

Phoebe, Leader/ Deacon of the Early Church

By Gloria Ulterino

Introduction

In case you missed it, September 3rd is St. Phoebe's Feast Day. I'm guessing that you missed it. I'm also guessing that you may well be wondering this: Who, exactly, is Phoebe? And why is she considered so important that she's given a Feast Day?

I'm so glad you asked! While there's minimal scholarship on this leading woman of the early Church (the 50s, within 15 years of Jesus' death and resurrection), we know enough to appreciate her strong faith and powerful work on behalf of the Gospel.

How shall I tell her story? (1) I begin with Paul's words, in his Letter to the Romans (written about the year 58, not long before his death). In this snippet, he also mentions a married couple, Prisca (Priscilla in Acts) and Aquila, his and Phoebe's missionary co-workers and friends. It is *their* house church in Rome (about 40-50 people, who met on Sunday mornings that receives this letter from Paul, probably delivered by Phoebe, herself. (2) As a storyteller, I choose to tell the story through *her* words, always basing them upon the scant facts we know. (3) Finally, I will add some details, rooted in current scholarship.

Romans 16:1-5a (NRSV translation)

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house."

Phoebe, in Her Own Words

Hello, everyone! I am perhaps best known as a friend of Paul's, one of several women with whom he worked on behalf of the Gospel. You probably know a bit about Paul: that he traveled some 10,000 miles proclaiming the Good News of Jesus throughout the Mediterranean world. That is, after Jesus Christ took hold of him, totally transforming his life from persecutor to evangelist.¹ At any rate, he

¹ See Acts of the Apostles, chapters 8 and 9.

and I became good friends and co-workers, soon after he arrived in my town of Cenchreae, right near Corinth, in what is known in your day as Greece.²

Oh, those were exciting days! Yet, difficult, too! A few of us, totally dedicated to spreading the Word about Jesus, the Christ, developed close, missionary friendships. We all loved preaching, as well as caring for and about the folks who made up our faith communities. Times could be tough, but we *never* gave up working on behalf of Jesus, the center of our lives.

Who am I? Paul named me *diakonos*, a deacon, the only woman among the twelve he so described. To him, this meant that I served my community by passionately and prophetically spreading the Word of God, as well as compassionately responding to their needs. Paul and I depended on each other for the gifts we brought to ministry. A Gentile, and unattached to anyone in marriage, I could bring my financial resources and civic connections to bear on Paul's needs; in return, he connected me with other passionate preachers, near and far, like the ministry couple Prisca and Aquila.

As you may know, Paul was a tentmaker by trade. So it was by a stroke of God's goodness that he first encountered, and then connected me with his two new tentmaker friends, Prisca and Aquila. The year was 49. Followers of Jesus were growing in number, *infuriating* Emperor Claudius! What could he do? Banish them *all* from Rome, including Prisca and Aquila. Where would they go? These two chose Corinth, right near Cenchreae. As tentmakers, you see, they would find people eager for their services; every May and June folks arrived in Corinth for the Isthmian Games, held there in honor of the Greek god Poseidon. Who could ever have imagined the ways of God? Paul, Prisca and Aquila, all passionate followers of Jesus, became my soul-mates!

While my ministry remained in Cenchreae, Prisca and Aquila led communities in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome.³ But, whenever we connected, Prisca and I would talk on into the night about the ministry we dearly loved. We also chuckled with delight at working with Paul. She told me about the time Paul urged them to go to Ephesus with him. And, sure enough, right away, he got himself into trouble, preaching in the amphitheater dedicated to the goddess Artemis. As it turned

² See Romans 16:1-7.

³ See 1 Corinthians 16:19 on their leadership in Corinth; see Acts 18:26, which hints at their leadership in Ephesus.

out, Demetrius the silversmith *immediately* started a riot, right then and there. Was he afraid of losing money on the sale of his trinkets? They didn't know, she told me, but they just barely got Paul out of harm's way that day. Then I told *her* about all the times he would get in trouble with the local officials; and every time, I was able to bail him out with my connections. How we loved Paul's passion! We simply couldn't imagine any other way of life. You can well understand, then, how grateful I was that Paul entrusted *me* with his letter to the Roman community, led by Prisca and Aquila. What a joy to see them again!

Some Further Thoughts

Are you surprised that some women were leaders of the earliest Christian communities? Especially since patriarchy (male leadership) dominated the world back then? And yet, as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza points out, there were some equality breakthroughs here and there in some religious circles. Regarding the Jesus movement, she maintains: "Its central symbol is that of a festive meal."⁴ But, the guests include the most unlikely: "the poor, the sinners, the tax collectors, and prostitutes," all who are "somehow deficient in the eyes of the righteous."⁵

Even in the culture, women occasionally stood out. At Pompeii, which offers a good sample of the economic activity open to women of the first century, free women could be found selling luxury items or exotic merchandise, like purple dye or perfumes, as well as working as butchers and fisherwomen. According to cultural historian Sarah B. Pomeroy, women's names—along with those of men—were stamped on pipes and bricks.⁶ It is important to remember that, outside of Israel, Christianity was primarily urban (as so clearly described by Wayne Meeks in *The First Urban Christians*). Therefore, as he points out, women in ministry were no longer necessarily defined by the men of their families; they could indeed become upwardly mobile, like the men. Finally, with regard to Phoebe's commercial connections, Caroline F. Whelan has discovered that legal documents of the day offered more possibilities to women than otherwise might be supposed. They had the right to make a will. Also, by the second century,

⁴ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p. 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁶ Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 240.

aristocratic “women were on an equal par with their husband in terms of ownership and disposal of property.”⁷

Of course, patriarchy would persist, as we can see from “The First Letter of Paul to Timothy;” now, this letter was not written by Paul, but by one of his disciples toward the end of the first century. “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”⁸

But women prevailed, nonetheless, along with some men who supported them. Even this Letter to Timothy describes the qualifications of deacons back then (chapter 3, verses 8-13). While most of these verses refer to men, verse seven is devoted to women deacons: “Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.” Scholars assure us that women served as deacons, even here, following in the tradition of Phoebe. Not only that, they would serve as deacons throughout the entire first millennium of the Church. How and where? More on that in another article.

Finally, on a personal note, I was determined to find St. Prisca’s Church in Rome, on a visit to that great city some years ago. With the assistance of our guide, I found it! There it was, a small church right next door to St. Prisca’s Hotel, within walking distance of the Colosseum. Probably dating from the ninth century, it was simple and appealing to me, with a large rectangular altar built of wood. In a book set out for travelers, I indicated my joy in this discovery.

⁷ Caroline F. Whelan, “*Amica Pauli*: The Role of Phoebe in the Early Church,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 49 (1993): pp. 73-74.

⁸ The First Letter of Paul to Timothy, chapter 2, verses 11-14.