

Deaconesses

An ancient ministry effectually bringing the compassion of
God to the modern world

- Our own society
- Women in poverty, without family, raising kids alone
- Divorce, abuse, trauma
- Economic problems
- Mental health
- Lack of catechesis, sacramental preparation
- Unprecedented levels of sickness
- God's compassion, love, and answer

Women, Children in Need

- Biblical
- Patristic

- Romans 16:1-2 Phoebe diakonon
- Timothy 3:8-12 These women must be grave, not slanderers, sober, full of faith

Ancient office of Deaconess

- Diakonon means service freely and lovingly given
- Other Greek words for slaves or service for pay
- I came not to be served, but to serve.
- I am among you as one that serves (as a loving servant)

Diakonon

- Numerous patristic references in the eastern church
- Sts. Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Sozomen
- Reached highest numbers in fourth, fifth and sixth centuries
- Expected that there would be many, even in small churches

Patristic References

- Deaconesses did not participate in the sacrament of holy orders.
- They were set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands by the bishop
- Considered clergy in both civil and ecclesiastical law.
- Diaconal stole, but no liturgical function except in baptism
- Servants of the chief pastor's pastoral heart

Deaconess as Clergy

- “O bishop, you must take for yourself workers for justice, helpers who will cooperate with you in guiding others toward life. Those among the people who most please you in this respect should be chosen and instituted deacons: on the one hand, a man for the administration of the many necessary tasks; on the other hand, a woman for ministry among the women. For there are houses where you may not send deacons, on account of the pagans, but to which you may send a deaconess. And, also, because the service of a deaconess is required in many other domains.”

**Women could go where men
couldn't**

- 112
- 2 ancillae quae vocantur ministrae
- Ancillae (female declension), handmaid, not fieldhand, household servant, could be nanny or wetmaid, beloved member of household
- Quae vocantur (who are called)= they had a title
- Ministrae=minister, translation of diakonon

Roman Governor Pliny to Emperor Trajan

- Virgins—ministry of prayer
- Widows—primarily ministry of prayer, may assume ministries of deaconesses in some communities
- Deaconesses-focused on service

3 groups of ministering women

- Anointing the bodies of the newly baptized with sacred chrism
- Chastity very important
- For this reason, many communities called only women who were 40 to 60 as deaconesses

Liturgical role of deaconess

- Assisted in administration of baptism—
annointing with sacred chrism
- Instructed catechumens and newly
baptized (mystagogy stage of
catechumenate)
- Oversight of widows & orphans
- Teaching & discipleship of women
- Messages from bishop to women

Functions of Deaconess in early church

- Ministry to the Sick and Poor in homes or hospitals
- Spiritual care (bringing Eucharist, anointing with oil of sick)
- Nursing the sick in their homes

Deaconesses' Ministry to Sick

- Ministered to the martyrs in prison
- Presided over the women's entrance to the church, examining letters of strangers and assigning seats
- Taking the Eucharist to those women who were sick or in prison. She was a lay Eucharistic minister de facto.

Functions of Deaconess in early church

- May she exhort the women who are disobedient; may she instruct those who are ignorant; may she convert sinners and teach them how to be modest... She will teach those entering (into the church) how they are to behave, and she will instruct those going out. She will patiently impart to the (female) catechumens what is appropriate and necessary; after three reprimands she will not longer deal with those who are disobedient. She will love and cherish those who aspire to live a life of purity or virginity; she will reprimand with modesty and reserve those who are hostile and rebellious; she will maintain a peaceful disposition with all; she will reprove in particular those who are prolific in vain words

Didascalia's description of pastoral role

- Order was never abolished
- After 6th century, declined
- Decline of Roman empire made it unsafe for women to live and work alone, and the protection of cloister became necessary.
- Monasteries absorbed deaconesses' functions.
- Then active women's religious life suppressed. Too dangerous.

Decline of Deaconesses

- Began in the monasteries: St. Vincent DePaul, 1625 “Your convent must be the houses of the sick, your cell the chamber of suffering, your chapel the parish church, your cloister the streets of the city.”
- 1734 non-juring Scottish bishops desired to revive deaconesses due to their patristic studies
- Early 19th century awakening of church, return to strong sacramental life and piety of the Oxford movement birthed concern for sick and poor

Restoration of Deaconesses

- 1822 Kaiserworth, Germany, Lutherans
- 1862 Bishop Tait of London set apart Elizabeth Ferard as a deaconess by the imposition of hands
- 1885 first deaconess consecrations in US
- 1889 General Convention canon for deaconesses

First Deaconesses in Centuries

REC Canon on Deaconesses

- **Section 1** A woman of devout character and aptitude may be set apart to the lay order of Deaconess by any Bishop of this Church, having jurisdiction in the Diocese or Missionary Diocese in which she shall serve.
- **Section 2** The duty of a Deaconess is to assist the Minister in the care of the poor and sick, the religious training of the young and others, and the work of moral reformation, but shall not include the performance of any liturgical function which is reserved to those in Holy Orders.
- **Section 3** No one shall be appointed Deaconess until she shall be at least twenty-three years of age; nor until she shall have laid before the Bishop testimonials certifying that she is a communicant of this Church in good standing, and that she possesses such characteristics as, in the judgment of the persons testifying, fit her for at least one of the duties above defined. The testimonial of fitness shall be signed by two Presbyters of this Church, and by twelve lay communicants of the same, six of whom shall be women.
- The Bishop shall also satisfy himself that the applicant has had an adequate preparation for her work, both technical and religious, which preparation shall cover the requirements as established by the Council of Bishops.
- **Section 4** No Deaconess shall accept work in a Diocese without the express authority, in writing, of the Bishop of that Diocese; nor shall she undertake work in a Parish without the like authority from the Rector of the Parish.
- **Section 5** When not connected with a Parish, the Deaconess shall be under the direct oversight of the Bishop of the Diocese in which she is Canonically resident. A Deaconess may be transferred from one Diocese to another by Letters Testimonial.
- **Section 6** A Deaconess may at any time resign her office to the Ecclesiastical Authority of the Diocese in which she is at the time Canonically resident, but she may not be suspended or removed from office except by the Bishop for cause, with the consent of the Standing Committee, and after a hearing before the Bishop and Standing Committee.
- **Section 7** No woman shall be recognized as a Deaconess until she has been set apart for that office by an appropriate service, to be prescribed by the Diocesan Bishop.

Deaconess Canon of REC

- All faith, wisdom and humility
- Meekness and gentleness of Christ
- Deeds of love
- Loving service, fruits of the Holy Spirit

Specific Character of Deaconesses

- The candidate with a vocation to an office in the Church needs more than professional training. The work of a deaconess is arduous and often lonely; she needs a deep spiritual reservoir to draw from in the arid times. She is a spiritual shepherdess, particularly to the women and children of Christ's flock, the fortunate and the unfortunate needy souls. It is no easy task to go out in the name of the Church, expected to carry responsibility, yet to be willing to follow; to be strong physically, mentally, and spiritually, but never to fail in tenderness, sympathy or helpfulness toward the weak, the simple, and the foolish. During the training period, her vocation must be nourished and developed and special training given in the ministrations of the office." Dss. Mary Truesdale, Quincy

More than Professional Training

- Mission-oriented interest in holistic evangelism & discipleship
- A manifestation of Christ's tender love
- Scriptural plan to do a supernatural work through the power of God
- Practical strategy to recruit, form and support individuals in carrying out the ministry of the Church

The REC cares about the poor & sick, women & children

- Committee to recruit, train and support deaconesses
- Report potential vocations!
- Report potential benefactors!
- Support the ministry where it currently exists
- Strengthen a ministry of apostolic origin

What now