



February 2, 2018
Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord

Dear OTSA Members,

The conspicuous polarization of our time has been in the making for many years both in society at large and within Christian communities including the Orthodox Church in North America. Since the *raison d'être* of OTSA is to foster dialogue on matters important to Orthodox theology and in service to the Church, the officers of the Society have decided to address the Society's membership on a subject we believe to be of general concern. What gives immediate rise to our decision are recent contrasting sets of initiatives and statements in favor of and opposed to a renewed female diaconate, in both sets of which there have been OTSA members involved.

Robust disagreement has characterized the Christian tradition from its inception. Although not an end in itself, controversy has often been the crucible in which the faith's coherence has been clarified. Divergent doctrinal approaches have sometimes proven reconcilable in our history; at other times, a debate's proper resolution has required affirming one approach and excluding another. Thus not every sharpening of differences is necessarily wrong: fierce opposition to a particular view may arise from a charitable and spiritually mature commitment to preserve unity in the authentic faith.

Yet in a time in which strongly held convictions are expressed on all sides, we may remember that other less salutary factors besides firmness of faith can contribute to polarization. To maintain a stance of unyielding resistance often demands less of us intellectually and spiritually than to make an attempt to understand a theological opponent's point of view, especially if it means subjecting our own to renewed and rigorous questioning. Alternately, we may seek to please others and avoid awkward disagreement: it may be that the same person who is "courageous" in blasting a theological opponent is remarkably timid in voicing even mild dissent towards a more extreme "ally." Sterile polarization may be in evidence when two theological subgroups engage in forceful confrontation, while at the same time showing little distinction or variation among their respective members. In such a case, disagreement has ceased to aid in the deepening of thought.

The question of the female diaconate has generated a kind of disagreement in the Church today that we believe is at risk of taking on this character of sterile polarization. As OTSA officers, whatever our individual leanings, we concur in the belief that further effort to understand differing perspectives is to be encouraged in the present stage of the Church's discussion among laypeople, scholars, clergy, and hierarchs. For this reason, last year OTSA was a sponsor of the conference "Renewing the Male and

Female Diaconate” organized by the St. Phoebe Society, which since 2013 has been “dedicated to education regarding the historical deaconess and her role” (<https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/about-us/>). As a sponsoring organization, OTSA does not endorse dialogue indiscriminately: when episcopal authority or the clear consensus of the faithful indicates that a given matter is settled, discussion of it can have little ecclesial value. But we do not find this to be the case with respect to this question. The historic order of deaconess is found in important layers of Orthodox tradition, even while there is debate concerning its development and its significance, both in the past and for today, and the nature of its relation to the male diaconate. There is therefore merit in continuing analysis and ecclesiological reflection. The fact that this issue does not stand alone, and that a certain urgency surrounding it is influenced by how it may be understood as connected with other basic matters (e.g., of theological anthropology), also should be given proportionate consideration in such reflection.

While it will not be the meeting’s primary focus, questions surrounding the female diaconate are likely to be taken up among other topics at OTSA’s next annual meeting scheduled for October 18-20 in Brookline, MA, devoted to the theme of liturgy and the arts. A call for papers will be going out to the OTSA membership in the coming weeks. As always, we ask everyone to mark their calendars and consider participating.

We have offered our comments as ones well aware of being caught up with others in the challenges and temptations that a polarized environment poses for all of us in the Church. We are also grateful that God will enable us, in the midst of our tensions, to be united in the fervent desire for His gifts of humility, charity, and wisdom in our ongoing discussions.

With thanks and all best wishes in Christ,

Will Cohen, President
Dn. Michael Azar, Vice President
Edith Humphrey, Secretary
Teva Regule, Treasurer