

The Early Church Fathers on Women's Ordination

Some who favor women's ordination note that the Early Church spoke of deaconesses. Since deacons were members of the clergy, they assume that deaconesses must have been as well. They further contend that if a deacon can move on to the priesthood, there should be nothing to stop a deaconess from doing the same? But they would be wrong. To be a deacon or deaconess simply means to be a minister or servant. And service can be rendered in a variety of ways. And so, it was with deacons and deaconesses in the Early Church. The record clearly illustrates this. Early Church writings describe the roles of both deacons and deaconesses. And nowhere do we find women performing the duties reserved to the clergy. Rather we find them assisting in other ways. Most notably, they helped women maintain their modesty during baptism or when they were sick.

Clement of Rome

Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate. For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect fore-knowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men [not women] should succeed them in their ministry (*Letter to the Corinthians* 44 [A.D. 95]).

Tertullian

It is not permitted to a woman to speak in the church; but neither (is it permitted her) to teach, nor to baptize, nor to offer, nor to claim to herself a lot in any manly function, not to say (in any) sacerdotal office (*On the Veiling of Virgins* 9 [A.D. 207]).

Hippolytus

When a widow is appointed she is not ordained but she shall be chosen by name... Let the widow be instituted by word only and let her be reckoned among the widows. But she shall not be ordained, because she does not offer oblation nor has a ministry. But ordination is for clergy on account of their ministry. But the widow is appointed for prayer... (*Apostolic Tradition* 1:4:5 [A.D. 215]).

The Teaching of the Apostles

We do not permit our 'women to teach in the Church,' but only to pray and hear those that teach; for our Master and Lord, Jesus Himself, when He sent us the twelve to make disciples of the people and of the nations, did nowhere send out women to preach, although He did not want such. For there were with us the mother of our Lord and His sisters; also Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Martha and Mary the sisters of Lazarus; Salome, and certain others. For, had it been necessary for women to teach, He Himself had first commanded these also to instruct the people with us. (3:6 [A.D. 225]).

Firmilian of Caesarea

But that woman, who previously by wiles and deceitfulness of the demon was attempting many things for the deceiving of the faithful, among other things by which she had deceived many, also had frequently dared this; to pretend that with an invocation not to be contemned she sanctified bread and celebrated, the Eucharist, and to offer sacrifice to the Lord, not without the sacrament of the accustomed utterance; and also to baptize many, making use of the usual and lawful words of interrogation, that nothing might seem to be different from the ecclesiastical rule (Fragment in Cyprian's Letters 74[75]:10 [A.D. 256]).

Council of Nicea

Likewise, in the case of their deaconesses, and generally in the case of those who have been enrolled among their clergy, let the same form be observed. And we mean by deaconesses such as have assumed the habit, but who, since they have no imposition of hands, are to be numbered only among the laity (Canon 19 [A.D. 325]).

Council of Laodicea

Presbyters as they are called, or female presidents, are not to be appointed in the Church (Canon 11 **[A.D. 360]**).

Epiphanius

It is true that in the Church there is an order of deaconesses, but not for being priestess, nor for any kind of work of administration, but for the sake of the dignity of the female sex, either at the time of Baptism, or of examining the sick or suffering, so that the naked body of a female may not be seen by men administering sacred rites, but by the deaconess (*Panarion* 79:3 **[A.D. 377]**)

John Chrysostom

[W]hen one is required to preside over the Church, and to be entrusted with the care of so many souls, the whole female sex must retire before the magnitude of the task, and the majority of men also; and we must bring forward those who to a large extent surpass all others, and soar as much above them in excellence of spirit as Saul overtopped the whole Hebrew nation in bodily stature: or rather far more (*On the Priesthood* 2:2 **[A.D. 386]**).

Apostolic Constitutions

I, the same, make a constitution in regard to virgins: A virgin is not ordained, for we have no such command from the Lord; for this is a state of voluntary trial, not for the reproach of marriage, but an account of leisure for piety (8:24 **[A.D. 400]**).

A widow is not ordained; yet if she has lost her husband a great while, and has lived soberly and unblameably, and has taken extraordinary care of her family, as Judith and Anna – those women of great reputation – let her be chosen into the order of widows (ibid 8:25).

A deaconess does not bless, nor perform anything belonging to the office of presbyters or deacons, but only is to keep the doors, and to minister to the presbyters in the baptizing of women, on account of decency (ibid 8:28).

For this is one of the ignorant practices of the Gentile atheism, to ordain women priests to the female deities, not one of the constitutions of Christ. For if baptism were to be administered by women, certainly our Lord would have been baptized by His own mother, and not by John; or when He sent us to baptize, He would have sent along with us women also for this purpose. But now He has nowhere, either by constitution or by writing, delivered to us any such thing (ibid 9:3).

Augustine

“[The Quintillians are heretics who] give women predominance so that these, too, can be honored with the priesthood among them. They say, namely, that Christ revealed himself . . . to Quintilla and Priscilla [two Montanist prophetesses] in the form of a woman” (*Heresies* 1:17 **[A.D. 428]**).

Council of Orange

Female deacons are by no means to be ordained. If there are any who have been already ordained, [illicitly] let them submit their heads to the benediction that is granted to the laity (Canon 26 **[A.D. 441]**).

Council of Chalcedon

A woman shall not receive the laying on of hands as a deaconess under forty years of age, and then only after searching examination. And if, after she has had hands laid on her and has continued for a time to minister, she shall despise the grace of God and give herself in marriage, she shall be anathematized and the man united to her (Canon 15 **[A.D. 451]**).