

## THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PECULIARITIES OF DEACONESS MINISTRY IN THE EASTERN AND WESTERN HAGIOGRAPHY OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH

**Anna Zaika**

Assistant Professor, National University of “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”, Ukraine  
e-mail: annazaika050689@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0002-2565-6837

### Summary

The article shows that Ancient Churches, independently of each other, in different regions worked on a general idea of women's church ministry, which could be called differently, but everywhere had common features. Deaconesses were the only institutionalized women's community within the Ancient Church, which developed around III–IV centuries in the East. Their powers, despite the peculiarities rites of initiation were never associated with sacred religious service – in terms of status, deaconesses were close to subdeacons. In the West, deaconesses as women with practical responsibilities properties disappeared very quickly.

In the hagiographic tradition, the center of the narrative was a specific person and his spiritual life. In the course of research we have analyzed the examples of the lives of deaconess of the Ancient Church. In these texts there is a special importance was attached to miraculous events, characterization in relief and detail the virtues and high status of holy women were promoted.

**Key words:** saint, tradition, Byzantine era, ordain, nun, ascetics, feminine nature.

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### 1. Introduction

Women's ministry in the Ancient Church was closely connected with the position that women occupied surrounded by the Savior, the apostles and the first fathers of the Church, and their status, which was formed in the Christian tradition.

The New Testament, on the one hand, proclaims the important idea of the equality of women and men in the matter of salvation, and on the other hand, women are excluded from direct participation in the priesthood from the very beginning. This fact, in the context of already established social ideas about women in antiquity, presented for the Ancient Church the problem of integrating the active work of Christian women into the prevailing conditions of church life. In connection with the above, an important question seems to be related to how in the Ancient Church the initial activities of women were gradually institutionalized, namely, what the developing institution of Deaconesses represented in terms of status and form of activity in the Eastern and Western Churches. The ministry of women in the Ancient Church is one of the actively debated topics in the scientific historiography of New and Contemporary times.

The scientific study of the issue is presented by representatives of the German historical theological school of the late 19th – early 20th centuries. (H. Achelis, L. Zscharnack, L. Stocker, A. Kalsbach), who created fundamental works on women's ministry. It is impossible not to note the work of the Catholic priest A. Martimort, who wrote about the impossibility of deaconesses performing any liturgical functions, including deacons (*Martimort, 1982*). Among the authors of general works on the problems of women's ministry, one should highlight the Greek scientist

E. Theodoru, who was one of the first to put forward the point of view according to which the rite of consecration of deaconesses was closely connected with their sacramental ministry, which, in his opinion, occupied a middle position between deacons and subdeacons (*Theodoru, 2017*).

The scientific relevance of this study lies in the need for modern theological and historical science to summarize source and historiographic data on this problem, which regularly appears on the agenda for the Orthodox community in connection with the development of the so-called “female ordination” in Protestant denominations and the discussion of the revival of the ancient women's ministries.

The main goal of the research is to characterize the specifics of the position and the development of deaconess ministry using the example of the lives of the saints of the Ancient Church.

The methodological basis of the research is the principles of historicism, comparative-historical and intertextual analysis.

To ensure completeness in the work, the maximum number of the amount of historical evidence known in modern historiography reports on women's ministry in the Ancient Church.

## **2. The features of the ministry of deaconesses in the Eastern hagiography of the Ancient Church**

The ministry of deaconesses in the Eastern Churches became widespread by the 4th–5th centuries, as evidenced by the not very numerous lives of saints with the mention of deaconesses, the historical subjects of which relate mainly to this. In modern historiography, quite a lot of works are devoted to various aspects of women's hagiography related to the study of the biographies of specific saints, source study problems or options for textual interpretations.

Despite the fact that a fairly large number of studies have been devoted to the ministry of deaconesses in the Ancient Church, there are not very many of them actually about the deaconesses of the Byzantine era – they are not related to hagiography, but to private aspects of their service in Hagia Sophia, the peculiarities of their dedication and role in worship, while there are currently no specialized publications on deaconesses specifically in Byzantine hagiography (*Theodoru, 2008*).

The dedication of deaconesses is recorded in the lives, but not described in detail. It is performed by a bishop and, judging by the terminology, through ordination, and in a number of cases it is considered as the completion of a woman's ascetic path. St. Euphemia, or Xenia of Rome, was ordained a deaconess by Bishop Paul. In the life of St. Euphemia's Bishop Autrey ordained his mother Dionysia as a deaconesses (*Ysebaert, 1991*).

In the apocryphal “Acts of St. Matthew the Apostle” tells how the apostle, after the baptism and ordination of the Ethiopian king as a priest, ordained his daughter-in-law (his son's wife) as a deaconesses.

In the lives, the characteristics of the personal piety of female deaconesses come to the fore as a stable topos. They act as strict ascetics who maintained virginity, constantly remained in prayer, and indulged in various ascetic deeds, such as the future deaconess St. Euphemia (Xenia) Rome, who observed strict fasting all her life and sprinkled the bread she ate with ashes from the censor (*Niglio, 2017*).

The “masculinity” of women is considered as a special virtue: Palladius testified that Olympias was a man in appearance; the abbess of the Tavna monastery, Deaconess Theodula, strengthened the maiden Eupraxia, who entered here, in the fight against temptations, urging her to behave like a man.

The desire to protect virginity and conceal special ascetic deeds became the reason for dressing in men's clothes of St. Susanna, who hid her gender. This case can be compared with another, when on the eighth day after Baptism the pupil and goddaughter of Deaconess Romana, St Pelagia, secretly left the deaconess, retiring to a place near Jerusalem, where she hid under the guise of a eunuch.

The ascetic life was the basis for receiving special spiritual gifts. St. Domnica during the reign of Theodosius the Great, leading a strict pious life, received from God the gift of miracles and prophecy about emperors, patriarchs, and many others. Deaconess Theodula, prophesying, predicted the death of Eupraxia's mother (Niglio, 2017).

The lives provide very little information about the status and direct activities of deaconesses, who could either one-time or systematically engage in charity. St. Xenia was a Roman, the daughter of a senator, who fled to Kos, distributing her property. St. Justina gave alms to the poor and donated to the temple.

In a number of lives, deaconesses appear as nuns and abbess of women's ascetic communities or monasteries. St. Euphemia (Xenia), after being ordained as a deaconess, headed a new convent in Milas. St. Irene of Cappadocia was dedicated to St. Patriarch Methodius of Constantinople to deaconesses and abbess of the Chrysovalantou monastery.

St. Domnica, during the reign of Theodosius the Great, arrived in Constantinople from Carthage – after Baptism and ordination to the deaconess by Archbishop Nektarios, she founded a monastery in honor of the prophet Zechariah (Malingrey, 1968).

Due to their advanced age and ascetic experience, deaconesses could have spiritual and catechetical functions in relation to women who turned to them for advice. In the lives of Galaktion and Epistima, a very elderly deaconess, who had been a monk for ninety years, is mentioned, who unsuccessfully dissuaded Epistima, who turned to her, from going to torture.

St. Porfiry of Gaza, who lived in the 4th century, tonsured the orphan maiden Salafta as a nun and entrusted her to the care of the deaconess Manarida-Photina, who was supposed to take care of her future life.

Of the special facts found in the lives, important are references to the feat of Saint Thekla, who was not considered a deaconess in church tradition. Nevertheless, she is seen as a role model for female deaconesses: this is the most ancient life in which the woman appears as a strong and independent person, to the point that she even dared to baptize herself, and then other people (Davis, 2001).

The only historical figure who was a deaconess about whom a voluminous block of information has been preserved that goes beyond the exclusively hagiographical tradition is St. Olympias, who came from a noble family, possessed significant property and gained fame as an associate of St. John Chrysostom. Her life and history of veneration are a topic separately covered in the literature, so it seems important to consider the activities of this ascetic specifically as a deaconess in the context of her high social position and within the framework of communication with St. John Chrysostom.

According to Palladius, St. Olympias was the bride or, for a short time, the wife of the deceased prefect of Constantinople, Nebridius. Sozomen testified about her noble origin and wealth, putting into the mouth of St. John Chrysostom's admonition to Olympias, who was wasting her property, that she should moderate her zeal and engage in charitable giving more judiciously. Justifying herself in court before the city prefect that she was innocent of setting the temple on fire, she claimed that she used her enormous fortune to renovate the temples. However, there is a number of other evidence about the wealth and nobility of the Olympics (Malingrey, 1968).

It is noteworthy that, being a deaconess and, obviously, a fairly independent figure in the church life of Constantinople at the time of St. John Chrysostom, Olympias was not afraid to accept the monks unjustly expelled by Archbishop Theophilus. This fact, reproduced by Palladius in the dialogue between the deacon and the bishop, is considered as an ambiguous act associated with a violation of church subordination, but indicating the independence of the actions of the Olympias.

St. Olympias became the closest interlocutor of St. John Chrysostom, as illustrated by the letters addressed to her. If we try to characterize in general terms the relationship between these two saints by correspondence, we can highlight several features. First, there is no mention in the letters of Olympias' institutional ministry as a deaconess. This side of the activity was of no interest to the archpastor as a reason for edification. Secondly, the saint addresses her, in essence, as a cell attendant, privy to the nuances of his own everyday life. Thirdly, as a confidant, Chrysostom entrusted Olympias with matters related to the management of the Church and, obviously, church politics. In particular, he asked her to help the bishop detain the envoy of the king of the Goths, who asked for the ordination of a new bishop. Fourthly, the edifications of Olympias as a cure for sorrows were aimed at dispelling her despondency, which was natural in exile, and exalting her virtues.

The status of a deaconess for the saint was primarily linked to the spiritual exploits of a woman who labored in fasting, prayer, non-covetousness and virginity – a mandatory attribute of Chrysostom's preferred path to salvation. For the saint, the main feat of the deaconess is the ascetic monastic life, which allows one to overcome the weakness of female nature. This assumption fits well with the evolution of the powers of deaconesses that took place in the early Byzantine period into the monastic work of women who devoted themselves not so much to practical church activities as to ascetic deeds.

### **3. The features of the ministry of deaconesses in the Western hagiography of the Ancient Church**

The images of deaconesses were almost not reflected in Western hagiography, which did not develop the veneration of women in this particular status.

Obviously, this is due to the rather early ban on the rank of deaconesses in Western Churches and with the fact that their title began to be attributed only to special nuns or abbess of monasteries. In particular, St. Radegund (VI century), wife of the Frankish king Chlothar, wanting to dissolve the marriage and become a nun, she turned to Bishop Medard of Noyon with a request to ordain her as a deaconess. It is obvious from the context that she is becoming a nun, since she begs Bishop Medard to change her attire and, having entered the sacristy, before being ordained dresses in monastic clothes (*Coates, 1998*).

St. Sigolena, who lived in the 7th century in the south of Gaul, having become a widow, she was ordained a deaconess by the Bishop of Arles. After her dedication, Sigolena founded the monastery of Troclar in Lagrave, in southern Gaul.

Deaconess Theodula, who led Saint Eupraxia, in the Latin version of her life was called deaconess, abbess, mistress – obviously a title deaconess in the Latin-speaking tradition was taken as an honorary title for the abbess of a monastery.

In the life of St. Nilus the Younger of Rossano (910–1005) a certain deaconess as the abbess of the monastery is mentioned. She met him at the entrance to Capua along with the virgins subordinate to her. A similar topos is present in the earlier life of Pope Leo III: it mentions the deaconesses who, along with noble matrons and citizens and nuns, came out to greet him when he returned to Rome in 799.

Modern researchers, based on the interpretation of the 73<sup>rd</sup> canon of the Council of Worms in 868 note the fact that in the West the title of deaconesses could be awarded to princesses or queens who entered a monastery.

Thus, in the short Western hagiographical tradition, references to deaconesses are always associated with the special status of exclusively nuns, sometimes abbess of monasteries.

Topos inherent in holy women “masculinity” in this context will also be present, in particular, in relation to the ascetic experience of St. Radegund, according to S. Coates, formed the new social ideal of his era – the “third gender”, identified with the clergy (Coates, 1998).

St. Sedulius, in his Epistle to Macedon, prefaced by the “Easter Song” (beginning of the 5th century), spoke of St. Syncleticia, possibly a deaconess, as a priest in whose body there was a “male spirit.”

And it was logical in this context to turn to the feat of St. Thekla, to whom Radegund was like in patience, according to Venantius Fortunatus. The image of Saint Thekla is quite popular in Western church literature, when her life turned into a set of topos and edifying examples that spread in Western hagiography.

#### 4. Conclusions

Thus, in the initial period of the existence of the Ancient Church, it developed the idea of women’s ministry being outside the apostolic succession; however, this ministry did not exclude the development of its own institutionalization.

Church tradition certainly traced the beginning of the ministry of deaconesses to the apostolic era. Ordination to deaconesses by bishops usually assigns them the monastic status of leaders of communities of virgins or convents – abbess assigned to the church.

Deaconesses are virgins of a high spiritual level of life, overcoming the weakness of feminine nature. In this context, dressing in men's monastic clothes in lives is also considered as a special kind of asceticism. Although the above functions and qualities were not characteristic exclusively of deaconesses, hagiographic literature illustrates the idea of ascetics having an honorary title and virtues that go beyond feminine nature. The title of deaconesses often reflected not so much the affiliation of women to a church institution, but was an additional epithet to describe the outstanding qualities of saints, whose authority in itself was significant for their contemporaries.

Women's ministry in the West has generally not been developed in the same as in the East, and perhaps did not exist at all in similar forms, as evidenced by the extremely insignificant information about the obligations of deaconesses.

The study does not cover all aspects of the problem. The issues of causes of termination of deaconesses ministry are awaiting further study.

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