

## The Witness of Women Saints

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In his novel *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, Paulo Coelho tells the following story:

“Do you know the exercise of the Other? It’s part of a story written a hundred years ago, whose author...”

“Forget the author, and tell me the story,” I interrupted. We were once more walking along the only street in Saint-Savin.

“A man runs into an old friend who had somehow never been able to make it in life. ‘I should give him some money,’ he thinks. But instead he learns that his old friend has grown rich and is actually seeking him out to repay the old debts he had run up over the years.

“They go to a bar they used to frequent together, and the friend buys drinks for everyone there. When they ask him how he became so successful, he answers that until only a few days ago, he had been living the role of the ‘Other’.

“‘What is the Other?’, they ask.

“The ‘Other is the one who taught me what I should be like, not what I am. The Other believes that it is our obligation to spend our entire life thinking about how to get our hands on as much money as possible so that we will not die of hunger when we are old. So we think so much about money and our plans for acquiring it that we discover we are alive only when our days on earth are practically done. And then it’s too late.’

“‘And you? Who are you?’

“‘I am just like everyone else who listens to their heart: a person who is enchanted by the mystery of life. Who is open to miracles, who experiences joy and enthusiasm for what they do. It’s just that the Other, afraid of disappointment, kept me from taking action.’ “‘But there is suffering in life,’ one of the listeners said. “‘And there are defeats. No one can avoid them. But it’s better to lose some of the battles in the struggle for your dreams than to be defeated without ever even knowing what you’re fighting for.’

“‘That’s it?’, another listener asked.

“‘Yes, that’s it. When I learned this, I resolved to become the person I had always wanted to be. The Other stood there in the corner of my room, watch-

ing me, but I will never let the Other into myself again – even though it has already tried to frighten me, warning me that it’s risky not to think about the future.

“‘From the moment that I ousted the Other from my life, the Divine Energy began to perform its miracles.’”<sup>1</sup>

What sainthood does is to articulate the entire meaning of the reality of the Christ event for humankind.

A number of ways of doing this present themselves to us. But the dominant one within the churches is always the doctrinal approach. Orthodox believers are supposed to stick to the “articles of faith as revealed by God”. In this way, however, Christ is often reduced to a sublime abstraction – always a positive abstraction, to be sure, but one that we can find we do not really know when we have to translate it into our experience in the communities where we live.

I suggest that there is another way of proceeding, which is simply to contemplate and experience Christ in relation to our own situation and our way of doing things. As indicated by the passage quoted above, the liberation Jesus brings is total liberation. It is not possible to speak of physical liberation separated or divorced from spiritual liberation. The physical is included in the spiritual. The truly spiritual embraces all the material, physical life of human beings and of our communities.

The veneration of the women saints for me is linked to the sort of religion my grandmothers had and I imagine will be a phase in our children’s religion. The cult of Mary seems to me to be linked to that of the women saints.

There are women saints who were the incarnation of Christianity for their time, such as St Sanduxt at the time of the apostle Thaddaeus and St Rhipsimea in the midst of turmoil during the conversion of Armenia. But we must rediscover more recent saints. I cannot imagine offering the ancient ones as examples to people who come to confide their troubles to me. We should be aware that sainthood does not stop with the Middle Ages, that our age has its own women saints, who can enter into our private devotions. If they feel real to us, this will not be just folklore we have picked up.

I have often experienced a sort of intimacy or friendship with the Blessed Virgin Mary, as though I have entered into a personal relationship with her as a figure emerging from history at the impulse of the Spirit. I perceive her within an historical perspective that causes me to feel equally in solidarity with the religious society of past centuries, that is, with the entire society and not just a few representative individuals. This historical perspective is part (though only a part) of the total perspective of the church – one of the “points of contact” which when gathered together will reveal to us the universal Christ.

This nearness of the holy is not difficult to imagine, Paulo Coelho tells us:

She is the feminine face of God. She has her own divinity... You should know that this woman – the Goddess, the Virgin Mary, the Shechinah, the Great Mother, Isis, Sofia, slave and mistress – is present in every religion on the face of the earth. She has been forgotten, prohibited and disguised, but Her cult has come down from millennium to millennium and continues to survive today.

One of the faces of God is the face of a woman.

Sainthood is being like God, who is love. I have never met a man or a woman, however debased, in whom I could not finally recognize this germ of sainthood; but the sainthood which is canonized or at least recognized is that which has grown and blossomed and is conscious of its origin – “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). This sainthood does not do away with our human limitations of character or intelligence, our various complexes, nor the repercussions all this can have for what is called a “moral” life. Sainthood for each person is to love God and other people as greatly as possible, just with that which he or she is.

There is no sainthood without the often painful detachment which the love of God and of others demands. In this sense, mortification is necessarily linked to the very mission and vocation of sainthood. In this mortification there is inevitably an ascetic element, which is no less inevitably disagreeable. But as the Armenian philosopher David the Invincible taught, one cannot die to oneself without giving oneself up.

This necessary mortification, according to David the Invincible, can be authentic only under three conditions. The first is relationship to Jesus Christ:

If mortification is purely external, and does not take place in a spirit of poverty or in harmony with Christ or Mary as model, it does not amount to much. Mortification has meaning only in the course of an authentic spiritual life whose source is Jesus Christ, and which is bent on following him through all the gropings, the acquiescences, the joys, the sorrows, the choices of a human life, nourished by his word, the sacraments and the example of the saints.

The second condition is freeing oneself for prayer:

There is, perhaps, one mortification, namely the regular insertion of times of prayer into one’s life.

And the third is service to others:

The privileged realm in which one experiences self-divestment is that of service to others, in any case for a layperson. There seems to be a deep link between really giving one’s attention to others and becoming detached from oneself.

Indeed, a woman saint is a woman who has succeeded in the greatest of successes, in being the way God intended to make us. In dying on the cross, our Master succeeded in starting a movement which turned the world upside down and which is still going after two thousand years. Can we imagine, apart from him, any man or woman more successful than St Augustine, or the sainted women of the gospels, or St Theresa? Anyone who would have had more influence on history, or carried to a higher degree the highest human potentialities? And was it not their saintliness which enabled them to succeed? Where would they have been without it?

But are there saints among us today?

Saints can be recognized by a radiance which one suspects is the result of a secret success, for it conceals itself behind a profound modesty. These are persons whose depth is not written in their faces or gestures, nor heard in their voices or what they say, but which reveals itself gradually when we know them very well and have experienced it ourselves, most often by chance.

We may consider Mary to be the greatest example of sainthood, but it is unlikely that she appeared to be so to people of her own time. It is not by chance that the gospels are practically silent about her. The same has probably been true for the women saints of every age, and even more so for those of today. Our world is too involved in running after sports stars and entertainers for the woman saint not to be left completely in the shadows. It is in the very nature of a saint to be in the shadow. *But it is a shadow that shines.*

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When I think about the reasons why I believe, my philosophy of course appears to me to be a fairly stable edifice. But what is most important is that I have encountered the living God in other people. I have guessed at, I have seen, I have recognized God’s face in certain persons.

### **Mamie’s witness**

My maternal grandmother, Fendok Nouchik Avighian (Mamie), moulded my way of being and passed on to me the oral tradition of the Scriptures and theology in a lyrical, spontaneous, specifically feminine way which had nothing formal about it.

Fendok was the daughter of a couple who adored her from birth. They were heads of the village of Mouch in western Armenia, and could give her whatever she wanted. Fendok was a pretty girl, but did not become aware of her beauty even when she grew up. She was introverted and had no lack of imagination, but the massacres of the Armenians carried out by the Turks allowed her no chance to develop her gifts.

After the genocide, she found herself an orphan in Tigranagert, waiting to be married. She soon made the acquaintance of a rich woman of that region, who adopted her. Like many young women of that era she was happy when, on arriving at Aleppo, a marriage was arranged for her.

From the day she was married, Fendok concentrated actively on her husband and her housework. She brought a daughter into the world, soon after settling in Décines, in France. With the birth of her daughter, her happiness seemed complete, and she devoted all her energies to the comfort of her little family. She was also frequently employed as a factory worker, generously helping her husband. From time to time she received a call for help from a neighbour, but Fendok preferred to keep her time and energy for her own needs. Why should she get involved in other people's problems? Her innocence would be compromised.

As an Armenian and a woman, many no doubt considered her the lowest of the low. But I was struck by her confession of faith in Jesus the Messiah, and by the reason she gave for her faith: "Lord God, light of mercy," she called him. Compare this with Mary Magdalene's confession of Jesus after his resurrection.

What do we mean when we say we considered Mamie as a disciple – a saint – in our family?

Although she was illiterate, she read the Bible through her own experiences. This is the essential thing.

The life of faith gave her back her real humanity, the way God created her, so that she could go beyond her child-martyr experience. What was eternal life for her, if not abundance, both physical and spiritual? It is being thirsty which can make us understand that we need the water of eternal life. Hunger and thirst are dehumanizing experiences. Those who are hungry and thirsty lose their dignity entirely. It is sinful to separate the needs of the body from those of the spirit.

Jesus says: life is here. The kingdom is here, now; eternal life is life in all its fullness, love and justice here and now, in our earthly lives.

After the long illness and death of her husband, Fendok was condemned to doing the most menial and lowest-paid work. She had to wait on her landlord whenever he sent for her. Even at home in her miserable lodgings, there was no chance for her to rest.

The rest of Fendok's story is of little importance, but when she returned to Lebanon her family welcomed her most joyfully. What strikes me is that when this woman had discovered the truth she became a witness to those she loved. She must have been very convincing, because we believed what she told us. She realized that Jesus came especially for the poor and the oppressed.

When Fendok died, nobody said that a unique woman was gone from this earth. Who knows? Perhaps it was her "angel"-like quality which drew her to Jesus. For me, what is interesting about Mamie's witness is the way it shows how someone very humble *can* pass on the gospel. And that is just what the high and mighty would deny!

### **A kind of resurrection**

Mamie's elder sister Margaret had spent her life taking care of and serving others and raising her family. She was happy with her family and her life was going well.

Late one night, young Mamie was awakened by a Kurd who told her that her sister had been in a quarrel with Turkish soldiers. She was taken to the bank of the Euphrates River. When she saw the group of police officers by the river, she realized that something terrible had happened. And there on the wet ground she saw the body of her sister, carefully laid on a mat on the bare earth.

Stunned by grief, Mamie felt her legs give way. She began to weep, and threw herself at the feet of a Kurdish officer, begging him to tell her what had happened. "Your sister committed suicide," they told her. "She threw herself in the river."

But Mamie could not believe it. She kept saying over and over, "My sister would never have committed suicide. She was murdered."

Mamie was informed that the suicide had been discovered by the servant of her father Sarkis, who had recently been killed, and that she must now wait patiently for justice to take its course. There was nothing else to do for the time being. "Don't worry," they told her, "justice will be done."

It did not take long for Mamie to understand that if she just waited, nothing would happen. She had to take charge of things herself. She decided that the criminal who had murdered her sister should be punished. A new woman was born in her.

With the help of some political groups, she had her story published in the newspapers. She joined in the struggle of those fighting against the deaths caused by the Genocide of 1915, and she rallied the courage of women who had lost daughters or sisters. She worked with the women in the shanty towns, teaching them to recognize their rights and their dig-

nity. Mamie was once bent beneath her yoke, made timid by tradition, fear and resignation, but today she stands up straight. She dedicates her life to helping other women to stand up straight as well.

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox and his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing (Luke 13:10-18).

Jesus said to Mamie without hesitation: "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity!" *You are somebody*, he said to her. *You are a child of God. You are a human being, as marvellous and as wise as every other. You are as capable of dignity and fulfilment as anyone.*

Jesus made his way to Mamie, and he touched her. Human contact can make all the difference between an existence bowed with resignation and a life which goes forward, upright and confident. Her body, which was bowed, straightened up. That is what his kind hands could mean to someone.

"She is the daughter of Sarkis," Jesus says to us now. Sarkis's family can count descendants, men and women. *She counts too.*

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Paulo Coelho, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, tr. Alan R. Clarke, New York, Harper Collins, 1966.

## The Meaning of Ministry

ELISABETH BEHR-SIGEL

**An introductory note by Fr Boris Bobrinsky:** For some years, the access of women to certain ordained ministries in the church has become more and more of an issue within Orthodoxy. This is due not only to the indirect influence of other churches, but also to the cumulative effect of the profound changes in the place of women in modern society and the consequent reflection by a number of Orthodox women. Among the most notable of these is Elisabeth Behr-Sigel. In this short essay she offers a remarkable synthesis of earlier discussions regarding the theological meaning of ministries in the church.

To be sure, on this complex topic on which no Orthodox position has yet been clearly defined (because it is a new issue), anyone can have intuitions, convictions and even prejudices – and the viewpoint set forth in what follows is one respectable position among others which are equally respectable. What is important is that reflection is taking place, even if we do not yet know the outcome. The church is constantly being confronted with challenges from the world, and if it is to show itself in its eternal youthfulness it must respond to the signs of the times. Of course this does not mean bending under pressure from the world, but rather, with the help of the Holy Spirit – thus, in the tradition of the church – having serious, profound and creative answers corresponding to the new realities of the human race on its way towards the kingdom of God.

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Ministry, from the Latin *ministerium*, means, according to its etymology, "service". Ministry is the office of one who serves. A minister is a servant. In the ecclesiastical language of today, the semantic field of these terms has come to be limited to the clerical. We speak of the "ministry" of a bishop or a priest, or of a Protestant pastor, a rabbi or an imam. These are "ministers of religion". On the other hand, lay persons who fulfil offices within the church, even if they do so regularly, are not