

Newness of Spirit: The Ordination of Men and Women

By Maria Gwyn McDowell

The question of the participation of women in the liturgical and priestly ministry of the Orthodox Church is a relatively new question, one which has come to it from the “outside.” Yet, for the last 30 years, the question has been seriously considered by Orthodox theologians who have made it our own. This is true of theologians who both oppose and support a greater participation of women in liturgical service. These theologians include Fr. Thomas Hopko, Dean John Erickson, Dr. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Bp. Kallistos Ware, the late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Dr. Kyriaki FitzGerald, Dr. Valerie Karras, as well as others. The difficulty, as Erickson points out, is that the Church Fathers never explicitly examined the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood. Generally, the Fathers accepted the cultural assumptions regarding men and women existent in Greek and Roman society. Such assumptions are no longer shared, even by the outspoken critics of the ordination of women. Erickson concludes simply that our tradition has not given us a satisfactory answer to the issue of the ordination of women.

Tradition is the Church's ongoing proclamation of the Gospel, led by the Spirit through time. It is the Church's articulation of the continuous work of God in our midst.

The argument against the ordination of women often rests on the fact that women have never been ordained and such a change in tradition is unacceptable. Tradition is the hallmark of Orthodoxy, it is the way we maintain our connection with the saints that have gone before us; in the words of Vladimir Lossky, Tradition is “the life of the Church in the Holy Spirit.”¹ Tradition is the Church's ongoing proclamation of the Gospel, led by the Spirit through time. It is the Church's articulation of the continuous work of God in our midst. Tradition, however, has never been an unchanging expression of our faith. While Christians continually experience God in three persons, the doctrine of the Trinity as we have it today was not settled until four hundred years after Pentecost. The dual nature of Christ — that He is fully God and fully human — also was not settled until well after Jesus walked in our midst. This does not mean that such “doctrines” were not true before they were agreed upon, but that it took time, discernment, discussion and often argument to be able to articulate our understanding. The practices of the Church have been far more malleable, even in the area of priestly ministry. As the Church has changed, the priesthood itself has changed. Bishops, once the head of a single congregation, are now the head of cities or even regions. Once married, they are now celibate. While there is no clear record of female priests, Orthodoxy has a history of ordaining women to the diaconate. The 1988 Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation on the Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women, held in Rhodes, Greece and sponsored by the Ecumenical Patriarch, has this to say about the order of deaconesses: “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.”

It is important when speaking of tradition to distinguish between Tradition and traditions, between the realization of the Gospel through time, and the various local modes that have borne these realizations. Of course, the ongoing challenge for Orthodox is to determine which forms and expressions of the faith are to be maintained, and which are historically conditioned. Certain expressions of the Tradition are held in greater esteem. For example, the seven ecumenical councils hold more weight than later local councils or individual Church Fathers. It is the dogmatic statements of the councils rather than their canonical disciplines which are considered doctrine. Issues of practice fall under canons, and practices vary throughout the Orthodox world. Practice is always an attempt to concretely live out doctrine as that doctrine applies to a specific situation or context. The priesthood falls under the rubric of canonical practice, a “tradition,” not a doctrine. Just as context changes, so can the practice which most faithfully expresses doctrine.

Orthodoxy prefers fewer rather than more dogmatic statements, not because we are afraid of delineating what is true, but because Orthodoxy recognizes that life in the Spirit is rarely effective when limited by excessive laws. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh points out in *Living Prayer* that, to the Hebrews, “what they are given is what they can bear ...” (35). God gave the Law in increments, moving from the violent Lamech in Genesis, to the restraining Law of Sinai, to the forgiveness of Christ. God addresses us where we are, as individuals and as a community. That we, as the Church, are being led by the Holy Spirit does not mean that the work of the Holy Spirit was complete in the Church at Pentecost. As Father Georges Florovsky noted four decades ago with reference to the ecumenical movement, but applicable to our discussion, “The true Church is not yet the perfect Church.”² We are an ongoing work of God. Just as slavery took centuries to work out, so too does the implication of the statement that, as we are baptized into Christ, “there is no longer male and female” (Gal. 3.28). This is all to say that the fact that women have never been priests in Orthodoxy does not necessarily mean they cannot become priests. Change is a part of the life of Orthodoxy; our practice has never been static. We are a community constantly responding to the work of the Spirit in a changing world, a world in which God is working. Such changes need to be thoughtfully discussed rather than rejected out of hand. Change in the Orthodox Church is not arbitrary reaction, but the faithful response to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our midst, who is calling us as a community to a more full recognition of what it means to live the reign of God on Earth.

One of the changes resulting from the concern of feminists in particular churches is a greater attentiveness to the language we use in our worship. At a basic level, the words we use in conversation or worship are very important, given the power of the tongue to build up or destroy those around us (James 3). However, the struggles over language in the Church have not been without serious problems. The “politically correct” Trinity of “Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier” blurs the reality that all three persons create, redeem and sanctify. Such language places God in a neatly defined box which we can understand. The early Church Fathers argue that all language runs the danger of this error. Everything we say about God must be unsaid, even the most positive statements about God, such as “God is love.” This is not because God is not love, but because God is not love merely in the way we, as finite human beings, understand love. This is what Orthodoxy refers to as “apophatic” theology. Apophaticism is describing something, God, by what we know God is not. This does not mean that our theology is irrational or unreasonable. It means that sometimes we cannot say what God fully is, so we must be content to say what we know God is not. The Fathers understand that all language is a reflection of our limitations, and thus limits God who cannot be limited. So, we must be careful in our use of language. This includes the language of fatherhood. St. Gregory of Nazianzus states:

It does not follow that because the Son is the Son in some higher relation (inasmuch as we could not in any other way than this point out that he is of God and consubstantial), it would also be necessary to think that all the names of this lower world and of our kindred should be transferred to the Godhead. Or maybe you would consider our God to be a male, according to the same argument, because he is called God and Father, and that deity is feminine, from the gender of the word, and Spirit neuter, because it has nothing to do with generation; ... It is very shameful, and not only shameful but very foolish, to take from things below a guess at things above, and from a fluctuating nature [a guess] at the things that are unchanging, and as Isaiah [8:19] says, to seek the living among the dead. —Fifth Theological Oration §§7 & 10, in LLC 3:198f.

Thus the argument, perhaps most eloquently asserted by C.S. Lewis, that we cannot speak of God as “like a good woman” in the same way we can speak of God as “like a good man,” falls prey to exactly the error that St. Gregory condemns. Just because we use male language for God does not mean that it is correct to understand that God is male, or that the only way to represent God is as a male. The scripture is full of female images for God, as well as non-gendered images. For example, God is a rock, a pillar of fire, a whispering breeze, a mother hen, a grieving mother, a warrior king. None of these is literal! In the Gospel of Luke, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third of a series of three parables, all told by Jesus to make the same point, the joy of God in finding what is lost. God is imaged as a shepherd who rejoices in finding a lost sheep, a housewife who rejoices in finding a lost coin, and finally, a father who rejoices in finding a lost son.

Let me be clear. I am NOT advocating that we change our Trinitarian language. The language of Father and Son is a constant reminder of two essential theological points. First, the Trinity is made up of persons in relationship, not just any relationship, but a family relationship. Second, the first person of the Trinity is always considered the source of Godhead, the second is the only-begotten. Frankly, no other phrase would be any more or any less adequate to the theological task. All language is insufficient for the mystery of God. We must always remember that our language is only a limited expression of the fullness of God.

Thus, argument that as a priest a woman cannot be an image of Christ is problematic for two other reasons. The first is quite straightforward. The priest as somehow naturally resembling the person of Jesus is not an understanding of priesthood present in the Fathers. The Fathers are “more concerned about the priest’s internal and ethical conformity to Christ than they are with his external and physical conformity.”³ Arguments that emphasize Jesus’ masculinity in light of His priesthood are found in modern Orthodox discussions, but they are most clearly exemplified, and possibly originates, from Catholic thought on the priesthood which is not entirely in line with Orthodox theology of the priesthood. In our liturgy, the priest represents the people, not Christ (nor the Father). Every prayer in the liturgy, with the exception of the prayer for the cleansing of the priest before the Eucharist, is in the first person plural: “we” and “us,” pronouns intended to include all those presently worshipping.

The second problem, concerning the idea that a woman cannot image God, is much more serious and fundamental to our faith, and has implications far beyond discussions over the priesthood. As human beings, we are all created in the image of God. This is not simply a 2000-year-old truth of the Church, but a truth of our very creation. Every man and every woman is an image of God. No individual lacks the image of God. The image may be buried to the point of invisibility, but Orthodoxy is adamant: we are all created in the image of God and we are all moving towards living the fullness of that image and likeness in our lives on a daily basis. This is the basis for the Orthodox theology of deification. St. Athanasius declares that God became human so that we might become God. Jesus assumed all of our humanity, not simply maleness, for, as St. Gregory of Nazianzus says, “what is not assumed cannot be saved.” Jesus is present in those who are poor, without reference to their sex. Every man and woman who exemplifies the gifts of the Spirit, faith, hope and love, is an image of Christ, and an image of God.

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel summarizes the implication of both of these arguments:

It is in the Church’s name — in persona Ecclesiae — that the ordained minister, facing East, meaning toward the coming Christ, begs the Father to send the Spirit upon us and upon these gifts here offered, that they may be for us communion in the Body and Blood of Christ “offered up once and for all,” as the Epistle to the Hebrews insists. And St. John Chrysostom proclaims that “it is Christ, made present by the Holy Spirit, who is the true minister of the mystery.” Removing himself as individual, the priest — minister, meaning servant — turns his hands and his tongue over to Christ. Why could these hands and this tongue not be those of a Christian woman, baptized and chrismated, called by virtue of her personal gifts to a ministry of pastoral guidance, which implies presiding over the eucharist? As the Fathers — with the Gospel as their foundation — have always claimed, the hierarchy of spiritual gifts granted to persons has nothing to do with gender.⁴

There is no consensus on the ordination of women to the priesthood, though the restoration of the order of deaconesses is viewed as a possibility, regardless of the question of the priesthood. Orthodoxy does not merely ask what is it that we have always done, but what is God doing in our midst today and how do we respond as faithful members of the Church? We are always learning about a God who is mysterious. We are always learning about the wonderful, fascinating, and sometimes frightening world God has created. This learning never stops; our transformation never stops. While we must be careful not to respond to fads, we must also be open to the constant newness which is the life of the Spirit in the Church.

- [1.](#) Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 188.
- [2.](#) G. Florovsky, "The Quest for Christian Unity and the Orthodox Church," in *Ecumenism*, Collected Works, 13, 139-140.
- [3.](#) John H. Erickson, *The Challenge of Our Past: Studies in Orthodox Canon Law and Church History* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), 62.
- [4.](#) Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, "The Ordination of Women: A Point of Contention in Ecumenical Dialogue," 2003 Florovsky Lecture, St. Vladimir's Seminary, NY.

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