

E N C Y C L I C A L L E T T E R
OF
His Serene Highness
THE MOST REVD. EDMOND JOHN KERSEY, SUPERIOR-GENERAL OF THE ORDER OF
ANTIOCH
Concerning
The Ordination of Women

EDMOND, The Servant of Jesus Christ, by the Grace of God Superior-General of THE ORDER OF ANTIOCH :

UNTO Our well-beloved Sons in Christ ANDREW LINLEY, Titular Archbishop of Mount-Carmel, ANTHONY SCUDERI, Titular Bishop of Gaza; and unto all the Faithful In Jesus Christ throughout the World :

Peace, Health and Apostolic Benediction!

Most Reverend Fathers, Good People :

THE arguments in favour of the admission of women to Holy Orders have been recounted at length by scholars in other contexts, and we do not propose to reiterate those arguments in this place except in outline terms for the purposes of necessary exemplification.

1. The Order of Antioch is representative both of the pre-Nicene tradition of the undivided Church of Christ and of the precepts of Orthodoxy as defined by the canon of St Vincent of Lerins, each being understood in the context of the 1889 Declaration of Utrecht.

2. The ordination of women is an issue which has profound historical and theological implications and that is currently the subject of earnest discussion in other communions. We issue this Encyclical for the benefit of the faithful, and to clarify both the canonical position of the Order of Antioch and the basis of that position. As a preliminary, we restate our position that "The traditional Christian believes sexuality and gender are psychological, biological, significant, and permanent" [Women and the Priesthood, edited by Fr. Thomas Hopko, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999, p 200]

3. Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, one of the foremost scholars in contemporary Orthodoxy, has written: "The order of deaconesses seems definitely to have been considered an "ordained" ministry during early centuries in at any rate the Christian East. ... Some Orthodox writers regard deaconesses as having been a "lay" ministry. There are strong reasons for rejecting this view. In the Byzantine rite the liturgical office for the laying-on of hands for the

deaconess is exactly parallel to that for the deacon; and so on the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* – the Church's worshipping practice is a sure indication of its faith – it follows that the deaconesses receives, as does the deacon, a genuine sacramental ordination: not just a χειροθεσια (chirothesia) but a χειροτονια (chirotonia). However, the ordination of women in the Catholic Church does exist. Although it is not widespread, it is official by the Roman Catholic Church.” [“Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ,” in *Women and the Priesthood*, ed. T. Hopko (New York, 1982, reprinted 1999), 16, as quoted in *Women Deacons in the Early Church*, by John Wijngaards, ISBN 0-8245-2393-8.] We should note that the Greek Orthodox Church has admitted two women to the diaconate in recent years.

See <http://web.archive.org/web/20041011174458/http://www.ana.gr/anaweb/user/showplain?maindoc=2182957&service=10> “The church High Clergy also re-examined the matter of the ordination of deaconesses, a practice common in the Church during the 4th and 5th centuries which was later faded away. The synod decided that bishops could decide at their own discretion to ordain certain high-ranking nuns if no priest was available, for example in isolated monasteries. It was stressed that the role of deaconesses should be social, for example the granting of last rites to the sick. According to the Archbishop of Peristeri, deaconesses should “play a role in society and not in the monastery.”

4. It is further evident that women occupied positions of ministry and leadership in the Christian Church of the first century after Christ. Such examples include Priscilla who with her husband Aquila (both of these are counted among the Seventy) instructed the powerful preacher Apollos, Lois and Eunice who taught Timothy (their grandson and son respectively) as a child and were noted as eminent for their piety and faith, Phoebe who is named as a deacon in the church at Cenchreae, and deacons Mary, Tryphaena, Typhosa and Persis who are mentioned by St Paul. Of the later church, we note the deacon Olympias, among the close friends of John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople, and the Episcopa Theodora, mother of Pope Paschal I.

5. Of the examples given at 4 above, the most theologically significant is that of the deacon Phoebe who is mentioned in Romans 16:1. This reference should be read together with the passage in 1 Timothy 3:11 where St Paul describes the qualities that holders of the office of deacon must possess, “the *gunaikas* [Greek for women] are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.” We also note that the church at Philippi was established by and was in the charge of three female deacons, Euodia, Syntyche and a third, for which St Paul uses the affectionate term, *syzugē* to mean “mate” (Phil. 4:1-3).

6. The evidence thus presented in 5 above indicates that it is clear beyond doubt that women were admitted to the ordained diaconate in the early Church. Following the interpretation of Metropolitan Kallistos in 3 above we cannot regard the interpretation that the female diaconate was a lay ministry, or that the status of "deaconess" was separate from the diaconate, or a term that meant anything other than "female deacon", as in any way credible. Further, the sacrament of Holy Orders is a unified sacrament, that is to say if a woman may be ordained deacon, there is no theological impediment that would then prevent her in theory from being ordained priest or consecrated a bishop. However, it should not be concluded that the role of female deacons was necessarily directly analogous to that of male deacons with respect to the Eucharist.

7. Additional reference to female deacons is to be found, *inter alia*, in the Didascalia of the Apostles, where it is claimed retrospectively that Mary Magdalene, Susanna and Joanna were among their number. The Council of Nicaea of 325AD likewise makes reference to female deacons. The legislation of Justinian in the sixth century mentions female deacons on multiple occasions, and in the Great Church of Hagia Sophia he lists the male and female deacons together, and goes on to specify that there should be one hundred male and forty female deacons. In the eighth century the Barberini Codex contains a rite for the ordination of female deacons which is in large part identical to the corresponding rite for male deacons. In the tenth century, Constantine Porphyrogenitus in *De Ceremoniis* refers to a special area for female deacons in the Hagia Sophia.

8. Many female deacons in the early church were in monastic orders (particularly abbesses) or widows (such as Olympias). However, others were the wives of bishops. Although a number of communities were founded by female deacons for unmarried women (whether widows or virgins), marriage did not preclude the raising of a woman to the diaconate. The Apostolic Constitutions recognise female deacons as having power over widows.

9. After the time of Constantine, notwithstanding a number of examples mentioned above, the female diaconate was gradually suppressed by forces within the church which sought to subjugate women and promote an ordained ministry that was exclusively male, and in time would become exclusively celibate.

10. The Order of Antioch must condemn such developments as those listed at 9 above, as is the case with many others of Constantinian innovation, as abhorrent to the Church of Christ. It cannot collude with any party that seeks to deny the facts of the history, origins and practices of the Church in order to promote a particular theological agenda. It preserves its obligation to represent

truthfully and in faith that tradition which develops directly from the heart of the teachings of Jesus Christ, as a body holding the Pre-Nicene theological position and thus as a representative of Traditional (Old) Catholicism and Orthodoxy. However, it rejects those arguments for the ordination of women that originate not in Tradition, but in contemporary secular modernism and feminism. It holds not that sexual distinction is something to be effaced, or that there are no psychological differences between male and female, or that the soul is sexless. Rather, it holds that the ordination of women is of a particular nature with the female just as the ordination of men is of a particular nature with the male.

11. The Order of Antioch is engaged in earnest prayer and ministry with the object of the restoration of the true Catholic faith and eventual reunion with the Holy See. As such, we must regret any pronouncement designed to make this object more difficult or distant.

12. The Order of Antioch therefore affirms its commitment to the ordination of women and the historical and theological basis of this commitment in the practice and teaching of the undivided One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: *Lex orandi, Lex credendi*. It holds that such ordination is valid.

13. Notwithstanding this conclusion, it is clear that at present the Body of Christ is divided profoundly on this issue, and the position of the Order of Antioch must therefore not be to place any obstacle towards reunion, or to cause the validity of its Holy Orders to be called into question.

14. The decision of the Order of Antioch is therefore that women should not be admitted to Holy Orders at the present time, although the question of their admission to the diaconate will be left open for further consideration in due course. The Order will continue to advocate the case for the ordination of women within the Roman Catholic Church, and will seek to follow the lead of that church on the matter.

15. The Order's policy on this matter is influenced by its origins, history and close relationship to the Holy See. It recognizes that other Christian communities may not share in these factors, and, not seeking immediate union with the Holy See, may come to other conclusions on them. No policy of the Order of Antioch shall be deemed simply by its existence to invalidate or otherwise affect the past actions of any of its members while serving in other Christian communities.

Given on 9 September 2012 by H.S.H. the Most Revd. Edmond John Kersey, O.C.R., O.A.

 Edmund P.

Superior-General

+ A. Liz.

Titular Archbishop (Witness)

No. 5 of 2012

