

# WOMEN DEACONS: WHY NOT NOW?

*A Project to Restore Women Deacons in the Catholic Church*

*St. Phoebe was a first-century Christian who is identified in Paul's Letter to the Romans as a deacon and benefactor of the church at Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth. She was the carrier of the Letter to the Romans.*

## Historical and Biblical Background

Phoebe set off from her home, the bustling port of Cenchreae, to carry the gospel of redemption and freedom, of God's love and the gift of faith to her sisters and brothers of Rome. They were divided among themselves, the weak from the strong. They needed to hear again Christ's call, "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law," (Rom 13:8). She knew the importance of her task, as along with the epistle, she carried with her the experience of her own community's conflict and factionalism. Her own people also had forgotten their unity in the Body of Christ. Such nonsense like, as their founder put it, the foot saying, "Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body," (1 Cor 12:15). How had they all forgotten so quickly the one Spirit who had begun such great work in them?

So, with missionary zeal, she undertook the long and arduous journey. All along the 300 mile way

## PHOEBE OF CENCHREAE Deacon of the Church



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

from the Corinthian port to the imperial capital, her Gentile heart was pregnant with gospel love and freedom. Arriving there, she herself would deliver the good news of Christ which was first proclaimed in her city by the same Paul who now addressed the Romans. She was entrusted with Paul's teachings, and with his request for support for his next missionary expedition to Spain.

But in that day (the Letter to the Romans was written between 54-59 C.E.), she would find no super-highways by which to travel. It would take her eight days to reach her destination. Nor would encounter franchise-lined

cities in which to find rest. No handy credit card or Motel 6 would ease her voyage. Rather, she would rely on the hospitality of Christian strangers along her way, and the kindness of her Roman hosts to take her in. Travelers visiting new cities were dependent upon the introduction of a mutual friend in order to be received into someone's home. The following introduction from the epistle's author was her ticket to warmth and welcome. Paul wrote, "*I commend to you*

*Phoebe our sister, who is a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well,*” (Rom 16:1-2).

This introduction is the only record of Phoebe’s life to have survived for the Church of the twenty-first century. We are fortunate that it is so rich. It is like a keyhole through which we can catch a glimpse of our ancient sisters and brothers in their community of faith.

### **Sister, Deacon, Benefactor**

First, Phoebe is called “our sister.” This epithet parallels that which Paul gives to Timothy in the Second Letter to the Corinthians. Though not a formal title, it denotes a special relationship to Paul himself and a status within the community. “Our sister” identifies Phoebe as the author’s coworker in ministry. Her transport of the letter, and request for support for Paul’s mission to Spain (Rom 15: 23ff) are two examples of her ministry which lie latent in the text itself. As Elizabeth Castelli observed, they “assure us that women, as well as men, were traveling missionaries in the earliest church,” (Castelli, 277).

Second, Phoebe is identified as “a deacon of the church at Cenchreae.” The original Greek, *diakonos*, is also sometimes translated as deaconess, minister or servant. “Deaconess” is clearly an incorrect translation, as it does not reflect the masculine ending of the original Greek. This translation is probably tainted with the patriarchal insistence that women’s leadership in the church be tightly circumscribed and recognizably distinct from the roles open to men. It also may be an anachronistic reading which attempts to assign a formal ministerial title of the fourth century (and its corresponding duties) to the much more fluid situation of the first.

In fact, *diakonos* was a word Paul used to

describe himself (see 1 Cor 3:5, 2 Cor 6:4). This parallelism indicates that Phoebe could, like Paul, Timothy, and Apollos, have been a preacher and a teacher. The secular meaning of the title in her world suggests other possibilities for the range of Phoebe’s ministry. Joseph Fitzmyer says, “In the Greco-Roman world *diakonos* denoted a ‘waiter’ at table, a royal ‘servant,’ or even a religious (non-Christian) office,” (Fitzmyer, 729). The connection to the table points toward a eucharistic function for a Christian *diakonos*. Whatever her specific duties, it is clear that Phoebe was a leader in the Christian assembly at Cenchreae.

Third, Paul calls Phoebe his “benefactor.” The original Greek, *prostatis*, may also be translated, “patron.” Here again, there is no gender-specific ending. And as with *diakonos*, Paul is borrowing the terminology of the secular world to describe the life of a just-emerging church. In other Pauline texts, the same Greek language is translated, “those who are over you,” (see Rom 12:8, 1 Thess 5:12). From this appellation, we can deduce that Phoebe was an “independent woman...of considerable means,” (Bassler, 135). Her patronage of Paul and the church at Cenchreae may have benefited the community in a number of ways. Most obviously, she supported the work of the church financially. We have already seen that Paul was dependent upon the generosity of the community to support his missionary activity. In addition, Phoebe could have hosted meetings. As a deacon and a patron, she may have hosted the eucharistic liturgies in her home. Lastly, a benefactor introduced those in her patronage to society circles. In the first century, benefactors managed the relationship between those in their care and the influential people of the city. Paul would have been especially dependent upon this kind of support because of his itinerant evangelization.

### **Leader of the Church**

Sister, deacon, benefactor. Missionary, evangelist, fund-raiser. There can be no doubt about

Phoebe's leadership in the church. She provided generously for the needs of her community at Cenchreae. She used her personal and material resources to create space for the Body of Christ to meet, to be fed, and to grow. She courageously undertook a difficult journey across land and sea to bring the message of God's redemptive love to the church at Rome. Hers was a practical leadership, attending to a wide array of needs, offering the gifts she had been given for the work of the Spirit.

**Sister, deacon, benefactor, missionary, evangelist, fundraiser. There can be no doubt about Phoebe's leadership in the church. She provided generously for the needs of her community at Cenchreae. She used her personal and material resources to create space for the Body of Christ to meet, to be fed and to grow.**

Like the Romans and the Corinthians, we are the beneficiaries of Phoebe's generous leadership that sustained the early Church. The fledgling faith of Jesus' first disciples survived a very harsh environment because of the efforts of Phoebe and women and men like her. In our day, we would have no Church to call home, nor gospel in which to find life without these, our ancestors. Therefore, like the first century Romans, we should heed Paul's direction "to receive her in the Lord, in a manner worthy of the holy ones."

To receive Phoebe is to acknowledge her life and leadership. It is to recognize with honesty and gratitude the contribution she made to the proclamation of the gospel, the sustenance of the community, and the life of the world. As the Romans to whom she carried Paul's epistle

welcomed her into their homes, we welcome her into our hearts. We pray with her for a Church marked by unity and charity. We assume the responsibilities that come with our gifts. We respond to our call as she did to hers: Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others (*prostatis*), with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness, (Rom 12:6-8).

The manner in which Paul introduces Phoebe demonstrates clearly that women exercised ecclesial ministry from the earliest days of Christianity. The breadth of her work provides inspiration for present-day imaginings about women of the Church. If she was able to be coworker, deacon, and patron in a cultural context far more deeply entrenched in a patriarchal worldview than our own, what possibilities does her example open up for the Church today? How are women today responding with their unique gifts to the need of the Church? And how is their response being received? Is the twenty-first century assembly receiving gifted women leaders "in a manner worthy of the holy ones," and helping them "in whatever [they] may need from [us]"?

Phoebe's emergence as a leader from the midst of a community struggling with division and liturgical turmoil makes her an especially significant model in our day. Into the midst of the Romans' infighting and disputes over dietary laws, Phoebe brought the message of Christ's liberating self-sacrifice. Her own presence and her delivery of Paul's astounding epistle urged the community toward unity, patience, mutual respect and trust in the loving providence of God. As she came from the Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth, she most likely had endured a similar struggle in her own community. She carried in

her experience and ministry a living message of the “more excellent way,” the way of love (1 Cor 13:31). And what is more necessary in our day, or in any day, than love? Especially Phoebe’s kind of love. Not the love of empty sentiment, but the love of courageous deeds, generous aid, and servant-leadership.



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This essay was written by Claire Noonan who holds a Doctorate in Ministry from The Catholic Theological Union. Noonan currently serves on the staff of the St. Catherine of Siena Center in River Forest, IL.

The feast day for Phoebe is celebrated on September 3. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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### FutureChurch

17307 Madison Avenue  
Cleveland, OH 44107  
216-228-0869

[www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org) [info@futurechurch.org](mailto:info@futurechurch.org)

