

# Women in Ministry in the Early Church

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**This essay succinctly reviews some of the evidence from the work of Ute E. Eisen that points to women exercising various ministries in the Church during the first six centuries, including being ordained as deacons, priests, and possibly even as bishops.**

Is the above title an oxymoron? Some would say that it is. One of the major arguments underpinning the rejection of women's ordination to the priesthood in the papal document *Inter insigniores* and its later counterpart *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* can be succinctly stated that "it has never been done." That argument has served only to deflect the rivers of ink into new courses, as scholars seek to prove either that it has been done or that it has not. Because it is impossible to prove a negative, the "has not" side has generally had the upper hand. Furthermore, until recently the evidence for women as presbyters in early centuries has been sparse. However, the question of "women in ministry" is not to be restricted to their exercise of the ministerial priesthood or their reception of priestly orders, at whatever point in time the presbyterate came to be a distinct order set apart by a particular ceremony. Even the churches of the Catholic tradition (Roman, Anglican, Old Catholic, and Orthodox), while setting apart certain persons for sacramental ministry, nevertheless affirm that ministry is much more widely bestowed and exercised.

In what follows I would like to sketch the evidence for women exercising a variety of ministries in the early Church, and not simply (though not excluding)

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priesthood. The groundwork for a significant forward step in this discussion has been laid by Ute E. Eisen in *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity. Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (2000), the basic source of information in this article. Eisen's method was inspired by Bernadette J. Brooten's pioneering *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (1982). Both these books examine, patiently and in detail, the inscriptional and papyrological evidence from the earliest centuries of the Common Era, and in the case of Brooten's book, the centuries immediately preceding. Brooten's work demonstrated that Jewish women in antiquity served as heads and patrons of synagogues, and very probably as elders (*presbyterae*). The automatic assumption that a woman designated a *presbytera* in her burial inscription or in a dedicatory tablet was the wife of a male *presbyter* simply must be called into question. The work done by both Brooten and Eisen has shown that the occurrences of the title *presbytera* with a woman's name tell us about the woman herself in almost all cases, and not about her husband.

Eisen investigated eight categories of ministry that can be shown to have been exercised by women in the first six centuries of Christianity. They are: apostles, prophets, teachers of theology, presbyters, enrolled widows, deacons, bishops, and stewards. This casts a wider net for "ministry" than has been usual until recently. At the dawn of the twenty-first century most of these offices are in fact being called "ministries," although those of apostles, prophets, and enrolled widows are ordinarily considered to belong to ages past.

### *Teachers*

Least controversial of the categories is that of teachers of theology. So many women are teachers of theology today that the "it has never been done" argument cannot apply. In the past it was common enough to ignore women theologians' contributions or, when they were undeniable, to attribute them to men. Thus Pope Benedict XV, in his encyclical letter *Spiritus Paraclitus*, commemorating the fifteenth centenary of the death of St. Jerome, solemnly asserted that in a letter from Paula and Eustochium to Marcella we "recognize the hand of Jerome." Eisen describes a whole series of Christian women teachers known to us from literature, including Marcella, Faltonia Betitia Proba, Melania the Elder, Paula, Eustochium, and Melania the Younger, all from the fourth and fifth centuries. She provides evidence from papyri and inscriptions of three otherwise unknown teachers, all specifically called *didaskalos* (or in Latin *magistra*).

Kyria is greeted as teacher in a papyrus letter from Egypt dating to the fourth century. The other two women are both named Theodora. The first, whose tomb epigraph in the Basilica of St. Agnes in Rome dates from 382, is called "the best keeper of the law and the best teacher of the faith" by her husband, who dedicated the inscription. "Best keeper of the law" indicates her knowledge of the

Scriptures, while “teacher of the faith” shows that she was a theological teacher. Of whom? She is said to have “directed her superior spirit to the saints,” meaning the believers in Rome. This Theodora was a worthy member of the company that includes the women mentioned above, contemporaries and teachers of Jerome as well as his pupils. The other Theodora *didaskalos* is the subject of one of only a few Christian *didaskalos* inscriptions from Macedonia, dating from the fifth or sixth century. She was evidently the head of a community of women vowed to virginity, and was their teacher in the life of virtue.

### *Stewards*

Another category that we would not, until recently, have included among Ministries is that of steward (*oikonomos*). Now we are more conscious of stewardship in the churches and of the special gifts that are needed for the care of the household of God. The Council of Chalcedon (451) orders that every church that has a bishop shall also have a steward appointed from the clergy to care for the church’s income during an episcopal vacancy (Canons 25 and 26). Clearly, then, in the fifth century “steward” was a clerical office associated with, if not restricted to, ordained persons. Eisen cites two inscriptions for women *oikonomoi*, one for Doxa in the fifth century and an undated one for Irene. While Irene was a steward in private service, Doxa may have been the steward of a monastery.

### *Widows*

Eisen describes two inscriptions for enrolled widows. The first, for Flavia Arcas, is from the second-century catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. Since it describes Flavia Arcas as having lived eighty-five years, she was surely one of the first Roman Christians. The second inscription, from fourth- or fifth-century Rome, states that Regina “sat” as widow for sixty years “and was not a burden to the Church, *univira*.” The description reflects the prescriptions for widows set out in Timothy 5:3-16. The use of “sat” suggests that Regina was an enrolled widow, not merely someone who undertook vowed widowhood as a private discipline. Eisen shows that the expression describes officeholders: for example, the presbyter Romanus, *qui sedit* (“who sat”) for a period of twenty-seven years and ten months. Still other testimonials contain expressions such as *Deo vixit*, “she lived [for] God,” to describe a woman of dedicated life. The inscriptions for widows are very numerous. While they reveal a high degree of respect for these ubiquitous churchwomen, some of them also suggest that the widows were ecclesiastically enrolled and exercised particular church functions.

## *Apostles*

The sole biblical instance of a woman explicitly called “apostle” is Junia (Rom 16:7). Her status as apostle was undisputed until the Middle Ages. Objection to the idea of women apostles rests mainly on an extension of the Lukan identification of “apostles” with the Twelve, clearly a mistake, if only because of Paul’s adamant insistence that he was an apostle. Outside Scripture we find the language of apostleship applied to several revered women. Origen wrote: “Christ sends the (Samaritan) woman as an apostle to the inhabitants of the city, because his words have enflamed this woman.” Theophylact, archbishop of Bulgaria, writing in the late eleventh century, also called this woman an apostle and even described her as “anointed with priesthood” and teacher of the whole city.

Mary Magdalene, who fulfilled even the Lucan criteria for apostleship (cf. Acts 1:21-22) was called “apostle to the apostles” because of her role as first witness to the resurrection. Hippolytus of Rome, writing in the third century, said that Christ met the women on Easter morning “so that women, too, would be Christ’s apostles.” Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century, comments on their apostolic role as countering the story of the Fall. In the second century *Acts of Thecla*, Thecla is depicted as preaching and teaching. In “The Conversion of Georgia” and “The Life of Nino,” popular from the seventh through the ninth centuries, Nino was an officially commissioned missionary preacher in Georgia, and the early traditions about her unashamedly dubbed her “apostle.”

## *Prophets*

The offices thus far described are relatively non-controversial. However, this changes when we find evidence in the *Didache* (chs. 11–13) that prophets in the second century “eucharistized,” that is, apparently presided or co-presided at the Eucharist. Both biblical testaments speak of women prophets (Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Noadiah, among the early Israelites; Anna, and the daughters of Philip, in the New Testament). Most would recognize that the Christian communities of the early second century acknowledged and gave thanks for the gift of prophecy. However, after this, the phenomenon of Christian prophecy is more controversial.

Though prophets and prophecy declined in Christian communities of the third century and following, Eisen finds a major inscription for a woman prophet, Nanas, from fourth-century Phrygia. She places this in the company of the “revelations” received by Cyprian of Carthage in the third century and the reflections of charismatic phenomena in the church orders of the third to the fifth centuries. A fourth-century document, “The Dialogue of an Orthodox and a Montanist,” also shows respect for women who prophesied, not only in Montanist, but also in

orthodox circles. The “orthodox” speaker affirms the Church’s acceptance of women prophets, while denying that women have a right to speak in church or exercise authority over men, or to write books in their own name. The “orthodox” uses this last prohibition as a reason to reject the prophets Maximilla and Priscilla; the fact of prophetic utterance is unchallenged.

### *Deacons*

**W**e come now to the three “traditional” offices that from an early time have been associated with the laying-on of hands with prayer, the heart of what is now the sacrament of Holy Orders. There is New Testament evidence of Phoebe, explicitly called “deacon” (*diakonos*) by Paul (Rom 16:1). English translations frequently render *diakonos* as “deaconess,” but in fact the word is the same (masculine gender) as the term Paul applies to himself. A difficulty in determining whether epigraphical evidence from the ancient world refers to women as “deacon” or “deaconess” comes from the practice of abbreviating the words to something as simple as *dk*. Such a practice is understandable, since stonecutters charged by the letter. Nevertheless, there are a number of inscriptions that refer to women unambiguously as *diakonos*. One such is the fourth-century memorial for the deacon Sophia, from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. It reads: “Here lies the servant and bride of Christ, Sophia, deacon, the second Phoebe, who fell asleep in peace on the twenty-first of the month of March during the eleventh indiction.”

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Sophia was by no means unique. In Jerusalem and its vicinity we know of at least six inscriptions of the fifth to seventh centuries for deacons: three men, two women, and a sixth whose name has been obliterated. Women deacons were especially numerous in Asia Minor, where we have evidence of them from at least the second century. 1 Timothy 3:11 probably refers to women deacons, and Pliny (*Ep. X*, 96, 8) speaks of two *ministrae* (the Latin equivalent of *diakonissa*) of the local church whom he had tortured to obtain information. Eisen summarizes the findings for Asia Minor: Women are called *diakonos* or *diakonissa* without apparent distinction; there is seldom any mention of specific fields of activity; their family situations varied (married and monastic women deacons).

A good many inscriptions were endowed *by* the women deacons rather than *for* them, and reveal a considerable degree of education. She concludes: “The abundant epigraphic evidence suggests the continuity of an office of women deacons in Asia Minor from the very beginning.”

There is also evidence from Greece and Macedonia, and Latin inscriptions from the West. Frequently the diaconal activity of women in the West is attested by the negative evidence of synods that attempted to suppress such work. Such prohibitions continued through the sixth century, thus showing that in fact women were being ordained and were working as deacons, since there is no point in forbidding what does not exist. Moreover, the synodal decrees were evidently not very effective, since they had to be repeated over a period of at least a century and a half.

### *Presbyters*

By far the greatest amount of ink has been spilled in arguing for or against the proposition that women have been, can be, or should be presbyters or priests. The assertion that they never have been is called into question by the existence of a good number of inscriptions from early centuries that assign the title *presbytera* or *presbytides* to a woman. The usual way of explaining these inscriptions is to say that either (a) the woman in question was a heretic, or (b) she was called *presbytera* because her husband was a *presbyter*, or (c) that the title simply means “old woman.” Eisen examines seven such inscriptions, three from the East and four from the West.

Evidence from the East includes inscriptions for Ammion, *presbytera*, from Phrygia in Asia Minor, Epikto the *presbytis*, from Thera in Greece, and the wrapping of the mummy of Artemidora, *presbytera*, from Egypt. Eisen maintains that until some time in the fourth century there were women presbyters, also called *presbytides*, active in the Church in Asia Minor, only some of whom belonged to schismatic groups. The fourth-century Synod of Laodicea attested to the presence of women who were ordained *presbytides* (Canons 11 and 44). Those from the West extend into the fifth and sixth centuries and include: Kale the *presbytis*, of Sicily; Leta the *presbitera*, of Italy; Flavia Vitalia, *prb*, from Dalmatia; and a nameless *sacerdota*, also from Dalmatia.

As late as the eighth and ninth centuries the struggle against women’s liturgical service in the Latin Church continued. Pope Zachary wrote to the emperor Pippin and the Frankish bishops and abbots in 747: “. . . as we have learned to our dismay, divine worship has fallen into such disdain that women have presumed to serve at the sacred altars, and that the female sex, to whom it does not belong, perform all the things that are assigned exclusively to men.” This apparently had to do with monastic women, the last holdouts of old.

## *Bishops*

Most controversial of all, and most sparsely attested, are the *episcopae*. We have an inscription for a “lady bishop” (*femina episcopa*) in a tomb poem from Umbria, ca. 500. She could, of course, have been a bishop’s wife, though in that case she should be called *coniux*. Then there is the very well known and lengthy inscription for a woman who was certainly *not* a bishop’s wife, but was the mother of a Pope: Theodora, mother of Paschal I (817–824), whose two inscriptions (mosaic and reliquary) in the church of Santa Prassede in Rome both call her *episcopa*. Eisen treads cautiously with this material. Given the fractious and feuding state of the Roman Church in the ninth century, the reference could be to various practices. Eisen states that despite this, even the official activity of a woman as a bishop in Rome should not be excluded in principle, however improbable it might seem from this distance in time.

## *Conclusion*

Were there women ministers in the early Church? Undoubtedly. Were there *ordained* women exercising ministry in the early Church? While much of the evidence preserved for us dates from a time when “ordination” was not yet a fixed concept or consistent practice, there is enough inscriptional and literary evidence even from later centuries to suggest very strongly that women did indeed enter the ranks of the Church’s ordained ministers as deacons, priests, possibly even the occasional bishop. What is absolutely certain is that during the first six or seven centuries of the Church’s life women carried out, and were recognized and revered for, a wide variety of services that today we acclaim as vital and indispensable ministries to the whole body of Christ’s Church.

## *References*

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