

## Women, Gender, and Religion

Edited by Susan Calef and Ronald A. Simkins

### The Ordained Women of the Early Church

#### Their Story

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#### Deacons in the Early Church

[1] These reflections spring from the *Ordained Women in the Early Church. A Documentary History*, a study that I co-authored with Kevin Madigan. The idea for that book was many years in the making. I had been aware of the material evidence for the ordination of women scattered in many places. There had been a number of studies on women in the early Church, especially that by Roger Gryson and the wonderful book by Ute Eisen. Neither of them attempts to collect all the material available, however, and both study a wide variety of women's activities in the early Church. There were studies of deaconesses by Martimort, and a remarkable collection of texts about women officeholders by Josephine Mayer. Initially, the idea was to produce a book at the popular level to make all this material accessible to the general reader. Then, when I team-taught a course with Kevin Madigan on women in the early Church, Kevin became interested in the project and it soon grew into a scholarly work. Because Kevin is a Medievalist, we agreed that he would handle the Latin material and I the Greek. I was familiar with the ordination texts and arguments about women deacons, and we included these texts with comment as necessary background, even though they had been collected and commented on previously. I was really far more interested in the less charted territory of literary allusions and inscriptions.

[2] Our study began with the New Testament, where in Romans 16:1-2 Phoebe is called a *prostatis*, that is, a patron of Paul and others, and also a *diakonos*, a masculine term for what later developed into the office of deacon, although at the time of the writing of Romans, it is unlikely to have been a developed office. Phoebe is identified as a *diakonos* of the church of Cenchreae, one of the seaports of Corinth. It is worth noting and not always recognized that the only person in the New Testament who is called a *diakonos* of a particular church is the woman Phoebe. Whatever *diakonos* meant at that time, whatever a man with that title would do, that is what she did. At that time, the function of a *diakonos* probably was agency or representation of the local church.

[3] In First Timothy 3:8-13 there is a long description of what a *diakonos* should be, and it includes the reference, “and likewise the women,” who are enjoined to be “serious, temperate, and faithful” (3:11). Some contend that this reference to women refers to wives of deacons. The better argument, I think, is that it refers to female deacons. The next possible reference is in the famous letter written in the early second century by Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia and Pontus in northern Asia Minor, to the Emperor Trajan. Pliny writes about his investigation of a group called Christians who had been denounced to him. He reports that he interrogated under torture two *ancillae* who were called *ministrae*. *Ancilla* is the ordinary word for female slave, but these two are also called *ministrae* (ministers) within their group. *Ministra* is possibly the Latin equivalent of *diakonos*, but this remains a matter of debate. Kevin Madigan discusses this passage at length in our book (26-27) and remains undecided.

[4] It is important to understand that in the earliest years of Christianity there does not seem to have been a deliberate exclusion of the non-baptized from worship. The primary textual evidence is 1 Corinthians 14:23, where Paul is talking about speaking in tongues and prophecy: “If you are all speaking in tongues, and no one is interpreting, then how will the *idiotes* who comes into your assemblies know what you are talking about?” The word *idiotes* means a non-expert, in other words, an outsider, someone who does not know what is going on. The context for such a remark is ancient household customs. Usually when a group gathered in a house, the front door remained open, so that people could walk right in. That is exactly what would have happened in the gathering of the Corinthian community. By the time of the *Didache*, which is usually dated late first to early second century, the change is evident: “Let none eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord’s name” (9.5). Here the idea of controlling who has access has emerged. Around the same time, there arises a perceived need to control who leads the Eucharist, first expressed by Ignatius of Antioch (*Smyrn.* 8.1-2).

[5] By the third century there is some idea developing of what we might call ordination. In the Greek text it is usually called *cheirotomia*, sometimes *cheirothesia*, or *epithesis cheiron*, all of which mean laying on of hands. When that concept is further developed in the Latin West, it is expressed in the language of *ordo* from which we get the word “ordination.” That language undoubtedly arises from the Roman societal structure, in which there are two elite *ordos*, senatorial and equestrian, both of which have strict requirements for admission and belonging. The terminology of *ordo* can be used more loosely of other groups, but for Latin speakers, that language expresses notions of rank and hierarchy; that is, ordination is admission into an *ordo*. In the Greek context it seems clear that the female diaconate was a

true ordination, a *cheirotonia*. As far as I am concerned, that question is closed, though some would still debate it. It is a true ordination *as ordination was understood at the time*, which is precisely the point that Gary Macy has made in his recent work on ordination (see his chapter in this volume). In the *Apostolic Tradition* attributed to Hippolytus in the early third century (perhaps in Rome, but there are many questions about the origin of that text), there is a clear understanding about those upon whom hands are laid. In that text there are no female deacons, and no hands are laid upon women. Hands are to be laid on bishops, presbyters, and deacons, but not on widows, virgins, lectors, subdeacons, or healers. In the *Apostolic Tradition*, then, there is a clear sense that laying on of hands meant something distinct.

[6] There is also early evidence for presbyters, but their role is a mystery. Indeed, besides standing around the bishop and deacons at the assembly, we really do not know what they did. Perhaps they were an advisory council to the bishop. They remain a shadowy group until the late fourth century when they emerge as something of the equivalent of country parish priests or estate priests. Agricultural working villas, which are fairly well documented in England and existed in other areas as well, have chapels, and so the presbyters are probably those who stayed at the chapel and did the liturgical celebration there.

[7] At the same time, from other texts it is also clear that by the third century there is an order of male deacons and of female deacons in some areas in the East, but they are not exactly the same. Each has a distinctive role that partially overlaps the other. Perhaps the phrase “separate but equal” would apply here. As for the male deacon, some of his roles include: assistance to the bishop, carrying out administrative and charitable works, assistance at baptism and other liturgical events, guarding the door at assemblies, assisting at the altar with the chalice and administering it to the congregation, and carrying elements of the Eucharist to those who are not present. What further role male deacons might have had in monasteries is not clear.

[8] The principal role of female deacons is ministry with women, pre- and post-baptismal instruction, and assistance at the baptism of women. The latter was necessary because baptism was by complete immersion of the nude body. Some texts state that it is not right for deacons or bishops to anoint the body of women. Some of the female deacon’s administrative and charitable works related to women include: mediation between women and male clerics, chaperones of women, provision of hospitality, and at times liturgical leadership in women’s monasteries. Sometimes a superior of a monastery is a deacon, but not always. The later equation of abbess with deaconess, however, is probably the basis for certain liturgical roles of abbesses in the Middle Ages.

[9] A word on *liturgical* and *sacramental* is necessary here. The female diaconate is conceived of as a ministry for and with women and not as inferior to that of the male deacon but distinct. Today in most of the West we tend to equate “liturgical” with sacramental role or ministry at the altar, but in the Eastern Church and also in the monastic tradition in the West, the Divine Office, consisting of the recitation of the psalms and the singing of hymns, is just as much liturgy as is sacramental activity.

[10] The hint of something else that is very intriguing may be found in Justinian’s *Novellae* 6.6 (mid sixth century, so rather late), which includes regulations for the great Church of Hagia

Sophia in Constantinople. For example, limits are given about how many of each order there should be, presumably because they were all supported by the Church: 100 male deacons, 40 female deacons, 90 subdeacons, 110 lectors, and 25 cantors. Those are the clergy who will be supported. A little later in the text, it is stated that everything that is said about the reverend clergy, “we wish also to be done with regard to the God-beloved deaconesses, so that they shall do nothing outside of the appropriate regulations. First, they should be of the right age, neither too young at the fullness of passion, vulnerable to making false steps, but already well into life, about fifty years old” (Madigan and Osiek: 125). There are earlier regulations about what age a female deacon should be, e.g., Canon 15 of Chalcedon specified age forty. They can arrive at sacred ordination (*cheirotomia*), whether they are virgins or have been married to one man, which may mean in widowhood. Those married twice or those of notorious life or under any suspicion will not be allowed to approach the sacred mysteries or to administer baptism to those who present themselves. The curious thing in this text is that “those” who present themselves to female deacons is masculine plural. This suggests that at least in Constantinople, deaconesses may have had a part in the baptism of men as well, or perhaps in preparing them for it. Deaconesses are also said to participate in “other secret rites and most sacred mysteries that they are accustomed to practice” (Madigan and Osiek: 125). What exactly does this mean? Might it mean that deaconesses had more sacramental participation than our other sources reveal? Unfortunately, we simply know nothing more about it.

### False Assumptions about Female Deacons

[11] Most of this material about the liturgical roles of deaconesses has been studied. No one, however, had looked very deeply into the large amount of social information in the literary texts and descriptions because we were fixated on the question: were they or were they not ordained? I wanted to know more about their lives, and in pursuit of that knowledge, discovered that several frequent assumptions were incorrect. The first is that there were never women office holders in the West, that it all happened in the East. Actually, there is more evidence of female *presbyters* in the West than in the East. The evidence for them is not straightforward because the female title *presbytera* is slippery. It can sometimes mean the wife of a male *presbyteros*. Perhaps when a male *presbyteros* made a commitment to celibacy, the wife received the title *presbytera*, or perhaps in some places it was simply a title: “Mrs. Presbyter.” However, another title in Greek, *presbytis*, is less likely to be simply the wife of a *presbyteros*, especially when she is appointed. In a maverick document, the *Martyrdom of Matthew*, which is rather late and its exact date unknown, Matthew appoints a king as a *presbyteros* and his wife as a *presbytis*. The text might testify to knowledge of the office of *presbytis* for women, since the author finds no need to explain it. The story goes on to keep church office in the family: the king’s sons are appointed deacons and the daughters, deaconesses.

[12] Another peculiar text from the Synod of Nîmes, France (394) reads:

The following was suggested by certain individuals, that contrary to apostolic discipline, unbeknownst, women seemed to have been assumed into levitical service (*in ministerium . . . leviticum*) in some place or another. Ecclesiastical discipline does not permit this because it is inappropriate, and such

ordination should be undone when it is effected contrary to reason. It should be seen to that no one so presume in the future (Madigan and Osiek: 185).

Levitical ministry could refer to the equivalent of a deacon's service, but perhaps also to other service at the altar.

[13] A second false assumption is that by the late third century the title "deacon" for women was replaced by "deaconess." That is not correct. Both terms continued to be used interchangeably through the sixth century. For example, Olympias the famous female deacon in the church at Constantinople (early fifth century) is always called *diakonos* in the texts, never *diakonissa*. The earliest datable text using *diakonissa* is the *Apostolic Constitutions* in the fourth century.

[14] The third false assumption is that all women office holders were celibate, either virgins or widows. That may have been true in many cases, especially in Palestine or Constantinople, but it does not seem certain in Phrygia or some other places in central Asia Minor. Some buried husbands and were, therefore, widows; but if they had to be widows before ordination, then they erected the monuments to their dead husbands well after their husbands' deaths – unless the next day after their husband died they suddenly were ordained! In the graveyard of a fifth century basilica in Philippi lies the grave of Agathe deacon and John treasurer, which surely must be a married couple. Kyria of Lycaonia seems to be married, as attested by an inscription on a blue stone found in 1885. It reads: ". . . of his parents, Conon presbyter and Kyria deaconess and of his wife Markas (?) Matriona." Many such inscriptions have been found and recorded. Where it is today is not known, and so, nothing is known of its context. The inscription is partial, but records the dedication of an unnamed son for his parents, who were presbyter and deaconess. Kyria his mother was undoubtedly ordained in her own right, since her title is not the feminine counterpart of her husband's, but different. The dedicator's deceased wife is also included. In this inscription an unknown man commemorates his father, mother, and wife. It is possible that the father died earlier and then the wife became a deaconess, but it does not clearly indicate that that is the case.<sup>1</sup>

[15] Another inscription from late fifth century Calabria in southern Italy, reads: "Leta presbytera. Sacred to her good memory. Lived forty years 8 months 9 days. Her husband made this monument. She preceded him in peace the day before the ides of May." Clearly, this is a woman with the title *presbytera*. Her husband does not even name himself, much less any office he might have held. Since this is a full inscription with nothing missing, we may conclude that Leta was a *presbytera* during the lifetime of her husband, and he probably did not hold church office. Unfortunately, we do not know for sure what a *presbytera* did.

[16] A fourth assumption that our study of the evidence has proved false is that by the fifth and sixth century the title deaconess was simply a title given to monastic superiors. That this is not the case is clear from a literary text, the *Life of Macrina*, written by her brother, Gregory of Nyssa. Macrina was superior of a monastery in Annesi, in northern Asia Minor, and it is never said that she is a deaconess. There is another woman in the monastery named

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<sup>1</sup>Unfortunately, this inscription was inadvertently omitted from the collection in *Ordained Women*.

Lampadion who is the deaconess. Based on the narrative, it appears that the deaconess Lampadion has liturgical leadership and is an intimate of Macrina, but that Macrina is in charge. In the monastery of Olympias in late fourth century Constantinople, Olympias is both superior and deacon. However, her three relatives Elisanthia, Martyria, and Palladia were also ordained as deaconesses for the monastery by John Chrysostom, “so that by the four diakonal services, the established procedure might be carried on by them unbroken and without interruption” (Madigan and Osiek: 34). We wish we knew what that “established procedure” was. It sounds like some type of liturgical function divided into six hours, perhaps a rhythm of prayer or singing of the Psalms, but we do not know with certainty. In any case, it is clear that the deaconess is not the same as the superior.

### The Lives of Female Deacons

[17] What do the inscriptions and the literature tell us about the lives of these women? They made pastoral visits to women in their homes to pray with them and to anoint and nurse them when they were ill. They instructed women for baptism and continued to instruct women in their faith afterwards. They (rather than male deacons) assisted the bishop at the baptism of women and administered part of the ritual anointing. They were spiritual leaders and teachers who taught groups of women, doorkeepers for women’s entrances into church, and perhaps something like a modesty police. They supervised women in the assembly, sheltered and protected socially vulnerable women, gave hospitality to travelers and those in need, and traveled with women as companions when needed.

[18] Their ministry was not confined to women, however. Theodoret of Cyrrus (fifth century) tells of a female deacon of Antioch who did pastoral visitation to the mother of a boy and befriended him as well. After his mother’s death, when as a young man he wanted to turn away from the religion of his pagan father to Christianity, he went for secret instruction to her whom he called his teacher, *didaskalos*. When his father pursued him with threats of harm, she disguised him and made arrangements for him to get out of the city and thence to Palestine. She was actually the one who instructed him in the faith. (Madigan and Osiek: 63-64)

[19] Sometimes female deacons lived as ascetics, like Marthana about whom we learn in the narrative written by Egeria, a woman from the West who traveled all over the Holy Land and wrote reports back to her sisters. When Egeria arrived at the famous sanctuary of St. Thecla in Seleucia, Isauria (south central Turkey),<sup>2</sup> she found a number of monastics and ascetic women, among them Marthana, an old friend who was a deacon. This suggests that female deacons sometimes supervised centers of pilgrimage and went on pilgrimage themselves. Many lived alone or with other ascetics; many more lived with their families, especially in central Asia Minor. They commemorated family members at their deaths and were commemorated by them. Some came from families in which others, including husbands, were members of the clergy. Many lived conventional lives, raising children, including foster children, and some owned slaves. They led liturgical prayer and song as in

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<sup>2</sup> Thecla was the most popular female saint until the sixth century, not excluding the mother of Jesus. There were two important sanctuaries dedicated to her. One was in Seleucia in southern Asia Minor, the other in Syria in the village of Maalula, but her cult was spread all over the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in Egypt.

the monastery of Macrina, or that of Olympias next to the great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Some ministered in some way at the altar, as did women of Calabria like Leta *presbytera* in the late fifth century or in Edessa in Syria at the same time.

[20] Female deacons used the social power that they had as patrons. Sophia of Jerusalem was well known for her hospitality and patronage and seems to have been connected to one of the great pilgrim hospices of the city. In 1903, her inscription was found in five pieces below the tomb of the prophets on the Mount of Olives and resides today in the museum of the White Fathers of St. Anne in Jerusalem. It reads: “Here lies the slave and bride of Christ, Sophia, deacon, the second Phoebe, who slept in peace the 21<sup>st</sup> of the month of March in the 11<sup>th</sup> indiction” (Madigan and Osiek: 90).<sup>3</sup> The allusion is to Phoebe of Romans 16:1-2, probably because of her role as a patron. There is more to the text, but the rest of the inscription is broken off and lost. Some female deacons made church dedications, as did Antonia of Hippos in the Golan. Her inscription was discovered in 2004 and published in 2005, is dated to the late sixth or early seventh century, and reads: “for the eternal rest of Antonia deaconess” (Segal: 51-53). This indicates that she made an offering for the church and was commemorated as a benefactor.

[21] Some female deacons were buried in church like other clergy, as is the case with Guilia Runa of Carthage, a Vandal by name. The inscription comes from a mosaic in the church of Augustine at Hippo (today in Algeria) and is dated to the period of the Vandal occupation, after 431. It reads: “Guilia Runa *presbiterissa*, rest in peace, lived for fifty years.” She is buried under the pavement, but to my knowledge the grave has never been excavated. Unfortunately, very little is known about liturgy or church offices in the Vandal period.

[22] Another intriguing inscription is actually the record of a bill of sale, dated 425, from Salona in Dalmatia, today Croatia. An otherwise unknown man named Theodosius purchased a burial plot from Flavia Vitalia, who is called *matrona* and *presbytera sancta*. The first title, *matrona*, tells us that she is honorably married, not a widow, but nothing is said about her husband. The second title, *presbytera sancta* (holy presbyter), suggests that she herself is the church’s agent, not her husband. If she bore the title simply as the wife of a presbyter, it is difficult to believe that she would have the authority to sell church property and have her name listed on the bill of sale; nor would she be likely to be called by the reverential “holy.”

### Conclusion

[23] The evidence is overwhelming that female deacons were truly ordained in the third, fourth, and subsequent centuries, especially in the East, that they exercised a wide range of ministries, and that their ministries are not simply identical with that of male deacons. In regard to female presbyters, there are certainly some women in some times and places who bore that title, but their role is not clear.

[24] We are called to celebrate the lives and the work of these women, what they did, not what we bemoan that they did not or could not do. We can critique patriarchal structures

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<sup>3</sup> Indictions are four-year tax periods. Many Byzantine inscriptions give the date by indiction, but unless they give the actual day of death, the year cannot be known.

that kept them and still keep women from some forms of spiritual leadership, but while doing so, let us not lose sight of the value of what these women actually did. As we reflect on the pastoral needs of women today – education, spiritual accompaniment, health needs, unwanted pregnancies, and family problems – we would do well to recognize that this was the pastoral work deaconesses were doing with women long ago. They were protectors and advocates of women in a world controlled by men, a world to which the female deacons had access through their clerical status.

[25] Finally, what implications can we draw for today? First, that the female deacons exercised their ministries primarily, though not exclusively, with women is not to be discounted or denigrated but rather celebrated. Women helping women is an empowering strategy in any society, including our own. To assign their service to second class status because it does not match our expectations is to reinforce patriarchal assumptions by devaluing women's experience and social life with each other. Second, the apparent fact that the ministry of female deacons and perhaps presbyters was primarily with women should not hinder, in the present or the future, the further development of the diaconate for women. It is a faulty theological argument to claim that nothing can be done unless it has already been done before – faulty, yet sometimes convenient. That is not the way the early Church operated, and it is not how the contemporary Church operates when it is at its best.

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