

The Role of Women in the Eastern Orthodox Church

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Abstract: *The Christian world is currently divided, as it has been since the institution of the Church, on the issue of women serving in the Church and the extent to which they should serve. Certain denominations allow the ordination of women while others, relying on Holy Tradition, are resolute in their stance that only men should be ordained into the ministry. This article attempts to provide insights into, and is an exposition and analysis of what the Eastern Orthodox Church has to say on this somewhat delicate subject and what the image of women was in the Early Church.*

Key Words: women's ordination; women's ministry; Orthodox Church; Christian priesthood; diaconate; apostolic succession; Holy Spirit – charisms

Priesthood is an area which was previously the domain of only men. It is now an area of “equal opportunity” in many Christian Churches. The Eastern Orthodox Church or *Ekklesia* however, remains resolute in its stance on the issue of priesthood and allows only males to become ordained as per its interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and Holy Traditions. The Holy Scriptures which were Divinely inspired writings and Holy Tradition which was an oral transmission of Divine Truth, are for the adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy and the *Ekklesia*, nothing less than the Revelation of the Triune Godhead.

The *Ekklesia* is an institution which is “Catholic” in that it is universal and promotes unity and freedom. It is an instrument of God's which helps to control, direct and purify mankind. The Orthodox Church is a conservative *Ekklesia* and yet offers her adherents enormous freedom which is embedded in the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition which serve as her guides. She is guided by the *Paraclete* or Holy Spirit. She has a definite outlook on life and clearly understands the interdependence of men and women whose relations with the Triune Godhead can never be seen in isolation from their relationships in society.¹ The *Ekklesia* embodies Divine *Sofia* or wisdom and is the conscience of her adherents. Men and women are embraced equally by her, but it is only men who may become ordained as priests. Why is this so given that women were also deaconesses for a couple of centuries?

The Apostles who were endowed with the *charis* (Gifts) of the Holy Spirit as the *Paraclete* (Comforter), were able to continue the redemptive work of Jesus Christ through their priesthood which they obtained from Him. Jesus led them to “glory” (Hebrews 2:10) and they became “the fathers in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (1 Corinthians 4:14-15) of all those who received their teachings. They established the early communities of the Church and spoke with authority which was God-given. Paul explains that the Apostles are the spiritual fathers of all believers. The Apostles were unable to deal with everything in their lives and thus entrusted many of their pastoral duties to *Presbyteroi* who acted on

¹ N. Zernov, *The Church of the Eastern Christians* (New York: SPCK, 1947), 68-70.

their behalf. These men were appointed by ordination and were responsible for worship and administration but gradually allowed women to help them in the latter regard.

The *Ekklesia* as it spread in the Greco-Roman world and indeed today, is a body made up of separate and unique individuals each of whom has a particular talent that can be utilized for the benefit of the entire ecclesiastical community irrespective of the race, nationality or socio-economic standing in society of its individual members.

No one person is considered to be superior to another or have a greater role or function to fulfil. In 1 Corinthians 12:25, we see the reason for the *Ekklesia*: "that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another." Even Jesus Christ as the Head of the *Ekklesia* which is His body serves: "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). Every believer has to mould his/her life to conform with God's Word and must work out his/her "own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). God desires that mankind including both men and women must be saved and to this end: "you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Men and women have very distinct responsibilities within the *Ekklesia*. Contrary to what many believe, the woman's role and function is no less than the man's but it is clearly different. Men are called to lead worship according to Paul: "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling" (1 Timothy 2:8). Women on the other hand are ordered to keep silent and are not permitted to have authority over men or to teach (1 Timothy 2:9-12). The *Ekklesia* has faithfully maintained this tradition in terms of priesthood and it is attested to in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Christ clearly chose those whom He willed (Mark 3:13-14; John 6:70). He did so in conjunction with the *Paraclete* and God the Father (Acts 1:2) after intense prayer (Luke 6:12). Male priests became intimately associated with the mission of Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Logos (Mark 16:14-15). The Apostles also prayed before selecting and appointing their assistants (1 Timothy 3:1-13; 2 Timothy 1:6).

Consequently modern-day priests, as the successors of the Apostles, share in the priestly office and not women. No women were among the Twelve Apostles or amongst their successors. This was a contrast to what was occurring in other early religions however, where the idea of priestesses was not uncommon in the Levant. In Rome one would come into contact with the Vestal Virgins while in Delphi there was an oracle served by priestesses. In the early Church women were not denied priesthood because of sexism or chauvinism but by the plan of the Triune Godhead.

Divine priesthood is a "functional imaging of the divine priesthood of God the Father through Jesus Christ."² It can thus only be imaged by man who is connected to the imaging of divine fatherhood. A woman's role differs in that she images functionally the role of the *Paraclete* who is the assistant of Jesus Christ in His work in the *Ekklesia*. Both men and women are considered in Orthodoxy, to be harmonious and mature persons with a sense of great personal responsibility. Each of the sexes has a deep *gnosis* or knowledge of their total dependence on the Triune Godhead for their salvation by the Grace of God the Father. Holy Scripture teaches us that Salvation is the task of the entire Triune Godhead. The Father wills that certain things happen. The Son fulfils the will of the Father and the will is then perfected in each individual believer by the *Paraclete*. This is the foundation upon which the teachings of the early Church was based concerning priesthood as a specifically masculine function. Men and women thus have distinct roles and functions within the Church. There is expected to be synergy in what men and women do in the Church in the same way that Jesus Christ and the *Paraclete* co-operate.

² C. Voulgaris, *The Sacrament of Priesthood in Holy Scripture* (Athens: Rhodes Consultation, 1996), 35.

In analyzing this typological reference, it becomes clear that the *Theotokos* (Mother of God), because of her total commitment to God becomes the cause of the salvation of mankind. It was through the *Theotokos* that the *Paraclete* was able to creatively incarnate the Son of God. The *Theotokos*, of all the people ever born is the person closest to God as she became the Mother of the Incarnate Saviour of mankind. Jesus was able to become the “first” Adam again, and also the “last” Adam and thus made the salvation of mankind possible. Mary was thus “the Mother of all creation”, a “second Eve who repaired the fault of the first woman.”³ Her special function in relation to the work of the *Paraclete* proved that she was indeed *kecharitomeni* (the most gifted of women).⁴ The fact that the *Theotokos* was not a priestess shows that even if women are not ordained as priestesses this by no means suggests any sexism or chauvinism, neither are they to be construed as having lesser dignity than men.

Both the Church and the Virgin Mary the *Theotokos* receive the *Paraclete* whose *energeia* (energy) is able to bring forth Jesus Christ. In the same way, believers are born into the *Ekklesia* as a revitalized and saved community. The typology of women is thus pneumatocentric as it is they who receive distinct gifts from the *Paraclete*. Men on the other hand have a Christocentric typology. It is men who receive the three offices of Jesus Christ including priesthood. Women on the other hand have a function corresponding to the *Paraclete*. Neither man or woman however lose their consubstantiality as equal “images” of the Triune Godhead. Where women are thus accepted as priests, there is a reversal of the roles and functions taking place in which Pneumatology and Christology are altered.

Women were therefore only invested with the duty of *diakonissa* or deaconess as an innovation in caring for other women who were infirmed or to assist in the baptizing of women in the *Ekklesia*. Even this was not without some measure of difficulty for example a woman who was recently widowed had to be *dokimazein* or placed on probation before being appointed as a deaconess. By the third century widows became an order of the *Ekklesia* and became part and parcel of the hierarchy of the Church. The Church Father Origen, stated in his commentary on Romans 16:1 that: “with the authority of the Apostle that even women” are made deaconesses.⁵

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* which was written in Syria in the first half of the first century as an Apostolic Constitution⁶ emphasized that the office of deaconess was a valuable position to have in assisting male priests. This *Didascalia* also suggested that there should be an “order of widows.”⁷ Widows had to spend their time praying for those who gave charity for the church.⁸ By the fourth century women deaconesses could welcome other women at the doors of the church but they were by no means part of the clergy. By the start of the fifth century women were ordained as deaconesses but only if they were virgins or widowed of one husband and at least forty years of age. Deaconesses were not allowed to marry if they were widows. John Chrysostom believed that certain women had *ton to axioma tes diakonias echouson* “dignity of the diaconate.”⁹

³ Zernov, *Church of the Eastern Christians*, 60.

⁴ Voulgaris, *Sacrament of Priesthood*, 34-36.

⁵ J.P. Migne (ed.), *Origen: Commentary on Romans*, *Patrologia Graeca* 14 (Paris, 1800-1875), 1278 A-C.

⁶ J.V. Bartlet, “Fragments of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* in Greek,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 18 (1917): 301-303.

⁷ *Ibid*, 314.

⁸ *Ibid*, 337.

⁹ J.P. Migne (ed.), *John Chrysostom: Homily on 1 Timothy*, *Patrologia Graecae* 62 (Paris, 1800-1875), 553.

Orthodox theologians concentrate on 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, where Paul warns women against teaching in the *Ekklesia* during worship because woman is created in man's image and not in God's image. This reasoning is flawed as there is an ontological unity between male and female and Jesus and His *Ekklesia* that cannot be accepted if one believes that man and woman were created in different "images". In any event, it is only Paul who re-iterates what is stated in Genesis 1:26-27 i.e. God "from the beginning made them male and female".

Why is it that Paul objects then to women teaching in the *Ekklesia*? What is more important to Paul in the function and role of men and women in the divine Economy is that men and women possess peculiar and unique qualities and thus are suited to distinct roles and functions. Each has a "unique talent."¹⁰ The Roman Catholic Church believes that the Apostles transmitted to their successors, the priests and Bishops, the fullness of the priesthood. This implies an uninterrupted chain of succession in ordinations from the time of the Apostles. Some Protestant churches on the other hand repudiate this doctrine. They remain convinced that either men or women obtain a call to serve in the ministry directly from God. In the Eastern Orthodox *Ekklesia*, the Bishop has no power to create priests. He simply sanctions an ordination of a priest performed by the work of the *Paraclete* who works in a mysterious way through the unanimous decision of a local *Ekklesia* which thus greatly values its bond of love or *agape* with the early Church of the Apostles.

Jesus was accompanied by a number of women while going out to preach. This was not well received by the Jews many of whom accused Jesus of making women neglect Jewish purification rights (Luke 23:2). In fact Epiphanius of Salamis explains that Jesus was leading women and children astray. He tells us in *Adversus Haereses* 42 that: "*kai apostrophonta tas gynaikas kai ta tekna...*"

Mark tells us that after Christ went to cities or villages and preached he was accompanied by Mary Magdalene and Susanna, and Joanna amongst many others (Luke 8:1-3). Furthermore when Jesus was crucified there were women looking on from "afar" (Mark 15:40-41). That the names of women are mentioned at all demonstrates that women played an important role in the community. It was women who discovered the tomb of the resurrected Christ on the Easter morning and met the resurrected Christ first. Clearly women were enthralled just as much as the men by the sight of Jesus performing miracles. Our Lord bucked the trend of His milieu and deliberately had a different attitude towards women than was expected. He conversed in public with the Samaritan woman (John 4:27) and allowed a sinful woman to approach Him in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:37). More importantly, He affirmed the equal status of the rights and duties of married couples (Matthew 19:3-9).

When people waited and prayed for the coming of the *Paraclete* after the Ascension, there were undoubtedly women amongst them (Acts 1:14) but on the day of Pentecost, the *Paraclete* filled them all, both men and women (Acts 2:1-14). And yet it was only "Peter and the Eleven" who proclaimed the fulfillment of the Prophecies in Jesus (Acts 2:14). According to Acts 12:12, it was Mary the mother of John-Mark who allowed gatherings of Christians to take place in her home. In Romans 16:1-2 Paul commends a woman by the name of Phoebe. He says: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *diakonos* (minister) of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints". The masculine noun *diakonos* in Hellenistic Greek is preceded by a feminine article and can thus be given a female usage as well irrespective of noun or the context. In the third century the formal position of deaconess appeared (*diakonos*) with that special reference

¹⁰ M. Ashton, *Women Priests? The Bible Answer to the Current Debate* (Birmingham: Christadelphian, 2003), 2.

to Phoebe. The order of deaconess thus appears to go back to the time of the Apostles.¹¹ A wife of a deacon also called a 'deaconess' because of the status of her husband. In First Corinthians we read of a certain Stephanas and his household who were the first converts to Christianity in Achaia who: "*eis diakonian tois hagiois etaxan heautous*" (1 Corinthians 16:15). The word 'deaconess' as used as in the case of Phoebe demonstrates that she: "has been a helper of many". Phoebe clearly gave support to the less fortunate in her community where there was great sorrow and distress. In Romans we also read about Aquilla and Prisca whom Paul describes as: "*tous synergous mou en Christo Iesou.*" This description indicates that Phoebe's charismatic role as an assistant is gradually becoming an official position.¹² Interestingly Paul uses the same description in speaking about Timothy (Romans 16:21), Titus (2 Corinthians 8:23) and others in the Epistle to Philemon (v.24). In Philipians, Paul speaks of Euodia and Syntyche, who "have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers" (Philippians 4:2-3). Mary the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12) and Lydia (Acts 16:14-15) did not have a ceremonial function as deaconesses. Their roles and functions were purely administrative.

The role of a *diakonos* evolved into more than an administrative function and as it did so, so too did the roles and functions of male and female deacons. The masculine role became distinctly a liturgical one. From the fourth century onwards, deaconesses assumed the role and function of pastoral care givers and administration.

In terms of prophesying, both men and women prophesied under the inspiration of the *Paraclete* as was the case in Corinth. But women had to cover their head when prophesying, unlike men who had no need of a head covering (1 Corinthians 11:4-5). Although men and women were equal in God's eyes, a man was a man and a woman should thus remain a woman. Each of the sexes had a specific function to fulfill in terms of God's plan. Women had to wear a veil so as not to dishonour their head who is man. Furthermore, according to 1 Corinthians 14:1-40, Paul insists that order must be maintained during worship and that "the woman should keep silence in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak (*lalein*)" but rather "keep silence" (*sigan*, vv.34-35). If women wish to know anything they should ask their husbands at home. This probably arises due to the habit of women to ask questions of those who were functioning in the Gifts which resulted in worship being disturbed and disrupted. Timothy backs this up in Timothy 2:11, where he asserts "let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness". In both 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 11, we see that male and female have distinct divinely appointed places in the order of Creation. This mode of thinking was very much in line with the Jewish mentality which according to Mosaic Law did not give great value to the witness of women in terms of religious issues.

In 1 Corinthians 1:2-16, Paul refers to the appropriate behaviour in worship.¹³ God is the model of the sexes who are created in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). In Greek custom, women attended worship without a veil on the head and with short hair and men attended with long hair.¹⁴ Paul according to *Theodoret, Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:11-35*, undoubtedly frowned on this as it was an affront to the order of creation.

As women were not allowed to teach or have authority over men they were unable to become an *episkopos* or *presbyter* who would instruct a community of believers (1

¹¹ J. Leipoldt, *Der Frau in der antiken Welt und im Urchristentum* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1959), 133.

¹² A. Oepke, "Gyne," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1933), 1:787.

¹³ H. Conzelmann, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 182.

¹⁴ *John Chrysostom: Homily XXVI on 1 Corinthians*.

Timothy 3:2-5). Just as the order of the Triune Godhead and their mutual relationship cannot be altered, so too cannot be altered the order of humanity and the mutual relationship of women and men in the order of creation which is restored in the *Ekklesia*.¹⁵ If male and female reverse their exclusive roles then they are also reversing their personal qualities and therefore also their mutual relationship. This is intolerable for Paul who recognizes the specific role and function of each of the sexes just as each of the members of the Triune Godhead have a specific role and function. On a human level, man “reflects what God is on the divine level.”¹⁶ The order of Creation goes back to God the Father (Ephesians 3:14-15) who is the source of all existence. Man’s ascendancy over women goes back to Creation where man was created first (1 Corinthians 11:8). Furthermore, woman was created for man as a helper (Genesis 2:18). Nonetheless, woman is of the same *ousia* (nature) as man as she originates from him just as by analogy, Jesus Christ and the *Paraclete* emanate from God the Father: “God the Father is Christ’s head as his generator and projector and is *homoousios*; man is woman’s head because he, too, is her generator and projector and *homoousios* with her. The analogy is consequent and proper...”¹⁷

A deaconess had far less to do in her role than her male counterpart and she was thus far less important than a male deacon although her pastoral care and administrative abilities were greatly valued by the communities in which they served. Despite this adherents were acutely aware that Jesus Christ did not authorize women to preach His Word with any apostolic authority. The Eastern Orthodox Church is thus faithful to the example set by Jesus concerning only male priesthood. It was the main task of the Apostles to preach the gospel, *kerygma and didache*: “in public and from house to house” (Acts 20:18-21). Paul asked Timothy: “what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

In the *Didascalia Apostolorum* we also encounter a description of a deaconess as a woman who is appointed to minister to women. She was expected to take communion to the ill and anoint women (the nudity of women should not be seen by men) but was not allowed to invoke Divine names in the water as this was the function of a male *diakonos*. Deaconesses were also to take a vow of continence if widowed and pray dutifully.¹⁸ A male deacon on the other hand had to perform: “a number of things that are necessary.”¹⁹ A male *diakonos* was the “right arm of the bishop”²⁰ whereas a woman was not. Tertullian in *De Prescriptione Haereticorum* and Irenaeus in his *Adversus Haereses* demonstrate great disapproval of a Gnostic practice to allow women to serve as priests.²¹

By the end of the fourth century the *Apostolic Constitutions* dictated that women no longer baptize as this was now considered the function of a priest. Deaconesses would serve as a go-between, intermediating between other women and officials of the *Ekklesia*. Deaconesses served as ‘ushers’ for the women’s section of the *Ekklesia* (this was usually on the left side of the centre aisle in the Church building). By the ninth century, both male and female deacons wore a stole. There was however a marked difference in that the type

¹⁵ Voulgaris, *Sacrament of Priesthood*, 40

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40-42.

¹⁷ Photius in J.A. Cramer, ed., *Catena Graece Patrum in Novum Testamentum* (Oxford, 1841; [reprint] Hildesheim, 1967), 5:208.

¹⁸ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 3, 1, 1-2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 2, 28, 6.

²¹ E.D. Theodoros, “He Cheirotomia e cheirothesia ton diakonisson,” *Theologia* 25 (1954): 576-601.

of stole worn by each sex. The male *diakonos* wore an *orarion* which went around one shoulder and under the other shoulder and later wore an *epitrachelion* or priestly stole which covered his entire back. The deaconess on the other hand wore an *orarion* which only went around her neck and hung in front occasionally with tassles dangling down. The role of the male was also very distinctly liturgical. It is clear that the New Testament provides much evidence as to the essential and important role and function of women in the *Ekklesia*. Women have been and are true disciples of Jesus Christ. They witness to Christ in their families and in society at large and are mothers of children. They bear witness to their faith and pass on the faith of the *Ekklesia* and its Holy Tradition and observe Holy Scripture. Women played and do play a decisive role in the life of the *Ekklesia* but priesthood cannot be validly conferred on them. They do however have a great mission in the renewal of society. The Eastern Orthodox Church may appear to be archaic in its interpretations but is true to the Holy Scripture and to her unbroken Holy Tradition in ordaining only men into the priesthood.

If the Holy Eucharist were conducted by a woman there would be no resemblance between Christ and His minister and it would be thus difficult to see the image of Christ in the minister as Christ was a man. In any case the Incarnation of the *Logos* took place according to the masculine gender and this fact can in no way be separated from the Economy of salvation. Christ is the 'groom' of His bride who is the *Ekklesia* and in this lies the Mystery and revelation of the Triune Godhead. The Priest represents the entire *Ekklesia* and offers sacrifice for her and prays for her in her entirety.

The priest becomes a sign in a sacramental sense and is a sign of Christ or *mimema Christou*. Priesthood is a special office set by the Triune Godhead in the context of the plan of God the Father. A plan of salvation which aims at restoring His own image and likeness in mankind which became distorted by the Fall. God the Father is thus the source of the priesthood. It is from Him "from whom are all things" (1 Corinthians 8 : 6). Jesus Christ obtained His *Vasileion Ierateuma* (Royal Priesthood) "not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life" (Hebrews 7:7) through His Passion, death and Resurrection. Christ's priesthood is thus inherent in His *ousia*. His office is eternal and perfect unlike that of Moses,²² who's office was imperfect and directed towards purifying the flesh (Hebrews 9:13).

Despite the many qualities needed to serve as priests existing in women, they were not mandated by Jesus Christ to preach with any Apostolic authority. Deaconesses did not receive *cheirotonia* (Holy Orders) upon their ordination as in the case of men. In the final analysis, When Christ returns His work will be seen in all the earth. His servants the *iereis* (priests) will share with Him in bringing the world to a full *gnosis* (knowledge) of God's ways: "They shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with Him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6). In those days all, male and female alike will be "a Chosen Race, a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation (*laos*), God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

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²² J.P. Migne, *Cyril of Alexandria*, Patrologia Graece 68 (Paris, 1800-1875), 805.

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