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# Highlights in the History of the Female Diaconate

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The early Apostolic Church set its seal of approval upon the ministering function of women, for in the records of the second century we find that women were solemnly ordained to a diaconate. While the appointment to the female diaconate excluded from the functions of public teaching and worship, it was considered co-equal with the male diaconate regarding the exercise of active charity.

With the growth of the congregation the work of administration, which in the beginning had been exceedingly simple, had grown to such proportion that if it were to be efficiently rendered, a division and further organization of labor was necessary. Out of this necessity grew the diaconate, to which were transferred certain official duties of the congregation. And this was enlarged in its scope so as to admit of the work of women.

There can be no doubt that the office of the diaconate of women is mentioned in Romans 16:1-2. The verses read: "I commend unto you Phoebe, our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea, that ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you; for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also." "Phoebe was a deaconess of the church." That is, she held an office to which she was set apart by the church at Cenchrea, from which follows: It is not an office which she had assumed for herself, or one transmitted by external succession from other deacons, but the congregation at Cenchrea had called her and set her apart to the work. She thus became, and remained even while at Rome, an officer of the Cenchrean church. We also note that her office was not a ministry of the Word or Sacrament, but a ministry of mercy, a ministry of the church, for the church, and by authority of the church. Nor is it to be understood that her work was a mere philanthropic work. The deaconess work is not to be a mere work of charity in ministering to temporal needs. Its end and aim is deeper and higher, viz., to save souls lost in sin for Christ. This is the end; the others are means. As the work fails in this, it loses its commanding position, and the deaconess becomes no more than a professional nurse or an ordinary parish visitor, or a mechanical agent and tract distributor.

Furthermore, the work must be done under the immediate direction of the minister as the head of the congregation. This is self-evident. Without this the work might easily become, and probably would soon become, a disorganizing factor in a congregation.

Returning from this dogmatical discursus to the historical, *there had been nothing* like the deacon and deaconess work before. It was a revelation to the heathen world. The Church proclaimed through such service of love the brotherhood and equality of men. She knew no national distinctions, such as Hebrew or Greek, no social differences, embracing the poor, the destitute, in the systematic charity of the Church. As her Lord had died for all, so she was come to care for all.

In the third century we find frequent reference to the office. The Apostolic Constitutions, Book 3, says: "Ordain a deaconess who is faithful and holy for the ministries toward the women." Pliny, the heathen writer, in his celebrated letter to Emperor Trajan, says, when speaking of the efforts which he made to obtain information respecting the opinions and practices of Christians: "I deemed it necessary to put two maidservants who are called deaconesses to the torture in order to ascertain what is the truth." In the third century we find into how large a system the first spontaneous charity had developed. Never had the world seen more heroic deeds of self-sacrificing love than those of Christian women, the deaconesses of the Church, in those memorable days. They nursed the sick; they visited the prisons; they followed the martyrs to the stake and stood with them on the bloody sand of the amphitheater. They carried their lives in their hands, willing at all times to be offered up in their service. These consecrated women are mentioned under the names *diakonoi* (deaconesses), *viduae* (widows) or *ancillae Dei* (handmaids of God).

The most noted of all the deaconesses of the early Church was Olympias, a friend and admirer of Chrysostom, the golden-tongued preacher of Constantinople. No fewer than eighteen letters are addressed by him to "my lady, the Deaconess Olympias, most worthy and beloved of God." She was descended from a good family, in early life was left an orphan and inherited large wealth. At an early age she was married and in less than two years was left a widow. The Emperor Theodosius desired to have her marry one of his own kindred, but her purpose was to devote herself to the Church, seeking for that reward which she opined is gained by an ascetic life.

*Possessing great wealth*, she was prodigal in her charities. Drinking in the spirit of the times, she developed that form of piety then so prominent, seen in almsgiving and austere practices. When Chrysos-

tom was expelled from the bishopric, he is mentioned as going to the baptistry and calling "Olympias together with Pentadia and Procla, the deaconesses, and exhorted them to fidelity to the Church and prayed them to yield obedience to whosoever might be his successor." The model deaconess of the fourth century practiced austerities in some of its most revolting forms. Thus Chrysostom in one of his letters to her writes: "I not only marvel at the unspeakable coarseness of thy attire, surpassing that of the very beggars; but above all, at the shapelessness, the carelessness, of thy garments, of thy shoes, of thy walk." And Palladius, a contemporary, says: "She abstained from animal food and went for the most part unwashed."—Many quotations could be given to show that the diaconate had declined from its original purity and position before the end of the fourth century and was being buried beneath the false doctrines and practices which arose in those times. They were a protest against the sins so prevalent in pagan life: gluttony, wine drinking, unchastity, ostentations, vanities, and turbulent mirth; the Church inculcated the opposite: abstinence, continence, humble dress, the disuse of ornaments, silence, and meditation. It is apparent that there was a wide extreme between Phoebe, the simple but useful deaconess of the church of Cenchrea, and Olympias, the wealthy, pious, but ascetic deaconess of the church of Constantinople.

While the records of the Eastern Church afford us clear testimony of an organized ministry of women workers during the fourth century, there is no direct evidence that such an order existed in the Western Church of the first four centuries, and it is difficult to ascertain to what extent the diaconate was established. In the sixth century we meet with the deaconess in Gaul. The councils mention it only to condemn it. Thus the 21st canon of the Council of Epaone (A. D. 517) declared that "the consecration of widows whom they call deaconesses we wholly abrogate from all our region," and a late canon of the Second Council of Orleans (A. D. 533) reads: "Moreover, we determine that to no woman hereafter shall the diaconate benediction be entrusted, by reason of the frailty of the sex." In spite of these prohibitions the female diaconate maintained its existence in Gaul for over 100 years.

It may be well to note that the female diaconate was never forbidden by any Eastern council, nor, with the exception of a few local synods in Gaul, was it ever abolished by the Western Church. Gradually however, the office fell into disuse, and the deaconess passed out of sight. This was, no doubt, due to the rise and spread of false ascetic principles, and in particular to the practice of religious celibacy. The deaconess was placed under the pernicious vow of celibacy and became

a nun. The nuns lived together in close, secluded communion. By and by monasticism reigned supreme, monasticism with its perpetual vows and galling observances and doctrines which were but the traditions of men. Shut in by the high wall of the cloister, separated from the wicked world by a grated iron door, these caged saints considered themselves a little holy inner world, thoroughly killing the age-long struggle of the loving female heart to be useful to a needy world. It was all a mistake, a sad, dark, pernicious mistake — this unscriptural falsehood of superior sanctity and exclusiveness.

Thus perished the institution of the female diaconate. The beautiful river whose living waters were designed to refresh and gladden the barren desert of human woe and suffering was itself lost in the barren desert of monasticism. But though it disappeared for a time, the office was not dead, but lay dormant until it emerged once more, and today it continues its beneficent influence.

Already in the eleventh to the thirteenth century a period opens in which women strive for a larger sphere of activity in the field of charity and to set themselves free from the shackles of monasticism. As early as the tenth century we find in Germany and Belgium the flourishing *Beguine Sisterhoods*, founded on the principle of fellowship and consisting of widows and unmarried girls who, without separating themselves wholly from their kind or vowing poverty, perpetual chastity, or absolute obedience, yet led, either at their own homes or in common dwellings, a life of prayer, meditation, and charitable ministrations. These sisters cared for orphans and the aged, went out to nurse the sick, to attend deathbeds — in short, there is perhaps none of the natural diaconal functions of women which they did not perform. They wore their own peculiar uniform. This Beguine movement really offers the first complete realization of the idea of a *collective female diaconate*, in the shape of free sisterhoods of women, and it is very significant that these institutions arose and took root in those great cities of North Germany, Flemish and German France, Switzerland — almost the whole range of those populations over which Protestantism spread itself two or three centuries later. They were thoroughly evangelical in spirit and were in a way forerunners of the coming Reformation. It is significant that the Beguines embraced almost everywhere the doctrines of the Reformation.

After the Reformation we notice an ever-growing attempt to revive the type of the early deaconess, which finally led to the work of Fliedner in Kaiserswerth and Loehe in Neuendettelsau. It may be interesting in this connection to note that the Pilgrim Fathers had, for a period at

least, their ordained deaconesses. In one of the memorials of the Pilgrim Fathers there is a description of one of the congregations, wherein we are told that there were 300 communicants, two pastors and teachers, four ruling elders, three able and godly men for deacons, one aged widow for a deaconess. Elsewhere, too, we read of similar appointments in Protestant churches.

However, the beginning of the deaconess work as a *collective* movement was made at Kaiserswerth on the Rhine, a Roman Catholic town. Thither in the latter part of the 19th century the starting of a silk factory attracted a number of Protestant families. To this parish, Theodore Fliedner, a young candidate of theology, was appointed as pastor. The salary was \$135 a year, and a debt of several thousand dollars rested on the property. But he joyfully accepted the proposal as a call from God. As his congregation was small, he had time to interest himself in the forlorn prisoners in the jail at Duesseldorf, six miles away. The spiritual neglect pierced his heart. The condition of the hospitals also lay heavy upon his thoughts. The attendants were incompetent and brutal. No regular provision was made for the consolation of the Gospel at the bedside of the sick and dying. He opened a little house in his garden, 10×10 feet in size, for a woman discharged from prison who wished to live a Christian life. Others came, a larger house was filled, but as for helpers — there were none. If, he thought, the Church of the Apostolic days had made use of Christian women under the title of deaconesses and if for centuries the Church had continued to appoint such deaconesses, why should he longer delay the revival of such an office? He resolved to start a training school and trusted that God would send thither the needful money, the sick people, and also the nurses.

In vain Fliedner pleaded with the neighboring pastors of more prosperous congregations to begin the work. When in the spring of 1836 the largest house in town was offered for sale, he bought it with not a dollar for the first payment. Soon after, Gertrude Reichardt, a young woman of proven Christian character, offered to come on the 20th of October as the first probationer. But so great was Fliedner's zeal to begin that the first deaconess motherhouse was opened Oct. 13, 1836, without a deaconess.

The ground floor was arranged for the expected patients. "One table, some chairs with half-broken arms, a few worn knives, forks with only two prongs, worm-eaten bedsteads, and other similar furniture that had been given. In such humble guise did we begin our task, and with great joy and praise, for we knew, we felt, that the Lord had prepared

a place for Himself." The hospital received its first patient Oct. 18, 1836, and she was a Roman Catholic; even as today the institutions of which Kaiserswerth was the seed grain welcome the sick, distressed, and outcast without distinction of creed, nationality, or color.

Ten years pass, and a young American clergyman of 25 is walking the streets of London. A sudden shower drives him into the shelter of an open doorway, where he discovers before him a stately building, erected by a pious Jew to perpetuate the virtues of his deceased wife. It bore upon the memorial tablet over the chief entrance the simple inscription: "Within the orphan shall find compassion." With deep emotion Dr. Passavant (such was his name) examined the beautiful edifice, made himself familiar with its management, and when he turned away, there had been formed within him a resolution to begin a like institution in America for Christ and the Church. It was a turning point in his life. A few weeks later he reached Kaiserswerth and saw with amazement how wonderfully God had blessed the deaconess cause. The motherhouse already numbered 108 sisters; the Dresden Motherhouse for Saxony had been founded; and preparations were under way to begin a motherhouse in London, to which 5 sisters had been sent the previous year for the newly established German hospital.

The Rev. Passavant made an earnest plea for deaconesses for America and also left a sum of money that chosen sisters might be especially trained on condition that they be sent over within two years. But it was not until 1849 that Theodore Fliedner arrived in Pittsburgh, assisted in the dedication of the hospital that had been opened in January, and on July 17 solemnly installed the four deaconesses he had brought with him in the *first Protestant Church Hospital in America*. The seed had been transplanted, and the friends of the cause saw a flourishing motherhouse after the pattern of Kaiserswerth arise on these shores. The outlook was promising. Probationers presented themselves, and on May 28, 1850, Louise Marthens was solemnly consecrated the first American deaconess.

Though the Institution of Protestant Deaconesses of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, was chartered in the same year, no other deaconess was consecrated under its auspices until 1891, an interval of 41 years. Why was this? We will venture to give a few reasons which would seem to indicate that the project was premature. In the first place, the whole subject of the wider sphere for women's activity was just beginning to be agitated. The training of women for nurses had only been attempted a few years before in London at the suggestion of Elizabeth Fry. But the training school had not been a success, and

a world of prejudices—religious, social, professional—hedged in those who longed to give their sympathy, service, and life to the sick and suffering. Not until Florence Nightingale—and she voluntarily took her training at Kaiserswerth—by her marvelous work in the Crimean War brought down this Chinese wall of stupid prejudices and exhibited nursing as an art peculiarly suited to women's deft fingers and delicate intuitions and tact, was it admitted that woman could honor her sex and bless the work as a Christian nurse. Then, too, there were influences at work hostile to the movement. The political world in the United States was agitated at that time by passions that religious bigotry and intolerance intensified to fever heat. Anti-popish riots in Boston and Philadelphia led to bloodshed and a frenzy of hostility to everything that seemed to indicate the faintest similarity to anything connected with the Roman Church. The hatred of, and agitation against, foreigners—and at that time Germans and Scandinavians were pouring in in large numbers, creating in timid minds grave apprehensions of peril to American institutions—aggravated the situation. The tide of prejudice was so strong that the deaconess' habit was permanently laid aside, and more than once the sisters were assailed by the public press. The charge was that they were Roman Catholics in disguise and had taken the vows of celibacy. These continued misunderstandings could not but have an injurious effect upon the cause and the institutes under its care.

In the Apostolic age we see the Church in the amplest exercise of her divinely appointed duty of preaching the Word—of attending to the office of the Christian ministry. The Church magnified the office. She made it of first importance. She proclaimed God's truths with all her might. But she did more than this. She was not only an organization for the preaching of the Gospel, but likewise a charitable organization for carrying out into visible results the principles she proclaimed and the law of love she preached. She addressed men's eyes as well as their ears. She proclaimed God's revealed truth. But she was also a divine epistle "known and read of all men." Uncompromising was her preaching. But the preaching which aided so effectively in overcoming heathenism was the *visible* preaching of her charity, her divine love and pity toward mankind. And thus the female diaconate made a tremendous contribution to the spread of Christianity.

We exalt and extol purity of doctrine—but it is idle to sneer at humanitarianism. The Church that visits the sick, comforts the sorrowing, cares for the widows and fatherless, and preaches the Gospel to the poor, is the Church which people will confess to be the real Bride of



Christ. The world has become almost deaf to words. But if not ears, it has eyes. It can see a visible Gospel, and one of the most beautiful visible representations of Christianity is the evangelical deaconess in her quiet and self-sacrificing work of Christian benevolence.

Give us, O good Lord, a female diaconate devoted freely and wholly to this most important work; a female diaconate, prepared and educated for the work and consecrated to it by the invoking of the Holy Spirit. It has always been a blessing and needs but a more general recognition and a more enthusiastic support at the hands of loyal Lutherans to bear yet more abundant fruit.

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