

ICON OF ST PHOEBE, DEACON

Writing an icon begins with prayer, discernment and research to learn about and the holy one whose image will be created so as to come to know and be guided by them and the Holy Spirit in how they are to be known and depicted. The design and creation of this icon of St Phoebe was a prayerful process supported by scripture study, historical research and a review of existing icons of St Phoebe.

Who is St Phoebe?

St Phoebe lived in Cenchreae, Greece (a coastal town and important port near Corinth) in biblical times. She was a Christian disciple and apostle of St Paul. St Phoebe was a woman of stature, of courage and a church leader of great faith and generous love. Although details of her life as a leader of the early church are limited, much information about her can be teased out and revealed by breaking open the only scriptural reference to her which appears in St Paul's letter to the Romans (16:1-2):

“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.”

St Paul's words of high praise reveal his esteem for St Phoebe; he identifies her as “*sister*” in Christ and accords her titles of *deacon* of the church and *benefactor* (patron) to him and others. From these three titles conferred by St Paul in his brief introduction, we learn that St Phoebe was a church leader and a loving, generous and committed co-worker of St Paul in God's Kingdom.

He also instructs the communities of Christians in Rome to welcome her as befits a saint, so St Paul considers her to be holy, and he also instructs them to support her work in any way she requires.

Clearly, St Phoebe had St Paul's full confidence, esteem and support. Many scripture scholars believe that not only did St Paul entrust his epistle for her to personally deliver to the church in Rome, but that she read, interpreted and preached it to the Christian communities. St Phoebe was more than deacon of the church of Cenchreae, she was apostle to the apostle, being commissioned by St Paul to travel to Rome by sea to fulfill his mission.

St Phoebe was courageous because she held a leadership role in the early church when the persecution of Christians was strong. In identifying St Phoebe as deacon, St Paul provides the earliest written record of women's ordained ministry in the church. The vocation of permanent deacon was open to women until the 13th century when the diaconate became transitional and open only to future priests.

St Phoebe had significant financial means to be so generous in her patronage. Patronage was critically important in the first 250 years of the early church because Christianity was spread and sponsored by local community patrons. Most Christian assemblies and liturgies took place in homes, often in households headed by women.

Most of this portrait of St Phoebe that emerges comes from contemplating St Paul's own words.

Other aspects of her life are less certain, but can be imagined with knowledge of ancient history and customs. It is unclear whether she was ever married but some scripture scholars and historians believe that St Phoebe was a freed slave and that her wealth might have come from inheriting part or all of her master's estate. The name "Phoebe" is from Greek and means shining or radiant and was a name given to female slaves. Some scholars suggest that she was so named because she had red hair, possibly suggesting a Celtic background, enslaved and originally brought to Rome before relocating to Cenchreae once freed.

St Phoebe's feast day, September 3, is in the Roman Martyrology. Although her liturgical status in the Roman Catholic Church is not that of a feast day or

memorial but a “commemoration”, her liturgy is celebrated in Eastern Rite and Orthodox Churches on September 3:

“Enlightened by grace

And taught the Faith by the chosen vessel of Christ,

You were found worthy of the diaconate

And you carried Paul’s words to Rome.

O Deaconess Phoebe, pray to Christ God that his Spirit may enlighten our souls.”

How to read this icon of St Phoebe

St Phoebe holds St Paul’s letter to the Romans in her left hand over her heart. She wears robes of deep green over her pearl white alb and a green deacon’s stoll emblazoned with the cross. The colour green is used to symbolize the Holy Spirit upon her and mirrors our clerical colours of Ordinary Time. St Phoebe swings an incensor in her right hand, another symbol of the diaconate. She wears a linen head covering, but her red hair is visible (she is clearly not Jewish but Gentile). Her ears are visible to say that she is attentive to listening to the Lord. Her halo and incensor protrude into the border because “nothing can contain the divine”. She is depicted as a mature holy woman of substance, a strong leader. Although her head is slightly tilted to the left, her eyes turn to look directly at and engage the viewer, an invitation to sit and pray with her. Her name and title are depicted on the background, St Phoebe Deacon.

This 9 ½” by 12” icon is painted in acrylic on a prepared wooden board and gilded with gold leaf.

Icon written by the hand of:

Suzanne Massie Manchevsky, May 2023