

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

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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.

While such fears are less common in the more ecumenical climate of the present day, they are still present. I believe it is necessary for women who come from non-Orthodox traditions to be given a proper induction into the Orthodox faith. The doubts and questions that arise in their minds, as they did in mine, about some of the teachings are sincere and genuine. Leaders of the church, clergy and laity, should be trained to listen with sympathy and answer with conviction. Here the lack of theological knowledge, especially among the laity, is a major obstacle. The sacrament of confession, prayers to Mary and the saints and special prayers for the dead were all new to me and difficult at first to accept. With encouragement from my husband, a visible exposure to the faith of hundreds in the church and a growing belief in the efficacy of such prayers, combined with an openness of mind inherited from an early liberal background, it has been possible for me to accept these teachings and practices.

The beauty and meaning of the Orthodox eucharistic liturgy is always a means of attracting others to its fold. This act of worship lies at the centre of the life of the community, blending families together in the expression of their common faith. As Leslie Brown says in his book *The Indian Christians of St Thomas*, "this service kept the Syrian Christians together down the centuries, even when they could not fully understand the meaning of the prayers and readings, sermons were infrequent, the Bible unknown and their customs and social life influenced by their non-Christian surroundings". However, to a new entrant in the church, certain prayers used during the worship on Good Friday are difficult to accept. I believe that the passages in which those who crucified our Lord are cursed are uncharitable in the light of Christ's teachings; and I hope and pray that a change will soon be made in these.

For the new recruit as well as for those born and brought up in the Orthodox faith, private confession has always been difficult. Confession in itself is good provided the priest who listens can counsel with knowledge, understanding and authority. He should have the insight and ability to understand and analyze the feelings of fear, sorrow, repentance or guilt of the one who confesses. If the priest is not adequately equipped, psychologically or spiritually, to deal with these problems, confession becomes meaningless. In the last few years our church has made concessions in allowing persons who wish to take part in holy communion to do so without private confession but after receiving absolution.

As I grew up further in the Orthodox way, I began to be more impressed by the place given to the Virgin Mary in our prayers and supplications. The position given to the mother of our Lord is next to the Lord himself. We have a large number of churches and cathedrals estab-

lished in her name. We observe Lent in her memory and have long periods of fasting invoking her intercession. The entire church, clergy and laity alike, observes all this with great devotion and piety. The position of Mary as the Mother of God is accepted without question. But I fail to understand how a church which gives so much respect and veneration to the woman Mary is not inclined to give any place or position in its ministry and work to half its members just because they are women. Let us not forget that it was the women who waited at the cross on Calvary when the men ran away. It was to them that Christ appeared on that first Easter day. It was to them also that he gave the mission of spreading the message of his resurrection.

As an Orthodox woman and especially as a mother, my interest and concern is in upholding my faith and values and handing them down to the next generation. I see today strong cross-currents of new ideologies and views blowing across the church. The young people are being exposed to these intellectual onslaughts, which may be contrary to Christian values and traditions, and many succumb to them. The clergy, no matter how strong and well-prepared to deal with such matters, is not numerically adequate to meet these cross-currents. Wars are not won by generals alone. The ordinary soldier needs to be trained to fight. Women are good fighters for a worthwhile cause, but they need the weapons and the skills. They need a thorough knowledge of church history, doctrines, the faith and order of the church, the position of their church vis-à-vis other churches, the strong and weak points in its tradition and culture. Our women should be given the facility to study in their own theological seminaries. The correspondence course in religious education offered by our church is definitely not enough. Women need to attend classes in which they can listen to the views of knowledgeable people in their specialized areas in order to formulate their own thoughts and develop their own ideas. The women in our church have not yet started asking for ordination. They want only to learn and equip themselves so that they can impart their knowledge to the younger generation.

Through meetings of church women in different parts of the world in recent years, Indian Orthodox women have gained much exposure to the thinking and activities of other churches. We are now reasonably well aware of our responsibilities to the church and the church's duty towards us. We know that conducting Sunday schools and charity drives and attending prayer meetings and organizing visits to hospitals and orphanages – necessary as all these are – are not the only work we are capable of doing.

In the secular world, women are found in all professions, holding important portfolios and positions. Many have excelled in medicine, law,

science and administration. They are found to be intelligent, efficient and hard-working, possessing a certain acumen in defusing difficult problems and situations. During the fifty years of Indian independence, the legal status of women has been raised. The state leadership has gained considerably from the expertise of its women officers in development, administration, education and health care.

Does the church not want the contribution that women can make in these fields? Women are capable of contributing positively in church administration, financial management, planning and policy-making at the parish, diocesan and central levels of the church organization. The constitution of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in India declares that "all men and women who have received holy baptism and believe in the divinity of the holy Trinity, the incarnation of the son... are members of the church". However, when it comes to the parish, it is clearly stated that "all men who confess and receive the holy Qurbana and have completed the age of 21 may be members of the assembly". It is from these members that the managing committee of the church, which makes decisions and implements policies, is chosen – and women do not have a chance to be on it.

The Supreme Court of India held in a recent judgment that women could also represent the family in matters relating to church administration. However, our church has not yet accepted this as its policy. It should amend its constitution to include women also in the higher echelons of its organization. As I have grown in the Orthodox way, the gender discrimination shown by the church leadership has become more and more apparent to me. While the systems in the church bureaucracy are difficult to change, small mercies have been shown in the recent past. Now in our church at the end of the baptism service, girl babies are also taken up to kiss the altar; earlier it was only the boys who had this privilege. Women are now allowed to read the Old Testament lesson during the Qurbana. So far, however, not many women have actually done this, since at the parish levels it is still to be accepted.

The Orthodox Syrian Church in India needs to find ways to tap the tremendous energy lying dormant among its women and use this for strengthening its faith and its ministry. We are fortunate in being members of this ancient church – a worshipping church of men and women keeping alive the teachings of our Lord and Master. The traditions are kept and old customs practised. When we repeat prayers and chants that have come down to us from the saints and prophets of old we notice how meaningful they are even in this age and time. Tradition can be invigorating and energizing if changes are allowed to happen as new ideas and viewpoints arise. Such changes can bring a cohesiveness in thinking and

unity in action in the community. Traditions and customs should never be outdated, retrograde and inhuman. They should encourage progress and openness.

The members of the Orthodox Church in India are spread out in different parts of the world. They live in alien cultures and societies. Very often they find it difficult to reconcile their traditional beliefs and practices with the liberal and modern trends in such societies. The mother church must be concerned about the growing generation of young people in such countries and how to keep them within the Orthodox faith. A woman who has grown up in this faith is always anxious about her children living away from the family and being exposed to influences which can undermine their faith in the church. I suppose this is a common problem of all Orthodox churches, and an interchange of ideas among our churches can result in some positive action.

The last few years of the Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women have seen changes in many non-Orthodox churches. We see women being encouraged to develop their potential and accept responsibilities in the church organization. These churches have progressed in all areas as their women have contributed immensely towards it. I feel let down and discouraged when I think of what we could have achieved in our church if only the women were given opportunities to help.

While growing steadfast in the Orthodox faith, I also feel a responsibility to pray and work for the unity of the churches. The ecumenical movement has envisaged the growth of a new community of men and women in the church who believe in partnership and equality, who encourage and sustain one another through love and respect and who work unitedly for justice and peace on earth. When the churches attempt to come together ecumenically there may be many theological issues regarding faith and doctrines facing them which cannot be reconciled. Thus we must think of other areas in which we can cooperate and work together.

Human and life issues can bring people together. This will include confronting all the forms of degradation and violence perpetrated on nature and people. We are sent into the world to proclaim the teaching of Jesus our Lord through our words and our actions. Christian ecumenism should concentrate more on the unity of churches for the mission of Christ in the world. The Decade's call to the churches to practise in their day-to-day activities the values of love, peace, justice and truth will thus be answered.

It will be my prayer and endeavour in the coming years to see that the Orthodox church becomes an active participant in such a movement.