

# Female diaconal service in the Coptic Orthodox Church today

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## Summary:

The article addresses the issue of the ministry of deaconesses in the Coptic Orthodox Church from the beginnings of its reorganization in the 1950s to the present day. It includes the history and organization of this new institution or secular order dedicated, not to chanting in liturgical services, but for charitable activities, for taking care of people, for visiting needy families, catechetical activities, education and prayer together with children and for serving those in suffering and living in ignorance. This organizing process was regulated in 1988 by Pope Shenouda and by Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church, deciding that the so-called "consecrated women" should advance through several steps: "consecrated women" (mukarrasa), sub-deaconesses and deaconesses, based on a millennial tradition of the Church reactivated in modernity due to pressing needs. The article documents how to cultivate and organize the ethos of the Christian ministry of the world, describing the experience gained in the Coptic Church in this regard.

## Keywords:

Deaconess, consecrated women, lay order, Coptic Church

## Introduction

In Church history, deaconesses are mentioned in the New Testament and since the Early Church. The word «deaconess» comes from a Greek word, *diakonos* (διάκονος), for «deacon», which means a servant or helper.<sup>2</sup>

The topic of deaconesses is currently under discussion in a number of Churches.

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<sup>2</sup> <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deaconess>> May 2, 2018.

In some a female diaconate has been recently organized, usually in a local and ad hoc manner. Nowadays one can say that the most developed form of female diaconal service and the most active, with the largest number of women, is organized by the Coptic Orthodox Church, throughout Egypt and even abroad.

During an interview on Coptic deaconesses which I conducted in 1988 with Pope/Patriarch Shenuda (1971-2012), at that time head of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, His Holiness told me that the historic deaconesses who inspired the modern Coptic experience were Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), Olympias, who worked with St John Chrysostom, and Anastasia who is named in the writings of St Severus of Antioch. He also said that at that time (in 1988) there were more than 150 «consecrated women» (*mukarrasat* in Arabic, singular *mukarrasa*) present in many dioceses.<sup>3</sup> In 2005 they were over 400; in 2013 about 500 and more than 900 in 2018, but there are no exact statistics.<sup>4</sup> Deaconesses are to be found in most of the Egyptian dioceses. In some dioceses they are numerous, in others there are only one or two, as Bishop Dimitrios of Mallawi confirmed to me in 2013.<sup>5</sup>

In this article I shall concentrate on the question of female diaconal service in the Coptic Orthodox Church as it exists today, including also its history and organization.

Let us note that in the Coptic Orthodox Church there are also a few male «consecrated deacons» who do not marry and lead a dedicated life of service to the Church similar to that of the deaconesses/sisters, but this issue is not addressed in this paper.<sup>6</sup> A well-known unmarried deacon who dedicated his whole life to the service of

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Pope Shenuda on February 20, 1988 in his residence in the monastery of St Bishoy, published in «Comment vit la femme copte aujourd'hui au sein de l'Eglise,» *Le Monde copte (LMC)* 16 (Limoges, 1989), 66-73, here at 70 and 69, henceforth cited as *LMC* 16.

<sup>4</sup> C. Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, Paris, 2005, 39, henceforth cited as Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*; interview with Metropolitan Pachomius in Damanhur in February 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Bishop Dimitrios in February 2013. In that year there were twenty-six consecrated women in Mallawi.

<sup>6</sup> Some men have chosen to follow a similar consecrated life for serving the Church, at the spiritual and social levels. Some may become celibate priests in parishes. In 2004 there were at least thirty dedicated celibate deacons and priests in Egypt; Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 39-40. This exists also in the diaspora, for example, in Los Angeles USA, where there is a house of male consecrated deacons, *St Paul's Brotherhood*. This way of life began in the House of the Consecration (*Bayt a-takris*) opened by Father Matta al-Maskin in 1958. A majority became priests and monks. Those consecrated men who want to serve the Church are called *mukarrasin*, cf. Ugo Zanetti, «La vita monastica nell'Egitto di oggi» in *Popoli, Religioni e Chiese lungo il corso del Nilo*, eds. C. Alzati and L. Vaccaro, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 2015, 445, 447.

the Coptic Orthodox Church is Habib Girgis (1876-1951), who organized the beginning of the Sunday school movement in his Church.<sup>7</sup>

### **Recent historical background<sup>8</sup>**

During an interview on the topic of deaconesses and female diaconal service, Iris al Masri (1904-1994)<sup>9</sup>, a prominent Coptic historian, told me the following: under Pope Yousab (Joseph) II (1946-1956), there were already in 1953 «deaconesses» (or rather some kind of women serving in the church), but this was not official. At the time of Pope Cyril VI (1959-1971), there were a few women living as «consecrated women», also in an unofficial way. For example, Father Salib Surial (d. 1994) of the church of St Mark in Giza (Cairo) seems to have had a house for women serving families and girls, who taught and held meetings of girls/young women.<sup>10</sup> They used to give a weekly report to the bishop. They were called «the eyes and ears of the bishop.»

In 1954 Father Bolos Bolos of the church of St George in Damanhur had a special room in the church courtyard for consecrated young women.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> He was canonized in 2013. See Bishop Suriel, *Habib Girgis: Coptic Orthodox Educator and a Light in the Darkness*, Crestwood, New York, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> As for the ancient history of the Coptic deaconesses, we do not have any text to testify to it; see C. Chaillot, «Deaconesses in the Coptic Orthodox Church,» *Ecclesia Orans*, 2018, 35, 307-325.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Iris al Masri on March 16, 1988. In 1932 Iris al Masri received her Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Education from Maria Grey College, University of London. Between 1952 and 1954, she pursued her research at Dropsie College, Philadelphia. From 1955 to 1985 she continued to lecture in Coptic History at both the Seminary in Cairo and Alexandria and at the Institute of Coptic Studies. In 1979 she published the book *Women in the Church*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iris\\_Habib\\_Elmasry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iris_Habib_Elmasry). For her book *The Story of the Copts* (two volumes, in English and ten volumes in Arabic) see <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/htli28v5jxppu0a/AADvuceDgtyEQgK2XoAFYsxpa?dl=0>. From 1955 to 1985 Iris Habib Elmasry continued to lecture in Coptic History at the Institute of Coptic Studies. In 2017 the Bibliotheca Alexandria gave her an honorary certificate, as a female figure who had a great influence in Coptic studies. Her sister Dora has written a book about Iris (in Arabic)

<sup>10</sup> There were then two women working with him: Mother Zakia, a kind of nun-in-the world, who helped with any need; and Sister Aïda who was responsible for girls in church meetings, home economy, needlework; she was a married woman with five children and served the church all her life until she died.

<sup>11</sup> Details about this period and these dates (1953 and 1954) need to be verified and recorded.

In St Mark's cathedral in Cairo, then situated in Azbakeya (Klutbey) near Ramses Railway Station, Pope Cyril had a group of church women whom he encouraged to serve and help the people. They used to meet once a week in St Stephen's church adjacent to the cathedral. They lived in their own homes nearby.<sup>12</sup> This ecclesial service offered to the church by women was also followed in other places in Egypt. According to Iris al Masri: «The real work of deaconesses is not to chant but to take care of people: visiting families, reading the Bible and praying together.» In 1956 Pope Cyril VI gave her a letter appointing her «moderator of the girls' meetings in churches.»<sup>13</sup>

Another type of female diaconal work in the Coptic Orthodox Church was that of the Daughters of Mary (*Banat Maryam*) in Beni Suef begun in 1965 by the bishop of Beni Suef, Athanasios (1962-2000), who initiated the first women in 1970.<sup>14</sup> In fact they called themselves «nuns» and had their own rules, recalling the Catholic way of active nuns,<sup>15</sup> which followed the model of female apostolic congregations in the Catholic Church.<sup>16</sup> In reality, their life and activities were similar to those of the Coptic consecrated women (*mukarrasat*). Since Bishop Athanasios' death in 2000, this community of female servants still exists but new taconis/consecrated sisters have

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Iris al Masri on March 16, 1988. Iris al Masri also told me that Pope Cyril (the only pope to allow this) gave these women the permission to clean the sanctuary (*haikal*), to wash all the priests' vestments as well as the altar coverings and the handkerchiefs used at the time of Coptic communion.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Iris al Masri.

<sup>14</sup> Zanetti, U., «La vita monastica nell'Egitto di oggi» (see the section entitled «Altri tipi di vita religiosa femminile», 444-45); Pieternella Van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*, Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 1995. On the *Daughters of Mary* see also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Daughters\\_of\\_St\\_Mary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Daughters_of_St_Mary)

<sup>15</sup> Pope Shenuda also told me that deaconesses and «consecrated girls» in the Coptic Orthodox Church have the same functions as some active nuns in the Catholic Church. Certain Coptic Orthodox nuns may give help to needy people who come to their convents asking for it, *LMC* 16, 70.

<sup>16</sup> In 2001 a Jesuit father living in Egypt, Jacques Masson, wrote that a new form of consecrated life for women was developing, with the foundation of the so called «Banât Maryam», founded by the charismatic bishop of Beni Suef, Athanasios, on the model of the female apostolic congregations in the Catholic Church. Masson was also mentioning the «consecrated women» who lived in groups and dedicated themselves to the service of the Church in the world. «They are gathered under the direction of a bishop, according to the eparchies. Their number does not cease to grow although we are not able to determine precisely their number,» J. Masson, «Les coptes entre tradition et modernité,» *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 51, 2001, 127.

been accepted and blessed by the new bishop Gabriel, as the other of consecrated women (*mukarrasat*) in Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

In a short article by Iris al Masri, translated into French as « Le service des diaconesses, » we read that during a lecture by Pope Shenuda in London on January 28, 1979, she asked a question about deaconesses. His Holiness then answered that this question was in the mind of many people but no decision could be taken about it by the Coptic Orthodox Church before a serious study was made. He outlined some relevant themes and asked her to write studies on this topic. She looked for some appropriate texts and prayers on deaconesses and gave them to Pope Shenuda.<sup>18</sup>

### **The first sisters' house in Giza**

Let us now turn to explain how this female diaconia began in an organized way in Giza (Cairo). When I was preparing my book *The Coptic Orthodox Church*<sup>19</sup>, I went there and was told the following. The first group in Giza was *formally* set up in 1960 under the spiritual guidance of Fr Salib Surial (d. 1994), the priest of the church of Saint Mark (in Giza), with two young women<sup>20</sup>, Fibi Ebeid and Jasmine<sup>21</sup>; they wanted to dedicate their whole life to God, not live enclosed monastics but as serving people in the Church in their daily life. In November 1959, together with Father Surial, they visited Pope Cyril, who gave them his blessing to lead such a life. They were consecrated on May 20, 1960 by the late metropolitan of Giza, Yoannes. In 2005 there were twenty-two sisters in Giza and Sister Fibi then was the superior.<sup>22</sup>

In February 2017, when I revisited the sisters' house in Giza, Sister Fibi (Ebeid) had passed away (on November 23, 2010) and I met sister Irini, one of the first deaconesses there, who told me about Sister Fibi's life and gave me a booklet

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Sister Catherine in Cairo in February 2017. According to Sister Catherine, a *mukarrasa* of the community under Bishop Mousa and one of the organizers of the yearly meeting organized by her group for all the Coptic Orthodox *mukarrasat*/deaconesses in Egypt, the consecrated sisters/taconi of Beni Suef now come to these yearly conferences in al Agami Centre, 30 km west of Alexandria.

<sup>18</sup> Al Masri, I., « Le service des diaconesses », *LMC* 8, Limoges, 1979, 8-10. Iris al Masri told me that she searched in the British Library and other libraries for prayers and other texts about deaconesses. According to her family with whom she lived in London (1974-80) she used to go all the time to the British Library. It would be useful to compile a bibliography of everything written by Iris al Masri on deaconesses/female diaconia.

<sup>19</sup> Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, Paris, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Fibi Ebeid who was then twenty-six years old.

<sup>21</sup> The sisters in Giza cannot remember her family name.

<sup>22</sup> Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 38. Some of these servants of the Church in Giza became nuns and some joined other groups, for example Mother Yuanna (d. 2000) became the head of the Convent of Saint George in Old Cairo.

published in her memory, *The Wheat Seed*.<sup>23</sup> As her life is closely linked to the beginning of the history and organization of the modern work of the consecrated women in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, it seems to me interesting to hear her story.

Sister Fibi Ebeid was born in 1934 in Asiut where her father, Archdeacon Ebeid Mikhail, was well-known as a preacher, Bible teacher and servant of the Church. In 1947 bishop Mikail of Asiut chose their home to be a place for spiritual meetings with talks. It was at that time that she began to think how to serve the church herself. After she finished highschool, she went to study English literature in Cairo in 1953. At this time she spoke about her call to serve the church to Father Salib Surial, her spiritual father, whom she met for the first time in 1953. Father Surial rented a flat in Giza for her and her friend Jasmine; they formed the first group (in Giza) in 1960. Both studied at Giza University in the Faculty of Literature and then taught English at school. They worked in the morning and served the Church in the afternoon. Then other young women joined them. In 1971 the then eight sisters all moved to a villa, 9 Ramzi Farag Street, opposite the Church of St. Demiana built in 1971. All followed a profession during the day and in the evening held their prayers and helped the sick and the poor. After 1981 they became full-time servants of the Church.

After Bishop Yoannes passed away in 1963, his follower, Bishop Domatios (d. 2011), also followed the project; he suggested that Father Surial contact Bishop Antonios to establish some schedules and way of life for the sisters. Since 1962 Bishop Antonios had been a «general» bishop living in Cairo and responsible for Christian education at all levels before becoming patriarch Shenouda in 1971. He also became the spiritual father of the group of women in Giza from 1963 to 1971. The number of sisters in Giza grew with time. In 2005 there were twenty-two sisters and in 2017 thirty sisters in the community, working in Giza and related places.<sup>24</sup>

Similar stories may be told of other places in Egypt, concerning bishops who were spiritual fathers of other young women who also wished to serve in the church. We may name, for example, Metropolitan Pachomius in Damanhur (Delta), Bishop Bimen (d. 1986) in Mallawi, Bishop Tadros in Port Said, Bishop Yohannes (d. 1987) in Tanta (Delta), and Bishop Benjamin in Shibin al Kom (Delta). They had a great interest in service (*khidma* in Arabic) in the Church. Some had been active servants in the church before being appointed as bishops. For example, the late Bishop Bimen of Mallawi, as celibate deacon, had previously worked closely with women in his ten years as a church servant in Giza; he could very well understand their diaconal aspiration and help them to become organized when he became the bishop responsible

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<sup>23</sup> Published in 2010 by the Giza deaconesses' home in Cairo.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Sister Irini in Giza in February 2017. See also Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 38.

for diaconical work in his own diocese.<sup>25</sup> As for Bishop Moussa (Moses), the Administrator of the Bishopric for Youth Affairs who has been responsible for all youth activities in Egypt and abroad since 1980, as a layman he was trained as a Sunday school teacher in the church of the Virgin in Faggala (Cairo); he studied medicine; he also served the Church as a celibate deacon helping for medical and spiritual care in rural area, specially with youth with Bishop Athanasius in Beni Suef.<sup>26</sup> Today a large group of sisters (*mukarrasat*), thirty-five in 2017, help him in his task.

As we have seen, at the time of Pope Cyril VI (1959-1971) only a few women lived as «consecrated women», but they were not consecrated deaconesses. It was under Pope Shenuda (1971-2012) that female diaconal work began in 1981 to be organized at the official level. On the day of Pentecost 1981 Pope Shenuda III consecrated a group of twenty-eight elderly women as «deaconesses», in the cathedral of Saint Mark in Cairo, during the liturgy, in the presence of many bishops. These women, most of them widows, had already served in the church and continued to do so as deaconesses. But it soon became obvious that their age hindered their ability to be very active as most of them were fifty or more. It was therefore decided to accept young women for this diaconal work. They performed the same service as the elderly deaconesses; they also received a blessing through a prayer. It was at this time that the name «consecrated women » (*mukarrasat*) began to be used officially.<sup>27</sup>

In 1985 Pope Shenuda gathered together a group of bishops who had «consecrated women» under their supervision. They drafted a by-law for their Regulations. In 1988 Pope Shenuda felt that the time had come for the so-called «consecrated women» gradually to become deaconesses, that is by advancing through several steps: «consecrated woman» (*mukarrasa*), subdeaconess and deaconess. At the time of my interview on February, 20, 1988, some proposals had already been written down and were going to be discussed by the Holy Synod meeting at Pentecost

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<sup>25</sup> Bishop Bimen was one of the most outstanding personalities in the Coptic Orthodox Church, a pioneer in the field of socio-economic development and the emancipation of women, trying to emancipate the women of the villages of his diocese and carve out a role for women in church service. He sent some of his consecrated women (*mukarrasat*) to study abroad, in S. S. Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, New York 2003, 155.

From a Interview in Caito in March 1988 with Sister Ester who was a *mukarrasa* under Bishop Bimen: Amba Bimen had tasted the fruit of social work when he was himself a celibate deacon, He prepared the congregations and the priests to accept the new order of deaconesses. He saw the necessity of helping and working for people in need and the necessity of doing it, with love.

<sup>26</sup> Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 70-1.

<sup>27</sup> During my interview with Pope Shenuda in Cairo in 1988, he called them «consecrated girls» which I render in this article as «consecrated women».

1988.<sup>28</sup> In the course of the following years the Holy Synod continued to study and discuss the matter in order to establish certain rites and conditions pertaining to the Order of Consecration for the Consecrated Diaconess.<sup>29</sup> The final texts with a view to adjusting their status as well as their consecration vows and prayers were printed in Arabic in a booklet published in September 2013 by the Bishopric of Youth in Cairo: *The Regulations for consecrated women approved by the Holy Synod with other matters concerning consecrated women. Ritual of Consecration of the consecrated woman - of the subdeaconess- of the deaconess* (Lâ'iḥa al-mukarrasât allatī aqarra-hâ al-majma' al-muqaddas ma'a bâqī shu'ûn al-mukarrasât. Taqs takrīs al-mukarrasa - musâ'idat al-shammâsa- al-shammâsa ), with prefaces by Metropolitan Bishoy (d. 2018) and Bishop Moussa, the two bishops responsible of the section of the deaconesses at the level of the Holy Synod. From this booklet we understand that the Holy Synod approved several texts on the rules and prayers: on May 25, 1991 for the status and consecration of the consecrated woman or *mukarrasa*, on June 5, 1993 about the subdeaconess and on June 6, 1998 about the deaconess.<sup>30</sup> These stipulations are recorded in the Book of Canons of the Holy Synod. Copts call them «tasoni» that is «my sister», in Coptic. I shall use these different names in this article.

## Organization

### Activities

In parishes and elsewhere the sisters serve mostly among women and young girls; they may also serve male children and aged men. They are entrusted with educational Christian work among young girls and children in Sunday schools and also with religious meetings in church with women of all ages. Some take care of orphans, the handicapped (physically and mentally). They supervise student hostels for girls, kindergartens or childcare centers, nursing homes, homes for aged women, retreat houses and sometimes administrative departments in the church, such as the bishopric for youth. They visit and help young girls and women at home as well as widows, the poor, the sick and also the aged. They help Christian families in poor

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<sup>28</sup> LMC 16, 66.

<sup>29</sup> See under « deaconess » <[http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7\\_priesthood.html](http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html)> May 2, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> See the booklet by Bishop Mettaous, *Deacons and Deaconesses*, St Mina Monastery Press, 2005, 40-4. This is expanded in Bishop Mettaous, *The Sacraments of Church*, no 7, *Priesthood* with the section on « Deaconesses in Church » from 49, with the vow and prayer for the consecrated women and deaconesses, 53-70 (available on <<https://stnoufer.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/the-sacrament-of-church-priesthood-bishop-mettaous.pdf>> May 2, 2018.). See also the section « consecrated sisters » (sisters, consecration, becoming consecrated, life of service, misconceptions) on <<https://suscopts.org/coptic-reader/>> May 2, 2018.



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villages and run-down quarters. A few work for medical care, including dentistry. Some are secretaries, selling books and other items in bookstores of the church (for example, in the bishopric for youth). A couple of deaconesses have studied theology and may teach this or other subjects.<sup>31</sup>

Their work is also adapted to the context of the place where they live. For example, in 2013, in Samalut, where the bishop built a large hospital, from the thirteen sisters some were nurses and worked in the hospital, while others were working with poor people in the villages giving spiritual service and also some medical help; yet others helped with the administrative work of the diocese. In Giza, the sisters serve the sick in the nearby hospital of St Demiana, take care of a kindergarten and several orphanages in four places in Cairo, and look after women students in special hostels. Some sisters (eleven in 2013) work in the retreat house of Anafora, 75 km from Cairo on the Desert Road to Alexandria, a place which is visited especially by many young Copts and all kinds of visitors, also foreigners.<sup>32</sup>

The consecrated women can help in counseling services for spiritual care and guidance. Their work is social, educational, pastoral, but above all spiritual.<sup>33</sup> They assist the priest and bishop in this service. Their activities have diversified. The Service of Women by Consecrated Sisters is described on several websites of the Coptic Orthodox Church.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Female diaconal service in the diaspora*

In countries outside Egypt we also find some consecrated women in the United States of America, Australia and Africa.

In the USA, sisters are found in the two dioceses of Los Angeles and of the Southern United States. In 2017 one sister was working in the Coptic Centre in Staten Island (New York), under Bishop David.

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<sup>31</sup> In 2017 no sister was teaching English or theology in the Coptic Orthodox theological seminary or in the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo, but one (under Bishop Mousa) was professor of English at the American University in Cairo (AUC).

<sup>32</sup> In 2013 two sisters were working in the house called *Anamnesa* to receive the groups and other visitors.

<sup>33</sup> LMC 16, at 68 ; Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> For example on the website of the diocese of the Southern United States «the service of consecrated sisters» <<http://sisters.suscopts.org/life-of-service/>> or <[http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7\\_priesthood.html](http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html)> under «deaconesses in the church» May 2, 2018.

There is a watsapp group for consecrated sisters.

In Los Angeles, under Archbishop Serapion, since 2003, there have been two consecrated young women who serve Sunday school children and youth and also care for individuals; their service is mainly for women and children.<sup>35</sup>

The Diocese of the Southern United States was the first Coptic Orthodox diocese to be established in the United States in 1993 for eleven southern states, with its seat in Dallas (Texas), under Bishop Youssef. Since 2006 there were consecrated sisters, with six sisters in 2018 living in different states: two in Dallas and two in Orlando, another one in Nashville, and one in Atlanta. They serve the women and female youth, working in a retreat centre, caring for the sick people, and doing counseling.<sup>36</sup>

In Australia, since November 2002, there has been a House for Consecrated Sisters in Sydney, with two sisters in 2018. It was one of the first sisters' *mukarrasat*'s house to be established outside of Egypt.<sup>37</sup> In 2013 they moved into a campus built specifically for them in the parish of Archangel Michael and St Bishoy in Mount Druitt, on the top floor of the Coptic school on site. Apart from their prayer life, they serve in the Sunday School, Bible study, spiritual meetings, and different programs for girls. They also help newly arrived Coptic immigrants settle in, and make sure the needs of families struggling financially are being met.<sup>38</sup> They follow the Synod's rules.<sup>39</sup> The sisters are under the direct responsibility of the Bishop of Sydney, Daniel; but the person who actually looks after the sisters' needs day to day is Father Botros Morkos, who is a priest in the parish.<sup>40</sup>

In Africa, under Bishop Antonios Marcos, from 1976 bishop for African Services with seat in Nairobi (Kenya) and then, since 1998, based in Johannesburg (South Africa), two sisters were sent from Egypt. When I visited Kenya I met two sisters. Sister Esther studied medicine in Egypt and was then sent for further social studies to England by bishop Bimen of Mallawi before going to work in Kenya. A local convert, Sister Naomi (from the Kamba tribe), was then working in Kisumu near

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<sup>35</sup> Email from Metropolitan Serapion, July 8, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Email from Bishop Youssef on April 28, 2018. On the website of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States you can find one section dedicated to consecrated sisters (The St Mary and St Poebe consecrated sisters) on <<http://sisters.suscopts.org/>> May 2, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Email from sister Mary Kamel, Sydney, on 28 November 2002; <<https://www.facebook.com/theotokos.demiana?fref=ts>> May 2, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Tasoni Mary is also the coordinator of a charity called Solace of the Lord that aims to get as many people as possible serving others, with a focus both within the Coptic community and in the wider Australian community. As such, groups visit prisons and help disadvantaged indigenous and refugee children with their studies.

<sup>39</sup> The rules have some adaptations for Australian life conditions.

<sup>40</sup> Email from Fr Antonios Kaldas, Sydney, 27 November 2017.

Lake Victoria with girls and women in the field of social and spiritual life and vocational training.<sup>41</sup>

In 2017, under Bishop Boulos, Bishop of Mission Affairs for East Africa (with his seat in Nairobi), there were four consecrated sisters: two in Kenya, one in Tanzania and one in Zambia doing service mainly with children and young women; they also helped with conferences and family meetings.<sup>42</sup> In 2018, however, there was no sister under Bishop Antonios Marcos in South Africa.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Life before the consecration of the 'mukarrasat'***

Before they are consecrated, the young women are asked to have some years of experience in practical work for the church. They should also be recommended as suitable for such diaconal work. In Egypt, there are two main places for their training, which lasts for three years: a house next to the monastery of St. Demiana in Belkas, under Metropolitan Bishoy of Damietta (Delta); and the house of the sisters under Bishop Mousa in Deir al Malak (Cairo). They may also be trained directly in the bishopric where they wish to live and work. After their consecration they are sent to the bishopric of their choice or to any bishopric in need of sisters.

There are several stages with first a preparatory trial time as novice, then as consecrated sister (*mukarrasa*), then as subdeaconess and finally as deaconess (as mentioned above).<sup>44</sup> One must be over forty to become a deaconess. The time for passing from one stage to another is not systematic, at least five years between the two stages. In fact most of the sisters remain consecrated women (*mukarrasat*) and only a few become deaconesses, but it is on the rise. Most of the candidates are young.<sup>45</sup>

With regard to the educational background of the sisters, many have completed university studies in different faculties such as medicine/dentistry, pharmacy, psychology, law, commerce, mathematics, engineering, agriculture, languages, psychology and also philosophy.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Pope Shenuda, *LMC* 16, at 68. C. Chaillot, «Activités missionnaires de l'Eglise copte en Afrique», *LMC* 20, 1992, 99-103.

<sup>42</sup> Email from Bishop Paul on November 27, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Email from Bishop Antonios Marcos on May 1, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> <<http://sisters.suscopts.org/V> May 2, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Most of them are about 23-25 years old when they begin to live their vocation, according to Pope Shenuda in 1988, *LMC* 16, 69.

<sup>46</sup> *LMC* 16, 69.

### ***The consecration***

The consecration (*takris*) is usually performed by the bishop in the diocese where the sister will serve. The prayer of consecration<sup>47</sup> with the vow now takes place before the morning raising of incense prayer, i.e. just before they begin the liturgy, outside the altar, in front of it. It is done without laying on of hands as this is only for deacons and priests in the Coptic Orthodox Church. At the time of consecration, the young women are given new names and receive new garments (a special dress and a small veil for the head) which are blessed during the consecration and which they put on in the church after the prayer said by the bishop. The sister also reads a pledge of commitment. At the end of the liturgy the sisters receive communion together with other women.<sup>48</sup> After the consecration they wear their habit every day, with a cross and a little small on their head. The novices also wear a specific habit.

### ***The vows***

Consecrated women make four vows: the three vows like those of nuns: poverty, celibacy and obedience, as well as a fourth vow of service (*khidma*).<sup>49</sup> A *mukarrasa* must be totally involved in the service for the Church. She has to be a virgin and her age should be more than twenty-five.<sup>50</sup> The sisters make a lifelong vow of celibacy and cannot marry after being consecrated. But elderly widows may be accepted as deaconesses, if more than fifty and widowed for at least five years.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Daily life***

The first deaconesses in 1981 were allowed to live at home, not in a communal setting. Now the consecrated women live together in one place, in groups, in houses or flats set aside for them, with an organized life, and meals and prayers in common. In this way they can share their daily experiences. They have their own rules for community life and prayer. Rules are necessary to answer all questions/events in the

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<sup>47</sup> See the prayer for consecrated woman (*mukarrasa*) in annex of this article.

<sup>48</sup> LMC 16, 67.

<sup>49</sup> The St Mary and St Phoebe consecrated sisters, <<http://sisters.suscopts.org/>> and <[http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7\\_priesthood.html](http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html)> May 2, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> The Regulations to become consecrated women approved by the Holy Synod (booklet published in 2013), 11.

<sup>51</sup> If the widow has lost her husband for five years or more and if she is less than fifty. LMC 16, Interview, at 68. Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 39. See also «Service of Deaconesses in the Church» on <[http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7\\_priesthood.html](http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html)> May 2, 2018; C. Chaillot, *Orthodox Outlook*, vol. IV no 3, 1990, 15.

life of the deaconesses/sisters.<sup>52</sup> Their timetable and prayer rules may differ a little from one diocese to another and also according to their work.<sup>53</sup> For their livelihood, they receive whatever they need from the churches/parishes where they serve. They obey the priest or the bishop with whom they work, accordingly.<sup>54</sup> The sisters have fixed visits to their family on certain occasions and by permission. A sister may be transferred from one place to another one according to the decision of the bishop.

### ***Prayer life***

Apart from their daily prayers, the sisters have periodical retreats, for example one week in a monastery. Other spiritual meetings are also organised for them.

In church, during the liturgy, the sisters/*mukarrasat* keep discipline among women, for instance organizing the women coming for communion by checking that each woman covers her head and holds a linen veil in her hand to be put in front of her mouth after receiving communion, as is done in the Coptic Orthodox Church.<sup>55</sup> The sisters sing together with the other women parishioners.

At the time of the baptism and chrismation of adult women (although nowadays this happens very rarely), the sisters may help before and after baptism; but they do not assist the priest as this is the duty of the priesthood. In any case, the consecrated women/deaconess will not and cannot do any work of the priest in the liturgy and the sacramental life, or perform any function of the deacons and subdeacons in serving at the altar.<sup>56</sup> No woman may enter the sanctuary.<sup>57</sup> Consecrated women/deaconesses are not regarded as clergy. They cannot read during the liturgy or even at public meetings,

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<sup>52</sup> Rules include questions/problems which may arise after the consecration of the consecrated women/deaconesses about any vow they have made. If the life of the sisters is well organized and well guarded by the bishop and clergy, this also reassures the parents about the safety of their daughters in a society, in Egypt, in which women rarely live by themselves, *LMC* 16, 70.

<sup>53</sup> Chaillot, *The Coptic Orthodox Church*, 79.

<sup>54</sup> *LMC* 16, 69.

<sup>55</sup> <[http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7\\_priesthood.html](http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html)> May 2, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Deaconesses/consecrated women have no part in the service of the altar; they do not serve at the altar or for the sacraments. During our interview, Pope Shenuda insisted on these points and the fact that the deaconess/consecrated woman cannot exercise any function of the priest, *LMC* 16, 68.

<sup>57</sup> See «Supervising the cleaning of the church and organizing its furniture, except for the sanctuary <[http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7\\_priesthood.html](http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html)> May 2, 2018, under «DEACONNESSES IN THE CHURCH.»

but only at special meetings for women.<sup>58</sup> This has relaxed as, for example, sisters leading the liturgical congregational responses and praises with many men and deacons present, can be seen on photos and videos.

### Conclusion

Coptic consecrated women work as certain active nuns do in the Catholic Church. But in the Coptic Orthodox Church nuns are devoted only to the life of prayer and contemplation in their monasteries, in solitude and apart from the world.

For Copts, service (*khidma*) of the Church is important. As Pope Shenuda underlined, the service of the Coptic consecrated women/deaconesses is a real dedicated life and a very vivid experience. This experience of organizing a female diaconia in the Coptic Church is unique and successful. During my interview in 1988, Pope Shenuda told me that the service of *mukarrasat*/deaconesses was already well accepted and respected by the laity who understand that it is needed. Many parishes were at that time asking him to have some consecrated women for their social projects. As the parishes need these women serving the Church, and *at the same time* these young women want to devote themselves entirely to the service of the Church, this proved to be a very fitting and fruitful combination. The deaconesses are assigned to services which are needed for the Church today. Their work is recognized as an official work of the Church.<sup>59</sup> They mediate between the women and the priests and also the bishop/s. As teachers of the spiritual life, they can also play the role of spiritual mothers, which is very important in the Coptic Orthodox tradition in which spirituality is highlighted and where, as in all the Oriental Churches, emphasis is placed upon attaining holiness during one's life in this world<sup>60</sup>.

This first organization is worthy of a detailed and fully documented history and dates. The writing of a detailed history of modern female diaconal service in the Coptic Orthodox Church, however, requires that all the information given in this article be developed not only for Giza but for all the groups around Egypt, with correct names and dates. This information needs to be sought in Coptic publications, which are mostly in Arabic, but also through recording interviews with witnesses while they are still alive.

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<sup>58</sup> LMC 16, 68. See also «Helping the priest during the Baptism of elderly adult women» on <[http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7\\_priesthood.html](http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecopticchurch/sacraments/7_priesthood.html)> May 2, 2018.; and «Helping the priest during the Baptism of adult women» on <<http://sisters.suscopts.org/life-of-service/>> May 2, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> LMC 16, 70, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, Brookline, Mass., Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998, 185.

### **The Order of Consecration for Consecrated Women**

After the doxology for Matins but before Matins itself, the woman coming forward to be consecrated reads the appropriate pledge, which is one of three forms of pledge. She stands before the sanctuary, contritely and with bowed head.

#### **The Consecrated Woman's Pledge**

I, the weak *N.*, who seek to be admitted to the way of consecration in the Coptic Orthodox Church, pledge myself before God's altar and before our father His Holiness Pope Tawadros<sup>61</sup> II/His Grace the Metropolitan or Bishop Father *N.* to keep the commandments of the Bible, to adhere to the Coptic Orthodox beliefs, to go to confession and receive communion and to engage in the combat of the spiritual life. I also pledge myself to be faithful in responsibilities, to conduct myself well towards others and to obey the ecclesiastical authorities represented by His Holiness Pope Tawadros II/His Grace the Metropolitan or Bishop Father *N.*

And, as I receive the blessing of putting on the habit of ..... on this day, (date) 20.. AD/17... AM, I pledge that my continued wearing of this habit is conditional upon my keeping to the way of consecration until the end, by the grace of God.

I beseech you to pray for me. Accept my prostration. Grant me absolution and bless me, my Master, Your Holiness the Pope and Your Grace the Metropolitan or Bishop.

✙ The Lord's Prayer is said and the Bishop recites the prayer of thanksgiving.

#### **Then the Bishop recites over her the following prayers**

##### **The Bishop says:**

✙ O Lord wise in counsel, who created mankind in His image and likeness, male and female created He them in His image and likeness, granting them blessing; we ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ **O Lord, You** who granted prophecy to Miryam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, to Deborah, Hulda and Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, and who granted Philip the Apostle to have virgin daughters who prophesied; we ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ O You who poured out the grace of Your Holy Spirit upon men and women alike, according them the gifts of the Spirit, we ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us

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<sup>61</sup> Rarely referred to by the English form of his name, Theodore.

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ O Lord, You who granted Mary Magdalene to be sent to announce Your Resurrection to Your holy apostles and granted Phoebe to be appointed a deaconess in Your holy Church; we ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us.

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ As You granted in the past, O Lord, grant now in Your presence to *N.*, *NN*, to share in Your service; and make us worthy to accomplish this service without incurring condemnation before You; and pour out the Grace of your Holy Spirit upon them, through grace and compassion; we ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us.

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ O Lord God, You who do not reject the women who offer themselves, in accordance with Your divine will, with a pure intention to accomplish Your service, but have granted that they should be called Your handmaids, grant the grace of the Holy Spirit to these Your handmaids, who desire to offer themselves to You that they may accomplish Your service; as You entrusted the grace of this service to Your handmaid Phoebe whom You had called to work in Your Church and who became a helper to Your servant the Apostle Paul; pour out on them Your holy gifts, through grace and compassion; we ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ O Eternal Lord, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, look now upon these Your handmaids, who have been called to the service of consecration; grant them the grace of the Holy Spirit. Purify them from every defilement of body and soul, that they may worthily accomplish the work which You have entrusted to them.

Yours is the glory and worship together with Your only-begotten Son and the Holy Spirit, to the ages of ages. Amen.

✙ O Lord God, Holy and Almighty, who sanctified women through the birth of Your only-begotten Son of the holy Virgin Mary according to the flesh; we ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ O You who gave the grace of the Holy Spirit not only to men but also to women, look down now, o Lord, on these Your handmaids, call them to Your service, send down, o Lord, on them the gift of Your Holy Spirit, preserve them in the Orthodox faith, that they may always accomplish Your service without blame, according to Your good pleasure. For to You are due all glory, honour and worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ O Holy God, You who are most high and who look down upon the humble women, You who have chosen both weak and strong and honoured the lowly, send



down the grace of Your Holy Spirit on these Your handmaids. Affirm them in your righteousness, so that when they follow your commandments and serve in the house of Your holiness, they may be honoured vessels to glorify You. We ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ Grant them, o Lord, strength to walk joyfully in the way of Your teachings which You have set forth as a precept for their service. Grant them, o Lord, the spirit of humility, strength, praise, endurance and patience, so that, bearing Your yoke with joy and persevering in combat, they may earn crowns of service. We ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ Yes, o Lord, You who know our weakness, make Your handmaids perfect, so that they may carry out the service of women, visiting sick women and those absent from church, caring for women who are poor and needy, assisting adult women on the day of their baptism, instructing women catechumens, and keeping order among the women in church. Give them strength to edify and set a good example; sanctify them; enlighten them; give them wisdom. For You are blessed and glorified, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ Hear our prayers, o Lord, and send down on them blessing from the Holy Spirit, that they may accomplish Your service without occurring condemnation and offer an ideal of sanctified life. Bless them, o Lord, these women whom You have purchased with Your precious blood. We ask You, o Lord, hear us and have mercy on us.

(Lord, have mercy)

**The deacon says:** We ask of the Lord.

**The bishop completes the prayer, saying:**

✙ For the peace of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, we ask of the Lord

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ For the service of women in the Church, for the poor and sick women and for the women who are catechumens, we ask of the Lord

(Lord, have mercy)

✙ For those coming forward to the service of consecration, recommended by those who have put them forward, that the Lord may grant them grace and strength and bless their service, as He blessed the service of Phoebe of old, we ask of the Lord

(Lord, have mercy)

**And finally, □ make us worthy to say with thanksgiving: Our Father, who art in Heaven....**

After that the Bishop makes the sign of the cross over them three times, as is customary (without laying his hand on them), saying each time:

**N. is consecrated in the Holy Coptic Orthodox Church of God (In the name of the Father...)**

Then he blesses the habits set aside for the consecrated women, making the sign of the cross over them three times, and they put them on.

Then the following exhortation is read:

**The special exhortation for the consecrated woman**

You should know, blessed daughter, that the Lord has chosen you for service as a consecrated woman in the Holy Church. Observe the commandments, take care to be without blame, preserve the garment of consecration from shame. Fill your mouth with the praise of God, remain always in fullness of grace through participation in the Holy Mysteries. Walk in obedience to your Father the Bishop and those who guide you in the path of God. Remain faithful to the doctrine and to the service which has been entrusted to you by the Church. And may the Lord grant you strength through His Grace and count you among the Wise Virgins, the blessed brides of Christ.

After that the service ends in the customary manner (Amen. Alleluia...), with the blessing and: **Our Father who art in heaven...**

The consecrated women attend the Divine Liturgy and receive the Holy Mysteries.

(Translated by Hilary Kilpatrick)

Source: The Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, *Lā'ihat al-mukarrasāt allatī aqarrahā al-majma' al-muqaddas ma'a bāqī shu'ūn al-mukarrasāt* (Ordinance for consecrated women passed by the Holy Synod together with the other matters concerning consecrated women). Cairo: Maktabat usqufīyat al-shabāb, 2013, 28-36.