

Orthodox Women as Writers

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A visitor to Constantinople from the new world, the diaspora of Australia, can only feel a novice pilgrim in the steps of the great women saints, martyrs and those known only to God who in their own way discerned the signs of their own time and witnessed to faith in both adversity and security. This empathy for the past is balanced by the struggle of the present, "living on the edge" in solidarity with contemporary women who seek equality in all aspects of life within the church, the family and community. Their work and struggle continue, despite the attitudes and practices of the church which define woman as distinct, different and diminished by her gender, notwithstanding the carefully affirming statements of their worthiness and special place in the church by laymen, clergy and bishops.

At the end of the 20th century, Orthodox women must take courage from the past to speak our concerns and our passions for and within the church. And when we do not have the opportunity to speak or to be heard, then we must write, as historians, sociologists, theologians, community workers, academics, mothers and daughters. Our voices have much to convey at a time when the world has never been so open to communication, both local and global. We have the skills; we need only the fortitude and commitment to our faith and to ourselves as Orthodox women.

Mary/Martha

Over the past decade, there have been efforts to raise the consciousness of Orthodox women to issues of concern through the written word. Most newsletters or journals produced by women, particularly in the United States, have until very recently been local or diocesan publications or for a specific interest group, such as the *Clergy Wives* newsletter. With experience of many other church women's groups which lack a network to share information, the women's desk of the World Council of

Churches has been instrumental in assisting Orthodox women to establish a universal network through a small journal published in Australia. Let me say a few words about the background and creation of the journal *MaryMartha*, for which I have been responsible since 1991.

During the 1980s, I was for some years the Orthodox woman member of the Australian Council of Churches Commission on Church and Society. Out of this emerged the Commission on the Status of Women, which was mandated to research issues such as domestic violence, poverty, ministry and inclusive language in worship. The reports were powerful. For the first time, a serious study of violence revealed truths to the churches which they were most unwilling to hear.

In 1988, the commission was relocated from Sydney to Perth, and I was appointed executive officer in addition to my work as coordinator of the women's desk for the state council of churches. The work of the commission was often "on the edge". Financial support from the churches for women's concerns was not always forthcoming. The church was accustomed to a situation in which women were kept busy providing the money for the work designated by the parish council, usually for "bricks and mortar" or mission societies. It was the federal government which provided funds for research on domestic violence and the women's department of the state government of Western Australia which funded the initial production of a quarterly journal, *Voices from the Silence*, and a yearly calendar. For the calendar we found hundreds of women, both secular and tonsured, living and departed, from churches and from other religions, to honour and relate their achievements and struggles for justice and thus to provide role models and icons for women of today.

The Ecumenical Decade – Churches in Solidarity with Women was launched in Perth in late 1988 with a liturgical service in which all the gifts of women were offered to the service of the church. We asked the bishops and clergy present to act for the full participation of women and to acknowledge all the gifts they were offered. In addition, the heads of churches were reminded of the presence of young women, who are barely visible in the church of today, for they can see more clearly than their mothers and older sisters how excluded women are from responsibility, ministry and equality with men. Regrettably, although the Orthodox are members of the council, no Orthodox priest was present.

In 1989, I was invited to be a member of the steering committee for the Orthodox women's consultation to be held in Chania, Crete, in 1990. We met in Cairo to discuss the theme "Church and Culture", with three sub-themes: human sexuality, ministry and participation and decision-making. At that meeting we realized how limited is the circu-

lation of papers concerned with the issue of women in the church. I had not heard of the historic inter-Orthodox women's meeting in Agapia, Romania, in 1976, with its well-thought-out recommendations for the Orthodox churches until nearly ten years later. The meeting in Crete reviewed the work of Agapia and made most of the same recommendations again.

One outcome of the Crete consultation was a grant from Ecumenical Decade funds to launch an Orthodox women's journal that would publish papers about issues important to women, to be distributed across all Orthodox jurisdictions without control or direction of one specific church. I was delighted to take on the challenge of editing the new journal. The first issue was distributed at the WCC assembly in Canberra in 1991; and by July 1997 sixteen had been published. The papers and articles have been interesting – sometimes controversial, sometimes a bit conservative, but always providing much-needed information for Orthodox women around the world. *MaryMartha* has been widely distributed, not only to individuals, but also to college libraries, seminaries and bishops. Yet during the first six years there was not a single acknowledgment of it by a priest or bishop – not even a complaint!

MaryMartha has not only provided a forum for many Orthodox women to express their opinions, ideas and historical and theological research but has also been the medium to disseminate reports, addresses and recommendations from several Orthodox women's meetings. Without this modest journal, few Orthodox women would ever know of their Orthodox sisters working for change in both liturgical practices and traditional community attitudes.

The title *MaryMartha* was chosen to reflect the two potentials within us all: the church of Marthas, serving others, always busy with chores and family, symbolizing the role of servant and nurturer; and the church of Marys, acting beyond that idealized image of woman, affirmed by Jesus Christ who said "she has chosen the better part" (Luke 10:42). Mary and Martha do not represent either/or possibilities for women; rather they represent the potential in all of us.

The need for networking

The network of information among women in the Orthodox church is essential. Many of those in the diaspora have the privilege of access to the Internet with the World Wide Web and electronic mail. But those of us who have these possibilities should not forget that for most Orthodox women in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, the printed word remains the most important medium for access to ideas and challenges for change.

In addition, we have a responsibility to share ecumenically who we are, what we believe and how we practise our faith with our sisters in other Christian churches. For too long Orthodox women have stepped back from dialogue with other Christian women, as though we fear being changed by exposure to different dogmas and traditions. Many Orthodox women have not realized that our participation at ecumenical women's seminars has been promoted by the insistence of women staff of the WCC and often financially supported by the generosity of Protestant churches. We have much to be thankful for: their desire to hear our voices and to read about our life experiences, the diversity of our spiritual journeys and our liturgical traditions. Such involvement not only allows for dialogue and sharing, but also anchors us more firmly in our tradition. We should not be afraid or suspicious of ecumenism.

My own country takes pride in its unique concept and practice of multiculturalism. We strive to create a cohesive community that integrates different religions, languages, cultures and races. Certainly we do not always succeed, and within the community there are bigots, racists and intolerant people who are ignorant and sometimes dangerous in their hatred of those perceived as different. However, nowhere in the community are relationships better than among women working together against violence and discrimination, for equality in and access to the workplace, for adequate child care and simply for friendship. When Laotian, Italian, Turkish, Greek, Chilean and Lebanese women meet for English lessons, they do not sit apart because one is Catholic, one Buddhist, one Orthodox or one without faith. Drawn to each other by a common need, they share their personal strengths and concerns for the future with each other. The women are encouraged to write their stories, to sing their songs and to share their traditions and religious beliefs. Women enjoy learning and reading of each other's experiences and dreams for the future. The need to participate in the future for the sake of their family over-rides any suspicion that the "other" is someone to avoid, someone who might weaken our beliefs and tradition. This obvious and powerful example of the universal sisterhood of women convinces me that what women share in common is far greater than what separates us.

The challenge of scholarship

Orthodox women scholars like Elisabeth Behr-Sigel in France have written of the need for Orthodox women to break the silence imposed on them not by the genuine tradition of the church, but by social customs and convention.¹ Nearly twenty years later, she appealed once more to Orthodox women "to widen their horizons beyond the bounds of the narrow parochialism within which they are often tempted to remain".² Eva

Topping from the United States, a Greek and Latin scholar, challenges Orthodox women "to re-examine the androcentric prejudices in Orthodox tradition that have determined attitudes and praxis of the church even in these times".³ More recently, Eva Adamziloglu, the first Greek Orthodox woman to attend the international conference of the Association of Women in Theological Research, stated that "feminist theology clearly concerns all areas of theology", and cited her own thesis, "Women in the Theology of the Apostle Paul" and the recent thesis of Constantinos Yokarinis on the ordination of women as examples of the application of feminist theology within the Orthodox church.

In addition to the more scholarly work undertaken within academic departments in Europe and the United States, other journals and newsletters are being published. Some are parochial and within a particular "ethnic" church; others are slowly gaining a wider readership. Journals such as *St Nina's Quarterly* and more recently *The Handmaiden* are addressing issues for women in the Orthodox church. Orthodox women are also contributing papers to professional journals in history, theology, anthropology and sociology. Some publications by women specifically address historical and social aspects of being in the Orthodox church, but the voice of Orthodox women still remains small compared to that of men – regardless of whether the message is conservative or confrontational.

Too few Orthodox women are willing to write for either public or ecumenical forums, particularly taking up issues raised by feminist theology or feminist scholarship in other disciplines. I do not accept the interpretation of this relative silence from Orthodox women as proof that all is well within all our communities and parishes. I cannot be convinced that, especially in the diaspora, there are only conservative voices, content with the situation of women in the church. When we so strongly deny being feminists, or having anything to do with the feminist agenda, we need to be reminded that it has been the feminist agenda and struggle, in both society and the churches, which has opened the opportunities for many women to be educated.

As I noted earlier, despite the series of formal meetings of Orthodox women promoted by the women's desk of the WCC since 1976, there has been little progress. The recommendations seem to go only as far as the desk of the bishop. My own observation is that most of these recommendations do not fully reflect the group discussions, keynote addresses or plenary sessions, much less the discussions around the coffee table. They do not truly relate, in bold, challenging and expectant words, what has taken place at the meeting. And the cautious language of the recommendations means that the final document can be easily ignored. There is no evidence that the church will actively and consistently promote

such consultations for women nor give freedom to women to organize such consultations themselves. And we have not yet learned to claim the freedom ourselves and organize regardless. We need to take an example from our Catholic and Anglican sisters, who have claimed the right to meet and discuss issues of women in the church as an essential and urgent matter. We need to keep in mind the wise words of Kathleen Bliss, the first secretary for the WCC Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church, in 1952: "To say that women's powers to educate and succour have found an outlet in an immense variety of ways is not the same thing as saying that the church has made use of even a tithe of the vast reserve of talent and devotion which lay to hand in the persons of its women members."⁴

In order to discern the signs of the times, more honesty, more research and more commitment are demanded from us than from women in the past. It is necessary to acknowledge that we do not live in religious societies in these times, nor do we live in the fourth century. We have to admit how difficult it is to accept without question those writings of the early fathers which disparage women and their purpose in this world. When debated in the context of their times and knowledge and society, they can perhaps be understood, if not entirely accepted. However, at the end of the 20th century, it is definitely unacceptable that many priests still only refer to those biblical texts about women which affirm submissive and secondary roles for them, attitudes too often adopted by fathers and husbands. In order to stay in place with the Christian faith, many women absent themselves from the liturgical and eucharistic life of the church because they find no refuge, no solace and no appropriate pastoral care.

As women who remain in the church, we hope to contribute ideas and constructive programmes to the church. Orthodox women have much to offer with our scholarship, our research, our writings, our words and thoughts and, dare I say, "our theology". Many Catholic, Anglican and Protestant feminist scholars and writers are raising issues about which we are silent. Christian feminists debate the uncomfortable and confrontational issues of women's ordination, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, pre-marital sex, clergy abuse, domestic violence, in order to inform, assist and support those members of the church who are suffering and in spiritual need, in order to cope with the tragedies and dilemmas of everyday life. All too often, the response of our church and our bishops to these issues is either silence or condemnation without discussion.

I look forward to the day when many Orthodox women writers and scholars will enter the debates on these issues, acknowledging the real-

ity of social problems that affect women and courageous enough to move beyond the esoteric and obscure theological theses that fill the shelves of academic institutions. Like Orthodox women, Catholic women concerned for the integrity and truth in the practice of their faith are also denied access to participation in the decision-making structures that determine their place in the church. Why are the writings of feminist theologians and historians so readily dismissed only because they are not Orthodox? Why the hostility to Orthodox women who challenge the canon laws and traditions that are derogatory to women, demean us because of our life-giving biology or exclude us from participation in the full sacramental ministry of the church?

As women's scholarship continues to grow in both secular and religious feminist writings, we must learn to discern from the wealth of material available what is relevant to our own lives and experiences, and learn to apply that to our own private personal and spiritual needs. The experiences of women from the past continue to come before us as women scholars, using their research skills and linguistic abilities, peel away the layers of the centuries. We are by turn dismayed and outraged, challenged and excited by the knowledge and writings of women who came before us and who lived lives of such noble action and faith.

It may well be time for Orthodox women to speak and write more frankly of their faith, their calling, their ministry and their sense of social justice in a world where we have not been heard or read. Perhaps we as Orthodox need also to be mindful of the critical words of John Chrysostom about our typical practice: "We open the Scriptures and interpret with such certainty in ourselves and our supposed piety; we read the Fathers and use them to condemn our neighbour; and we learn the canons by heart in order to stigmatize those around us."⁵ The church and our communities are surely capable of accepting questions from women, listening to their doubts and their challenges by reading their research articles without the automatic accusations of heresy and wrong practice. I hope that journals such as *MaryMartha* and *St Nina's Quarterly* will mark the beginning of opportunities for Orthodox women not only to write about the well-known women saints and celebrations of the church, but also to examine more closely the legacy of these stories for today. If the example of the saints, martyrs and ascetics is to guide women in their daily lives and faith journey, then the telling of the story must relate to the experiences of today.

Throughout the centuries the skills of reading and writing have been in the control of men, the church and the wealthy. Women were not so privileged unless the male members of the family deemed it suitable for them to be educated. It is not surprising to learn from new scholars and

translators that, from the times of the early church, the monasteries were filled with women who wanted the freedom to read the Scriptures and live a prayer life in full knowledge of their faith. I suggest they may well have wanted a longer life as well, childbirth being the notorious cause for the early death of women. In this century, women are increasingly well educated and work in professions. We may have found an acceptable niche in the parish or diocesan office, we may teach in the theological seminary, we may even be given responsibility by the church to undertake particular roles, but we are not protected by the laws of the land nor are we considered by the laws of the church. We still require the "patronage" or favour of the clergy, the bishop or the male laity of the parish council. Without such patronage, we are like the women of centuries ago, deprived of the right to read and write.

If we are to withstand the criticisms against the emerging voices of Orthodox women, whom too many dismiss as caught up in "Western feminist rhetoric" that distorts the truths of Orthodoxy, we must reflect on the example of the courageous Kassiane, a sharp observer of human frailties, who expressed her opinion of those who lacked courage and commitment in a memorable phrase: "I hate silence when it is time to speak."⁶ Kassiane defied the edict against the veneration of icons. By defending women against the slurs of an emperor, she lost any claim to the throne of Byzantium. How fortunate we are to have inherited her words and music twelve centuries later! An independent woman, abbess, hymnographer and poet, Kassiane encourages us from the past to speak out, to write, to push to the edges the definition of our place in the church.

In a paper on Kassiane, Eva Topping wrote: "It is time for Orthodox women to speak openly, to claim our history through research, writing and publication, to claim our equal rights in the church. Unlike Kassiane, there is no imperial crown at risk; rather, we stand to gain full participation and responsibility in the church."⁷ At the point when women feel most keenly their exclusion from so much of the life of the church, when they believe their God-given talents, intelligence and faith are being ignored and diminished by the church, then it is time to listen to Kassiane and act. We can no longer be silent, for it is time to speak and to write.

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourouzh has said that the debate on women's roles of participation, and even ordination in the church, should take place "in a spirit of intellectual honesty and spiritual integrity... while hammering at the intellectual inertia of the Orthodox and the humiliating situation of women."⁸ At no other time in history have women, as teachers and scholars, had more opportunity to contribute

their intellect, their scholarship and their spiritual integrity. Let us dare to be wrong as we struggle to write our thoughts and our understanding of theology. We are all called to be theologians. Let us dare to dream our place in the church as one of full acceptance of women, created equally in the image of God. Let us dare to be prophetic voices, as we dare to discern the signs of the times.

NOTES

- ¹ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Orthodox Women and their Participation in the Church* (report of the Agapia consultation), Geneva, WCC, 1976, p.17.
² Report from the Levadia meeting on "Orthodox Women in a United Europe", Nov. 1994.
³ Eva C. Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy*, Minneapolis, Light and Life, 1987, p.127.
⁴ Quoted by Susannah Hertzell, *A Voice for Women: The Women's Department of the World Council of Churches*, Geneva, WCC, 1981, p.18.
⁵ John Chryssavgis, *Homily on Luke 8:41-56*.
⁶ Cited in *The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers*, Buena Vista CO, Holy Apostles Convent, 1991, pp.373-81.
⁷ Eva C. Topping, "It is Time to Speak", in *MaryMartha*, Vol. 1, no. 4, 1992, p.8.
⁸ Cited by Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, Redondo Beach CA, Oakwood Publications, 1991.

Human Sexuality and the Body

An Orthodox Perspective

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In his *Divine Names*, St Dionysius the Areopagite calls on us to "contemplate a certain one and simple nature of the peaceful Union, unifying all things to Itself and to themselves and to each other" (10.2). While the unity referred to here is that of God, Dionysius outlines a framework of how to relate to all that is around us. We are called to unify our thoughts, actions and relationships and to direct them towards God. All things must be understood in relation to God, to oneself and to those around us. This framework in fact closely resembles the Orthodox understanding of the holy Trinity. Each person of the Trinity exhibits a different hypostasis while maintaining the same essence. Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to one another by way of mutual indwelling – *perichoresis*.

Just as Orthodox trinitarian theology applies to all aspects of church life, so too it applies to an understanding of human sexuality. The Orthodox tradition would disagree with those who think that sexuality has no place in Christian anthropology. For many, the problem here begins with the fact that sexuality is directly related to the body. A misguided understanding of the human body has grown out of remnants of Greek philosophical dualism combined with misinterpretations of scripture fostered by Gnostic influences and bolstered by selective reading of monastic texts. By contrast, Orthodox worship and life have always seen the person as a whole, well-integrated being though not complete in any sense, since perfection always awaits us.

Especially in the dialogue *Phaedo*, Plato draws a sharp distinction between the body and the soul. The body is the tomb of the soul (65d), leading it astray (65b). The contemplative life of the soul is better without the distraction of the body (65c). While there are times when Plato sees the harmony of beauty in the body and soul,¹ he more often describes the body as inferior to the soul.² It is a source of evil and an impediment to the soul's attaining of truth (*Phaedo*, 66). The soul is