

Name: Paulina Pedas  
Division: Junior  
Parish: Saint Sophia Cathedral

**Topic #1 St. Paul writes “God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength” (1 Corinthians 10:13, NRSV). What are some times in your life in which you have experienced the truthfulness of St. Paul’s statements?**

Reverend fathers, honorable judges, and fellow parishioners, thank you so much for hosting the metropolis level of the 2014 Saint John Chrysostom oratorical festival. Christos Anesti!

Imagine the scorching sun blazing upon the shifting sand. With temperatures soaring past 140 degrees, the sand is harsh, unforgiving and infertile. Stretching out into the distance, the desert is empty and endless – giving no food, no water, and no shelter. It is a never-ending purgatory of sand and sky.

I was in that desert -- when I started to question my Orthodox faith. I learned that because I am a girl, my role in the church would be different from what I thought.

Two years ago, my brother became an Altar Boy, and had a great spiritual learning experience. With my education in Sunday school, and my growing love of my religion, it hurt my soul to know that I could never serve in the Altar just because I am a girl. I cried countless Sunday nights. I wanted to know why girls could not serve in the Altar. My parents and

grandparents could not provide me with adequate answers. All of a sudden, I had entered uncharted territory -- there was a rift between me and my faith.

As I lost hope in my faith, my focus drifted from God's world to the material world. It was a dark time. I did not want to go to the church I loved anymore. I felt left out. I learned from my Catholic and Episcopal girlfriends that they served on their altars, so, I asked my parents if we could join their churches.

Despite my temptation, the Theotokos gave me strength, and I had an epiphany that I did not need to go to leave my church. For it was not the whole Orthodox religion that was causing me angst, It was just this one area. I already had Christ's love. What I needed was my church's support. I wrote my parish priest a letter. When we met, Father Steve helped restore my faith. He reminded me that historically, from Mary Magdalene to the many female saints, women have played important roles in the church, and that girls, like me can, too, participate. St. Paul's words, in First Corinthians chapter 10, verse 13, "God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength," rang true. I was tempted to take the easy way out by joining another church, but with the help of my priest, and remembering Christ's example of battling the devil in the desert, I found the strength to focus on Christ's love.

What I learned was that I do have a voice and it is okay to tell people how you feel. I realized that in its simplest forms the church values all its members equally, whether you're a woman, man, girl, or boy. As stated in Galatians chapter 3, verse 28; "...there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Perhaps the modern Greek Orthodox church is listening to Saint Paul, as I discovered that our church recently commissioned its first

institutional chaplain, a woman, here in the USA, and that the church does not prohibit girls from the Altar. In fact, the possibility of deaconesses returning to the church is being discussed in Constantinople right now. Such great, hopeful movements coupled with more traditional roles for girls such as, singing in the choir, volunteering in the Philoptochos, participating in Oratorical festivals, teaching in Sunday school, and becoming nuns, should inspire all of us to be active in our faith.

Overall, it is important for girls of the Greek Orthodox faith to keep in mind that we do have a voice and that it should not go unheard.

I was silent in the desert as many of us have been. I am no longer in that desert. And through my experience, I ascertained that when one keeps Christ's love in their heart, they will always have the strength to conquer any desert that they may face.