



WOMEN DIDN'T COUNT

“... Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children (χωρὶς γυναικῶν καὶ παιδίων).” (Mt 14: 17-21)

Just a curious thought. As far as the disciples are concerned, including Matthew, the holy Evangelist, the “women” (and children) in this scene don’t “count.” And in our traditional texts, for example, in the text of our Byzantine prayer of the Blessing of the Breads at the Litya (Litany) at the end of Vespers, we mention the “five thousand fed by five loaves,” by Christ. But there were, actually, women, in this scene, and today we would expect them to be “counted,” as adult human beings (distinct from the men and “children”) present at this event.

Now, let me ask: Am I “offended” by the “not-counting” of women in this Gospel-account? No, I’m not. Because I know, from my study of history, that in the first century, whence this text originates, women were not “counted” as members of the public arena, which was reserved, at that time, exclusively for men.

But glory be to God for the church-experience I have in my today, in which I contextualize the many texts we have received in Tradition. I know that the cultural reality of the first century is informative, but not re-formative, of our reality in the 21st century, even when it is reflected in Holy Scripture. We, in our different cultural context, do “count” women, who, in our today, have an education, and responsibilities, which they did not have in previous generations. I realize that what I’m saying here is a truism, but today’s reading led me to think about it, that in the present-day “women count.” So let me thank God for that, and embrace my responsibilities once again today, as a cross-carrying woman, who can stand up and be counted in the “crowds” of our Lord’s followers.

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