

# Women and their offices in the early Church

**Mary Magdalene – spokeswoman of the women** within the circle of disciples around Jesus, assigned with the proclamation of the resurrection, **female apostle of the apostles**

**Tabitha – disciple** and head of the Church community of Joppe

**Lydia – Patroness** and **Head** of an organized group of women and a small house Church in Philippi whose Church services she presides over

**Junia – female apostle** of the 1<sup>st</sup> century in Rome. Paul greets her in his letter to the Romans and calls her **distinguished within the apostles**.

**Phoebe – woman deacon and patroness** of the Church community of Cenchreae, 1<sup>st</sup> century, **bearer and interpreter** of Paul's letter to the Church community of Rome.

**Deborah, Maria, Huldah and Hannah – prophetesses** from Caesarea, 1<sup>st</sup> century. Their acting and healing is passed on by contemporaries like Eusebius.

**Thekla – female apostle and missionary**, 1<sup>st</sup> century, assigned by Paul to “go and teach the word of God”, still worshipped as “first female martyr and apostle-like” in the Eastern Church.

**Ammion – woman priest** in Phrygia/ Asia Minor, 3<sup>rd</sup> century, well accepted by her parish

**Anna – woman deacon** in Rome, catechist and spiritual advisor to women

**Nanas – prophetess** in Asia Minor, 4th century, well known because of the intensity of her prayers, specially within the liturgy

**Olympias – woman deacon** in Constantinople, bishop advisor and founder of a women's community

**Nino – female apostle**, 4th century, named “Evangelist” in the hagiography as, theological teacher and missionary in Georgia

**Kale – woman priest** in Centuripae/Sicily, 4th/5th century, equal to men in her ministry

**Theodora – female bishop** in Rome, 8th century, you can find her mosaic at Zeno Chapel in S. Prassede

*Those are the names of a few, but there were hundreds of women in office in the early Church. Without their missionary work there would be no Christian Occident.*

*Angelika Fromm / Annegret Laakmann (October 2008)*

## Explanations

### **Apostle/female apostle**

Those who bear witness of the resurrection. Many women carried this title. The title is not limited to “the twelve” (disciples) in the early church. Even Paul was not one of the “twelve”.

### **Prophet/ prophetess**

Charismatic spokesperson for the word of God. Already in Judaism this office was more important than the office of the priest. The church Father Origines (2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> century) acknowledges “that women as well can be blessed with the grace of prophecy”.

### **Patron/patroness**

Leaders of house Churches. In the ancient world, patronesses were independent and often rich women, who had power and influence and offered their houses to the Christian Church. Paul also took advantage of their patronage.

### **Deacon/female deacon**

In the Church communities of Paul, diaconate means the assignment to proclaiming the word, to leadership and administration of the Church community. Later, the female deacons were ordained in various rituals which included all elements of the ordination of men. Women deacons belonged to the higher clergy.

There is evidence of ordination of women deacons up to the 7<sup>th</sup> century in the Western and up to the 13<sup>th</sup> century in the Eastern Church.

### **Priests/women priests**

Up to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, there were Christian communities who ordained women priests. The synod of Laodicea (4<sup>th</sup> century) ordered that women were not permitted to be appointed presbyters or leaders in the Church.

### **Bishops/female bishops**

In research, women holding the title “episcopa” have always been interpreted as the wife of a bishop. However, Bonosus, the husband of Theodora, was neither a bishop, nor did he hold any other Church office.

### **Women's Ministry:**

**a reality in the early Church – indispensable in today's Church!**