



Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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St. Phoebe was a first-century Christian who is identified in Paul's Letter to the Romans as a deacon and benefactor of the church at Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth. She was the carrier of the Letter to the Romans.

Historical and Biblical Background

Phoebe set off from her home, the bustling port of Cenchreae, to carry the gospel of redemption and freedom, of God's love and the gift of faith to her sisters and brothers of Rome. They were divided among themselves, the weak from the strong. They needed to hear again Christ's call, "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law," (Rom 13:8). She knew the importance of her task, as along with the epistle, she carried with her the experience of her own community's conflict and factionalism. Her own people also had forgotten their unity in the Body of Christ. Such nonsense like, as their founder put it, the foot saying,

"Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body," (1 Cor 12:15). How had they all forgotten so quickly the one Spirit who had begun such great work in them?

PHOEBE OF CENCHREAE

Deacon of the Church



So, with missionary zeal, she undertook the long and arduous journey. All along the 300 mile way from the Corinthian port to the imperial capital, her Gentile heart was pregnant with gospel love and freedom. Arriving there, she herself would deliver the good news of Christ which was first proclaimed in her city by the same Paul who now addressed the Romans. She was entrusted with Paul's teachings, and with his request for support for his next missionary expedition to Spain.

But in that day (the Letter to the Romans was written between 54-59 C.E.), she would find no super-

highways by which to travel. It would take her eight days to reach her destination. Nor would she encounter franchise-lined cities in which to find rest. No handy credit card or Motel 6 would ease her voyage. Rather, she would rely on the hospitality of Christian strangers along her way, and the kindness of her Roman hosts to take her in. Travelers visiting new cities were dependent upon the introduction of a mutual friend in order to be received into someone's home. The following introduction from the epistle's author

was her ticket to warmth and welcome. Paul wrote, “I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well,” (Rom 16:1-2).

This introduction is the only record of Phoebe’s life to have survived for the Church of the twenty-first century. We are fortunate that it is so rich. It is like a keyhole through which we can catch a glimpse of our ancient sisters and brothers in their community of faith.

Sister, Deacon, Benefactor

First, Phoebe is called “our sister.” This epithet parallels that which Paul gives to Timothy in the Second Letter to the Corinthians. Though not a formal title, it denotes a special relationship to Paul himself and a status within the community. “Our sister” identifies Phoebe as the author’s coworker in ministry. Her transport of the letter, and request for support for Paul’s mission to Spain (Rom 15: 23ff) are two examples of her ministry which lie latent in the text itself. As Elizabeth Castelli observed, they “assure us that women, as well as men, were traveling missionaries in the earliest church,” (Castelli, 277).

Second, Phoebe is identified as “a deacon of the church at Cenchreae.” The original Greek, *diakonos*, is also sometimes translated as deaconess, minister or servant. “Deaconess” is clearly an incorrect translation, as it does not reflect the masculine ending of the original Greek. This translation is probably tainted with the patriarchal insistence that women’s leadership in the church be tightly circumscribed and recognizably distinct from the roles open to men. It also may be an anachronistic reading which attempts to assign a formal ministerial title of the fourth century (and its corresponding duties) to the much more fluid situation of the first.

In fact, *diakonos* was a word Paul used to describe himself (see 1 Cor 3:5, 2 Cor 6:4). This parallelism indicates that Phoebe could, like Paul,

Timothy, and Apollos, have been a preacher and a teacher. The secular meaning of the title in her world suggests other possibilities for the range of Phoebe’s ministry. Joseph Fitzmyer says, “In the Greco-Roman world *diakonos* denoted a ‘waiter’ at table, a royal ‘servant,’ or even a religious (non-Christian) office,” (Fitzmyer, 729). The connection to the table points toward a eucharistic function for a Christian *diakonos*. Whatever her specific duties, it is clear that Phoebe was a leader in the Christian assembly at Cenchreae.

Third, Paul calls Phoebe his “benefactor.” The original Greek, *prostatis*, may also be translated, “patron.” Here again, there is no gender-specific ending. And as with *diakonos*, Paul is borrowing the terminology of the secular world to describe the life of a just-emerging church. In other Pauline texts, the same Greek language is translated, “those who are over you,” (see Rom 12:8, 1 Thess 5:12). From this appellation, we can deduce that Phoebe was an “independent woman...of considerable means,” (Bassler, 135). Her patronage of Paul and the church at Cenchreae may have benefited the community in a number of ways. Most obviously, she supported the work of the church financially. We have already seen that Paul was dependent upon the generosity of the community to support his missionary activity. In addition, Phoebe could have hosted meetings. As a deacon and a patron, she may have hosted the eucharistic liturgies in her home. Lastly, a benefactor introduced those in her patronage to society circles. In the first century, benefactors managed the relationship between those in their care and the influential people of the city. Paul would have been especially dependent upon this kind of support because of his itinerant evangelization.

Leader of the Church

Sister, deacon, benefactor. Missionary, evangelist, fund-raiser. There can be no doubt about Phoebe’s leadership in the church. She provided generously for the needs of her community at Cenchreae. She used her personal and material resources to create space for the Body of Christ to meet, to be

fed, and to grow. She courageously undertook a difficult journey across land and sea to bring the message of God's redemptive love to the church at Rome. Hers was a practical leadership, attending to a wide array of needs, offering the gifts she had been given for the work of the Spirit.

Like the Romans and the Corinthians, we are the beneficiaries of Phoebe's generous leadership that sustained the early Church. The fledging faith of Jesus' first disciples survived a very harsh environment because of the efforts of Phoebe and

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women and men like her. In our day, we would have no Church to call home, nor gospel in which to find life without these, our ancestors. Therefore, like the first century Romans, we should heed Paul's direction "to receive her in the Lord, in a manner worthy of the holy ones."

To receive Phoebe is to acknowledge her life and leadership. It is to recognize with honesty and gratitude the contribution she made to the proclamation of the gospel, the sustenance of the community, and the life of the world. As the Romans to whom she carried Paul's epistle welcomed her into their home, we welcome her into our hearts. We pray with her for a Church marked by unity and charity. We assume the responsibilities that come with our gifts.

We respond to our call as she did to hers:

Since we have gifts that differ according to

the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others (prostatis), with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness, (Rom 12:6-8).

The manner in which Paul introduces Phoebe demonstrates clearly that women exercised ecclesial ministry from the earliest days of Christianity. The breadth of her work provides inspiration for present-day imaginings about women of the Church. If she was able to be coworker, deacon, and patron in a cultural context far more deeply entrenched in a patriarchal worldview than our own, what possibilities does her example open up for the Church today? How are women today responding with their unique gifts to the need of the Church? And how is their response being received? Is the twenty-first century assembly receiving gifted women leaders "in a manner worthy of the holy ones," and helping them "in whatever [they] may need from [us]"?

Phoebe's emergence as a leader from the midst of a community struggling with division and liturgical turmoil makes her an especially significant model in our day. Into the midst of the Romans' infighting and disputes over dietary laws, Phoebe brought the message of Christ's liberating self-sacrifice. Her own presence and her delivery of Paul's astounding epistle urged the community toward unity, patience, mutual respect and trust in the loving providence of God. As she came from the Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth, she most likely had endured a similar struggle in her own community. She carried in her experience and ministry a living message of the "more excellent way," the way of love (1 Cor 13:31). And what is more necessary in our day, or in any day, than love? Especially Phoebe's kind of love. Not the love of empty sentiment, but the love of courageous deeds, generous aid, and servant-leadership.



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The feast day for Phoebe is celebrated on September 3. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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Prayer Service to Honor Phoebe of Cenchreae

Celebrate Phoebe on September 3 or at any other time

Prepare the gathering space with a center pillar candle and small, votive candles surrounding it.

Greeting: *(the prayer leader welcomes people, invites introductions, etc.)*

Opening Song: *All Are Welcome* (Marty Haugen, © 1987 GIA Publications, Inc.) or *Anthem* (Tom Conry, © 1978 New Dawn Music)

Presider: The grace and peace of Jesus the Christ be with you.

All: And also with you.

Presider: This day I commend to you Phoebe, our sister and benefactor, a deacon of the first-century Church or Cenchreae. We gather to celebrate her life, her story and witness. *(Light the center candle.)* May we receive her in Christ as is fitting for the saints.

All: Amen.

Presider: We gather to bless those who follow Phoebe's example of faith and ministry.

All are invited to come forward, light a small candle and name those outstanding in their service to the community, especially lectors, missionaries, benefactors, pastoral ministers, St. Vincent de Paul Society members, Eucharistic ministers, religious educators, deacons and their wives, etc. When the naming has come to a natural end, the presider continues.

May we receive on another in Christ as is fitting for the saints.

All: Amen.

First Reading: Romans 12: 1-13

Response: *Servant Song* (Richard Gilliard, © 1977, *Scripture in Song*, Arr. David Haas, © 1999 *Gather* GIA Publications, Inc. #476)

Gospel: John 15: 12-17

Reflection/Preaching: *A brief homily is offered on the readings and the life of Phoebe, or if the assembly is small, reflections may be shared by all present.*

Intercessions:

Response: Loving God, hear our prayer.

O God, Phoebe was called sister by your servant, Paul. Give us the grace to live together in love as sisters and brothers, daughters and sons of you, our one Creator.

We pray...

O God, Phoebe was called deacon. Grant us the courage and humility we need to embrace our own vocations and to recognize the gifts given by the Spirit to each member of the community.

We pray...

O God, Phoebe was called benefactor. Make us generous people who care for the needy and the stranger.

We pray...

(Other prayers may be added as the community wishes.)

Closing Prayer

Presider: Let us pray.

All: Spirit of Christ, you filled our sister, Phoebe with courage, generosity and faith. May we receive her witness with gratitude. May the memory of her life fill us with hope. And may we be today a Church in service to the world. Thanks be to God!

Closing Song: *Sing a New Church* (Delores Dugner, OSB, © 1991 Srs of St. Benedict, #388 *Today's Music MIssal Issue* by OCP Publications)

Prayer service developed by Claire Noonan, M. Div. who is a program director at Call to Action in Chicago, IL, and a graduate of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley.

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Phoebe of Cenchreae: Deacon of the Church

1. Phoebe played many different roles in the early Church. Name six of them.

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2. Where was Phoebe's home?

3. How far was her journey to Rome?

4. Why was it important that Phoebe carry a letter naming her while she was on the road?

5. St. Paul refers to Phoebe as "our *sister*." What is important about calling Phoebe by this term?

6. St. Paul refers to Phoebe as "a *deacon* of the church at Cenchreae." Answer the following questions about this reference:

a. Who else was considered a "deacon" in the early church?

b. What are some possible roles that a deacon fulfilled in the early church?

7. St. Paul refers to Phoebe as his “benefactor.”

How do scholars like Jovette Bassler interpret this word?

How would a modern day “benefactor” be the same or different today?

8. If Phoebe was able to be such an influential leader in the early church, what can today’s men and women of the Church learn from her? Specifically, answer these questions from the article.

How are women today responding with their unique gifts to the need of the Church?

How is their response being received?

Is the 21st century assembly (parishes and dioceses) receiving gifted women leaders “in a manner worthy of the holy ones,” and helping them “in whatever they need from us [the Church assembly]”?

10. Write a brief letter (1-2 paragraphs) introducing Phoebe to your parish or school group of peers. Tell your peers why she is important and why Catholics should pay special attention to her role as a biblical woman.



*This worksheet was prepared by Janet Claussen as a part of FutureChurch’s **More! Celebrating Women Witnesses Teacher’s Edition**. To order the complete edition with 13 essay, prayer services and worksheets, go to www.futurechurch.org or call 216-228-0869 X5.*