

## PRIESTESSES OR PRIESTS' WIVES: *PRESBYTERA* IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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It is widely recognized within the academic community that women were ordained to the diaconate in the Eastern church according to the evidence of early church orders,<sup>1</sup> although there is still some disagreement as to the nature of the ordination, i.e., to “major” or “minor” orders.<sup>2</sup> There is even more conflict among scholars regarding the ordination of women in the early church to the other two major orders of clergy, that is, the priesthood and the

1 Although it does not give the ordination rites, the early third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum*, extant in Syriac from a probable Greek original, parallels the ministry of female deacons to that of male deacons; A. Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vols. 401/407, Syr. 175 and 179 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1979); English translation in A. Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vols. 402/408, Syr. 176 and 180 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1979). Book VIII, 3-5, 16-26, of the fourth-century Syriac *Apostolic Constitutions*, which is heavily dependent on the earlier *Didascalia*, gives the ordination rite for bishops, presbyters, deacons, deaconesses, subdeacons and readers, and the consecration rite for confessors, virgins, widows, and exorcists; Marcel Metzger, ed., tr., intro. critical text, notes, *Les Constitutions Apostoliques, Tome III, Livres VII et VIII*, Sources Chrétiennes 326 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987), 138-48, 216-28; English translation in “Apostolic Constitutions,” in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, reprint ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 481-83, 491-93.

2 In the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the ordination of the deaconess is listed immediately following that of the male deacon, and is virtually identical in format to that of the deacons and presbyters. As with those two male orders, the bishop is to lay hands on the woman to be ordained deaconess “in the presence of the presbytery and of the deacons and deaconesses,” and to ordain her with a prayer corresponding to her female ministry: it mentions women of the Old Testament who were filled with the Spirit and served the Temple, and alludes to the Theotokos. The omission of the word “ordination” (χειροτονία) in the instructions has led Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, trans. K. D. Whitehead (San Fran-

episcopacy. The present article assesses the arguments over the past two decades of early church historians in both the United States and Europe, such as Giorgio Otranto<sup>3</sup> of the University of Bari in southern Italy and Karen Jo Torjesen<sup>4</sup> of Claremont Graduate University, that women in the early church were ordained or appointed to these other major orders, especially the priesthood (presbytery).

In the absence of extant references to women presiding over and serving liturgically as presbyters in communities, scholars and other interested parties who have made this claim base their hypothesis on one or more of three types of evidence: 1) art historical evidence, primarily from the Roman catacombs, that women presided over the eucharistic celebration; 2) literary, especially canonical, prohibitions against the ordination of women; and 3) epigrammatic evidence that women held the rank of presbyter and bishop. It is outside the scope of this study to examine all the

cisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 67–75, to conclude that the deaconess was not considered part of the ordained clergy. However, the similarity in format, as well as later evidence, has led most other scholars to the opposite conclusion, including Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. Jean Laporte and Mary Louise Hall (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1976), 62–63, 115–20 (the latter section is a direct response to Martimort); Evangelos Theodorou, “*Ἡ «χειροτονία» ἢ «χειροθεσία» τῶν διακονίσσων*,” *Theologia* 25:3 (July–Sept. 1954), 449–50; and Cipriano Vagaggini, “L’ordinazione delle diaconesse nella tradizione greca e bizantina,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974), 163–73. Paul F. Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West* (New York: Pueblo, 1990), 84, sidesteps the issue by cautioning against an over simplistic categorization of ministries and orders in the early church.

3 Giorgio Otranto, “Note sul sacerdozio femminile nell’antichità in margine a una testimonianza di Gelasio I,” *Vetera Christianorum* 19 (1982): 341–60; Giorgio Otranto, *Italia meridionale e Puglia paleocristiane: Saggi storici* (Bari: Edipuglia, 1991). An English translation of the former Otranto article appears in Mary Ann Rossi, “Priesthood, Precedent, and Prejudice: On Recovering the Women Priests of Early Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7:1 (Spring 1991): 75–94 (the translation appears on pp. 78–93, specifically).

4 Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993). Note that this article is not intended to address, much less dispute, the primary thesis of Torjesen’s book, that women held leadership positions in the church when it was home-based and “private,” but were marginalized as the church became licit and public.

arguments in detail, but representative examples of these three types of evidence will be reviewed, in the above order, to evaluate their merit within their own contexts, beginning with the evidence of catacomb frescoes.

*The Art Historical Evidence*



*Plate 1 Fresco from the Greek Chapel,  
Priscilla Catacomb, Rome, early third century*

The artistic representation perhaps most frequently commented upon is this early third-century banquet scene from the Greek chapel of the Priscilla catacomb in Rome [plate 1]. Depicting a meal of some sort, traditionally it has been interpreted as a possible eucharistic scene, with all of the figures presumed to be male with the exception of the third from the right (for example, in the chapel built above this catacomb, a reproduction of this damaged fresco portrays all the other six figures as male). In the past two decades or so, however, some have challenged this based on what they perceive as feminine gestures, garments, and body shapes in the other six figures—the image even appears in a calendar with early Christian images of women clerics. Torjesen uses the image at the beginning of chapter 2 of *When Women Were Priests*, averring that “[t]he clothing and hairstyles worn by the participants suggest that most of them are women.”<sup>5</sup> Mary Ann Rossi believes these figures all to

<sup>5</sup> Torjesen *When Women Were Priests*, 52

be women presiding at a Eucharist, suggesting that they were bishops or presbyters.<sup>6</sup> The poor condition of the fresco makes it unlikely that there can be any secure determination, but two neglected points make less credible the argument that all the figures are female.



*Plate 2: Orans figure, Cubiculum of Velatia, Priscilla Catacomb, Rome, mid-third century*

First, and most importantly, interpreting all the figures as women ignores the significance of the veiled female figure. In late antiquity, it was considered indecorous for a woman to be seen in public unveiled, and the Apostle Paul specifically prohibited women from preaching (“prophesying”) in church with their heads unveiled.<sup>7</sup> The fact that one of the few things that can be discerned in the fresco from the Greek chapel of the Priscilla catacomb is a veil

6 Both Mary Ann Rossi and Carol Kroegeer argue that all seven figures are women in the documentary video, *Women’s Ordination: The Hidden Tradition*, 58 min. (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1992).

7 1 Cor 11:4–16.

on one of the figures, and the corollary fact that women typically *are* depicted veiled, specifically when praying, undermines the argument that this fresco depicts seven women.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, while the veil on one of the figures indeed indicates that it depicts a woman, it is unclear whether this is a liturgical meal and, more importantly, whether anyone is presiding over this meal in a liturgical sense. Kenneth Steinhauser doubts the eucharistic interpretation of the fresco. Rather, he suggests that “the painting depicts not a eucharistic celebration but a *refrigerium*, a commemorative meal at the tombs of the dead, which Christians had inherited from their pagan ancestors.”<sup>9</sup> Steinhauser points out that both literary and archeological evidence shows that early Christians celebrated funeral meals in both East and West, including Rome specifically.

Another possibility is that the fresco may depict an *agape* (“love”) meal. These meals were shared by the entire Christian community, but were distinct from the Eucharist.<sup>10</sup> The possibility of an *agape* meal is strengthened by the significance of the number of figures—seven. This may be an allusion to the clerical order of

8 Linda Sue Galate, “Evangelium: An Iconographical Investigation of an *Ante Pacem* Image,” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1997), has effectively argued that these two images, as well as numerous other *orant* catacomb figures, were not representations of biblical or other actual women, but should be read as a symbol of the Good News of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This of course does not detract from the argument that women are typically shown veiled when praying; in fact, almost all of the numerous catacomb images given in the Galate dissertation are shown with veiled head. The author thanks Dr. Galate for her generosity in discussing this issue (in fact, Dr. Galate provided additional support by noting that late antique women typically are shown unveiled only under special circumstances, e.g., when in mourning).

9 Kenneth B. Steinhauser, “Images of Women in Christian Antiquity,” in *Equal at the Creation: Sexism, Society, and Christian Thought*, eds. Joseph Martos and Pierre Hégy (Toronto, Buffalo, & London: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 49–69, at 63.

10 For example, Gregory Dix, in his translation of Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition*, gives chapter 26 the title “Of a Private Agape”; Gregory Dix, ed., *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr*, reissued by Henry Chadwick (London: SPCK, 1968), 45. For more on the *agape* meal, see Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre, 1945), 82–85.

the diaconate since seven deacons were originally chosen to minister to the apostolic Christian community: in particular, to ensure fairness in the daily distribution of food among the members of the community.<sup>11</sup> In other words, even if the fresco does depict clerics, these figures may be male and female *deacons*, not presbyters or bishops.

In brief, then, the paucity and ambiguity of specifically liturgical depictions of women in early Christian frescoes combine to produce an art historical record which provides no strongly persuasive—much less conclusive—evidence that women were ordained to either the priesthood or the episcopacy in the early church.

### *The Canonical and Epistolary Evidence*

The second type of evidence for the ordination of women to the priesthood in the early church is based on the logical inference that, if something is repeatedly prohibited and condemned, either formally or informally, it probably is occurring with regularity. This is how Eisen, for instance, interprets several prohibitions to the inclusion of women in the ranks of the priesthood and of the episcopacy (that is, the order of bishops), prohibitions which appear occasionally and in various forms in the early Christian church.<sup>12</sup> She notes in particular the fourth-century Cypriot bishop, Epiphanius of Salamis, who included in his *Panarion* a polemical treatise against heretical groups, several passionate tirades against the ordination of women to the priesthood or episcopacy, denouncing such practices as contrary to Christian tradition and to both Old Testament and New Testament scriptural injunctions, as in the following passage:

They ordain women among them bishops and presbyters because of Eve, [not hearing] the word of the Lord: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16). But the apostolic word remains hidden from them: "I permit no woman to speak or to have authority over a man"

11 Acts 6:1–6.

12 Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 117–21.

(1 Tim 2:12) and again: “Man is not from woman, but woman from man” (1 Cor 11:8) and “Adam was not deceived, but Eve was first deceived and became a transgressor.”<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Otranto has interpreted another episcopal tirade—a letter of Pope Gelasius I, written in the year 494 to the churches in Sicily and southern Italy admonishing them not to allow women to minister at the altar<sup>14</sup>—as evidence that women were ordained in these areas as priests or, to use the more accurate terminology, presbyters (that is, “elders”).

It is important to contextualize these various prohibitions before drawing any inferences from them. For example, Eisen and Otranto place great weight on a few instances of a bishop (particularly Epiphanius) denouncing the ordination of women or their presiding liturgical participation. However, the reliability of such denunciations as evidence of actual practice becomes problematic when one notes that the practices being denounced are occurring in areas *other* than the one where the writer himself lives, i.e., they do not come from firsthand observation and experience. The axiom “where there’s smoke, there’s fire” is not sufficient from a scholarly point of view; there must be some evidence of the fire itself *in situ*. This lack of firsthand, descriptive witness of women priests from those attacking the ordination of women thus adds additional doubt to the credibility of asserting that such practices might have been common in the early church in certain geographic areas – or even that they occurred at all. Epiphanius, for instance, decried every heresy he ever got wind of, whether the information

13 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49, 2.2–5, 3.2 (GCS 31 (1980), 242ff). English translation in *The Panarion of St Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis. Selected Passages*, translated by Philip R. Amidon (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 173–74; quoted in Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 118. The last scriptural quotation is from 1 Tim 2:14.

14 “Nihilominus impatenter audivimus, tantum divinarum rerum subisse despectum, ut feminae sacris altaribus ministrare firmentur, cunctaque non nisi virorum famulatus deputata sexum, cui non competent, exhibere.” Otranto, *Italia Meridionale*, 100–107; Otranto, “Note sul sacerdozio femminile,” 343–49 (Rossi, “Priesthood,” 80–84); see also Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 129.

he had received was accurate or not.<sup>15</sup> While his diatribes certainly illuminate his own views about the legitimacy of women clerics, Epiphanius thus can scarcely be categorized as a credible witness to the actual practices of heretical groups, particularly given that he is inaccurate in his description of female orders within the catholic Church, an inaccuracy probably deriving, again, from his lack of firsthand experience and knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

As for the papal letter, Gelasius never uses any specific clerical titles to describe the women he accuses of taking on liturgical functions. Otranto argues that the way in which Gelasius depicts their actions points to the priesthood, but it is unclear 1) whether these women are actually ordained members of the clergy at all; and 2) if ordained, whether they are presbyters or deacons, the latter being a possibility since the word *ministrare* ("to serve" = Greek *diakonein*) is used,<sup>17</sup> and since, as Otranto himself notes, southern Italy was strongly Hellenized and thus likely to be familiar with women deacons.<sup>18</sup> In fact, it is entirely possible that the women to whom Gelasius referred were serving at the altar (*feminae sacris altaribus ministrare*) either without ordination or as female deacons, since it is unclear what exactly was the nature of their altar ministry.

In reality, there really is only one canonical prohibition which has some meat to it. That is Canon 11 from the mid- to late fourth-century Council of Laodicea, in the province of Phrygia in Asia Minor. This canon forbids the appointment of women as what the council calls *presbytides*, or female presbyters. Because several of the terms used in this canon clearly indicate clerical status and thus the

15 See, e.g., Elizabeth Clark's discussion of his inaccuracies in Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 86–100.

16 See below regarding his conflation of the orders of deaconess, *presbytis*, and widow.

17 While this Latin word has the generic meaning "to serve," the word *ministrae* was used for female deacons, just as the Greek word *διάκονος* has both generic and technical meanings. See, e.g., the second-century letter to Trajan of Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. Pliny informs the emperor that he has tortured "two servants, who are called [female] deacons" (... *ex duabus ancillis, quae ministrae dicebantur* ...). The letter is discussed in Gryson, *The Ministry of Women*, 14–15.

18 Otranto, "Note sul sacerdozio femminile," 349–51 (Rossi, "Priesthood," 84–85).



canon provides perhaps the strongest evidence for a separate women's clerical order, the *presbytis* (singular form) will be discussed in a separate section below. However, it should be noted at this point that the literary evidence for *presbytides* is quite sparse and inconsistent,<sup>19</sup> and—unlike the title *presbytera*—the terms *presbytis* and *presbytides* occur rarely in the early Christian sources and monumental remains which the next section examines.

### *The Epigrammatic Evidence*

The final major evidence for the contention that women were ordained to major orders in the early church are epigrams, primarily in the form of archeological remains of funerary steles. Among the first to raise the possibility of women priests in early Christianity on epigrammatic grounds was Joan Morris.<sup>20</sup> Based on inscriptions which included the titles *presbytera* or *episcopa* for certain women, Morris asserted that women had been widely ordained as presbyters and bishops. Little of this material was new. However, within both academic and ecclesiastical circles, the women in these inscriptions had been understood as the wives of priests and bishops.<sup>21</sup> Morris provided no satisfactory answer to that interpretation, and Mary Jo Torgjesen resurrected it two decades later, again with no attempt to refute the rejoinder that the titles were honorary ones accorded to spouses.<sup>22</sup>

Other scholars have recognized the ambivalent quality of the

19 There are probably not more than a half dozen texts which refer to *presbytides*, and the meaning of the term is not identical in all of them. See the entry for *presbytis* in *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 1131.

20 Joan Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop. The Hidden History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (New York; London: Macmillan, 1973).

21 The married episcopacy died out in both Eastern and Western Christianity, although married men were often consecrated as bishops in the early Church; similarly, the practice of allowing married men to be ordained to the priesthood was formally disallowed in the Latin West beginning in about the fourth century, but continued to exist in practice into the medieval period. To this day in the Orthodox Churches, the wife of a presbyter is called by the feminine form of that term; thus, within the modern Greek Orthodox Church, the title *presbytera* is still used for the wife of a priest.

22 Torgjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, 9–10, 114–15.

titles *episcopa* and *presbytera*, but have proposed that the epigraphical context for the use of these titles, in certain instances, is inconsistent with an interpretation of "wife of ...." Giorgio Otranto,<sup>23</sup> and, most recently, Ute Eisen<sup>24</sup>—have studied and reassessed epigrammatic evidence<sup>25</sup> which they assert demonstrates that there were women officeholders in early Christianity.

Otranto has argued that epigrams for women titled *presbytera* or *episcopa* which do not include their husband's name cannot be for the wives of clergy because male presbyters and bishops would not commission inscriptions for their wives without including their own names in the inscriptions.<sup>26</sup> However, this is not necessarily true. The widow of a priest or bishop probably would still have continued to be known within the community by the feminine form of her late husband's title, even though she was no longer technically the wife of a presbyter or bishop; in this case the inscription might have been paid for by the parents or other members of the woman's family. Furthermore, a widowed *presbytera* or *episcopa* may have chosen to remarry.<sup>27</sup> Although remarriage was frowned upon in early Christianity, it was permitted, and it was not until the Council in Trullo, held in Constantinople in 691–92, that the former wives of bishops were considered to be barred from remarrying in the Eastern Church, by virtue of their subsequent monastic vows and possible ordination as deaconess.<sup>28</sup> Even then, the canon says nothing about the wives of priests. Not until the 12th to

23 Otranto, *Italia meridionale*; Otranto, "Note sul sacerdozio femminile."

24 Eisen, *Women Officeholders*.

25 While some of the epigrams are literary, most are monumental inscriptions, the overwhelming majority of which have been found in the Greek-speaking half of the late Roman Empire, i.e., Asia Minor, the lower Balkan peninsula, and Sicily and southern Italy.

26 Otranto, *Italia meridionale*, 109–15; Otranto, "Note sul sacerdozio femminile," 351–54 (Rossi, "Priesthood," 86–88).

27 This may have been the case, e.g., with respect to the epigram for Leta, discussed in Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 129–31; Otranto, *Italia meridionale*, 109–10; Otranto, "Note sul sacerdozio femminile," 351–52 (Rossi, "Priesthood," 86–87).

28 Canon 48, in G. A. Rhalles and M. Potles, *Σύνταγμα τῶν θείων καὶ ἱερῶν κανόνων*, Vol. 2 (Athens: G. Chartophylax, 1852), 419.

14th centuries do the Byzantine canonists Theodore Balsamon and Matthew Blastares interpret it as normative for these women as well.<sup>29</sup>

The most exhaustive exploration of these inscriptions is by Ute Eisen, who examines, in addition to the epigrammatic evidence for women with the titles of various charismatic offices—such as apostle, prophet, and teacher—those with the titles of consecrated or ordained offices: enrolled widows, deacons, presbyters, and bishops. Again, as with the evidence brought forward by Morris, most of the cited inscriptions refer to a woman by the feminine form of a male clerical title, i.e., *episcopa* and *presbytera*. Eisen relies heavily on Otranto regarding the interpretation of the title *presbytera* in monuments from southern Italy, and she adds as additional evidence Gregory the Great's consistent use of the word *coniux*, not *episcopa*, for the wives of bishops in his *Historiae*.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, she argues, the term *episcopa* in Canon 14<sup>31</sup> of the Council of Tours, held in 567, probably did not refer to the wife of a bishop because there is "no other instance in Latin literature of a bishop's wife being titled *episcopa*. We must conclude from this that as a rule the title *episcopa* was not applied to bishops' wives."<sup>32</sup>

There are a couple of problems with this argument. One is that the term *episcopa* does appear in the Greek-speaking East (quite naturally, since the term *episcopos* is itself Greek) where, as noted above, it generally refers to the wives of bishops. There is no reason to assume that *coniux* is the only term which may be used for the

29 See Roman Cholij, *Clerical Celibacy in East and West* (Leominster, England: Fowler Wright Books, 1989), 25–30; Patrick Demetrios Viscuso, "A Byzantine Theology of Marriage: The 'Syntagma Kata Stoicheion' of Matthew Blastares" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1989), 173–77. Cholij claims that a bishop's wife was not required to take the monastic tonsure until the legislation of Isaac II Angelus in 1187, but in fact Canon 48 uses the word *ειστροω*, which is the third person imperative form of the verb *εισσειμι*, "to enter" or "to go into."

30 Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 200.

31 "Episcopum episcopam non habentem nulla sequatur turba mulierum."

32 Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 200. Gary Macy, "The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages," *Theological Studies* 61, no. 3 (September 2000): 490–91, finds merit in Eisen's argument.

wife of a bishop in the Latin West based solely on Gregory the Great, particularly given the small number of references. A second, more serious problem is the logic behind Eisen's rejection of this traditional interpretation of the word *episcopa* in the canon from the Council of Tours. This canon, like many others in both East and West, is obviously meant to prevent sexual misconduct. Hence, a bishop is not allowed to have women in his entourage with whom he is not intimately related by blood or marriage; in other words, this canon forbids female ecclesiastical "groupies" (*turba mulierum*, or "a crowd of women") to serve him in the absence of a wife. Positing an unrelated female bishop as part of his retinue is highly implausible given the sense of the canon.

Thus, most of the evidence offered to support the contention that women were ordained to all three major clerical orders is less than compelling. However, there are two titles found in both epigrammatic and literary evidence which are compelling and which, by virtue of their distinctiveness, simultaneously weaken even further the argument that women were ordained to the priesthood and episcopacy in the early church in the Christian East, a practice which then presumably vanished in the early Byzantine period. These two titles are *presbytis* (female presbyter or elder) and *diakonos* (deacon). It is the latter office for which we have the most evidence in late antiquity, and which continued to exist well into the middle Byzantine period. Before examining the female diaconate, however, let us turn first to the relatively unknown and unexplored question of the *presbytides*.

### *The presbytis*

The feminine title *presbytis* (plural *presbytides*) is the one word used in some epigrams,<sup>33</sup> and in a very few documentary sources, which may indicate a true presbyteral office of some sort for women. It is etymologically connected to the usual women's title *presbytera*, but is distinct from it, and may be a true feminine equivalent to the

33 See Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 123–28.

masculine *presbyteros*. Unfortunately, we know almost nothing about the *presbytides* of the first two or three centuries because there are very few references to them, and Christian authors writing either later or from other geographical areas generally assume them not to have been clergy. Typical of this opinion is Epiphanius, late-fourth-century bishop of Salamis in Cyprus (if one equates *presbyterides* with *presbytides*):

Now it should be observed that church order required only deaconesses (ὅτι ἄχρι διακονισσῶν μόνον τὸ ἐκκλησιαστικὸν ἐπεδείθη τάγμα); it also included the name “widows” (χήρας τε ὠνόμασε), of whom the older were called “eldresses” (πρεσβύτιδας), but were never assigned the rank of “presbyteresses” (πρεσβυτερίδας) or “priestesses” (ιερίσσας). For that matter, not even the deacons in the church hierarchy were entrusted with celebrating the Eucharist; they only administered the Eucharist once consecrated.<sup>34</sup>

In what appears to be the only scholarly article devoted to the question of the *presbytis*,<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Afanasiev has hypothesized,<sup>36</sup> on the basis of Epiphanius' remarks and inferences from the fourth- or fifth-century Syrian *Testament of our Lord*<sup>37</sup> that the *presbytides* of the *Testament* may indeed have been senior Widows.<sup>38</sup> In the *Testament of our Lord*, the deacon's petitions include separate petitions, in order, for the ranks of the clergy—bishop, presbyters, deacons, *female presbyters* (*presbytides*), and sub-

34 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 79, 3, 6; 4, 1 (GCS 37, 478); English translation in Amidon, *Panarion*, 353; quoted in Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 119.

35 Nicholas Afanasiev, “Presbytides or Female Presidents,” in *Women and the Priesthood*, rev. ed., ed. Thomas Hopko (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1999), 79–92.

36 Afanasiev, “Presbytides,” 81–82.

37 *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, edited by I. E. Rahmani (Mainz, 1899).

38 Robert Taft similarly equates the two, identifying the *presbytides* of Canon 11 of Laodicea with “the widows who sit in front” in the *Testament*. See Robert Taft, “Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When—and Why?,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998): 27–87, at 32.

deacons<sup>39</sup>—with the petition for the *presbytides* reading as follows: “For the female presbyters let us beseech, that the Lord hear their supplications and in the grace of the Spirit perfectly keep their hearts [and] support their labour.”<sup>40</sup>

However, the placement of the petition for the female presbyters between those for the deacons and for the subdeacons—the same position the Widow occupies both in the *Testament's* rites of ordination<sup>41</sup> and in its eucharistic order<sup>42</sup>—indicates that the *presbytides* were not ranked with the male presbyters but rather occupied a liminal position between the male deacon and the subdeacon similar to that of the female deacon in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.<sup>43</sup> This congruence in the placement of the *presbytides* in the deacon's petitions with the canonical Widow in both the ordination rites and the eucharistic order, together with the omission in the *Testament* of either any description of the functions of the *presbytides* or mention of them in the eucharistic order, led

39 “Pro presbyteris (feminis) supplicemus, ut Dominus exaudiat earum supplicationes et perfecte in gratia spiritus custodiat ipsarum corda, adjuvetque earundem laborem.” *Testamentum I*, 35, in Rahmani, *Testamentum*, 86–87. In a footnote, Rahmani states that his Latin translation “presbyteris (feminis)” of the Syriac *qaššā* (“female elders” or “female priests”) corresponds to what he believes to be *πρεσβύτιδες* in the lost Greek original; he also cites canon 11 of Laodicea. The author is grateful to Frederick G. McLeod, SJ, for his help with the Syriac.

40 English translation in Grant Sperry-White, *The Testamentum Domini: A Text for Students, with Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1991), 22.

41 *Testamentum I*, 40–3 (the deacon's section occupies chapters 33–39, while the subdeacon's ordination appears in chapter 44 and the reader's in chapter 45). See Rahmani, 78–107; Sperry-White, *The Testamentum Domini*, 43–45 (English translation only of the ordination prayers).

42 *Testamentum I*, 23; in Rahmani, *Testamentum*, 46–47; Sperry-White, *The Testamentum Domini*, 19. Deaconesses receive communion with the laity, as the first among the women.

43 See n.2, above. As in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the word “ordination” is not used in the section title for the ordination of Widows, but it is used in the text at the beginning of chapter 40 (Rahmani)/41 (Sperry-White). In his annotations, Sperry-White, p. 43, observes that the same Syriac word for ordination (*mettastha<sup>n</sup>nuta*) is used here as for “the bishop, presbyter, deacon and subdeacon, another indicator of the higher regard in which T [the *Testamentum*] places the widows of the community.”

Afanasiev to conclude that the *presbytides* in the *Testament* “were the eldest of the widows and therefore were included under the rank or number of widows.”<sup>44</sup>

While it is clear that they were indeed included under the Widows, there is no reason to suppose that the *presbytides* were only “the eldest of the widows,” a conclusion which Afanasiev presumably based on Epiphanius’ account. Rather, it is likely that the title *presbytides* was simply a synonym for canonical Widow, since the canonical Widows—particularly as defined in the New Testament—were older women in any case.<sup>45</sup> Regardless, the ranking of clergy evidenced by the order for the ordination rites and for reception of the Eucharist is further corroborated by the liturgical instructions for the eucharistic consecration, which call for the Widows to stand immediately behind the presbyters on the left side of the altar, mirroring the deacons’ placement behind the presbyters on the right side.<sup>46</sup> All of these rubrics indicate a clerical structure in the *Testament* where Widows—and, hence, logically, the *presbytides* mentioned in the deacon’s petitions—were the female equivalent of male deacons.

44 Afanasiev, “*Presbytides*,” 81.

45 1 Tim 5:9: “Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once. . . .” (NRSV) For more on consecrated Widows, see Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989).

46 *Testamentum* I, 23, in Rahmani, *Testamentum*, 34–37; English in Sperry-White, *The Testamentum Domini*, 13–14. Curiously, in the *Testament*, deaconesses are mentioned but appear to be ranked with subdeacons and readers—in the deacon’s petitions (I, 35, in Rahmani, pp. 86–87) they are commemorated in the same petition with them, and the rubrics for the eucharistic consecration call for the deaconesses to stand behind the subdeacons—or even lower, to judge from the order of eucharistic reception given in I, 23 (see n. 42, above). On the one hand, this relatively late text appears out of step with the evidence in other early church orders of the fourth century, such as the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which rank the deaconess among the clergy (see the next section of this article) and the Widow as consecrated but not ordained. On the other hand, it illustrates the ambiguous and complex relationship between Widows and deaconesses in early Christianity. See Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 166–83; also, Susanna Elm, “Vergini, vedove, diaconesse: alcuni osservazioni sullo sviluppo dei cosiddetti ‘ordini femminili’ nel quarto secolo in oriente,” *Codex Aquilarensis* 5 (1991): 77–90, and Thurston, *The Widows*, 52.

However, Afanasiev distinguished the *presbytides* of the *Testament* from those mentioned in Canon 11 of Laodicea, which demands that “so-called *presbytides* or [female] presiders (*προκαθημένας*) shall not be appointed (*καθίστασθαι*) in the church.”<sup>47</sup> Ute Eisen has convincingly argued that Epiphanius unjustifiably conflated three different women’s offices (deaconess, *presbytis*, and Widow) into one, and that Canon 11 of Laodicea, with its use of the clergy-specific term *καθίστασθαι*, implies that the *presbytides* held a leadership position.<sup>48</sup> Afanasiev equally regards the

47 “Περὶ τοῦ, μὴ δεῖν τὰς λεγομένας πρεσβύτιδες, ἤτοι προκαθημένας, ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ καθίστασθαι.” Ioannes Baptista Pitra, *Iuris ecclesiastici graecorum historia et monumenta iussu Pii IX. Pont. Max. Vol. 1: A primo p. c. n. ad VI saeculum* (Rome: Typis Collegii Urbani, 1864; reprint, Bardi Editore, 1963), 496. Canon 44 from the same council excludes women from the sanctuary: “Ὅτι οὐ δεῖ γυναῖκας ἐν τῷ θυσιαστηρίῳ εἰσέρχεσθαι.” Pitra, *Iuris ecclesiastici*, Vol. 1, 501. However, it would be illogical to interpret this as a blanket exclusion of women from the altar area since other contemporaneous documents, including the *Testament*, imply that ordained women *were* in the altar, and were supposed to be there, as deaconesses and/or widows. Rather, it is more reasonable to assume that Canon 44 has one of two purposes: 1) to reinforce Canon 11’s prohibition against women presiding at the Eucharist; or 2) to exclude from the altar area certain non-ordained women, e.g., aristocrats or wealthy donors. The first view is echoed by Robert Taft, “Women at Church,” 32, who suspects that the canon “may have been addressing the problem of female ministry ... [in] some particular local situation perceived to be getting out of hand....” As for the second hypothesis, while Taft, 32, is no doubt correct in observing dryly that “one can hardly imagine that all laywomen of Asia Minor were flocking into the sanctuary at services,” some laywomen may have believed that they should be allowed into this liturgical space reserved for clergy. In fact, less than a century after the Council of Laodicea, the Augusta Empress Pulcheria, accustomed to receiving along with the emperor the paschal Eucharist within the sanctuary under Sisinnius of Constantinople, was furious when his successor, Nestorius, blocked her entrance into the sanctuary during the Easter liturgy in 428. See the English translation of the extant Syriac version of the fourth century *Letter to Cosmas* 8 in Taft, “Women at Church,” 70.

48 Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 119–20. It should be noted, however, that in the early-third century *Apostolic Tradition*, while the term *καθιστάναι* is used for a bishop (sec. 10 in Dix, *Apostolic Tradition*, p. 18, regarding a confessor’s becoming a bishop), it is also used for the deacon (sec. 9, in Dix, 15–16) and the Widow (sec. 11, in Dix, 20–21) in non-sacerdotal and non-clerical senses, respectively. In the section on the deacon, a distinction is made in types of ordination: the deacon “is not ordained (*χειροτονεῖν*) for a priesthood, but for the service of the bishop” (11, 2, p.



presbytides here as clergy, although he emphasizes, instead of *καθίστασθαι*, the “well-defined, quite unambiguous liturgical meaning” of the term *προκαθήμεναι*.<sup>49</sup>

However, Afanasiev did not thereby conclude that *presbytides* exercised a presiding *liturgical* role since he pointed out that, as seen in the Ignatian epistles, “it is a fact that the first presbyters had no liturgical functions”; rather, they formed “the council or, as St Ignatius of Antioch expressed it, the *synedrion* or “senate” of the church.”<sup>50</sup> Only “in exceptional circumstances” did presbyters preside over the Eucharist “since the bishop himself celebrated the eucharist as the natural expression of his leadership whenever he was present at the assembly.” Thus, Afanasiev proposed an alternative theory which better fits both the positive evidence and the evidence *ab silentio*. He posited that perhaps women in the early church had supervisory roles as *presbytides* from which they were later restricted as the increasing size of the church made it impossible for the bishop to oversee the sacramental needs of his entire flock, leading the presbyters to adopt a clearly liturgical and sacramental office at the “parish” level from about the second half of the third century.<sup>51</sup> John Meyendorff argued similarly:

Some sources suggest that women-presbyters (*πρεσβύτιδες*) were found in some churches, but they disappeared when presbyters, and not only bishops, assumed regular presidency at eucharistic celebrations.<sup>52</sup>

15), which is why “the bishop alone shall make (*χειροτονεῖν*) the deacon” (11, 5, p. 16). With respect to the Widow, the *Apostolic Tradition* distinguishes between appointment (*καθίσταται*) and ordination (*χειροτονεῖν*) (11, 4, p. 20), which “is for the clergy (*κλήρος*) on account of their <liturgical> ministry (*λειτουργία*)” (11, 5, p. 21). See Dix, *Apostolic Tradition*, 15–21, and the discussion in Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God*, 168, esp. n. 86.

49 Afanasiev, “*Presbytides*,” 82. The principal meaning of the verb *προκαθήμεναι* is “to preside” in a clerical sense, particularly with respect to the bishop and/or other senior clergy. See the entry for the term in Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 1151.

50 Afanasiev, “*Presbytides*,” 84.

51 Afanasiev, “*Presbytides*,” 84–85.

52 John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1988), 50.

Afanasiev's rationale for not ascribing presiding liturgical functions to the *presbytides* is an unconvincing tautological one:

Therefore, if local churches ... had the kind of *presbytides* or female presidents that the Laodicean council describes, then it would be extremely unlikely that the bishop would have charged them to perform any sacraments. Christian consciousness, as in Judaism, firmly refused to recognize a priestly dignity in women.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, the sense of Canon 11—the rationale for its exclusion of *presbytides* who “presided” over the church—must be at least in part liturgical. If the *presbytides* had a purely administrative and pastoral role, there would have been no reason to reject them. Moreover, the presiding role of the bishop, and later the presbyter, was simultaneously liturgical and administrative; the “presider” was the effective head of the parish. Afanasiev and Meyendorff are certainly right in discerning the root of the problem in the changing functions of the presbytery in the early church. It was the very fact that presbyters were acquiring presiding sacramental functions which appears to have led to Laodicea's exclusion of women from the entire order. In other words, perhaps some *presbytides* actually were taking on the newly-acquired liturgical duties of the presbyteral order. Particularly if they had a prominent liturgical presence, as seen in the *Testament*, it would have been relatively easy to expand their liturgical role in a manner paralleling that of the male presbyters. Thus, *presbytides* did not lose their previous liturgical authority; rather, they were not able to expand it in the same way as male presbyters. Their male equivalents, in the *Testament*, were the deacons, not the presbyters, so it would not in any case have been appropriate for the *presbytides* to exercise presiding functions of any sort. Afanasiev was right in distinguishing the *presbytides* of Canon 11 from those of the *Testament*, but the two texts are alike in not recognizing a presiding liturgical function to this order.

Thus, there is no specific support for Eisen's assertion that the

<sup>53</sup> Afanasiev, “*Presbytides*,” 85.

*presbytides* must have “belonged to the higher clergy, which performed the service at the altar.”<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the strongest evidence against her assertion is the argument *ab silentio*. As Afanasiev pondered, “If female presidents existed . . . and if they were a Church-wide phenomenon, then we should have evidence about them in at least several other church documents. The absence of such documentation is what is so puzzling.”<sup>55</sup> Afanasiev is right; there is nothing more extant regarding the *presbytides*. Thus, there is too little evidence to say anything definitive about this order one way or the other, beyond the fact that 1) the *presbytis* does not appear to be the same as the *presbytera* and, at least in some instances, may be the same as the enrolled Widow; 2) the *presbytis* probably had some sort of supervisory function within early Christian communities, but there is no indication of a recognized supervisory *liturgical* function; and 3) the *presbytis* was canonically deleted from the ranks of church officials in the fourth century.

In general, therefore, the evidence of women in major orders other than the diaconate in the early church is spotty, unclear, and unconvincing. There is very little evidence extant for the one possible female clerical order outside the diaconate—that of the *presbytides*—but this order was legislated out of existence at the Council of Laodicea. Moreover, the argument *ab silentio* is a very powerful one. Even Epiphanius—who credits distant heretical groups with ordaining women and is at least familiar with the names (if not the distinction in function) of female orders in the catholic Church—nowhere mentions any instances of ordained women presbyters in the catholic Church, even in order to vilify such a practice.

### *The Female Deacon*

Given the lack of sufficient evidence for comparative purposes between the male *presbyter* and the female *presbytis*, a reasonable alternative is comparative analysis of the male and female diaconate

<sup>54</sup> Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 122.

<sup>55</sup> Afanasiev, “*Presbytides*,” 85.

in early Christianity. Curiously, such comparative analysis does not appear to have been undertaken by those scholars affirming women presbyters and bishops in the early church. Actually, that there is so much extant on the female diaconate in comparison to the fragmentary and ambiguous nature of the evidence for a possible female presbytery or episcopacy in the same era mitigates against a strong case for women in the priesthood and episcopacy. Given that such solid literary evidence exists for the female diaconate<sup>56</sup>—church orders, letters, synodal canons, as well as epigrams—it is difficult to ignore the significance of the absence of such material for a female priesthood and episcopacy.

Moreover, in the case of the title “deacon,” although the feminized noun *diakonissa* (which is comparable to *presbytera* and *episkopa*) appears in both epigrams and church documents for women deacons from about the fourth century,<sup>57</sup> the more common form in the first three or four centuries is the second declension, or grammatically masculine, word used with the feminine rather than the masculine article—i.e., ἡ διάκονος. For instance, the overwhelming majority of epigrams for women deacons in Eisen’s compilation are second declension (masculine endings), not first declension (feminine endings).<sup>58</sup> By contrast, no similar examples exist of the masculine forms *episkopos* and *presbyteros* used with the feminine article to denote women with these titles, although one would have expected the same format to have been used for these other orders, nor has any scholar affirming

56 It is not the purpose of this article to review the evidence of the female diaconate in the early church. The published research on this topic is already substantial, and several of the most important works are listed in n. 2, above. Other relevant articles and books include J. G. Davies, “Deacons, Deaconesses and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14 (1963): 1–15; Susanna Elm, “Vergini, vedove, diaconesse”; A.-A. Thiermeyer, “Der Diakonat der Frau,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 173 (1993): 226–36; and Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998).

57 Davies, “Deacons, Deaconesses,” 1, n. 1, states that the term *διάκονισσα* first appears in synodal literature in Canon 19 of the Council of Nicaea.

58 Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, ch. 7.

women presbyters and bishops in early Christianity suggested a reason for the use of the male term with the feminine pronoun for female deacons, but not for presumed female presbyters or bishops. This is perhaps the strongest *ab silentio* argument since there is considerably more epigrammatic evidence than canonical and other documentary evidence for women with possibly clerical titles, and thus there is a sounder basis for extrapolating from what is extant. This grammatical/terminological evidence both substantiates the general scholarly opinion that the female diaconate was recognized as a clerical order in the early church, and simultaneously undermines the argument that women were ordained or appointed as presbyters and bishops in their own right.

Finally, the early church orders and other extant material on the diaconate show that the female order is clearly seen as an adjunct to, but distinct from and subordinate to, the male diaconate. For instance, the *Apostolic Constitutions* requires that the deaconess neither say nor do anything without the male deacon.<sup>59</sup> This is because the female diaconate had a more limited ministry and function than did its male counterpart. Male deacons ministered to and oversaw the pastoral administration of the community as a whole, while female deacons ministered specifically to the women of the community, as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* articulates:

This is why, O bishop, you must take to 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 as 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.<sup>60</sup>

The rationale in this document for the female diaconate is pro-

59 *Apostolic Constitutions* II, 26: "Ἡ δὲ διάκονος ... μηδὲν ἄνευ τοῦ διακόνου φθειρομένη ἢ πράττουσα ..." Marcel Metzger, ed., tr., intro. critical text, notes, *Les Constitutions Apostoliques, Tome I, Livres I et II*, Sources Chrétiennes 320 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985), 238.

60 *Didascalia Apostolorum* 16, in Vööbus, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 156.

priety, i.e., to prevent the scandal that would be associated with the home visits of male deacons to unrelated female parishioners: "For there are houses where you may not send deacons, on account of the pagans, but to which you may send deaconesses. And also because the service of a deaconess is required in many other domains."<sup>61</sup> The concern for propriety can also be detected in two other functions of the deaconess: (assistant) baptizer and chaperone. Since all converts were anointed with oil and baptized nude in the early church as a visible symbol of their spiritual rebirth,<sup>62</sup> a female deacon<sup>63</sup> (or Widow, in the *Testamentum Domini*<sup>64</sup>) performed the physical baptism of adult women as male deacons did for men, although neither male nor female deacon was considered the celebrant.<sup>65</sup> As for the role of chaperone, the author of the *Apostolic Constitutions* was clearly aware of the potential for clergy sexual misconduct almost 1700

61 Ibid.

62 E.g., John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions* 2, 24, describes this part of the rite as performed in Antioch in the late fourth century: "Next after this, in the full darkness of the night, he [the bishop] strips off your robe and, as if he were going to lead you into heaven itself by the ritual, he causes your whole body to be anointed with that olive oil of the spirit, so that all your limbs may be fortified and unconquered by the darts which the adversary aims at you." Jean Chrysostome, *Huit catéchèses baptismales inédites*, intro., critical ed., tr. and notes Antoine Wenger, Sources Chrétiennes 50 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1957), 147. English translation in *St John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, tr. and annot. Paul W. Harkins, *Ancient Christian Writers* 31 (New York: Newman/Paulist Press, 1963), 52.

63 *Apostolic Constitutions*, III, 16, in Metzger, *Les Constitutions Apostoliques* II, 154–58; Francis X. Funk, *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1905), 201; cf. Vööbus, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 53.

64 *Testamentum Domini* II, 8, which also prescribes that women being baptized be shielded from the presbyter or bishop's view by a veil: "Then let women be anointed by the widows, who sit in front, the presbyter reciting over them. (But these widows, in the baptism, let them receive them beneath a veil, while the bishop says the profession, and thus those who renounce them." Rahmani, *Testamentum Domini*, 128–31; English in Sperry-White, *The Testamentum Domini*, 28.

65 Neither deacons nor deaconesses could baptize (III, 11), in Funk, *Didascalia*, 201, but this prohibition was underscored for women (III, 9), in Funk, *Didascalia*, 201, on the basis of women's subordination (see below) and the Virgin Mary's lack of a sacerdotal role. The important role of deaconesses in the baptism of adult women may have led to a blurring of distinctions in orders, and hence the admonition.

years ago when he admonished: "So let not any woman address herself to the deacon or bishop without the deaconess."<sup>66</sup> Not only does this instruction make clear the female deacon's role, but it also assumes that there are certain areas of pastoral activity for which a female parishioner must turn to a male deacon.

The more limited ministry of the female diaconate does not negate its recognition as an ordained order or that it was considered, in at least some parts of the church, to be a "major" order (to use the term anachronistically). Certainly, as demonstrated above, it was a liminal order, located between the male diaconate and the subdiaconate, and was in some fashion subordinate to the male diaconate. Nevertheless, it is clear that female deacons were ordained and had both pastoral and liturgical functions, although their ministry was more restricted than that of male deacons. In any case, the clear evidence of subordination and a more restricted ministry for female deacons further weakens the notion that women served equally as presbyters and bishops in the early Church.

### *Conclusion*

In summary, a review of the main arguments for the assertion that women served as presbyters and bishops in the early Christian church appear weak. There is no definitive art historical evidence because the banquet fresco in the Priscilla catacomb is badly damaged, the event it depicts and the presumed clerical order of the participants are unclear, and the sex of the figures depicted is ambiguous at best. The epigrammatic evidence for women presbyters and bishops is virtually non-existent since arguments for interpreting the titles *presbytera* and *episcopa* as clerical rather than spousal ignore the differing grammatical forms both for female deacons and for the little-understood *presbytides*. As for early church prohibitions of women in liturgical roles, the reliability of almost all of such prohibitions or condemnations is highly suspect

<sup>66</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions* II, 26: "οὕτως ἀνευ τῆς διακόνου μηδεμίᾳ προσίτω γυνὴ τῷ διακόνῳ ἢ ἐπισκόπῳ." In Metzger, *Les Constitutions Apostoliques* I, 238.

as they were about situations in locations distant from the authors condemning the practices.

The one exception to this is Canon 11 from the Council of Laodicea, which raises the question of who the *presbytides* were. It would be extremely valuable if more material could be found on them as the only female order, except the diaconate, attested to in the literature. The scanty evidence for them, however, shows a female, possibly clerical, order which appears most analogous to the male diaconate and whose existence was terminated by canonical legislation of a regional synod, apparently in order that they *not* exercise presiding functions. Finally, a comparative examination of the female diaconate demonstrates that the existence of a female presbytery or episcopacy is unlikely based on: 1) grammar and terminology, as noted above; 2) the lack of textual evidence for women presbyters and bishops in comparison to that for women deacons; and 3) the subordinate and more limited ministry of the female deacon relative to the male deacon.

It is difficult to recover, and particularly to interpret successfully, the incomplete and contradictory evidence of female clergy in early Christianity. Using such material for the purposes of modern polemics regarding the ordination of women to major orders today is even more problematic. On the one hand, there remains no convincing evidence of women presbyters and bishops in early Christianity. On the other hand, the evidence is clear that women were ordained to the diaconate and served a variety of pastoral and liturgical functions in that order. Moreover, the existence in the first centuries of the *presbytis* and the female deacon alludes to other leadership and supervisory roles, as clergy, which women had in early Christianity.

Any attempt to draw conclusions for the modern church from the practice of the early church must account for the cultural and social context of late antiquity. At a time when women held no official leadership offices in either Roman or Jewish society, when women clerics did not exist at all in Judaism and in the predominant (pagan) religion were generally limited to serving female dei-



ties,<sup>67</sup> the liturgical and pastoral functions given to women in early Christianity appear broad in comparison. It is not surprising that the early Christian church, existing in a patriarchal society and culture, did not give men and women equal liturgical and clerical offices. Rather, it is surprising, given the context of late antique society and Christianity's Jewish roots, that the early church appointed and ordained women as clergy at all.

<sup>67</sup> The most notable exception, the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, was a charismatic "office" whose holder did not interact with the public. The Oracle could, of course, exercise indirect authority and influence by her prophetic utterances, but her cryptic utterances were normally conveyed to the petitioner and interpreted by a male priest of Apollo.



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