

Women in the Life of the Orthodox Church

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In recent years the ecumenical movement has shown a growing interest in the Orthodox tradition, motivated by the fact that Orthodoxy can offer solutions to many of the problems facing Christianity in the modern world. This is the context for bringing together the theme of "discerning the signs of the times" with the issue of the place of women in the churches, a context which is characterized by the progress of knowledge in a wide variety of disciplines, especially the scientific study of human beings and their environment.

First witnesses of the resurrection

But these ecumenical studies sometimes quote the expression "discerning the signs of the times" out of context. In Matthew 16:3, this phrase has a precise theological meaning: it refers explicitly to the mystery of the resurrection. Addressed to those who refuse to believe the word of God and to acknowledge the Christ, the expression has the character of a revelation, transcending time and turning every chronology upside down. The Pharisees and Sadducees, as a test, demand a sign from Christ. He replies that he will give them no miracle except the sign of Jonah, who was thrown into the sea and on the third day emerged from the belly of the fish. This passage from ancient reality to the absolutely new, experienced in the joy of Easter, takes place in the midst of unbelief.

This unbelief was the crucial paradoxical test which later had to be endured by the women returning from Jesus' tomb. The Myrrh-Bearing Women, carrying the ancient spices, proclaimed the news of Jesus' resurrection:

... returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them (Luke 24:9-11).

The apostles did not believe these women; yet it is first of all because of their words that the reality of the resurrection became the central affirmation of Christianity.

We may ask whether contemporary ecumenical research takes the reality of Easter sufficiently into account. Within the ecumenical movement, Orthodox theology has never stopped insisting on explaining its ecclesiological vision by beginning with the mystery of the resurrection. Here it is appropriate to recall the view of Fr Serge Bulgakov that the unity of the church is not an institution, but rather a new life with Christ and in Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The light of Christ's resurrection shines on the church, and it is filled with the joy of the resurrection, which triumphs over death. Across the millennia the witness of the women returning from the tomb has indeed spread throughout the world, and has taken its place at the heart of Orthodox church life in liturgical celebration.

As the liturgical refraction of the light of Easter, the Orthodox hymns can shed light on this theological and also ecumenical reflection. Like a ray of light passing from one transparent medium to another, a diffraction occurs between historical chronology and the Easter event, which is conveyed by the richness of Orthodox liturgical celebrations. In the liturgical tradition, the interpretation, no longer of signs but of the Sign for all time, is indissolubly linked to the message of the Myrrh-Bearing Women.

The presence of these women attests to the Easter unity of the Passion and resurrection of Christ. What is extraordinary about them is their faithfulness to Christ. It is this which can assure Christian unity in times when everything seems to be pushing towards dispersal and denial. Through the wealth of hymns dedicated to the Myrrh-Bearing Women, the realization of the unity of the Easter mystery shapes the inner life of the believer. Orthodoxy has always affirmed that it was women who were the first to see and proclaim the gospel of the resurrection, the Sign of the times.

Christians from other traditions are sometimes struck by the paradox of a reverse chronology in the Orthodox liturgy. For example, during the Vespers service for Good Friday, at the very moment when the *epitaphion*, the holy shroud representing Christ in the tomb, is placed in the centre of the church, the witness of the women is already affirmed by the hymn for the beginning of Easter: "The angel of the Lord came to the Myrrh-Bearing Women at the tomb and said, 'Myrrh is fitting for the dead; but Christ has shown himself a stranger to corruption.'" In praise of the Mother of God, during the Easter period, the twofold angelic annunciation – at the birth of her Son and at his resurrection – is pro-

claimed: "The angel cried to the one full of grace, 'Rejoice, O pure Virgin, again I say, Rejoice. Your Son is risen from his three days in the tomb.'"

It remains to be studied how these ecclesiastical traditions might influence the contemporary development of ecumenical reflections on the role of women in the churches.

The cosmic dimension of the incarnation and the resurrection, "source of life of the universe", leads to new visions of the human person and the place of human beings in the world, relativizing the classical schemes imposed on humanity from ancient times. The old order is reversed, and the Orthodox church sings: "Rejoice, you who were the first to see Christ's resurrection and who proclaimed to his apostles the restoration of the whole world." We celebrate the Myrrh-Bearing Women as "apostles of the apostles", and the joining in of all the disciples: "the chorus of your disciples unites in joy with the chorus of the Myrrh-Bearing Women".

This uniting in joy is indissolubly linked with the coming of the Holy Spirit promised by Christ before his passion. The women had received from the risen Christ the mission to go and tell the disciples that the time had come: "But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17). The hymns go beyond human chronology, telescoping it theologically by bringing together the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Women saints in history and today

This manifestation of the trinitarian mystery in the light of Easter should constantly illumine our search for unity. Recent church history, marked by the witness of martyrs as in the first centuries, has shown that the human person plays a part in the mystery of Easter and constitutes a new source for ecclesiastical tradition. In the second century, the figure of St Blandine of Lyons tied to the stake represented the icon of Christ on the cross, thus giving courage to the other Christians of Fourvière. In the 20th century the church has again seen the witness of innumerable martyrs, but sufficient account has not yet been taken of these in the development of theological reflection. In Western Europe, for example, we might mention Mother Marie Skobtsova, who is only beginning to be known ecumenically.

The church benefits from a luminous heritage of Easter joy, indissolubly linked to the witness of many generations of Christians. It is to be hoped that this witness can take its place in the memory of the church in a modern, creative doxology. The visibility of women in the church can increase within an ecclesial tradition that is richer and more diverse than

we sometimes think. This tradition has room for openness to wholly new initiatives.

Contemporary theological reflection has begun to move in this direction. The first theological discipline to take into consideration the place of women as such and the breadth of their commitment has been the study of sainthood and the saints. As early as the latter half of the 1920s, Georges Fedotov carried out some statistical studies which led him to suggest that, in the Russian church at least, there was a marked lack of knowledge of saints other than priests. This disparity worked to the disadvantage of the laity and notably of women. The question of the place of women in relation to the changing times had already been of concern to the members of the preparatory commissions at the Council of Moscow in 1917-1918. This was an acknowledgment not only of the historical place of women in the church, but also of the new perspectives of modern times.

Some of the colleagues of Georges Fedotov at the St Sergius Institute of Orthodox Theology in Paris, including Metropolitan Eulogius, Fr Serge Bulgakov and Antoine Kartachev, all of whom had participated in the Council of Moscow, shared his concerns. Their successors, including Archbishop Georges, Fr Alexis Kniazeff and Fr Nicholas Koulomzine, encouraged theological engagement by women.

There is every evidence that the study of the saints provides obvious examples of recognition by the church of equality between women and men. But the study of the saints as a theological discipline has not developed very far in the Western churches; and its importance for ecumenical reflection is only beginning to be rediscovered – for example, at the meeting of the plenary commission of Faith and Order in Moshi, Tanzania, in August 1996.

The equality of women and men is theologically self-evident, since every human being is called to exercise a "royal priesthood". This ministry corresponds to God's general invitation to "be holy as I am holy". The broad and open concept of holiness or sainthood precludes the deviations of scholastic anthropology which sometimes make ecumenical dialogue such a delicate process.

Women's roles in the church

A spiritual openness makes it possible to compare – both in present-day realities and in the prospects for the future – those factors which are invoked to minimize the role of women in the Christian churches with those which exalt women's role. These factors are closely woven together, and each person gives them importance according to his or her degree of social and cultural, spiritual, intellectual and personal development. In brief outline we may distinguish the following:

- *Economic factors* have often in history exerted a pressure which works to the detriment of women, for example with regard to their rights.
- *Political factors*, developing differently in the history of different countries, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, have often created and maintained inequalities for women. For example, women have been excluded from participation in government, sometimes *de jure*, as under certain dynasties, sometimes *de facto*, as is still the case in certain democracies.
- *Educational factors* – specifically the undereducation of women. While Byzantine civilization had women scholars, access to schools – and later university degrees – in the West was restricted to men for a long time.

These distinctions were not only the consequence of socio-economic and political factors, but also of religious prejudices. Here let us merely point out that forces minimizing women's role in Western European society were plentiful in the wake of Augustine's influence in the Middle Ages.

Turning to factors which re-establish the equality of women's role in the churches, we begin with an essentially Orthodox factor – the role of the wives of priests.

Not only are Orthodox secular priests married, but before being ordained a priest must have his wife's consent. No doubt this has prevented a good many difficulties for the church. During the priestly couple's life together, it is in fact the role of the wife to ensure that the church's rules regarding the private life of the men in its service are observed. Since the wives of priests have themselves sometimes come from priestly families, they have generally been better educated than the parishioners. Thus they became, by right or in fact, Christian educators, well-informed about the practice of the faith, and this reinforced their social and religious influence.

Among the factors favouring the development of the role of women, we should mention the example of the growing participation of women in teaching at various levels, as well as in a number of scientific disciplines, in the midst of the complex modern relation between theological knowledge and that of the other sciences. A recent symposium in Oxford provided striking examples of the potential links between Orthodox evangelization and mission activities, in far eastern Russia and Alaska, and the development of ecological approaches to the largely unexplored natural environment of these regions. The example of a missionary couple named Veniaminov working in the Aleutian Archipelago is particularly striking. Their ecological research has been widely acknowledged in scientific cir-

cles. Action by a woman to protect the environment in close connection with Orthodoxy is a particularly modern theme.

Among the exemplary areas as far as women's participation in the life of the Orthodox church is concerned is the perfect equality which can exist between the theological commitments of men and women. Today, committed Orthodox women can be found in the ecumenical movement at the worldwide level. No doubt it is the character of theology, which is somehow prophetic and completely free, which has allowed this rapid development. Change has been slower in other, more institutional areas, particularly in the restoration of the diaconate for women or the creation of new responsibilities. This is a consequence of the complex features of conciliarity in the Orthodox church.

Ecumenically, such discrepancies create difficulties in dialogues regarding the role of women. Certainly the surpassing importance accorded to confessional language in the West during the second millennium, at the expense of the affirmation of the common faith, has produced complex theological developments which have sometimes even justified the discriminations. These issues, which have generally been excluded from ecumenical discussion over the past seventy years, can be approached more easily today thanks to the growing importance of the theme of *koinonia* or communion in the various dialogues.

The role of women in the transmission of the faith is beginning to be re-evaluated. Its paramount importance during the recent period of persecution in Russia, for example, needs to attract the attention of more historians, theologians and poets. Hymn-writers must be found to give expression to this historical witness down into modern times, taking account of both the historical period and the Christian witness given within it. This is not a matter of copying ancient prayers, but of creating new texts which truly read the signs of the times in the light of Easter. For it is only when the people of the church are gathered that there can be effective inculturation and the creation of liturgies of praise which open the church to the world.

As for the service of women in the church, it is appearing today in all its diversity. The needs of the world create new situations. The possibilities are limitless, infinitely varied. Still there is sometimes a lack of aptitude in discerning these possibilities and in opening up the range of Christian activity.

Perspectives in building a united Europe

A certain aptitude for effectively organizing the equality of activities of men and women seems apparent in the contemporary example of building a united Europe.

In this context, the approach to the role of women in this or that area of parish work should also be brought up to date and made more systematic, leading to reflection on the working conditions of women in the church. A useful meeting on "Orthodox Women in a United Europe" (Levadia, Greece, November 1994) stimulated some profound reflection as well as information-sharing. If it is urgent to take up this matter of adapting our point of view to the modern world, then it is also appropriate not to reduce the role of women to one of serving only. A variety of recent studies, particularly in the context of the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women, have made explicit the imbalances between the confessions.

As moderator of an inter-religious round table on the role of women in the three monotheistic religions, organized by the Forward Studies Unit of the European Commission in Toledo in November 1995, I was struck by a theme which came up several times in the presentation and discussion of "Mediterranean Society: A Challenge for Three Civilizations?":

Historians are beginning to recognize a disturbing fact: while women made rich, profound and specific contributions to the development of European culture during the first millennium, their contributions were absent from the cultural scene during the centuries which followed. Women suddenly became culturally invisible in the West, from the beginning of the second millennium.

Subsequently, during a seminar on "The Cultural and Religious Dimensions of Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue", organized in Brussels by the European Commission, we demonstrated the new perspectives on this issue which Orthodoxy could open for Western Europe.

Orthodox theology in fact escaped the deviations of mediaeval Western scholasticism – and thus also the consequences of these for various areas in church and society, particularly concerning the place of women in the church. The resulting openness is now being made more explicit, within Orthodox communities themselves as well as through Orthodox activity in the ecumenical and indeed inter-religious contexts. This is a vision which has a great future for the social and economic reality of Europe as a whole.

Nevertheless, despite the success of modern advances, theological vigilance is called for in order to prevent a one-sided interpretation of purely symbolic factors. Paradoxically, the wealth of Orthodox symbolism could be at risk of exploitation in superfluous developments with regard to femininity and masculinity. Extremist arguments could lead to theological formulations harmful to the cause of unity. Orthodox dogma

is beginning to examine this area, and it is hoped that this will contribute to making the sometimes intricate complementarity of these symbols better understood. This would be an enriching contribution to ecumenical thought. Despite the wide diversity of points of view, it is important to develop the process of dialogue and exchange of ideas, so that questions which have gone unanswered in the past can be discussed.

Let me conclude by mentioning one of the most spectacular ecumenical advances of recent years: the growing use of icons in shared worship services. When the icon of the Mother of God known as the Icon of the Sign or the Icon of the Life-Giving Source is before the eyes of everyone, it begins to direct the prayers towards Christ and his mother. In seeking a harmonious solution to our outstanding questions about the role of women in the church, we turn to the Mother of God in prayer. We realize that even if theological consciousness is not always completely clear, the visions offered by Orthodox icons open up new approaches for all of Christianity.