

# Orthodox Women and Our Church

By Eva C. Topping

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male and female.*

## INTRODUCTION

However ancient its roots and however powerful its traditions, no church is today an island unto itself. This is no less true of the Orthodox Church than of its sister churches. From its apostolic beginnings to the present day the Orthodox Church has profoundly both shaped and been shaped by history. It cannot be otherwise.

Like other Christian communities of faith, the Orthodox Church exists in time and space. It owes its location on earth and its temporal existence to Christ, the founder. In order to establish the Church, God descended from heaven to earth, became human (as proclaimed in the Creed) "and lived among us" (John 1:14). God and the Church thus entered the history of humankind. Through two millennia Orthodox Christians have never escaped from the here and now. Nor can we today. Modern technology has turned our country of two hundred and fifty million souls into a single neighborhood, our planet into a global village.

Our Church, the Body of Christ, moreover, does not consist of robots. Rather, it is composed of women and men made of flesh and blood, each generation of which lives in a particular time and place. In each generation, therefore, the Church faces challenges and changes imposed by a particular historical and cultural context. In one way or another, it is inevitably affected and compelled to respond, whether negatively or positively. The Church does not exist in a vacuum.

From the new experiences of men and women arise new questions, demanding answers. Frequently, old answers are inadequate, sometimes even useless. What is then required of our Church is the open minded re-examination and creative use of its historical experience and sacred traditions.

Located in the United States in the closing decade of the twentieth century, our Church cannot and dares not ask for whom the bell tolls. To ask this question is to put the future and welfare of Orthodoxy in this country at risk in the third millennium.

The woman's movement is now universally recognized as a dominant sign of our times (Behr-Sigel 106-11). In most of the Christian oikoumene feminists are ringing the bell inside the Church itself. Once raised, the issue of women's place and role in the ecclesial body cannot be laid aside, stonewalled, unanswered.

That this bell tolls today as loudly for the Orthodox Church as it does for other churches can no longer be denied. As recently as a decade ago it was deemed extraneous to Orthodoxy. Like the "evil generation" of Pharisees and Sadducees, however, we too must heed the Lord's warning to "interpret the signs of the times" (Matthew 16:1-4).

Orthodox women have ears that hear and eyes that see the changes around them. Better educated and living in a more open egalitarian society, they have choices undreamed of by their grandmothers and mothers. Outside their Church they are experiencing an equality and a sense of personhood new in the history of humankind. Once upon a time it was not possible for Orthodox women either to express alienation or to leave their Church. Thanks to enormous economic, political and social changes, that time no longer exists. For our Church to pretend otherwise will prove dangerous.

More and more Orthodox Christian women are questioning their present subordinate status, their restricted participation in the rich liturgical and sacramental life of our Church. Each day their number increases. Their voices grow stronger. One Orthodox woman theologian writes of the "mental anguish" and "spiritual crisis" endured by women of our Church because of ancient traditions which marginalize them. Another refers to the "gap" that separates the "theoretical" Orthodox Church from the "real" Orthodox Church. Orthodox women of faith are asking whether or not our Church really believes that women are created in the divine image. The Scriptures and Orthodox theology answer their question with a "yes." But when Orthodox women here and now attend our Church, they experience a "no" which causes them pain and alienation.

The empirical reality of women's lives in the Church thus exposes a serious contradiction between what the Church proclaims and what it practices. Nor can it any longer be hidden under a mystifying bushel of obfuscations or justified by newly-minted theologies which lack biblical and patristic pedigrees.

In 1982, Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon (second only to the Ecumenical Patriarch in the hierarchy of the ecumenical throne) confessed publicly that within the Orthodox Church "internal dialogue" on the question of women in the Church was deficient (Behr-Sigel 162). In the nine years since then the situation he described has not significantly changed. It is therefore time to encourage and broaden this much-needed "internal dialogue." That is the hope and purpose of this paper.

It is, of course, not possible to discuss here all aspects of the contradiction between Orthodoxy's theology and its praxis in regard to women. This contradiction is now almost two thousand years old. Nor is it possible to answer all the questions involved in the issue of women in the Orthodox Church. Our history is too long, our traditions too many, our theology too complex, our experiences too varied.

To produce even a general overview of "Orthodox Women and our Church" presents daunting challenges. One pen can hardly do more than raise some questions, suggest a few answers and make some recommendations. This may, however, prove useful as the Orthodox Church in the United States prepares for the third millennium. Guided always by the divine light of the Holy Spirit, we can succeed in transforming our Church into a "spiritual house" of "living stones" (I Peter 2:5), female and male.

Informed discussion followed by action is imperative. Orthodox women will not forever wait silently and patiently for the "new creation" (II Corinthians 5:17) in which discrimination based on gender has been abolished. At stake is not only the equality and full humanity of women within the ekklesia. Beyond this, the spiritual and sacramental wholeness of the Body of Christ is also at stake.

## **DIAKONIA**

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are a variety of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

## I Corinthians 12:4-6

The record of women's service or diakonia in the Church provides a useful perspective for discussing Orthodox women's roles and status. This splendid record ought to be better known.

Orthodox women belong to an ancient sisterhood. For two thousand years it has honorably and sacrificially served the Church. Not only have the gifts of women always been varied, historically, their roles have been far more diversified than at present. This is a very important point.

Women have been disciples, apostles, evangelists, deacons, miracle-workers, missionaries and prophets. They have preached, composed hymns, taught and healed. Women have built and endowed churches and monasteries. They have established and maintained countless philanthropic institutions everywhere in the Orthodox oikoumene. Essentially an extension of women's domestic responsibilities, philanthropy has always been considered a proper "feminine" activity for women of the Church.

In times of ecclesiastical crises, women always proved to be defenders of Orthodoxy. Powerful, "Christ-loving" empresses of Byzantium convened and dominated three important ecumenical councils (Ephesus 431; Chalcedon 451; and Nicea II 787). Empress Theodora "restored" Orthodoxy in 843. Imperial defenders of the faith, Pulcheria, Irene and Theodora added immortal haloes to their bejeweled crowns.

For almost two millennia, women have served the Church as monastics, unceasingly praying for the salvation of humankind. In fact, the first Christian monastics were women. Among them are the "desert mothers" whose ascetic achievements and wisdom matches those of the celebrated "desert fathers."

Finally, from the time of Nero to Stalin, whenever the Orthodox Church was persecuted, women paid blood tribute for the faith. Orthodoxy's liturgical calendar is sanctified by numerous female martyr saints. For martyrdom knows no gender.

Since the Orthodox Church has apostolic roots, the record of women's diakonia is as old as the ekklesia itself. It begins in the historic community that gathered around Jesus. This first part of women's history in the Church is little known. At the same time, it is of utmost significance.

Mary's son, the young, charismatic rabbi from Nazareth, called women as well as men to "follow" Him. The verb *akoloutho* (follow), with its special New Testament meaning of "to become a disciple," is used of women (Mark 15:41) and men alike. Among others, women like Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna (Luke 8:1) received and accepted the call to discipleship. They belonged to Jesus' intimate circle.

Authentic Orthodox tradition recognizes these women as *mathetria* (disciples). In Byzantine sermons and hymns these remarkable foremothers are repeatedly identified as *mathetria* of Jesus. Being His disciples, they shared Jesus' early ministry (Luke 8:1-3). Enrolled singly among the saints of Orthodoxy, these women disciples are also celebrated collectively after Easter on the Sunday of the Myrrbearers.

The equal discipleship of women, their public presence and participation in Jesus' itinerant mission,

represents a radical and scandalous break from traditions of Jewish culture in the first century. At that time, discipleship was restricted to men only. Rabbis were prohibited from teaching women, either privately or publicly. Jesus did both. How He abolished this gender-based discrimination is related in Luke 10:38-42.

Once when Jesus was visiting His friends in Bethany, Martha busied herself with preparations in the kitchen. Her sister Mary, however, "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" (v.39). A rabbinic phrase, "to sit at someone's feet" meant "to study with a person, to become a disciple." On her own, Mary had assumed a traditionally "male" role. What she was doing was a new experience for women.

Martha then asked the Lord to send Mary back to the pans and pots, to the proper "place" for all females. But He refused, telling Martha, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (v.42).

The Lord of our Church thus rejected the idea of a single "special" role for women. Recognizing women as persons, He validated their autonomy. Christ offered them new roles, new spaces outside the home. Empowered and encouraged by her Teacher and friend, Saint Mary of Bethany (June 4) claimed a new role for herself. The choice was unconditionally hers alone.

Furthermore, according to the unanimous witness of the four Gospels, it was the women disciples alone who proved to be the true "followers" of the Lord.

Unlike James and John (Mark 10:36-40), no mathetria ever asked for status and power. Unlike Judas (Mark 14:43-46), no mathetria ever denied her Teacher. And unlike all the male disciples who "fled, every one of them" (Mark 14:50) when Jesus was arrested, all the women disciples stayed with Him. They alone went all the way to the Cross and beyond.

Having shared the agony of the Crucifixion, the women disciples were the first to experience the joy of the Resurrection. The Easter story thus belongs to women.

They were the first to see the Risen Lord. From women's lips fell the first triumphant "Christ Is Risen" (Christos Aneste). The women disciples were thus the first to proclaim the good news (evangelion) that Christ had indeed trampled on death by death. The frightened, runaway male disciples first heard the "good news" of the Resurrection from the women.

Orthodox tradition names these faithful women disciples the "first evangelists," thereby acknowledging the primacy of their diakonia. Saint Mary Magdalene (July 22), their leader, is given the unique title of "Apostle to the Apostles." (Topping, Saints 246-55). Without the valid witness of the faithful women disciples there would be no Gospel to preach. The truth of the Christian message ultimately depends on the words of women. With the women's proclamation of the Empty Tomb the Church was born, and this at a time when a woman's word was worth less than nothing.

The four Gospels reveal that discipleship, membership in the community gathered around Jesus, was not gender-prescribed. Open equally to men and women, it depended only on individual commitment to Jesus' liberating vision of a new world order. In it, mutual love and service replace old structures of power and hierarchy: "whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of

Man came not to be served but to serve. . . ." (Mark 10:44-45).

As seen in Acts and the genuine Pauline epistles, Christ's vision of a new order, in which women and men were equal, guided the Apostolic Church, inspiring its communal life and work.

The diakonia of women was unrestricted in the first decades of the Church. Although the whole story is not known, it is nevertheless clear that women participated on equal terms with men in the Church during the first century. It is likewise clear that leadership in the first Christian communities was exercised by women as well as men. If we are to believe the testimony of the New Testament, our Church has founding mothers as well as fathers.

The names and activities of some of the prominent women in the primitive Church were fortunately recorded in the writings of the Evangelist Luke and Saint Paul. They provide evidence that the most important positions of authority and leadership in the fledgling Church were not prohibited to women.

In each church, the apostle exercised the greatest authority (I Corinthians 12:28). Some were women. The greatest of all apostles (not one of the "Twelve"), Saint Paul mentions a number of women whom he valued as co-workers (synergoi, Romans 16:3). Nowhere does Paul ever suggest that they were in any way subordinate to him or that their apostolate differed from his.

Paul calls Jounia an "outstanding apostle" (Romans 16:7). Sharing Paul's admiration for Jounia, Saint John Chrysostom wrote, "Oh, how great is the devotion of this woman that she should be worthy of the title of apostolos" (Migne 60-669).

True to the historical record, the Orthodox Church in fact recognizes a number of women saints as apostolos. These includes Paul's co-workers, Jounia (May 17), Prisca (February 13), Apphia (November 22) and Nympha (February 28).

To these should be added Saints Mary Magdalene (July 22), commissioned by the Risen Lord Himself on the first Easter morning (John 20); Mariamne and Photeine (February 17 and 26 respectively); Thekla (September 24), commissioned by Paul to preach the gospel (in Byzantine art she is depicted holding a book, the attribute of the apostle); and Horaiozele, commissioned by Saint Andrew, the first Patriarch of Constantinople, to continue his apostolate. (Hagioreites 277-78). Accustomed as we are only to the twelve male apostles, the existence of women apostles comes as an unexpected revelation.

In sacred stories and songs, Orthodox tradition preserves and cherishes the memory of women apostles who evangelized the Roman Empire. Like their male colleagues, they traveled, preaching the Word, converting and founding churches. Women apostles performed miracles. Like their male colleagues, they healed the sick, cast out demons and resurrected the dead.

The women apostles feared nothing, not even torture and death. Like Saint Thekla, some were martyred. By their sacrificial deaths they insured the life of the Church and its final triumph over paganism.

Other women received the charism of prophecy and exercised leadership in the primitive Christian congregations. According to Saint Paul (I Corinthians 12:38), prophets ranked second only to the apostles.

At the birth of the Church at Pentecost, fire touched the heads of the women who had gathered with the male disciples in the "upper room" (Acts 1:13-14). Free of gender-bias, the Holy Spirit did not stop first to see whether a male or female body housed a soul: "It allots to each one individually just as the spirit chooses" (I Corinthians 12:11). The biological category of sex has no relevance to the granting of spiritual gifts.

Thus, women as well as men were empowered to prophesy and to speak with authority for God. In Acts 21:8-9 Luke mentions the four famous prophesying daughters of Philip the Evangelist. In them and other women was fulfilled God's promise to "pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17). Women spoke publicly the word of God.

Women also served the primitive church as deacons. The first of a long line of women-deacons in our Church, Phoebe, lived near the city of Corinth. She was a diakonos (Romans 16:1-2), deacon, not a deaconess of the large church at Cenchreae. Entrusted with leadership responsibilities at home and with important missions abroad, Saint Phoebe (September 3) was a church official held in high regard by Paul.

From this and similar evidence, we may conclude that charisms, status and roles in the primitive church were not defined as "male" or "female." Women and men alike practiced Christian diakonia. The role of apostle, prophet, teacher, and deacon, each was open equally to women and men of faith. The Pauline corpus thus presents the luminous image of a vibrant Church which used all the varied gifts of women in a variety of roles to further its salvific mission and to spread the Gospel in a hostile world.

In the beginning, the Church was faithful to the vision of its divine founder. Then it was a koinonia (community) of believers in which distinctions based on class, nationality and sex did not exist. It was for women a rare springtime of promise and fulfillment.

In its deliberations on the question of women's place and participation in the Church, Orthodoxy must look to the model of equal discipleship and diakonia, which Christ established and which the apostolic Church followed.

Full participation of women in the life of the Church, however, did not last long. Restrictions based on gender began to appear already at the end of the first century, as ancient patriarchal patterns, structures and traditions re-asserted themselves in the Christian community.

By the fourth century women had been effectively excluded from leadership and authority in the Church, their diakonia greatly circumscribed. Since then the ecclesial situation for Orthodox women has remained basically the same. A few recent cosmetic changes have not in any way altered traditional structures and practices which discriminate against women.

This, however, is not to say that women's service to the Church ended in the fourth century. Far from it. Women's love of God and loyalty to Orthodoxy has to this day never diminished. Nor has their desire to serve ever wavered. On the contrary. Orthodox women today ask the Church to expand their diakonia, to open to them other ministries that they might use all their many gifts to serve God and God's people.

## TRADITIONS

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:27

The male must always command and the female must everywhere be in second class (en deuterata taxei).

Saint Cyril, (qtd. in Migne 68:1068C)

When Orthodox Christian women ask for symmetry between their diakonia and that of their brothers, they are told that "tradition" has made arrangements which cannot be altered. This answer acts as a stone wall. It prevents discussion. The "tradition" appealed to is seldom, if ever, identified. The premises on which it is built are never explained. This answer also implies that there is one monolithic "tradition" concerning women in the Church. This, however, is not the case.

The Orthodox Church is uniquely blessed with magnificent traditions of spirituality, theology, liturgy, and art. Through its long pilgrimage through history, however, it has also adopted ideologies and practices which are alien to its basic beliefs and dogmas. In time, these also became accepted as "tradition," sacred and eternal. Some of them, "leftover beliefs of a neolithic age," (Behr-Sigel 8) are still operative in the closing decade of this millennium.

As indicated by the above quotations from Genesis and Saint Cyril, there is more than one tradition relative to the nature and "place" of women. One affirms the equality and symmetry of female and male, both created in the divine image and likeness. The other proclaims universal male supremacy and female subordination.

At this point, our Church has to decide which of the two represents Orthodoxy's authentic, sacred Tradition (spelled with a capital "T"). In the process of making the decision, clergy and laity alike must bear in mind Christ's warning against abandoning the "commandment of God" (entolen tou theou) and keeping "human tradition" (paradosin ton anthropon) (Mark 7:8). These words of Christ imply a conflict between the two.

Enunciated in the fifth century by Saint Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, second-class status has for too long been the living reality for Orthodox Christian women. It is their experience today.

Were the Alexandrian patriarch to pay us a pastoral visit, he could quickly ascertain that an all-male clergy and hierarchy still rule the Church. Women do not hold positions of authority and decision-making. In more ways than one, women remain "in second class." Begun early, when Orthodox females are only forty days old, their subordinate status, determined by their sex, lasts a lifetime.

Still in place, this powerful tradition assigning Orthodox women to permanent second-class rests on two premises. (Topping, Mothers 44-45) Bolstered by selected biblical texts and androcentric exegesis, it justifies women's subordination in the Church on two grounds. Through Eve, their "first mother," women are second in the order of creation and first in the order of sin.

According to Genesis 2:21-22, God created Eve out of a rib removed from Adam. Man preceded

woman. The Greek (and Latin) Church Fathers interpreted this text as proof of women's inferiority. The all-wise Creator of the universe had designed women to be lesser than and inferior to men. The text in itself does not support this interpretation.

The inferiority of women, however, was not an idea derived solely from scriptures. It had roots deep in classical Greek culture. For example, Aristotle had taught that every female born was a "deformed male" (*De Generatione Animalium* 782A, 17ff). Accepted as scientific fact in ancient and medieval times, this anti-woman theory was elevated by Christian thinkers into divine law, everlasting and immutable.

Inferiority inevitably implies "weakness." A text from the New Testament provided the proof. A second-century presbyter in Asia Minor described women as the "weaker vessel" (to asthenosteron skeuos) (I Peter 3:7). The alleged "weakness of the female" (to asthenes or he astheneia tou theleos) thereafter became a stock motif in patristic references to women. Femininity was synonymous with weakness.

Time and again in Byzantine hymnography, even the most heroic of Orthodoxy's women-martyrs are reminded that they are genetically the "weaker vessel." (Topping, *Mothers* 61-65) (Their sex was sometimes also described as "rotten" (sathron)). To call a woman a "man" was to give her the highest possible praise. Of all women, the Theotokos alone was spared "feminine" weakness.

The voluminous writings of the Greek Church Fathers amply document their reductionist, negative and demeaning image of women. Women are described as physically, morally and intellectually weaker and inferior to men. It is revealing that Saint Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) hesitated to apply the word "woman" to Makrina, his beloved sister and teacher (Migne 46:960b). (She had transcended the failings common to her sex.)

Chosen at random out of many, a few examples will serve to illustrate the dominant patristic view of women. Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus (315-403) attributed to women instability, weak-mindedness and frenzy (Migne 35:800). Saint Cyril (+444) believed "the whole species of females is somewhat slow of understanding." (Migne 74:689B, 691C-692D). This prestigious dogmatic theologian combined fervent devotion to the Theotokos with contempt for all other women.

This phenomenon was not peculiar to Saint Cyril. Orthodox theologians and scholars have commented on it. "The spectacular development of the veneration of the Mother of God was accompanied by a growing and concomitant scorn for Mary's sisters who were condemned to silence and relegated to an inferior place in the ecclesial community." (Behr-Sigel 36).

Although his best friends were women, Saint John Chrysostom (347-407) characterized the female sex as fickle, garrulous, servile, and lacking the capacity to reason (Migne 47:510-511, 59:346, 61:316). He concluded therefore that women are justly confined to undemanding domestic roles, freeing men to manage the important affairs of church and state. (Migne 62:500).

Given this derogatory view of "female nature," it does not surprise that this golden-tongued patriarch of Constantinople categorically excludes all women from the sacramental priesthood. This exclusion, he states, is in accordance with "divine law" (theios nomos). (Jurgens 17, 38).

In the same treatise, Chrysostom alludes to the second premise of the tradition which denies woman equal participation and diakonia in the Church. It is this: women occupy first place in the order of sin (hamartia). That being so, Chrysostom advises priests and bishops that women require greater pastoral care because of their "propensity to sin." (Jurgens 102).

Genesis 3:1-18 provides the proof of women's "primacy" in sin. When Eve ate the forbidden fruit, she became the first sinner. In this anti-woman tradition, Adam is generally exonerated from any responsibility for the disaster in Eden. I Timothy 2:14 identifies Eve as the only sinner: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." Accepting this verdict against Eve, the Church Fathers repeatedly call her the "author," the "instrument," and the "mother" of sin. Because Eve is named the single parent of sin, all her female descendants have been sentenced to eternal submission, silence and subordination to the superior, stronger sex. (Again, the Theotokos is the lone exception.)

According to this male-centered tradition, in contrast to all women, all men do not have a "propensity to sin". Consequently, some men can enter the priesthood, but no woman. The exclusion of women is total, categorical. In the blunt words of Saint John Chrysostom, "let the whole female sex retreat from such a task" (the priesthood)." (Jurgens 17).

Such are the premises of an entrenched androcentric ideology which stereotypes half of the Body of Christ as weak, inferior and sinful. As a result, women are judged unfit to participate fully in the "royal priesthood" (basileion hierateuma), to which all baptized Christians are called (I Peter 2:9). (Topping, Mothers 102-21) Because of their sex, women are considered to be less "royal" and less "priestly" than their fathers, brothers and sons.

Sanctified by certain biblical texts, interpreted with a bias against women and buttressed by the immense authority of the Church Fathers, this tradition has, from the fourth century to the present, prevailed over the one which reflects Christ's teachings and praxis. Consequently, Orthodox women today are where Saint Cyril long ago put them, "in second class."

Nevertheless, despite the remarkable staying-power of this sexist ideology, Orthodoxy's authentic tradition remains in place. Asserting women's dignity and equality, it invalidates the traditional superior male/inferior female, ruler/subject model. In contrast to the tradition which was made by men (to preserve power and privileges), the Sacred Tradition of our Church projects a positive image of women.

Two fundamental teachings of the Orthodox Church undergird this Tradition.

First, at the spiritual core that distinguished Orthodoxy from other branches of Christianity is the unshakable belief that the divine "image and likeness" (Genesis 1:26) exists within every person, female and male, without exception. This belief has biblical foundation: "So God created humankind (anthropon) in his image (kat'eikona Theou) . . . male and female He created them." (Genesis 1:27). The divine image and likeness which God stamps on human beings is thus the same for male and female. God transcends all human categories, including sex. Likewise, the divine image immanent in women and men lacks gender specificity.

Their misogynist discourse notwithstanding, the Greek Church Fathers of the fourth century placed

Genesis 1:27 at the center of their dynamic theology and anthropology. Saint Gregory of Nazianzos the Theologian (329-389) expressed the passionate and "revolutionary" (Behr-Sigel 91) conviction of the Cappadocian Fathers that women and men share a single, God-given 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." (Migne 36:289-292). Orthodoxy's authentic tradition has never repudiated this theology.

Saint Basil of Caesarea (330-379) likewise confirms the image of God in women. In his encomium of Saint Joulitta the Martyr (July 30), Basil assigns to her these self-confident words:

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 by the will of the Creator. (Behr-Sigel 90).

The great archbishop of Caesarea so completely rejects the assumption that the male represents the norm for humanity that he chooses a woman to proclaim the equal worth and dignity of her sex. It is as if Saint Basil, himself the grandson, son and brother of strong women, wants women to know who they really are. Elsewhere he writes, "Let no woman say, 'I am weak'" (Behr-Sigel 88).

Both of these influential Cappadocian Fathers emphatically reject the patriarchal notion that women have a "special" nature, that they are something "other." In their view, women share one nature (physis) with men.

The Church Fathers, however, were unable to move beyond prevailing patriarchal structures and ethos. Christendom's most brilliant, creative theologians though they were, Saints Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzos, were captives of the traditional androcentric mind-set of their era. On the one hand, they preached the spiritual equality of women. On the other hand, accepting inherited cultural stereotypes, they did nothing to change the unequal status of women, even in the Church.

The three Cappadocian Fathers could not conceive of men and women holding identical positions and sharing identical functions either in society or the Church. However, what was inconceivable to them in the fourth century is both conceivable and realistic to Orthodox Christians standing on the threshold of the twenty-first century.

Theosis (deification) is the second passionately held belief undergirding Orthodoxy's sacred Tradition. God, who assumed "human flesh and dwelled among us" (John 1:14) calls humankind to become "partakers of the divine nature" (theias koinonoi physeos) (II Peter 1:4). Greek patristic tradition understands the message of deification to be the message of salvation. The message is the same for both genders.

From the third century on, the Greek Fathers time and again repeat what was classically stated by Saint Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373): "The Word of God (Logos tou Theou) became human (enanthropeo) that we might be deified" (Migne 25:1928). Through divine grace and love (philanthropia) it is possible for Christians of both genders to become god.

In patristic discussions of theosis, women are never treated separately. Believing that women as well as

men are created in the "divine image and likeness," the Greek Church Fathers do not apply categories of gender to deification. Their vision of human nature and destiny is inclusive. Female persons are not excluded from the divine image. Together with men they receive from the Creator the calling to become god and to achieve holiness: "I said, you are gods." (John 10:34). Like God, holiness is characterized by neither hierarchy nor gender.

By canonizing women, the Orthodox Church does in fact acknowledge that holiness knows no gender. The Church grants the title "holy" (hagia) to countless women, famous and anonymous. From September 1 to August 31 hardly a day of our liturgical calendar exists which is not hallowed by a female saint. Female saints indeed form half of the golden chain that binds Orthodox Christians of all times and places into one living, undivided koinonia.

No Orthodox Christian needs to be reminded that it is a woman who stands pre-eminent among all the saints. Many are holy (hagia/hagios). But only the Theotokos is "All-Holy" (pan-hagia). The Orthodox Church indeed exalts Mary precisely because she is Panagia (All-Holy). (Ware, Orthodox Church 263 n.19).

Through the ages, countless women have been transfigured into living icons of Christ. The haloed heroines in Orthodoxy's pantheon of saints refute the patriarchal image of women as the inferior, weaker and more sinful sex. One has only to read the saints' lives to marvel at women's strength and goodness, their love of God and loyalty to the Church. Shining paradigms of holiness, these women are models to be imitated by all Orthodox Christians, women and men alike.

In the persons of our many "holy mothers," Orthodoxy's authentic Tradition has long since confirmed that the daughters of Eve share equally in the divine image and that they reflect equally the glory of God. The sexist assumptions and conclusions used to maintain women's subordinate status in the Church fail to stand up in the light of Orthodoxy's Tradition of saints.

Finally, Orthodox Tradition embraces the apostolic church which Orthodoxy claims as its origin. In that Church women were not only numerically significant. Sacred history records that they also contributed significantly to the Church as leaders, apostles, deacons, prophets, missionaries and teachers.

## **REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances . . . . Do not quench the Spirit . . . but test everything; hold fast to what is good (I Thessalonians 5:16-21).*

The above verses come from a letter sent by Saint Paul to the new church in Thessalonike. Written in 50 A.D., it is the oldest extant piece of New Testament writing. In it the apostle gives the troubled congregation some good advice. As we reflect on Orthodox women and our Church, it will profit us to keep in mind the words of Saint Paul, especially to heed his warning not to "quench the Spirit." With glad hearts and minds open to the Holy Spirit, we are sure to receive life-giving grace.

Thus far, discussion of the critical issue of women and the Orthodox Church has been inadequate and superficial. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh regrets the "many fearful spirits that are afraid of rethinking ideas that have been accepted without reflection." (qtd.in Behr-Sigel, p.xii). The discussion,

according to Father Thomas Hopko, is at a "primitive state." (p.x) Dr. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel correctly emphasizes the "necessity of a creative reflection." (p.4) The need for such discussion is obvious.

Beginning with the "timid and stammering" (Behr-Sigel 18) conference of Orthodox women held (1978) at Agapia in Roumania, there have since been several others. (Rhodes, 1988 and Crete, January, 1991). Having minimal resonance in the community, these conferences have not significantly advanced the discussion. From accounts in the press, it seems that generally the participants are the same persons, that they draw the same conclusions, make the same recommendations. The time has come to widen participation in the discussion and to advance the arguments of both sides in a more constructive manner.

These objectives could be furthered by the establishment of a broadly based commission, composed of hierarchs, priests, laywomen and men, to organize and oversee a long-range plan of investigation and discussion of all aspects of Orthodox women's roles and status in the ecclesial community. (Such commissions and programs already exist in a number of churches in this country, including the Roman Catholic.) Diocesan and local commissions, also broadly based, could have the responsibility for arranging lectures, study-groups and meetings. This could then afford all the people of the Church, clergy and laity alike, the opportunity to hear and discuss various points of view, to ask questions and express opinions.

The opportunity to speak and be heard is especially important for Orthodox women, who "for nearly 2,000 years had been invited to keep silent." (Behr-Sigel 10). It is time to let them speak of and for themselves, openly and freely. It is likewise time for the Church to listen to what its faithful women have to say. They deserve a respectful hearing. The Church ought not imitate the eleven male disciples and dismiss the words of women as female "foolishness" (Ieros) (Luke 24:11).

The agenda for a program of meaningful discussion should at least include the following issues.

### **Liturgical Language**

All language communicates, carries messages. Words convey thoughts. (The Greek *logos* has multiple meanings, including "word" and "reason.") The language used in the liturgy about human beings carries to Orthodox women a painful message of subordination and non-existence. Some familiar examples will serve to illustrate.

Traditional phrases like the "God of our fathers" and the "faith of our fathers" suggest two things: either our mothers had no God and faith or they had another God and faith. Yet nothing could be further from the truth!

References are made to the "brotherhood in Christ." Is there not a sisterhood in Christ, the untold millions of pious Orthodox Christian women? Prayers are offered for our "fathers and forefathers." All Orthodox Christians have mothers and foremothers. Should we not also remember them in our prayers.

Likewise, Orthodoxy's many canonized "holy mothers" are routinely forgotten. The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom concludes with the words, "Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us." And yet our numerous "holy mothers," the female saints, including the Theotokos, also hear our prayers and intercede for us in heaven. Surely, their *presbeia* (intercession)

is no less powerful than that of the "holy fathers."

Phrases like the "brethren of this holy Church" or the "sons of God" are frequently heard. They completely ignore the existence of at least half of the Body of Christ. The congregation includes women, sisters, wives, daughters, mothers of the "brothers." Even as women sit in the pews and worship God, such androcentric, exclusive language denies their very presence. Does not God have daughters as well as sons?

The Church must show greater sensitivity in the use of language. The remedy is not at all difficult. The addition of words like "women," "daughters," "sisters," "mothers" to traditional liturgical phrases could help reduce the unnecessary marginalization of Orthodox women through language.

In this connection, it is pertinent to note that Christ made such an addition, altering Judaism's liturgical language which referred to the Israelites as the "sons of Abraham." A poignant story, it is told in Luke 13:10-17.

When Christ healed the crippled woman who had been bent over for eighteen years, the "leader of the synagogue" accused Him of breaking the Sabbath. Christ then "shamed" His opponent, asserting the priority of the woman's welfare over man-made traditions of the Sabbath. He not only enabled her to stand up straight, by calling her "a daughter of Abraham," Christ was also the first to recognize the woman's personhood and human dignity. Previously, only males, the "sons of Abraham," were recognized as persons in the Jewish community of faith.

### **The Uncleanliness of Women**

The Orthodox Church does not teach that women are "unclean" and "ritually impure" during menstrual periods and for forty days after giving birth. Nevertheless, it tolerates practices (based on Leviticus 12 and 15) which define females as "unclean" and "ritually impure during" these times. According to this tradition, females are prohibited from taking communion, from baking bread for the Church, and even from attending services when there is "an issue of blood."

In effect, this primitive tradition of the "blood taboo" excommunicates Orthodox Christian women, not because they are guilty of any, sin but because certain natural processes are taking place in their female bodies. This and similar traditions deeply offend women. Metropolitan Anthony has correctly called them "an insult to women." (Behr-Sigel 9).

Yet, this taboo is still officially maintained by the Church and defended by some churchmen. Not long ago, a prominent Orthodox theologian explained that "uncleanliness" describes the "biological condition" of a woman who has just given birth. He further stated that she needs forty days to "normalize" before she can return to normal social and Church life." This explanation raises the question, is the giving of a life "unclean" and "abnormal"? Furthermore, what is the sin or stain that requires a new mother to be "purified"?

Without violating any of its teachings and doctrines, the Orthodox Church should disclaim and discard all manifestations of this tradition which demeans women. The Church could thereby bring its praxis into harmony with that of our Lord.

The three synoptic gospels (Mark 5:21-43, Matthew 9:18-26, Luke 8:40-48) tell how Jesus ignored Jewish tradition when He healed the hemorrhaging woman who touched Him. Jesus did not shrink from her, in fear of pollution. He considered her neither defiled nor defiling. Instead, with infinite tact and love, Jesus restored the woman to health and to the community from which the "blood taboo" had socially and ritually isolated her for twelve years. Orthodox Christian women today ask why our Church holds to a tradition which Christ Himself abolished.

### **Access to the Altar**

Orthodox females are from infancy denied access to the altar. There appears to be no theological justification for the denial. It is probably connected with the idea that females are agents of pollution because they menstruate. Thus is created another tenacious tradition which discriminates against Orthodox Christians who are born female.

The discrimination begins when forty-day old baby girls are churched. Unlike baby boys, they are not carried around the altar. (There are today only a few priests who take all infants around the altar.) At 40 days, baby girls are mercifully unaware of the discrimination. But they experience it soon enough, at the critical age of their physical and emotional development. We have altar boys, but no altar girls.

How do we explain to adolescent girls why only boys are allowed to serve God at the altar? Whatever the explanation, the message they get has to be that in some mysterious, unspoken way, girls are not as "good" as boys. Hurt feelings at this time in the life of an Orthodox girl can lead (and it often does) to permanent alienation from the Church.

In adulthood, Orthodox females, no matter how pious and faithful, are still denied access to the altar. The irony of their exclusion is not lost on them. The imposing figure of a woman, the Theotokos, dominates the sacred space from which all her sisters are barred. Only men are allowed to stand at the altar, close to Mary. Ecclesially invisible, women watch silently from a distance.

Resolution of this issue does not mean violation of Orthodox teachings. Sacred Tradition does not present obstacles. Given Orthodox belief that both males and females are created in the image and likeness of God, that both are called to become God, why is access to the altar available only to males?

### **The Diaconate of Women**

The ecclesial visibility of Orthodox Christian women could be promoted by tonsuring women as readers and chanters. But more importantly, the diaconate of women should be re-instituted in our Church. From Agapia (1976) to Crete (1991), conferences on women and the Church have consistently recommended its renewal. However, despite these repeated recommendations and almost a decade of sporadic discussion, no action has been taken on this matter.

The Tradition of women's diaconate is well established and documented. It begins with Paul's co-worker Phoebe, "deacon of the church at Cenchreae" (Romans 18:1) in addition to her, Orthodoxy recognizes a number of women deacon saints. Among them are Susanna, ascetic and martyr; Nonna, the mother of Saint Gregory the Theologian; Olympias, deacon of Hagia Sophia, the trusted friend and associate of Saint John Chrysostom.

Until well into the twelfth century women were ordained deacons in the Orthodox Church. Almost a millennium later, in the twentieth century Metropolitan Nektarios (+1920, canonized 1961) ordained several women deacons in Greece.

The ancient ordination service is included in the Euchologion. (It is there, ready to be used once again.) Women were ordained after the Anaphora during the divine Liturgy. Recognized as part of the sacramental priesthood (hierosyne), they wore the orarion and took communion at the altar.

During the long history of the women's diaconate, their roles varied, liturgical, pastoral, catechetical, philanthropic, according to the needs of the Church. When the order is renewed, it "must not be simply an archaeological reconstruction". (Behr-Sigel 225). If it is to have meaning and to be a true diakonia after the model of Christ, the women's diaconate should be based on authentic Orthodox theology. And it should also be creatively structured to serve the needs of the contemporary world and Church.

Women and men must share equally in the dignity and responsibility of service to God and the people of God. The Holy Spirit does not discriminate according to biological categories. Nor should the Church so define its ministries.

## **The Priesthood**

In any discussion of women and the Church, the question of women priests cannot be avoided. In ecumenical discourse it has displaced the filioque as the burning issue of our time. It cannot be ignored.

Given the fact that there is no biblical or historic precedent for women priests in the Orthodox Church, the issue is considerably more complex than that of the diaconate.

The idea of ordaining women priests has encountered resistance. Ultimately, however, this is the issue that will test Orthodoxy's allegiance to the ecclesial ideal proclaimed in the ancient baptismal formula. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ . . . there is no longer male and female" (Galatians 3:27-28).

Through the sacraments of baptism and chrismation Orthodox females receive the same heavenly illumination (ouranion ellampsin) and the same gift of sanctification (hagiasmou doron) as do males. Why then is an iron clad line drawn to bar all Orthodox women from the sacramental priesthood?

At present, this critical question is being answered in two ways. First, the exclusion of women from the priesthood is defended by appeals to the dominant tradition (the one which defines females as inferior, "weak and sinful") and to certain Biblical passages taken out of context. Second, the exclusion is justified by new theories, the "iconic image" and "complementarity," both of which lack Scriptural and patristic bases. Since these answers have proved theologically inadequate, intensive theological reflection and critical re-examination of all Church traditions are imperative.

We cannot here present the arguments on both sides of the issue. They are the subject for extensive and honest dialogue between clergy and laity, between women and men, between theologians and lay persons. All members of the "royal priesthood" have the privilege and responsibility to help form the mind of the Church. The process will take time and will not be easy. It will undoubtedly cause pain. But the Church can no longer postpone a serious response to this serious question.

Prejudices, fears and passions will have to be laid aside. In this connection, the advice of Saint Isidore of Pelusium to Saint Cyril of Alexandria still holds: "Prejudice does not see clearly" antipathy does not see at all. If you wish to be clear of both these affections of the eyesight, do not pass violent sentences, but commit causes to just judgment" (Migne 78:361C).

History now presents Orthodoxy with a "cause" to "commit to just judgment," the issue of women's place and participation in our Church. For fallible human beings to judge this cause justly will be difficult. But given the promise of divine grace, it can be done. The Holy Spirit will not fail us.

Christ Himself made us the promise: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:13).

Once the search begins, the truth shall be found.

With "faith, hope and love" (I Corinthians 13:13) these reflections are offered for your consideration and prayers.

## Notes

1. This work of the noted French Orthodox theologian advances the discussion of our present subject.
2. For details see Eva C. Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy: Women and the Church* (Minneapolis, 1987) *Saints and the Sisterhood: The Lives of 48 Holy Women* (Minneapolis, 1990).
3. See the names given in the useful work of Matushka Ellen Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate: An Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis MN, 1991), pp. 11-19
4. Basil's view is analyzed by Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "The Image of God in Man-- Is Woman Include?" *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (1979), pp. 195-199.
5. A readily available commentary can be found in Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London, 1987), pp. 236-242.
6. See, for example, the 48 women saints whose lives and deeds are related in *Saints and Sisterhood*.
7. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel was the keynote speaker at this meeting.
8. For criticism of these views see Elisabeth Moberly's review of *Women and the Priesthood* edited by Thomas Hopko (New York, 1984), in *Sobornost* 6 (1984), pp. 86-89; *Holy Mothers*, pp. 124-125; Behr-Sigel, pp. 175-179.