

St. Elizabeth the New Martyr

by Fr. Ted Bobosh / May 3, 2017

In the Winter 2017 issue of [THE WHEEL](#) there is an article about St. Elizabeth the New Martyr, one of the members of the Russian royal family who was murdered in 1918 by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution. After the assassination of her husband, Elizabeth committed her energies and her wealth to establishing an order of sisters of mercy – nuns dedicated to the service of the needy people of Moscow and Russia. Her goal was to establish women’s monasteries not based in what had become the traditional form of women’s convents in Russian Orthodoxy, but rather an order which was far more active in ministering to the poor. She felt her order of women would far better attract educated women to serve the Church. She conceived her ideas at a time when some in the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church were also for the first time in centuries beginning to rethink the role of women in the Church. In fact as the Russian Orthodox Church began to envision a separation of the Orthodox Church from the tsarist state at the beginning of the 20th Century, many ideas were being considered for the Church to fulfill its role in society and to shake off the shackles which had been imposed on the Church since the time of Peter the Great.

The article in THE WHEEL is written by Elena and Nadezhda Beliakova, [“St. Elizabeth the New Martyr: The Quest to Restore the Order of Deaconess.”](#) Despite the article’s title, the Beliakovas point out:

It should be noted in passing that Elizabeth was against the restoration of the liturgical function of deaconesses that existed in the early church because, as she put it in an explanatory note on the purpose of the convent:

“The conditions of Church life have changed. The consecration of the ancient deaconesses was necessitated by their participation in the baptism of adult women, the announcement of the baptized, and the old ritual of Communion, when a woman could enter the altar area. Today, this is no longer needed, but there is a need to preach the Christian faith and help others following the example of the ancient diaconate on behalf of the Church and for the sake of Christ.”

I find a couple of things interesting in St. Elizabeth’s comment. One thing is she acknowledges that changing historical conditions in the world as well as in the Church necessitate that the Church itself has to change, adapt, evolve to deal with these changes. The reality of historical change had, at least in St. Elizabeth’s understanding, changed the needs of the church and its ministries. Women deacons were less necessary since the baptism of adult women had virtually disappeared from the Church. That would seem to mean that in our current day where the baptism of adults has become more frequent again and necessary because there are many adults who were never baptized as infants or in the Orthodox Church, the time is here for the church to again adapt to the changing historical realities.

Another point is that St. Elizabeth comments that there was a time in Orthodox Church history when women approached the altar to receive Holy Communion. A practice of excluding women (and lay men for that matter) from approaching the altar for Communion is a change that happened in the Church. It is not the oldest Tradition of the Church. The received Tradition reflects changes that occurred in the life of the Church – the received Tradition, at least liturgically speaking, is not part of the unchanging nature of Orthodoxy. Piety and practice have changed over time for many reasons. The Church can always examine those changes and those reasons and decide that for its current mission – for its catechism and evangelism – that liturgical practices need to change again. This may mean going back to the older way of doing things, or

altering the received Tradition to better reflect the nature of the Church and its mission and message to the world.

Another comment in the article that I found interesting came from Metropolitan Vladimir (Bogoyavlensky), Chairman of the Department of Church Discipline. In a report which was written specifically about the restoration of the order of the deaconess, Metropolitan Vladimir notes:

Even though we know from church history that in ancient times deaconesses mostly served as members of the clergy, we also know that the nature of women's ministry has always conformed to the needs of the Church in each historical period.

His comment that deaconesses served as members of the clergy in the early church stands out to me. There are many today who deny that very point and say the women deacons in the early church were exactly not part of the clergy of the Church. Metropolitan Vladimir does see them as being part of the ordained clergy of the Church. His comment that “the nature of women’s ministry has always conformed to the needs of the Church in each historical period” is also fascinating. It would indicate that any discussion about women’s ministry in the Church should focus on what the current need of the Church is. If we have need of specific women’s ministry in the 21st Century Church, which I think we do, then we should be able to establish it without much resistance from the Church. The role of women in 21st Century Western society is very different than it was in traditional Orthodox cultures and in the past. Women today are educated, have careers and take common leadership roles throughout society. This in itself seems to necessitate that the Church open not only the discussion but the opportunities for women’s ministries today.

<https://frted.wordpress.com/2017/05/03/st-elizabeth-the-new-martyr/>