

Women and Diaconal Ministry in the Orthodox Church:
 Past, Present, and Future
 December 6, 2014
 Susan Ashbrook Harvey

Ministries of the Word

It is an honor and a privilege to be here today, among fellow Orthodox and above all, for this particular purpose. I am here not to talk about my work, but to offer what I do, as an offering of service, in the hopes that it may be of use.

I come from a background of service to one's church. I was raised an American Baptist, in a family that could boast of ordained ministers on both my mother's and father's side. My father, too, was an ordained minister and – equally influential for my own religious formation – a seminary professor. I grew up in a household centered around church participation and involvements. I sang in the choir; served as an altar server; attended retreats and summer camps; and was president of our church youth group. My parents taught Sunday school (4th grade) and served on multiple committees. My father remained centrally active in the church until his death in 1999, at the age of 72. My mother, now 88, served on church committees until quite recently when it became difficult for her to make the meetings.

Here, then, is what I learned from my parents and family: one serves the church in every way that one can. I have never thought of Orthodoxy as a break from my past, but rather as a fulfillment of the faith I have been learning as long as I have lived.

My journey to Orthodoxy took some years. I became a catechumen formally in July 1985, and the following spring on the Sunday of Mary of Egypt was received by chrismation at an OCA parish in Rochester, New York, where I was teaching at the University of Rochester at the time. I attended services as often as they were held. The only other people who were there as often as me were the choir, which – although small – was fantastic. The choir director, Mark Bailey, was in many ways a catechetical instructor for me. He, along with the priest, Fr. Cyril Stavrevsky, taught me Orthodoxy by teaching me the services. Thunderstruck by the beauty and power of liturgy, I felt also overwhelmed by how much I needed to learn. Because the choir was small, wonderful, and welcoming, and because I was always at the church, I began to sing with them. Ever since, I have found it almost impossible to locate myself anywhere else in a congregation.

In 1988 we moved to Rhode Island. Near our home was a welcoming Antiochian parish, St. Mary's in Pawtucket, led at that time by Fr. Timothy Ferguson. Soon, I was in the chanters' stand with several others (including several women), and in the choir loft, and also serving as epistle reader when there was need. On rare occasion, if there was good reason, I preached at an evening service. During those early years in Rhode Island, Fr. Timothy as my spiritual director formed in me a deep commitment to understand my work as scholar and teacher within the secular academy, as itself a vocation within the church. In 1989, following the Rhodes Conference on Women in the Orthodox Church, Fr. Timothy responded to the spirit of that meeting by inviting Metropolitan Philip Saliba to come to St. Mary's and

tonsure all four of us who were chanters at the time: two women (myself and Maureen Gurghigian) and two men (both now retired). It was a glorious occasion, and a humbling one.

Some things from my upbringing have profoundly marked my Christian involvements for my whole life, and they provide the basis for what I am here calling the Ministry of the Word as I seek to enact it now, in my Orthodox life. These correspond to the four ministries identified on your outline:

1. the commitment to serve a local parish with concrete involvements that utilize my skills ('proclaiming and teaching');
2. a deep love for the Bible (the Ministry of Reading);
3. a love of worship (the Ministry of Song);
4. and the desire to put my education and knowledge to the service of the church (the Ministry of Teaching).
- 5.

Let me say something about each.

1. Proclaiming and Teaching:

Raised in a liberal Protestant tradition, it never occurred to me that there would be any limitations on *how* I could serve the church. Part of what took so long in my journey to Orthodoxy was worry about what place there would be for me not only as a non-ethnic convert, but further, as a woman. What I appreciated very much first at St. John's in Rochester, and now for nearly 30 years at St. Mary's, has been the willingness of priests to let me provide service through the gifts I have, and the openness of both parishes to women's liturgical participation in the forms of ministry I have pursued: chanting, singing, reading the epistle, and (sometimes) teaching. Here, then, is the service – a ministry of the Word - I offer in and through my parish. Not every priest, nor every parish, is open to such service. I have been very lucky, and very grateful for this blessing.

2. the Ministry of Reading

Orthodoxy is blessed with services that are lavishly adorned with scripture. Readings abound, from the Old Testament and the New. The Psalms accompany us at every turn. Biblical allusions and cadence carry us through each and every moment of the liturgy. I was fortunate to be raised in a household and in a religious community where I heard Bible read aloud, often, with reverence, majesty, and also with deep familiarity (I will always hear my father's voice in this particular way – he was a beautiful reader of scripture). I feel keenly the importance of offering the words of the Word in liturgical practice. Bible must be offered, must be read aloud in liturgy, in ways that serve to bring it home to the congregation – to make the words their own, to make the words heard and known and lived. Reading the Psalms and lections of matins and vespers, and reading the Epistle in the Divine Liturgy, are acts of important ministry. It is always hard when someone reads awkwardly, or stumbles over the words as if the Bible were something foreign or strange; or when someone whips through the Psalms so quickly one can barely catch the sense (especially a hazard of young seminarians, I fear). I have always loved this form of ministry because it is also a way for the reader (myself) to attend more closely to the words of the Bible, to take them into mind and heart and savor their richness.

3. the Ministry of Song

I grew up singing in a church choir, and I found myself there from the start of my Orthodox life. When I first began to attend Orthodox services, I was overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the liturgy. So many words to hear; so much to try to grasp and understand. And most of those words were sung, so they slid by, in wondrous cascades of melodies and tones. I could never keep up. I began to sing with the choir as a convert first of all because it helped me to follow the words. Singing allowed me to focus on the services no matter their length; it covered my weariness; it enabled me to 'lay aside my earthly cares'; it enabled me to memorize whole chunks of liturgy, whether litanies, hymns, troparia, responses or prayers. I could carry liturgy with me wherever I went, whatever I was doing. I still do (I never enter a class to lecture, to this day, without humming the Troparion in tone 3 from Sunday matins: "Say among the heathen that the Lord reigneth". This is what I do for a living at my university: I speak among the heathen!)

I entered the chanters' stand originally for the same reasons. There were not enough people to chant so it was a way to help. It was also a way to learn. And, as with reading scripture or singing in the choir, it was a way to offer to the congregation a ministry of the words of the Word: to offer with reverence and clarity these words which teach and guide and lead us.

I am one of very few Orthodox women privileged to be a tonsured chanter. In the 25 years since my tonsuring took place, I have often reflected on the meaning of that act. I have done my best to make that tonsuring mean something in my own life, and certainly to take seriously the responsibilities of serving in the chanters' stand: to do the services well, in an ordered and careful way. Some things I do better than others, but I take very seriously that this is a responsibility, an office I was given and to which I am consecrated.

Over the years, this awareness has affected me in different ways. There have been occasional periods when I have considered leaving the chanters' stand. But in a fundamental sense, I do not feel it can be my choice to do so. I was tonsured to this service; in some very real sense, it is not mine to stop or give away. It is a responsibility I must fulfill: what else could that act of tonsuring have meant? On the other hand, I must say frankly that I do not think it matters to anyone else – not to my parish (where I don't think anyone really remembers I was tonsured, and lots of people now don't know); and, more painfully, I don't think it matters to my larger Church. To my knowledge, no one was tonsured after us. The church has not done anything with that tonsuring, that I can see. Many women and men are chanters who are not tonsured. It's as if it never happened. But it did happen. And it is a blessing I carry with me, every day. In my parish, people thank me now and again for chanting, and I am grateful that I can provide this ministry. It is a service I will continue to fulfill as long as I am able.

4. the Ministry of Teacher

As it happens, my training and profession involve teaching and researching the history of Christianity, with a particular focus on Byzantine and Syriac traditions. Thus a particular grace I know in my own life is the constant intersection of my work and also my life in the church. I am glad when I can put my knowledge to the service of the church. On occasion I have preached, or spoken at St. Vladimir's or Holy Cross seminaries, or served the archdiocese with my scholarship. It always means a great deal to me when that can happen.

Epilogue: The Voices of Liturgy: Why Women's Voices Matter

When I enter an Orthodox church without women's voices, hearing only the voices of male clergy, I am invariably startled. It sounds hollow, pale, and partial to my ears. It sounds to me as though the whole of the laity are silenced in that partial sound. The congregation feels like an audience: passively watching and listening, but not participating in the worship being offered. Surely our hope is to cultivate deep and vibrant participation among the faithful, for the life and health of our churches and of our Church. Acknowledging that women have ministries to offer – and are in fact already offering them – is a critical step in bringing that hope to fruition. Naming these ministries for what they are – sacred offerings to God, worthy as consecrated service – is also a demonstration that the Church no less than God's own Self values these offerings. Such respect and valuation then become part of parish life, of the laity's own awareness and participation, and indeed of the clergy's awareness and appreciation for the full congregation. It thereby magnifies all our attitudes towards service.

I cannot end without a reflection from my scholarship (after all, it is the real thing I do!). It was a unique feature of ancient Syriac Christianity to have consecrated women's choirs from the early fourth century. According to Syriac canon law in both the Roman and the Persian Empire, every village, town, and city church must have a women's choir to sing the morning and evening services, Sunday liturgy, and the feast days. These were not choirs of nuns, but women consecrated to this musical ministry. Syriac church canons mandated that the choirs must sing the doctrinal hymns of the church that provided holy instruction for all the faithful. For many centuries, the choir directors were women deacons. These choirs remain a living practice in Syriac churches to this day.

Syriac Fathers such as St. Ephrem the Syrian offered occasional comment on these women's choirs. St. Jacob of Sarug, for example, drew the attention of his congregations to the sound of the women's choirs in liturgy. Jacob argued that the sound of women's choirs in liturgy was important for two reasons. First, because the women's choirs led the congregations in singing the responses and the refrains to the hymns. They provided model and means for active lay participation in the liturgy in very practical terms. But secondly (and this is my favorite), he argued that the sound of the women's choirs in the liturgy was the constant reminder that salvation had indeed come for all people: not only for Adam, but also for Eve; not only for men, but also for women. If St. Ephrem knew this in the fourth century, and St. Jacob of Sarug knew it in the sixth century, shouldn't we also know it in the 21st century? Did we forget?

I think of this often. Women's voices matter in the church's liturgical life. They are the constant and necessary offering to complete the liturgy – the work of the people – as a true and whole offering to God. Without them, the work of liturgy is incomplete. It is our grace, our blessing, and our obligation to offer that completion. We can do so in the ministry of the Word. And the Church has the power to name this as ministry, and to consecrate it as such.

Thank you.