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THE PLACE OF THE WOMAN IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

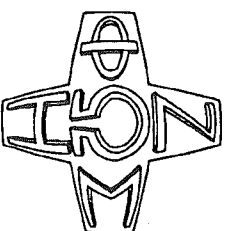
and
the Question of
the Ordination of Women

CONCLUSIONS OF THE
INTERORTHODOX CONSULTATION

On

THE PLACE OF THE WOMAN
IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH
AND THE QUESTION OF THE
ORDINATION OF WOMEN

(Rhodes, Greece — 30 Oct. - 7 Nov. 1988)



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A.

THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES

I.

The Mystery of the Incarnation and the Church

1 The Church, as the great mystery of the work of salvation by Christ, has as her center the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God. The recapitulation and renewal of all things was realized by the shared energy of the Holy Trinity, for which reason it is in God's Church that the whole mystery of the divine Economy is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God realized in the world.

2 The manifestation of the Kingdom of God is inaugurated in the Church and through the Church, as the historic Body of Christ, into which all of the faithful are incorporated as members, and as such are constituted the People of God.

3 As members of the one and the same body, the faithful are united with each other and with the divine Head of the Body through divine grace in the new life in Christ. Through this they live the new reality as a continuous communion (koinonia) with the Triune God, thus becoming "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9). All of the

members of the Church share in the prophetic, high priestly and royal office of Christ. They become through divine grace communicants of all the blessings of divine glory by their adoption. They live the fullness of the divinely revealed truth in the Church and obtain the experience of the variety of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the mystical (sacramental) life of the Church.

4 The Holy Spirit was given to the Church "so that it could unite those who are divided by different races (genei) and conditions (tropoi). For the aged and the young, the poverty-stricken and the wealthy, the infant and the adolescent, the woman and the man, every soul becomes one thing" (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians* 9,3, *PG* 62,72) in the body of the Church. Thus, in the mystery of the Church, the faithful are interconnected and, as an unbroken unity, they celebrate (leitourgoun) the Paschal and Pentecostal Mystery of Christ. This they do by means of the grace of the sacraments through which "in Christ, we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

II.

The Priesthood of Christ

5 As the head of the Church, Christ is forever the only Mediator and great High Priest. For the means of His whole work of salvation and His sacrifice, He reconciled hu-

manity to God (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Through the grace of the Sacraments in the Church, the Holy Spirit testifies to the continuity of the presence and mediation of Christ, through which the faithful are constituted "children of God," "heirs of God and co-hears with Christ." "All have received the Spirit of adoption" (Rom. 8:15-17) and all have been made members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:17; Eph. 4:25, 5:30), "conformed to the likeness of the Son" (Rom. 8:29), and have become the "people of God" (1 Pet. 2:10). All the faithful then, are able to participate "in accordance to the measure of the faith" which they have (Rom. 12:3-8) in the gifts (charismata) of the Holy Spirit and in the varied ministries (diakoniai) in the body of the Church (Acts 1:17, 24; Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 12:5, 2 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 4:12; Col. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 4:5). The sacramental Priesthood is a distinctive gift (charisma) of the Holy Spirit. It unifies all of the gifts (charismata) and all of the ministries (diakoniai) in the Church. The Lord Jesus Christ remains forever the great High Priest and the sole celebrant of Sacraments.

6 Among the many gifts (charismata) of the Spirit in the life of the Church is the "sacerdotal" or "special" Priesthood. Granted by the Lord Himself, the sacramental Priesthood leads, nurtures and builds up the body of believers. It was given by the Lord to the Apostles and to their successors in the apostolic ministry of

episkopé for the people of God. This sacramental Priesthood, iconically presenting Christ, as the head of the body, is granted to the Church through the grace of the Holy Spirit at the sacrament of Ordination (Cheirotonia) by which those being ordained are made "servants of Christ stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1).

7 Jesus Christ gives this special Priesthood to the Apostles and to their successors. The consciousness of the Church from the very beginning excluded women from participation in this special priesthood, on the basis of the example of the Lord and the Apostolic Tradition and practice, in the light of the Pauline teaching concerning the relationship of the male and female in the new reality in Christ (1 Cor. 11:3).

III.

The Typology of "Adam-Christ" and "Eve-Mary"

8 The distinction in the relationship of man and woman, in regard to the sacramental Priesthood according to the "order of nature," flows from the deeper understanding of the relation of men and women in the plan of salvation in Christ, yet it was never, in any case, understood in the Orthodox Tradition as a diminution of the role of women in the Church. In the mystery of the whole divine Economy of salvation, women are understood as equally sharing

with men in the *image of God*, and as being of equal honor with men. As such, women in the Church assume their own roles for the restoration of the distorted image of God, which is a consequence of sin.

9 The distinct role of women is expressed by means of the typological analogy "Eve-Mary" and by means of the special relationship of women to the distinct work of the Holy Spirit in the whole plan of salvation in Christ. The typological relationship "Adam-Christ," by means of which Adam is the prefiguration of Christ on the one hand, while Christ—being the New Adam—is the model (typos) of the old Adam who recapitulates the human race, is foundational to the whole patristic theology and life of the Church. Consistent with this, the typology determines the special content of the ministry of women in the work of the realization of the recapitulation of the New Adam and the salvation of the whole human race.

10 The central person in the special ministry of women in the divine plan of salvation is the Mother of God, the Theotokos. In her is fulfilled the special work of the Holy Spirit for the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God. The typological relationship "moving from Mary to Eve" was necessary for the release of the bonds of Eve and the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God, through the Holy Spirit and Mary. Thus, while on the one hand Eve "being disobedient,

became the cause of death, for herself and all of humanity," on the other hand, the Virgin Mary, "being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for all of humanity" (St. Irinaeus, *Adver. Haer.* III, 22, 4, *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 211 (1974), pp. 441). So in this manner, Eve represents the ancient fallen humanity, while the Theotokos represents the renewal of that ancient fallen humanity, through the birth in Christ of the new humanity.

11 This ministry of woman was fulfilled through the creative descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Virgin Mary, which became a "new locus" (topos) for the "power of the Most High which descended upon her." The Holy Spirit cleansed her and granted to her the necessary "creative ability" (gennetiken dynamin) through the wondrous Incarnation of the Son and Word of God which took place through her. Thus, the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, at the Annunciation, became the receptor of the epiphany of the Holy Spirit for the fulfillment of the typological reclamation by Mary of Eve (tes apotes Marias eis ten Evan antykléseos), and for the Incarnation of the New Adam who recapitulates in Himself all things. This relationship between the special work of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and the typological relationship of the Old and New Adam in history, thus provides us with important insights into the Church's approach to the issue of men and

women in regard to ordination to the sacramental Priesthood.

IV.

The Male Character of the "Sacramental" Priesthood

12 The Theotokos has been presented to us as the model (typos) of the Church. The Church, like the Theotokos, receives the Holy Spirit, through whose energy Christ is born and, also, the children of the new humanity in Christ are brought into the world. Thus, in the patristic tradition, there is presented the typological relationship of the *motherhood* of the Theotokos and the *motherhood* of the Church. The special functional relationship of the role of the Theotokos with the work of the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation is extended to and lived in the age of the Church.

13 This typological relationship provides the foundation—through the example of the Theotokos—of the general content of the consciousness of the Church concerning the impossibility or ordaining women to the Christocentric sacramental Priesthood (*Apostolic Constitutions* III, 6,1-2, 9,1-4, *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 329 (1986), pp. 132-140; see also Tertullian, *De Virginibus Velandis*, 9,1, *PL* 1, 902; St. Epiphanius, *Adver. Haer.*, 59, 2-3; *PG* 42, 741-744). Whenever this ecclesiological consciousness is changed, it creates serious ecclesi-

ological problems. These have appeared in the past, and today they are clear in the ecclesiology of those who support the ordination of women to the special priesthood. This is so precisely because this change in ecclesiology weakens the patristic teaching regarding the balance in the Church of Christology in relation to Pneumatology.

14 Thus, the impossibility of the ordination of women to the special priesthood as founded in the Tradition of the Church has been expressed in these ecclesiastically rooted positions:

- (a) on the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who did not select any woman as one of His Apostles;
- (b) on the example of the Theotokos, who did not exercise the sacramental priestly function in the Church, even though she was made worthy to become the Mother of the Incarnate Son and Word of God;
- (c) on the Apostolic Tradition, according to which the Apostles, following the example of the Lord, never ordained any women to this special priesthood in the Church;
- (d) on some Pauline teachings concerning the place of women in the Church, and
- (e) on the criterion of analogy, according to which, if the exercise of the sacramental

priesthood by women were permitted, then it should have been exercised by the Theotokos.

V.

Christ and the Theotokos in the Recapitulation of Humanity

15 Jesus Christ is the saviour of all persons, both men and women. Yet, in the typological and iconic experience of worship and the pastoral life of the Church, Christ as the High Priest is presented to us appropriately and fittingly only by a male in the High Priestly image. Conversely, the Theotokos, the Mother of God, represents all of humanity, both female and male in the divine act of the Incarnation, giving to the eternal Son of God His human nature. She is the Mother of all, especially the members of the Body of the Church. As such, the Theotokos, in the typological and iconic experience of worship and the whole experience of the Christian life, presents us before the Lord's throne in a way which uniquely speaks for us as creatures of God.

16 All Christians, women and men, must come into personal communion (koinonia) with Christ, Who shows no discrimination toward us, for He is the Saviour of each and all in total disregard of any humanly based discriminations. Just as Orthodox Christians, men and women, we find in the first of all

Saints, the Theotokos, the person who gave the flesh and soul of humanity to the Son and Word (Logos) of God for His Incarnation, a "ready help," and "intercessor" and a "true mother of all Christians."

17 However, in the typology of worship the unbroken Tradition of the Church, with no exception at all, has called upon only certain men to serve at the Altar as Priests who iconically present to the Body of Christ her head and Lord, the High Priest Jesus Christ. In like fashion, the female figure of the Theotokos is the typological representation of all the People of God. The representative and intercessory place of the Theotokos is made manifest in the iconographic cycle in Orthodox architecture, according to which the icon of the Theotokos, holding the Christ in her lap (Platytera), dominates the liturgical space over the Altar Table. Thus, in the iconic and typological framework of worship, the male figure is appropriate to the High Priestly role, and the female figure of the Virgin appropriately models the Church for all of the members of the Body.

18 We are here not simply dealing with theological concepts and ideas. We are in a sphere of profound, almost indescribable experience of the inner ethos of the world-saving and cosmic dimensions of Christian truth. The iconic and typological mode of dealing with the issue tells us that rational constructs will not

be adequate to describe and express it fully. Like all of the mysteries of the Faith as lived in Orthodoxy, this one too, is articulated with the fear of God and with a sense of reverence. Yet, deep in the inner workings of the ethos and Tradition of the Church, we sense that our words are words of truth and not mere apologies, and that ignoring the reality of which they speak will not only deny the past reality of the Church, but will deprive all who do so of foundational and essential dimensions of the full Christian experience of life in Christ.

B.

SPECIAL CONCERNS

VI.

The Equality and the Distinctiveness of Women and Men

19 As was noted above, the Orthodox understanding both of God and the human person is rooted in the fact of Divine Revelation. The manner in which we approach God, and the way we understand women and men is not left solely to our limited reason, valuable that it is. Rather, God has acted to provide us with insight into who He is and to who we are (Ps. 118:27).

20 Because of the Divine Revelation, which is centered upon the Incarnation of our

Lord, the Orthodox would affirm the following features as central to our understanding of men and women. Firstly, God is the creator of both men and women. Each has his or her origin with God. This conviction is further strengthened by our acknowledgement that Christ has come to save men and women equally and to restore both men and women to communion (koinonia) with God (Col. 1:20).

21 Of equal significance is the Orthodox conviction expressed throughout the Holy Scriptures and Tradition of the Church that there is a distinction between the male and the female which is rooted in the very act of creation (Gen. 1:27). This distinction does not imply any form of inferiority or superiority before God. On the contrary, it is a distinction established by God Himself as part of His divine plan. Salvation does not involve, therefore, the denial of our identity as women and men—but rather the transfiguration of this identity.

22 Witnessing the tragic dehumanization which we often encounter in our contemporary society, the Orthodox are bound to affirm in the strongest possible way the dignity of the human person, both the female and the male. Any act which denies the dignity of the human person and any act which discriminates against women and men on the basis of gender is a sin. It is therefore the task of the Church to affirm before the world the dignity of the human per-

son, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26).

VII.

Fuller Participation in the Life of the Church

23 With spiritual discernment throughout the centuries, the Church has encouraged the Christian woman to practice, together with man and in accordance with her nature, her personal inclinations and vocations, a whole variety of ministries. These have been in the area of liturgical, pastoral, catechetical, didactic, missionary, and social work. Special attention should be paid to female Monasticism for the manner in which it has contributed to the advancement of the position of women in the Church in particularly difficult circumstances.

24 While recognizing these facts, which witness to the promotion through the Church of the equality of honour between men and women, it is necessary to confess in honesty and with humility, that, owing to human weakness and sinfulness, the Christian communities have not always and in all places been able to suppress effectively ideas, manners and customs, historical developments and social conditions which have resulted in practical discrimination against women. Human sinfulness has thus led to practices which do not reflect the true nature of the Church in Jesus Christ.

25 Therefore, it is necessary that the fullness of truth should be constantly preserved through intense and unceasing prayer, calling upon the Divine assistance for "discernment of spirits" (1 John 4:1) and interpreting the true meaning of "the signs of the times" (Mt. 16:3). Only thus the Church will be able to re-order her ability to walk according to the will of God and to declare His Kingdom in each particular time and in each particular place.

26 The Church should re-examine potential data, views and actions, which do not agree with her unshakable theological and ecclesiological principles, but have intruded from outside and, being in fact perpetuated, may be interpreted as demeaning towards women.

27 Moreover, the necessity for a specific delimitation of roles in the Church should be emphasized, especially in matters pertaining to ecclesiastical organization. The Orthodox underline spiritual authority rather than temporal power. When we speak about authority in the Church, we are in no way advocating a sort of bureaucratic organizational clericalism but rather we are emphasizing a special charism in the Church.

28 It follows that when we speak of roles in the Church, we speak of special gifts (charismata) of the Holy Spirit to be received with gratitude rather than of what may be interpreted

as administrative "ranks" to be enforced by a hierarchical structure. We would here note the importance of highlighting the pastoral dimension that is ours to address issues raised by Orthodox women. These fall within the therapeutic function of the community manifested in different tasks entrusted to its members. We would also underline the importance of the actual work which women are undertaking at the parish level today, but often without sufficient support and encouragement from the leadership of the Church.

29 Among such tasks we would note the following:

- (a) Education and Christian nurture at all levels ranging from Church schools to higher theological education in seminaries;
- (b) Pastoral counseling of married couples, families, preparation for marriage, preparation for baptism, and care of people in situations of distress;
- (c) Church administration, the participation in decision-making bodies at the level of the parish, the diocese and the national church;
- (d) Social service including working with the elderly, hospital work, working with the deprived and the neglected;
- (e) Choir directors, readers, singers;

- (f) Iconography;
- (g) Youth work;
- (h) Representation in the various aspects and areas of the ecumenical movement, and
- (i) Publications/communications.

All these tasks are to be seen as supportive diaconia, a complementary pastoral dimension in harmony with the specific sacerdotal ministry of the clergy.

30 We would also make special reference to the fact that the increasing number of women who are graduates of theology and other fields of advanced study in certain Churches creates a new reality which the Church is called to consider constructively. The zeal, the faith and the dedication of many of these women could effectively contribute to the renewal of parish life and church life as a whole, especially if greater attention were paid to them and if the undertaking on their part of their charismatic and theological ability in their work of teaching in their ministry and pastoral care for the people were blessed through a special ecclesiastical act. The same applies to a greater degree for able and charismatic nuns, who, alongside the practice of asceticism in the monastery, could be present in the parish and care for special needs of the Church militant. Similarly, the wife of the priest exercises a distinctive ministry. Special

attention should be given to her vocation as it exists within the contemporary society.

31 All the above, and all other related matters, connected with the place of the woman and more generally of the laity in the Church, regarding their active participation in the various church services and ministries, should become the object of further study by Theological Schools and specialized researchers. To this end would contribute positively the more regular convocation of theological meetings and consultations, such as the present one, and would promote our spiritual cooperation and participation in the trials and hope of the Church.

VIII.

The Diaconate and "Minor Orders"

32 The apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived. It was never altogether abandoned in the Orthodox Church though it has tended to fall into disuse. There is ample evidence, from apostolic times, from the patristic, canonical and liturgical tradition, well into the Byzantine period (and even in our own day) that this order was held in high honour. The deaconess was ordained within the sanctuary during the Divine Liturgy with two prayers, she received the Orarion (the deacon's stole) and received Holy Communion at the Altar.

33 The revival of this ancient order should be envisaged on the basis of the ancient prototypes testified to in many sources (cf. the references quoted in the works on this subject of modern Orthodox scholars) and with the prayers found in the *Apostolic Constitutions* and the ancient Byzantine liturgical books.

34 Such a revival would represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world in many spheres. This would be all the more true if the Diaconate in general (male as well as female) were restored in all places in its original, manifold services (diakonia), with extension in the social sphere, in the spirit of ancient tradition and in response to the increasing specific needs of our time. It should not be solely restricted to a purely liturgical role or considered to be a mere step on the way to higher "ranks" of clergy.

35 The revival of women deacons in the Orthodox Church would emphasize in a special way the dignity of woman and give recognition to her contribution to the work of the Church as a whole.

36 Furthermore, would it not be possible and desirable to allow women to enter into the "lower orders" through a blessing of the Church (Cheirothesia): sub-deacon, reader, cantor, teacher... without excluding new orders that the Church might consider to be necessary? This

matter deserves further study since there is no definite tradition of this sort.

IX.

The Challenges Posed by Feminist Theology in Non-Orthodox Churches

37 The urgency of speaking about the place of women in the Church in the overall context of clearly addressing real life issues confronting Christians is to be acknowledged. In this respect the importance of specific societal contexts in which our various churches live should be noted. Ours is a call to witness, and the expression of our witness should use a "language" that would clearly communicate our thinking as Orthodox Christians to our non-Orthodox partners in dialogue, be they other Christians within the ecumenical environment, non-Christians, atheists or advocates of specific ideologies and trends of thought.

The challenge of the feminist movement should be particularly addressed as one of the manifestations of real life issues raised within society today.

38 From the perspective of the Gospel, the Church is called by feminist theology to speak about her understanding of the equality of men and of women while respecting their distinctiveness in the perspective of faith. How-

ever, the requirements or demands of the movement should not be confused with vague theological uneasiness. Not all the issues raised by the feminist movement are theological issues. Some of them are social issues clothed in seemingly "theological" formulations.

39 The issues raised by the feminist movement should be considered by us Orthodox with all reservations and vigilance in their totality as well as in the particular aspects by great feminist initiatives such as the following:

- (a) The use of the inclusive language which should not be taken lightly by us within concrete limits.
- (b) The emphasis placed by feminists on the exegesis of specific biblical texts especially in the Pauline writings.
- (c) Their challenge to the idea of the submission of women as it relates to bodily uncleanness reintroduced into our ethos from the Jewish tradition.

X.

The Call to Holiness

40 Every believer has been called by the Lord to a life of discipleship which is characterized by love of God and of neighbour (Mt. 22:36-40). The process of sanctification begins in this life through Baptism and Christma-

tion, it is celebrated in the Eucharist, it is nurtured through the Holy Scriptures and Tradition, it is strengthened through prayer. The activity of discipleship is manifested by each both in the liturgical assembly and in the urgency of daily life in the world. Every faithful is called by the Lord to follow Him within the daily responsibilities, relationships and obligations of life.

41 The Orthodox believe that the lives of both the male and the female Saints have much to teach us. The Saints show us that they followed the Lord within the context of the circumstances of life. They remind us, therefore, that we too are called in this life to avoid sin and to live a life of virtue to the glory of God.

42 In our reflections during this meeting about the contemporary role of women in the Church, we have been constantly reminded especially of the Theotokos and of the many women Saints whose lives revealed the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. Among these Saints we remember especially St. Phoebe and St. Olympia the Deaconesses, St. Catherine the Philosopher, St. Macrina the Nun, and St. Nina the Missionary, St. Monica the Mother, and St. Olga the Princess. When we consider the example of these and other women Saints, we truly rejoice in the Lord because of their witness, their courage and their piety.

43 Indeed, we are surrounded by a treasured "cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1) and we constantly seek their prayer that we too might be worthy of our calling. As sons and daughters of the Father, as followers of the Lord and as persons blessed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, our ultimate goal is to be Saints in order to glorify God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—now and forever and unto ages of ages.