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## Chapter 2 – Menstruation

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# Terminology

- **Menstruant** – an adjective or noun (substantive adjective) referring to a woman during her menstrual period
- **Menstruous** or **menstrual** – an adjective referring to the menstrual cycle
- **Ritual impurity** – The notion in a religion or culture that certain persons or items are “unclean”, normally meaning they must be segregated from the community as a whole, and a rite may need to be performed in order to make them “clean” again. In Leviticus 15:19-24, it says:
  - <sup>19</sup> “When a woman has a discharge of blood that is a menstrual discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. <sup>20</sup> Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean. <sup>21</sup> Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until the evening. <sup>22</sup> Whoever touches anything upon which she sits shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until the evening; <sup>23</sup> whether it is the bed or anything upon which she sits, when he touches it he shall be unclean until the evening. <sup>24</sup> If any man lies with her and her impurity falls on him, he shall be unclean seven days, and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean.



# Overview of the Chapter

- **Historical and cultural/geographical tradition of the church**
  - *Historical*: Has the church always held to notions of menstrual ritual impurity? What about Acts 15:19-20?
  - *Cultural/Geographical*: Has the church maintained menstrual ritual impurity everywhere?
- **Liturgical and theological considerations**
  - How far does the exclusion of menstruants extend: “just” the Eucharist, other things (receiving *antidoron*, kissing icons, etc.), church attendance itself?
  - What is the *theological rationale* for maintaining menstrual ritual impurity? How does that rationale fall in terms of *priorities* vis-à-vis inclusivity of women generally and especially regarding access to the Eucharist and other sacraments and services?



## *Didascalia Apostolorum, ch. 26*

“For if you think, O woman, that in the seven days of your flux you are void of the Holy Spirit, if you die in those days, you will depart empty handed and without hope. But if the Holy Spirit is always in you, without (any real) hindrance you keep yourself from prayer and from the Scriptures and the eucharist.”

“[If] in the seven days of your flux you regard yourself unclean according to the second legislation – after seven days, therefore, how can you be purified without baptism? But if you shall bathe yourself, through that which you suppose, that you are purified, you shall abrogate the perfect baptism of God which completely forgave you your sins, and you will be found in the evils of your former sins, and you shall be delivered over to the fire eternal. But if you be not bathed, according to your own imaginings you remain unclean ... .”

“In like manner also you shall not separate those (women) who are in the wonted courses; for she also who had the flow of blood was not chidden when she touched the skirt of our Saviour’s cloak, but was even vouchsafed the forgiveness of all her sins.



# Dionysius of Alexandria

Dionysius was Pope of Alexandria in the mid-third century (i.e., at around the same time as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* was written in the region of Antioch in Syria):

“Concerning women in their menstrual separation (*en aphedrō*), whether it is right for them in such a condition to enter the house of God, I think it unnecessary even to inquire. For I think that they, being faithful and pious, would not dare in such a condition either to approach the holy table or to touch the body and blood of Christ. For even the woman who had the twelve-year discharge and was eager for a cure touched not him but only his fringe. It is unobjectionable to pray in any state and to remember the Lord in any condition and to beseech him to obtain aid, but he who is not completely pure in both soul and body shall be prevented from approaching the holy and the holy of holies.”



# St. John Chrysostom (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c.)

From *Homily 3 on Titus* (regarding what God intended in the Levitical law with his rules on ritual impurity):

“The woman in child-bed is unclean. Yet God made child-birth, and the seed of copulation. Why then is the woman unclean, unless something further was intimated? And what was this? He intended to produce piety in the soul, and to deter it from fornication.”

From *Homily 33 on Hebrews*:

“But let us see in what sense ‘Marriage is honorable in all and the bed undefiled.’ Because (he [Paul] means) it preserves the believer in chastity. Here he also alludes to the Jews, because they accounted the woman after childbirth polluted: and ‘whosoever comes from the bed,’ it is said, ‘is not clean.’ [Lev. 15:18] Those things are not polluted which arise from nature, O ungrateful and senseless Jew, but those which arise from choice. For if ‘marriage is honorable’ and pure, why forsooth dost thou think that one is even polluted by it?”



# Later Canonists: Exclusion and Inconsistency

*Theodore Balsamon, a 12th-century canonist and patriarch-in-exile of Antioch:*

“Today we see such [menstruating] women in *gynaecea* [the women’s section of a church] and especially in monasteries standing freely in the vestibules [*pronaoi*], which are decorated with all sorts of sacred images, and devoting themselves to the praises of God. And inquiring how this can be, we hear that they are not attending church – which does not seem so to me. For these vestibules are not for common use [*koinoi*] like the forecourts [*proaulia*] of the churches, but are a part of them set aside for women who are not prevented from attending church.”

*Matthew Blastares, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century canonist in Constantinople:*

On the issue of male ejaculants, he rejected ritual impurity, arguing that nocturnal emissions were *involuntary* and that “nothing created by God is by its nature impure”. On the issue of the female diaconate, however, while recognizing that it had existed, he said the following about its disappearance: “Later, however, the Fathers forbade them to approach the altar and carry out any service [*hyperēsia*] there because of their menstrual periods.”



# Liturgical and Theological Points

- The apostolic church did not require Gentiles to follow the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:19-20).
- Christ's encounter with the woman with the issue of blood was interpreted in diametrically opposed ways in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and Dionysius of Alexandria's canonical letter.
- Where ritual impurity took hold, menstruants were not only excluded from communion but expected not to enter church.
- The Alexandrian tradition gives *no* theological rationale for imposing Levitical impurity on menstruants.
- By contrast, the Antiochenes provide significant reasons: nature is from God and therefore good, the Holy Spirit's presence, etc.
- Contemporary Orthodox churches differ: 2015 ROC statement v. 1997 decision of Antioch and 2020 statement of Constantinople.



# Modern Synodal Decisions

Russian Orthodox Church, *On the Participation of the Faithful in the Eucharist*, Section IV (2015): “The canons prohibit receiving communion in the state of female impurity (canon 2 of St Dionysius of Alexandria, canon 7 of Timothy of Alexandria). An exception may be made in case of a danger of death, and whenever the issue of blood continues for a long time due to chronic or acute illness.”

Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople, *For the Life of the World*, Sec. III.29 (2020): “In fact, while the Orthodox Church has always held as a matter of doctrine and theology that men and women are equals in personhood, it has not always proved scrupulously faithful to this ideal. The Church has, for instance, for far too long retained in her prayers and Eucharistic practices ancient and essentially superstitious prejudices about purity and impurity in regard to women’s bodies, and has even allowed the idea of ritual impurity to attach itself to childbirth. Yet no Christian woman who has prepared herself for communion through prayer and fasting should be discouraged from approaching the chalice. The Church must also remain attentive to the promptings of the Spirit in regard to the ministry of women, especially in our time, when many of the most crucial offices of ecclesial life—theologians, seminary professors, canonists, readers, choir directors, and experts in any number of professions that benefit the community of faith—are occupied by women in increasingly great numbers; and the Church must continue to consider how women can best participate in building up the body of Christ, including a renewal of the order of the female diaconate for today.