not see deaconesses in line with Christian communal theology but within the confines of Roman sacral morality. But at the same time, he wants to create an ideal Christian community. Theodosius I banned the Vestal Virgins in 394, and these were required to be virgins.

The Latin Councils or the Gallic Councils of the epoch of Justinian tend to delineate a sharp distinction of the clerical status, perhaps even more so than in Byzantium. The tone against deaconesses is more sharply negative. A letter written by Saint Pope Gelasius († 496) in 494, addressed, '*ad universos episcopos per Lucianam, Brutios et Siciliam constitutos*', speaks of female ministry at the altar as a negative situation [*ut feminae sacris altaribus ministrare firmentur*] (Pope Gelasius, *Dilectissimis fratribus universis episcopis per Lucianam et Brutios et Siciliam constitutis*, Patrologiae Latina, 59, 1862, c 26. See also Maassen 1893).

If we look closely at the rulings of the Gallic Synods of the 5th and 6th centuries, these are overtly concerned with morality and church discipline, the deaconess being just one of the many concerns about morality and marital purity. A close reading of this Latin legislation reveals how the clerical ranks are compared to the Old Testament priests, a symbolism appearing in the Orthodox tradition also, but not in such a directive scholastic manner.

That in fact the deaconess was not of primary concern as such in this legislation is shown by the development that just like the deaconess, the male deacon was soon to be obliterated from the sacral order *ordo sacerdotalis* and delegated to the order of ministry *ordo ministrantium* in the tradition of scholasticism and Thomas Aquinas (Bider 2017:87). As we have implied above Canon 92 of the Statuta Ecclesia Antiqua implies that the deacon is not received into the sacerdotum but the ministry (Basdevant & Gaudemet 1989:353).

The tension between the ministerial and sacerdotal was also indirectly related to the issue of purity and chastity. How this happened is a complex issue. In any case, marital purity issues of menstruation appear as a concern in Byzantine and Latin canonical traditions, the former represented by Theodore Balsamon, or Mathew Blasteres. This is rather strange in terms of these two Byzantine canonists since they

mention issues of menstruation and purity in a much later period of the Church's history as if indicating a shift uniting issues of purity, clerical order and delineation.

The rather negative stance towards deaconesses can be discerned in several Western Synods. The Synod of Epao or Epaoe (517) forbids the 'consecration' [*consecrationem*] of deaconesses (Maassen 1893:15). We can mention other Gallic synods with a negative stance toward deaconesses. Canon 26 of the First Synod of Orange (Arausicanum 441/Concilium) forbids the ordination of deaconesses [*De Diaconis non ordinandis*], (Sirmondi 1629:460). The Council of Orleans (533/Concilium Aurelianense II) in Canon 17 speaks of women who received the benediction of deaconhood contrary to the canons [*Feminae quae benedictionem diaconatus hactentes contra interdicta canonum acceperunt*]. Even more interesting is Canon 18, from the Synod of Orleans, stating that women should not be given the benediction of deaconhood because of the weakness of sex [*Placuit etiam, ut nulli, postmodum feminae diaconalis benedictio pro conditionis huius fragilitate credatur*] (Maassen 1893:63).

However, the legislation regarding deaconesses must be seen in the overall tendency of separation and purity which marks the development of the Latin tradition. For example, the Council in Nantes 660 stresses the need to separate; the priests are forbidden to live in the same house with women, and women cannot wait on priests and go near the altar. They cannot be seated within the chancel rails (Landon 1909:388).

The Latin tradition as a result of various reasons gradually dissected the various functions of priesthood and the concept of a hierarchical church prevailed in the middle ages, whereas the Orthodox Church always emphasised the communal nature of the church; but because of the church's captivity under political or other rule, and other reasons, the communal emphasis subsided in favour of the solidification of clerical categories, which reached its heyday in the ecclesiological developments in Tsarist Russia of the 19th century.

However, having said this, the Orthodox Church maintained this emphasis on communion by the fact that all priests are dependent on the community for their ordination and for their work. The priest never possessed anything apart from his association with the service inside a communion, even if this has been distorted by a later emphasis on the powers of the bishop (Afanasiev 2007:150).

For the Latin tradition, Yves Congar observes (Congar 1972):

Ordination encompassed at the same time election as its starting point and consecration as its term. But instead of signifying, as happened from the beginning of the twelfth century, the ceremony in which and individual received a power henceforth possessed in such a way, that it could never be lost, the words *ordinare, ordinari, ordinatio*, signified the fact of being designated and consecrated to take up a certain place, or better a certain function, *ordo*, in the community and its service. (p. 180)

Mother of God as a 'woman minister and deified human being'

If there is a prime example of an ultimate harmony between the sacral and ministerial, it must be the Mother of God. The Orthodox tradition gives her a pre-eminent place in the scheme of salvation. Her 'rational' and 'emotional' assent to the offer of salvation makes her a person where form and substance coincide in perfection. She gave birth to Christ, but also ascended to heaven (first mentioned in the Euthymiac history), and was deified. While at the same time, she was a minister or a pastor, if these functions are seen in the context of caring and love or compassion. In her person, this was also mingled with the role of a mother of Christ, with the basic challenges of being a mother. She is called the ultimate Temple of God (or expression of communion), because she bore Jesus Christ. Further, after her ascension, she continues to intercede between heaven and earth.

Here, there is a diaconal role clearly demonstrated; the Mother of God works for and through communion. But there are many images of similar mediatory roles of women in the tradition. Even a pagan woman, the daughter of the Pharaoh (Ex 2), is seen in the tradition as a cause of salvation because she saved Moses (the Jewish Midrash identifies her as Bithiah) 'the cause of salvation'. We can also mention Zipporah, the Midianite woman whom was also the cause of salvation of the Jewish people (Ex 4:26). Fascinatingly enough, the importance of a principle called 'Mother Goddess' resonates in the pagan reflections of Julian the Apostate, who wanted to loosen the attachment to Christianity.

The Mother of God in the form of the icon 'Orans' is depicted above the Orthodox altars. This position of the Mother of God entails a position of acceptance; she accepts all, and all become one in this embrace. This relativises the otherwise exclusive area of the altar.

Here, the 'redemptive' association of women in the tradition brings another aspect into the discussion. It appears that even apparently minute or insignificant acts can have a crucial or facilitating role for the realisation of a redemption through Christ. The function of prophecy, which was well known in the early Church, but now completely forgotten, was an important part of the work of the Christian mission. Here, prophecy was not understood in a limited sense of knowing the future, but knowing what is and is not useful for the building of communion in Christ. Women were associated with prophecy (Ac 21:7 – Philip's prophetic daughters). Prophecy is associated with the diaconate and in the Apostolic Constitutions, the Mother of God is associated with prophecy as other historical women also (Apostolic Constitutions 8:1).

The ministerial and, at the same time, sacral roles of women appear in many accounts of holy women in the Orthodox tradition, which include Mary of Egypt. A certain Zosimos, who sees Mary of Egypt, discerns the Holy Spirit working through her. She brings about salvation to herself and others

through her example. Even intellectuals such as the Byzantine philosopher Michael Psellos just like other fathers before him, stress the central role of their mothers in assisting them in taking the correct path. In a story from *Spiritual Meadow*, which describes the life of a religious woman, who was from the Holy City 'we hear of a nun saving a man from temptation and a community through her sacrifice' (Moschus 1992; Wortley 1992:179).

In all these examples from the Orthodox tradition, there is a direct route from the ministerial to the sacral, which relates to the Holy Spirit and the work of redemption. Here, the sacral must be clearly discerned or identified in the acts of ministry.

Personalism

The popularity of personalist theology in the Orthodox Church related to the earlier historical strides in the theology of Communion or *Sobornost* can function as a facilitating bridge between the seemingly growing divide between the sacral or mystical and ministerial. In Roman Catholic theology, there is today the emphasis on the theology of 'synodality' or 'conciliarity'.

In Orthodox personalism, there is the stress on the 'relative' role or function of any clerical member or member of the laity depending on his or her relationship with the 'communion'. In other words, one cannot be an individual (cleric) or rather *person* outside of a communion (Lubardić 2019:144). Contemporary Orthodox personalism expands on the idea that the unique position of the clergy, if any, is mainly dependent on its relationship with the community and the building up of the 'person'. This entails a dynamism, which can contribute to the alleviation of the stalemate of an overtly static sacral understanding of priestly functions and the priesthood's relationship with the laity.

Personalism implies the necessity of 'relation' that is of communion, but this also at the same time means a renewed re-evaluation of each individual person and his or her role in the community. If the person in 'relation' is a primary category, we must also attribute the category of service or ministry to each person because this is a primary feature of any relationship in love.

In this context, some scholars have suggested that deaconesses or women priests could be viewed in the category of the pastoral rather than the theological (Ladouceur 2020:182). But the problem here is that the sacral in the Orthodox mind cannot be separated from the communal or ministerial. Emphasising the various functionalities in the communion, or categories, such as women, men, deacons, singers and so on, without a broader sacral vision may enhance their visibility in ecclesiological reflection but runs the serious risk of classification and therefore the opposite result – a dissection of the communion, where any person is simply out there to express himself or herself in his or her individualism. While the person can serve as a category for reflection, it cannot 'possess' the right to personhood through its inherent powers or functions, which is however indirectly implied by the study of Behr-Siger and Kallistos Ware (2000).

A balance needs to be reached in new identifications, but at the same time maintaining unity of the communion or in other words, its sacrality.

Conclusion

The recent archaeological discoveries in Ashdod, the ordination of a female deaconess in Africa, and other similar events in the Orthodox tradition coincide with a general trend in the Orthodox tradition, which draws on a renewed reflection of what it means to be part of a Christian community or communion. Traditionally, Orthodox theology has indirectly or directly emphasised the communion, which is manifested in its ordination rites and other liturgical traditions. This has been often expressed by terms such as *Sobornost*, *Koinonia*, but even theological trends such as 'Personalism'. Work in the communion has a ministerial dimension and one of service to which all are called regardless of their clerical rank. This work in and for the communion is in essence the work of the Holy Spirit and is unpredictable, undefinable, free and often crossing predetermined borders and definitions. We cannot always determine what is important or not for the building up of Christ's community and how it is done, which touches on the sacral dimension of ministry.

The experience of contemporary Orthodox parishes stresses the need for a broadening of ministerial categories understood in terms of 'service' to the community. For example, it is no longer feasible that the male deacon is limited to a purely ritualistic role but must recover his traditional broader diaconal role (caring for the poor, unifying the community etc.). In terms of the deaconess, at least it is possible to associate them with their traditional associations with monasteries, widowhood, social work and many other forms prevalent in the earlier history of the Church.

The Orthodox tradition always linked ministry or service with the sacral. The priestly categories reflect the needs of the community in Christ and derive their form and function from these needs. The sacral and mystical is the result of the character of the Communion in Christ itself and its salvific character implying strict order, but always including dynamism, movement, interaction and freedom of love, which means that categories in the communion itself must be perpetually judged and reassessed according to the goals and character of the mystical union of Christ offered to the human being. Here we must remind ourselves as shown by the example of the African mission, but especially by the archaeological finds mentioned in Ashdod, that the entire church building together with its believers is sacred because all are engaged in the ministry for this communion. Just as the ontological border between the human and divine is breached in a free and undeterminable act of love of Christ.

In terms of the deaconess, there must be a renewed reflection on exactly how this dynamism between the ministerial and

the liturgical is carried out; otherwise, the discussion will tend to fall into an artificial dualism of rituals and life.

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