

DISCERNING ESSENTIAL CONCERNS

Varieties of Gifts

Women's Ministries in the Contemporary Church

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There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

A community of monastics growing and manufacturing medicinal herbs in Guatemala; a young Romanian woman who is among 300 studying at a theological school dedicated to training women theologians; a group of Orthodox women in France discussing the ordination of women to the priesthood; a deaf woman who has converted from the Baptist faith to Orthodoxy, working with deaf children at an ecumenical school in Costa Rica; a woman from Uganda who, along with other Orthodox women, is running a poultry farm; a monastic who has travelled to Korea to set up a convent; a missionary from the United States who has dedicated five years of her life to the church in Tirana, Albania; the sole woman on the faculty of a major Orthodox seminary; a Finnish woman working in the youth office at the World Council of Churches; the wife of a priest leading a Bible study group in the local parish; a group of widows who minister to the elderly at a hospital which has no funds to provide a full-time staff; a deaconess teaching religion at a private school in Damascus.

All of these women have names and ministries to which they have been called. This is a small sample of the ministries in which contemporary Orthodox women are sharing. The list continues to grow every day. Our church is a body of believers which "does not consist of one member but of many" (1 Cor. 12:14). St Paul tells us: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27); and it seems as if this body is growing – not growing extra limbs, but strengthening those which exist. After almost 2000 years, our church is reaching out in ways which in one sense are not new (since it has a long history of philanthropic and diaconal work) but which fully engage the challenges of contemporary society.

Orthodox tradition supports an understanding of ministry which asserts the dignity and equality of all. It speaks out against superior/inferior models of ministry in which some are the elect and others are the followers. All are called to be participants in the holy life. The sacred tradition of our church emphasizes the contribution of all, including women.

The tradition of the church

Three fundamental Orthodox teachings support this tradition:

1. We believe that the divine image and likeness (Gen. 1:26) exists within every person, both male and female. The Bible tells us "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). While certain fathers of the church have distinguished "image" (*eikōn*), as the potential for life in God, from "likeness" (*homoiosis*) as the realization of life in God, for others no distinction exists.¹ With the human being as image of God, God becomes the innermost centre of the human being.² St Gregory the Theologian states that men and women share a single nature and destiny:

There is only one Creator of man and of woman, one dust from which both have come, one image [of God], one law, one death, one resurrection... The serpent deceived them both, and one was not found to be the stronger and the other the weaker... Christ saves both by his sufferings. Was he made flesh for the man? This also for the woman. Did he die for the man? The woman is also saved by his death.³

St Basil the Great agrees with St Gregory that the image of God exists in women. In an encomium to St Julitta the Martyr, he puts the following words in her mouth: "We women are taken from the same matter as men, we were created in the image of God like them. Like the masculine sex, the feminine sex is capable of virtue, and this is by the will of the Creator."⁴

2. Our church also believes that all Christians are called to theosis or union with God – to be "participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). For the Orthodox, the salvation and redemption of the human being is theosis.⁵ This is not an instantaneous event but a life-long endeavour, a relationship with God which takes one's entire life to perfect. All receive the calling from God to be in union with him and to achieve holiness.

3. Since Pentecost, it is the Holy Spirit who has made and continues to make Christ present in the world through his body, the church. Each person must discover, regardless of his or her station in life, the work to which he or she is called by God and through this work make Christ present to the whole world, by the power of the Holy Spirit working within.

The image and likeness of God in the human being, the call for all to union with God (*theosis*) and the commission to make Christ present to the world allow for the full participation of all members, both men and women, in the life of the church. It is not just that all Christians who have been baptized and chrismated are allowed to be members of "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9), in other words, members of the body of Christ, but it is their responsibility and the means for their salvation. At the time of chrismation, believers take their place in the order of the laity. The presence of and our response to the Holy Spirit in our lives enable us to take part in the various Spirit-bearing ministries of the church. Ministries are the responsibilities to which God calls his people. Through these ministries we come face to face with the risen Christ through the lives of others. This encounter is a type of union with God.

Therefore, through the ministries to which we have been called, we engage in *theosis* or union with God. And it is through this *theosis*, this very unique and specific ministry, that we take part in our personal salvation. Since the personal salvation as ministry includes those with whom we work, the ministry becomes the salvation not only of the individual but of all involved. The working of the ministries of the church – in reality, the Holy Spirit working in the body of believers – is in a way the working of the salvation of the world.

We see today a development of many of the women's ministries which have been documented from the past. These older ministries include those of disciples, apostles, evangelists, deaconesses, miracle workers, missionaries, prophets, teachers, healers, founders of churches, monasteries and philanthropic institutions, conveners of councils, defenders of the faith, saints, martyrs, spiritual mothers, and monastics.⁶ Many of these ministries have developed with the changing times; others have fallen away or, should I say, are awaiting recognition. In fact, we have many women "doing the work", engaging in many of these older ministries, yet both these women and their ministries have not been recognized by the church on earth.

Contemporary ministries in the church

What are these "new ministries"? How have the older ministries developed? How are women ministering to the needs of our church and world? The list of current ministries among women in our church is a long one.

More and more often women are playing administrative roles within local parishes, dioceses and archdioceses. Women serve as members and presidents of local parish councils. Organized groups of women are

engaging in desperately needed philanthropic work. For example, the Philoptochos Society in North America has contributed a great deal to the Orthodox church by providing funding for medical and other non-profit organizations.

In local parishes more and more women are taking part in activities which historically have involved only men. While the majority of positions as Sunday school teachers and choir members continue to be filled by women, we now also find women who have been blessed as readers, chanters and youth directors. Moreover, a re-evaluation of the minor order of acolyte has been called for.⁷ While some believe a woman is not allowed to enter the altar area, the deaconesses within our tradition were in fact allowed to enter the sanctuary to perform their work. On the basis of this, those who advocate the tonsuring of young girls to the minor order of acolyte consider that this is in keeping with the theology of our church.

In some US parishes young girls are participating in the procession during the Great Entrance; in others they are assisting the priest during the dispensing of the eucharist. They may stand holding the cloth used by communicants to dry their lips, or carry the container holding the bread offered to the communicant after partaking of the eucharist.

Of the women who have pursued theological degrees at Orthodox seminaries, a few are working as members of seminary faculties. Some are serving as religious education directors at the parish, diocesan or archdiocesan level; some are theologians dedicated to research and writing; some are taking part in ecumenical or interdisciplinary theological consultations and dialogues at the national or international level; some are pastoral assistants in charge of programmes at local parishes which include Bible study, youth work, providing food and clothing for the poor in the community, adult education, prison and hospital ministries, ecumenical and inter-religious activities; some are teachers in religious and ecumenical organizations.

There are women health-care professionals who are offering care to parish members; women missionaries, both short-term and long-term, working in domestic and overseas settings; lay groups of women who come together for Orthodox fellowship. The work of women who serve as pastoral counsellors is extremely valuable and important, for they can provide or organize support groups to deal with many issues which are not adequately addressed in the local churches, such as divorce, rape, incest, physical and emotional abuse, euthanasia, abortion and suicide.

We are also seeing a slow but steady resurgence of women entering monastic orders. Along with this, we are seeing a re-emergence of the order of the deaconess. Though their numbers remain few, they are serv-

ing churches in Greece, Syria and Egypt. Their responsibilities are culturally dictated and there are also some differences in liturgical practice – deaconesses are blessed in certain Orthodox churches and ordained in others. It is interesting that in the Orthodox churches of Western Europe and North America, there has been a greater focus on the theological implications of the re-emergence of the order of the diaconate, while in the Oriental Orthodox churches the emphasis has been on the practical implications.

A discussion is taking place in North America and Western Europe on the ordination of women to the priesthood. While this issue may have come to Orthodoxy from “the outside” – from contact with Protestant churches – it has generated some interest among Orthodox women and men. The theologians of our church are delving more deeply into the topic, searching the writings of the fathers of the church for an Orthodox understanding of this issue. But the discussion is not simply a theoretical one. I have been told of three women in the United States who have left the Armenian Apostolic Church and joined the Episcopal Church (Anglican) because they felt they were being called to serve God as a priest/minister.

The ministry of women which is perhaps least known in our church is that of spiritual director. Simply through the way in which women communicate many women are providing spiritual direction to one another every day. I know of one woman whose bishop has granted her the blessing of hearing confessions and providing spiritual direction, though she does not recite the prayer from the sacramental rite. This ministry of the church needs to be explored more thoroughly; I mention it here simply to acknowledge those women, whether they be monastics, the wives of priests or wiser and more experienced members of our communities.

Last, but certainly not least, is the ministry of the wife of the priest. This extremely valuable ministry is sometimes thrust upon women without anyone having informed them of exactly what is involved in fulfilling it. Unlike the priesthood and other vocations in the church, there seems to be no “school” which one can attend to prepare for the ministry of the wife of the priest. As a woman whose mother is the wife of a priest, I can personally attest to how difficult, emotionally and physically, this job can be. The expectations put upon the priest's wife are great. More and more we do find that the wives of priests are organizing to provide support for one another, enabling the younger wives to learn from the experience of the older ones. In the United States priests' wives have organized on a wider scale to assist the families of priests who are in crisis. When an unexpected tragedy strikes a priest and his family, this

national organization does what it can to assist with financial support to the family.

Building on earlier work

I would like to conclude by recalling some of the recommendations of the Inter-Orthodox Consultation on Women and the Question of Ordination which took place in October-November 1988 in Rhodes.

1. Are women receiving the support and encouragement from the leadership of the church in ministries which work in harmony with the specific sacerdotal ministry of the clergy? Among these the report mentions the pursuit of education; access to pastoral counselling; participation in decision-making bodies at the level of the parish, diocesan and national church; social work; involvement as choir directors, readers and singers; as iconographers; in ecumenical work; as youth leaders; and in publications and communications work.⁸
2. Has the apostolic order of deaconess been restored in all places, in all churches? According to the report (sec. 32), revival of this order “would represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world in many spheres”.
3. Are women entering the lower orders of the church (for example, sub-deacon, reader, cantor, teacher) through a blessing (*cheirothesia*) (sec. 36)?
4. Are we addressing such issues raised by feminist theologians as the use of inclusive language, the necessary analysis of certain biblical texts, specifically those of St Paul, and the submission of women as it relates to bodily uncleanness (reintroduced into our ethos from the Jewish tradition)? We have a responsibility to discuss these issues, if only to provide an Orthodox answer to these questions for our non-Orthodox fellow Christians (cf. sec. 39).

These are some of the more difficult issues which we as Orthodox women must address.

To close, I would like to recall the words of a prayer from the Orthodox ordination service of the deaconess:

O God, the Holy and Almighty, you have blessed woman through the birth in the flesh of your only-begotten son and our God from the Virgin, and you have given the grace and visitation of the Holy Spirit not to men only, but to women as well. Lord, look now upon these your servants and call them to the work of your ministry. Send down upon us the rich gift of your Holy Spirit. Preserve us in the Orthodox faith, that we may fulfill our ministry in blameless conduct according to what is pleasing to you. For to you are due all honour, glory and worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.⁹

Women in Jesus' Earthly Life

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¹ Among the latter are Athanasius, Gregory the Theologian and, though debated, Gregory of Nyssa; for a discussion of Nyssa's position see Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2d ed., Chicago, Open Court, 1995, pp. 122f. Those who distinguished "image" and "likeness" included Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.*, V,6,1), Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata*, II,22), Origen (*De principiis*, III,6,1) and Basil (*Homil. in Ps.* 48, 8; *De Spiritu Sancto*, I,2). G.B. Ladner believes the distinction is of Gnostic (Valentinian) origin; cf. "The Philosophical Anthropology of St Gregory of Nyssa", *DOP*, Vol. 12, 1958, p.63n11. Regarding the distinction in the Fathers, see Thunberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-29.

² Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979, p.67.

³ *Oratio XXXVII in Matt. 10:10*, 1-12.

⁴ Cited by E. Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, tr. S. Bingham, Redondo Beach CA, Oakwood Publications, 1991, p.90.

⁵ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New York, Penguin, 1964, p.236.

⁶ On these ministries see Eva Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy: Women and the Church*, Minneapolis, Life and Light, 1987; and *Saints and Sisterhood: The Lives of 48 Holy Women*, Minneapolis, Life and Light, 1990. Two of the most notable disciples were the sisters Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38); Joanna and Susanna (Luke 8:1) may also have accepted the call to discipleship after being healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Among the first women apostles were Mary Magdalene, Junia, Prisca, Apphia, Nyumpha, Mariamme, Fotini and Thekla; there is also St Horiaioele, who was commissioned by St Andrew, the first ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, to continue his work. Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) was the first deaconess, but we have a clearer understanding of the ministry of the deaconess from the account of St Olympias by St John Chrysostom (*PG*, Vol. 52, pp.549-623; cf. Kyriaki FitzGerald, "The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess", in T. Hopko, ed., *Women and the Priesthood*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981, pp.75-95). Among women missionaries are St Nina, who evangelized Georgia, and St Verena, who evangelized Switzerland and Germany. Women prophets mentioned in the New Testament include Anna (Luke 2:36) and the four daughters of the evangelist Philip (Acts 21:8f.). The most notable example of a woman convener of a council was the Empress Irene (Nicea 787); Eudoxia and Pulcheria had leading roles in the events which led up to Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) respectively. A noted woman defender of the faith was the Empress Theodora, who played a crucial role in the restoration of icons in 843. Two "ammas" or spiritual mothers — Sarah and Synkletika — are included along with the spiritual fathers in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* or *Gerontikon* (*PG*, Vol. 65, pp.420b-428a). Benedicta Ward includes in this category Amma Theodora, a woman who was said to be consulted by many monks; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Kalamazoo MI, Cistercian Publications, 1984, pp.82-84.

⁷ Emilianos Timiadis, "The Concern for Women in the Orthodox Tradition", *Diakonia*, Vol. 12, no.1, 1977, p.19.

⁸ Sec. 28; for the complete text see *Ecumenical Trends*, Vol. 18, no.3, March 1989, pp.36-42.

⁹ Cited by Kyriaki FitzGerald, "Orthodox Women and Pastoral Praxis: Observations and Concerns for the Church in America", in T. Stylianopoulos, ed., *Orthodox Perspectives on Pastoral Praxis*, Brookline MA, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1988, p.111.

From the beginning to the end – from the stable of Bethlehem, to Golgotha, to the garden on Easter morning – women are present in Jesus' earthly life. This is the witness of the gospels. Uncommon in terms of Jewish customs of the day, the presence of women, including some of dubious morals, among those closest to the Galilean rabbi was striking for his contemporaries. Jesus' adversaries, the Pharisees, criticized him for it, as is seen in the story of the woman caught in adultery who was brought to him (John 8:2-12). It discredited him in their eyes. His disciples as well were astonished when they found him in conversation with a woman, who was also a Samaritan and thus considered a heretic (John 4:27).

Jesus allowed himself to be touched by women: by the woman with a haemorrhage, who was considered impure (Matt. 9:18-22); by the woman who had sinned, who covered his feet with her tears and kisses (Luke 7:36-50). He gave in to the moving pleas of the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). From Galilee, a group of women accompanied him who "had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities" (Luke 8:2). Among these women, one is always named, while the names of the others differ in the different gospels: Mary called Magdalene, "from whom seven demons had gone out", an intimate friend of Jesus, who would be the first to see the Resurrected One.

The gospel texts which recall the Lord's numerous relationships with women created a problem for later Christian commentators. They thought to resolve it by covering what would normally be disreputable with pious intentions, thus justifying these dubious associations. The miseries of women – illness, impurity, ignorance, sin – are supposed to have called forth the Saviour's infinite mercy. These women represented humanity, totally lost without him. Male human beings, on the other hand, were chosen to be his apostles, to represent him and to proclaim his message of grace.