



THE Deaconess IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

A BRIEF SURVEY

FR ABEL OGHLUKIAN

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translated from the Armenian by
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PREFACE

The issue of bestowing the diaconate on women is not a novel phenomenon in our church. Since at least the eleventh century this office developed steadily in several fairly clear stages. Its focus in lively contemporary debate is rather connected with discussion of the principle of legal equality between men and women in our social and societal contexts. If women have achieved striking advances in political, economic, educational and cultural fields, the question arises as to what their proper place is in church, what premises can be found in tradition for extending their scope for service, facilitating and properly evaluating their work for the church. These are the subjects the present study addresses.

Fr. Vardan Hac'uni laid the foundation for a consideration of women's inestimable contribution to Armenian national and church life in his major monograph, *The Armenian Woman Before History*.¹ Forty-one years after its publication Dr. Maria Christine Arat submitted the following dissertation to the Vienna State University, "The Deaconesses of the Armenian Church in Canonical Perspective".² In this way the topic of ordination as deaconess was again brought indirectly to the attention of Armenian church hierarchy.

This present inquiry is based on Dr. Arat's above research, while critically elaborating it with new historical, literary and canonical data. To facilitate comprehension I have avoided the strict application of scholarly methodology whenever possible and have restricted literary citations to the necessary minimum.

The stimulus for producing this brief volume has been provided by the current national-religious, spiritual and cultural reawakening in Armenia and the urgent imperatives related to it. Its goal is to direct the attention of our religious authorities and churchloving community to a very ancient national-ecclesiastical tradition currently almost completely overlooked, i.e. the ordination of deaconesses by the Armenian church. I hope that readers will find in its proposals material for broadminded, unbiased consideration to assist Armenian women with a calling in committed diaconal service to Christ as established in the Armenian church.

In this regard I owe a special debt of gratitude to His Grace, Bishop Khajak and Bishop Hovnan for their sincere fraternal evaluation and support, to Fr. Augustinus Sekulian of the Mkhitarist Brotherhood of Vienna for providing me with literature and invaluable specialized assistance during the preparation of this work, to Fr. Abraham Mkrtchian and Mrs. Vartiter Nikoghosian for editing the study and Sarkis Hambartsumian for the photographs.

May the company of celibate women hermits and churchloving deaconesses mentioned in this work receive the recompense for their labor in the heights from the light of heaven, as they fervently intercede for all.

The Author

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

References in the New Testament

Romans 16:1-2 and I Timothy 3:11, 5: 3-16 are considered important reference points in connection with the inauguration of a female diaconate.

In his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul addresses Phebe as *diakonos* in the opening line: "I entrust to you our sister Phebe, who is a servant (= *diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae." Two divergent conclusions have been reached by commentators on the passage. Some do not regard the forms *diakonos* and *diakonia* as technical terms, arguing that the notion of calling in the early church was still rather vague.³ Hence the above expressions lacked the specificity of designating discrete terms of service or ecclesiastical rank.⁴ Others find support in the opening of the apostle's letter to the Philippians (1:1) where he includes deacons along with all the bishops and Christians greeted.⁵ From this they deduce that already in apostolic times the term *diakonos* bore the precise sense of an organized ecclesiastical office. Furthermore, since the feminine form *diakonissa* (deaconess) is unfamiliar to the apostle, it is suggested that it is not implausible that women may also have been embraced by the cognate masculine form.

Moreover, it is proposed that the apostle is addressing an exhortation to deaconesses at I Tim 3:11 ("Similarly their [i.e. deacons'] wives [should be] modest, not indulging in scandal, meek, faithful in everything") since the verse oc-

curs in a whole section of advice to deacons. However, they do not view the deaconesses to whom the remark is directed as fulfilling anything like the clearly delineated role they would later perform.⁶

The third New Testament text which offers insight into the situation of deaconesses is I Tim 5: 3-16. There the topic under discussion is the office of widow and its duties. The apostle counsels young widows not to be enrolled "as, when their passions lead them away from Christ, they want to marry (v.11)." He suggests that the proper candidate the church should accept for this office is "one who is truly a widow, is left alone and has put her trust in God, who rises for prayer and petition night and day...a widow should be classed among the widows who is not less than sixty years of age, who has been wife to one husband and is testified to have been [active] in good works. (5-10)." Expressions like "being classed among the widows" indicate that such a status existed in the early church.

The whole tradition of the eastern church and especially three of its illustrious representatives, Clement⁷ and Origen⁸ of Alexandria and St. John Chrysostom⁹ envision those three passages as the matrix of the female diaconate.

References in the First Three Centuries

No work from this period survives directly relating to a female diaconate. Only indirect data are available from Christian and pagan sources about the existence of deaconesses in the church which do not afford a precise description of their ecclesiastical office. In his capacity as governor

of Bythynia in c.112 the Younger Pliny informs Trajan that he deemed it essential to subject two women whom the Christians called "servant" (*ministrae*= *diakonissai*) to interrogation by torture about the veracity of the faith they confessed.¹⁰ Despite a certain connection which this citation establishes with I Tim 3:11, it does not allow us to define the deaconesses' role in the church.¹¹

The same is true of two sub-apostolic Fathers, St. Ignatius of Antioch (d.110) and his contemporary, St. Polycarp of Smyrna. The former speaks about widows serving the church, but since the latter are virgins, they form a different category to those mentioned in I Timothy 5.¹² The latter, however, offers a more complete picture of widows' duties, stating that they should live a Christian life of prayer and avoid wrongdoings, denials and bearing false witness since they are 'God's altar'.

According to the information Tertullian presents, widows belonged to the ranks of the clergy, but were not endowed with a particular office and were not permitted to preach.¹³ While Hippolytus of Rome distinguishes between widows and virgins in his 'Apostolic Tradition', indicating that the former are not ordained,¹⁴ he betrays no awareness of deaconesses in a contemporary sense.

Both Clement (150-215) and Origen (185-215) of Alexandria were familiar with widows who belonged to the ranks of the clergy, while lacking the right to preach.¹⁵ Though these two authors mention deaconesses, as with the other writers of the second and third centuries, they oppose granting women teaching and liturgical functions. Indeed, the Fathers of this period provide widows and deaconesses with ascetic guidelines rather than an ecclesiastical office within their community.

The Classical Period of the Deaconess (3rd-6th c.)

- The Syriac *Didascalia* (Teaching of the Apostles)

Precise references to deaconesses are preserved only from the third century via Syriac tradition. The most important source represented is the Teaching of the Apostles,¹⁶ a work edited at the beginning of the third century. There widows are clearly distinguished from deaconesses, both receiving a full description.

The widow is a sort of lay hermit in the community. She is prohibited from performing ritual acts and preaching. The widow's primary duty is to pray on behalf of the parish and look after the sick. She could also perform "ordinations", a right which obviously did not entail the transfer of ecclesiastical authority.¹⁷

In the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, deaconesses are mentioned alongside widows for the first time. Their duty is to preach and be of assistance at baptisms where a male deacon's involvement is limited. "There are houses", says the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, "where, in consideration of the heathen, one may not send a [male] deacon." The deaconess' basic function, as stated above, was to anoint female neophytes with oil before baptism (the priest or bishop only anointed the woman's forehead after baptism). Thereafter, the deaconess took it upon herself to supervise her spiritual instruction. If the bishop represents God the Father and the priest Christ, then the deaconess, by her calling, symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit, in consequence of which one should accord her fitting respect.¹⁸

• *Apostolic Constitutions* (4th c.)

The *Apostolic Constitutions* is also the fruit of a Syrian milieu and was probably compiled in the fourth century.¹⁹ Whereas the role of the widow here is gradually disappearing, that of the deaconess occupies a central position.²⁰ The latter can be either a widow or virgin under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of a male deacon. The deaconess symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit and is respected accordingly, yet "as the Holy Spirit was not active apart from Christ's economy", so also the deaconess does not function in the parish without the male deacon's guidance. During communion she did not stand among the men, but occupied first place among the widows and virgins. The basic factor by which she gained entry to the ranks of ecclesiastics was appropriate unction by the bishop. Here too her primary function is to be of assistance at baptism, however she is not given the right of spiritual care or preaching. The deaconesses could not give a blessing in church or conduct services such as those considered within the purview of the deacon or priest. Among her extra-liturgical duties, the deaconess might (with his permission) relay the bishop's message to other communities and form a liaison between the highest ecclesiastical authorities and the women of a particular congregation. Washing the body of deceased women was also considered one of the deaconess's main tasks.

Thus we observe that according to the *Apostolic Constitutions* compiled in a Syrian environment, the deaconess gained a distinct character through unction, and yet was still strictly forbidden to devote herself to preaching or any type of service at the altar.

- *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*²¹ (5th c.)

This document too derives from the same ambience.²² Here greater significance is attributed to widows, so that deaconesses are presented as subject to their supervision. The vocation of widowhood is bestowed by a blessing which, however, cannot be interpreted as liturgical unction. Certain parallels may be observed between the status of widowhood and the diaconate which is solely reserved for men, e.g. the former's fixed position during services is assigned at the bishop's left, while the latter stands at his right. Nevertheless, since the widow's life is devoted to the ascetic ideal, they are free of all pastoral responsibilities, a role fulfilled by deaconesses, though still under their supervision.

- *Conciliar Decisions and Documents* (4th-6th c.)

Decisions affecting deaconesses are already contained in the nineteenth canon of the Council of Nicea (325). The passage concerns those entering the Catholic Church from various sects: "Similarly deacons and all who are under canons will retain their office. We also remarked that deaconesses who have [only] the semblance of ordination are to remain in all respects part of the laity."²³

In the canons of Theodosius²⁴ (390) a candidate to be deaconess must be sixty years of age. This is lowered to forty in the fifteenth canon of the Council of Chalcedon (451). In case of contracting marriage after ordination, the severe penalty of excommunication was fixed. In the sixth century, among the laws promulgated by the emperor Justinian, the deaconess was acknowledged as a state official. Among the four hundred and twenty-five active clergy in Constantinople's cathedral of Agia Sophia forty

deaconesses are listed who resided either in their parents' house or in a community near the church.²⁵ The development of deaconesses in the church reaches its conclusion with the Council of Chalcedon.

Deaconesses in Byzantine Tradition

From the fourth century onwards, the names of numerous well-known deaconesses are recorded in the Byzantine church as, for example, St. John Chrysostom's close friend, the deaconess Olympias, St. Macrina, sister of St. Basil of Caesarea and St. Gregory of Nyssa, as well as the latter's wife Theosebia etc. In this period most deaconesses were related to clergy, the mother of this or that priest, or his sister or wife. At the Council in Trullo (692) it was resolved that after a priest's elevation to the episcopate, his wife should live separately from him.²⁶

The tradition of ordaining deaconesses in the Byzantine church continued until the tenth and eleventh centuries, after which it gradually fell into abeyance.

Deaconesses in the Syrian Church

It has already been remarked that the office of deaconess as an ecclesiastical vocation was early acknowledged in a Syrian ecclesiastical milieu. It continued to develop both among the (Jacobite) West Syrians and the (Nestorian) Church of the East until the eleventh century. In both communities the deaconess acquired various duties and functions. When we compare them with those currently performed by the deacon, we note that, apart from certain reserva-

tions, the deaconess not only received a particular form of ordination, but ascended to the altar during the liturgy, bore the gifts during the Great Entrance and read the gospel.²⁷

In view of the preceding descriptions, we may conclude that the era from the fourth to the eleventh century is the classic period of development of the female diaconate in church history. Subsequently, it slowly began to disappear almost everywhere. In this connection, the Armenian church remains the sole exception.

History of the Deaconess in the Armenian Church

While the office of deaconess was falling into decline in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in both eastern and western churches, it enjoyed a revival in Cilician Armenia. The vardapets Pōghos Tarōnec'i (d.c.1123) and Mkhit'ar Goš (d.1213) rejected this renewal as a novelty which had entered the Armenian church through Latin influence.²⁸ However, it is clear that the role of the deaconess in Cilicia could not have re-emerged as a result of Latin mission, as the last traces of the female diaconate had already vanished in the West.

Why then did the Armenian vardapets adopt such a negative attitude towards this movement?

The answer to this question suggested by Dr. Arat is that medieval vardapets entertained inimical views towards women, not only in ecclesiastical or ritual matters, but also non-religious. For example, in Mkhit'ar Gōs judicial manual (*Datastanagirk'*) women are forbidden to give evidence in law courts and to crush the grapes used to prepare communion wine etc. The author bases her argument on the following citation "Man is perfect, but woman is [only] half."²⁹

To that one must respond that the above quotation is inappropriate as a foundation for such a contention. It is true that Tat'evac'i, among other vardapets, does not regard women as on an equal social standing with men. However, his purpose in that passage is not to review woman's equality or liberation, but rather, in accordance with the title of the sixth

section of his 'Book of Questions', to comment on the Pentateuch and Mosaic Laws. The whole forty-fifth chapter of this portion is a reply to the question regarding animal sacrifice in terms of a linguistic and semantic investigation of scripture. The law that the sacrificer should be male was obviously not instituted by Tat'evac'i, but Jewish tradition. Moreover, if his explanations result from such bible study, then we too should state in like fashion:

Firstly because man is perfect and woman half; secondly because the male is active while the female passive; thirdly because woman derived from man; fourthly, because the man contributes the blood (to the foetus); fifthly, because the man is head.

Thus we observe the entry of a semitic thoughtworld on the basis of the Old and New Testaments into Armenia via Christianity and its appropriation by some Armenian vardapets. This is natural and could not have been otherwise.

The development of the office of deaconess in the Armenian church can be divided into four historical periods:

1) Greater Armenia in the fourth to eighth centuries. There are uncertain references in the canons to women who have a claim to be present at baptisms.

2) Eastern and Cilician Armenia in the ninth to eleventh cents. There the term deaconess is employed in ritual texts (*maštoc'*) of ordination.

3) From the twelfth cent. there are literary references and rites for the ordination of deaconesses in liturgical texts, first in Cilicia and then in eastern Armenia.

4) The renewal of the female diaconate in the seventeenth century.

• **First Period (4th-8th c.)**

From the fourth and fifth centuries literary data dealing with the question of the deaconess, such as the Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum* and *Apostolic Constitutions*, have not come down to us. Yet it would seem that the Armenians were not completely unfamiliar with that tradition. The Haykazeen Dictionary, based on evidence from fifth century Armenian translations renders the term deaconess as "female worshipper or virgin servant active in church and superior of a nunnery."³⁰ In the sixteenth canon of a series handed down to us under the name of St. Sahak we read:

Baptism should be performed with reverence and women should not venture to stand near the priests during baptism as some have been accustomed to do audaciously and baptize with them, but let them pray in their own place.³¹

The same canon was reaffirmed by the second synod of Dvin in 554/5:

Women should not venture to stand by the priests...but let the deacons assist them and let the women pray at their own places and not participate with the priests, as we hear that they occupy the place of deacons.³²

As we have seen, the canonical references of the fourth to eighth centuries are directed against women who do not have the rank of deacon. Here it is also worth mentioning that there are no specific canons pertaining to deaconesses in the whole book of canons. The phe-

nomenon can be explained by the fact that the first edition of the collection was executed at the behest of Catholicos Yovhan the Philosopher already at the beginning of the eighth century, which implies that the office of deaconess probably belongs to a later period.

• Second Period (9th-11th c.)

In the second period the term deaconess³³ is encountered in Armenian manuscripts. In a ritual text (no.457 of the Venice Mkhitarist Collection) which is regarded as a compilation of the ninth-tenth centuries under the rubric "Ordination of those worthy to be monastics" there is an addition referring to the ordination of nuns where it is said that the vesting of those who become nuns should be done by the deaconess:

One should give women the schema and perform the same rite. But let the deaconesses perform this bare-headed and cover their brow with a black veil to the eyebrows.³⁴

• Third Period (12th c.)

Despite the fact that Catholicos Nersēs Snorhali's general encyclical to all classes of the Armenian people offers no particular remark to either nuns or deaconesses, detailed literary references to deaconesses begin in the same century, beginning with the following passage from his nephew Nersēs Lambronac'i.

Monasticism is not only lower than the priesthood, but also the diaconate, since the former is also open to women, as St. Basil writes, yet the diaconate in no way.³⁵

In Mkhitar Goš juducial manual of 1184 we read the following concerning deaconesses:

There are also women ordained deacon who are styled deaconess to preach to women and read the gospel to obviate a man entering the convent and the nun leaving it. When the priests perform baptism they [the deaconesses] approach the font to wash the women with the water of atonement below the curtain...Do not consider this new and unprecedented, as we learn it from the tradition of the holy apostles; for it says, "I entrust you our sister Phoebe who is a servant of the church."³⁶

We encounter similar references to deaconesses in the lawbook composed by Smbat Constable in 1265:

With the priest's permission, deaconesses can also be ordained and proclaim sermons to women and read the gospel where men should not enter...and can wash children and women in the water of atonement...This office was early abandoned by Armenian women. Yet it can be traced to the apostle's words, "I entrust you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church."³⁷

Step'anos Orbēlean, archbishop of Siwnik' in his "History of the Province of Siwnik'" of 1299 writes the following about deaconesses:

There are some women who become deaconesses to preach in nunneries...she preaches and reads the gospel not in the throng on the bema, but on her own in some corner. But let her not approach the service of the holy sacrament in any way like male deacons.³⁸

Here Dr. Arat ends her investigation of how the role of the deaconess is reflected in the works of Armenian vardapets. However, it might be of interest at this juncture to turn to two fur-

ther sources of importance. The first is the letter of the vardapet Pōghos Tarōnec'i at the beginning of the twelfth century, "Epistle Against Theopisthēs the Byzantine Philosopher", while the second is Grigor Tat'evac'i's "Book of Questions" already encountered.

Above Pōghos Tarōnec'i was mentioned in passing as an author by Dr. Arat, yet it is worth becoming more closely acquainted with his approach to this issue. Complaining about certain Syrian ecclesiastical customs, he states that "the Syrians allow women to go up to the altar, which is not right." He then adds:

They also allow women to go up to God's holy altar, something foreign to the apostolic and prophetic canons. Moreover, the Holy Spirit abhorred that women should set foot on the altar.

Now it is written in the law that Moses alone had a right to ascend to the top of the mountain and speak with God and that was an image of this God-receiving altar of God. Meanwhile, all the priests stood at the foot of the mountain which represents the Church of Christ. The people also stood at the foot of the mountain, which is the church's external chamber. That mountain was an image of this holy church and a command was laid down under the old law to approach the holy mountain in holiness. Under the new dispensation scripture says that only James, brother of the Lord, had the right to enter the holy of holies. Under the old dispensation the mountain was ablaze with fire, while in the new it is the Church which is God's dwelling and the place of sacrifice of Christ's immolation of His blood. This is the truth of Christ's economy which the holy hierarchs assembled at Nicaea affirmed in instituting anathemas and stating that it is not lawful for women to ascend to the altar and did not allow them to speak at all in church. The apostle Paul too restricted the offices of women and did not allow them to speak at all in

church. So they [the Syrians] opposed Paul in permitting women on the bema.³⁹

On the question of baptism Tat'evac'i opposes Latin custom in rejecting the performance of baptism by women even in cases of extreme necessity:

The heretical nation of the Franks admit that though baptism is the priest's function, in case of necessity, if there is no priest available anyone who knows the order of baptism can baptize. And is there is no man around and the child is near death, a woman can baptize if she knows the formula which Christ taught (In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), she sprinkles the water and says, "May (s)he be baptized." This too is a great heresy and insolent curse against the church's regulations.⁴⁰

Thereafter Tat'evac'i lists all his arguments for opposing this Latin custom. These are extremely interesting in permitting us to form an overall impression of the school of Tat'ev's position on this issue:

Firstly because such an evil heresy is not to be found in other Christian churches.

Secondly, God gave Adam, not the woman, the type of this sacrament at the beginning of creation when He directed the animals to Adam to name them.

Thirdly, if such grace had been bestowed on woman, why was the Virgin Mary, Mother of God not present at her son's baptism in the Jordan?

Fourthly, if the Spirit did not descend upon the eunuch, through the Apostle Philip, one of the seven deacons, until he was spirited to Azovt and only then the Spirit descended on him at baptism, how is it that the Spirit's grace is bestowed through a woman by washing in water?

Fifthly, if there was the possibility of a woman performing priestly functions in

case of need, why could the virgin Nunē not baptize any of the Georgians when she brought them to a knowledge of God, but sent a message to St. Gregory asking him for priests to baptize them?

Sixthly, if a woman can baptize in an emergency, why did St. Gregory the Illuminator who was much more honorable than a woman, not baptize any believers before his consecration in Caesarea, after which he baptized thousands upon thousands and tens upon tens of thousands in the river?

Seventh, baptism is the priest's function and priesthood is service to God. However, neither the idolaters had the custom of offering sacrifice to their false gods by means of women, nor do any of the heathen do this. Thus, if it was necessary to maintain such integrity among the heathen, how much more is that true of the church, which represents the true dispensation and law of purity?

Eighth, since women have no authority to perform animal sacrifice, which is the criterion of purity in matters of the flesh, how appropriate is it to allow them to approach the rite of spiritual purity?

Ninth, baptism is a priestly function and the priesthood is free and not subject to debt to anyone. Yet woman is man's servant and foot and so it is not right for the servant to do the master's work, as stated in the canons of Nicaea that slaves have no permission to occupy an office in the service of the church, except when emancipated by his master's will as in the case of Onesimus (Phil.). If the holy hierarchs did not permit men in servitude to receive an ecclesiastical rank, how much greater a heresy is it to allow women to whom God said, "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you," (Gen 3:16) to perform the office of a priest who belongs to the class of free men, not slaves?

Tenth, baptism is the function of the priest and is effected by prayer. However, the apostle bids women cover their head during prayer because of the angels, i.e. because of the priests who are referred to as 'angel' in scripture. Hence, how reprehensi-

ble is it to allow them to venture to conduct the priestly office? Moreover, there are many other citations from scripture which demonstrate that such a practice is false and vain.⁴¹

Tat'evac'i does not only reject women's conducting baptism, but also being Godmother or being referred to as Godmother in connection with the rite. As *ekklesia* in Greek is grammatically feminine in gender, so only the Church can be Godmother, as the "church of the newly born." To the question, "Can a woman be Godfather or not?" he gives the following response:

She cannot; for we say Godfather, not Godmother. The Church is Godmother of neophytes, because a woman cannot be guarantor or witness and hence cannot be a Godfather. Again, as women cannot function as priest, so they cannot be a Godfather. Not only that, it is not right for a woman to remain in church during baptism, for the Virgin Mother of the Lord was not present at Christ's baptism in the Jordan, as already mentioned.⁴²

Obviously, it is possible to object that here Tat'evac'i's criticism affects unordained women, not directly deaconesses. Yet one must also bear in mind the fact that he never refers to deaconesses, not even during his interpretation of the clerical ranks, especially the sixth pertaining to the diaconate.⁴³ Yet in treating the sixth clerical rank of deacon, Nersēs Lambronac'i, Mkhitar Goš Step'anos Orbēlean and Smbat Constable all alluded to deaconesses. This fact suggests that a theologian like Tat'evac'i following the scholarly standards of his time, who in compiling his works would have consulted at least the most important works of medieval Armenian literature, could not be ignorant of that church's tradition of ordaining deaconesses or even express himself against this "national

church" tradition. These are questions to which we will return later.

The famous vardapets Yovhannēs Pluz (d.1293) and Movsēs (d.c.1323), both from Erzinka (Erzincan), also adopted a negative position vis-a`-vis women's being Godmother or performing baptism. Thus the former, in his "Advice to Ordinary Christians" counsels:

Do not make a Muslim your Godfather. Do not submit a written deposition from a woman, for a Godfather is witness and guarantor and instructor in the faith, whereas it is not right for a woman to be either a witness, a guarantor or a teacher.⁴⁴

In his "Refutation of Mixing Water in the Holy Eucharist" of the year 1309 Movsēs Erzinkac'i comments with reference to the Marcionites' heretical practices: "What is more – they are baptized by women, for which we anathematize them."⁴⁵

Returning to Dr. Arat's researches, she also reviewed a series of literary data concerning the ordination of deaconesses in some liturgical texts of ordination. Thus in Ms no. 199 of the Venice Mkhitarist collection compiled at the beginning of the thirteenth century there is a canon bearing the rubric, "Ordination of woman deacons, i.e. deaconesses." There is also an additional canon "To make deaconesses" in a ritual copied in Cilicia in 1314 (Maštoc' Matenadaran MS no.199). One of the ritual books of Tat'ev from the same year contains an explanation "Of Deaconesses" which, among others, offers proof of the practice of ordaining deaconesses in the Armenian church. In that connection Dr. Arat remarks that when the Armenian patriarch of Turkey, Archbishop Šnorhk' Galustean ordained deaconesses, he would usually employ the normal rite for ordaining male deacons.

During recent research I came upon another small source entitled "Ordination of women deacons, i.e. deaconesses", which I present now as an additional witness to this custom:

(1) "Ps 54 "My heart emitted the word" is said...

(2) litany "Let us implore in faith".

(3) Then the bishop says this prayer:

Beneficent and merciful God who made everything by the word of Your command and through the fleshly economy of your only-begotten Son in purity have made woman the equal of man and, as it seemed pleasing to you to grant the grace of the Holy Spirit not only to men, but to women also, that He may keep this woman stainless and pure in deeds of righteousness through the mercy and compassion of Your Christ. With whom, to You also, almighty Father and the life-creating, liberating Holy Spirit befit glory, dominion and honor, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen. Our Father...⁴⁶

From the fact that our oldest extant manuscripts containing the canon for the ordination of deaconesses derive from the 13th-14th centuries (Venice 199 and Matenadaran 2787) one might possibly surmise that the canon in question entered our ritual book of ordination from the original compilation of the general ritual book in the days of Catholicos Maštoc' Eghivardec'i (897-898).⁴⁷

The Revival of the Female Diaconate (17th century)

Despite the crisis situation dominating Armenian politics under Iranian suzerainty when the catholicate of Etchmiadzin became the center of contention between rival claimants, the seventeenth century was a period of spiritual and cultural revival. In this brief space of time Armenian monasticism experienced a renewal especially in the region of Siwnik' thanks to the selfdenial of the vardapets Movsēs III Tat'evac'i, Pōghos Mokac'i, Kirakos Pontac'i and Sargis Parontēr.⁴⁸ In the course of that overall revival there was a reform not only of male monasteries, but also of a series of nunneries in Siwnik'. In his voluminous, seminal work *Sisakan* Fr. Ghevond Ališan notes the following list of such institutions in that area:

The nunnery of the Mother of God in Halidzor, the nunnery of the Mother of God in Šinaher, the nunnery of the Mother of God in Noratunk', the nunnery of Ilk'apat, the nunnery of Kot', the nunnery of Šorot' etc.⁴⁹

The nunneries of Šeneher (Šinuhayr) and <ot' are of particular interest for the number of their monastics as well as their prolific copying activity. The following details concerning them have been assembled from the *Sisakan* collection mentioned above:

The second village of Dzoraget is not only larger than Halis and Khot, but in fact all the villages in the region. In the

past as at present it has been called Seneher and perhaps for that reason some have interpreted it as Sinahayr or Sinuhayr and someone has inverted it as Hayrašen. Beside Seneher was the great nunnery of the Mother of God to the west of Halidzor on a lofty plateau, of which the church and part of the wall round the cells is still erect which were built in 1676, in the days of Catholicos Yakob IV...as stated in an inscription on the wall of the church apse.⁵⁰

This house and sanctuary was built by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the year of the Armenian era 1125 (=A.D. 1676) in the catholicate of the Lord Yakob.⁵¹

Again on top of the arch someone has inscribed a memorial to the builder Azri or Azaria in the year 1676.

By the direction of the Holy Spirit I the pilgrim Azri, the most sinful from the plain of Agulis, came to the nunnery and had this church built along with the surrounding walls and holy cells. It was warm for thirty days in the year of the Savior 1676.

More details emerge from an inscription written in the face of the door in the same year.

In the year of our Lord Jesus Christ 1676 this church was constructed through the means of us handmaidens who have assembled here in the monastery and number eighty persons. Years after building this house some of us were moved to go to the area of Agulis and having come here they built this church by their labor and with their honest earnings. It was begun on April 4th and completed on September 8th. Therefore I beseech you sisters and virgins who come after us [to commemorate] my brother's service...⁵²

Apart from these inscriptions we have a series of literary references to the nunnery of Seneher preserved in the manuscript colophons of

scribes residing in this nunnery. Indeed pure nuns did not spare their zealous spirit and the light of their eyes, placing them at the service of Armenian culture and advancement of the scribal art.⁵³

From the pen of the nun of this monastery Mariam we read the following in the colophon to Matenadaran Ms no.1455:

On the completion and fulfilment of the twenty-first jubilee and at the same date on the Japhetic calendar this codex was penned...This work called *voskep'orik* was written by the weak, infirm and falsely named Mary, believer in name only and virgin, but extremely weak in achieving results and in action...[in] the nunnery of the Holy Mother of God and holy convent indwelt by angels called Šênher in a large body of nuns wearing hairshirts.⁵⁴

That final expression clearly implies that several tens of nuns lived in the Šênher nunnery. As we saw above, this high number is confirmed by the reference in the inscription at the entry to the monastic complex to "eighty persons." But only sixty years after the nunnery's construction, during Catholicos Abraham III Kretac'i's hierarchical visit, he sadly remarks on the nunnery's declining condition:

One hundred and fifty nuns used to reside here, but now there were only twelve penitents, and they were perplexed and had lost hope...I encouraged the penitents and [noted] all the essentials lacking in their church, books, a measure of cloth, chalice and cross. Moreover, the outer chapel where men would stand when they came on a visit and the hermitage were delapidated and in ruins. I had a carpenter brought with timber and planks and, handing him the cost of the materials and a craftsman, I bade him swiftly rebuild them and went on my way. I bought and dis-

patched all the ecclesiastical vessels I could procure in the village of Tat'ev and since they did not have flour for bread, I gave orders for some wheat from the monastery to be given to [the nuns] who had no means.⁵⁵

The nunnery of Šorot' among others originated in the seventeenth century during the overall spiritual and cultural revival. The village of Šorot' or Šurut' in the region of Ernjak (now Nakhijevan) is mentioned in historical sources from the thirteenth century. By the seventeenth century it appears "resplendent in wealth and merchandise as well as the construction and repair of churches."⁵⁶ In the years 1630-633 before assuming the office of catholicos Movsēs III Tat'evac'i came to these parts with his colleague the vardapet Poghos Mokac'i and founded a school "to assemble the boys from the surrounding villages to study."⁵⁷ Study was not restricted to men, but was widely available for women, but separate from men in a nunnery. The following literary references are preserved regarding the nunnery at Šorot':

O holy fathers, brothers and thoughtful readers, when you come upon this holy book reading or just looking though it, commemorate in your pure prayers the sinful Aristakes falsely-named, waster of the education [I received] who hail from the region of Bznunik', from the area around Khlat' and now am far from home in the region of Nakhijevan. [Commemorate] also my sister Margarit the blessed nun who not only wrote this text but has labored on many writings. Since our mother passed away when she was one year old she was nurtured in the hermitage among the nuns and when she reached puberty she began the scribal art and continued until old age, receiving nothing [for her services] but [doing] everything for the glory of God. May she gain the reward of her labors from Him. She also bestowed much effort on

wretched me both in writing letters and other matters for years and she was responsible for delivering me from the world and keeping me in the office of my calling, though I have been deceived by sin and found wanting, I implore Christ with my sinful mouth to reward her according to her kindnesses and after this life number her with the wise virgins. Amen.⁵⁸

And now I Aristakes, the last of scholars and disorderly among those in orders, poor in worldly goods and exiled from my homeland, servant of the word by a supernal calling, devoid of deeds and empty of virtues, deceived by sin, longed with fervent love and passionate desire for this holy book which is a compilation of the good news of the gospels of Matthew and John. I received this holy book as a remedy for my irremediable soul and a tiller for my shipwrecked life and gave it to my sister Margarit to copy in the region of Ernjak in the nunnery of Šorot', under the protection of the holy Mother of God, in the year of the Armenian era 1120 [=A.D.1671].⁵⁹

At the end of the same manuscript another scribe (probably contemporary) has written the following eulogy to the very charitable virgin:

We also say, "[Lord] have mercy," on his [Aristakes'] sister Margarit,

For she was a penitent virgin, working without incurring tedium,

For she wrote many books by hand and left them to the Armenian church.

For she has grown very old in labors, and advanced in many years,

May the Lord give her some of His remedy and may her worthy of His kingdom.

You Margarit, aged mother, yearned for in the clay of death,

In this world you saw much sorrow; [you suffered] even more from your family

Devoting yourself much to copying, you lost something of the light of your eyes.

May the Lord of remedies reward you, [setting] you among the wise virgins.

To Him be glory always, for ever, in the past, now and in the future.⁶⁰

In the colophon of another miscellany manuscript copied in 1669 we read about the female scribes:

Now this holy book was written in the year 1118 of the Armenian era [=A.D.1669] in the patriarchate of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin of Catholicos Yakob, in the episcopal tenure of our region of Esayi, the excellent teacher, in the area of Ernjak, in the town of Šorot', under the protection of the holy Mother of God and of the holy Illuminator, by Margarit, the captive soul beset by sin, tossed about by life and perishing in the depths of iniquity, full of evil in spirit.⁶¹

Other female scribes like Margarit flourished in Armenian scriptoria, such as Goharine who copied Grigor Narekac'i's Prayerbook, the hermit Šušan who copied Khorenac'i and Eghišē etc.⁶² More significant for our purpose is the scribe of Matenadaran Ms. no. 39 who in her verse colophon included her name and title in an acrostic which reads "Ustianē sarkavag" (deacon).⁶³ From these important data one may conclude:

1) There were deaconesses in Armenian nunneries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

2) The tradition of bestowing the office of deacon on women was not an innovation at that period, but was certainly the continuation of an older tradition in the Armenian church.

3) With the example of Abraham III Kretac'i, as we saw above, from the days of Movsēs III Tat'evac'i on our catholicos not only did not regard the existence of nunneries and

deaconesses as non-traditional, but directly encouraged and assisted them to flourish in their spiritual calling.

Armenian Nunneries Outside the Borders of Armenia: St. Catherine's Nunnery, New Julfa

After the partial references to deaconesses in Cilicia and Eastern Armenia, we observe the phenomenon in a fully organized setting first in the seventeenth century outside Armenia's borders at St. Catherine's nunnery, New Julfa. It was founded in 1623 through the efforts of Khodja Eghiazar. The first members of the sisterhood were three nuns who had taken refuge near St. John's church at New Julfa in the aftermath of Šah Abbas' deportation from Armenia, Urük'sana, T'aguhi and Hrip'simē. They brought with them from Armenia relics of St. Catherine, to whom the foundation was to be dedicated, as well as St. Hrip'simē and St. John the Baptist. The nunnery had high walls with cells round the central church. The monastery was also styled a 'desert'. During the first fifty years of its existence the number of sisters rose to thirty-three, after which it gradually decreased. The attempt to rejuvenate it numerically in 1937 was unsuccessful and so the institution was finally closed in 1954. The nunnery also operated a girls' school. After taking one's monastic oath which was administered after the age of twenty, the novices might receive four clerical orders from the bishop. The custom of ordaining deaconesses in the nunnery was instituted in 1851 by Archbishop T'adēos Pēknazarean. Presumably only a few nuns were ordained deaconess to read the gospel and see to a number of other clerical tasks, while the rest

were satisfied with receiving the four minor clerical orders.

In this connection it is worth mentioning an interesting text recently translated by Fr. Tačat Eartēmean entitled "Materials For A History of Armenian Monasticism (14th-17th c.)."⁶⁴ The fifteenth photograph there portrays five nuns from St. Catherine's convent, New Julfa. The nun on the right is noteworthy. She is probably a novice with a *p'ilon* and headcovering like a *vegħar*. Presumably her taking vows was the occasion for the picture being taken.

Apart from St. Catherine's, three other nunneries are mentioned where the custom of ordaining deaconesses was practised. The first followed the example of St. Catherine's and was founded in Tiflis a century after it with a dedication to St. Stephen. Being familiar with the St. Catherine's nunnery in New Julfa, Prince Aškharbēg Behbut'eanc' conceived the desire to found a similar establishment in Tiflis. However it fell to his son, Melik' Behbut'eanc' to realize his father's unfulfilled dream of erecting a nunnery on the family's property in Tiflis in c.1724-26. Hence, St. Stephen's nunnery remained under the family's immediate influence for a long time, so that the abbess was selected by them alone. As at St. Catherine's it was Archbishop T'adēos who introduced the custom of ordaining deaconesses. The abbess always had the order of protodeaconess and bore one or two pectoral crosses and a ring on her ring finger. The nunnery's final abbess was Sr. Hrip'simē T'ahireanc', a woman possessing both authority and influence. Some of the gifts she donated to the monastery at Etchmiadzin are still preserved at the Mother See. In the catholicos' old apartments is the image of the cathedral at Etchmiadzin presented to Khrimean Hayrik, beautifully sewn with gold thread, as well as the cathedral's wooden doors. On the main door the following inscription can be read: "Memorial to

the protodeaconess Hrip'simē Aghek' T'ahireanc' 1338" [=1889]. According to the brief inscription slightly below in Roman characters it was prepared in Tiflis by "Ingenieur Nicolas Grigorian."⁶⁵

It lies outside my present purpose to offer a detailed study of the above two nunneries, St. Catherine's and St. Stephen's, however I would thoroughly recommend those interested in the subject to consult Fr. Khorēn Khuc'ean's work, *A History of St. Stephen's Nunnery in Tiflis* (Tiflis, 1914). On pp. 79-100 the author also offers circumstantial reflections on St. Catherine's nunnery in New Julfa. To offer a clear picture of community life in those nunneries their sisterhood canons are reproduced below from that source.

Canons of St. Catherine's Monastery of New Julfa

1. The nunnery of St. Catherine is placed under the direct jurisdiction of the spiritual authority of the diocese.
2. The nunnery is to be governed by an executive body called "The Board of Governors of St. Catherine's Nunnery, the members of which are to be experienced priests appointed by the bishop of the diocese or his vicar.
3. The nunnery's board of governors should be in session every Saturday in the nunnery to consider the good ordering and regulation of internal life and the nunnery's financial situation.
4. One of the nunnery's board of governors should be treasurer by appointment of the

diocesan spiritual authority. He should be provided with an account book from the prelacy committee to keep a regular register of the nunnery's income and expenditure.

5. The nunnery's board of governors must maintain a vigilant scrutiny over the nunnery's lands, income and expenses. It may never sell the lands or pawn them, but may put them up for rent once this has been publically announced by the prelacy committee.

6. The nunnery board of governors can lend ready cash or borrow from others with the permission of the ruling hierarch, the vicar or the prelacy committee.

7. Two of the virgins are to be assigned to the office of steward by order of the ruling bishop. They must act with the knowledge and assent of the nunnery's board of governors and the abbess.

8. Each Saturday the stewards should present a detailed account of expenses to the nunnery's board of governors in the presence of the abbess and all the virgins.

9. At the beginning of each month the nunnery's board of governors should examine the previous month's income and expenditure and ratify it.

10. At the beginning of each year the same board of governors should bring before the tribunal of the diocesan authority all the previous year's account books, deeds and list of properties, tenants and rent for examination and publication.

11. Virgins and postulants are required strictly to obey the nunnery's rules and canons. None of them may leave the nunnery and go to her relatives or acquaintances without the abbess' permission.

12. All are required to be in church regularly for the hours of the office.

13. All are required to obey the orders and regulations of the nunnery's board of governors and the abbess.

14. The abbess is required to supervise vigilantly the virgins' and postulants' morals and conduct as well as the regulation of the office. She is to reprove and admonish the disorderly. If after the second reprimand one of them does not reform her ways, the abbess should inform the nunnery's board of governors about her. If the disorderly one is still not reformed after warning and admonition, the nunnery's board of governors is required to inform the ruling bishop of all the virgin's or postulant's infringements. The ruling bishop ought to decide the type of punishment, or ecclesiastical penance (for virgins and postulants) whether to forbid her temporarily to wear the stole or expel her entirely from the nunnery.

15. Virgins should strive to facilitate the activity of the benevolent society of Armenian Women of New Julfa which takes care of the needs and necessities of orphaned and indigent girls in school, assisting in their instruction and education at the national college for young ladies.⁶⁶

Viewed from a canonical perspective it is obvious that these regulations cannot be re-

garded as complete. In fact there are numerous omissions such as the the abbess' election and length of tenure, the reception of virgins, tonsuring and other similar questions are not dealt with in the above canons. Nevertheless, these were the basic canons by which the virgins of St. Catherine's nunnery were directed for long years.

Although the St. Stephen's nunnery in Tiflis lacks a formal set of canons, valuable information regarding the structure of the community's internal life can be gleaned from a letter from the Abbess Yustinianē to the local Armenian bishop Nersēs:

1. Generally it is the custom at the outset of the divine betrothal to inquire of the person who is constrained by the love of God to present his daughter for betrothal here with the immortal bridegroom Christ whether she possesses honesty and good conduct. Has she been sobermindedly nurtured in mild-temperedness? Have they [the parents] trained her more in spiritual or manual pursuits? Do her parents also have sufficiently virtuous conduct?

Had they devoted her to God from her childhood or as a result of some other factors or causes? If these qualities are found in the young virgin who is to unite herself with us in a spiritual way of life, we receive her willingly with love. But at first we begin gradually to direct her mind towards our monastic path, then little by little we complement this with study of the holy scriptures which are useful and beneficial in finding eternal life and what is pleasing to God. We continue in this way until we bring her to that perfection whereby she she becomes worthy soon to receive the holy office of the protodiaconate.

2. The community as a whole is composed of about fifteen persons. The hermitage does not permit this number to be increased, firstly because of constrictions of living space and secondly to maintain an amicable and peaceful regimen and inter-relations, insofar as they belong to different families and generations. Even children from one marriage are not in complete harmony and affection. Where then would we put those who are born strangers to each other in affection except we are trained to unite properly through the monastic life and to be governed without confusion and disorder?

3. Each has money for living expenses brought from their parents according to their ability. Some bring it with them when they first enter the monastery, others at ordination, while others contribute two t'umans annually to procure bread and see themselves to their vestments. Those whose parents initially promised to meet such expenses but find themselves unable to pay and are thus deprived of a means of livelihood are provided for by the abbess from the nunnery's effects and those of the wealthy virgins. All the nunnery's monies and income are under her authority, including those of the virgins and she too sees to all expenditures for food and clothing. As well as income from assets, she controls outlay on building and church supplies, on the household, the orchards and shops owned by the nunnery. Similarly when one of the virgins who has money falls sick, it is the abbess who cares for them and apportions some of their funds for doctors' fees and medications.

4. If one of the virgins who is financially provided for is under the yoke of the diaconate, neither she nor any of her relatives has the right to reappropriate the sum or intervene either during her lifetime or thereafter. As long as she is alive it is administered by the abbess and on her death part of the sum is spent on proper funeral arrangements. The nunnery inherits the remainder without incurring any fraud. If the virgin has not attained the diaconate, during her life the above stipulation applies, but after her death the nunnery returns half the sum to her parents and utilizes the other half to cover the cost of the burial. However, if any were to rebel against the community and demand her funds (a situation we have never encountered), the nunnery's governing body would revoke her ecclesiastical order and expel her in lay garb and it would be impossible to readmit her.

5. Anyone wishing to go to her father's house or to relatives for pressing business or affairs first receives permission from the abbess. The abbess then considers whether it is acceptable to go and, if so, allows her a moderate amount of time. If not, she refuses permission for her to leave the nunnery and she may not venture out without the knowledge of others. Particular vexations or other offences must first be addressed to the abbess, and if she ignores them, to the community. If they cannot help either then it is seemly for her monastic calling to bear her troubles in silence. But if she is unable to endure this for long, the statutes do not forbid her to present her grievances to the spiritual governors alone without elaborating vari-

ous other matters which might cause scandal. It is not permitted to make representation to the spiritual governors before going before the abbess and monastic community according to our code of practice to which she [that virgin] was already committed.

6. The same care is shown to all in common, but if someone is crowned with greater virtuous conduct and sobriety than the others, fasts and is adorned with modesty and meekness and has always decked herself in the fear of God so as to be a model for the others, the abbess holds them in extra esteem and devotes special attention to them whether in private or by public display. If some are found guilty of infringing some of our regulations, their punishment is appropriate to the infraction and the abbess reproves them lightly on the rules. If she is found culpable of more serious sins, she is brought before the spiritual governors and undergoes a severe penance commensurate with her fault.

7. Each should strive to be valiant and vigilant in her good works, chaste of evil actions. They should desire to achieve a name for purity by their virtuous behaviour. If some disagreement should arise over a minor issue, they should quickly become reconciled to one another before the abbess learns of it. Diligence in private prayer depends on the individual's wish and inclination: there is no coercion in that sphere. However for public prayer they are to wake at dawn without contrary will, with a pure heart and stand before the holy altar with humble veneration singing the psalms alternately accord-

ing to the canons of every church. Matins begins with all the community kneeling and is followed by the hour of bread (čášu) for the benefit of the people. After the completion of this hour they select the remaining psalms. Leaving thereafter with prayer on their lips they all go to their rooms for the morning, first greeting the abbess. After that they sometimes begin their handwork whose profit and benefit to the hands of all is obvious. Sometimes they spent time reading the holy scriptures and then the abbess holds them privately in respect. None can stay [in the nunnery] without attending prayer during the office except by reason of illness or other reasonable cause. Individual rooms are provided for the most revered virgins and communal for the others.

8. At noon lunch is prepared in the refectory first and then the community enters along with the abbess and each stands at her place round the table until grace is said. Then they sit with decorum and enjoy the common meal without a murmur without any distinction in food between great and small. The dishes are arranged to suit the day: sometimes there are two kinds, sometimes three, sometimes more, sometimes less. In each case everything we practice is common to great and small.

9. In the evening they begin with vespers according to the custom of the universal Church, then the hour of peace and at the conclusion of common prayer they sing the eighth psalm "In my distress" alternately as before. At night when they have finished their meal they say the "ekesc'ě" together and, taking leave of one another in love, they go their several ways to rest

in vigilance and prudence, sleeping moderately and not all through the night.⁶⁷

It is clear from both these canonical vignettes that the highest ideal of these communities was to attain the office of the diaconate, of which the novices were worthy only after long years of serious spiritual and religious preparation.

There was another nunnery in Šuši whose members, however, never exceeded four or five.

Here the Galfayean nunnery in Istanbul is noteworthy in that it lives on to the present in its last deaconess-sister. The Galfayean sisterhood was founded in 1866 by Srbuhi Nšan-Galfayean as the "Galfayean National Orphanage of Three Years Dedicated to the Holy Virgin" fundamentally for the purpose of caring for orphans. This sisterhood is further significant in that all its members were deaconesses and the abbess, protodeaconess. The nunnery's first abbess was ordained deaconess by Patriarch Naroyian in 1932, while the 'last' currently in service, Sister Hrip'simē Sasunian, was ordained by Patriarch Šnorhk' Galustean in 1982. In 1990 she was invited to Lebanon by the Catholicate of the Great House of Cilicia to elicit new vocations and found a new sisterhood. Already on June 2nd, 1991 the monastic veil was bestowed upon the first candidate, K'narik Gayp'ak'ean in the cathedral at Antelias. Accordingly the Armenian sisterhood of the Followers of St. Gayeanē has been created next to the "Birds' Nest" orphanage at Jibeyl.⁶⁸

Deaconesses' Vestments

To complete the picture of Armenian deaconesses it would not be out of place to reflect briefly on their habit. Our first data concerning this derive from the twelfth century.

All the writers agree that they bore a small metal cross suspended from their brow and a stole from their shoulder. Mkhit'ar Goš presents the following image: "Their garb is exactly that of the *hawatawork'* except for a cross on the forehead and stole suspended on their right." ⁶⁹

Smbat Constable and Step'anos Ōrbēlean provide virtually the same details. In more recent times, photographs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries illustrate them dressed in a robe during the liturgy and vested in a white veil almost from head to foot.

Conclusion and Afterword

Bearing in mind the oral communication concerning the *hawatawork*' by the French Armenologist Charles Renoux, it is not possible to view the present study as complete. The Haykazean Dictionary interprets the terms *hawatawor* as "nun, unmarried or married woman devoted to God in faith and fidelity and woman hermit." A special investigation is necessary to determine what position this class occupied in the Armenian church and the relationship between them and the deaconess. Nevertheless, considering the descriptions presented up to now and the literary evidence pro and contra the deaconess, I have come to the following conclusions.

- It is true that deaconesses existed in the Armenian church and are still present, but it is not possible to speak of a female diaconate dispersed throughout the Armenian church as an enduring institution, as it bore a purely local character in that church.

- The female diaconate in that church was not full but partial in comparison with the range of duties performed by the male deacon. Despite the identity of their rite of ordination, the deaconesses' role in church was limited. Probably one might liken it to the activity of the present day sub-deacon. The situation of a full female diaconate obtaining in Istanbul contrasts with this, but, as was said, is the result of a purely local development.

- We have already observed that the female diaconate was the result of a pastoral, or rather a ritual need. Women were called to serve the church where the activity of a priest or deacon was limited by the demands of propriety. We also saw that deaconesses are a fairly late development in the Armenian church and thus cannot have arisen from that origin since, at least after the ninth century, if not from the beginning, it is impossible to find the practice of anointing the entire body of the baptized person in Armenia, a situation which prevails to this day among the Syrians. What precise need deaconesses met in the Armenian church still remains a moot point, but it is clear that it was neither ritual, nor pastoral. Both the canons of St. Sahak Part'ew and those of the second Synod of Dvin indicate that the matrix of the female diaconate among Armenians is not to be found in association with baptism. It is much more plausible that it was the outgrowth of a woman's spiritual and monastic movement in that church where, for understandable, natural reasons, there was a desire to be self-sufficient in certain ecclesiastical functions.

- The negative attitude of medieval Armenian vardapets to the issue of bestowing clerical orders on women is the consequence of biblical influences, and the spirit and outlook of the time. Behind their criticisms lies the conviction that women are impure and hence may not be permitted to approach the holy.

- Despite the deaconesses' local character and limited functions, it is undeniable that the office found a place within the Armenian church. If this much is clear, the basic question that concerns us then is how it is possible to revivify the female diaconate, if not in a monastic setting, then at least for the pastoral life of local churches. Granted the paucity of clergy, this

need is felt everywhere. Vocations to be deaconesses exist in Armenia and especially in the Armenian church in America, yet they are not encouraged by the church authorities. Too bad! How many sincere devotions which show promise are allowed to die, knocked against the deaf wall of the ecclesiastical hierarchy? In Armenia a new vista is opening for evangelization and mission. Can the church authorities justify preserving the monopoly of their limited male clerics in the face of such a responsibility? Today the deaconess has more she could do in the Armenian church than ever before. Visiting Armenia after the earthquake to care for disaster victims, Mother Theresa was amazed to discover that there was not a single woman in the Armenian church with the authorization to apply even her Christian love towards her compatriots through looking after the sick, or other expressions of social concern. I repeat that I am talking about the permission officially granted by church authorities which is called *diakonia*, in the sense of Christian voluntary service. The Armenian woman today is deprived of this *diakonia* established in the church, this conscious, voluntary service which becomes realized in Christ. The only duty reserved for her is sewing on patches and cleaning up in a pious ladies' guild, whereas she should be reinvested, at least in part, with the religious vocation she once created in our church with its brilliant spirit of tolerance.

- In light of the presence of candidates with a calling it is not difficult to envision a school next to the church where they could follow a two-year course to obtain corresponding ritual and religious knowledge. After ordination they might be assigned to a missionary activity, always remaining under church auspices. On the other hand, certain Armenian women living in the west and saturated with feminist ideas must

bear in mind that it is only through a sincere desire for voluntary Christian service that it is possible to re-enter the ranks of the clergy and not by insisting on the principle of equality. The illusion of creating a matriarchy to pit against the patriarchy should not be an opiate for women.

- Certainly, it is plain to every intelligent person that although the question of women entering the clergy begins with the diaconate, it does not stop there. Thereafter follows the question of bestowing on them the priesthood and episcopacy. In contrast to a series of protestant denominations, this is problematic for the traditional or apostolic churches (Ancient Oriental, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic). Despite the doctrinal difficulties rooted in tradition, the fundamental obstacle in the way to conferring spiritual and ecclesiastical offices on women is also the question of distributing executive authority in the church, something which is the monopoly of a male clergy. Is it prepared to share this monopoly with women on the principle of equal rights? Certainly this is a question for the distant future. But now the time "has come" when more than ever the need to re-establish the female diaconate is felt to be imperative. That is no casual innovation, but rather an ancient tradition consecrated by the Armenian church.

- What sort of character the female diaconate would now have--celibate or married, monastic or lay is not an essential, but administrative question. That is the task of an episcopal synod which would examine these issues without prejudice in accord with the church's current needs and come to a decision. Yet at the close of this book I think it is appropriate to direct the Church Fathers' maxim once more at the ranks of bishops:

"You are not to consider it new and unprecedented, because we learn from the tradition of the holy apostle...I entreat you...our sister who is a servant [deaconess] of the church."

NOTES

1. Fr. Vardan Hac'unl, *Hayouh'n patmut'ean a'jew* Venice, 1936. See also his *Patmut'wn h'n hay taraz'n* [History of Ancient Armenian Costume] Venice, 1924.

2. Maria Christine Arat, "Hay ekelec'woy sargawakuhinerē kanonakan tesankiwnēn dituac," *Handēs Amsōreay* 1-12 (1987), pp.153-189.

3. B. Weiss, "Zum Diakonat der Frau," *Trierer theologische Zeitschrift* (1975), pp. 14-15.

4. Hünemann, "Diakonat, Ein Beitrag," *Diaconia Christi* 9 (1974), pp. 1, 34, B. Kleinleyer, "Zur Geschichte des Diaconissen," *Liturgisches Jahrbuch* 34 (1984), pp. 59-60, A. Stand, "Witwenstand und Ämter-strukturen in den christlichen Gemeinden," *Bibel und Leben* 12 (1971), pp. 186-197.

5. G.G. Blum, "Das Amt der Frau im Neuen Testament," *Novum Testamentum* 7 (1964-65), pp. 145-146, G. Lohfink, "Weibliche Diakone im Neuen Testament," *Die Frau im Urchristentum*, G. Dautzberger (ed.), *Quaestiones Disputatae* 95, Freiberg, 1983, p. 326.

6. M.B. Stritzky, "Der Dienst der Frau in der alten Kirche," *Liturgisches Jahrbuch* 28 (1978), p. 151. G. Lohfink, op. cit. n. 5, p. 323.

7. Stromata III, 6, 53 (*Patrologia Graeca* 8, col.1158). See also J. Mayer, *Monumenta de viduis diaconissis virginibusque tractantia* (=Florilegium Patristicum 42, Bonn, 1938), pp. 7-8.

8. Commentary on Romans 10:17 (*Patrologia Graeca* 14, col. 1278) and Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, pp. 8-9.

9. Homily XI on I Timothy 3:11 (*Patrologia Graeca* 62, col. 553) and Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, p. 18.

10. R.C. Kukula, *Pinus Minor*, Lipsiae, 1912, p. 316.

11. A. Kalsbach, "Diakonisse," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 16, Stuttgart, 1950, pp. 918-928.

12. Ad Smyrn. 13, 1 in Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, p. 5 and Kalsbach, op. cit. n. 11, p. 18.

13. Ad uxorem 7 in Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, pp. 41-42 and De baptismo 1, 17 in Mayer, p. 41.

14. Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, p. 33.

15. Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, pp. 7-9.

16. R. H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Oxford, 1929, H. Achelis and J. Flemming, "Die syrische Didaskalia," *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, NF X, 2 (1904), F.X. Funk, *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum*, 2 vols., Paderborn, 1905.

17. Didascalia 1-5, Funk, op. cit. n. 16, 1, 196, 17-198, 30.

18. See *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 3, J Höfer and K. Rahner (eds.), Freiburg, 1959, pp.371-372, Fr. Yakobos Tašean, *Vardapetut'wn arakeloc' anvawerakan kanonac' mateanē, Tught' Yakobay ar Kodratos ew kanonk' Taddēt K'nnut'wnk' ew bnagirk'* [The Inauthentic Book of Canons, the Teaching of the Apostles, The Letter of James to Quadratus and the Canons of Thaddeus: Studies and Texts] Vienna, 1896; *Kanonagirk' hayoc'*, [Armenian Book of Canons] V. Hakobyan (ed.), vol. 1, Erevan, 1964, pp. 18-66.

19. J. Assfalg and P. Krüger (eds.), *Kleines Wörterbuch des christlichen Orients*, Wiesbaden, 1975, p. 19.

20. Funk, op. cit. n.16, I, 341, 9, Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, p. 25.

21. I. Rahmani, *Testamentum Domini nostri Jesu Christi*, Moguntiae, 1899.

22. Assfalg and Krüger, op. cit. n. 18, p. 351.

23. As Hakobyan points out in the notes to his edition of the Armenian canons, the text here is an abbreviation of the Greek original which refers the whole passage to deaconesses in contrast to the Armenian which cites them only in the second sentence. See *Kanonagirk' Hayoc'* pp. 130, 565.

24. T. Mommsen and P. Meyer (eds.), *Theodostiani libri XVI*, 1/2, Berolini, 1905, pp. 843-844. Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, p. 16.

25. Justinian, Novellae, R. Schoell and G. Kroll (eds.), Berolini, 1895, p.21 and Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, pp. 34-35.

26. Concilium Trullanum, c. 48 (Mansi II, p.966) and Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, pp. 40-41.

27. See Jacob of Edessa in Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, vol. 2, Dissertatio de Monophysitis, chp. 10 and Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, pp. 53-54. John of Tella in Bar Hebraeus, *Nomokanon*, VII, 7, A. Mai (ed.), *Scriptorum veterum nova collectio*, vol. 10, Romae, 1838 and Mayer, op. cit. n. 7, p. 53.

28. Fr. V. Hac'uni, "Kusank' Hayastani mhēj [Nuns in Armenia] *Bazmavēp* (1923), p. 72.

29. Grigor Tat'evac'i, *Girk' harc'manc'* [Book of Questions], Constantinople, 1729, p. 365.

30. *Nor Baṙgirk' haykazean lezui* [New Armenian Dictionary] G. Avetik'ean et al (eds.), vol. 2, Venice, 1837, p. 701.

31. *Kanonagirk' hayoc'*, vol. 1, pp. 377-378.

32. A. Thēr-Mik'elean, *Hayoc' ekele'akan trawunk'ē* [Armenian Ecclesiastical Law], vol.1, Shushī, 1903, p. 380; *Kanonagirk' hayoc'*, p. 485.

33. In Armenian the term is distinguished by the feminine termination -uhl.

34. Barsē Sargisean, *Mayr C'uc'ak hayeren jeragrac' i Venetik* [Grand Catalogue of the Armenian Manuscripts in Venice], vol. 3, Venice: St. Lazar, 1966, pp. 27-33.

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36. Mxit'ar Goš, *Girk' Datastant* [Judicial Manual] Xosrov Torosyan (ed.), Erevan, 1975, pp. 136-137.

37. Smbat Constable, *Datastanagirk'* [Law Book] A. Galstyan (ed.), Erevan, 1958, pp. 66-67.

38. Step'anos Siwneac' episkoposi, *Patmut'iwu tann sisakan* [History of the House of Siwnik'] M.Emin (ed.), Moscow, 1861, p. 80.

39. Pōghos Tarōnec'i, *Tught' ěnddēm Teoptstē hořom p'ĭlisop'ayin* [Epistle Against Theopistes, the Byzantine Philosopher] Constantinople, 1752, pp. 178-179.

40. Grigor Tat'evac'i, op. cit. n. 29, pp. 588-589.

41. Ibid. pp. 589-590.

42. Ibid., p. 591.

43. Ibid., pp. 606-608.

44. Mařtoc' Matenadaran MS no. 1712, f. 156v.

45. Mařtoc' Matenadaran MS no. 8075, f. 132v. In the manuscript the work is wrongly attributed to the vardapet Esayĭ Nč'ec'i.

46. Mařtoc' Matenadaran MS no. 907, ff. 309v.-310r. This canon is found in the ritual MS no. 237 of the National Library (Galata) after the fourteen steps of the vardapet, on p. 220, *Loys*, Constantinople, 1906, p. 1200). The canon is also found in the following manuscripts of the Matenadaran, Erevan: no. 907, ff. 309v.-310r. (17th c.), 953 ff. 114r.-v.-r. (1656), 954, f. 80v. (16th c.), 960 f. 243v. (1498), 970 f. 69r. (16th c.), 2787 f. 168r.-v. (1314), 3508 f. 160r.-v. (1434), 4195 f. 305v. (1321), 4363 ff. 288v.-289r. (16th c.), 4961 f. 251r.-v. (15th c.), 5153 f. 182v. (16th c.), 6450 f. 160r.-v. (1443). I wish to express my particular thanks to the senior curator Gēorg Tēr-Vardanyan for bringing these data to my attention.

47. The first redaction of the ritual (Mařtoc') is ascribed to the catholicos of that name. The historian Kirakos Ganjakec'i remarks on this subject:

He [i.e. Catholicos Mařtoc'] compiled the book which is called mařtoc' after his name, collecting and structuring all the prayers and readings with his own additions, which contains within itself all the orders of the Christian faith.

(*Hamařōt patmut'wun i srboyn Grigorē yawurs twr lusabaneal* [A Brief Historical Exposition from St. Gregory Until His own Days] Venice, 1865, p. 45. See also Abp. Maghak'la Ōrmanean, *Azgapatum* [National History] Constantinople, 1913, cols. 1016-1018). With regard to the prayer involved in the rite of ordination it is significant that it is preserved in a tenth century Georgian pontifical manuscript. See A. G. Martimot, *Dea-*

conesses: *An Historical Study*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986, p. 181 and the literature cited there.

48. See Aṛak'el Davrizhec'i, *Patmut'wn Aṛak'el Vardapet Davrizhec'woy* [History of the Vardapet Aṛak'el Davrizhec'i] Vagharšapat, 1896, pp. 249-314. See also Ōrmanean, op. cit. n. 47, cols. 2318-2320, 2335-2339, 2342-2350, 2362-2366, 2385-2389, 2399-2422 and N. Akinean, *Movsēs G. Kat'oghikos Tat'ewac'i ew twr zhamanakē, Npast mē hayoc' ekeghec'akan patmut'ean* [Catholicos Movsēs III Tat'evac'i and His Time, A Contribution to Armenian Ecclesiastical History] Vienna, 1936.

49. Fr. Ghewond Ališan, *Sisakan, teghekagrut'wn Siwneac' aškarhi* [Sisakan, A Description of the Region of Siwnik] Venice, 1893, pp. 21-22.

50. Ibid., p. 258. The Soviet Armenian Encyclopaedia contains the following reference: "To the south of the location of the village, at the edge of the valley of Vorotan lies a nunnery complex comprising a church, gawit', refectory, and cells next to the enclosing wall. The church of the Holy Mother of God was constructed in 1676." (*Haykakan sovetakan hanragttaran*, vol. 8, Erevan, 1982, p. 508).

51. Ališan, ibid., p. 258.

52. Ibid., p. 259.

53. On this see Abp. Norair Bogharian, "Hay grčuhiner," [Armenian Female Scribes] *Ston*, 4-5 (1954), pp. 133-134.

54. Ff. 506v.-507v. The manuscript was copied in 1673. See also the colophon of the scribe Erin in Matenadaran MS no. 4088, ff. 256r.-257r. (copied in 1673): "Now by the grace of the bounteous one I began and with His mercy completed [this text] in 1122 of the Armenian era [=1673]...[this book] termed a liturgical breviary was copied in the hermitage of sinher at the door of the Holy Mother of God."

55. See Ališan, op. cit. n. 49, pp. 259-260.

56. Ibid., p. 351. See also *Soviet Armenian Encyclopaedia*, vol. 8, p. 544.

57. Ališan, ibid.

58. Matenadaran MS no. 9240, f. 14v. (copied in 1671).

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59. Ibid., ff. 184r.-185r. See also a similar colophon on f. 345v.
60. Ibid., ff. 346v.-347r.
61. Matenadaran MS no. 1733, f. 365.
62. Alisan, op. cit. n. 49, pp. 353-354. See also Bogharian, op. cit. n. 53.
63. Matenadaran MS no. 39, f. 32v.
64. *Bazmavēp* 30 (1989).
65. In this connection it is interesting to recall the information presented in Dr. Arat's footnote to her article in *Handes Amsōreay* that a nun called Katerinē presented herself to Yovhannēs, patriarch of Jerusalem, in 1864 seeking ordination as deaconess, like the nuns of St. Stephen's. The patriarch refused on grounds that it was contrary to the tradition and canons of the Armenian church.
66. Cf. Fr. Khoren Khuc'ean, *T'iflist S. Step'anos kusanac' anapati patmu'twnē* [The History of St. Stephen's Convent in Tiflis] Tiflis, 1914, pp. 96-99.
67. Ibid., pp. 41-46.
68. See *Armenian Life Weekly*, 37, June 21, 1991, pp. 13, 35. With regard to St. Catherine's convent and the Galfayean sisterhood see also Abp. Ghewond Čepeyea, "Sargawaguhinerē Hayoc' Ekelec'woy mhēj [Deaconesses in the Armenian Church] *Hask* 4-5, (1989), pp. 169-172.
69. *Mxd'tar Goš*, p. 137.

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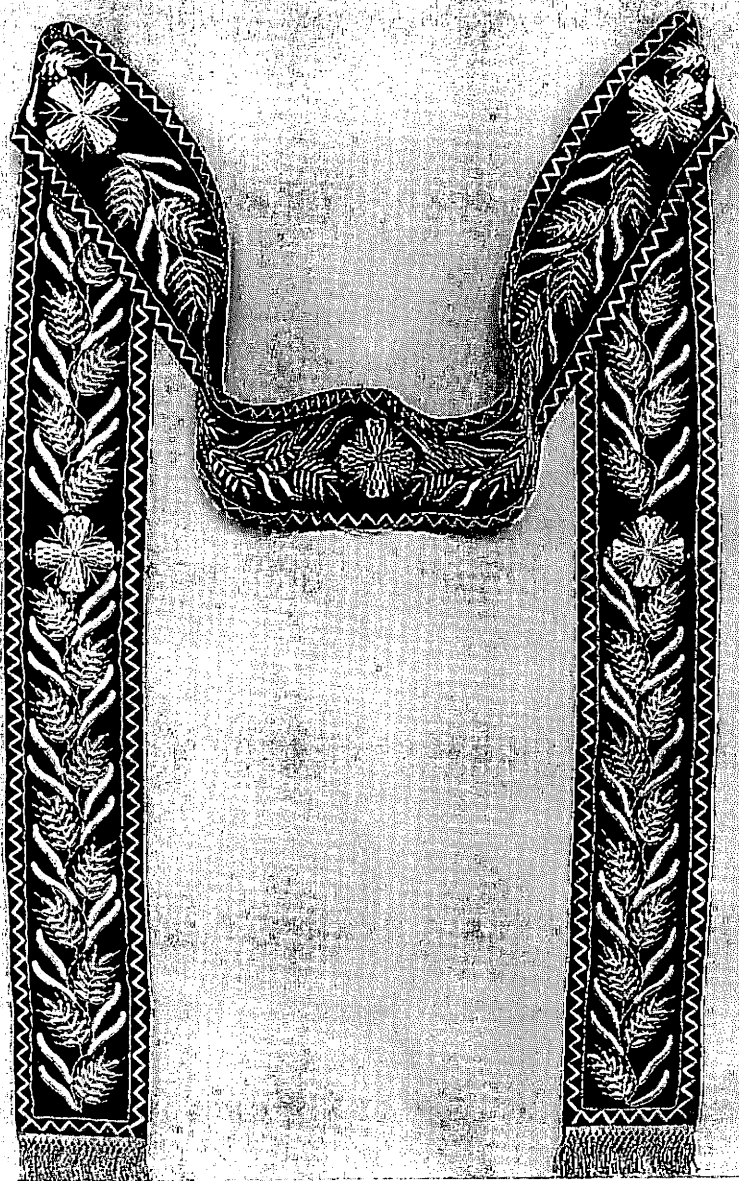
Protodeaconess Sister Hrip'simé Aghek'-Tahireanc'
in her liturgical vestments, Jerusalem, 19th century.



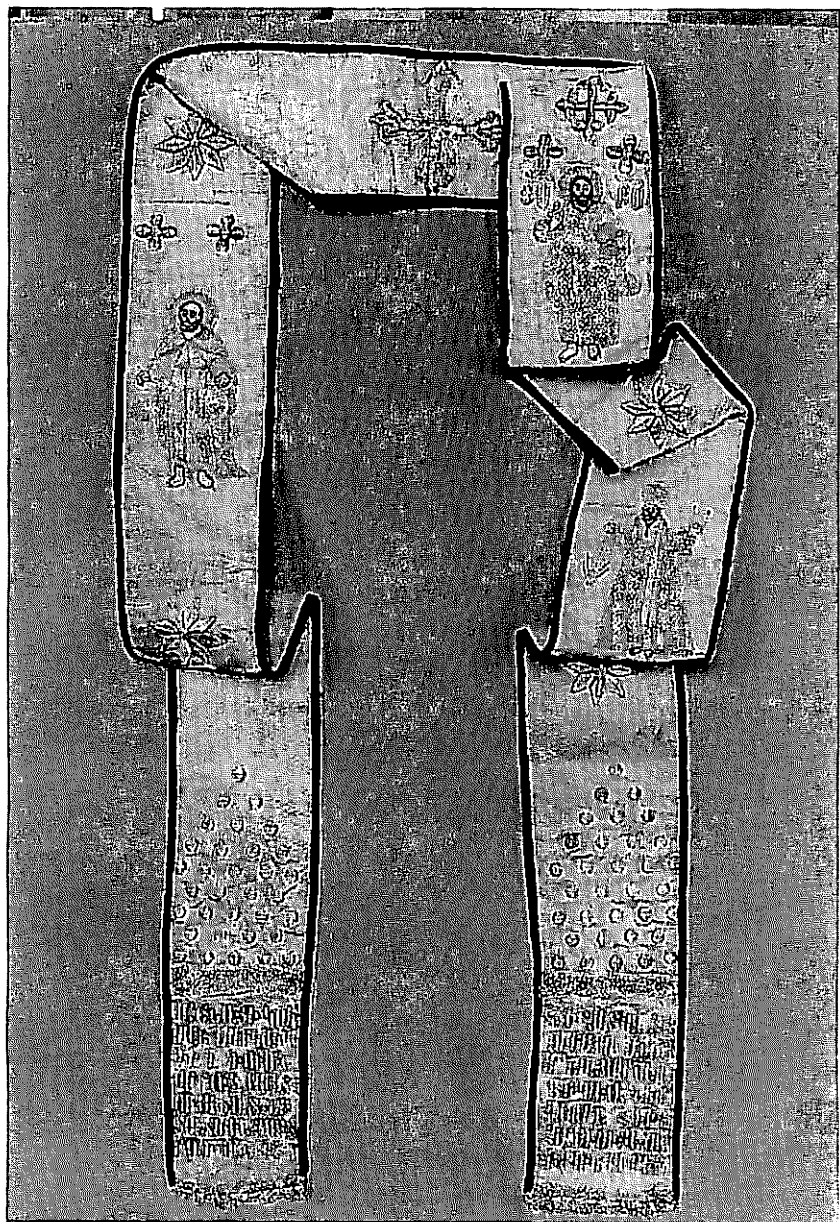
A nun at Sinaher Nunnery in Siwnik', 17th century.



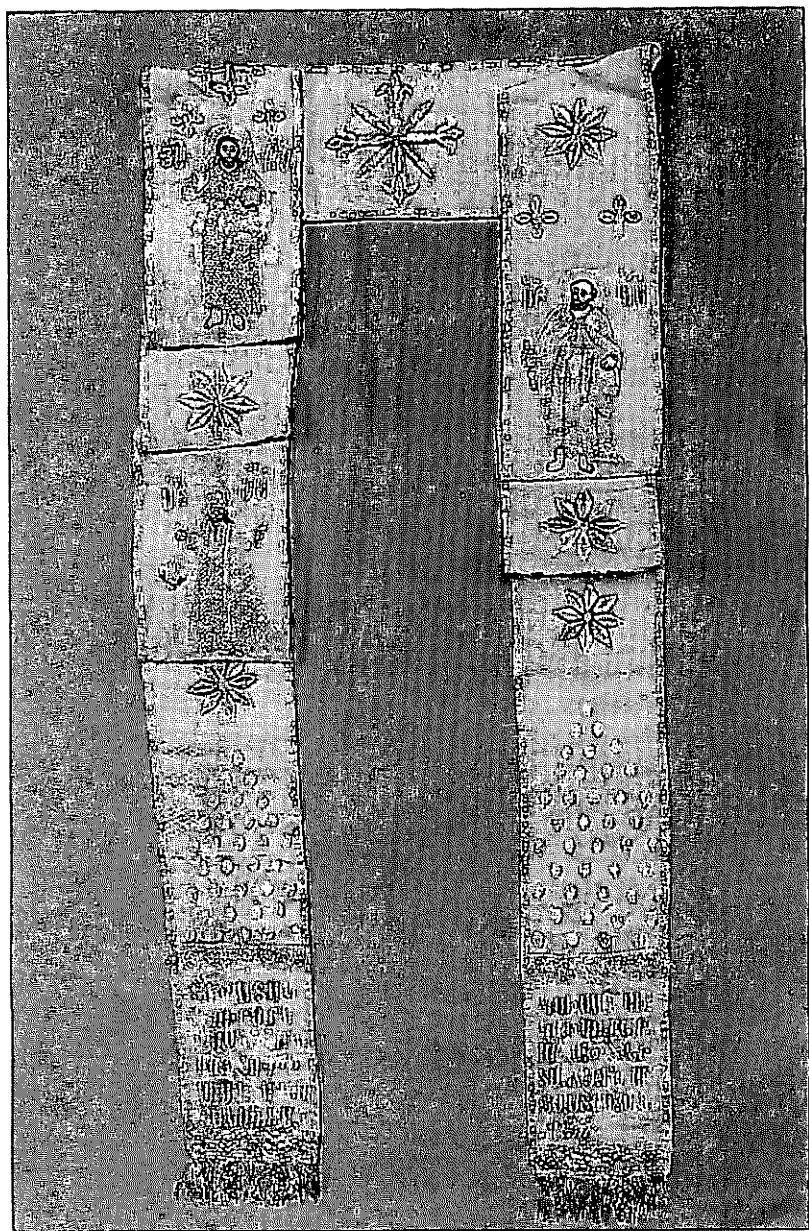
Armenian nuns
[New Julfa]



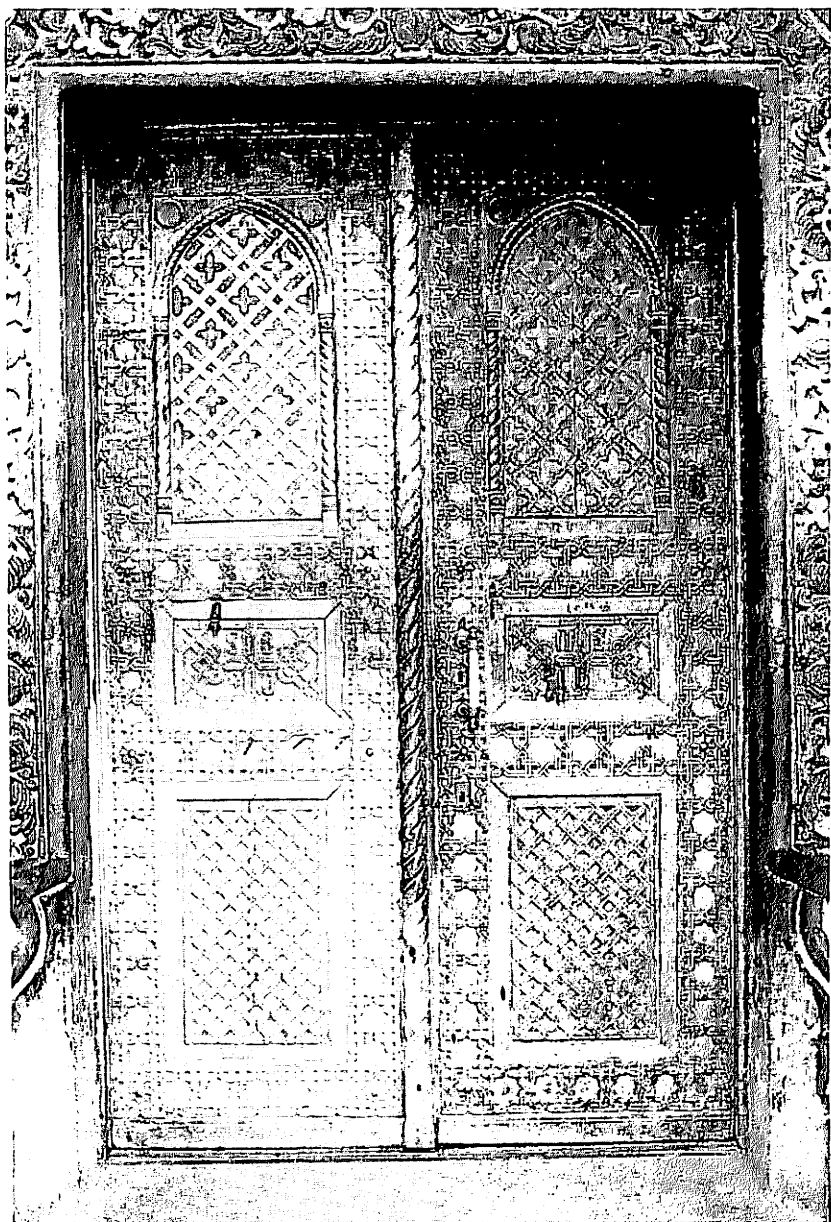
Gold-threaded deacon's stole
from St. Stephen's Nunnery, Tiflis.



Gold and silver threaded deacon's stole (Etchmiadzin Collection). The inscriptions read: (on the left) *Deaconess Sister Anna at the door of the Cathedral of Holy Theotokos, Astrakhan, 6.IX.1837.* (On the right) *Given by Anna Mnac'akanian in memory of her deceased sister.*



Gold and silver threaded deacon's stole, depicting Jesus Christ, St. Stephen and St. Peter (Etchmiadzin Collection). The inscriptions read: (on the left) *This [deacon's] stole is [donated] in memory of the soul of Hrip'sime Mnac'kanean.* (On the right) *Deaconess Sister at the Cathedral of Holy Theotokos in Astrakhan, 1837.* These two stoles (see previous photo) were used by two sisters, originally from Yerevan, who served as deaconesses at Holy Theotokos Cathedral in Astrakhan.



The doors of the main entrance to the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin, donated by Sister Hrip'sime Aghek' Tahireanc'. The inscription reads: *In memory of protodeaconess Hrip'sime Aghek' Tahireanc', 1889.* On the bottom: *Ingenieur Nicolas Grigorian.*

THE DEACONESS IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

by

FR ABEL OGHLUKIAN

The issue of bestowing the diaconate on women is not a novel phenomenon in the Armenian Church. Since at least the eleventh century this office developed steadily in several fairly clear stages. Its focus in lively contemporary debate is rather connected with discussion of the principle of legal equality between men and women in our social and societal contexts. If women have achieved striking advances in political, economic, educational and cultural fields, the question arises as to what their proper place is in church, what premises can be found in tradition for extending their scope for service, facilitating and properly evaluating their work for the church. These are the subjects the present study addresses.

It is hoped that readers will find in the proposals of this survey material for broadminded, unbiased consideration to assist Armenian women with a calling in committed diaconal service to Christ as established in the Armenian church.

Fr Abel Oghlukian, Ph. D., is currently the Vicar General of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of Canada. He has been an assistant professor at the Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Vienna and is a lecturer in Dogmatic Theology at St. Nersess Armenian Seminary.

S. Peter Cowe, Ph. D., the translator, is an assistant professor of Armenian Studies at the Columbia University.

COVER PHOTO: Armenian deaconess Hrip'sime Aghek'-Tahireanc', Jerusalem, 19th century. COVER DESIGN by Rasmik.

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