



WOMEN
in the
ARMENIAN
CHURCH

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*The cover photo is from the book THE COSTUMES
OF ARMENIAN WOMEN, published by the HAI
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INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet was first prepared as a paper by Lousie Kalemkerian and presented at the Diocesan Assembly of the Armenian Church of North America (Eastern Diocese) on May 8, 1982, at Holy Resurrection Parish in New Britain, Connecticut.

The author most capably brings to our attention the general question of the role of women in the Armenian Church. More specifically, she focuses our attention on women functioning in the role of ordained deacons in the Armenian Church. She draws on scriptural, historical, and canonical sources and considers these in the light of the current legitimate needs of the Armenian Church.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the comments herein made, one must frankly admit that the questions raised are legitimate questions and concerns and as such deserve the thoughtful consideration of all, for the greater glory of Almighty God and the strengthening of our Holy Mother Armenian Church.

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Armenian Church of North America

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CONSTITUTIONS OF THE HOLY APOSTLES

CONCERNING THE DEACONESS — THE CONSTITUTION OF BARTHOLOMEW.

XIX. Concerning a deaconess, I Bartholomew make this constitution: O bishop, thou shalt lay thy hands upon her in the presence of the presbytery, and of the deacons and deaconesses, and shalt say: —

THE FORM OF PRAYER FOR THE ORDINATION OF A DEACONESS.

XX. O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who didst replenish with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah; who didst not disdain that Thy only begotten Son should be born of a woman; who also in the tabernacle of the testimony, and in the temple, didst ordain women to be keepers of Thy holy gates, — do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant, who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit, and “cleanse her from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,” that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her to Thy glory, and the praise of Thy Christ, with whom glory and adoration be to Thee and the Holy Spirit for ever. Amen.



The CONSTITUTIONS OF THE HOLY APOSTLES is an ancient collection of canons for the Christian Church. It purports to be a collection of canons given by the Holy Apostles themselves in the first Council of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. Whether or not this is actually the case, it is beyond dispute that the collection comes to us from a time during the first four centuries of the Christian era.

For our purposes, it is interesting to note that the above prayer for the ordination of deaconesses is attributed to none other than St. Bartholomew, one of the acknowledged patron saints and First Illuminators of the Armenian Church.

— Fr. Vartan Kasparian

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise (Yeghissian) Kalemkerian, was born on December 2, 1945, in Detroit, Michigan. She grew up in and was active in St. John Armenian Church of Detroit.

In 1967, she received her B.A. degree from Wayne State University. Later, in 1970 she received her M.A. degree from Seabury Western Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.

In 1971, she married Joseph Kalemkerian. Their marriage has been blessed with two daughters: Sarah Arshaloo and Mary Helen.

From 1970 to 1973, she served as the Director of the Department of Religious Education for the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern).

Louise served as co-editor for the publication DAY BY DAY from 1979 to 1986, when the publication was temporarily suspended. She also is the editor for the Eastern Diocese publication AVEDIS, a position which she has held since 1984.

Also, she was the co-author of PRAYERS FOR ARMENIAN CHILDREN and SAINTS FOR CHILDREN.

To discuss broadening the role of women in our Church life is to affirm that the service of our female members is good, positive and essential to the well-being of the Armenian Church in America. In accepting this charge from the Primate and Diocesan Council to present my views, I offer them as a means to open discussion on another way of increasing their service, and also as a way of bridging the acute clergy shortage we are experiencing.

God has called women to His service as teachers and leaders in the education ministry of the Church. Our parish church schools are staffed preponderantly by women, our superintendents are mostly women, and the women of the church have taken on other educational ministry in our Church through the women's guilds, religious education committees, etc. Indeed, it is the women of the church who are spearheading the movement for retreats, educational programs, spiritual growth seminars, Bible studies and the like.

Beyond serving within the educational function of the Church, women have been limited. Within the Church, the Body of Christ, there are diverse forms of ministry, both ordained and lay. Some of these exist in the 1980's, while others have fallen into disuse, for varying reasons. In the ordained ministry there exists the ministry of the diaconate, a ministry which in its fullest meaning is not presently being exercised, and which has been open to women as well as men at different times in the Church's history.

The diaconate is a ministry of service. The word actually means servant. In the universal Church, the diaconate has been a separate order from the priesthood, with separate functions. It has not necessarily been a step on the way to the priesthood. In the Armenian Church we have ordained men deacons who are not candidates for higher orders, but who offer their efforts in one aspect of the deacon's ministry, the liturgical. When the first seven deacons were ordained and set apart by the Twelve Apostles, their function was primarily to serve tables, that is, serve at the Eucharist, and minister to the widows and orphans (Acts 6:1-6).

In our community today the ministry of deacons is seen primarily as a liturgical one. The other aspects of ministry, pastoral, educational, administrative, have become the responsibility of our priests. In an age when we do not have anywhere near the number of priests necessary to meet the needs of our parishes, we ought to look at the totality of the deacons' ministry as a means of increasing the number of ordained servants in the Church. And opening that ministry to qualified women will both help bridge the clergy shortage and provide new avenues of service for them.

Both Biblical and canonical sources reveal to us that there were deaconesses in the early Church. St. Paul speaks about Phoebe, a deaconess (Rms. 16:1), acknowledging existence of this ministry in apostolic times. He also enumerates various other women in the following

verses (Prisca, Mary, etc. 16:3, 6, 12ff) as well as in Philippians (4:2-3) indicating that women participated in considerable measure in the spreading of the Good News. In another passage, the qualifications of deaconesses are noted, mentioning that "the women must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things." (1 Tim. 3:11)

Mention is made in the canons of several of the Ecumenical Councils of the existence and functioning of deaconesses. (See The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, vol. 14, pp. 4ff.) Deaconesses were not bound to a monastery or convent as were nuns, as evidenced by what we know of Phoebe, Prisca (a married woman), and other women in the Lord's service in the early Church (1 Cor. 9:5). In our own history, we have had deaconesses who participated in both liturgical and pastoral activities, assisting at the baptisms of women and children. References to the "Ordination Rite for Deaconesses" are found dating from the 14th century (see Hatzouni, Hayoohen Badmootyan Archev, pp. 152ff.) In recent times we have had several deaconesses functioning in Istanbul and New Julfa, women who have received ordination and who act as proto-deacon during the Divine Liturgy, reading the Gospel and carrying the Gifts. Thus the precedent for the ordination of women to the diaconate does exist in our own church.*

At the present time the Armenian Church needs more "workers in the harvest." Parishes exist which have neither priest nor deacon to serve and minister to them. New communities are being established which must be organized. Programs of campus ministry must be developed. The visible presence of the Church, through her ordained ministers, must be increased. And there are women who are willing and capable of performing these and other functions, given the benefit of ordination.

These are a number of specific areas in which such ordained deaconesses can serve, either at the Diocesan or parish level. The most noticeable form of service would be liturgical. Besides serving a priest at the celebration of the Sunday Divine Liturgy, deaconesses can conduct services in priestless parishes, on college campuses, in nursing/old age homes, or assist at weekday celebrations of the Divine Liturgy, and funerals, baptism, weddings, etc. In addition to these, an ordained deacon or deaconess can be granted permission by the Diocesan Ordinary to take Holy Communion to nursing homes and hospitals.

Another form of service which deaconesses can render is that of visitations and counseling. Within the Armenian Church are theologically trained and educated women, who have received the benefit of clinical pastoral education and have been schooled in ways of ministering to the

* At the present time, there is at least one such deaconess in Istanbul, a woman who has received ordination, Deaconess Sister Hripsimeh Sasoonian. It was encouraging to witness her visit to the United States and her service during the Divine Liturgy during the summer of 1986. In fact, on Sunday, August 16, 1986, the Feast of the Assumption, she assisted the Primate of the Western Diocese, His Eminence Archbishop Vatche Hovsepian during a solemn celebration of the Divine Liturgy at St. Mary Armenian Church of Yetteim.

sick and bereaved, and their families. Whether in a parish by herself, or as a pastoral assistant complementing the efforts of the priest, the deaconess can provide support, counsel and pastoral care in a variety of situations.

The Armenian Church in America has recently seen the influx of Armenians from abroad. Many of these people need assistance in finding housing, jobs, dealing with immigration matters, etc. The AGBU is not the only institution whose responsibility it is to assist these people. Deaconesses would bring the **visible presence** of the Church to people who need the Church's help and aid. Why should only secular organizations provide the support and sustenance to those in need, which from earliest times was the responsibility of the believing community?

The educational aspect of this ministry includes both Church School adult education, and workshops, retreats and conferences for various ages, as well as the regular opportunity to preach sermons. With ordination comes the recognition of apostolic ministry and the acceptance by the community of the deaconesses' ministry. The opportunity to preach on a regular basis appropriately combines two apostolic educational functions, that of both teaching and proclaiming the Good News.

One other area in which deaconesses can serve the Armenian Church is administrative, whether on a parish or Diocesan level. Especially if deaconesses are provided with the opportunity to serve in priestless

parishes as Deaconess-in-Charge (as we presently have Deacons-in-Charge), they will combine parish administration with other aspects of their ministry. The extent of a woman's theological training would determine in which of the aforementioned areas she would serve. Her qualifications for the diaconate would be based, as for a man, on her life, her faith, and her knowledge, and assignment to specific positions would be by the Diocesan Ordinary.

Some if not all of the previously noted activities are already performed in this Diocese by women, without the benefit of ordination. If the Church were to ordain women, the graces of the Holy Spirit, given in Holy Orders, would enable them to better serve Our Lord through His Church. Ordination would also provide recognition and acceptance of their ministry and leadership role within the Armenian Church and community. It would further serve as a role model for other female members of the church, encouraging young ones to consider the diaconate as a life's vocation, one which, as the priesthood, can be combined with family responsibilities.

What about marriage? Must the deaconesses in this Diocese be celibate, as the ones in Istanbul or New Julfa? Since a man's marital status does not affect his ordination to the diaconate, and he may marry both before and after ordination, so the same rule must apply equally to women. Similarly, the issue of age. A reference in I Timothy (5:9ff) denotes 60 as the age of ordination, while the

canons mark 40 as the appropriate age (see Canon XV of the Council of Chalcedon, 451; also these "Excursus on the Deaconess of the Early Church," the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, vol. 14, p. 41ff; Quinisext 692, Canon XIV, Chalcedon 451, Canon XV; Quinisext 692, Canon XL; and Quinisext 692, "Excursus on the Marriage of Clergy," The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, vol. 14, pp. 365ff.) In the same way that a deacon's age has not been an issue, so a deaconess' age must not become a factor in determining ordination.

The Armenian Church is a living organism, the Body of Christ. A body lives and breathes, grows and changes. The needs of the Church have always taken precedence over convention, and sometimes over canon law. More than 30 years ago four young deacons were ordained to the Holy Priesthood by the Primate before their marriages, in contradiction of canon law. The needs of the church, to have four more priests, outweighed the canon which required the Ordinary to wait until each one had married. In recent times in Armenia and in the United States, several celibate priests have been relieved of their vows of celibacy and been permitted to marry and function as kahanas*, in direct opposition to the Church's canons. However, it was the need of the Church to retain their services as priests which took precedence over canon law. This is the principle of *ekonomia*, which the Church has practiced for centuries,

* *married priests*

that its needs, the needs of the people, take precedence over its law. As Our Lord Himself said, "the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." (Mk. 2:27)

God continues to call women into the ordained ministry. It is the Holy Spirit who prompts the desire for ordination to the diaconate in the hearts of these women. Permitting the graces of ordination to those desiring them would be recognition that their service is part of the apostolic ministry of the Church. Ordaining women to the diaconate would provide the Armenian Church with more ministers at a time when she needs them desperately. The need of the present day for more workers in the harvest may lead us in the Church to rethink our conventions of an all-male diaconate and return to the traditions of earlier times.

At the center of New Testament teaching is St. Paul's statement that "in Christ there is neither male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Such understanding of the equality of men and women, given to us by Baptism, may direct us to a realization of a fuller expression of ministry for our female members.

May we all be open to the leadings of the Holy Spirit in this matter, that we, the Church, may truly be the living, breathing Body of Christ, striving to spread His word to every corner of the world.

Paramus, N.J.