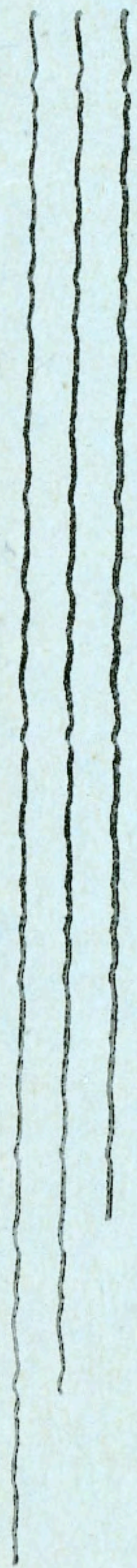


The

VOCATION

of

THE DEACONESS



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# The Vocation of the Deaconess

Picking up a parish leaflet, a visitor to an Episcopal Church read the announcement that a young woman was to be made a Deaconess that morning, by the Bishop of the Diocese. Soon she found herself taking part in a service unfamiliar to her. She saw a woman in simple religious habit, standing at the Altar rail. She heard her make solemn promises of personal dedication to the service of Our Lord and His Church, and of obedience to the Bishop and his representatives. She saw the Candidate kneel and the Bishop lay his hands upon her head, as he said, "Take thou authority to execute the Office of Deaconess in the Church of God." Prayers were made for the new servant of Christ and blessing given. The Holy Communion was then celebrated, the Deaconess tarrying to receive her Lord as the first act of her new life.

## WHAT IS THIS OFFICE?

As the service closed, the visitor had many questions to ask. What is this Office of Deaconess? How long has the Church had an office of ministry in which a woman may serve? What kind of work is it that Deaconesses do in the Church? What is required of

those who would serve in this Office? How are women trained for it?

### **THE SOURCE.**

To find the source of the Deaconess idea, we go back to the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who showed forth so supremely all human virtues and qualities. In the perfection of His self-giving, we find something more definite and positive than just a sweet unselfishness. His life was full of purpose in action and in teaching. He was supremely conscious of His Vocation. "I came not to be ministered unto, but to minister." "I must be about my Father's business."

Preparing for the time when His visible life on earth would be culminated by His death, He inspired, and called disciples, and trained Apostles, that His Kingdom might extend ultimately to the ends of the earth.

What was the response of the women of that day? "Certain women who had been healed . . . Mary called Magdalene, Joanna, and Suzanna, and many others, ministered of their substance" to the Lord and His Apostolic band. Women had the honor to be the last at the Cross when He died, and first at His tomb on His Resurrection Day. After the Ascension, they assembled with the Apostles for prayer in the Upper Room.

They were present on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the waiting Church. As Christianity spread, we hear of Dorcas, outstanding in good works and alms deeds; of Lydia, baptized with all her household, who made her home headquarters for the Church in Thyratira; of Priscilla, who with Aquilla was a leading teacher in the Church at Ephesus; and the daughters of Philip at Caesarea, who prophesied.

### **THE OFFICE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.**

St. Paul included in his greetings, "those women which labored with me in the Gospel." To him we owe the first actual mention of a Deaconess. He commended Phoebe, a "servant" of the Church in Cenchrea, as one who had been a helper of many and of himself also. In writing his first Epistle to Timothy, he gives instruction concerning qualifications of women in the midst of his instruction about Deacons. The title, "Deacon" was evolved from a common Greek word meaning "one who serves in loving kindness." It was used in common gender form for both men and women during the first three Christian centuries. These "servants" of the Church assisted the Apostles, and later the Bishops in the care of the poor, the sick, and the needy, and the work of instruction in the Faith.

## **IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CENTURIES.**

The Order of Deaconesses grew in the early years of the Church, because it was needed especially in the ministry to women. There were larger numbers in the Eastern part of the Church. While there are records of Deaconesses in Rome, in Constantinople there were six Deaconesses attached to a parish Church, and for several centuries the number of Deaconesses who served at the Cathedral of St. Sophia was fixed at forty. The outstanding characteristics of the Order were: First, women were made Deaconesses by the laying on of hands by the Bishop; secondly, they always served under the direct authority of the Bishop; the Deaconess ministry was always one of active service.

During the Middle Ages there were many changes in social conditions which made changes in the Church's ministration. The Office of Deacon increased in importance; the Office of Deaconess gradually fell into disuse. The protected life of the convent became the one opportunity for religious service for women. The Sisterhoods were private organizations of lay women living the monastic life and were largely independent of Church authority.

## **THE REVIVAL OF THE OFFICE.**

In the Nineteenth Century there was a growing recognition of the value of religious work of women, which caused some of the leaders of the Church to believe that the Office of Deaconess might again be as valuable an aid to the Church, as in old time. In 1862, the Office was restored in the Church of England, and a little later in America. Although the Order grew slowly in both countries, several hundreds of women have been trained, set apart, and have served the Church with notable devotion and steadfastness in the home and world-wide mission fields.

## **TODAY, IN AMERICA.**

As the Deaconess Office is a part of the serving ministry of the Church, Canon law prescribes its duties and requirements. The duty of a Deaconess is to assist in the work of the Parish, Mission or institution to which she is appointed, under the direction of Rector, or Priest in charge, or directly under the Bishop in nonparochial work. She is, in fact, one of the under-shepherds in the care of Christ's flock. The sick, the afflicted, and the poor are her special charge. The teaching of the Christian Faith is one of her prime duties. With permission of the Bishop, the Deaconess may read the Choir Offices in

Church or Chapel, and give instruction or make addresses at these services.

A parish Deaconess usually has a bit of every type of work to do. She may have the duty of Sacristan with the preparation of the Altar for Holy Communion, or the training or supervision of the Altar Guild. She may teach in the Church School, or be the superintendent. Some Deaconesses specialize in Religious education. With the work for children, there are service projects, mystery plays at Christmas, parties and picnics to be directed. Before the Bishop's visitation there is a class of children to be prepared for Confirmation, and possibly, private appointments for individuals unable to attend the Rector's classes. The Deaconess will have to give devotional addresses, or possibly conduct the meditations at a Quiet Day. To the organizations for young people or with the women's groups, the Deaconess may bring guidance and help. This may be of a practical nature, such as the cutting of garments for the supply box, or the serving of breakfast after corporate Communion services.

Sometimes it is possible for two or more Deaconesses to live together, working as partners, or at different tasks. This is ideal and follows Our Lord's plan of sending the disciples out two by two. Unfortunately, in

the present times, this is not usually possible because of financial and other reasons. So here the Order meets a specific need of the Church. Where only one worker is possible, the Deaconess lives and works alone. She has her modest salary, and generally finds it best to have rooms where she may do her own housekeeping because her hours are irregular. She makes her rooms a real home, finding in their quietness a support and rest, and in the housekeeping problems a re-creative balance from the nervous tension of dealing with people. Like herself, her home is dedicated to the service of the Master. It may be used for small meetings when the parish house is not available or not existant. The Deaconess is glad that she does not have to ask some one to open her home to a group of lively children making valentines for the hospital, for her own furnishings are not too nice to stand the scuffing of many little feet. Mothers, as well as children like "to see where Deaconess lives," and a mental note is often made of the tasteful yet inexpensive furnishings, and especially of the little prayer corner, with the idea of making something like it at home. Not only is it a pleasure for the Deaconess to share a cup of tea with a friend or fellow worker, but people with problems can be invited to drop in, and often

can be better helped in the friendly and informal atmosphere.

The simple religious habit that is customary for a Deaconess to wear, identifies her as a servant of Christ and His Church. It opens many doors and hearts to her services. There is joy in the beaming greeting of unknown children, or the ready approach of strangers with requests small or great, or the familiar opening, "May I ask what Order . . . ?" leading sometimes to an amazing outpouring of intimate experiences and problems.

The day is full of interruptions for the Deaconess, but most of these are opportunities. Called from her busy desk, she becomes the witness at a wedding, or Godmother to the little illegitimate baby from the back alley, or she goes to have prayers with the dying woman she has brought to Baptism. The number of calls seem endless, but points of contact are made, and words of comfort or instruction given at the moment needed to ears the pulpit can not reach.

In the non-parochial field, there is a variety of work the Order is doing. One Deaconess is in charge of a hospital, several are at the managing and mothering end of homes for children. Church Settlement Houses have been founded by Deaconesses and are managed by them. Several large metropolitan

areas have City Missions with Deaconesses on their staffs who give their entire time to visiting the sick, giving instruction, and holding services in city and county hospitals and in institutions for the delinquent. Among three tribes of Indians the Church is serving through its Deaconesses. In the rural field, there may be several villages to which the missionary Deaconess will go, visiting and teaching. She may have to start with a handful of children in a discouraged mission and work up a Church School. She may conduct a Church School by mail for isolated children. In the Virginia mountains there are several mission houses where Deaconesses live and minister to the religious and social welfare of the highland people.

### THE NEED.

Such is the kind of ministering for which the Church needs the Office of Deaconesses. There have never been enough women who came forward to serve in it. The Church could use many more. It is true that not every good and devout woman is suited for the Office, for a certain amount of initiative and executive ability is necessary. The standards are necessarily high, and candidates must be thoroughly tested and trained, for the ideal is a permanent dedication, an entire self-surrender. The Church is not

lacking in women who could meet these standards, if they could but hear the Call and have the willingness of an affirmative answer. For the woman who can qualify, there is in the ministration of the Office, abundant opportunity for the exercise of the highest faculties of mind and spirit, and the use of every talent and ability.

### **THE REQUIREMENTS.**

Church Canon prescribes the requirements. First, a woman must submit letters of recommendation to the Bishop of the Diocese or District, who receives her as a Candidate. She must have good health of mind and body, and have a good educational background. She must spend two years in preparation. Before being set apart, she must be at least twenty-five years of age and have successfully passed canonical examinations in Holy Scripture, Church History, Christian Missions, Doctrine, Ministration, Religious Education, and Social Service. She must have had at least nine months of practical training either as a part of her course, or previously in practical work of an allied nature.

### **THE TRAINING.**

The preparation of the Candidate is best accomplished at a Deaconess Training

School. Beyond the academic and practical work, the most important part of the training is the devotional and spiritual development. This can best be gained by living with a group of like-minded Christians keeping a simple religious system, if not a fixed rule of life. In these days of individualization, there is need of particular preparation for the life of specialized Christian living and serving of the Office requires. It is no easy task to go out in the name of the Church, expected to carry responsibility, yet to be willing to follow; to be strong physically, mentally and spiritually, but never to fail in tenderness, sympathy, or helpfulness toward the weak, the simple, and the foolish. As the Vocation unfolds to her growing perception, the Candidate realizes that she alone could never attain to so high a calling without the help of God's grace. She desires something more definite than her personal dedication can give her.

### **THE ORDERING SERVICE.**

The answer lies in the solemn service by which a woman is admitted Deaconess. This is what distinguishes the Deaconess, who serves in a ministerial Office in the Church, from the trained professional Church worker, or from the Sister of a Religious Community. A lay Church worker may do almost



everything a Deaconess can do, just as a layman may do almost everything a Deacon can do, but there is a difference in character. The Ordering service is meaningful and real. It bestows something not had before.

The part of the Candidate is to truly dedicate herself, with all her talents, abilities and experience, to God, to be used as, and where He will. The part of the Church is to receive this offering, but the *sine qua non* of the service are the Bishop's words of authorization to a specific Office, and the laying on of the Apostolic hands, conveying the sought-for gift of the Grace of the Holy Spirit for the living of the Vocation.

### THE CALL.

As the Lord Jesus called men and women to follow and to serve Him, long ago in Galilee, so He calls today to those who have ears to hear His Voice. How does He speak? In the still small Voice within the heart! But His call may come to different souls in different ways. It may come through Holy Scripture or printed word. It may come through the words of a friend, or as inspiration from the story of some one who has given his or her life in God's service. The Call may come clearly, instantly, vividly, or it may come slowly and calmly, just a growing, gradually unfolding certainty. As in the

days of old, a woman catches such a glimpse of the beauty of Christian holiness, that her heart responding to it, longs to be dedicated to a purposeful discipleship, a life of ministry directed by Christ and His Church. The Deaconess Vocation is not a withdrawal from the world, but a life of active ministry to be lived in the midst of it. The words of Jesus have a direct meaning to the woman He is calling to this Office, "I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from evil. . . . Sanctify them through Thy truth. . . . As Thou hast sent me, even so have I sent them into the world."

### CONCLUSION.

This booklet has been prepared from the writings of several Deaconesses. It is a hard task to compress the history and work of the Order into small space. It is difficult also, to attempt to put into cold words, the deep, inner satisfactions and joy of the Vocation. Yet it is a pleasure to present to the young women of the Church a challenge and a call to come with us in the Way. Borrowing the words of Bishop Phillips Brooks, we would say to you, "There is no career that can compare with it. . . . In the world where there are a great many things to do, God has given us the best and happiest."

## **DEACONESS TRAINING SCHOOLS**

### **THE CENTRAL HOUSE FOR DEACONESSES**

serves as Headquarters for the Order of Deaconesses, and provides training for women as Deaconesses for religious work, missionary, sociological, and educational, as required and defined by the Canon of the Church.

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For information write:

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