

# ROLE OF THE DEACONESSSES IN THE ANCIENT TRADITION OF THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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**Abstract:** The problem of deaconesses in the history of the Church has aroused much interest for theologians and researchers over time, regardless of denomination or spiritual guidance. The terminological confusion between *cheirotenia* and *cheirotesia* in the early Church has brought a confusion regarding their status within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Although there are conflicting views on their liturgical role, we argue that the status of deacons were different from the deaconesses; their responsibilities being rather in the social area and catechetical-pastoral activities, especially among women.

**Keywords:** *Cheirotonia*, *Cheirotesia*, Cappadocia, Deaconesses, Liturgical Ministry.

## 1. Introduction

In the Orthodox tradition and practice the role and position of women were always very well defined. The same happened also with the hierarchy of the upper or lower clergy, although in the first centuries there were some ambiguities of an etymologically order, but not also of responsibilities. It is possible that some confusion occurred also due to the misuse of the term that designated the action by which a candidate was conferred with

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the honour or status as a member of the clergy. This is of course about the words *cheirotomia* and *cheirotesia*, both traditionally, but confusingly, rendered in English as *ordination*.

Today – at least within the Orthodox Church – there is no longer any doubt about the theological content of the two terms. *Cheirotomia* is the rite by which a male candidate is invested in one of the sacramental hierarchical orders, namely: the diaconate, the priesthood and the high priesthood (archiepiscopate), while *cheirotesia* is the ritual by which a candidate is given either the position of a member of the lower clergy, namely the one who reads (*lector*), hypodeacon, or one of the honorary grades (distinctions) for outstanding merits, pastoral, administrative or theological offered to the parish priests: *sakellarios* (blue belt-bearer), *oikonomos* (red belt-bearer) and *stavrophore* (cross-bearer) or to the monks: *singhellos*, *protosinghelos* and *archimandrite*, including being installed in a religious function, such as archpriest (for the parish priests) or abbot or prior (for the monks).<sup>1</sup>

Things were not as clear in the past. In other words, the meaning of the two terms, *cheirotomia* and *cheirotesia*, has varied over time, and even today there are different views on the meaning and the relationship between the realities expressed by them, most likely due to their etymological proximity. Both terms are based on the word *heir* (hand). In the case of *cheirotomia* this is joined to the word (verb) *teinein* (stretching), and in the case of *cheirotesia* it is joined to the word (verb) *titenai* (to put). Therefore, in a most simplistic way, *cheirotomia* would be translated as the action *to reach out*, what to the ancient Greeks held the meaning of *stretching the hand to vote or to choose*, with this last sense being also taken by the early Church, as we see in the Saint Apostle Paul "(Titus) was also chosen by the Churches ..." (2 Cor. 8:19). In turn, *cheirotesia* would be translated as the action of *putting the hand*, suggesting that, at the beginning, it

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<sup>1</sup>Ene Braniște, *Liturgica Specială (Special Liturgical Book)*, Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Publishing House, 1980, 415-416.

was used by the bishop for granting a hierarchical degree in priesthood, both in the higher and lower clergy.<sup>2</sup>

In other words what *cheirotesia* was then, meaning *putting the hands by the bishop* on a candidate to receive a clerical rank, is now in the rite of ordination. These technical explanations might confuse some scholars because it would lead them to the idea that there has been a reversal of the roles, as long as the meaning of *cheirotesia* seems to be closer to that of ordination today. What seems to be closer to the truth is the fact that the two terms were used, at least in the first centuries, synonymously. The distinction that we know today, namely that *cheirotomia* is associated with the sacramental hierarchy and *cheirotesia* with the lower clergy as well as to an honorific hierarchy, belongs to a somewhat later stage.<sup>3</sup>

This is how we will also explain the confusion over the position of *deaconesses* in the early Church, with its serious reverberations, discontinuous, until today. We will see, however, that they never belonged to the sacramental hierarchy; more specifically they were never in a similar position to that of the deacons. This is the problem that I think it should be considered by those who, for different reasons (pure ignorance or challenge), try to bring the issue on to the agenda of current theological debates.

## **2. *Constitutiones Apostolorum***

A fundamental patristic document, *Constitutiones Apostolorum* (CA) seems to be giving no difference between the formula of *cheirotomia* for deacons and the formula of *cheirotesia* for

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<sup>2</sup>Victoria Bolfă Otic, *Rolul Femeii în Biserică. De la diaconesele antice la diaconia femeii de astăzi* (*The Role of Woman in Church. From Ancient Deaconesses to the Deaconesses of Nowadays*), Cluj Napoca: Argonaut, 2010, 111.

<sup>3</sup>The distinction between *cheirotomia* for the sacerdotal world (to enter among the clergy) and *cheirotesia* for the lower positions, was made progressively, starting with the eighth century, and appears more clearly in later legal documents, by the canonists Zonaras and Balsamon in the twelfth century. Otic, *Rolul Femeii în Biserică*, 112.

deaconesses. Both include the gesture of putting the hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit. About deacons it is said, "putting your hands over him ... fill him with the Spirit and power, as you filled Stephen the first martyr..."<sup>4</sup> About deaconesses it is said, "to put your hands over her ... give to her the Holy Spirit and cleanse her of all the filthiness of her body and soul" (CA VIII, xix-xx, 756-7).

Moreover, there is some information which suggests that *cheirotomia* of deacons and *cheirotesia* of the deaconesses were committed before the altar, as was common for bishop, priest and deacon, although opinions are divided, and the proposed theological solutions often remain only assumptions. The fact is that where this supposition is accepted we find some differences even in the ritual itself, namely,

The candidate subjected to the diaconal ordination make a kneeling, the candidate who will become a priest makes three kneelings; each one of them lays his head on the altar. Instead, the deaconess makes no kneeling, but she only bows her head on the altar. At the ordination (a new proof that the terms *cheirotomia* and *cheirotesia* were used interchangeably without any discernment. *note author*) of the sub-deacon the bishop utters just one prayer, but at the ordination of the deaconess, deacon, priest and bishop, are uttered two separated by a litany and during each litany, the hand is kept on the head of the one who is ordained. The prayers are different.<sup>5</sup>

Also, it is assumed that after the *cheirotesia* of the deaconess she was handed also the insignia of the diaconry, *orarion* and the *chalice*, but again here there are some differences. For example the deacon wore *orarion* on his left arm so that one extremity fell in front and the other at the back. Instead, the deaconess wears the *orarion* around the neck, under a veil covering her shoulders,

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<sup>4</sup>Constituțiile Sfinților Apostoli prin Clement, in ed. Ioan Ică jr., Canonul Ortodoxiei, I, Canonul Apostolic al primelor secole, Cartea VIII, xvii-xviii, Sibiu: Deisis/Stavropoleos, 2008, 756. Henceforth references are given in the text CA.

<sup>5</sup>P. Scazzoso, *Dionigi Areopagita. Tutte le Opere*, Milano: Rusconi, 1981, 214-215, 218-219. See Bolfă Otic, *Rolul Femeii în Biserică*, 120.

so that the two extremities are in front.<sup>6</sup> Of course, wearing the *orarion* was the hallmark of the ministry; but what kind of ministry? Recently, Orthodox theologians have come to believe that, in fact, the *orarion* of the deaconess would have been something like the garment worn nowadays by the nuns who dressed the great schema, namely *analab[v]os*, a garment like the *epitrachelion*, but shorter, with two extremities in front, under the *rasa*.<sup>7</sup> This is meant to remind the one who dresses in it that she carries the cross every day and she is crucified with Christ. So there is no liturgical meaning; it is not connected with the liturgical ministry.

After communion, the deacon and also the deaconess received the chalice from the bishop, with the difference that if the first received it to go to administer the communion for the believers outside the altar, the deaconess received it to put it on the altar.<sup>8</sup> In other words, there are similarities and differences that instead of clarifying things complicate them more and invite everyone to a profound reflection, without misconceptions, with the hope of further clarification. However, in CA we also find: "The Deaconesses neither bless nor make of what is committed by the priests (*presbiteros*) or the deacons, but guard the doors or serve the priests at the baptism of women, because of the decency" (CA VIII, xxviii, 759). Again, "the Deaconesses the same as the *hypodeacon*, the one who reads or the singer, is the servant of the deacon" (CA VIII, xxviii, 759). Moreover, "the offerings that abound for the Sacraments are distributed differently between the members of the clergy as follows: four parts to the bishop, three parts to the priest, two parts to the deacon and to the others - *hypodeacon*, those who reads, deaconesses - one part" (CA VIII, xxxi, 760). These references show that the deaconesses were not equal with the deacons, but with the other minor ministers.

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<sup>6</sup>Otic, *Rolul Femeii în Biserică*, 122.

<sup>7</sup>It is about rather a presupposition than a certain thing because there is no argument to be sustained.

<sup>8</sup>Otic, *Rolul Femeii în Biserică*, 122.

### 3. Deaconesses in the Writings of St Basil the Great

Saint Basil, probably the most gifted cleric of his time, was extremely active, managing to excel in all areas in which he worked: a theologian of great finesse and clarity, natural leader, exceptional administrator, re-organizer of the monastic and social life, fine diplomat and witness of the truth of faith, while the majority of his fellow bishops embraced, either by conviction or opportunism, the Aryan doctrine. One of his most effective methods of preserving the unity of the Church was communication with the other bishops, priests, state officials, relatives or friends, through letters. Precisely in these letters we find some information about the existence of deaconesses in the life of the Church in Cappadocia of his time. We consider especially two epistles, namely 199 and 297.

St Basil wrote in Epistle number 199 addressed to Amphilochius, concerning the Canons:

The deaconess who commits fornication with a heathen may be received into repentance and will be admitted to the oblation in the seventh year; of course if she be living in the chastity. The heathen who, after he has believed, takes to idolatry, returns to his vomit. We do not, however, give up the body of the deaconess to the use of the flesh, as being consecrated.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the deaconess suffers a double punishment: she is excluded from any ministry and from communion for 7 years, as well as the laymen who are fornicators.<sup>10</sup>

In the current theological terminology, the word 'consecrate' is inextricably linked to an act of consecration or sanctification. As the word *cheirotomia* does not appear in the text itself, we can assume that when he speaks of 'consecration' Saint Basil has a broader and inclusive vision, which also includes *cheirotesia*. Although it seems there is some uncertainty in expression, or a slight confusion of the meaning of the two terms, we believe that

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<sup>9</sup>St Basil the Great, "Letter 199", xliv, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8. eds., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Edinburgh: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, 239. See also Canons of St Basil 51 and 70.

<sup>10</sup>St Basil the Great, "Letter 217", lix, 257.

it is in reality more about a drastic application of more severe punishments than about the content of the canons themselves. However, if we compare the punishments suffered by a deacon who has committed the same sin we conclude that the deaconess was not part of the clergy, because all the clergy in similar situations were excluded but not excommunicated for the reason that the same mistake is not punished twice.<sup>11</sup>

The Deacon who committed adultery after he was ordained will be removed from the diaconate, but once he has fallen among laymen, he will not be taken out of communion, for indeed there is an old canon, according to which those who have lost their rank must be subjected only to this kind of punishment ... and for the deacon it is enough that he was condemned to chastisement, namely defrocking or laicization.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore it seems to be quite clear that we cannot speak of an identity of ministry, and about a similar status within the sacramental church hierarchy for deacons and deaconesses, because normally, for the same sin we should speak about the same punishment.

The Epistle number 297, addressed to a widow, speaks about another situation involving a deaconess. Without specifying any name, it indicates one of the most important assignments for Saint Basil. Being a diplomat without equal in the Church of his time, he had a great respect for couriers or messengers.<sup>13</sup> Well, in his letter number 297 Saint Basil says that he found "a suitable courier" whom he calls deacon, but – attention! – he refers to a young woman (not a young man), whose mission was to carry a letter to a widow whom he knew very well and he assured her that the bearer of the letter is a faithful woman, educated, rich

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<sup>11</sup>Bolfă Otic, *Rolul Femeii în Biserică*, 81.

<sup>12</sup>St Basil the Great, "Letter 188," ix, 225.

<sup>13</sup>It was difficult to find a reliable messenger in St Basil's time, as it was an extremely dangerous job. They were unknown, anonymous, though they were well paid. See Nicu Dumitrașcu "Misiune creștină prin corespondență la Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Christian Mission by Correspondence at St Basil the Great)" *Orizonturi Teologice* 4 (2002), 19-29.

and, of course, trustworthy. Saint Basil seems to use the term deaconess as a highly reliable service, without any sacramental and ecclesiastical connotation. In fact one of the researchers of the missionary work of Saint Basil, Benoît Gain said that it was extremely difficult to find someone to carry a letter and those messengers did not have an exact name, but rather many different designations, including the one of deacon.<sup>14</sup>

Although these assumptions are very interesting, generating different opinions, some of them totally divergent, what interests us more, in this case, is the presence of deaconesses in the life of the Church in Cappadocia and their contribution to the development and strengthening of inter-community relations and, especially, of their direct impact, as representatives of the lower clergy, in the life of Christians who suffer, who are sick and who have infirmities of all kinds, in other words in the social life of the city.

#### **4. The Role of Deaconesses in the Life of Church**

One of the important duties of a deaconess is that of the pastoral activity of instructing the neophytes the basics elements of the truths of faith that they should know before receiving the baptism. Instruction is continued after baptism for a long period and deaconess becomes a sort of a mother to the baptized woman.<sup>15</sup> This catechetical function of a deaconess is part of the spiritual heritage of the ancient Christian tradition, and the deaconesses took care of the religious education not only of those newly baptized but also of the sisters from monasteries and, sometimes, even of the faithful who came to ask for this. Some of them were endowed with the gift of the discernment of the spirits, and they advised the believers also in personal, family and social problems irrespective of gender, age or social status. Of course this exhortation should not be confused with any position or sacramental commission. They were also

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<sup>14</sup>In *L'Église de Cappadoce au le siècle d'après le correspondance de Basile de Césarée (330-379)*, Rome: Orientalia Christiana Analecta, Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1985, 23-5.

<sup>15</sup>Otic, *Rolul Femeii în Biserică*, 107.

involved in the education of young orphan girls or of young women who came from poor families. Besides leading religious training schools, near churches or monasteries, they undertook evangelization of women in their homes. As it was not easy and even dangerous sometimes, their activity was closely protected and sustained by the members of the clergy.

Clement of Alexandria encourages the presence of deaconesses around the clergy accompanying them in diverse missions of catechesis and evangelization, through the example of the great Paul who said "Did we are not allowed to carry with us a woman-sister, like the other Apostles and Cephas?" (1 Cor. 9: 5). Although some believe that this is only about of a Christian woman of the type that, like the holy women, accompanied the Apostles, saving them from the little cares of life (in other words, who did their housekeeping!), Clement thinks that the mission of some of them was different. Specifically, he believes that, since the apostles and - by extension in time - clerics are busy preaching and witnessing Christ in communities, their attendants (but not their wives!) had the mission to enter the homes of women and to present to them the word of the Lord without leaving room for slander and malicious comments and often in extremely dangerous circumstances.<sup>16</sup> In other words, he does not deny the fundamental role of the companions of the apostles, but he focuses on their pastoral and catechetical work.

The most important liturgical task of a deaconess was to train and assist women in the ritual of the Holy Baptism, but without uttering any theological formula, or blessings. It was natural for the deaconess who handled the catechetical instruction of a woman to be with her throughout the administration of the Sacrament of Baptism and to help in her most significant moments, which required a certain amount of privacy. It is not decent for a woman to be undressed by deacons and especially lubricated all over her body with holy oil. This was a concrete help that bishops were seeking from them to maintain decency

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<sup>16</sup>Clement of Alexandria, "The Stromata," III, vi, in *Nicene and Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, eds., Edinburgh: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994,: 390-91.

while baptising women (CA III, xvi, 661). For example, after the bishops or priests<sup>17</sup> anointed women with holy oil on the forehead, as a foreshadowing of Jesus' baptism, the continuation of this moment was made by the deaconesses because it was not permitted for the women to be 'seen by men'. More specifically, after this moment, and before entering the baptismal fountain, the catechumen woman "took off all her clothes and finery, and the deaconess anointed with holy oil every part of her body."<sup>18</sup> The bishop or priest baptized women through immersion in water (CA III, xvii, 661) after the order already established by invoking the Holy Trinity (Mt. 28:19) and the deaconesses were those who assisted them in this process. In the end the baptized women were anointed with Holy Oil by those who conducted the Sacrament of Baptism (CA III, xvi, 661).

Besides this they also had other duties, perhaps less important, but with a certain significance in the deacon's ministry plan. There were some tasks scheduled, which could also be seen today with a lot of sympathy and respect by a certain part of the community of women of the Church, such as overseeing the entry of women in the Church to all religious services, especially to the Holy Mass, with the express task of finding suitable locations for each of them, depending on age. Also they handle the co-ordination of the liturgical chants and prayers made for them, as the central moment of the kiss of peace (CA VII, xi, 745). It seems that, in certain historical periods, in monasteries, deaconesses had a more specific role, namely reading the epistles, the prayers of intercession and even the Gospel,<sup>19</sup> although there is quite a clear distinction between their

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<sup>17</sup>Deacons are also invoked as those who did the mystery of baptism, but it is explainable due to the terminological confusion that persisted in the first centuries between the elders and deacons.

<sup>18</sup>D. Spada and D. Salachas, *Costituzioni dei santi Apostoli per mano di Clemente III*, 16, 1-4, Roma: Urbaniana, 2001, 89-90. Otic, *Rolul Femeii în Biserică*, 105.

<sup>19</sup>See the case of St Olympias, deaconess of the Great Church of Constantinople, Otic, *Rolul Femeii în Biserică*, 106.

duties and those of the deacons and a certain degree of their involvement in the liturgical rite (CA VIII, xxviii, 759).

For example, during the solemn Mass the deaconesses could stand as deacons in the altar,<sup>20</sup> near Bishops, and with their permission (blessing) even commit certain acts, such as pouring the wine and water into the chalice. Their specific duty, however, was that of household order: cleanliness in and around the altar, washing the coverings of the Holy Table and the vestments, bringing the light to the altar, etc. Their less liturgical, and more auxiliary role, is also found in their marginal position at the time of impartation, more like the one of the laity than the one of the clergy:

First let clergy to do the impartation in the following order: the Bishop, and then the elders, then the deacons, then widows, then the readers, then the hypodeacons, then those with the gifts of the Spirit, the newly baptized and the children. And the people in this order: the elderly and the virgins, and then the others. And among women first the *deaconesses*, then the others."<sup>21</sup>

Another important function of the institution of deaconesses was that of social assistance and pastoral care. Basically, they fulfilled any task received from the bishop, especially in the area of activity where the presence of the deacon was not the most appropriate. They dealt mostly with the elderly women, sick, or those in any malady, but it cannot be said that there was any limitation in this respect. They ministered to all women, regardless of the age or social class. A more specific category was that of the Christian women who were in pagan homes or families, where their presence required some flexibility from the others. The message of the bishop and the Church was more easily transmitted in a hostile environment, for the most part, if it came through persons endowed with great humility and decency, but very well prepared both spiritually and socially. In

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<sup>20</sup>*Testamentum Domini*, in ed. Ioan Ică jr., Canonul Ortodoxiei, I, Canonul Apostolic al primelor secole, Cartea I, xxiii, Sibiu: Deisis/Stavropoleos, 2008, 799.

<sup>21</sup>*Testamentum Domini* I, xxiii, 799. The same CA VIII, xiii, 754.

terms of the number of deaconesses, we think that it must have been in direct proportion to the needs of the society, as they say, also about deacons (CA III, xix, 662).

According to the *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, "Deaconess must strive to care for women. And both to deal with those related to the annunciation, leave, ministry and support" (CA III, xix, 662). When the bishop says, "You, deacons must therefore search out all those who need visiting and give the news to your bishop about the afflicted; for you must be their soul and senses" (CA III, xix, 663), he is addressing in fact both, namely, deacons for men and deaconesses for women.

The respect enjoyed by the deaconesses in the early Church, either in Palestine or Syria, or in Greece and Macedonia, or in other places of the ancient Christian world, but especially in Asia Minor, is confirmed also by the discovery of a large number of Christian inscriptions encrusted in stone, in which are sometimes mentioned, not only their names but also their deeds in order that they remain in the memory of those who knew them. In the most important centres of Asia Minor, namely, Bithynia, Pontus, Cilicia, Galatia, Lycaonia, Lydia, Phrygia and Cappadocia, there are many inscriptions, really epitaphs which record the presence and the activity of the deaconesses.

## 5. Famous Deaconesses in Cappadocia

One of the most important deaconesses dating from the fourth century in Cappadocia was the sister of St Basil the Great, *St Macrina*, who can be truly called a spiritual mother not only for young women from the monastic community that she established, but also for her brothers. Macrina was a very cultured woman. Since childhood she was concerned with reading the Holy Scripture, the understanding of the meaning of biblical books and their implementation; she also knew very well the writings of the Holy Fathers and the profane authors, especially of the Greek philosophers. All these, together with her personal experiences, make her capable of transmitting also to others a strong faith, fully rooted in the ancient Christian tradition, but also living and working specifically in the lives of

all who knew her. Her life written by her brother, Gregory of Nyssa, shows her like a deaconess fully involved in all aspects of the church life of her time. Although there are controversies concerning her liturgical involvement, nobody disputes her quality as a deaconess and her role in the catechetical and social activities.

It is known that she founded a monastery which she administered according to precise rules, where the continuing ascetic life is supported by a regular program of prayer, and of fully assuming all the labours of such a life of seclusion, heavier or lighter, in the context of voluntary obedience to the abbess. The spirit of this community was of mutual respect, assistance and sisterhood. Although she was seen as the spiritual mother of all, Macrina made no differences between the girls who came into the community, regardless of their social rank, and she did not consider herself as being superior to anyone. Moreover, the diaconal work in this monastery was not restricted to only one person or to an elitist group where it could be entered into through a secret initiation, but to all who had the desire and the ability to put themselves in the service of others. Macrina brought into the monastery many girls who were in a modest condition, some extremely poor, for whom she was also mother and nurse,<sup>22</sup> and also women of noble birth, from the aristocrats, rich and influential in the high circles of society, as was Vetiana, daughter of Senator Araxios.<sup>23</sup> Saint Gregory did not call them directly deaconesses, but their humble behaviour, their perfect lives and the ministries undertaken for the good of those from their spiritual family and social communities related to the monastery, lead us to conclude that the diaconate, in the sense of service to others, should not be seen as a rarity, an exceptional situation, but rather as a state of fact, a way of life and living. Neither does this mean that all nuns in the monastery of St Macrina were deaconesses nor that she was the only one.

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<sup>22</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *Viața Sfintei Macrina* (The Life of St Macrina), trans. from Greek into Romanian by Ion Pătrulescu, Timișoara: Amarcord, 1998, 44.

<sup>23</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *Viața Sfintei Macrina*, 45.

In the *Vita Macrinae* written by Gregory, we also find one who is specifically called deaconess: "I met among virgins a deaconess who headed the choir, called Lampadium. She said she knows well about those decided by Macrina for the funeral."<sup>24</sup> This Lampadium was not only very close to Macrina as she knew her spiritual testament, but she also had a special assignment to lead the group of nuns, a part of the monastic community, devoted to the ecclesiastical chant who sang at the Holy Mass and at the other religious services. However, it is quite difficult to determine her actual role in the monastery. Some believe that she was a kind of "master of ceremonies or of novices", others that she was responsible for supervising the administrative activity and/or that of charity or social assistance. In other words, they are confident that she fulfilled the role of deaconess, but we do not know with certainty what specifically this task was.

In Cappadocia it seems that there was a certain tradition of female diaconate that came from the family. *St Theosebia*, wife of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who joined the rank of deaconesses after the custom of the time, was recognized for her clean life and her self-giving for others. Her work as a deaconess was marked both by charity and also by catechetical and social services. She was a caregiver for the sick, for the poor and orphans, guided and catechized the women who were to be baptized. She did not neglect the permanent prayer to God to increase these gifts, not for her sake, but for the good to those who needed her, because she was full of love for Christ and for people.

*St Gorgonia*, sister of St Gregory of Nazianz, was taught even from the time when she was young, in her family, to read the Holy Scriptures and to devote herself to the unceasing prayer, and she had a very special gift for the interpretation of the Psalms. Later, after she was baptized, she went among deaconesses and her principal mission was to take care of the needy, the poor, those in weakness and trouble, people with no home, orphans without any support, sick people who were left

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<sup>24</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *Viața Sfintei Macrina*, 45.

alone, all found their relief at the table and in the house of deaconess Gorgonia.

There is an inscription at Archelais (Aksaray), dedicated by an unknown author to a deaconess named Maria. It is one of the most important testimonies regarding their existence in the life of the Christian communities, but also regarding the concrete activities that they undertake. The text itself is interesting because, in addition to listing the concrete activities that deaconess Maria has performed for the benefit of the community in which she served, namely, she educated the children, received guests, washed the feet of saints, fed the needy, it includes direct references to the New Testament texts that substantiate them.<sup>25</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

The work of the deaconesses was quite complex and, because it took place at a time doctrinal and liturgical difficulties, it caused some confusion, especially regarding their canonical status in the Church. The terminological confusion between *cheirotenia* and *cheirotesia* in the first Christian centuries however did not bring with it confusion of responsibilities. The documents invoked in this study show a clear distinction between the mainly liturgical role of the deacons and the mainly catechetical and charitable role of the deaconesses. With a special permission given by the bishops they were also entitled to perform certain liturgical acts. Although, there are conflicting opinions about their canonical status in the church hierarchy, nobody can deny their role in promoting the Gospel of Jesus Christ mostly among women, where they fulfilled their responsibilities most effectively, but when needed, entering into other social environments.

I have noted just a few names of the deaconesses who remained in the history of the Church through their social, liturgical or catechetical activity, undertaken for everyone in

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<sup>25</sup>This is about 1 Tim. 5.10 "...if she brought up children, if she feasted the foreigner, if she washed the feet of saints, if she helped those in distress, if she gave herself to all kinds of good deeds.", and 1 Tim. 3.4.12 (attributes of the deacons and deaconesses) or Titus 2.4 (to guide the younger ones.)

need of all kinds, but also for their families and of their role in promoting and strengthening the true values of the Christian faith. They are just an example to understand better the deaconesses from Cappadocia, and also other provinces of the time for the Church, and for the Christian world in general, those who remained anonymous to us, but not for God.