

they were accustomed to, beyond their way of thinking, to a genuine *metanoia*, a true change of heart and mind, open to the mighty actions of God and to the surprises of God in the present.

Like the disciples, we too can hold views which do not reflect the reality of the Lord and the gospel. We can have perspectives and prejudices which reflect more of our cultural background than of the teachings of Christ. We must therefore be constantly ready to let the gospel of the Lord penetrate more fully into our hearts and minds. With the help of our fellow believers, we need to be willing to assess our values and our perspectives on others in the light of the gospel.

An example of faith

The story of St Photini, the Samaritan woman, is a story of a person who truly changed for the better because of her encounter with Christ. Despite her difficult past, she was willing to open herself up to the light of Christ. She became a person of faith; and because of this she was willing to be a disciple and to become a missionary. Photini became a bearer of the light of Christ and she shared this light with others. Because of this St John Chrysostom declares:

Let us then imitate the Samaritan woman. Let us converse with Christ. For even now he has taken his stand in the midst of us, speaking to us through the disciples and prophets. So let us listen and obey (*Homily 31 on the Gospel of St John*).

Growing Up Orthodox and Female

A Story from the Middle East

MAHA MILKI WEHBE

Forty years ago, in a modest house in a village in Lebanon lived three sisters and two loving parents, forming a happy family. In a setting of olive trees against rising mountains, life was simple. The village community, along with the fifty surrounding villages, belonged to the same church, served by a saintly priest who reflected the church to the people for 17 years, before becoming the bishop of another region.

Suddenly, one day the father of this family was gone. The four females of the house were on their own, without material or moral support. The situation was especially grave in a country where a family without a male at the head was marginalized and looked down on, if not degraded.

Because the eldest sister was suffering from a nervous breakdown, the middle sister was forced to the forefront. It was she who had to stand up to greedy neighbours trying to rob them of their land, without effective backing from her sisters and mother, who were ashamed, as "helpless females", to confront tough and persistent male neighbours. This sharpened her vision, directed her ambition and pushed her fears to the background. Thrust into an atmosphere of frustration, she turned it into a will to succeed.

She applied to the best university in the country and was awarded a full scholarship, which took care of her lodging and pocket-money. During the first year in Beirut, the war, which was to last for 15 years, broke out. Unable to reach her home town, she worried constantly about the condition of her elder sister. Under the circumstances, the nearby church and its youth group became her second family (later she would marry one of the members of the group).

The group was a dynamic one, venturing into the mountain villages to meet people, clean their churches, chant in their services. In this new community she learned more about Orthodoxy, both intellectually and spiritually. The group also opened her up to ecumenical activities and

endeavours. She felt a sense of accomplishment, and soon became the animator of the group. Her new community became a shelter during the dark days of bombing and sniping, and the shift from the church of the village and her family there to the new setting was a smooth one.

Her years in university not only offered her an academic education, leading eventually to a degree in agriculture, but also deepened her awareness of life and the problems related to dealing with different groups in society. The selfishness of people became clearer to see, and the difficulty of facing life alone posed a problem. In the meantime the war intensified; and when the university had to shut down, she fled under difficult security conditions to her village, where she had to remain for more than a year. There she put her theoretical agricultural studies into practice, getting up before sunrise to go to the fields with the villagers, and coming back to learn knitting and sewing in a local institution.

In the village she applied not only what she learned in university but also used what she had learned in the city church. She became an increasingly active church member, helping the priest in his ministry and church activities. As a result, the village people saw her as a strong person with a well-defined outlook on life – no longer an orphan who was looked on as a burden, but a young woman one could depend upon. She was no longer afraid to confront situations, but always remained ready to serve.

A few months later, when the university reopened, the entire family moved to Beirut. The mother had to work outside the home for the first time in her life to pay the rent for a small apartment and to support the family, now that the youngest daughter was also in university. A new life developed, and they found themselves in a new social milieu, a multi-confessional and a multi-class community.

As the months rolled by and university days were coming to a end, a new relationship with an old friend was intensifying. This was to culminate in engagement a year later and then in marriage. The young man was very attached to his church. Before their marriage, the couple travelled to Greece with a group of students from different churches. At that time they became close friends with a young priest who was to become the bishop of Beirut and who would officiate at their wedding.

Persistently he urged the young man to become a priest under him; equally persistently she resisted the idea: an Orthodox priest was the last thing she wanted her husband to be. She envisaged service in the church in a different capacity.

Meanwhile, the couple moved to one of the Gulf states, where the husband had taken a job in the business community. But the Lord had put his seal on him, so where was he to escape? They went back home, back

to the bishop, back to have a baby girl and back for him to be ordained a deacon and later a priest. Over the difficult years that followed, she continued to resist this new situation and declined to belong fully to the church as institution. She was lukewarm, seldom going to church and rarely touching any book related to it. She intensified her own voluntary activities in secular clubs and women's movements, but not in the church.

One day, the bishop appointed her to be a member of the Women's Programme of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). This brought her face-to-face with the sudden awareness that she was theologically ignorant. How could she represent her church? Immediately she made a firm commitment to move from relation to action, from being a merely passive recipient to being an active participant. She became aware of a new task, that of being a partner with her husband in the ministry of Christ. The call to ministry was a call to both of them, in accordance with the talents of each. Hence, a process of reshaping had to begin.

The first step was to take up theological training at the seminary of her church in Balamand. She began by auditing courses, one with fourth-year students, one with the beginners and another with a visiting professor. Her studies entailed a 90-minute drive to Balamand and back, spending time away from her husband and daughter and sometimes having to stay overnight at the seminary.

Another step was attending national, regional and international meetings. This exposed her to other peoples and cultures, and she learned more and more to recognize others as they are. Involvement with the women's desk of the World Council of Churches and other related bodies helped to further her commitment to the church worldwide.

On another level, her evolving awareness of her own increasingly deepened church affiliation drew her attention to the other wives of clergy in her diocese. Meetings, activities, trips and social work began to be planned and organized, which led in turn to a widening of the circle to reach out to women at large in the church of Antioch. With the strong support of the patriarch and bishops, the idea of the First Antiochian Women's Convention was born, and when it took place in Syria in August 1996 it was a huge success, bringing together women from the dioceses, all exhibiting one heart and one mind. A healthy new baby had been born, and everyone wanted to help in its upbringing.

On a more personal level, she decided to stop her part-time teaching at high school, a decision which coincided with her being appointed as coordinator of the Women's Desk of the MECC in Lebanon. This was a large responsibility, but her zeal and commitment led her to accept it;

and she was able to put her skills of organization and public relations to more fruitful use. Before accepting the position she sought the advice of the Patriarch, who recounted to her an incident involving a task he had to do as a young boy. When he asked his father if he could do it, the father replied, "Someone else has done a similar chore before you." The answer was Yes – with an affirmation of anticipated success.

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The seeds of leadership are, in many women, sometimes dormant but always exhibiting themselves in indirect ways, developing. It is true that all things work for the best for those who love God. In my own life, all of the past, the sweet and the bitter, was slowly engraving the shape of what was to be. The grace of God and a considerate, open-minded husband, who permitted and encouraged the potential in me, helped me to grow and become active. The church leaders and spiritual fathers, brothers and sisters are still pushing me in the direction of ministry. I learned that to grow up and be effective as an Orthodox meant a deep awareness of being part of the church and not merely a cut-off individual. The church is the place, the dimension in which God manifests himself – the church being the world and not only the neighbourhood, along with all those who have struggled before us. For me, this communal feeling, which always involves belonging to groups seeking the grace of the Lord, has meant that the church is a place of transfiguration.

But growth is always a function of grace, which is the only factor that changes people. Knowledge of God is also experiencing him, and this happens only in a community. Knowledge is togetherness. But this togetherness should never be one-sided or sexist. We are not to create a parallel female body to combat male dominion. All are one in Christ, because each is perfected by the one God, and as such every woman and man is perfected the more he or she comes closer to the centre of the circle – Jesus. The female should never seek to compete with the male but rather to fulfill the potential of harmonizing mind and heart in a unity which she is more equipped to harmonize. She is not a diminished human being longing to become complete according to the male historical model. Christ is her model. He perfects her. Only if this vicious circle is cut can true liberation take place. And true liberation happens only in, through and with the help of God.

DISCERNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Growing Up Orthodox and Female

A Story from the West

VALERIE ZAHIRSKY

The epithet "father of his country" refers to a strong leader who has moulded the early destiny of a nation. It is an impressive title, which indicates clearly that the man to whom it is applied has done significant things. But the church gives us someone who lived in such a way that she was given a far more exalted title: "Mother of God". This one, Mary, is presented as an example not only for women but for all human beings.

A panoply of other women surrounds Mary in the church. In the New Testament we meet Prisca, of whom St Paul writes with high regard, indicating her prominence by sometimes mentioning her name before that of her husband Aquila. She instructed a well-known and dynamic preacher named Apollos to give him a better understanding of the faith. Not only did she have the wisdom and discernment to recognize his need for instruction, but she also felt herself qualified to offer it. Prisca also took an active role alongside Paul and her husband in the trade of tentmaking. Paul also writes with great affection about Phoebe, who is sometimes called a "deaconess", though the word used to describe her would have been recognizable to the Roman Christians of her day as meaning a missionary who is qualified to teach. Phoebe did teach, taking one of Paul's most complex letters to the house church in Rome and interpreting it for the believers there.

Other men appreciated the influence of women on their own lives and the life of the church. In 369 St Basil the Great wrote to Bishop Eusebius of Samosata about his feelings on the death of his mother: "The only consolation I had in life was my mother, and I have been deprived of her through my sin. Do not ridicule me because I, a grown man, complain of being an orphan, and forgive that I cannot bear, in the parting of her soul, to realize that none of her godliness is revived in me."