

Canons of the First Seven Ecumenical Councils Concerning Women's Ordination

Extracts from

“The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees”, Henry R. Percival (Editor), in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, Philip Schaff (Editor)

First Council of Nice, 325 AD.....	2
CANON 19	2
NOTES	2
EXCURSUS ON THE DEACONESS OF THE EARLY CHURCH.	3
CANON 11	5
The Council Of Chalcedon, 451 AD.....	8
CANON 15	8
The Council In Trullo, 692 AD.....	8
CANON 70	8
The Second Council of Nice, 787 AD	9
CANON 14	9
HEFELE.....	10
Canons and Rulings Approved by the Synod in Trullo, 692 AD	11
CANON 24.....	11

FIRST COUNCIL OF NICE, 325 AD

CANON 19¹

CONCERNING the Paulianists who have flown for refuge to the Catholic Church, it has been decreed that they must by all means be rebaptized; and if any of them who in past time have been numbered among their clergy should be found blameless and without reproach, let them be rebaptized and ordained by the Bishop of the Catholic Church; but if the examination should discover them to be unfit, they ought to be deposed. Likewise in the case of their deaconesses, and generally in the case of those who have been enrolled among their clergy, let the same form be observed. And we mean by **deaconesses** such as have assumed the habit, but who, since they **have no imposition of hands, are to be numbered only among the laity.**

NOTES

ANCIENT EPITOME OF CANON 19

*Paulianists must be rebaptized, and if such as are clergymen seem to be blameless let then, be ordained. If they do not seem to be blameless, let them be deposed. **Deaconesses who have been led astray, since they are not sharers of ordination, are to be reckoned among the laity.***

FOULKES

(*Dict. Chr. Ant.* s.v. Nicaea, Councils of.) That this is the true meaning of the phrase **οἶον, ἐκτεταῖται**, viz. “a decree has now been made,” is clear from the application of the words **οἶον** in Canon xvii., and **ωρίσεν** in Canon 6: It has been a pure mistake, therefore, which Bp. Hefele blindly follows, to understand it of some canon previously passed, whether at Aries or elsewhere.

JUSTELLUS

Here **χειροθεσία** is taken for ordination or consecration, not for benediction,... for neither were deaconesses, sub-deacons, readers, and other ministers ordained, but a blessing was merely pronounced over them by prayer and imposition of hands.

ARISTENUS

¹ Canon 19 of “The Canons Of The 318 Holy Fathers Assembled In The City Of Nice, In Bithynia”, in “The First Ecumenical Council, The First Council of Nice, A.D. 325”, in The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees (pages 121-126), Henry R. Percival (Editor), (Pentecost 1899). The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, edited by Philip Schaff. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997)

Their (the Paulicians') deaconesses also, since they have no imposition of hands, if they come over to the Catholic Church and are baptized, are ranked among the laity. With this Zonaras and Balsamon also agree.

HEFELE

By Paulianists must be understood the followers of Paul of Samosata the and-Trinitarian who, about the year 260, had been made bishop of Antioch, but had been deposed by a great Synod in 269. As Paul of Samosata was heretical in his teaching on the Holy Trinity the Synod of Nice applied to him the decree passed by the council of Arles in its eighth canon. "If anyone shall come from heresy to the Church, they shall ask him to say the creed; and if they shall perceive that he was baptized into the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, he shall have a hand laid on him only that he may receive the Holy Ghost. But if in answer to their questioning he shall not answer this Trinity, let him be baptized." The Samosatans, according to St. Athanasius, named the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in administering baptism (*Orat. ii, Contra Arian. No. xliii*), but as they gave a false meaning to the baptismal formula and did not use the words Son and Holy Spirit in the usual sense, the Council of Nice, like St. Athanasius himself, considered their baptism as invalid.

There is great difficulty about the text of the clause beginning "Likewise in the case, etc.," and Gelasius, the *Prisca*, Theilo and Thearistus, (who in 419 translated the canons of Nice for the African bishops), the PseudoIsidore, and Gratian have all followed a reading *diakonwn* instead of *diakonisswn*. This change makes all clear, but many canonists keep the ordinary text, including Van Espen, with whose interpretation Hefele does not agree.

The clause I have rendered "And we mean by deaconesses" is most difficult of translation. I give the original, *Emnhsqhmen de diakonisswn twr ej tw schmati ejetasqeiswn epei k.t.l.* Hefele's translation seems to me impossible, by *schmati* he understands the list of the clergy just mentioned.

EXCURSUS ON THE DEACONESS OF THE EARLY CHURCH.²

It has been supposed by many that the deaconess of the Early Church had an Apostolic institution and that its existence may be referred to by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans (16:1) where he speaks of Phoebe as being a *diakonov* of the Church of Cenchrea. It moreover has been suggested that the "widows" of 1

² Henry R. Percival, "Excursus On The Deaconess Of The Early Church", Canon 19 of "The Canons Of The 318 Holy Fathers Assembled In The City Of Nice, In Bithynia", in "The First Ecumenical Council, The First Council of Nice, A.D. 325", in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees* (pages 123-126), (Pentecost 1899). The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, edited by Philip Schaff. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997)

Timothy 5:9 may have been deaconesses, and this seems not unlikely from the fact that the age for the admission of women to this ministry was fixed by Tertullian at sixty years (*De Vel. Virg.* Cap. ix.), and only changed to forty, two centuries later by the Council of Chalcedon, and from the further fact that these “widows” spoken of by St. Paul seem to have had a vow of chastity, for it is expressly said that if they marry they have “damnation, because they have cast off their first faith” (1 Timothy 5:12).

These women were called *diakonissai*, *presbutides* (which must be distinguished from the *presbuterai*, a poor class referred to in the Apostolic Constitutions (ii. 28) who are to be only invited frequently to the love-feasts, while the *presbutides* had a definite allotment of the offerings assigned to their support), *chrai*, *diaconissae*, *presbyteroe*, and *viduce*.

The one great characteristic of the deaconess was that she was vowed to perpetual chastity. The *Apostolical Constitutions* (vi. 17) say that she must be a chaste virgin (*parthenon agnh*) or else a widow. The writer of the article “Deaconess” in the *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities* says: “It is evident that the ordination of deaconesses included a vow of celibacy.” We have already seen the language used by St. Paul and of this the wording of the canon of Chalcedon is but an echo (Canon xv). “A woman shall not receive the laying on of hands as a deaconess under forty years of age, and then only after searching examination. And if, after she has had hands laid on her, and has continued for a time to minister, she shall despise the Grace of God and give herself in marriage, she shall be anathematized and the man who is united to her.” The civil law went still further, and by Justinian’s Sixth Novel those who attempted to marry are subjected to forfeiture of property and capital punishment. In the collect in the ancient office there is a special petition that the newly admitted deaconess may have the gift of continence.

The principal work of the deaconess was to assist the female candidates for holy baptism. At that time the sacrament of baptism was always administered by immersion (except to those in extreme illness) and hence there was much that such an order of women could be useful in. Moreover they sometimes gave to the female catechumens preliminary instruction, but their work was wholly limited to women, and for a deaconess of the Early Church to teach a man or to nurse him in sickness would have been an impossibility. The duties of the deaconess are set forth in many ancient writings, I cite here what is commonly known as the XII Canon of the Fourth Council of Carthage, which met in the year 398:

“Widows and dedicated women (*sanctimoniales*) who are chosen to assist at the baptism of women, should be so well instructed in their office as to be able to

teach aptly and properly unskilled and rustic women how to answer at the time of their baptism to the questions put to them, and also how to live godly after they have been baptized.” This whole matter is treated clearly by St. Epiphanius who, while indeed speaking of deaconesses as an order (**tagma**) asserts that **“they were only women-elders, not priestesses in any sense, that their mission was not to interfere in any way with Sacerdotal functions, but simply to perform certain offices in the care of women”** (Hoer. lxxix, cap. iij). From all this it is evident that **they are entirely in error who suppose that “the laying on of hands” which the deaconesses received corresponded to that by which persons were ordained to the diaconate, presbyterate, and episcopate at that period of the church’s history.** It was merely a solemn dedication and blessing and was not looked upon as “an outward sign of an inward grace given.” For further proof of this I must refer to Morinus, who has treated the matter most admirably. (*De Ordinationibus*, Exercitatio X.)

The deaconesses existed but a short while. The council of Laodicea as early as A.D. 343-381, forbade the appointment of any who were called **presbutides** (*Vide* Canon xi); and the first council of Orange, A.D. 441, in its twenty-sixth canon forbids the appointment of deaconesses altogether, and the Second council of the same city in canons xvij and xviii, decrees that deaconesses who married were to be excommunicated unless they renounced the men they were living with, and that, on account of the weakness of the sex, none for the future were to be ordained.

Thomassinus, to whom I refer the reader for a very full treatment of the whole subject, is of opinion that the order was extinct in the West by the tenth or twelfth century, but that it lingered on a little later at Constantinople but only in conventual institutions. (Thomassin, *Ancienne et Nouvelle Discipline de l’Eglise*, I Partie, Livre III.)

CANON 11³

PRESBYTIDES, as they are called, or female presidents, are not to be appointed in the Church.

NOTES.

ANCIENT EPITOME OF CANON 11

Widows called presidents shall not be appointed in churches.

BALSAMON

³ Canon 11 of “Synod Of Laodicea”, (A.D. 343 – 381) in “The First Ecumenical Council, The First Council of Nice, A.D. 325”, in The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees (pages 277-280), Henry R. Percival (Editor), (Pentecost 1899). The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, edited by Philip Schaff. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997)

In old days certain venerable women (*presbutides*) sat in Catholic churches, and took care that the other women kept good and modest order. But from their habit of using improperly that which was proper, either through their arrogancy or through their base self-seeking, scandal arose. Therefore the Fathers prohibited the existence in the Church thereafter of any more such women as are called *presbytides* or *presidents*. And that no one may object that in the monasteries of women one woman must preside over the rest, it should be remembered that the renunciation which they make of themselves to God and the tonsure brings it to pass that they are thought of as one body though many; and all things which are theirs, relate only to the salvation of the soul. But for woman to teach in a Catholic Church, where a multitude of men is gathered together, and women of different opinions, is, in the highest degree, indecorous and pernicious.

HEFELE

It is doubtful what was here intended, and this canon has received very different interpretations. In the first place, what is the meaning of the words *presbutides* and *prokathmenai* (“*presbytides*” and female *presidents*)? I think the first light is thrown on the subject by Epiphanius, who in his treatise against the Collyridians (Hoer., 79:4) says that “women had never been allowed to offer sacrifice, as the Collyridians presumed to do, but were only allowed to minister. Therefore there were only deaconesses in the Church, and even if the oldest among them were called ‘*presbytides*,’ this term must be clearly distinguished from *presbyteresses*. The latter would mean priestesses (*idriassav*), but ‘*presbytides*’ only designated their age, as seniors.” According to this, the canon appears to treat of the superior deaconesses who were the overseers (*prokathmenai*) of the other deaconesses; and the further words of the text may then probably mean that in future no more such superior deaconesses or *eldresses* were to be appointed, probably because they had often outstepped their authority.

Neander, Fuchs, and others, however, think it more probable that the terms in question are in this canon to be taken as simply meaning deaconesses, for even in the church they had been wont to preside over the female portion of the congregation (whence their name of “*presidents*”); and, according to St. Paul’s rule, only widows over sixty years of age were to be chosen for this office (hence called “*presbytides*”). We may add, that this direction of the apostle was not very strictly adhered to subsequently, but still it was repeatedly enjoined that only elder persons should be chosen as deaconesses. Thus, for instance, the Council of Chalcedon, in its fifteenth canon, required that deaconesses should be at least forty years of age, while the Emperor Theodosius even prescribed the age of sixty.

Supposing now that this canon simply treats of deaconesses, a fresh doubt arises as to how the last words — “they are not to be appointed in the Church” are to

be understood. For it may mean that “from henceforth no more deaconesses shall be appointed;” or, that “in future they shall no more be solemnly ordained in the church.” The first interpretation would, however, contradict the fact that the Greek Church had deaconesses long after the Synod of Laodicea. For instance, in 692 the Synod in Trullo (Can. xiv.) ordered that “no one under forty years of age should be ordained deaconess.” Consequently the, second interpretation, “they shall not be solemnly ordained in the church,” seems a better one, and Neander decidedly prefers it. It is certainly true that several later synods distinctly forbade the old practice of conferring a sort of ordination upon deaconesses, as, for instance, the first Synod of Orange (Arausicanum I. of 441, Can. xxvj.) in the words — *diaconoe omnimodis non ordinandoe*; also the Synod at Epaon in 517 (Can. xxj.), and the second Synod at Orleans in 533 (Can. xvij.); but in the Greek Church at least, an ordination, a *ceirotoneisqai* took place as late as the Council in Trullo (Can. xiv.). But this Canon of Laodicea does not speak of solemn dedication, and certainly not of ordination, but only of *kaqistasqai*. These reasons induce us to return to the first interpretation of this canon, and to understand it as forbidding from that time forward the appointment of any more chief deaconesses or “presbytides.”

Zonaras and Balsamon give yet another explanation. In their opinion, these “presbytides” were not chief deaconesses, but aged women in general (*ex populo*), to whom was given the supervision of the females, in church. The Synod of Laodicea, however, did away with this arrangement, probably because they had misused their office for purposes of pride, or money-making, bribery, etc. Compare with the foregoing the Excursus on Deaconesses, appended to Canon XIX. of Nice.

This canon is found in the *Corpus Juris Canonici*, Gratian’s *Decretum*, Pars I., Dist. XXXII., c. xix, in Isidore’s version; but Van Espen remarks that the Roman Correctors have pointed out that it departs widely from the Greek original. The Roman Correctors further say “The note of Balsamon on this point. should be seen;” and with this interpretation Morinus also agrees in his work on Holy Orders (*De Ordinationibus*, Pars III., Exercit. x., cap. iij., n. 3).

THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON, 451 AD

CANON 15⁴

A WOMAN shall not **receive the laying on of hands as a deaconess** under forty years of age, and then only after searching examination. And if, after she has had hands laid on her and has continued for a time to minister, she shall despise the grace of God and give herself in marriage, she shall be anathematized and the man united to her.

NOTES

ANCIENT EPITOME OF CANON 15

No person shall be ordained deaconess except she be forty years of age. If she shall dishonor her ministry by contracting a marriage, let her be anathema.

This canon should be read carefully in connection with what is said in the Excursus on deaconesses to canon Nix. of Nice. This canon is found in the *Corpus Juris Canonici*, Gratian's *Decretum*, Pars II., Causa XXVII, Quaest. I., Canon xxij.

CIC remark on Canon 15: In this canon, a woman can be ordained as a deaconess, had hands laid on her, and ministers. This "laying on of hands" for ordination as a deaconess is distinguished in "Excursus On The Deaconess Of The Early Church" from "laying on of hands" to Holy Orders as a deacon, presbyter, or bishop.

THE COUNCIL IN TRULLO, 692 AD

CANON 70⁵

WOMEN are not permitted to speak at the time of the Divine Liturgy; but, according to the word of Paul the Apostle, "let them be silent. For it is not permitted to them to speak, but to be in subjection, as the law also saith. But if they wish to learn anything let them ask their own husbands at home."

⁴ Canon 15 of "The 30 Canons Of The Holy And Fourth Synods, Of Chalcedon", in "The Fourth Ecumenical Council, The Council Of Chalcedon A.D. 451.", in The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees (pages 548-549), Henry R. Percival (Editor), (Pentecost 1899). The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, edited by Philip Schaff. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997)

⁵ Canon 70 of "The Canons Of The Council In Trullo; Often Called The Quinisext Council, A.D. 692." in "The Sixth Ecumenical Council, The Third Council Of Constantinople A.D. 680-681", in The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees (pages 752-753), Henry R. Percival (Editor), (Pentecost 1899). The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, edited by Philip Schaff. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997)

[The sessions of the council were held in the domed hall (or possibly chapel) in the imperial palace; which, the Acts tell us, was called Trullo.⁶]

NOTES.

ANCIENT EPITOME OF CANON 70

Women are not permitted to speak in church.

“Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak,” is the passage referred to. 1 Corinthians 14:34.

CIC remark on Canon 70: The presence of this in the Canons of the early church suggest that the trajectory of scripture about liberation of women has a ceiling. This is not a new point of contention. The absence of commentary suggests that theologians, editors and translators considered the plain meaning as a valid and sufficient statement of church law needing no further elucidation. While only the first four councils are universally accepted, this canon in the Sixth Council is consistent with earlier councils.

THE SECOND COUNCIL OF NICE, 787 AD

CANON 14⁷

That no one without ordination ought to read in the ambo during the synaxis. THAT there is a certain order established in the priesthood is very evident to all, and to guard diligently the promotions of the priesthood is well pleasing to God. Since therefore we see certain youths who have received the clerical tonsure, but who have not yet received ordination from the bishop, reading in the ambo during the Synaxis, and in doing this violating the canons, we forbid this to be done (from henceforth,) and let this prohibition be observed also amongst the monks. It is permitted to each hegumenos in his own monastery to ordain a reader, if he himself had received the laying on of hands by a bishop to the dignity of hegumenos, and is known to be a presbyter. Chorepiscopi may likewise, according to ancient custom and with the bishop's authorization, appoint readers.

NOTES.

ANCIENT EPITOME OF CANON 14

⁶ “Historical Introduction” of “The Sixth Ecumenical Council, The Third Council Of Constantinople A.D. 680-681”, in The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees (page 626), Henry R. Percival (Editor), (Pentecost 1899). The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, edited by Philip Schaff. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997)

⁷ Canon 14, “The Canons Of The Holy And Ecumenical Seventh Council”, in “The Seventh Ecumenical Council, The Second Council of Nice A.D. 787.”, in The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees (pages 1060-1061), Henry R. Percival (Editor), (Pentecost 1899). The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, edited by Philip Schaff. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997)

No one shall read from the ambon unless he has been ordained by the bishop. And this shall be in force also among monks. The superior of a monastery, if he has been ordained by the bishop, may ordain a lector but only in his own monastery. A chorepiscopus also can make a lector.

BALSAMON

I say therefore from this present canon and from canon 19:that they may properly be made superiors, who have never received holy orders; since women may be placed in such positions in our monasteries. And as **these women do not hear confessions, nor make readers, so neither do superiors do this who are neither monks nor priests, nor could they do this even with the license of the bishop.**⁸

HEFELE

Van Espen (1. c. p. 469 sqq., and Jus Canon., t.i. pt. 31:tit. 31, c. 6), professes to show (a) that at that time there was no special benediction of abbots (different from their ordination as priests), and that therefore the words, “if he (the superior of the monastery) himself is consecrated by the bishop to the office of hegumenus,” and “evidently is a priest,” mean the same; (b) that at the time of our Synod every superior of a monastery, a prior as well as an abbot, had the power of conferring upon the monks of his monastery the order of lector; but (c) that the way in which Anastasius translated the canon (si dumtaxat Abbati manus impositio facta noscatur ab episcopo secundum morem praeferendi abbatum), and the reception of this translation into the Corpus juris canonici, c.l., Dist. lxix., gave occasion to concede the right in question, of ordaining lectors, only to the solemnly consecrated (and insulated) abbots.

This canon is found (as just noted) in the *Corpus Juris Canonici*, Pars I., Dist. LXIX, c.j.

CIC remark on Balsamon’s remarks about Canon 14: In AD 787, women are still prohibited from exercising general ministry among men. Women may be made superiors of a monastery for women, since the office of “superior” does not require holy orders. However, even within this ministry limited exclusively to other women, superiors who are not also monks or priests are not permitted to hear confessions or authorize others to be readers, even if the superiors are licensed by the bishop.

⁸ “Balsamon” (page 1061), in remarks about “Canon 14”, in “The Canons Of The Holy And Ecumenical Seventh Council”, in “The Seventh Ecumenical Council, The Second Council of Nice A.D. 787.”, in The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees (pages 1060-1061), Henry R. Percival (Editor), (Pentecost 1899). The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, edited by Philip Schaff. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997)

CANONS AND RULINGS APPROVED BY THE SYNOD IN TRULLO, 692 AD

CANON 24⁹

A widow put into the catalogue of widows, that is, a deaconess being sixty years old, and marrying, is not to be admitted to communion of the Good Thing, till she cease from her uncleanness; but to a widower that marries no penance is appointed, but that of digamy. If the widow be less than sixty, it is the bishop's fault who admitted her deaconess, not the woman's.

CIC remark on Canon 24: A bishop is required to make a widow a deaconess, upon which she is put into the catalogue of widows.

⁹ Canon 24, "The First Canonical Epistle of Our Holy Father Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia to Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium", in "Appendix: Containing Canons and Rulings Not Having Conciliar Origin but Approved by Name in Canon ii. of the Synod in Trullo" (692 AD), in The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees (page 1139), Henry R. Percival (Editor), (Pentecost 1899). The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 14, edited by Philip Schaff. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997)