

## **The Liturgy of Our Lives**

*Women in the Church—Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*

Serbian Conference, Chicago, IL-Nov. 2007

By Teva Regule

### **Yesterday**

I would like to begin by taking you on a journey, a journey to the late 4<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople. (This is an imaginary journey, but one grounded in the historical evidence of the time. So, let us travel.) Picture, if you will, that you are a resident of the capitol city of the most powerful empire at the time. [Perhaps, not so unlike living in Chicago in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, as we know that Chicago is the “capitol” of many things ;-)] Just like our lives today, you probably have the concerns of everyday life—supporting a household, raising children, shopping for daily supplies, etc. You are of Eastern European/Asian ancestry—in this instance, from the eastern edge of the Black Sea—Georgia, (instead of the western edge—Serbia ;-)) Your ancestors had migrated to Cappodocia (present day Turkey) and made their way to the capitol in search of a better life for their children.

Years before, their ancestors had joined a movement that proclaimed that the long-anticipated Messiah of the Jewish people had come. It was a movement that was open not only to the Jewish people, but also the Gentiles. They had heard of Him through a woman missionary and preacher, named Nina. [“Nina” would later become known as St. Nina, Evangelizer of the Georgians and “Equal to the Apostles.” (b. late 3<sup>rd</sup> c.) A bookmark in honor of her is in your conference packet. Now, back to our story.] Your ancestors were entranced by the stories that this woman, Nina, told of this *Man* who cured the sick, claimed to forgive sins, and raised the dead. Sadly, *He* had gotten into trouble with the Roman and Jewish authorities and was put to death, but amazingly *He* came back to life! In fact, *He* proclaimed that *He* was

(or should I say, is) the Resurrection and the Life and that those who believe in Him will have ever-lasting life! (Jn. 11:25) This was a message that had filled them with hope and so they believed. Nina baptized them into this new life and they now called themselves “Christians.” Every Sunday (the “Day of the Lord”) they, and others who believed, would gather for an agape meal to remember the life, death, and resurrection of this Christ. [Justin the Martyr, in his *First Apology* (~150AD), recounts these gatherings. He writes, the Christians

gather[ed] together in one place, the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read...the president verbally instructs, and exhorts the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray...bread and wine are brought, and the president...offers prayers and thanksgivings...The people assent saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each...<sup>1</sup> Now, back to our story once more.]

Unfortunately, your ancestors had to live less-than-open lives regarding to their newfound faith. At times members of this group, especially those working for its mission, were persecuted by the authorities. [For instance, we know from an ancient secular text, one of the letters from Pliny, Governor of Bithynia, to Trajan (112AD), that he asks for guidance on how to handle the Christian sect, writing that he had to place “two women called ‘deaconesses’ under torture.”<sup>2</sup>] Perhaps, just like in modern day under the Communist authorities, it was your grandmother, who maintained the faith, insisting that her children be secretly baptized and putting her name up as, in the case under communist rule, a “volunteer to be part of the ‘twenty,’ the group of women believers, according to the legislation under Krushchev, to whose demands for a place of worship they would concede.”<sup>3</sup> There were stories in your family of these more trying times, but recently, a new emperor had ascended the throne and “legalized” the Christian

---

<sup>1</sup> Justin the Martyr, *First Apology*, Chapter 67.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters of Pliny and Trajan*. Accessed via [www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pliny-trajan1.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pliny-trajan1.html) on 9/05/2004.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, “Women in the Orthodox Church,” trans. D. Takles, in the *St. Nina Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2, Spring 1988.

faith. No longer would its adherents be subject to persecution. This “Peace of Constantine” brought Christianity into the mainstream.

Today is Sunday. As in times past, your family gathers with other believers to remember the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But now, this gathering is no longer in house churches, but it takes place in public, at a huge Cathedral—Hagia Sophia. It seems as though the entire population of the capitol is going to the service today. The energy is palpable. The liturgy begins as a stational service at various points around the city where the faithful gather and sing psalm verses and refrains to the Theotokos and Son of God. You love to sing, especially hymns praising God while you wait for the procession to come by in order to join in the march to the Cathedral. The procession of clergy is quite large—over 60 presbyters, 100 deacons, 40 deaconesses, 90 subdeacons, 110 lectors/readers, and 25 chanters (including children’s and women’s choirs).<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the emperor and his entourage would join the procession as well. It takes a while, but you all eventually make your way to the Cathedral. At the doors, an entrance prayer is read calling on God to “accept the Church [people of God] as She approaches....” Everyone then enters the sanctuary singing the festal Troparion, the special song for the feast. Music fills the air and one can almost *feel* the joy of the feast in the air. The bishop then greets the Emperor and Empress as they enter through the Royal doors (the doors leading into the nave from the narthex, not from the nave into the altar area). All eyes are then fixed on the Ambo area (center podium) where stories from the Old and New Testaments are read. You get as close to the Ambo as possible, pressing up against the railing that acts as a “crowd control.” After the readings, there are multiple sermons<sup>5</sup>, the last one given by the bishop. You and others,

---

<sup>4</sup> E. Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate: An Historical Perspective*, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Light and Life Publishing, 1991), p. 18. Also: Taft, Robert, *Through Their Own Eyes: Liturgy as the Byzantines Saw It*, (Berkeley, Ca.: InterOrthodox Press), p. 61. Henceforth: Taft, *Byzantines*.

<sup>5</sup> Taft, *Byzantines*, p. 81.

listen intently. One such speaker, John Chrysostom challenges you to not only hear the words of the Gospel, but to act on their ethical implications. Some in the crowd clap when they approve. Others whisper among themselves at his admonitions. Still others verbally show their displeasure when they disapprove! These might be some of the same ones that leave the service after the sermon! [Unlike today, where we sometimes arrive late, in Chrysostom's time, everyone arrived with the procession, but some left early!] After the sermon, a litany in which the community prays for the world and its worldly cares (i.e. The Great Litany) is intoned with everyone responding "Lord, have mercy."

At this point in the service, everyone seems to be moving. The clergy move to the altar area. [There was still no iconostasis as we know it today.] A group of those who have yet to be baptized leave the celebration. The women in this group of catechumens meet with some of the deaconesses for further instruction in the faith in preparation for baptism. Those who remain in the service are the faithful. You all exchange the Kiss of Peace, the gifts are brought from an outside collection area [Gk. skevophelokian] to the altar area by the deacons, and then you dialogue with the priest during the great Eucharistic prayer (the Anaphora, Gk. Up-carry/carry up). It is here that you hear [There are no "inaudible" prayers.] of the history of salvation from the Christian perspective—giving your "Amen" to not only the words of Institution—"Take, eat, this is my body...", but also the words of consecration—"Make this bread the body of Your Christ...". You *all* call down the Holy Spirit to bless the gifts. You then all receive the consecrated gifts—the bread in your hands and the wine from the cup. [The "spoon" was not introduced until around the year 1000 and was initially condemned as an unheard of innovation.<sup>6</sup>] Today, communion takes three hours<sup>7</sup>! After communion, you sing more praises

---

<sup>6</sup> Taft, *Byzantines*, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Taft, *Byzantines*, p. 119.

to God for having the opportunity to glimpse the “True Light.” It is an exhausting, but exhilarating experience.

After the service, you meet up with your friend, Olympia, a deaconess and confidant of the bishop, John Chrysostom. She works in close association with the bishop and is in charge of the “liturgy after the liturgy” (Bria), taking the consecrated gifts to those women who are infirm and who could not come to the service today. With the other deacons, she also helps to distribute the leftover offering to the poor and needy of the city. As you accompany her on her rounds, you speak with her about your faith, every day life, and perhaps, some recent troubles in your family. She offers consolation and advice. Had you been a nun under her care, she (or any abbess) would not only be able to hear your “confession, “ but also given you absolution. [It wasn’t until approx. the 9<sup>th</sup> c. that giving absolution became the function of the ordained priest.] You return home, spiritually enriched by your experience of the day—the liturgy of life. You have received a taste of the Kingdom, the “True Light.”

Women in the life of the Church—Yesterday... as missionaries, preachers, teachers, counselors, chanters/singers, monastics, ordained deaconesses, (and although I didn’t mention them above, as prophetesses and “widows”), guardians of the faith, and faithful laypeople who makeup the body of Christ.

## Today

Women in the life of the Church—Today. How do we experience God in the Church?

What does the “liturgy of our lives today look like?”

We have seen the true light! We have received the Heavenly Spirit! We have found the true faith! Therefore, let us worship the undivided Trinity who has saved us.<sup>8</sup>

These are the words of the faithful immediately after receiving the Body and Blood of Christ during the Divine Liturgy today in the received tradition. God, the eternal Other, is beyond space and time. In His love, He created the world out of nothingness. Union with God is what is *life*. Even though we live within the bounds of space and time, we have the opportunity to embrace this *true light* and, as St. Gregory of Nazianzen says, “learn the mystery of the illumination from Heaven.”<sup>9</sup> In doing so, we enter into a never-ending relationship with God. Of course, we can never really fully know God, just as we can never fully know other persons. We can know about them, but never really truly know them in totality. It is a never-ending process.

This relationship formally begins at our baptism. However, as with any relationship, we must nurture it in order for it to grow. We have the opportunity to do so throughout our lives within the community of the Church. The Divine Liturgy, in particular, is replete with the opportunity to know God, to enter into this never-ending relationship with God. God has given us the invitation in both its horizontal and vertical dimensions. In the Liturgy, we experience God through the person of the Risen Christ. Christ, as both God and human, is the unity of the created with the uncreated, the bridge from the created world to God. He is the archetype of the

---

<sup>8</sup> *The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*, (SCOBA Commissioned), p. 57. Henceforth, *The Divine Liturgy*.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Nazianzen, *Epiphany Sermon*, [www.roca.org/oa/119/119d.htm](http://www.roca.org/oa/119/119d.htm).

true human person. As St. Athanasius says in his work *On the Incarnation*, “God became a [human person] so that we may become gods.”<sup>10</sup> When we gather as a community in the Liturgy, we are in the company of the Lord. We become the Church. It is in the Church that is, at the same time, the Body of the Risen Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and as my Dogmatics professor, Dr. Fr. Emmanuel Clapsis emphasizes, “a therapeutic, healing community,” where we receive Christ.

God has given us the invitation. We must respond. In this part of the talk, I will highlight the opportunities to know God within the context of Liturgy, to experience a taste of the Kingdom, through Scripture, Tradition, our relationships with others, and our reception of Holy Communion. I will also emphasize that this invitation requires a response on our part. Throughout this section, I have included personal reflections on ways that I have encountered and served God through my own liturgical participation. In addition, I will explore areas where women may further serve. As Fr. Alkiviadis Calivas, Professor Emeritus of Liturgical Theology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, says, “Salvation is accomplished by God in cooperation—synergy—with humanity.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Scripture**

The first part of the Divine Liturgy is the Liturgy of the Word. It is here that we read and hear the Scriptures, encountering God through His presence in history. In the early Church (as we have seen) the first reading was from the Old Testament and was followed by a reading from one of the letters of the Apostles. The last reading was from one of the Gospels. We have retained only the New Testament readings today. In the message of the Bible we learn about

---

<sup>10</sup> St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, (Crestwood, N.Y.: SVS Press, 1982), p.93.

God—who God is, who Christ is and about His powers and of the existence of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We also learn how to live within history, in wholeness and in a proper relationship with others, through the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. Furthermore, we get a glimpse of the future Kingdom in such parables of the Publican and Pharisee and the Rich Young Man.

The word “liturgy” or *leitourgia* comes from the Greek *laos* (people) and *ergon* (work). It is the “work of the people.” It is a dialogue of the priest and the people. *I have always participated in the liturgy by singing and chanting the responses. I started reading the Epistle within the liturgical assembly when I was in high school and have continued doing so for over thirty-two years. Every time I am scheduled to read the scriptures, I have taken special care to read and reflect on them beforehand. The letters of the Bible were meant to be read aloud to the brothers and sisters of the community. When I read them in the Eucharistic assembly, I am participating in an experience that has its origins in the beginning of the Church. Both the community and I are connected to the Early Church, as well as the Church through time through the public reading of Scripture.*

*Recently, I have begun giving homilies within the liturgical assembly as well. Although this is a rather new area of ministry for women, it has been welcomed in my parish. As a theologically trained woman, I am thankful to have the opportunity. It has been a challenging opportunity, but a spiritually enriching one. One never really knows a subject until you are required to teach it and explain it to others. While it is important that those who are trained in theology be able to recover the original meaning of the text and to explicate the passage of Scripture to others in the congregation, it is also necessary to be able to give some insight into*

---

<sup>11</sup> Alkiviadis Calivas, “The Sacramental Life of the Orthodox Church,” in F. Litsas, ed., *A Companion to the Greek Orthodox Church* (New York, 1988), p. 33.



*its importance for our lives today. I have used insights not only from my years of study, but also from my life experience encountering God within the Church. By meditating and reflecting more fully on the text, I have been able to learn about and relate to God in a way I had not previously experienced. I feel honored to be able to share my insights with my sisters and brothers in Christ. I hope I have deepened their understanding of God and what He has done for us and enhanced their experience of God through the Liturgy.* In as much as we *all* allow the words of the Scripture to penetrate our being, we grow in our relationship with God and with one another. It is in this relationship that we experience that other dimension, the world to come.

### **Tradition**

The Tradition of the Church is the presence of God's Spirit in His Church through history. It is the work of the Holy Spirit, leading us to the Risen Christ, to the Kingdom of God. In addition to the knowledge of God that we have acquired through the Scriptures, throughout history we learn more about God through the lives of the saints and understand more of who God is and what He has done for us through the decisions of the Ecumenical councils. The Tradition of the Church represents the continuum of knowledge passed down and enlarged from one generation to the next and reinterpreted for each.

Throughout the liturgical year, the Church remembers those women and men who have gone before us and lived lives imbued with the Holy Spirit. We call them saints. We all have saints with whom we can identify and strive to emulate. Of special importance to me is the saint I introduced in the opening of this presentation, St. Nina (d. 334 AD) known as "Equal to the Apostles" and evangelizer to the people of Georgia. (St. Nina is commemorated on 14 January.) She is reported to have lived a life of quiet piety, but did not hesitate to preach and to teach the

Gospel, as well as baptize people into the life of Christ. For her, the message of salvation brought by Christ and her experience of the risen Christ in her life was so transforming that, according to her *Life*, St. Nina gave up the privilege and security of her noble birth to spread the Good News to others. May she be an example for all of us.

In addition to commemorating—singing hymns and reading excerpts from the *Synaxarion*—those who have known God before us, the Liturgy includes many doctrinal statements to help us better know who God is. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, for example, is an encapsulation of the doctrine of the Church, telling us who God is and what He has done for us, who Jesus Christ is and the history of salvation, the economy of the Holy Spirit, and the expectation of the life of the world to come. Originally a baptismal profession of faith, it was added to the Liturgy in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century once infant baptism became more of the norm. By reciting the Creed at every liturgy we are re-actualizing our baptism. We are given the opportunity to reflect on how our belief in God structures our existence and our understanding of life, the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and our salvation. Our faith shapes who we are, what we do, and why we do it.

All of these experiences of and statements about God and the history of salvation actualize the presence of God in our midst. This is done through the collective memory of the Church and our participation in the event of the assembly. In as much as we can become a part of these lives and events, we are transfigured towards Christ and the Kingdom to come.

### **Our Relationship with Others**

Our relationships with others help us to know God and to glimpse His Kingdom as well. Our participation in the community is how and where we learn about ourselves, where we cease

to be “individuals” and become “persons”—those in relation. It is through these relationships that we have the opportunity to know God and others not only in a cognitive sense but through an encounter of the heart.

We begin the Liturgy by praying for all in what is now called the Great or Peace Litany. We pray for the “peace in the whole world...unity of all...travelers...for the sick, the suffering, the captives....”<sup>12</sup> As mentioned earlier, in the early Church this litany was said immediately prior to the Kiss of Peace. In the Kiss of Peace we actualize the love of God between one another. It signifies are membership in the Body of Christ (e.g. baptism). Each is our sister or our brother. Through the Risen Christ, we can move beyond our divisions within society, whether ethnic, racial, gender, or cultural, and assume a Christian identity. Our differences are transcended in the unity of the Body of Christ. [As Vladimir Lossky writes,

The fullness of nature demands the perfect unity of humanity, one body which is realized in the Church.... Within the unity of the common nature the persons are not parts, but each a whole, finding accomplishment of its fullness in union with God.<sup>13</sup>]

While we are given the opportunity to enter into this peace, how we experience God’s peace and love are conditioned by the community’s response to God’s invitation. *In my own parish, as in the Early Church, the entire community shares the Kiss of Peace. I look forward to doing so at every Liturgy. My physical expression of agape love draws me closer to the members of the community and gives our worship a sense of unity.* Inasmuch as we can give ourselves over to the other, we can participate in and enter into God’s love, in both its horizontal and

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Divine Liturgy*, pp. 33-35.

vertical dimensions. The more we enter into this love, the more we become who we are called to be, both as persons and as community.

### **The Eucharist**

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life...I am the living bread... [those] who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in Me and I in [them].” (Jn. 6:32-58) Food is life and the “new food of the new life which we receive from God in His Kingdom is Christ Himself.”<sup>14</sup> This is the “superessential” bread, the bread of life (usually translated as “daily bread”) to which we refer in the Lord’s prayer. We ask God for a taste so that as we say in the Anaphora of the Liturgy, it may be “for the awakening of the soul, for forgiveness of sins, for communion with your Holy Spirit, for fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>15</sup>

The body of Christ is, as we say in the Liturgy, “broken and shared, broken but not divided, ever eaten but not consumed, sanctifying those who partake.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike other food which is in a state of decay and is eaten by us to be consumed and then dispelled, when we partake of the body and blood of Christ we are *integrated into it*. The corruptible elements are transformed into symbols of life which incorporate us. Christ becomes the life for many, as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann says, “uniting them to Himself.”<sup>17</sup> This opportunity to receive the body and blood of Christ is given to all of us from the time of our baptism at every Divine Liturgy. However, we must be prepared to receive it. It is important to remember that none of us is totally “worthy” to receive the Body and Blood of Christ by our own accord but none of us is

---

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), p. 241.

<sup>14</sup> Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> *The Divine Liturgy*, p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life*, (Department of Religious Education (OCA), p. 1983), p. 68.

made unworthy due to natural biological functions either. *When I receive Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharist, I feel His presence more fully in my life. I am part of His life and the lives of all my sisters and brothers in Christ.* When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ we can all say, "We have seen the true light."

Women in the liturgical life of the Church Today—as chanters/singers, readers, preachers/teachers, members and participants in the Body of Christ (and although I didn't mention them above (and certainly not an exhaustive list) as hymnographers, iconographers, ecclesiarchs, monastics, chaplains, and pastoral assistants.

## **Tomorrow (Back to the Future or Ahead to the Past)**

### **Our Response**

The future is a gift from God. It sustains God's people in hope and empowers us to create a *future in the present*. God invites all of us to participate in this future. It is up to us to respond, to enter into that synergistic relationship which gives us a taste of the kingdom while we are here on earth. Our experience is conditioned by our ability to enter into this relationship, to participate in it. The Liturgy is an *event* that we *enter into*.

Our ability to enter into the Liturgy is predicated on our ability to offer our gifts. This has implications for liturgical renewal, including our use of language in the service, as well as the roles within the assembly. Our participation may be hindered due to our own sin—our laziness or hardness of heart. It may also be limited due to the reality of our maturity. We begin as children in the faith, and hopefully, grow into adulthood. Along the way, we find ourselves and discover our gifts that express the fullness of our humanity. Sadly, our gifts may not be recognized by the community and this may hinder our ability to participate in the event of the

assembly. This can be seen in the tendencies towards clericalism and congregationalism within many of our parishes. However, it is most acutely felt and seen by many laypersons, especially women, in the liturgical assembly. Unfortunately, the participation of women in the liturgical celebration varies widely. While the ministry of women may be welcomed in one setting, it may be forbidden in another merely because they are women. However, the same is rarely true for men, just because they are men. The Church needs to recognize that not all roles within the assembly are gender defined.

### *Altar Server*

I would now like to look briefly at two such roles—that of the altar server and the diaconate. The Orthodox Church's theology of God and our relationship to Him is life-giving. However, there are times when certain practices in the Church fail to reflect this life-giving theology. One area that has been particularly painful to many girls and women is the practice of only allowing males to serve within the altar in parishes. Although many bishops, priests, and theologians admit that there is no good theological reason for such a practice (women have served in the past as female deacons in Byzantium and as altar servers in Russia and elsewhere as well as in monastic settings), it persists. Within the past few years, a small number of parishes have taken tentative steps to include girls as altar servers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this has been a welcome development in those settings. Still some resist (or even prohibit) the practice.

In general, altar service is simple and functional. Yet we go to a great deal of trouble to disallow the service of girls and women. So, if there are no good theological reasons for disallowing girls/women to serve in the altar, why *should* girls/women be allowed to participate

in the ministry of altar service? Can the Body of Christ be built up by allowing their participation in this ministry? As one who has spent a great part of her adult life studying and contemplating this issue and who has a great interest in liturgical theology, I offer four immediate reasons:

1) As we have seen, the liturgical services of our Church are filled with opportunities to learn about God and grow closer to Him. Serving within the altar (an example of “active learning”) can give us an important opportunity to shape this relationship in a positive manner. Serving can increase our understanding of and connection to a celebration that is done for and with all believers but one in which many of the liturgical actions are rarely, if ever, seen or experienced by those of us in the congregation. **By not allowing females the opportunity to serve, we are depriving them of an important catechetical opportunity.** This was made abundantly clear to me during one of my liturgics classes. As someone who put a great deal of effort into the class, I was always surprised at the little things that the men seemed to know, but of which I was totally unaware. It is important for everyone to read about the liturgy and to participate as a member of the congregation. But we can get a richer and deeper understanding of the service when we are able to observe and participate within the altar area.

In my opinion, the policy of only allowing males to serve also has an adverse educational effect on them as well. While many of them should be offering their gifts in other capacities and learning from those experiences (e.g. the choir), they are encouraged only to serve within the altar, limiting other educational opportunities.

2) **Not allowing girls and women the opportunity to serve can have an adverse effect on their spiritual lives.** This is especially true of girls who want to serve and are told that they are not allowed. Not only do they miss an intimate connection with the liturgy, but they are told that the gifts they offer are not welcome. In as much as the Church can be the community within

which we experience God, this rejection, which can be quite painful, may become an impediment to the growth of that relationship. Their experience of the liturgy - the most intimate connection with God in this life - then becomes less than the ideal.

3) **We do damage to the integrity of the Church.** By disallowing the service of girls and women within the altar, we fail to live up to the life-giving theology of our Church, especially the anthropology of the Great Cappodocian Fathers. We are all made in the image of God and called to grow into His likeness - *theosis*. We do this within the community of the Church, which is the risen Body of Christ. Furthermore, we are all called to build up this Body and are given gifts in order to do so. As it says in 1 Cor. 12:7, "to *each one* is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Our baptismal vocation should not be gender-determined. While no one has a "right" to altar service, no one should be denied the opportunity to serve merely because of their gender. By not aligning our liturgical practice with our theology, we risk establishing a "gender determinism" to altar service that is not only devoid of such necessary criteria as ethical and moral considerations, but which inhibits our ability to build up the Body of Christ. Many theologians admit there are no good theological reasons for not allowing girls the opportunity to serve. Yet we remain either unable or afraid to act. It is as if the Body of Christ is *paralyzed*. A living and healthy Church welcomes all the gifts of its members. I want to be clear, I am not talking about the ordained presbytery or episcopacy. I am only addressing the issue of altar service for which we have a history of both male and female participation.

4) The last reason that I will offer in the context of this talk is that, **instead of inculcating a sense of service, limiting altar service to males can give them a false sense of entitlement that is antithetical to the Gospel message of humility and love in service to Christ and His Church.**



We rely on our bishops to keep the unity and integrity of the Church and its traditions. But “integrity” does not mean “sameness.” It means adherence to a code of values. Another meaning of "integrity" is "completeness." In concern for the "*completeness* of the Church and its traditions" on this issue, I urge our bishops to examine the issue in greater detail. I conclude this section by quoting Rev. Dr. Konodothra M. George on the strength of Tradition and its manifestation in our practice, "The real strength of tradition should be its transparent openness to the power of the Holy Spirit who always guides us into an ever-renewed vision of the Truth." Let us be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in the *living* Tradition of the Church.

*Female Diaconate (Ahead to the Past)*

I would now like to turn to the female diaconate. (The following remarks are part of a more in-depth presentation on the topic, including a history of the order and an examination of its restoration (both male and, in many cases, female) within faith traditions.)

The Church is in the world to serve the community and draw us closer to God. For over one thousand years, the Church ordained women as Deaconesses to function within the community in a ministry of service to one another in God's love. The link between liturgy and service is crucial to what it means to gather as Church in worship. Liturgically, it is the deacon's function to bring the people together and unite them in corporate prayer. It is in our service to the other that we are united with them. Our service to the other brings them with us to worship. It is my hope that the Church will someday not only restore the ordained female diaconate, but revitalize the office, encouraging women to serve within the community and the Liturgy as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, a noted French Orthodox theologian, and others have said, in the "context of the culture and present requirements of the day."<sup>18</sup>

Although the diaconate in the Eastern Orthodox Church has remained an active ministry since apostolic times, its scope and function has greatly diminished since the fall of Byzantium. The male diaconate generally functions solely in the liturgical realm and, oftentimes, has become just a transitional stage to ordination to the priesthood. The female diaconate has virtually disappeared. There have been numerous attempts for over one-hundred and fifty years to reinstitute the female diaconate. As early as 1855, the sister of Czar Nicholas I tried to restore the office.<sup>19</sup> Other prominent Russians also lobbied for its restoration, including Alexandr Gumilevsky and Mother Catherine (Countess Efimovsky). According to numerous sources, in

---

<sup>18</sup> *An Orthodox Diaconate for Women?* Reported in *Sobornost* 23:1 (2001), pp. 60-63.

1905-06, several bishops, archbishops, and metropolitans of the Russian Orthodox Church encouraged the effort. According to a report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women in Agapia in 1976, this issue was to be a major topic at the Council of the Russian Church beginning in 1917, but due to the political turmoil in Russia at the time, the council's work was not addressed.<sup>20</sup> (It should be noted that other items on the agenda included adopting the use of the vernacular in the liturgical services and the reinstatement of the married episcopacy.)

Other efforts were made in Greece. On Pentecost Sunday in 1911, Archbishop (now, Saint) Nektarios ordained a nun to the diaconate to serve the needs of the monastery. A few years later, Archbishop Chrysostomos of Athens appointed "monastic 'deaconesses' who were nuns actually appointed to the subdiaconate."<sup>21</sup>

More recently, the issue has been discussed at the international conferences for Orthodox women in Agapia, Romania (1976—at which its restoration was unanimously recommended), Sophia, Bulgaria (1987), Rhodes, Greece (1988), Crete (1990), Damascus, Syria (1996) and Istanbul (1997). Furthermore, in July of 2000, after over a year of careful review of the subject, a formal letter was sent to the Ecumenical Patriarch by more than a dozen members of the Orthodox community in Paris, including such noted Orthodox theologians as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Fr. Boris Bobrinskoy, Olivier Clément, and Nicolas Lossky. The letter traces the history of the female diaconate and notes that the Patriarch himself has stated that there is "no obstacle in canon law [that] stands in the way of the ordination of women to the diaconate. This institution of the early Church deserves to be revitalized."<sup>22</sup> It also states that the order should

---

<sup>19</sup> Gvosdev, *The Female Diaconate*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, referencing Tarasar, Constance J. and Irina Kirillova, eds., *Orthodox Women: Their Role and Participation in the Orthodox Church* (Report on the Consultation of Orthodox Women, Sept. 11-17, 1976, Agapia, Romania) (New York: World Council of Churches Press), p.27.

<sup>21</sup> FitzGerald, "The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess," p. 90 referencing Theodorou, *Cheirotonia*.

<sup>22</sup> *An Orthodox Diaconate for Women?* Reported in *Sobornost* 23:1 (2001), pp. 60-63.

“involve more than a simple and archaeological reconstitution of the ancient ministry of the deaconesses ...it is a question of its revitalization, in other words of its realization in the context of the culture and requirements of the present day.”<sup>23</sup>

What would the deaconess do in the Church today? The question is generally preceded by the acknowledgement that the ancient deaconess assisted in the baptism of women, etc. It is oftentimes assumed that since we no longer have many adult baptisms (infant baptism being the norm) that we no longer need deaconesses. (Although a simplistic analogy, it is interesting that the same question is not asked of the male diaconate. i.e. Since we no longer need ‘table servers’ at the Eucharist, a function of the biblical diaconate, why do we need male deacons?) This issue has been discussed within Orthodox circles as well. According to the report of the Crete consultation (1990), a deacon or deaconess could

lead people in prayer, give spiritual counsel, distribute Holy Communion where possible. [In addition] The renewal of the diaconate for both men and women would meet many of the needs of the Church in a changing world...catechetical work...pastoral relations...serving the same needs for monastic communities without a presbyter ...reading prayers for special occasions, ...performing social work ...pastoral care ...engaging in youth and college ministry ...counseling ...anointing the infirm ...carrying out missionary work ...ministering to the sick, ...assisting the bishop or presbyter in the liturgical services....<sup>24</sup>

The report concludes that a creative restoration of the diaconate for women, could lead in turn to the renewal in the diaconate for men as well.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> *Orthodox Women's Consultation on Church and Culture*, Crete, January 1990. Accessed via <http://members.iinet.net.au/~mmjournal/MA...REPORTS/CRETE%20%Consultation%201990.htm> on 4/28/2003.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

*Considerations for a Reinstated Female Diaconate.*

A) The Liturgical Role of the Female Deacon.

When discussing the reinstatement of the female diaconate, the question of her liturgical role, including her service within the altar area, often arises. (It is my opinion, if this question were settled, we would currently have women deacons in the Orthodox Church.) According to the *Apology* of Justin the Martyr (~60 AD), the ministry of the deacon was expressed in the liturgical celebration of the gathered Eucharistic assembly,

...reading the gospel, leading the intercessions of the people, receiving the gifts of the people and 'setting the table' for the meal, serving the Eucharistic meal....[Moreover] the social service carried on by the deacons seems to be been rooted in the liturgical celebration.<sup>26</sup>

As we have seen, the link between liturgy and service is crucial not only to the office of the diaconate, but to our understanding of what it means to gather as Church in worship. It is in our service to the other that we are united with them. Our service to the other brings them with us to worship. In my opinion, it is a distortion of the office to have the male deacon serve only during the liturgy, but not within the community, and conversely, to have a future female deacon serve within the community, but not during the liturgy. As Dr. FitzGerald says in her book, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*,

It is important to remember that in the past women deacons did have important responsibilities in the Eucharist assembly as well as in the administration of baptism, in praying with and for those in need, and in bringing Holy Communion to those unable to attend the Eucharist. ...Today, these expressions of ministry can certainly continue. At the same time, we also need to examine how women deacons can participate in the Eucharist and other liturgical services in a manner which is expressive of the living Tradition of

---

<sup>26</sup> Anglican-Lutheran International Commission, *The Diaconate as Ecumenical Opportunity*, (London: Anglican Communion Publications, 1996), p. 10 referencing *Apology* of Justin the Martyr.

the Church and which is not defined by cultural norms of another time.<sup>27</sup>

B) The Need.

But do we really need a rejuvenated diaconate and in particular, a restored female diaconate? To help answer this question, it is instructive to understand the responsibilities of a typical parish priest. Fr. Alexander Garklavs outlined a number of functions expected of today's parish priest in his presentation at the 2004 Pastoral Conference held at St. Tikhon's Monastery in June of 2004. In addition to all the liturgical duties of the priest (Sunday and any daily liturgical services, baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.), he enumerates some of the priest's responsibilities in parish life in America:

Pastoral visitations, educational work, Bible study, adult study, youth work, teen work, working with choirs and choir directors, marriage preparation, marital counseling, visiting shut-ins, grief counseling, [hospital visits], office work, preparing and printing bulletins and schedules, parish mailing, aspects of parish administration: parish council meetings, budgets, agendas, PR, building committees, sunshine committees, yard work, etc.<sup>28</sup>

As far back as 1953, Archbishop Michael of the Greek Orthodox Church in North and South America realized that there is so much to do in each community that the

endeavors of these priests alone do not suffice. For should the priest wish to know, as he must his spiritual children by name, their problems, and their spiritual and moral needs, this would certainly be beyond his physical and spiritual resources.

These tremendous needs of the Greek Orthodox Church in America has urged us to make a fervent appeal such as this to our daughters-in-Christ, . . . With the future welfare of our Church and membership at heart, we are considering the establishment in this country of an order of deaconess.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 197.

Clearly, a rejuvenated diaconate, a ministry that has service as its primary focus, is necessary in our Church today. No one person can fill all the duties necessary for the building up of the Body of Christ, the Church. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “Each of us has been given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”<sup>30</sup> The diaconate is not merely a “stepping stone” to higher orders. It is, as Dr. FitzGerald explains, “a full and parallel order of ordained ministry to which both men and women are called by God.”<sup>31</sup>

C) Is an *ordained* ministry necessary?

It is an unfortunate effect of clericalism that lay participation in our churches varies widely. This is especially true of the participation of women. The range of women’s participation in the life of the Church can vary from diocese to diocese and even from parish to parish within each diocese. Still, many laywomen are already doing diaconal work in our parishes. Is ordination, then, necessary? What does an “ordination” mean? To begin to answer these questions, it is important to remember that we are all called to ministry within the Body of Christ. Each of us is called to minister to others in our daily lives—we are all expected to teach others, especially those in our care; to be able to perform CPR on our neighbor, if necessary, for example. And yet, we set apart certain people to do such tasks on a professional basis. Unlike us, they must be trained in their profession and pass exams before we, as a society, confer a designation on them as “teacher” or “medical professional.” Likewise, throughout history the Church has “set apart” those “consecrated for service.” There are theological reasons for blessing someone in ministry.

[First,] Those who are set aside for ministry have the authority of the Church but they are also integrated into and

---

<sup>28</sup> Garklavs, Rev. Alexander, *The Orthodox Pastor in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Talk presented at the 2004 Pastoral Conference (OCA) at St. Tikhon’s Monastery, South Canaan, PA, June 2-4, 2004. Accessed via [www.oca.org](http://www.oca.org).

<sup>29</sup> FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 154-5.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor. 12:7, NRSV.

<sup>31</sup> FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 165.

accountable to the Church. [There are no “loose wheels.” This is a reciprocal relationship. The Church is also accountable to them by providing support and preparation for carrying out diaconal ministries in its name.] [Second,] Setting aside a person by the Church is a way to affirm the fact that we, as a Church, are members of one another [and Third,] We believe that it is by the grace of the Holy Spirit that spiritual and pastoral gifts are enlivened.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, an ordination by the bishop who is the guarantor of the unity of the faith, is *universal in scope*. The authority of the bishop is rooted in Jesus Christ and it is Christ who confers it by the Holy Spirit through the act of ordination.<sup>33</sup> As Dr. FitzGerald acknowledges, “Ordination is not a right or a possession of anyone. Rather, it is a profound acknowledgement, by the Church, of God’s action in the life of a particular person who is called to serve Him and His Church in a distinctive and public manner.”<sup>34</sup> It is an action that is beyond temporality, connecting us with those that have gone before us and those that have yet to live. It is a connection to the Church—past, present, and future.

---

<sup>32</sup> Francis, Sarah Byrne, *Orthodox Chaplaincy: Reflections and Recommendations in The St. Nina Quarterly* forthcoming.

<sup>33</sup> BEM, p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> FitzGerald, *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church*, p. 184.



*Meeting the Orthodox Deaconess in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

The Church is blessed to have a number of laywomen working in diaconal roles already, including pastoral assistants, chaplains, ecclesiarchs, and monastics. Through conversations and reflection, I have collected some of their experiences. I would like to now share them with you now. (Most of the reflections below are verbatim accounts of their experiences. In some cases, I have contextualized their comments for clarity.)

*Reflections of a Chaplain*

The first time I was scheduled to serve over night as an on-call chaplain, I received a page at 5 am. I groggily called the Intensive Care Unit, and spoke to a nurse who requested that I visit an anxious, weeping patient who would be undergoing surgery later that morning. I was told that the patient, “Andrew” was Orthodox Jewish. The nurse said that Andrew had a tracheotomy, and therefore could not speak. I entered the small ICU, which was silent but for the beeping ventilator and monitors. I introduced myself to Andrew, a 50-year old man with a scraggly beard and dark eyes. I told him that I would be happy to sit with him in this time of anxiety, and pray with him if he desired. “I understand you are Jewish,” I said, thinking that I might try to locate his rabbi if he had specific religious needs. He shook his head, and began awkwardly attempting to cross himself in an Orthodox manner. “Oh!”, I said, “You’re Orthodox!” Apparently, he had been misunderstood. “Actually, so am I!”, I said. His eyes registered surprise and joy, and he began crying calmer, gentler tears. He took a pad and wrote in large, shaky letters, “I am Orthodox. I am scared.” I put my hand on his shoulder and consoled him, and after a short conversation (via the notepad) about his surgery and his fears, I offered to pray for him. I taped an icon of the Resurrection on the wall across from his bed, and standing beside him, chanted the Trisagion prayers and a Psalm. Andrew became visibly calmer; a sense of peace came over his face. He left for surgery, trusting in God’s protection. I did not see Andrew again, but I believe that God led me to him on that early morning, to ease his fears and to refocus his heart on God’s loving presence in a time of suffering.

[Now, how much more complete would this story have been if the “deaconess” could have brought communion to the afflicted and ailing?]

*Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant*

It is Pentecost and I am to give my sermon. I am nervous but excited to be speaking about the Descent of the Holy Spirit! When I preach or teach, I know I am doing what I love, doing what I am called to do. I get to use my passions and gifts in a way that benefits the community I love.

[There seems to be no better ministry than to be able to use one's gifts (on a *universal* basis) for the community that one loves.]

*Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant*

I am tired. I have just finished a long day at work and am drained. I have to lead the adult Bible Study tonight. I go to the chapel to collect my thoughts. We are reading and studying a passage from Matthew today. I ask God to give me the words. I read the passage slowly aloud. During the bible study, I am surprised at the profoundness of the words that come out of my mouth. I am energized and enlivened as are those around me. It is getting late so we wrap it up. I am totally exhausted when I get home but filled with the Spirit.

[As "deaconess" she could read and preach not just for the small group in the Bible Study but for all in the liturgical assembly.]

*Reflections of an Ecclesiarch*

I am directing students in the preparation of the chapel. We are approaching Holy Week. I need to be aware of all the liturgical order of the services, the rubrics, the chanting... I put on my robe in the vestry and notice how the bishop is getting dressed, something I have never seen before. I explain part of the *Proscomedie* service to a young seminarian. I have always enjoyed the teaching part of this job. At first, some of the guys were "a little leary" of a woman doing this job. After all, I am not only a woman, but a convert. But, it has been a transformative process for all of us. Now, when challenged, they come to my defense, "of course she should do it, she knows what she is doing."

[It is important in our ministry as "deaconesses" to not only earn the authority but have others recognize it.]

*Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant.*

I am helping Father with the Bridegroom services during Holy Week. At this particular service none of the altar servers are available. Father quickly motions for me to go into the altar and get one of the candles for the procession. I don't know whether I wanted to be an altar server growing up or not. Now, here I was carrying the candle in the procession. Such a simple thing... Somehow, I knew exactly what to do. It was a great honor. To be able to serve and be more fully integrated into the worship service gave me a connection to the liturgy of the Church in a way that I had never experienced before. Everyone should have the opportunity to experience the liturgy this way.

[Perhaps, our daughters will get that opportunity. I remember that my sister wanted to be an altar server when she younger. They said that only boys could do it because they could be priests one day. But, if altar service led to the priesthood then our seminaries would be full of those boys. However, they are not. As a seminary student, I am always amazed at the things they know about the service of which I had (until recently) no idea. I certainly missed a great catechetical opportunity. They say that anyone who has business "back there" and has the

blessing to do so can serve and that there is no reason why girls can't and yet they don't allow us. I have spent many years frustrated by the policy. I remember my younger brother and how proud he was to serve at the altar. I also remember other boys who could care less but felt entitled to their service. We are all called to build up the Body of Christ. Is the Church utilizing all of the talents of its members to do so?

Altar service is an important but misused service in the Church. Women serve in women's monasteries. And prior to the fall of communism, women served almost ubiquitously within the altar area in Russia. In addition, there are young women who serve in isolated parishes in England and in the US. Would ordaining women to the diaconate and allowing women and girls to serve within the altar area allow for a more authentic form of altar service?]

*Reflections of a Pastoral Assistant.*

Father always said that no one person can meet all the spiritual needs of the congregation. Lately, he has asked me to hear confessions. Although, I am trained in pastoral care, I am nervous as this is such an awesome responsibility...

[I remember reading that Paul Meyendorff (Professor of Liturgical Theology, St. Vladimir's Seminary) as a young child in France, would be taken to the monastery by his mother to go to confession with one of the nuns. It was only after he had been properly counseled that he would then approach the priest for absolution.<sup>35</sup> This is an example of carrying on that tradition within the parish context. However, it is important that deaconesses and those giving spiritual counsel be trained to do so. In addition, by setting her aside to minister in this capacity, the deaconess is accountable to the Church.]

The diaconate most closely manifests our ministry to the world. It helps us bring all of creation into unity with God. Unfortunately, our lives are often fragmented. We are disconnected from those around us. A revitalized diaconate can help bridge this gap. He or she can "interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes for the world."<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, the Church in America faces a great many challenges in order to minister to the needs of Her faithful. Certainly, a rejuvenated diaconate—a ministry dedicated to service—for and by both men and women can, in the words of Dr. FitzGerald, "bear witness to Christ the

---

<sup>35</sup> Meyendorff, Paul, "Penance in the Orthodox Church Today," *Studia Liturgica* 18 (1988), p. 105.

<sup>36</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 543.

Servant as well as facilitate a creative and salutary response by the Church to so many of the spiritual challenges which face us today.”<sup>37</sup>

The Liturgy gives us a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. But it should also make us *restless*, as we realize how far we are from that ideal for most of our life. We need to recognize our faults and limitations and move beyond them, striving to do the will of God “on earth as it is in heaven.” A community whose members are hurt is deformed. We need to be the Church, a therapeutic, healing community. It is then that we can experience the love of God more fully in this world as in the next. As Fr. Calivas writes, “When we have come to experience the mystery of the Eucharist at its deepest levels, we come to understand that being is life, and that life is communion and that communion is love.”<sup>38</sup>

Thank you.

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>38</sup> Calivas, *The Eucharist*, p. 128.