

¹¹ *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p.140; cf. Num. 15:37-41; Deut. 22:12.

¹² *Kontakio of Romanos*, p.124.

¹³ Here we should mention an ancient non-conciliar canon of the Orthodox church – Canon II of *The Letter of the Blessed Dionysius*. It reads: "Menstruous women ought not to come to the holy table or touch the holy of holies (Greek: 'the body and blood of Christ'), nor to churches, but to pray elsewhere." Balsamon's note on this canon adduces the example of the woman with the issue of blood who dared to touch only the hem of Jesus' garment. Cf. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2d series, Vol. 16, repr. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974, p.600. This canon contradicts the views of the 3rd-century *Didascalia Apostolorum*, which objects to the view that Jewish ceremonial law is binding on Christians after baptism: "If you think, O woman, that in the seven days of your menstrual flow you are void of the Holy Spirit; if you die in those days, you will depart empty and without hope. But if the Holy Spirit is always in you.... why do you keep yourself from approaching the works of the Holy Spirit...? Wherefore, beloved.... do not observe these things, nor think them uncleanness; and do not refrain yourselves on their account, nor seek after sprinklings or baptisms or purification for these things."

¹⁴ On *hygiēs*, cf. *The Analytical Greek Lexicon*, London, Samuel Bagster, 1973, pp.395, 412; on *sōzein*, G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 7, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1971, p.990.

¹⁵ See Nancy Forest-Flicr, "Headship in Marriage: A Closer Look at Ephesians 5", *The Handmaiden*, Vol. 1, 2, 1996, p.25.

¹⁶ Cf. Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, Collegeville MN, Liturgical Press, 1976, pp.8, 55-61.

¹⁷ Cf. René Laurentin, "Mary: Model of the Charismatic as Seen in Acts 1-2, Luke 1-2 and John", in Vincent P. Branick, ed., *Mary, the Spirit and the Church*, Ramsey NJ, Paulist Press, 1980, pp.39-41.

¹⁸ Cf. Peter E. Gillquist, ed., *Raising Them Right: A Saint's Advice on Raising Children*, by *Theophan the Recluse*, Mt Hermon CA, Conciliar Press, 1989, pp.48, 15, 10ff.

¹⁹ Cf. Andre Feuillet, *Jesus and His Mother*, Still River MA, St Bede's Publications, 1974, p.209.

²⁰ This is a topic of heated debate among Christians today, including Orthodox Christians. Patristic sources did not agree and indeed sometimes individual authors were inconsistent; for example, St Jerome said in one place that "if woman shall not rise again as woman, nor the man as man, there will be no resurrection of the dead" (*Letter 108 to the Virgin Eustochia*, 23), but at another point argued with Rufinus that in the resurrection women will be turned into men. To this Rufinus responds: "If it is man alone who is to receive at the resurrection the form of clay which was originally given in Paradise, what becomes of that which is written, 'He made them male and female, and blessed them'?"; *Apology*, 1, 24, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, p.447.

Women in the Early Christian Church

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A study of the rich bibliography related to the position of women at different points in the historical course of Christianity leads directly to the conclusion that women and men are equal citizens of the kingdom of heaven, but that, compared to men, women are unequal and degraded members of the social expression of the church. The first reality is attributed to the grace, the mercy and the love of God, which has been manifested through the mystery of divine economy; the second is attributed to fallen human nature.

The kingdom of heaven is not only an eschatological reality. Within the eucharistic community, the faithful experience the sanctifying grace of God which transforms the holy gifts into the flesh and blood of Christ and the faithful into participants in the glory of the Lord; and created time is shifted from the seventh day of the perishable creation into the eighth day of the new creation, which is restored by Christ.

The fourth ecumenical council (Chalcedon 451) defined the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ and the salvation of the faithful by him and set forth succinctly the basic principle of the salvation of all humankind: what is not assumed is not healed.

This means that the Son and Word of God possessed all of human nature, both male and female, and gave it the possibility of being saved from the determinism of corruption and death. This possibility is given to everyone; and it depends upon the free cooperation of men and women whether they will become members of Christ's body and participants in his imperishable glory.

This unprecedented spiritual experience of the faithful, both men and women, has borne rich fruit throughout the history of the church from the earliest centuries until today. Men and women have testified to the truth of the gospel with their words, their behaviour and their lives, and have supported the faith of other Christians. A chorus of martyrs, men

and women, were thrown to the lions because they did not worship the emperor as their god.

The redemptive grace of God does not make any exceptions. The generous gifts of the Holy Spirit are bestowed equally on men, women and children. In an Orthodox church this truth is depicted on the walls and on the iconostasis, where men and women saints are equally honoured. It is especially visible at the moment when all the faithful are invited, without discrimination, to participate in the life-giving holy banquet. In this holy communion for redemption and eternal life there are no exceptions.

However, the characteristics of this kingdom of God are quite different from those of this world of decay and corruption. That is why many propositions about life which would liberate people from self-centred behaviours gain acceptance only very slowly and with great effort.

Undoubtedly, the civilization that was dominant in the Mediterranean basin for about two thousand years before the birth of Christ was governed by men. Women were considered more or less as instruments of propagation and pleasure, inferior in intellectual ability and unsuitable for any form of creative social presence. The callous view of women and their position which prevailed in the Graeco-Roman world was reinforced by the curse of the Mosaic law, in which sin, evil and woman acquired the same negative connotations, making it impossible for women to play a creative role in social life. Woman's position was determined by reference to the man, who ruled over her, oppressed her, used her and approached or rejected her according to her menstrual cycle.

It was in this mosaic of cultures – in which the ancient classical spirit encountered the Orient and Rome, the rabbinic traditions in Palestine vigorously resisted outside influences and the culture of the Egyptians created strong tendencies to mingle ideas and values – that the first Christian communities were founded, consisting of men, women and children.

Clement, the bishop of Rome towards the end of the first century after the birth of Christ, offers in his letter to the church in Corinth a clear image of the moral standards and social behaviour of the Christian woman. She should have an unblemished, modest and clear conscience. She should submit to her husband, attend to her duties to the family and be prudent and self-controlled as to her impulses. In her communication with others gentleness and self-restraint should characterize everything she says, and she should prefer to remain silent. This obviously corresponds to the portrait of an exemplary woman according to the social standards of that time, when the culture did not permit a woman any role other than that of the faithful wife, the affectionate mother, the silent

housekeeper, characterized by moderation in her actions and wishes. We could say that this model of the woman in society is not very different from the Penelope of the Homeric epic. However, there is one basic difference: the prospect of salvation. In this letter, however, Clement of Rome does not mention any other role for the women in the eucharistic community apart from the basic information that she participates in it.

A few years later, in his letters to the church of Smyrna and his student Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch mentions the categories of virgins and widows in the church and the care that the church owes them. About the same time Polycarp, in his letter to the Philippians, also mentions the special class of widows, whose duty is to be virtuous, irreproachable and modest. Widows either receive the care of the community or devote themselves to acts of charity.

The works of the apostolic fathers in the middle of the second century underscore the differences between the pagan women and Christian women. The liberal morality of pagan women is not acceptable for the Christian woman, who is characterized by modesty and virtue.

The writings of the third-century Alexandrian fathers Clement and Origen offer a number of philosophical views about women but no significant information about their contribution to the life of the church. During this period the church had to face two conflicting movements of Gnostics. One, led by Epiphanius the son of Carpocrates, supported free love, while the other, with Tatian as its leader, showed contempt towards marriage and praised a life of extreme asceticism.

Clement of Alexandria responded to the heretical views of contemporary Gnostics by saying that men and women have the same substance and are spiritually equal and that their only difference lies in their biological functions; but he offers no further information about the position of women in the life of the church.

Origen, who was the successor of Clement in the catechetical school of Alexandria (185-254), demonstrated extreme ascetic tendencies in his own life, strictly following the passage in the gospel of Matthew which speaks of those "who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12). He praises chastity as a supreme quality, while allowing marriage only as a concession to human weakness.

It is obvious that the extreme ascetic tendencies of the Gnostics which influenced Origen were easily supported by the misogyny of the Old Testament. A similar attitude towards women was adopted by Tertullian (160-225), who identified Eve – and therefore all women – with sin. In this understanding, the sexual instinct is considered to be the source of sin. Rather than trying to transform it – as with any other

human urge, wish or decision – in the new reality in Christ, the person chooses abstinence instead.

The general acceptance of abstinence nurtured asceticism, both male and female. Of course, not all of those flowers which bloomed and bore fruit in the desert were rooted in an heretical contempt for the human body which the Lord assumed and made incorruptible. The anchorite tendency started from a different perspective on the kingdom of heaven, which emphasized the possibility for the believer to experience the kingdom of heaven immediately. This would demand the renunciation of anything standing in the way of salvation, such as attachment to physical needs, earthly possessions, fame. It seems that the heretical challenges for abstinence and spirituality were intense at that time; and the church responded in its own spiritual way.

The sources indicate that female monasticism emerged towards the end of the third century. The reason it prospered was the desire on the part of gifted women to achieve spiritual perfection and to escape from the oppression of a society ruled by men, with its unwanted arranged marriages and restrictive social conventions. Women's monasticism was revolutionary by the standards of that time, not only because it overcame social prejudices, but also because women's monasteries were threatened by many dangers from the outside, such as raids by barbarians and bandits. Not surprisingly, some of their contemporaries conceded with admiration that the nuns had acquired a "male ethos".

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, and Epiphanius, bishop of Salamine in Cyprus, specifically mention in their writings the roles that women cannot play in the eucharistic community. The church's response to the challenge of Gnosticism for the priesthood of women was clearly negative. At a time when the social role of women was confined either to silence and modesty at the margins of society or to vulgarity, immorality and intrigues, the Gnostics offered women the possibility of playing an important role in the community. Epiphanius rejects any such prospect for Christian women, while clearly delimiting the duties of deaconesses.

Basil of Ankara and Methodius of Olympus, who wrote at the beginning of the fourth century, emphasized the quality of chastity. Spiritual freedom can be experienced in this world. It is possible for a woman with a chaste life to avoid the social repression of marriage and select another way of life, which is blessed and protected by the church. Thus she enters the order of deaconesses, widows or virgins.

Deaconesses, widows and virgins

Besides the information provided by the New Testament about the role of *deaconesses* in the early church, their mission was depicted in

subsequent Christian texts as providing guidance to women who had been converted to Christianity, so that they would live according to their new faith. The text of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which is of Syrian origin and dates back to the fourth century, contains a very important piece of information bearing on the revival of the institution of deaconesses which has attracted great interest among Orthodox churches today. Its description of the service for the appointment of a deaconess sets out an order in which the prayer that is read and the laying on of hands prove that it is an ordination ceremony. The duties of the deaconess do not include priesthood, sermons or teaching but mostly support for women in suffering, especially in cases where it would be improper for male deacons to face or touch a woman's naked body.

It is obvious that the order of deaconesses derives from a sense of pastoral solicitude regarding the suffering of Christian woman and the spiritual guidance of newly converted women. At the same time, deaconesses had an auxiliary but active role during the sacrament of baptism, again probably in connection with the need to avoid scandal at the sight of a naked woman's body, especially before the baptism of infants was established, and in bringing the holy communion to sick women at home.

Widows were also a very active class in the New Testament and early Christian periods. A woman without a husband was excluded from any rights in the community. Even when the social environment chose the man she would marry, she still ran the risk of living in seclusion if she did not give birth to a son. Again, if she had given birth to a son and later lost her husband, she would have to face social rejection and actual poverty, for there was at this period of time no form of organized social welfare for widows and orphans. The solicitude of the church was thus substantial. Widows were unprotected women, who as a rule needed the charity of all Christians.

According to the historical sources, however, widows also played active roles in the Christian community. Not only did they accept the donations of others but they themselves participated efficiently in acts of charity and welfare. They visited the sick, gave advice to Christian women, prayed, fasted and participated in the sacramental life of the church. No form of the imposition of hands on widows is recorded anywhere; however, their duties do not seem to be different from those of deaconesses.

The particular emphasis given to chastity during the first two centuries, when the church was fighting against the heretics, led to the emergence of a recognized class of *virgins* within the life of the church.

At the end of the third century, Methodius of Olympus in his work *Symposium on Virgins, or Concerning Chastity* praises chastity as it is

presented by women themselves and in the way they experience it. A virgin woman is full of glamour, radiance and magnificence since she is dedicated to the church, which according to the Apocalypse is “our mother”, the “temple and tabernacle of God” (Rev. 12:1-6). Chastity is highly praised, whereas marriage is considered a need of the fallen human nature.

In fact, Christians in the Mediterranean basin at the end of the third century considered chastity as the supreme gift from heaven, an angelic quality on earth. Women who chose chastity belonged to the categories mentioned earlier – nuns, widows and virgins – and believed that the rejection of the sex instinct could contribute to spiritual perfection. Those who did not choose virginity are confined to the roles of mother and wife.

In the New Testament we see all the marginal and stigmatized groups of the society finding a place near Christ: prostitutes, tax-collectors, Gentiles, children, those possessed by demons, lepers, bandits. For the first time, women find their place. The idea of motherhood as a woman’s sole mission was surpassed, and the reliability of women was recognized, as in the case of the Myrrh-Bearing Women who came to the empty tomb. These are signs pointing to the transformation of an ossified and callous society governed by men alone. But solidified mentalities change at a very slow pace, because the grace of God presupposes voluntary human cooperation. Hundreds of years later, after centuries of Christian life in Western societies, a different social situation seems possible for women, after the chain reaction in all aspects of life precipitated by the Industrial Revolution.

Women today are successfully assuming new and creative roles in society and are rightfully seeking a re-evaluation of their position in the life of the church. Certainly the service of contemporary women in the life of the parish and diocese varies according to the needs and the challenges that the local church accepts. This presence vindicates women and proves the spiritual equality concerning salvation and its expression in the society.

The Women in the Easter Narrative

Apostles of the Apostles

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In his commentary on the Song of Solomon, St Hippolytus of Rome sets forth an allegorical interpretation of the biblical text, in which he also brings out his theological views.

Hippolytus interprets Song of Solomon 3:1ff. by means of the Easter narrative as found in the Matthean and Johannine gospel traditions. Here he introduces the symbolism of the old and the new Eve, who for Hippolytus are “types” (*typoi*) for the synagogue and the church respectively. According to the commentary (ch. 25), the transition from synagogue to church, from the old Eve to the new Eve, takes place by means of the Tree of Life, which is itself the Risen One and to which Eve clings passionately, “in order to be able to rise into the air”. This begins at the moment in which the women encounter the Risen One and continues through their proclamation of the resurrection; as *typoi* of the new Eve, the women become “apostles of Christ”.

In the woman who clings to the feet of Jesus (Johannine tradition) in order to ascend along with him, Hippolytus sees Eve, whom Christ brings with him as a “sacrifice” in the sense of an offering (*dōron*) to his Father. Eve is no longer a fallen woman, but rather one who has been redeemed; it is no longer the Tree of Knowledge which she is touching, but rather the Risen One, the Tree of Life. According to Hippolytus, the Eve who touches the Tree of Life, the tree which overcomes death, is the new Eve, the church.

In this same chapter of the commentary, Hippolytus speaks of the inner connection between the old Eve and the new Eve. As noted above, the women in the Easter narrative are *typoi* of the new Eve; and if the old Eve represents the synagogue, then the women witnesses to the resurrection, as *typoi* of the new Eve, represent the church. The women in the Easter narrative are sent by the Risen One to the disciples, to proclaim the resurrection to them. Thus they become “apostles to the apostles”, or “apostles of the apostles”.