

Women and their offices in the early Church

Mary Magdalene – spokeswoman of the women within the circle of disciples around Jesus, assigned with the proclamation of the resurrection, **female apostle of the apostles**

Tabitha – **disciple** and head of the Church community of Joppe

Lydia – **Patroness** and **Head** of an organized group of women and a small house Church in Philippi whose Church services she presides over

Junia – **female apostle** of the 1st century in Rome. Paul greets her in his letter to the Romans and calls her **distinguished within the apostles**.

Phoebe – **woman deacon and patroness** of the Church community of Cenchreae, 1st century, **bearer and interpreter** of Paul's letter to the Church community of Rome.

Deborah, Maria, Huldah and Hannah – **prophetesses** from Caesarea, 1st century. Their acting and healing is passed on by contemporaries like Eusebius.

Thekla – **female apostle and missionary**, 1st century, assigned by Paul to “go and teach the word of God”, still worshipped as “first female martyr and apostle-like” in the Eastern Church.

Ammion – **woman priest** in Phrygia/ Asia Minor, 3rd century, well accepted by her parish

Anna – **woman deacon** in Rome, catechist and spiritual advisor to women

Nanas – **prophetess** in Asia Minor, 4th century, well known because of the intensity of her prayers, specially within the liturgy

Olympias – **woman deacon** in Constantinople, bishop advisor and founder of a women's community

Nino – **female apostle**, 4th century, named “Evangelist” in the hagiography as, theological teacher and missionary in Georgia

Kale – **woman priest** in Centuripae/Sicily, 4th/5th century, equal to men in her ministry

Theodora – **female bishop** in Rome, 8th century, you can find her mosaic at Zeno Chapel in S. Prassede

Those are the names of a few, but there were hundreds of women in office in the early Church. Without their missionary work there would be no Christian Occident.

Angelika Fromm / Annegret Laakmann (October 2008)

Explanations

Apostle/female apostle

Those who bear witness of the resurrection. Many women carried this title. The title is not limited to “the twelve” (disciples) in the early church. Even Paul was not one of the “twelve”.

Prophet/ prophetess

Charismatic spokesperson for the word of God. Already in Judaism this office was more important than the office of the priest. The church Father Origenes (2nd/3rd century) acknowledges “that women as well can be blessed with the grace of prophecy”.

Patron/patroness

Leaders of house Churches. In the ancient world, patronesses were independent and often rich women, who had power and influence and offered their houses to the Christian Church. Paul also took advantage of their patronage.

Deacon/female deacon

In the Church communities of Paul, diaconate means the assignment to proclaiming the word, to leadership and administration of the Church community. Later, the female deacons were ordained in various rituals which included all elements of the ordination of men. Women deacons belonged to the higher clergy.

There is evidence of ordination of women deacons up to the 7th century in the Western and up to the 13th century in the Eastern Church.

Priests/women priests

Up to the 6th century, there were Christian communities who ordained women priests. The synod of Laodicea (4th century) ordered that women were not permitted to be appointed presbyters or leaders in the Church.

Bishops/female bishops

In research, women holding the title “episcopa” have always been interpreted as the wife of a bishop. However, Bonosus, the husband of Theodora, was neither a bishop, nor did he hold any other Church office.

Women's Ministry:

a reality in the early Church – indispensable in today's Church!