

She Is the Forgotten Apostle

Fr. Ted Bobosh / November 22, 2020

Today, November 22, we in the Orthodox Church honor a 1st Century woman, the Holy Martyr Apphia (Philemon 1:2), who has been given by the Church both the honorific appellations of “Among the Seventy Apostles“ and Equal-to-the-Apostles. She had the special honor of being baptized by St Paul, according to her hagiography. St Paul calls her ‘beloved’. As a Christian woman she is ranked as a saint, martyr, numbered as one of the 70 Apostles, and called Equal-to-the-Apostles – a pretty impressive resume for anyone in the Orthodox Church. Despite her rank, in a Church which loves ecclesial & celestial ranking and hierarchy, sadly, she is relatively unknown, forgotten and largely ignored. This may be a result of the other facts of her holy life – she is a woman and not a monastic but married. Through the centuries in a male, monastic dominated Church with a history of misogyny, she was reduced to a name with a title but no longer listed among the 70 Apostles and no longer “beloved”. It is another sad chapter in church history is that through the centuries the list of the 70 Apostles becomes all male (see the list on OrthodoxWiki, and the icon of the 70 posted there). St Apphia is dropped from the list although she retained the title, probably because she had that appellation before the all male lists were composed. She must have been well known at one time for her to be honored as Equal-to-the-Apostles (defined on Orthodoxwiki as “one whose work greatly built up the Church, whether through direct missionary work or through assisting the Church’s place in society“). No doubt through the centuries the notion of a married woman Apostle made some monastic churchmen uncomfortable. A similar fate was met by St Junia (Romans 16:7), a companion of St Paul. The Latin Church eventually changed Junia’s name into a male name as the male and monastic dominated clergy were not comfortable with a married woman saint in the apostolic pantheon. The Deaconess Phoebe mentioned by St Paul in Romans 16:1-2 is another biblical married woman saint whose renown dwindled through history – her hagiography says almost nothing and some Orthodox clergy even deny she is a deacon of any kind though she is given that title by the Church. She is another biblical female saint who has a title which now the church empties of meaning as with St Apphia.

St Apphia is commemorated three times on the Orthodox Calendar:

1] Today, November 22, she is remembered along with three male saints of the Apostles among the Seventy mentioned in Luke 10 whom the Lord Jesus commissioned to proclaim the Gospel and cast out demons. She is the only one of these 4 Apostles among the Seventy who is also honored in the Church as Equal-to-the-Apostles.

2] She is also commemorated on February 19 where she is honored with two other Apostles among the Seventy. Her husband, St Philemon, is also ranked among the Seventy Apostles. Despite having two feast days to honor her, not much is said about her in the hagiographies, which again I think is because she is a woman, married and an Apostle, a combination which I think over time caused her stock to fall in the church controlled by male monastics.

3] Additionally, she should be commemorated on January 4, the Synaxis of the Seventy Apostles, even if she is not specifically mentioned by name or has been excluded from the list of the Seventy.

On the Orthodox Church in America webpage for November 22 we read this about St Apphia and her fellow apostles:

The Holy Apostles of the Seventy Philemon and his wife Apphia lived in the city of Colossa in Phrygia. After they were baptized by the holy Apostle Paul, they converted their house into a house of prayer, where all those who believed in Christ gathered and attended services. They devoted themselves to serving the sick and downcast.

Saint Philemon became bishop of the city of Gaza, and he preached the Word of God throughout Phrygia. The holy Apostle Paul continued to be his guide, and addressed to him his Epistle filled with love, and in which he sends blessings “to Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer, and to our beloved Apphia, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house” (Phil 1:1-3).

Saint Onesimus (February 15), also mentioned in the Epistle, was Saint Philemon’s former slave.

Saints Philemon and Apphia, and also Saint Archippus (who also lived at Colossa), all received the crown of martyrdom during the persecution of Nero (54-68). During a pagan festival an enraged crowd rushed into the Christian church when services were going on. All fled in terror, and only Saints Philemon, Archippus and Apphia remained. They seized them and led them off to the city prefect. The crowd beat and stabbed Saint Archippus with knives, and he died on the way to the court. Saints Philemon and Apphia were stoned to death by order of the prefect.

Nothing in this hagiography gives us a sense of why Apphia is sainted as Equal-to-the-Apostles. In her hagiography for February 19 we read on the OCA webpage a few more details about her life:

Saints Archippus, Philemon and Apphia, Apostles of the Seventy were students and companions of the holy Apostle Paul. In the Epistle to Philemon, the Apostle Paul names Saint Archippus as his companion, and mentions him again in the Epistle to the Colossians (Col. 4:17).

Saint Archippus was bishop of the city of Colossae in Phrygia. Saint Philemon was an eminent citizen of this city, and the Christians gathered in his home to celebrate church services. He was also made a bishop by Saint Paul and he went about the cities of Phrygia, preaching the Gospel. Later on, he became archpastor of the city of Gaza. Saint Apphia, his wife, took the sick and vagrants into her home, zealously attending to them. She was her husband’s co-worker in proclaiming the Word of God.

During the persecution against Christians under the emperor Nero (54-68), the holy Apostles Archippus and Philemon and Apphia were brought to trial by the ruler Artocles for confessing faith in Christ. Saint Archippus was brutally slashed with knives. After torture, they buried Saints Philemon and Apphia up to the waist in the ground, and stoned them until they died.

Still, we do not get a sense of why she was raised to the saintly rank of Equal-to-the-Apostles. The troparion and kontakion (hymns) for February 19 do not even mention the holy Apphia. While the troparion and kontakion for November 22 do at least include her name though saying little about her, except the kontakion calls her “all wise” but no explanation is offered for this praise of the godly woman.

Troparion — Holy Apostles Philemon, Archippus, Apphia, and Onesimus, entreat the merciful God to grant our souls forgiveness of transgressions.

Kontakion — Let us praise the Apostles of Christ, who illumine the ends of the earth like all-radiant stars: glorious Philemon and dedicated Archippus, Onesimus, together with Mark and Apollos, and the all-wise Apphia. Let us cry to them: “Unceasingly pray for us all!”

The online Orthodoxwiki has a very brief hagiographical note for her, whom they identify as Apostle Apphia. The hagiography is taken from St. Nikolai Velimirovic's *The Prologue of Ohrid*.

“The holy, glorious, all-laudable Apostle Apphia is numbered among the Seventy Apostles. She is the wife of the Apostle Philemon and along with Sts. Philemon and Archippus she ministered to the town of Colossae from its Christian center, her home. During a pagan feast the Church had gathered in her home for prayer. When the pagans learned of it they raided the home and took Sts. Archippus, Philemon, and Apphia to be killed. They were whipped, buried up to their waists and then stoned. Sts. Philemon and Apphia gave up their souls to God. The Church remembers St. Apphia on February 19.”

Amazingly little about a woman who is honored as an Equal-to-the Apostles and heralded as “all wise” in hymnology and called ‘beloved’ by St Paul in the Bible. I have seen lists of 26 Orthodox Saints with the title “Equal-to-the-Apostles.” Eight of the 26 are women – Sts Mary Magdalene, Apphia, Photini, and Thekla are all biblical saints with the latter three being companions of St Paul; the other four were involved with bringing entire empires into the Christian household: Helen, Nina, Empress Nana of Georgia, and Olga). Perhaps in the modern age if women’s roles are restored in the church, Christians will take a greater interest in these women Apostles and Equal-to-the-Apostles. This in turn may inspire the Church to even further restore the role of women in the Church’s ministry. Hopefully Orthodox scholars will take an interest in discovering why St Apphia is praised as “all wise”, “beloved” and “Equal-to-the-Apostles.” Rediscovering her life may in fact inspire other women to strive to take up apostolic ministry in the 21st Century which can only help build up the Body of Christ (Romans 14:19).

O Holy Apphia, our beloved Saint, pray that our souls may be saved and that God will raise up in His Church all members to be witnesses to the faith and ministers of the Gospel.

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