

# ***MEN AND WOMEN “IN THE SERVICE OF CHRIST”***

## ***Reflections on the Diaconate in the Orthodox Church***

*Fr. John Chryssavgis*

**Abstract:** The principal focus of this presentation is not merely the historical and theological, or even the liturgical and canonical dimensions of women and the diaconate or women and ordination, but rather the pastoral and practical concept of *authority and ministry* in the church. There can be no clear understanding of the priesthood or even of the episcopate unless we first properly appreciate the diaconate. Out of his experience as a deacon of over thirty years, the author claims that the theology of the priesthood should not begin from the top down, but rather from the notion of humble service and *diakonia*, without which none of the priestly ministries make any sense at all. And he concludes that a creative revival of the diaconate could become the source of resurrection for the ordained ministry in general, thereby playing a crucial role in the mission of the church. In this respect, the restoration of the diaconate may well prove both timely and vital.

Let me open by saying how delighted I am to be a part of this conference and to be invited by Prof. Vassiliadis to address this gathering. I should preface my words by noting that my principal interest in this subject is not merely the historical or theological dimensions of women and the diaconate or women and ordination, but rather the pastoral and practical concept of authority and ministry in the church. It is my conviction that there can be no clear understanding of the priesthood or even of the episcopate unless we first properly appreciate the diaconate. Having served as a deacon of over thirty years, I believe that our theology of the priesthood should not begin from the top down, but rather from the notion of humble service and *diakonia*, without which none of the priestly ministries make any sense whatsoever.

### **Introduction: Re-Learning to Serve**

I learned from a young age, at the feet of my presbyter-father, that our noblest task is to *bear the cross* of Christ, to imitate Christ, who came to serve and not to be served (Mark 10.45). This means that the noblest thing is to be a Christian – not a bishop, a priest, or a deacon. It also means that this noblest vocation of all is open equally and unequivocally to both men and women.

Over time, of course, the Church established the three ordained orders. Among these, the diaconate [derived from the word *diakonia* (service), which in itself implies an absence of institutional or hierarchal structure] is the first order of priestly ministry. Moreover, if no one can become a priest or a bishop without first being ordained to deacon, this underscores the fact that the diaconate can be neither overlooked nor undermined; regrettably, however, the diaconate has in fact been disregarded and reduced to the detriment of the priesthood in general. It is time, then, for a revitalization of the diaconate, both for the purpose of a reorientation of the ordained ministries (a matter of profound theological and spiritual significance) as well as for practical reasons (including the understanding of the salient role of women for a proper appreciation of the diaconate). Reclaimed in its historical and sacramental dimensions, a revived diaconate could provide a crucial and timely response to contemporary needs.

## A Reorientation of the Ordained Ministries

In a meeting of Orthodox bishops several years ago in Chicago, one hierarch touched on the heart of the problem, when he asked: “Is someone *called to the diaconate*? Do we not say people are *called to the priesthood*?” Once again, the precise response to this question is that we are called primarily to bear the cross of Christ; we are called first to the royal priesthood, to the priesthood of all believers. Unfortunately, such questions also underscore the confusion surrounding the sacrament of ordination. For one is not called to the diaconate any more than one is called to the episcopate; in fact, mystically – or, more correctly, hierarchically – one is not even called to the priesthood at all – at least, the priesthood as a distinct order; rather, one is called to *the priestly ministry of the Church, which has three distinct orders*. After all, each of the specific terms applied to ordained ministers – *episcopos* (bishop), *iereus* or *presbyteros* (priest), and *diakonos* (deacon) – are in fact properly and only reserved for Christ.

In recent centuries, the diaconate has enjoyed a symbolical or transitional role in our Church. Parish clergy are ordained to the priesthood after serving only briefly as deacons. It is as if they are *expected* to “move on!” or “move up!” The diaconate itself has been reduced to little more than a preparation or stepping-stone for the priesthood or episcopate. The latter two stages are often considered more significant for the ordained ministry, whereas the diaconate resembles a kind of sub-priesthood, rarely perceived as a lifelong or permanent office. This is clearly part of the problem surrounding the suspicion or trepidation of bishop – and, to a lesser degree, also congregations – with regard to the ordination of women deacons, who are seen as seeking promotion to higher clerical orders.

In many Orthodox churches, the diaconate has been still further reduced, relegated in some to a purely aesthetic or in most to an exclusively liturgical office. While not insignificant, these functions only scarcely express the full potential of the diaconate. Indeed, from an historical perspective, the purely *liturgical obligations* were traditionally delegated to sub-deacons, who were neither ordained nor consecrated but simply “named” or “appointed.” Deacons, however, were always responsible for more than liturgical order; deacons functioned as an essential aspect of the Christian community and its diverse manifestations and expressions.

So my first argument is that there is something seriously missing from the ordained ministry if deacons are undervalued or omitted in the overall picture. A fuller vision of the ordained ministry should recognize the role of *the bishop* as the bond of unity and spokesman for doctrine; likewise, it should respect the role of *the presbyter* in celebrating the presence of Christ in the local community. Yet it should also realize the role of *the deacon* as servant in *completing and complementing this circle of unity and community* in the local Church. And this role may be fulfilled by men and women alike.

The authentic image of the Church that we should be seeking – in our minds and hearts as in our ministry – is that of *a dinner table*, and not that of a corporate ladder. The Church is not a pyramid, where all attention and authority are turned toward and look to the summit. We are to imagine the Church as comprising a sacrament, where the principal and essential focus is the celebration of the eucharistic feast, in which “the least is greatest” (Matt. 23.11), “the last is first” (Matt. 20.16), and “the leader is servant.” (Matt. 20.26)

Accordingly, if the image of the table – the picture of *church-as-eucharist* – is our formative and normative icon of the Church, then we might imagine deacons as waiting at festive tables or serving community needs, rather than as pawns at the bottom of some powerful or political organization; and certainly not as apprentices or interns awaiting promotion or self-fulfillment. Each of the orders is self-sufficient; it is not incomplete or contingent on further advancement. In this perspective, we can appreciate the invaluable and inviolable importance of deacons, male and female alike. After all, what greater gift could anyone ever ask for than – merely, only, simply – to serve: for some ministering socially at tables in the Mystical Body of Christ, just as for others ministering liturgically at the Mystical Supper? I certainly know of no other, no better, no more sublime.

### **A Practical Revitalization**

In the Orthodox Church, at least unlike other denominations, we have always retained the order deacons; the diaconate has never fallen into complete disuse, even if it is merely a shadow of its shining prestige during the second and third centuries. For far too many years, the potential of the diaconate, including both men and women, has not been brought to fruition or even adequately fulfilled. So what we do (or can do) with deacons in our Church is the question we must now address.

In my humble opinion, today the diaconate could express the *diversity* of gifts found among the laity as the “royal priesthood,” which ought to be embraced and enlisted in a sacramental (namely, in an ordained) manner by the Church. Thus, ministerial dignity may be conferred on certain members of the laity, male and female, whose particular qualifications would be formally incorporated and integrated within the community. Such persons should be commissioned or empowered through the imposition of hands and grace of the Spirit, their various charismata – ceremonially; or sacramentally – recognized and intimately bound with the altar. In this way, they would support – and not be regarded as substituting – the ordained ministry of the Church.

Thus, matters of pastoral care, practical administration, financial concern, and even theological education could quite easily be delegated to deacons. Here is my vision: Someone whose administrative gifts are welcomed for the organization of a parish might be “ordained” to perform this task in the community. He (or she) could be a deacon that serves (whether part-time or full-time) in that capacity. The same could occur in cases where someone (again, either male or female) has certain unique gifts in specific areas: for instance, as youth minister or even financial comptroller (just as monasteries have a novice master and a steward [*oikonomos*], as catechetical instructor or hospital chaplain, as pastoral assistant or social worker, and so on. Deacons may also be officially “called and commissioned” to preach or counsel, perform functions of parish or public service, as well as assist in liturgical and community affairs, such as administering the sacraments to members of the community in need.

I would dare go a step further and venture to claim that there is no reason whatsoever for educators in theological schools and seminaries to be ordained presbyters unless their principal ministry lies in parish ministry. There is, after all, a long tradition of this in our church. Otherwise, we are passively surrendering to another deleterious temptation in our Church, namely that of clericalism – no matter how spiritual our justification or how logical our vindication may be! Here is the fundamental and essential

question for me: *Does someone have to be a priest in order to do what he is doing?* "Ordained" is one thing: "ordained a priest" is another!

The rebalancing of our hierarchy – the reorientation of our ordained ministries – through the restoration and reinvigoration of the diaconate (both male and female) could invariably have profound theological significance, spiritual influence, and practical consequence for the development of our parishes and the growth of their ministries.

### ***Lessons Learned: Personal Observations***

1. I learned over a number of years in church administration, parish ministry and theological education that the priesthood is the cause of much confusion in many ways resulting from a misunderstanding of authority both by those in priestly orders as well as by the laity. This has proved deeply hurtful alike for those ordained as for those aspiring to ordination.

If we properly understand the diaconate, then we will better understand the other orders of the priesthood, too. We will also understand why – and how – women can quite naturally – by which I mean traditionally, rather than exceptionally – participate in the diaconate without arousing hierarchical fears of ordination to the presbyterate or foregoing theological discussion about the male priesthood. Candid, objective, and dispassionate conversation about the priesthood can only enrich our appreciation equally of the ordained ministry and the royal priesthood.

2. I have also come to appreciate that part of the challenge lies perhaps in the unrealistic expectations that we have of the priesthood, upholding the priest as a perfect icon or infallible model. Contemporary theologians cite patristic sources about priests *manifesting* and *realizing* the priesthood of Christ and the priesthood of all believers. This perception is encountered in more traditional as in more enlightened theologians.

Yet, it is *romantically idealistic, if not spiritually perilous* to claim that a priest *represents* Christ or even all people; it is far more humble to believe that the priesthood *presents* God to the people (as in the Old Testament) and the community to Christ (as in the New Testament). And there are innumerable “ordained” ways of doing this! One of them is precisely the diaconate. It is similarly arrogant to claim that the priesthood is “not simply *one* of the ministries” – that is to say, “not only *one* vocation among many” – and that the priest somehow embraces “*all* vocations” and not just a “*religious* vocation,” which all people have without any distinction whatsoever. So certain theologians goes as far as to claim that the priest has *no* ministry at all because he is somehow the term of reference for and ultimate consummation of *all* ministries. In my humble opinion, such claims are presumptuous, both opening up to diverse forms of abuse and alluding to yet a third challenge, to which we have already made reference.

3. One of the critical problems in our misunderstanding of the priesthood – and especially in our misconception of the diaconate in relation to its incorporation of women – is the confusion between ***priesthood*** (as *inclusively* embracing the ordained bishop, priest and deacon, but also the royal priesthood) and ***priest*** (as a *distinct* order of the ordained ministry). Unless we disabuse ourselves of this confusion – which only further advocates secular and unsacred authoritarianism – then we cannot really appreciate *any* of the three orders of priesthood.

***Conclusion: Fulfilling a Vital Role***

Thus, the diaconate could be expanded and enhanced to reflect a modern ministerial expression, even while being rooted in the historical apostolic experience. Perhaps deacons will gradually also awaken other ministries from their hardened roles and traditional expectations. A creative revival of the diaconate in our age could become the source of resurrection for the ordained ministry in general, thereby playing a crucial role in the mission of the church. In this respect, the restoration of the diaconate may well prove both timely and vital.