

The Priesthood of Women

A Look at Patristic Teaching

CONSTANTINOS N. YOKARINIS

¹¹ There is probably a reference here to 1 Tim. 5:10; cf. Martimort, *op. cit.*, pp.125f.; Theodorou, *Heróides*, pp.78f.; Gryson, *op. cit.*, pp.90f. Martimort includes citations from Greek monographs published in the first half of this century through 1957 (pp.143-45).

¹² Cf. Bonnie Bowan Thurston, *The Widows*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1989, p.73; cf. Theodorou, *Hé Cheirotonia*, p.18; Gryson, *op. cit.*, pp.14f.; Grierson, *op. cit.*, p.4; Martimort, *op. cit.*, pp.25f.

¹³ On the nature of the ministry of the deaconess see also the introduction to this book. A fuller investigation of this order is found in Thomas Hopko, ed., *Women and the Priesthood*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999, and in my own study, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church: Called to Holiness and Ministry*, Brookline MA, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999. The most extensive collection of primary source material translated into English on the topic of women deacons is perhaps the World Wide Website www.womenpriests.org, maintained by the Roman Catholic theologian John Wijngaards.

The ordination of women is certainly one of the most controversial issues in the Christian world today. The admission of women to the ordained ministry by more and more churches in the West has been the source of deepening ecumenical disagreement, particularly since the official decision of the Church of England in 1992 to ordain women.

When we try as Christians to resolve these disagreements, we immediately face the question of which criteria should be used to decide them. Do we appeal simply to the words of the Bible? Or to the authority of two millennia of Tradition embodied in the church? Or to the working of the Holy Spirit in the church today? Or to our God-given powers of reasoning about such matters? And if we appeal to more than one of these criteria, which if any are to have priority? For all Christians, these are theological questions.

The priesthood of women has had a long history. It arose as a serious issue in the Christian community for the first time during the period of Gnosticism and Montanism. It was revived in the divided Christian church eighteen hundred years later. A century after that, the question still has a dynamic in the life of the church which threatens to undermine all efforts to restore church unity.

During most of church history there has been little serious discussion of the admission of women to the ordained ministry. The debate is a contemporary one, raised by the decision of some Western communions to admit women to the priesthood. Although the Orthodox church has never faced the priesthood of women as an existential problem, this does not mean that the issue has been ignored. The Orthodox church wants "always to be ready to make its defence to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that is in us" (1 Pet. 3:15). Orthodox views on the subject have been articulated in special conferences, especially the inter-Orthodox meeting held in Rhodes in 1988.

Discussion of the priesthood of women cannot be limited to academic theology, because of its potential to open up a frightful chasm within the whole church. I believe we have a long way to go in examining these theological issues before we arrive at the truth. Consequently, declarations of an absolute character regarding the ordination of women, made without exhaustive theological research, can only damage the effort for church unity. Especially in the divided world in which we live today, Christian churches must be cautious and wise when debating or acting on such an extremely sensitive issue.

I have been invited, in the context of this consultation on "Discerning the Signs of the Times: Women in the Orthodox Church", to present the findings of my own research on women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopacy. This research, carried out over six years, was the basis of the doctoral thesis I submitted to the faculty of theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 1992. Entitled "The Priesthood of Women in the Context of the Ecumenical Movement", this was the first work of its kind in the Orthodox literature to treat the issue from an historical and dogmatic perspective from the time of the early church to the present day. All the aspects of and arguments around the issue which have been presented in the past by all parties involved in discussions about the exclusion of women from the priestly office were closely scrutinized in the light of patristic and dogmatic teaching.

The multi-faceted nature of the issue of the priesthood of women creates additional difficulties. Yet trusting the Lord's promise that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, he will be among them, I believe he will finally lead us in the right direction, so that, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the true answer will be found and the obstacles to unity overcome.

My research has been based exclusively on the patristic and dogmatic teaching of the Orthodox church. I should make absolutely clear at the outset that I am not going to answer the question, "Should women be accepted into the priestly office or not?" I believe that a decision on such a disputed fundamental issue belongs to the church. Consequently, any disagreement on it can be overcome only after long and exhaustive theological research. What is needed is theological common ground, and I believe my research can contribute positively to this quest.

The exclusion of women from the ordained ministry over twenty centuries of church history is a fact that no one can ignore. In seeking to understand the existing situation and the reasons for the impasse, I asked myself four questions:

– Are the arguments which are presented theologically irrefutable?

- Do these arguments correspond to the nature and substance of the problem?
- Do these arguments agree with revealed truth, so that they can be accepted as an indisputable teaching?
- Why have all the theological arguments failed to give an answer which is universally accepted?

These questions demand careful answers. In approaching them, I had to examine concurrently every possible aspect of the issue, in order to test whether the arguments and views expressed were in line with the faith and teaching of the early church and the patristic tradition. In this examination it emerged clearly that the critical point of the dispute is the "male character" of the incarnated God-Logos. I recalled the words of Maximos the Confessor: "Because of the mystery of the incarnation of the Logos, all have the ability to comprehend all biblical enigmas and types, as well as the ability to know every phenomenon and intellectual thing which occurs."¹ Here was patristic advice to leave aside all that has been written about women's ordination and take the dogma of Chalcedon as a challenging point of departure for examining the issue. My thesis is therefore based on the theology of the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). As far as I know, it is the first to approach the issue of women's ordination from this promising standpoint.

A dogma is an absolute principle of faith in the life of the church. Its authority cannot be denied. And the dogma of Chalcedon is the cornerstone of the Christian church, as it was taught by the apostles and the church fathers, and exists as the revealed truth experienced in human history.²

Having decided to approach the entire issue from a christological perspective, I had to examine a range of critical questions such as these: What is the content of biblical anthropology?

- How did the fathers understand human nature?
- How did the fathers understand the division of the first Adam into male and female form?
- What is the meaning of the expression in Orthodox dogmatic teaching that the Son of God was "perfect human being"?
- What is the meaning of the male form of the human nature of our Lord; and was this a theological or historical necessity?
- What are the implications of maleness in the divine economy?
- In what way are biological realities – male or female identity – connected with our salvation?
- Is the teaching of the church that a divided humanity and the whole world are recapitulated in the person of the God-man to be understood as an eschatological reality, an ideal "beyond" the actual existing church?

- If we define the nature of priesthood in terms of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, are we referring to the sacrifice of his perfect human nature or his maleness?
- Adam and Eve were created in the image and likeness of God. The image of God is the Son, the archetype of all human beings. Consequently, the image is only one, and it was redeemed and renewed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Is this one image of God male or female?
- Do we understand salvation in terms of ontology or in terms of biology?
- If we believe that the content of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was reconciliation and the restoration of unity, how can the priesthood be offered under the conditions of the division between male and female?
- If the Holy Spirit “blows where it chooses”, what theological support is there for saying that the characteristics (male-female) of a sinful world can be obstacles to the Spirit when the cross and the resurrection speak of a new creation?
- When we speak of the bearers of Christ’s priesthood as acting in his place and being in his type, are we understanding priesthood in terms of natural resemblance?
- Priesthood functions and is expressed in the eucharist. The church is a sacramental body; and the sacraments are a real participation in the incorruptible life of the body of Christ. Can we, while experiencing our union with Christ, invoke conditions of sin – the division between male and female – to justify theologically the exclusion of women from the priestly office?

A careful look at these questions makes it obvious that research into this subject involves a great number of topics and perspectives – the anthropological, the trinitarian, the christological, the ecclesiological, the eschatological.

The mystery of incarnation

Leaving aside for the time being all the arguments pro and con, let us focus on the mystery of incarnation. The incarnate Word is the founder of the kingdom of God, the reason of our salvation and our eschatological hope. What does the Orthodox church believe and teach about incarnation according to the dogma of Chalcedon, which is the cornerstone of the church?

Because both sides, for and against, focus on the male character of Christ, we must take the fact of God’s incarnation as our starting point, basing this theologically on the dogma of Chalcedon. In other words, the answer to the problem is connected directly with the human nature of

Christ, because the male character of his incarnation is at the heart of the problem.

The patristic understanding of the elements of the human nature of the incarnate Logos was summarized succinctly by John of Damascus: “all the attributes of the first Adam, save only his sin, these attributes being body and the intelligent and rational soul”.³ According to biblical anthropology, Adam’s human nature consisted of the following elements and properties:

- The image and likeness of God. Here the question is to which part of Adam’s nature, body or soul, these divine properties belong. According to John of Damascus, “‘after his image’ clearly refers to the side of his nature which consists of mind and free will, whereas ‘after his likeness’ means likeness in virtue, so far as that is possible.”⁴ Such an understanding implies that biological elements or characteristics are absent from the image and likeness, and that the image is only one for both sexes, male and female. This point is crucial for any theological approach to human nature. Theological anthropology must be constructed from the top down, beginning from trinitarian and christological dogma, in order to discover in human reality the unity of nature and the multiplicity of created hypostases.
- The first Adam – one and undivided human being and nature – has been “torn” into forms of existence, male and female. This distinction was added provisionally at the end in order to enable the human being as created to survive in the conditions after the fall.⁵
- One of the most important divine properties was the ability of the human person to exercise a form of leadership and power over the creation. The grammatical form of the verb *archetosan* is plural. This means that both sexes have received from the Creator the authority *in equal terms* to exercise sovereignty over the creation. This demonstrates in a clear and convincing way their equality as human beings and bearers to the same degree of the special properties, qualities and abilities assigned to both of them.

After the fall, the implications of this division or distinction into sexes change. They lose their sovereignty over creation and their equality and unity disappear. This is the starting point of their division in ontological terms. Their life is now miserable; fear, conflict, pain, deterioration and death appear as tragic consequences of their misuse of freedom.

Let us now take a synoptic look at the patristic teaching on *what* the God-Logos actually assumed, in regard to his human nature, in his incarnation.

1. According to John of Damascus, “‘the nature of the Word’ means neither the subsistence alone, nor ‘the common nature of the subsis-

tence', but 'the common nature viewed as a whole in the subsistence of the Word'"⁶ – in other words, body and soul. Human nature as a whole, both male and female, has been assumed by the incarnate Logos. If Christ as human being had belonged to the divided or "torn" human nature, he would not have been able to offer any healing to the human race, because he himself would have needed healing – and the female would have been excluded from his salvation.

It should be noted that the perfection of the human being does not exist in Adam or Eve, nor in the Virgin Mary, nor in John the Baptist, but only in the incarnate Word, who is the archetype of humanity, the image of perfection of all human beings, male and female.

2. Theologically, his conception by the Virgin Mary and from the Holy Spirit, not from man's sperm, is interpreted as abolishing the division into male and female, because in himself Christ has "recapitulated" humanity and creation.
3. The male character of his becoming human has been taken on "in order that his individuality (*idios*) might endure",⁷ even on the level of his humanity, thus proving how genuinely he is co-essential (*homoousios*) with our human nature. Thus his being male attests to a relationship, just as his hypostasis as "son of God" does. Furthermore, his male character indicates that we were given by grace what God has by nature.
4. There are two reasons for saying that the male character of his incarnation has nothing to do with any concept of human sexuality. First, he has taken on himself the pre-Fall nature of the first man, who at that stage had no awareness of his biological differentiation as male or of his sexual functioning – remembering here that the division into male and female was to serve the post-Fall conditions of the human race, while the incarnate Logos assumed the human nature without sin.

Second, the human nature of Jesus Christ has no previous existence. The human nature Christ assumed in the womb of the holy Virgin was not a complement of his mother's humanity in the way that the first Eve assumed the nature of Adam in order to be his complement. Christ's human nature was unique, because it came to existence from the pure blood and holy flesh of the Holy Virgin and from the Holy Spirit. So, the incarnated Logos became *he aparche tou phramatos*, "the beginning of a new essence", the second or "new" Adam, which means the one and undivided human being.

5. The hypostatic union produced certain results for human nature. According to patristic teaching, the incarnation of the Logos had the consequence of salvation and even taking on divine properties.⁸

6. The first Adam was created "in the image and likeness" of God, but in the case of the incarnation, the aforesaid elements are not dynamic properties in the God-man, but are fulfilled reality, since the Lord himself was made man in order to make man God. The Lord did not raise "the previously fallen image" in his God-man hypostasis, but united it to his own by grace. This is a new element, which did not exist in the human nature of the first Adam, because in the context of incarnation there is a substantial difference: we move from "in the image" to the "image", which is the Son of God.
7. The son of God is the archetype of man and woman. Consequently, it is imperative to have a clear understanding of the nature of the christological archetype, which the person of grace and salvation is invited and challenged to imitate (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1), in order to become a child of the kingdom of God.

Our aim is to obtain the possessions of his sacrifice, because he is the only High Priest and the priesthood belongs exclusively to him.

The traditional view that priesthood belongs exclusively to men because the incarnate Logos was a male human being reduces the archetype of all human beings to the level of a *natural resemblance*. This is understandable in terms of our sexuality, which is characterized by polarity, conflict and passion and related to the situation after the fall. But patristic teaching is more than clear on this point. Jesus Christ united humanity, and the difference between male and female has been taken away by the Spirit in a mysterious way.

Priesthood has an ontological content. It is a gift and function of the Holy Spirit and cannot be related to biological elements. In its ecclesiological dimension the priesthood cannot be linked to any form of division or particularity known as male or female.

The sacrifice on the holy cross is a sacrifice of the God-man, not of his maleness. Therefore the male character of his humanity cannot be used as a criterion for excluding women from the priesthood, because this would completely contradict the dogma of Chalcedon. There is no dogmatic decision that would justify such an exception based on the distinction of sexes; the only reasons for doing so are connected with the human weakness for understanding and living the mystery of the divine economy, because, according to Maximos the Confessor, "[Christ] is seen and understood by many people as flesh and not as Logos, although truly he is Logos".⁹

Of course, it cannot be denied that some fathers rejected female ordination as emphatically as possible, basing their claim that a woman is unsuited to ministerial orders on the fact of her subordination to the man – particularly if one takes into consideration God's intervention to define

the structure of human relationships, fixing the duties and rights of male and female, so that by definition woman is seen as incapable of receiving the divine grace that would empower her to perform the duties of the ministry.

Our human weakness has been aggravated by negative historic conditions such as social stratification, the domineering role of men, the disadvantageous position of women. Interpersonal relations between the two sexes throughout history have been kept in a climate of conflict and division. The tradition of the church as an expression of how we live our faith is formed in the reality of its historical context. The church has grown up and organized itself in the realm of history; it is not an extraterrestrial community. So it is not surprising that it has been influenced to a certain extent by the dominant patriarchal structures and ideas of the Graeco-Roman world in which Christianity emerged. The church has always struggled to get rid of any form of sin. Only in this context can the survival of such elements of division as the exclusion of women from priesthood be understood.

It is theologically inconsistent to believe in Christ, who "recapitulated" the divided human being and the creation in his God-man hypostasis, and at the same time to support views such as the exclusion of woman from the priesthood because of her sex. It is ironic that this exclusion is based on the heart of our salvation, Christ's sacrifice – which is precisely the restoration of the unity of a divided world as a presupposition of the restoration of our communion in God.

The church has an eschatological destiny and character, but it is very often forgotten that there can be no *eschaton* without a reference to our presence in history. As the church struggles to make the kingdom of God a reality, the first thing to be overcome is every form of division. John Chrysostomos specifically says: "See the dignity of the church, the angelic condition! No distinction there, 'neither male nor female'. I would that the churches were such now!"¹⁰ The Christian church serves the kingdom of God. Its duty is actively to prepare its members in the present historical setting to overcome the division which marks the presence of sin. If we really want the kingdom of God to come, as we pray, then it is imperative to abandon our sexist views. This idea is not mine; it belongs to our Lord, as Clement of Rome says in the *kyriakon logion*.¹¹

If our theological research has clarified the common position of our dogmatic and liturgical tradition that Christ is "the offerer and the offered" and that in the holy sacrament "God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, dispenses all, while the priest lends his tongue and affords his hand",¹² then a convergence of views and attitudes of the churches is possible within the framework of the ecumenical movement.

For academic theology, therefore, the dogma of Chalcedon would seem to offer a key that can unlock the impasse in which we find ourselves and open up new horizons for approaching this issue. Let me finish this brief summary of my research by quoting another distinguished father of the church, Gregory the Theologian: "There is one Maker of man and woman; one debt is owed by children to both their parents."¹³

An ecclesiological perspective

The church is the work of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father into the world. Just as it is the new unity of human nature purified by Christ, the unique Body of Christ, so too it is the multiplicity of persons, who all receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The object of the work of the Son is the common nature: this is what Christ redeems, purifies and recapitulates. The work of the Holy Spirit is directed to persons, communicating the fullness of grace to each human hypostasis in the church, making each member of the Body of Christ a conscious co-worker with God, a personal witness to the truth. This is why the Holy Spirit appeared on the day of Pentecost in a multiplicity of flames resting on each person present. The relation between the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit in the church might seem to have the character of an antinomy: the Holy Spirit diversifies what Christ unifies. Yet what is supreme in this diversity is its perfect concord, what is manifested in this unity is its infinite richness.

But even more must be said: without this diversity of persons, the natural unity could not be realized, and in its place would come the abstract, administrative unity of blind submission by members of a collective. There would be no place for the development of persons; and diversity would be transformed into its opposite: the mutual oppression of individual and limited beings. There can be no unity of nature without diversity of persons, and no persons fully realized outside natural unity. The meaning of the church as one and catholic demands a perfect harmony of two terms: unity and diversity, nature and persons.

There are thus two dogmatic reasons why the divine grace of the Holy Spirit cannot be prevented by the biological elements of human nature such as maleness or femaleness: the christological unity of human nature, and the pneumatological diversity of the human person. Priesthood as a spiritual gift and power belongs only to persons.

NOTES

- ¹ Maximus the Confessor, *Kephalaia peri Theologias, Hekatomtas A,66; PG 90, 1108A.*
- ² While the Oriental Orthodox churches do not include Chalcedon among the ecumenical councils, they do fully accept its theological conclusions regarding the incarnation of Christ.
- ³ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, III, 13 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2d series, Vol. 9, p.57).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, II,12 (*NPF, ibid.*, p.31).
- ⁵ Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 16,14 (*NPF*, 2d series, Vol. 5, p.406): "... following out, or rather perceiving beforehand by his power of foreknowledge what, in a state of independence and freedom, is the tendency of the motion of man's will – as he saw, I say, what would be – he devised for his image the distinction of male and female, which has no reference to the Divine Archetype, but, as we have said, is an approximation to the less rational nature."
- ⁶ *Op. cit.*, 3,11 (*NPF, loc. cit.*, p.55).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, IV,4 (*NPF, ibid.*, p.75).
- ⁸ See John of Damascus, *ibid.*, IV,18 (*NPF, ibid.*, p.66): "He therefore assumed the whole man, even the fairest part of him, which had become diseased, in order that he might bestow salvation on the whole... Therefore, God the Word, wishing to restore that which was in his own image, became man. But what is that which was in his own image, unless mind?"; cf. Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, Discourse III, para. 33 (*NPF*, 2d series, Vol. 4, p.412): "As we are all from earth and die in Adam, so being regenerated from above of water and Spirit, in Christ we are all quickened; the flesh being no longer earthly, but being henceforth made Word, by reason of God's Word who for our sake 'became flesh'."
- ⁹ *Op. cit.*, PG 90, 1152A.
- ¹⁰ St John Chrysostom, *Homily III on Acts* (*NPF*, 1st series, vol. 11, p.18).
- ¹¹ Clement of Rome, *Pros Korinthious*, B'XIII, 1,44.
- ¹² St John Chrysostom, *Homily 86 on John*, para. 4 (*NPF*, 1st series, vol. 14, p.326).
- ¹³ Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration*, 37,6 (*NPF*, 2d series, Vol. 7, p.338).

Women, Power and Social Movements

NICHOLAS K. APOSTOLA

The issue of the place and role of women in the church has been raised to a new degree of importance largely because of the changing roles of women in civil society and the development of modern political and social analysis. This is not to downplay the significance of the issue. For the first time the church has been obliged to begin to think about the nature of gender roles in its structure and decision-making institutions. However, the church is a unique institution in society, and for believers these issues have a meaning beyond the immediate, even though the need to address them is very immediate and very real.

For many people – both men and women – this issue raises questions of justice and the equality of persons. And while these ideas have gained new meanings as a result of the political and social struggles beginning with the Enlightenment, they are not foreign to Christianity or in fact to the entire Judaeo-Christian tradition. Many would say that the very claim that there is an intrinsic and inalienable character to "human rights", to the dignity of the human person, is due in large part to this tradition. Who of us would say that God is not just; that God does not demand justice? Who of us would say that God does not love each of his children equally? Thus it seems to me that the question is not whether the church believes in the equality of and justice for all persons. It is what does equality mean? And how does God effect justice?

The difficulty for many within the church today is that these questions are being raised in a language and style that seem foreign. Arguments and rationales have been borrowed from modern political and social thought and given only the slightest veneer of theological language. In itself the fact that the ideas have been borrowed, that developments in civil society are forcing the church to look anew at the underlying principles of its own beliefs, is not bad. But it would become problematic if these forces were to direct not only the church but also society as a whole to an understanding of the nature of creation, human