

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."

**“Such wonderful sisters and mothers”**

Growing up in the Orthodox church meant that I was surrounded by the examples of women who had performed many kinds of service in the church, thus pointing to many possibilities for my own service. A friend once said that the great thing about being Orthodox was to have “such wonderful mothers and sisters” in the faith.

Yet there was another side to the exciting possibilities these women placed before me. For it seemed that many people in non-Orthodox churches were completely unaware of the woman-rich history of the Orthodox church and were conditioned to see Orthodoxy as an oppressive force beating down on women. I wondered why people seemed so determinedly unaware.

As a teenager I was given a book about Mother Maria Skobtsova, a Russian intellectual, activist and divorced mother who became a nun. Mother Maria, who had led an unconventional life before becoming a monastic, continued to be so afterwards. She did not live in a cloister but organized a centre of worship in Paris which also included a house where she and her helpers gave refuge to Jews, offered meals to the poor and provided temporary shelter for many who had no place to live or who came to talk late into the night about theology and philosophy. Mother Maria was a familiar figure in the fish and vegetable markets of Paris in the early mornings, looking for bargains on the food needed to nourish the numerous denizens of the house on Rue Lourmel.

Mother Maria was arrested by the Nazis and eventually died in Ravensbrück. Several survivors wrote that they were sustained in those terrible days by the Bible studies and prayer meetings she conducted. They remembered her absolutely unshakable faith in God, her ability to comfort others even as she suffered, and the sense of humour that still occasionally bubbled up in a comment she would make in the midst of horror.

*The Diary of Anne Frank* was a popular book among girls of my age at the time I was reading the story of Mother Maria. A short time later, we were all reading another account of a family who hid people and was finally captured during the Nazi years — *The Hiding Place*, by Corrie Ten Boom. The author wrote about her sister Betsy’s wonderful efforts to comfort and instruct fellow prisoners in Ravensbrück with prayer and Bible study. She described those efforts as unique, the sole spiritual activities in the camp. Certainly this work was admirable and courageous, but if Mother Maria’s work was going on in the same place at the same time, could it have been unknown to the Ten Booms? There must have been underground communication among the camp’s Christians, or Betsy would not have been able to gather people as she did. It seemed to

me the Ten Booms’ story would have been richer had it acknowledged the ministry of an unusual woman from a Christian tradition so different from their own, who yet felt moved in the same way they did to offer people hope in hopelessness.

A Western feminist theologian, speaking at a large gathering of women, gave me another example of the sometime “invisibility” of Orthodox teaching. She said that the church leaves women caught between two unacceptable models: Eve, who is considered to be the source of all sin, or Mary, the impossible ideal who is in any case unrelated to the lives of real women.

Listening to her, I found the image of an icon coming into my mind again and again, the icon of the resurrection in which Christ is pulling Adam and Eve up from death with his two powerful hands. In some versions his face is towards Adam; in others it is turned towards Eve. But it is clear that he is saving them both. If they were equally guilty in the Garden of Eden (as most Orthodox hymnography suggests), they are now equally drawn to the light of his presence. How did a well-educated theologian so totally miss this, I wondered?

As for the speaker’s view of Mary, it was clear that it was very strongly shaped by the Roman Catholic teaching of the Immaculate Conception. Mary was removed from the realm of human existence and had become irrelevant, unnecessary. She had no place in women’s struggle to find their proper ministry in the church. All this was far from the Orthodox idea that Mary, born as we are, gives all of us a fully realized and blessedly imitable example of how to use our human nature to glorify God in every moment of life.

It was not only people in other churches who had a skewed idea of Orthodoxy. Francine du Plessix Gray, a writer who has travelled widely in Russia and interviewed many Russians, quotes with approval another writer’s words in her book *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope*:

Byzantine Christianity may have been more repressive of women than Roman Catholicism... because the region was more vulnerable to the goddess-centred fertility religions of the Near East, and the Orthodox church had to contend with unusually powerful matriarchal patterns. Furthermore, its ascetic obscurantism was never counterbalanced by a tradition of chivalric love, or by the liberating secular influence of a Renaissance or an Enlightenment.

And so Russian culture remained totally deprived of that idealization of marital sex which prevails in much of the Roman Catholic tradition. The Orthodox clergy, which referred to women as “those cursed by God” continued to look on the female sex as the source of all spiritual danger. Faithful to Tertullian’s view of women as “the devil’s gateway” Orthodox theology emphasized women’s mental inferiority and their powers of witchcraft.

Reading this, I was amazed to think that the Orthodox church with its long tradition of married clergy could be thought less likely to “idealize marital sex” than the Roman Church which so carefully sequestered its clergy from marital encounters of any kind. I tried hard to think when my priest husband had last referred to me as being “cursed by God”. Who, I wondered, had decided that the influence of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were necessarily “liberating”? Why do so many people assume, mistakenly, that Tertullian is an Orthodox saint? And what in the world does “ascetic obscurantism” mean?

### **Becoming an “Orthodox apologist”**

My reaction to all this was to decide to become a sort of “Orthodox apologist” and to try, when I could, to talk about the teachings of the church as they really are and as they really affect the experiences of women. This has given me the chance to talk with many people from many backgrounds. It has also shown me that our own clergy and laymen sometimes need to be reminded of the precedent set by women like Phoebe, Prisca and the many others who have taught, preached, evangelized, studied and ministered during the centuries. Nobody can be allowed to stifle the work of women through attitudes that have little to do with Christianity and everything to do with chauvinism.

Trying to be true to the faith and witness to others is a daunting task. But as I grew up in the church, it seemed to be the most exciting challenge imaginable. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. As they stand with us, we can take strength from their example. We can show other women how many kinds of work and ministry are open to them, and so desperately needed from them, in this ancient church that will light our way into the next century and far, far beyond.

## **Growing Up Orthodox and Female**

### **A Story from India**

*SHANTI VERGHESE*

The healthy growth of a child depends on its environment, the nourishment it gets, the mental, physical and spiritual stimuli it receives during its formative years. The church, our mother, nurtures us and we in return give her our love and loyalty.

I belong to the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in India, which is believed to have been established by the apostle Thomas in A.D. 52. As an ancient church, it is a storehouse of traditions and customs – some good, some not so good. The topic of “growing up Orthodox and female” might be analyzed from the angle of a girl child who is born into the church, grows up learning its doctrines, accepts its traditions and customs and does not question the teachings of the church or her position in it, as this is part of her life and thought. On the other hand, a young woman who comes into the Orthodox faith at the time of her marriage must learn many things and accept a new tradition. The church is often very apprehensive about these “late-comers”. As members of non-Orthodox, mostly Protestant denominations, they come with different ideas and beliefs. Their influence on the family and their reservations about the Orthodox church may cause genuine concern among the church leadership.

I belong to this second group. I came into the Orthodox fold at the age of 23. When my future husband and his father invited their bishop to our wedding, he seemed at first upset that a promising young member of his flock, from a family of staunch Orthodox believers, was about to marry someone from outside the Orthodox faith, the daughter of a theologian and priest of a non-Orthodox denomination of the Syrian church. Even strong embankments around a rice field sometimes crack and crumble due to the continuous lashing of water against them, he noted. His worry was that the onslaught of my non-Orthodox ideas could cause cracks in the walls of my husband’s Orthodox faith. However, he said, he took comfort in the knowledge that in this particular case the walls were extra-strong.