

A Commemoration of the Ordination of the Philadelphia Eleven: July 29, 1974

This commemoration marks the ordinations of the first eleven women to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia on July 29, 1974..

Through most of the history of the Christian Church the position of women has been secondary to that of men. During the first half of the twentieth century, as women in the Episcopal Church were seeking to expand their participation in the life of the church, many women became church workers or directors of religious education as "Deaconesses" -- a separate order from male Deacons.

The movement for ordination equity gained momentum in 1970 when laywomen were seated for the first time with voice and vote at a General Convention of the Episcopal Church. A resolution called for a vote to eliminate the canonical distinctions between male deacons and female deaconesses, with the intent to clear the way for women seeking ordination to be recognized as full and equal deacons. When that motion was adopted, The Episcopal Church was presented with the issue of whether to ordain women as priests and bishops too.

Another resolution was proposed at the 1970 General Convention to approve women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate. It failed to pass the House of Deputies, but nonetheless had much positive support. A similar resolution narrowly failed to pass at the next General Convention in 1973.

By July 1974, supporters of women's ordination grew restless with the stalled legislative process and a service was scheduled to ordain women to the priesthood. Three retired bishops agreed to preside: Daniel Corrigan, retired bishop suffragan of Colorado; Robert L. DeWitt, recently resigned Bishop of Pennsylvania; and Edward R. Welles, retired Bishop of West Missouri. A fourth bishop, José Antonio Ramos, Bishop of Costa Rica, was also present at the service in support of the women being ordained, but did not act as an ordaining bishop.

Eleven women who were deacons presented themselves as ready for ordination to the priesthood. These women, who came to be called the "Philadelphia Eleven", were Merrill Bittner, Alla Bozarth-Campbell, Alison Cheek, Emily Hewitt, Carter Heyward, Suzanne Hiatt, Marie Moorefield, Jeannette Piccard, Betty Schiess, Katrina Swanson, and Nancy Wittig. They were ordained on July 29, 1974 at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The ordinations inspired both celebration and controversy in the Episcopal Church. The House of Bishops declared them "irregular" and the Philadelphia Eleven were prohibited from officially exercising priestly functions. Nevertheless, the movement for the ordination of women continued to move forward. On September 7, 1974 George Barrett, retired Bishop of Rochester, ordained Lee McGee, Alison Palmer, Betty Rosenberg, and Diane Tickell in Washington, DC. Finally, at the next General Convention in September 1976, the ordination of women to the priesthood was approved to begin on January 1, 1977, and the previous "irregular" ordinations were regularized.

The Collect of the Day

Holy God, you are always calling us to serve you in various ministries, so that your Church may grow and thrive: we pray that, following the example of the eleven women ordained in Philadelphia on this day, we may “never cease our labour, our care and diligence, until we have done all that lies in us, to serve as messengers, stewards, and keepers of your Good News.” We pray because of Jesus, who calls us to follow. Amen.

or

Holy God, we thank you for the courage of the eleven women who offered themselves to your service as priests on this day in Philadelphia. With gratitude, we honor all those who defended their cause and assisted them in answering your call. Help us, having their bravery in mind, to continue the work of inviting, blessing, and utilizing the gifts of all persons, for the building up of the Body of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

or

Jesus our brother and friend: we rejoice that your Church prepared and supported the eleven women ordained as priests this day in Philadelphia. As Mary and Martha brought diverse gifts to your service, so may we choose the better part, seeking to serve you in all orders of ministry, for the sake of the Gospel and the good of your Church. We pray as you have taught us, in your life-giving name. Amen.

The Lessons

Exodus 1:15-21

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?” The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.” So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

Sirach 1:4-15

Wisdom was created before all other things,
and prudent understanding from eternity.
The root of wisdom—to whom has it been revealed?
Her subtleties—who knows them?

There is but one who is wise, greatly to be feared,
seated upon his throne—the Lord.
It is he who created her;
he saw her and took her measure;
he poured her out upon all his works,
upon all the living according to his gift;
he lavished her upon those who love him.
The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation,
and gladness and a crown of rejoicing.
The fear of the Lord delights the heart,
and gives gladness and joy and long life.
Those who fear the Lord will have a happy end;
on the day of their death they will be blessed.
To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
she is created with the faithful in the womb.
She made among human beings an eternal foundation,
and among their descendants she will abide faithfully.
and her branches are long life.

Galatians 3:23-29

Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Luke 24: 1-11

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

A Litany

God of our forebears, we remember the first women ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church: Alison, Alla, Betty, Carter, Emily, Jeannette, Katrina, Marie, Merrill, Nancy, and Suzanne.

Thank you for calling them to priesthood, and for giving them the resolve to answer.

We thank you, Holy One.

We remember the bishops who acted to ordain them:

Daniel Corrigan, Robert DeWitt, and Edward Welles.

We thank you for their apostolic service.

We thank you, Holy One.

We give thanks for the leaders of the Church of the Advocate, who embodied hospitality and care.

We thank you, Holy One.

We thank you for the bishops and deputies who acted to break down gender barriers to ordination, opening the way for women to answer your call in this church.

We thank you, Holy One.

Spirit of love, we pray for ears to hear your call, and the strength to answer.

Hear us, Holy One.

Spirit of wisdom, we pray for discerning hearts, so that we may recognize the gifts and ministries for which you equip us.

Hear us, Holy One.

Spirit of justice, we pray for those who are devalued and limited rather than lifted and celebrated; help us to see your glory in every human face.

Hear us, Holy One.

Spirit of love, we pray for your church and for your world. As we strive to bring equity to our church, we pray to serve as models of justice and peace for our neighbors.

Hear us, Holy One.

Holy and gracious God, we pray to participate each day in the renewal of your church and in the healing of the world. Teach us to value one another, to rely on the breadth of our diverse gifts, and to unite us in bonds of love. We pray because of Jesus, who teaches us to serve. Amen.

[Collects and Prayers written by: The Very Reverend Kay Sylvester, Diocese of Los Angeles]