

THE DEMISE OF THE DEACONESS MINISTRY OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH

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Summary

The article shows that the concepts of deaconess, which persisted until the Middle Ages, will be synonymous with the word nun and will not be associated with a special female ministry, the final institutionalization and further existence of which became impossible due to the lack of its close connection with liturgical functions. The most important issue, which has not lost its relevance to this day in both academic and applied meaning, is the issue of institutionalizing women's church service, an alternative to both monastic and exclusively social. However, this issue should be recognized as closely connected not so much with the needs of modern society, but with the needs of the Church and the general church consciousness.

In the course of research, we have analyzed the reasons of demise of deaconess ministry in the Eastern and Western traditions of the Ancient Church. In these texts there is a special importance was attached to features inherent in deaconesses, who are obliged to lead a strict pious life and perform certain ceremonial functions while attending divine services.

Key words: tradition, ordination, prioress, nun, chastity, ascetics, rank.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/6821>

1. Introduction

In the initial period of the existence of the Ancient Church, the idea of women's ministry, existing outside the apostolic succession associated with the sacred rite, was formed, which, however, did not exclude the development of its own institutionalization for this ministry. The organized ministry of deaconesses in the Ancient Church certainly exists from the 3rd–4th centuries. In their position they were close to subdeacons, at least they are mentioned alongside them, but they were not included in the male clergy.

According to the rite preserved in the Barberini manuscript (8th century), deaconesses were ordained by the bishop through ordination, but not through laying on of hands in the later sense of the word, in the altar. Deaconesses never performed deacon or other liturgical functions, and the ordination rite, which outwardly brought women closer to deacons, gave rise to the controversial question that still persists in historiography about whether they, like deacons, were included in the church hierarchy.

Within the framework of the characteristics of the apostolic and catholic Church in relation to women's ministries, this question should be answered negatively, and the peculiar uniqueness of the rite can be explained by the specificity not of the actual functions, but of the general high status of deaconesses. The ministry of women in the West was not generally developed to the same extent as in the East, and perhaps did not exist at all in similar forms, as is shown by the very little information about the powers of deaconesses.

Even Christian women who were not vested with special powers could care for the sick, maintain order in the church, instruct widows or virgins, and generally maintain communication between the clergy and the female part of the community, which naturally led to the gradual disappearance of deaconesses in the East and their almost complete absence in the West.

The history of the study of the order of deaconesses in the later, Byzantine period in the East is important, since it did not develop in the West. Researchers were interested in questions about the location of deaconesses during their ordination, as well as their role during the service in the Constantinople Church of St. Sophia; what their attire looked like; what was the relationship between their service and that of the deacon (R. Taft and V. Karras); what were the famous deaconesses of that era like (E. Theodoru), how are the images of ascetics presented in Byzantine hagiography and what role they played in the development of female monasticism (S. Harvey, A. Talbot). However, the only one who described and commented in detail on the service of the Syrian deaconesses, the rites of their ordination and the reasons for their disappearance was catholic priest A. Martimort.

The scientific relevance of this study lies in the need for modern theological science to summarize historiographic data on the issue of the reasons of demise of deaconess ministry in the Ancient Church because the social and scientific interest has been constantly connected with current proposals for the restoration of the rank of deaconesses within the framework of the “internal” or “external” mission of the Church.

The main goal of the research is to characterize the reasons of the demise of deaconess ministry in the Eastern and Western traditions 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 abolition of the deaconess rank in the Eastern Church

The time frame and reasons for the disappearance of the ministry of deaconesses in the East are not reliably recorded. The first indication that the female rank in Byzantium, at least in the Jerusalem region, was abolished, dates back to the 6th century, that is, to the time of the formation of the corpus of Justinian's Novellas, testifying to the contrary.

In the “Spiritual Meadow”, John Moschus, at the beginning of the 7th century, reported as a recent event the story of the Jerusalem Archbishop Peter, who, in order to avoid the temptations of the Elder Conon, wanted to ordain a deaconess to help him in the Baptism of women, “but did not do this because custom did not allow it”. It is quite possible, however, that this custom was not of a church-wide nature and related to a regional tradition. Deaconesses are mentioned in novellas and later – in the 7th century in Constantinople, at the Council of Trullo (691-692), the same is in a certain sense confirmed by the rite of ordination of deaconesses in the 8th century. Researchers have suggested that there were regions that did not know this ministry in principle. According to A. Martimort there were no deaconesses in Egypt and Ethiopia (Martimort, 1982).

In the literature on the reasons for the disappearance of deaconesses, there is a number of established opinions, dating back to the tradition of the 19th and early 20th centuries. According to I. Augusti, in the post-Constantine era, the state largely took over the functions of organized charity, as a result of which the role of deaconesses gradually began to diminish. Abbess Catherine believed that deaconesses ceased to exist because there were no more women capable of enduring the difficulties of this activity.

It seems logical to argue that the main function of deaconesses, the assistance with Baptism, gradually lost its meaning with the widespread spread of the practice of infant baptism. Already in the 72nd decree of the Council of Carthage of 401, repeated at the Council of 419

and included in the “Extracts from the Register of the Carthaginian Church” (5th century), there is a mandatory requirement to baptize infants.

During the Baptism of women, the Church might not have recognized the special need for the mediation of deaconesses, as is evident from the case described by John Moschus, that is, the service of deaconesses was no longer considered specific and irreplaceable. However, such a change in church practice cannot be considered as an absolute reason for the abolition of the rank of deaconesses, since the Baptism of adult women had to be reduced, starting from the 4th century and further as Christianity actively spread, whereas it was precisely at this time that the rank of deaconesses was established in the East and experienced a kind of “flourishing”. Justinian's Novellas indicate that a certain function related to assistance during Baptism was retained by deaconesses.

The late rite of ordination of the 8th century gives reason to assume that these external attributes of deaconesses could have been associated by contemporaries with liturgical duties similar to those of deacons that did not exist for women. Such concerns found their most vivid expression in the West and indicated to the church authorities the threat of the emergence of heresy, which is why in the era of Balsamon, by the 12th century, the word “deaconess” became an honorary title. However, the “development” of women’s ministry into a full-fledged “diacotate” in the church tradition in the East, unlike the Western Churches, has never been considered a global potential threat at least due to the fact that not a single canonical ban on the ministry of deaconesses has been made public either at the local or at the general church level (*Theodoru, 2017*).

The main role in the gradual disappearance of women's ministry in the East was played by the spread of female monasticism, which completely “absorbed” the characteristics inherent in deaconesses, associated with the need to lead a strict, abstinent and pious life, as well as to perform ceremonial functions, being present at the performance of divine services.

It cannot be completely ruled out that the practical functions of deaconesses were generally related only to the specific region in which the Didascalia and Apostolic Constitutions were in circulation (Syria and Asia Minor), since other written sources do not provide detailed information about the practical activities of deaconesses. However, this female rank, by the very fact of its widespread existence beyond these regions, testified not to a practical or, even more so, liturgical form of service, but to a specific form of female asceticism, since the Church recognized the main virtue for women as the preservation of chastity and prayer – it is not for nothing that the leaders (prioress) of the first communities of virgins were called deaconesses. Hence, the rapid merging of the status of deaconesses and the first nuns becomes natural and logical.

The term deaconess in the Byzantine tradition of the 13th–14th centuries could be applied not only to ordinary nuns, but also to female leaders within women's monasteries: this is how the matron of the dormitory and the cellarer (manager of the household) are called in the typicon of the small and short-lived monastery of the Mother of God in Constantinople.

The authorship of the monastic charter is attributed to Theodora Synadena, niece of Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus (c. 1224–1282), who was her guardian after the death of her parents. In the text of the charter (first half of the 14th century), instructions are set out for the deaconess as the prioress of the monastic community, who must be “God-loving and God-fearing,” so that she could “judiciously and for the current benefit” manage the monastery, keep everything in strict order, have a “meek and humble character,” be simple in communication, and have “full attire and mantle”. The deaconess as a cellarer should be “the one who takes care and supervises your food, and she should also take care of the wine, if you have it”. At the same

time, the prioress of the monastery “as having care for the general needs” was considered by the author of the charter as a superior person over the two named deaconesses, together with whom she should take care of all the sisters. This usage would be similar to the situation in the West, where the term deaconess, as applied to the heads of women's monasteries, is found in the writings of Peter Abelard.

Although by the 11th–12th centuries it was difficult to speak about the preservation of practical functions for deaconesses, as well as about the very form of existence of this rank, nevertheless, according to V. Karras, the Church retained the need for women's ministry, which was now performed by women of a different rank.

She records the first type of service based on a fresco in the church of the monastery of Panagia Blachernai in the city of Arta (Epirus), which depicts a weekly procession outside the church in Constantinople with the participation of three women (Irene-Eulogia [1218–1284], the sister of Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus, and her daughters Anna and Theodora), carrying censers and/or incense boxes.

The second type is represented by a different service: according to the typicon of the Constantinople Pantocrator Monastery, it must have four well-off and respected women in the rank of “grapta”, who, in pairs, would monitor the order in the church and help the pilgrims when necessary, including when they gathered together for the Friday evening service. It is unlikely that those women, according to V. Karras, were initiated, like the deaconesses of their time, and had some kind of rank, but they received material support, like other clergy (Karras V, 2023).

Finally, the third type is represented by the rank of women “myrrh-bearers” in the Jerusalem Church (it presumably arose between the 5th and 9th centuries, and ceased to exist at about the same time that the rank of deaconesses disappeared, that is, by the 13th century or soon after). On the morning of Holy Saturday, the “myrrh-bearers,” symbolizing the arrival of women to the Tomb, accompanied the Jerusalem Patriarch and his clergy in a procession to the Kuvuklia in the Church of the Resurrection of the Lord in Jerusalem, performing liturgical hymns, cleaning the oil lamps, after which they were extinguished, and the Kuvuklia was closed. V. Karras believes that the “myrrh-bearers” were ordained through the ordination to the lower ranks of the clergy as readers, and the listed forms of church service replaced the institutional service of deaconesses.

The last unique mention of deaconesses in the Church of Constantinople should be recognized as graffiti from the Church of Hagia Sophia with the image of a woman in a long robe with a chalice in her hand, next to which was the corresponding inscription “deaconess” (if the image can be attributed to a time no later than the first half of the 15th century, then the signature was apparently added later, possibly in the 16th century). The very mention of deaconess for such a late time is unique, which testifies to the long existence of this term.

3. The abolition of the deaconess rank in the Western Church

Unlike the Eastern Churches, in the West there are a number of direct prohibitions on women's ministry. The first relates to the above-mentioned Council of Arausio in 441, which vividly illustrates the subsequent practice of the Gallic Councils in 684 : “deaconesses should not be ordained at all”. Only the dedication of widows outside the altar was allowed, who, according to the logic of the canon, had the right to exist, in contrast to the already dedicated deaconesses, who stood in the church together with the people without external distinctions of church status.

If the Council of Arausion, although it distinguished between both statuses of women, still allowed the preservation of the status, then the Council of Epaone in 517 already unconditionally identified widows and deaconesses, prohibiting both services: "We completely prohibit the consecration of widows, who are called deaconesses, throughout our entire region, granting them as a blessing, if they ask for their return, only one repentance". This prohibition, with a direct reference to the Epaone decree, was repeated by the Second Council of Tours in 567. By "return" was meant strict repentance and prayer, that is, an ascetic life, by which previously consecrated women could differ from laymen (*Predel, 2005*).

The very fact that the categorical abolition of the service of deaconesses was repeated several times at several Councils testified to its incomplete disappearance in Gaul in the 5th–6th centuries. Moreover, the Second Orleans Council in 533, as if reconciling itself to the presence of women, "who until now, contrary to the prohibition of the canons, have accepted the blessing, prescribed the necessity of celibacy for them – its violation was punishable by excommunication from Communion". This passage can be understood as a prohibition on receiving a blessing "contrary to the canons," that is, not according to the rules, while a blessing received in accordance with the law is permissible. But such an interpretation is refuted by the following, the 18th rule of the same Council: "Also make a decision that henceforth no woman be given a deacon's blessing because of the weakness of her nature".

According to J. Ludlow, Southern Gaul at that time was a place of clash between eastern and western traditions: Massalia (Marseille), once a Greek colony, still retained, albeit transformed, connections with the East. Since the 5th century onwards, monks associated with the Eastern tradition settled in Southern Gaul, and this same period became the time of the flourishing of the service of deaconesses in the East, in connection with which periodic attempts to introduce or renew this service in Southern Gaul are quite understandable (*Ludlow, 1866*).

Why the ministry of deaconesses is so negatively perceived in the Gallic tradition is not exactly known. Two pieces of evidence may help to shed light on this mystery. The first is reflected in a lengthy letter of Pope Gelasius I (492–496): "We have heard with unspeakable sorrow that such a flagrant violation of the Divine institutions has come to us, that women are allowed to serve in the holy altars and that the sex to which it does not belong carries out all that is given over to the authority of men". The Pope then goes on to list in sufficient detail the terrible punishments for those who contributed to or participated in attracting women to this kind of altar service.

The second testimony is from the Council of Rouen in 650: "We were told that some priests, after celebrating the mass, neglecting to consume the Divine Mysteries themselves, which they had previously consecrated, pass the Lord's Chalice to the women serving during the mass or to some laymen...". In connection with this, the presbyters were ordered to "give them Communion from their own hands," and not to give "Communion into the hands of anyone: neither a layman, nor a woman".

Perhaps this practice reflected the already fading practice of joint asceticism of ascetics of different sexes or the influence of some heresy of local origin. It was precisely this danger of turning the deaconess service into a liturgical service that caused justified concerns among the Western clergy.

The lack of development of the ministry of deaconesses and its early prohibition can be explained by the real fear of the Church in the West that women would exceed their authority and claim priestly functions, for which there were grounds, starting from an even earlier time. Thus, St. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote about a certain heretic Mark, whose followers celebrated the Eucharist. Mark's disciples "in our Rhone countries many women were seduced..."

Obviously, there were also women who dared to baptize on their own: “But the audacity of a woman who has appropriated to herself the right to teach, in any case, cannot encroach on the right to baptize, unless a new beast appears, similar to the former one – so that as one abolished baptism, so another began to perform it by his own authority”. Perhaps abuses of this kind existed in Carthage after Tertullian, which gave rise to special decrees: “A woman, no matter how learned and holy she may be, should not hope to instruct men in the assembly”; “A woman should not perform baptism”.

In the Middle Ages, the idea of the service of deaconesses in the West became the subject of archaeological discussions related to the interpretation of apostolic texts. In practice, according to Bishop Atton of Vercelli (Northern Italy, 10th century), “we can consider as deaconesses those who have reached old age and, preserving chastity, lead a pious life, conscientiously prepare the priests’ prosphora for the service, guard the doors of the church, wash the stone floors” (Ludlow, 1866).

The Salisbury theologian Thomas Chobham (1160–1233/1236) in his work “Summa confessorum” (after 1215) focuses on the moral aspect of the problem related to the relations between male clerics and women, and develops hypothetical thesis about the ancient duties of deaconesses, specifying that they could read the Gospel precisely in a convent, since it was inappropriate for a deacon to be among the choir of nuns.

It can be reasonably argued that for Western medieval canonists, who had no real idea of the functions of the ancient deaconesses, the latter were only abstract examples in their discussions of the conditions for entry into the rank of clergy, from which women, according to their arguments, were clearly excluded by virtue of their belonging to the female sex and by virtue of their lack of the appropriate capacity for church service (character), which, in addition, is of an irreversible nature, like baptism (Harnack, 1910).

In a certain sense, the works of medieval scholastics formulate the final legal basis for the prohibitions on the ministry of deaconesses in the Western Churches, which did not take shape in Byzantium. Although a similar kind of reconstruction can also be found in the 12th century Eastern canonist Theodore Balsamon, who quite freely interpreted the 126th canon of the Council of Carthage on virgins, when he wrote that virgins are ordained in order to be ordained as deaconesses, that is, he equated their ordination with the ordination of deaconesses.

4. Conclusions

Thus, although there are no definite facts confirming the existence of the institutional female ministry of deaconesses before the 3rd century, when it developed in the Eastern Churches, church tradition firmly linked its emergence with the apostolic era. The time of the “flourishing” of the service of deaconesses in the East should be recognized as the 4th–6th centuries, when in a number of texts there are already certain indications of the activities of deaconesses, references to whom can be found along with nuns and ascetics who observed strict celibacy.

The demise of the ministry of deaconesses in the East occurred after the 6th century, but not as a result of specific conciliar decisions, but gradually, perhaps over a fairly long period of time, in connection with the spread of female monasticism, which included the features inherent in deaconesses, who were obliged to lead a strict pious life and perform certain ceremonial functions, being present at divine services. The hagiographic tradition also assigned deaconesses an exclusively monastic status.

In turn, the Western Churches did not know the ministry of deaconesses in the developed form in which it existed in the East – here it arose and took shape, probably, much later.

Deaconesses were ordained as virgins, widows or wives of future clerics (bishops) no earlier than forty years of age, who maintained strict chastity, from respectable, noble and financially secure families, and as a result of this received an upbringing and education that was not typical for women of that era.

The lack of development of women's ministry in the West and its rather rapid prohibition can definitely be explained, in contrast to the Eastern Churches, by the fear of the hierarchy that women would lay claim to priestly functions, which is evident in the example of special cases in Gaul, when some women accompanied the clergy and dared to help them during the Liturgy. However, by the Middle Ages, when this issue had lost its relevance, the scholastics' appeal to the authoritative and significant, in their opinion, women's ministry in the Ancient Church, given the impossibility of its existence in the modern era, would become a kind of "common-place" in theological works.

The study does not cover all aspects of the problem. The issues of causes of restoration of the female diaconate are awaiting further study.

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