

Department on Cooperation
of Men and Women
in Church, Family and Society

Division of Studies
Commission on
Faith and Order

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

Attitude of the Orthodox Church
by Professor Nicolae Chitescu, Bucarest

In the Orthodox Church the opinions of theologians do not count. The only thing that matters are the traditional regulations established by the Church as a whole in its canons and in its practice.

We will therefore begin by giving a short summary of the question as contained in our own "Manuel de Dogmatique et Symbolique" (published at Bucarest in 1958, in collaboration and with the blessing of His Beatitude Patriarch Justinian, pages 914-915). We shall then go into the question at greater length, showing on what authority the practice of our Church is based.

Women cannot receive the sacrament of ordination in the Orthodox Church. The ordination of women is prohibited both by Scripture (I Cor. 34) and by the subsequent rulings of the Church. The Montanists ordained women in the early Church. But deaconesses (who were found up to the 12th century) "did not receive the ordination of a deacon. They only received a blessing (a 'hierourgie') whereby they were entrusted with a mission in the life of the Church as a whole. They carried out a large number of services: instructing women candidates for confirmation, helping with the baptism of women, standing at the doors by which women entered during the services of worship, and helping widows, old women, girls, etc."

The justification for this attitude is found above all in the "Apostolic Constitutions" (VIII, 28, 6, 28, etc.). St. Epiphanius also states that "although an order of deaconesses does exist in the Church, it is not intended for priestly functions or anything of that kind, but in order to supervise the good conduct of the feminine sex" (Haer. LXXIX, 3). He adds, "ever since the world began, no woman has ever served the Lord as a priest" (ibid. XLI, 2, cf. Tertullian, De vel. virg. IX: "non permittitur mulieri in Ecclesia loqui, sed nec docere nec tingere, nec offerre, nec ulius virilis muneris, necdum sacerdotialis officii sortem sibi vindicare").

The titles of priestess ("presbytera", "presbyterissa") and of Bishopess ("episcopa") provide no justification either for thinking that they implied an order of women priests. These words were used to denote the wives (and mothers) of priests and Bishops, especially when they divorced so that their husbands could enter the monastery.

Later on the abbesses ("abbatissa") were not entrusted with priestly functions either, although they received a solemn blessing.

We will now give a few details.

The biblical justification for this is primarily the fact that our Lord did not include any woman among the twelve or the seventy to whom he gave power to perform the sacraments. The Holy Apostles themselves did not appoint women as heads

of Christian communities, although women played an important part in forming these communities, when they were called "deaconess", "presbytera", "presbyterissa" and "Bishopess".

Then there is the period when women are "impure", stressed in the Old Testament (see Leviticus XII and XV: 19 sq.), during which according to certain canons women were not permitted to receive baptism. During this period women could not carry out priestly duties. There is a special canon prohibiting women-priests, based on this point of view. It is the IInd canon of Denis of Alexandria (cf. La Synt. At., IV, 7). The VIth and VIIth canons of Timothy of Alexandria express the same point of view (Synt. At., vol. IV, pp.333-336). The XLIVth canon of the local Synod of Laodicea forbade women to approach the altar in churches. The service of women was valuable when adult converts were received into the young Church. They were needed to help in administering baptism and supreme unction to women. But as infant baptism became general, women were no longer needed for this sacramental service.

As my personal opinion I would add that deaconesses may be maintained for the same reason as in the early Church, where the conditions are the same.

The fact may be mentioned that in Russia, during the Crimean War, there existed an association of Russian deaconesses called "Vozdvizenske Zadruje".

Who were the deaconesses frequently mentioned in the New Testament (e.g. Rom. 16:1,2,6 and 12; I Tim. 5:9 ff., etc.)? They were virgins or widows who took a "votum" not to marry, and devoted themselves to the service of God. They lived in their own homes until they were 40 years old, under the supervision of the Church. At the beginning they dressed just like other women; but later on they wore a special costume, which distinguished them from lay women. After reaching the age of 40, the best of them were consecrated by receiving a special blessing from the Bishop.

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The "Apostolic Constitutions" refer to them in this way (VI, 17). The XVth canon of the IVth Ecumenical Synod, and the XIVth canon of the VIth Ecumenical Synod also refer to this consecration at the age of 40.

We will now give a few brief indications of the regulations contained in the "Apostolic Constitutions", and some other details given by the writings at the time of the Early Fathers, with the comments of the authors of the commentaries on the canons.

The Apostolic Constitutions speak of the service which can be undertaken by deaconesses. They watch at the doors of the Church (II, 57), they help the priests when women are baptised; but they do not administer the sacraments, nor carry out the other duties of priests and deacons (VIII, 28).

Deaconesses are needed in cases where (because of the infidels) a deacon cannot be sent to visit women; deaconesses are also needed at baptisms and to perform supreme unction (III, 5). They also accompanied the women who went to see the Bishop, looked after women who were ill, looked after aged widows, and gave instruction to women-candidates for confirmation.

Clement of Alexandria (Paedag. III, 12) speaks of the services rendered by deaconesses in preaching to women. Tertullian (De vel. virg. IX), St. Epiphanius (Adv. haeres, LXXIX, 3, 4) and St. John Chrysostome (Hom. XXXI) show that they rendered service "apart from the ministry of the altar".

The canonist N. Milasch (who is a great authority in the Orthodox Church) commenting upon the XVth canon of the IVth Ecumenical Synod, writes that the function of deaconesses, and the services which they carried out, were unknown in the XIIth century. The same remark had been made by the canonist Vlastare in the XIVth century (Synt. At. VII, 171).

The Apostolic Constitutions clearly state that deaconesses were consecrated by the Bishop, by the laying on of hands (VII, 19-20).

Matthew Vlastare describes this consecration as follows: the woman was presented to the Bishop who laid his hands on her bent head, pronounced the special prayer which began with the same words as the prayer used at the ordination of deacons, and placed the orarium over her head. She took Communion after the deacon and the Bishop gave her the Communion Cup. This consecration was called "hirothésie" to distinguish it from "hirothonie" (the form of consecration used for the orders). (Cf. the XVth canon of the IVth Ecumenical Synod in Synt. At. VI, 172).

There is some discussion among the canonists about the age at which virgins or widows could receive consecration as deaconesses. According to St. Paul it was 60; according to the canons it was 40.

The canonist Zonara explains that the difference is due to the fact that St. Paul speaks of widows, whereas the XVth canon of the IVth Ecumenical Synod speaks of virgins - adding that virgins who are not married by the age of 40 will not be likely to marry. Stress was laid on the dignity of the petitioner rather than on her age.

Vlastare emphasises the fact that they took the vow of chastity when they became deaconesses, although they were not enclosed nuns.

The canons of the VIth Ecumenical Synod did not permit women to speak during the liturgy, as they were included among the general category of "laity" to whom this prohibition applied. (Cf. canon LXIX of Trullo, Synt. At. II, 453-6; 14/34-35; Tertullian "De praescriptione", XLI), but they were permitted to speak outside the Church.

At the time of St. John Chrysostome the deaconesses were praised for their zeal in instructing women and abandoned children in the houses set up by Christian charity.

With regard to the negative aspect of the problem, the IXth canon of Laodicea (IVth century) is quoted. It forbids the appointment of presbytesses (priestesses), who are mentioned in I Tim. 5:2 and Titus 2 as carrying out the office of teaching in the Church, but not during the liturgy. They also gave instruction to candidates for confirmation, and prepared women for baptism. They were consecrated by a ceremony resembling that for deaconesses.

The Synod of Laodicea forbade the appointment of presbytesses, because of the abuses committed by certain "presbitides" due to pride and material interests. (See the XIth canon of the Synod of Laodicea, Synt. At. III, 181; cf. canon LXIX of Trullo, Synt. At. III, 312).

Some of the decisions taken by the Synods of the Western Church show that, from the VIth century onwards, the position of deaconess disappeared "because of the abuses and because of feminine weaknesses" (Synods of Arausicanum, 441; Synod of Agathen, 506; IIInd Aurelian Council, in the XVIIIth canon. Cf. the Hefele or Mansi collection).

Consequently in the Orthodox Church the canonical doctrine and actual practice have always remained the same, absolutely prohibiting the consecration of women to the hierarchy. Their services were used in the Church, after a blessing which some of them received from the Bishop.

In the Orthodox Church of Roumania this doctrine and practice have always been respected.

In the organisation of our Church, of which more is known after the XIVth century, the order of deaconesses was not known. The only title and function known was that of abness or "egoumenissa", which was conferred through the blessing of the Bishop. The abness was specially responsible for the supervision of nuns.

According to the XVIIIth article of the Statute of organisation of the Orthodox Church of Roumania, which has been in force since 1949, the women who are elected as members of the parish council can perform certain functions which do not involve any special blessing, for instance:

- a) beautifying churches, the courtyards outside churches, and cemeteries, and keeping them in good state;
- b) training and supporting the church choir;
- c) helping the poor, and looking after orphans and widows;
- d) visiting and helping the sick;
- e) setting up and running the parish library; organising colportage in the parish;
- f) helping the priest in giving instruction to candidates for confirmation, and in setting up missionary circles;
- g) instituting and running any form of Christian charity-work.

In the Orthodox Church of Roumania old women are also employed especially to prepare the arthos needed for Holy Communion, and to keep the church clean - excepting the altar.

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