

Phoebe

**“I commend to you my sister Phoebe,
the deacon of the church at Cenchreae.”
Romans 16,1**

Some critics just dismiss Phoebe’s status in the apostolic Church by saying that *diakonos* in Greek only means ‘servant’, as Michael Richards tries to do (The Tablet, Letters, 8 February)? Does this not apply to all the words that referred to ministries in apostolic times: *presbuteros* (elder), *episkopos* (overseer) and even *apostolos* (delegate)? If we argue as he does, we might as well discount all such New Testament terms as having no more than secular implications.

Diakonos denotes a very ancient ministry. It was instituted by the apostles even before *presbuteroi* or *episkopoi* were. *Diakonoi* were properly ‘ordained’ by the imposition of hands and the invocation of God’s Spirit (Acts 6:1-6). Paul mentions ‘bishops and deacons’ in one breath (Philippians 1:1). In the early Christian communities everyone knew that *diakonos*, no less than *episkopos*, indicated a person with an ‘ordained’ ministry. It is therefore highly significant that Paul calls Phoebe not only a ‘*diakonos*’, but, as the text says literally: ‘(also) being (the) deacon *of the church in Cenchreae*’. Would Paul use the term loosely in this context?

The early Greek Fathers certainly understood Phoebe to have been an ordained minister. St. Clement of Alexandria (150 - 215) speaks of the ‘women deacons’ (*diakonoi gunaikēs*) whom ‘the noble Paul mentions in his letters’. Origen (185 - 255) states: ‘This text (Romans 16,1-2) teaches with the authority of the Apostle that also women are instituted as deacons in the Church’. And may we omit the testimony of Pliny the Younger, Roman governor of Bithynia (112 AD), who reports that he arrested a group of Christians whose two female leaders bore the title of *ministrae* (Latin for *diakonoi*)?

All this becomes more than speculation if we remember the detailed ordination rites for women deacons, just as for male deacons, that have been preserved, dating back to at least the 4th century. In those rites the bishop calls on the Holy Spirit to pour out the grace of the diaconate on the woman ordinand ‘as you granted to Phoebe the grace of your diaconate whom you had called to this ministry’.