

INTRODUCTION

An old Chinese blessing (or curse) says: “May you live in interesting times!” While all epochs of Church history have had their own particular interest, our own time is especially interesting. That is, we increasingly find being called into question dogmas, values and life-styles which have never before been questioned by Christians. And as the Church, we must make some sort of answer, both to the inquiring world and to our own perplexed church people.

This work is written from the perspective and for the use of the normal parish priest, who may not have the necessary leisure to keep up with the latest word from the sometimes strange world of Academia. Often more pressing concerns are the local issues of his Parish Council, the sick and elderly in his parish who need his presence and the Sermon, (unprepared as of Saturday night, which needs preparing by Sunday morning). Into this hectic schedule, he will sometimes get a question, in genuine perplexity, from a parishioner, about the role of women in the Church. Having observed, for example, that women are routinely ordained in the other Christian confessions, a pious parishioner may ask, “Father, why doesn’t *our* church ordain women as priests? Isn’t that sexist?”

It is all too easy to give an inadequate reply to such questions. If one’s opinions run to the liberal side, one may answer, “Well, it is still an open question for us Orthodox. We’re still thinking about it. Maybe one day we will. Just try and be patient.” Or, if one’s temperament runs to the more conservative side, one may answer, “Oh! That will never happen here! Why? Well...uh... well, just think about it. A woman couldn’t be a priest. She would be ritually unclean once a month and unable to enter the altar!” (A fairly dubious answer: if ritual impurity were the concern, it would follow that post-menopausal women *could be* candidates for the priesthood.)

This volume is written to try to address these common concerns and questions, dealing with our theological Tradition in a way that is “user-friendly” to the beleaguered parish priest and his perplexed parishioner.

CHAPTER 1: SUBORDINATION AND HEADSHIP

“(Husband), take the same care for (your wife) as Christ takes for the Church. Even if it becomes necessary for you to give your life for her, yes, and to be cut into pieces ten thousand times, yes and to endure and undergo any suffering whatever, do not refuse it...”

St. John Chrysostom, Homily 20 on Ephesians

A parishioner asks, “Father, to be honest, I’m kind of embarrassed by all this talk about the husband being the head of his wife and about the wife submitting to her husband. This doesn’t seem right. Shouldn’t marriage be an equal partnership? It all seems to be so degrading to the woman!”

It is just here that many North American women (and men!) feel uncomfortable with what they think is the teaching of their Church. In North America especially, the Land of Equal Rights, we are used to a certain equality between husband and wife. Gender roles are still used (the man may mow the grass and the woman may do the laundry) but they are roles assumed by two equals. Thus, any talk of “submission” sounds a discordant note in this arrangement. What does the Church really say about the nature of men and women’s relationship together—about subordination and headship in marriage?

We begin first by examining the Scriptures.

The Old Testament Creation Stories: Genesis 1- 3. Any examination of gender must begin with the Biblical accounts of the Creation and Fall of Man. In the creation story in Genesis 1, we are told that Man and Woman are both equally made in God’s image, according to His likeness, and that both together exercise authority over creation. That is, they are made as the free expression of God’s love and for the purpose of freedom and love. Love to each other, freely given, with joy and without constraint, is the goal of all human relationships and this is what is meant by being made in the image of God. All other aspects of their relationship, (such as leadership, authority and submission) exist for no other reason than to further this over-arching purpose of mutual love.

“Let us make Man in Our image,” God says, “according to Our likeness; let them have dominion” (Gen. 1:26) “So God created Man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Gen. 1:27). Note that both Man and Woman equally share the divine image, and both are together given joint dominion over creation. Thus, Man and Woman are of equal worth and value before God.

Yet in the context of this shared equality of dignity, there is also a subordination of the Wife to the Husband, of Woman to the Man. For God wanted to create a helper fit for Adam and comparable to him. According to the story in Genesis 2, God made all the animals and brought them to Adam to see what he would name them. In naming the animals, Adam did not merely exercise authority over them—he also came to know their essential nature (for in Hebrew thought, a name is not a mere verbal label but the expression of one’s true and inner nature). Thus, in naming all the animals, Adam came to know that in none of them was a helper “comparable to him”. Thus it was that God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam and took a part of him, a side of him, an aspect of him (usually translated “rib”) and made this part of him into a helper fit for him: his wife Eve. Upon this, Adam cried out, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”—in other words, my true self—“she shall be called Woman (Hebrew *Ishah*) for she was taken out of Man (Hebrew *Ish*). (We note that the Hebrew word for Woman, *Ishah*, is simply the word for Man with the feminine ending).

In this second creation story we notice several things which speak of the nature of Man-Woman relationships. Firstly, the repeated emphasis on their essential equality of dignity and identity of nature: Woman is the same nature as Man, being “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh”. Also we see a measure of subordination of Eve to Adam. *She* was created as a helper for *him* (and not *he* being created as a helper for *her*—St. Paul alludes to this in 1 Corinthians 11:9 and 1 Timothy 2:13). As such, Adam *names* his wife, even as he named the rest of sentient creation, thus expressing his authority over her as head and husband.

In the story of the Fall in Genesis 3, sin interrupts all the harmony of creation, including the unfallen harmony between husband and wife. (Note: the subordination of wife to husband was present *before* the Fall—only now sin will accentuate this subordination and use it to work division between them.)

In the story, the wife steps out of her provided role as helper and takes the spiritual lead as if she were the head. Thus she is deceived by the lies of the serpent and takes the forbidden fruit. Her husband Adam, however, is not deceived—he takes the fruit and sins with his eyes wide open. Thus they fall from their paradisaic state and plunge the creation, of which they were joint heads, into ruin.

The result? Their tasks and roles, which before were to be fulfilled with joy, will now be accompanied by woe, misery and death. The woman retains her role as Life-bearer—but now she will bear children with pain. No longer strong, she will be weak, so that her desire will be for her husband and his protection, so that he must rule over her. (Gen. 3:16) The man retains his role as Chief Steward of the earth—but now the ground he tills is cursed and will bring forth thorns and thistles so that he must eat his bread in the sweat of his face (Gen. 3:18-19). They jointly inherit mortality—they are driven out of Eden and barred from the tree of life by the cherubim with the flaming sword (Gen. 3:24).

In all these accounts we see a pattern of subordination and equality: the Man and Woman are essentially equal in dignity as the image-bearers of God and as jointly having authority over the earth, but this equality is expressed in different roles, in which the Wife is subordinated to her Husband.

The New Testament: The Teaching of Christ and the Apostles. This Old Testament teaching of equality of nature and subordination of role is continued in the New Testament.

Firstly, Christ affirmed the essential dignity and equality of the Wife to the Husband.

When asked about the nature of Husband and Wife (and whether divorce for any cause were allowed) Christ refers back to this original creation story (Matthew 19:1-10). Divorce, He said, was not *commanded* by Moses in the Law as a part of the original Divine Will—rather, it was only *allowed* Israel “because of the hardness of your hearts”. Originally, Man and Woman were made “one flesh”, one organism, one unit (Gen. 2:24, Matt. 19:5-6), being joined together thus by God Himself. Thus, as no longer two but one, it was not permitted to tear this unity apart and thwart the work of God. Christ re-iterates the equality of the Husband and Wife and makes godly divorce an equal impossibility for both.

This represents an advance in the status of women in Israel—for previous to this, a woman could be divorced by her husband for any reason. Indeed, Christ always took women seriously and elevated their status. He spoke and taught women as well as men (we think of Mary, sitting at His feet along with His disciples, hearing His word, in Luke 11:38-42 as well as Photini, the Samaritan Woman at the well, in John 4). This was unusual for Rabbis of His time, who felt that the Law should rather be burnt than taught to a woman. And of course the sign of belonging to the New Covenant was capable of being received by women as well as men, unlike the sign of the Old Covenant, circumcision, which was to be received by men only. In all His dealings with women, Christ respected, ennobled and elevated them.

Secondly, Christ not only re-enforced the Old Testament teaching of woman's essential equality with men, He also re-enforced its teaching of woman's subordination. That is, He gave spiritual authority to men only, not to women. Though He had women disciples available to Him, He chose only men as His Apostles and as bearers of His authority. This was significant, for He could have chosen women. It is true that women with authority were somewhat a rarity in the ancient world and in Israel. But then Christ did much that was "out of step" with Israel—including such "scandalous" things as setting aside the supreme place of the Law and as claiming to be God. It is difficult to believe that He would have balked at a lesser "revolution" like women apostles, were such the Father's will. He had already outraged His contemporaries by teaching women in public—why would He stop at making them teachers—unless such were not His will?

(Some say that Christ also did not make any Gentiles His Apostles, though Gentiles were later to be accepted as equal with Jews, and they argue that a similar situation obtained with women. No women were Apostles—but then, they say, no Gentiles were either. If we now take Gentiles as leaders, why not women? But the argument is fallacious. For Christ had no Gentile disciples following Him before His Ascension (indeed, He forbade the Twelve to enter towns of the Gentiles to preach), but He had women disciples available. If He chose no women as Apostles, it was not owing to their not being available, as with the Gentiles. Rather, it was because He set His seal on the subordinate role for women.)

Christ's teaching is echoed and continued, of course, by His Apostles.

St. Peter affirms both the equality and the subordination. He affirms the equality in marriage when he tells the husbands that their wives are "fellow-heirs of the grace of life" with them and that they should give honour to their wives "lest your prayers be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7). He also affirms the subordination of wives when he exhorts them to "be submissive to your own husbands...for in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him 'lord'..." (1 Peter 3:1-6).

St. Paul also teaches the same. He acknowledges the equality before God of husband and wife, saying, "Neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as the woman was from the man (i.e. Eve from Adam), even so the man is also from the woman (i.e. all men born from their mothers), and all things are from God." (1 Cor. 11:11-12). Indeed, he even affirms that, so far as our salvation is concerned, gender is completely irrelevant: "In Christ," he says, "there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28).

In marriage, this basic equality is worked out in a context of mutual inter-dependence: each spouse relies upon the other. Indeed, he writes that the husband and wife should not deprive each other of their "conjugal rights" because "the wife does not have authority over her body but the husband does and likewise the husband does not have authority over his body, but the wife does." (1 Cor. 7:4). In this equality, it is not therefore a matter of the husband being the boss. Rather, both submit jointly to Christ as their Lord and exercise a mutual care for (and authority over) each other. This is because, he says, echoing the teaching of Christ on the creation story in Genesis, the husband and wife are not two individuals, but one flesh (Eph. 5:31)—and naturally, he says, a man would care for his wife as he cares for his own body, since she *is* one body with him.

But this equality is not the total picture: with the Apostles as well, there is the teaching of subordination.

St. Paul also teaches that "the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man and the head of Christ is God." (I Cor. 11:3).

And in the same passage that St. Paul affirms the unity of the husband and wife as one flesh, he also teaches that the wives should submit to their husbands "as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the

wife as also Christ is head of the Church and is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.” (Eph. 5:22-24). Similarly, the husbands are told to “love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it” (Eph. 5:25).

The Matrimonial Model: Christ and His Bride. What do these passages mean? Here we come to the heart of the matter and to the meaning of Christian marriage (which is why this passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is chanted as the Epistle in the Marriage Service).

Our human love is not the original, the prototype. The love of God for us is the original: our poor love for one another (such as married love) is the copy, the echo, the reflection of the divine love. Thus God’s love for His People, Christ’s love for His Church—*that* is the original and the fount and source of all our love for one another. In marriage, the husband and wife try to reproduce this divine love. And though made equal before God (the love of husband and wife is the love of two equal free persons, two captives set free by Christ), yet their gender is made to reflect this primordial divine mystery in different ways. The husband is an image of the love of Christ for His Church; the wife is an image of the love of the Church for Christ. That is why (and also *how*) the wife submits to her husband: not because she is a slave or lesser than he (for Christ submits to the Father as to His Head, and Christ is not lesser or inferior to the Father). Rather, her following his leadership is an image of how the Church submits to Christ—not slavishly, but freely, not as being degraded by submission to Christ, but ennobled by it.

In the same way and for the same reason, the husband acts as head for his wife—as an image of Christ’s love for His Bride, the Church. And how does Christ exercise His headship over His Bride? By dying for her, “giving Himself for” the Church, by surrendering all His dignity and taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:1f). Indeed, Christ showed how this special kind of Christian authority works when He laid aside His garments, girded Himself with a towel and washed His disciples’ feet in John 13:1-11. *That* is what it means to love the Bride. *That* is how the husband ought to exercise true Christian headship toward his wife—by humbling himself and serving her, by washing her feet as the Lord did for *His* Bride.

Christian Headship: A New Kind of Authority. This is perhaps the reason for much misunderstanding and resistance to the teaching of Christian headship: the spiritual vocabulary is not understood. For the Church does not use the word “authority” to mean what the world means. In the world, authority means “power over” others, power to make them do one’s will, the authority of a superior over an inferior. This is not authority as the Church understands it. For Christ gave us a new understanding of authority. “Those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you: but whoever desires to become great among shall be your servant and whoever of you desires to be first shall be the slave of all. For even as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45). This is the Church’s understanding of authority and of headship and submission. Authority is primarily the authority *to serve*; submission is *accepting that service in love*. The note sounded is one of love, not law. If one insists on one’s “rights”—either the right to rule or the right not to be ruled—one is no longer walking in love and has fallen from the Christian understanding of headship and submission.

As with many things, poetry gives the best insight into spiritual things. Look at the poetry written between a man and a woman when they are in love, at their love letters. Here, where love clearly reigns, one can see that insistence on one’s “rights” is the furthest thing from the minds of either. The man is the true head—he wants to protect his beloved, to do valiant deeds for her, to win battles in her honour, to die for her (--even as our Lord did for *His* Beloved, the Church). And the woman images the

true submission—she wants to follow his lead whatever the hardship, to bear all things for him, to give herself entirely to him, as he gives himself entirely to her. This, being love, is the true image and example of Christian headship. We sometimes think of “the husband as head” being exemplified by an “Archie Bunker” figure, seated royally in his chair, with his wife “Edith” hovering as a servant around him. Actually, according to the true teaching of Christ and His Apostles, “the husband as head” is exemplified by the service of love. It is not “Archie Bunker” seated royally that is the true image—it is the knight kneeling before his lady that is the true image (--which is why marriage proposals were given by men to their ladies while the men knelt before them). Admittedly, being fallen creatures, men and women fall short before this ideal of headship and love. But that is the standard the Church holds out before us—to be all that we can be, to be servants one of another, to be Christ and His Church in our homes together.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Stephen B. Clark, Man and Woman in Christ, Servant, Ann Arbor, 1980.

Anne Moir and David Jessel, Brainsex: The Real Difference between Men and Women, Mandarin, Great Britain, 1989.

CHAPTER 2: THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

“When someone has to preside over the Church and be entrusted with the care of so many souls, then let all the female sex give way before the magnitude of the task—and indeed, most men also!”
St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood

A parishioner asks: “Father, all the other Christian confessions ordain women priests. Why doesn’t our Church? Isn’t that sexist?”

Some Orthodox material might give the impression that the practice of ordaining only men to the priesthood and the episcopate *is* sexist. Elizabeth Behr-Sigel (in her book *“The Ministry of Women in the Church”*) argues for the ordination of women. She writes “The priest is the spokesman for the eternal Word. He lends his voice to the Word. Can this voice not be a feminine one?” (p. 178). Eva Topping (in her book *“Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy”*) strongly and stridently argues for women’s ordination, saying that the Fathers were discriminatory and prejudiced in their oppressive treatment of women. “The church fathers,” she writes, “justified the oppressive structures against women by appeals to the authority of St. Paul and by sexist interpretations of selected scriptural texts...if women are to acquire equal dignity in the church, this two thousand year old tradition of discrimination against women must be examined and reassessed” (p. 43-4). Even some in the episcopate seem to be at least somewhat sympathetic to these feminist concerns. Metropolitan ANTHONY (Bloom), writes (in a Preface to Behr-Sigel’s book mentioned above) “the Orthodox must re-think the problem of woman in the light of the Scriptures” (p.xiv). Even Bishop KALLISTOS (Ware), in the recent edition of his *“The Orthodox Church”* writes, “There is a small but growing minority within Orthodoxy which feels strongly that the whole question (of the ordination of women) has yet to receive...the rigorous, searching examination it requires...(they feel) the arguments that have been advanced, whether against or in favour of such ordination, to be deeply inadequate” (p. 293). Is it possible that our “two thousand year old tradition” *is* sexist? Why doesn’t the Church ordain women to the priesthood and episcopate?

As Metropolitan ANTHONY says, any true Orthodox examination of the problem must be undertaken in the light of the Scriptures, which is the Patristic and Traditional way for the Church to begin. (Obviously, our understanding of the Scriptures is guided by the approach of the wider Tradition and interpretations of the Fathers—Orthodoxy is not a “Bible only” religion). What do the Scriptures say?

The Old Testament Roots: The Priesthood of the Law. In the Old Testament, God established a priesthood to represent Him on earth—to image His authority on earth by its teaching and decisions (Malachi 2:7) and to make possible, by its sacrifices, the communion of sinful Israel with the holy and living God in their midst. This priesthood, a hereditary one through the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron, was restricted to men.

This was unusual in the ancient world, which knew both male priests and female priestesses. Indeed, Israel was unique in its refusal to have a theology and cultus like all the nations. None of the nations surrounding Israel shared its insistence on a male-only priesthood, even though these nations were just as “patriarchal” in their understanding of the place of women in society. Why was this?

Israel was unique among the nations in more than its insistence on a male-only priesthood. More fundamentally, they stood alone in affirming the radical transcendence of God above nature. All the other nations’ religions were essentially pantheistic—they saw God as immanent throughout nature and the natural forces as expressions and manifestations of this immanent God. Indeed, God was more or less co-terminus with the world. It was unthinkable to them that God (or the gods) could stand apart

from the world or exist before it. The world and God were both eternal. God was, in a sense, the soul diffused throughout the natural world. This world had forces within it that were both male and female and it was this combination that produced fertility and reproduction and kept the world going. Thus gods were worshipped as being sexual, as both sexually male and sexually female. Pagan religion knew both *gods* and *goddesses*. As such, it was appropriate for these gods and their female consorts to be imaged both by priests and priestesses.

Over against this, Israel asserted that God was transcendent—that He was in no sense co-terminus with and contained by His world. Rather, He created the world when before there was nothing and when all was topsy-turvy, without order or form, completely “void” (Gen. 1:2). He created the world by a mere sovereign word of command, merely saying “Be!” and it came to be. The natural forces of the world-- forces of fertility and potency, of sexuality and reproduction-- were not manifestations of an immanent God, but the result of His decrees from on high. True, God *filled* the world—He was immanent in the sense that there was no place in the world which God did not fill and over which He did not exert His sovereignty. But, unlike paganism, He also *stood above* the world. If paganism saw Divinity as a field which contains and germinates the seed sown in it, (a “Mother Nature”), Israel asserted that the Divine was the Sower that sowed the seed of life into the field from above. The pagan gods were personifications of sexuality and the world’s innate life-forces—as such, they were male and female. And their priests, imaging these sexual forces, had both male and females, a combination meant to mirror the sexuality of the Divine. But Yahweh, the Hebrew God, was different. He was above sexuality, in that He was no mere personification of sexual natural forces, but stood transcendent and above them.

In the thought and symbolical cultic imagery of that day, the male also imaged the transcendent (the sky-father), while the female imaged the immanent (the earth-mother). As such, it was appropriate for this transcendent God, above gender and sexuality, to be represented by an all-male priesthood, since the purpose of a male-female priesthood was to image the male-female components of the divine nature. The priesthood of Israel was the expression of a religion which made the transcendence of God its central differentiating focus. Yahweh was a transcendent God, not a Goddess immanent within nature, and He stood alone, having no consort, no female principle, no equal. Paganism required both men and women as priests, since they imaged the sexual unions latent in nature. The image of the Creator God as a single sex, as male only, removed God from the categories of nature, to which divinity was subjected in paganism and brought Him into the realm of transcendence: here was the “sky-father” without an “earth-mother”!

Thus the Old Testament refusal to have female priests was rooted in its understanding of the nature of the God these priests represented.

The New Testament Fruit: the Institution of the Apostles by Christ. The God revealed and worshipped by Christ was the same God who was worshipped in the Old Testament and represented by its priests. That is, the Father (with the Son and the Spirit) is transcendent above the world and not immanent and confined in it. (That is why He is called “the Father” and not “the Mother” and why these terms are not inter-changeable, even though the Father is beyond gender and sexuality.) Even as the Old Testament priesthood imaged and manifested the authority of Yahweh to men, so Christ ordained His Apostles to represent His authority to the world.

We have to be careful here, though. The Old Testament priesthood finds its direct fulfilment, not in the Christian clergy alone, but in *the Christian Church as a whole*. The ancient Temple with its priests is replaced, not by the bishops of the Church in themselves, but by the whole Church. It is *the entire Church* which is the “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9). The Aaronic priests formerly offered sacrifices to

God; now, it is the entire Church, each order—bishop, presbyter, deacon, laity—functioning together in harmony, that offers the spiritual Sacrifice of the Eucharist.

Nonetheless, the clergy have their unique part to play in this whole. One of their tasks is that of ruling and of teaching with authority. This role was held by the Aaronic priests of the Old Testament; it is held by the bishops (and their priestly delegates) now. It is the task of the episcopate to “rightly define the Word of Truth” by their authoritative teaching and their preaching. (It is a task which they share with their fellow-presbyters, the priests, whom they delegate to rule the churches in their stead.)

And it is here that the all-male nature of this task is preserved.

Christ ordained only men to be His Apostles—not because women were not available for this task, but because, as bearers of Divine Authority, the authority must be borne by men.

As was said above in the previous chapter, gender is not a mere biological accident—it also images divine realities. The male images Christ, the Divine, the sky-father, the Lover, the Seeker, the authoritative Teacher. The female images the Church, the Human, the earth-mother, the Beloved, the Sought, the receptive Disciple. In the language of this symbolism, authority is given to the male, as to the symbolic image of Christ the Teacher, not to the female, the symbolic image of the Church, the Disciple.

Thus it is not just that women would not have been accepted as authoritative teachers in the ancient world. In fact, there *were* female priests in the pagan religions and also in the heretical Gnostic forms of Christianity (which taught male and female “emanations” of God). Rather, women were not given priestly Apostolic authority because that authority was appropriately given to the male as to the iconic image-bearer of God.

Christ’s Example Preserved: the Apostolic Church. This teaching of Christ finds its echo in the writings of the Apostles. In the secular culture of that day, there was a drive to have women clergy. (It was this drive which would later produce the women priests of the Gnostic and Montanist heresies.) Not only that, but the teaching of the Apostles itself could be misunderstood. St. Paul’s teaching that gender, like all human and natural distinctions, had been transcended in Christ, so that now “in Christ there is no male or female” (Gal. 3:28) seems to have been misunderstood by some. They concluded from this that, since gender has been abolished, women may now have spiritual authority as ordained teachers in the Church.

St. Paul corrects this notion. In 1 Timothy 2, writing about the various roles in the Church, he gives instructions first to the men (v. 8) and then to the women (v.9-10). He then goes on to say “Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. For I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man but to be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived fell into transgression. Nevertheless, she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love and holiness, with self-control.” (v. 11-15).

There is no suggestion that St. Paul here writes for a situation peculiar to the women of Ephesus for whom this was originally intended. Rather, in all his instructions in this Epistle, (such as his instructions on necessary qualifications for bishops (chapter 3), or the honouring of presbyters (chapter 5) or the commands to the wealthy (chapter 6), we have the impression that these are timelessly universal instructions. Indeed, he says as much himself: “I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God” (1 Tim. 3:15).

What then does he mean? First of all, comparing this teaching with similar teaching in 1 Corinthians 14 (“Let the women keep silent in the churches, for she is not permitted to speak, for they are to be submissive, as the Law also says” (v. 34), we note that certain speaking is not permitted women in the church assembly. But what kind of speaking?

It cannot be a total ban on speaking, for St. Paul allows women to pray or prophesy, provided that their head is covered (1 Cor. 11:5, 14:31). Like the men, she can “speak in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19). The particular type of speaking that is forbidden is that of *authoritative teaching*—the teaching that is, in St. Paul’s thought, associated with pastoring (see his pairing together of “pastors and teachers” in Ephesians 4:11).

That is consistent with his words in the 1 Corinthians 14 passage we are considering. In the wider context of that chapter, he talks also of “speaking” and “keeping silent”. In 1 Cor. 14:6-30, St. Paul gives instructions as to how tongues and prophecy are to be regulated in the church assembly. If any, he says, speak in tongues, let there be two or three, then let all wait for the interpretation of the tongues. If there is no interpretation forthcoming, let there be no more tongues—let the tongue-speaker “keep silent in church” (v. 28). Similarly with prophecy: let there be two or three prophecies, then let all wait while “the others”—those whose task it is to judge such things—judge the prophecies. If anything is revealed to these judges who sit by to the effect that the prophecy is not a true one, then let the prophet “keep silent” (v. 30). The meaning of the command that the women “keep silent” would seem to be determined by this context. The women are to “keep silent” in that they are not to join in the authoritative verdict of these judges of teaching. They are not to join them as they “rightly define the Word of Truth”.

Thus St. Paul says the same thing in both these passages. Women are not prohibited from all speaking, just from that speaking which is expressive of teaching authority in the church.

The Theological Foundation. And what is his reason? St. Paul does not ground his reason for his prohibition in 1 Timothy 2 in any cultural factors. He does not forbid women as authoritative teachers because they would not be accepted by society (in fact, they would), nor in their lack of education (in fact, some women were well-educated.) Rather, he grounds the prohibition in the essential nature of men and women, in creation. Adam, he says, was created first and thus had the God-given authority and Eve was created for him (not vice-versa). Also, he says, when Eve stepped out of her role and usurped Adam’s leadership, she was deceived—for God’s spiritual protection depends upon on obedience to His Word.

It would seem then that the apostolic reason for prohibiting women from the exercise of spiritual authority has to do with the nature of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. For men and women have different ways of perceiving, understanding, relating to the world and, therefore, of exercising authority. Let’s look at this more carefully.

Brook Herbert, in her article “Towards a Recovery of the Theology of Patriarchy” (published in the *St. Vladimir Theological Quarterly*, volume 40, number 4), describes this basic difference between men and women. She talks about a “perceived polarity between male and female modes of understanding” (p. 295). Women tend to be “inward oriented”; they tend to be subjective and to use intuitive, trans-rational perception. Men tend to be “outward oriented”, to be objective and to use rational, discursive reasoning. That is, they each relate differently to the world around them—and this difference makes them each suited to their varied and different tasks of fatherhood and motherhood.

Commenting on Karl Stern’s work, Herbert suggests that “feminine predisposition towards intuitive knowledge is closely allied to the woman’s creational predisposition for motherhood” (p. 296). The role of the father, on the other hand is to “meet his child in the external world” so that his reception and acceptance of the child “constitutes the legitimation of the child’s being” (p.296-7). Also, the father’s role is to “stand between the family unit and the world as mediator and protector...it is fatherhood which visibly declares the distinct and exclusive parameters of familial communion” (p.297-8). Simply put, women are constituted to better perform the tasks of ordering the inner life of the family in nurturing. Men are constituted to better perform the tasks of relating the family to the outer world, in protection.

Now the exercise of priestly authority in the Church has precisely to do with these masculine tasks of legitimization and protection. That is, the pastor's task, by his teaching and authority, is to accept each member of the parish family so as to guarantee his or her place in the church. And as the liaison between the local parish community and the other and wider worlds outside the parish, his task is also to define the borders (the "parameters") of the community so that it exists as a community and to protect it from the outer dangers of heresy and error.

Thus, this authority over the community is given to men, as a call to spiritual fatherhood, because men are better suited for this task by their inner constitution. (Women are better suited than men to *their* tasks and have their own indispensable and valuable roles in the Church. But this authority is not one of them.)

The Contemporary Debate. The concern of the ordination of women is one which excites much emotion, on all sides of the dispute. Those who argue for the ordination often feel it as a "justice issue". Either not understanding or accepting the Scriptural and Patristic understanding of the matter, they feel very keenly that women are unfairly excluded from an important part of the life of the Church. What can we say to this?

Firstly, it has to be admitted that women are excluded from the priesthood (and the episcopate) but that this "exclusion" is not an matter of fairness or unfairness. For "fairness" is a quality of *Law* (i.e. one is "treated unfairly" when one is not given what one is *legally* entitled to)—and in the Church, matters of calling and obedience are qualities of *Grace*, not *Law*. Like all basic human callings, they are given from the hand of God as God wills, out of His love—and not because we are entitled to any of it.

(It was thus even in the Old Testament: the gift of priesthood was given to those of the tribe of Levi, of the family of Aaron only. It was a gift of grace; no one was "entitled" to it. Those who were not of the "right" tribe and family were thus "excluded".)

Thus, all the gifts of the Spirit are given sovereignly, as the Spirit wills (1 Cor. 12:11), not as we would like.

We can see this in nature and in our family life. God gives a certain gift to women *as women*: the potentiality to share in His Creatorhood, to bear life. Motherhood is the secret of God which He shares with the women alone. The men are excluded. There is a certain pain in this, a wistful longing and wonder to "know what it's like". (It is not considered masculine to admit this, however! But it is true.) That is why the husband of the pregnant wife will wait forever, with his hand over her pregnant belly, to feel the baby move. What is he really doing? Whether he knows it or not, he is trying to capture some inkling of the secret which God is sharing with his wife and from which he, like all men, is forever excluded. It is not a question of fairness. God sovereignly gives this gift to the women and not to the men.

So with authority in the Church. It is a task He gives to the men, not to the women. Again, it is not a question of fairness, but of God's sovereign dispensation.

But there is another part of this pain, of this feeling of unfairness. And it is to do not with God's ordering of His Church, but of our human failing to fully live out God's call.

There is, in many people's minds, a fundamental (but false) equation of service in the Church with ordained priesthood. That is, many think that to be of service to God, they must be ordained. Since women cannot be ordained, they feel excluded from any meaningful service to God in Church.

It is this equation which needs to be challenged and eradicated. It is NOT the case that service to God in the Church involves ordination. The Church needs to recover a sense of the holiness of the laity as an important and essential order in the Church. The laity need to be acknowledged by the clergy as those who are called by God to meaningful service.

Tasks of counselling, healing, visiting and ministering to the sick, intercessory prayer, outreach, scholarship—all of these ministries can and should be carried out by an empowered laity as they respond to the call of the Spirit in their lives. As long as the laity's meaningful role is not acknowledged and blessed by the Church, some will continue to feel the exclusion of women from the priesthood as an unfairness and a source of pain. We need, in fact, not to change our understanding of priesthood, but to enlarge and enrich our understanding of laity. The current debate on the ordination of women is God's call to us to recover our original Orthodox understanding of the dignity and calling of the holy laity.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Manfred Hauke, Women in the Priesthood?, Ignatius, San Francisco, 1988.

CHAPTER 3: MENSTRUATION AND COMMUNION

“If the Holy Spirit is always in you, you keep yourself from Prayer and from the Scriptures and from the Eucharist without just impediment...”

--the Didascalia Apostolorum

A parishioner asks, “Father, is it right for a woman to receive Holy Communion during her monthly time? I’ve heard some older Orthodox women say it’s not right. Some say one shouldn’t even enter the Church when one is unclean like that! But menstruation is nature’s way, isn’t it? How can something natural make one unclean?”

It has to be admitted that the practice of considering women ritually “unclean” during the time of their menstruation has a long history in the Church—though there seems to be some variety of practice as to what this entails. Some would say that women during this time may enter the church temple but not receive Holy Communion, some would say they may not enter the temple at all. Some would say such women may not venerate the holy icons or bake the *prospora* bread during this time. All of these views presuppose that menstruation makes a woman ritually unclean while it lasts.

Allied to this is the long-standing practice of banning a woman from entering the church after childbirth. During this period of forty days, she is also considered ritually unclean and before her re-integration into the life of the Church, she must be prayed for by the priest to be cleansed of her “uncleanness”. It is this element in the Service of the Churching of Women that makes the use of this Service problematic in the minds of some.

Certainly concepts of ritual impurity fly in the face of modern secular thought. Modern society has banished concepts of holiness from its collective consciousness as well as any idea that what is “natural” might also be “fallen”. In this secular climate, there is of course a great antipathy to any concept of women being made “ritually unclean” through what is, after all, a “natural” bodily function.

The History of the Practice: A Divided Verdict. Nonetheless, the practice has a long history. In the year 247, Dionysius, patriarch of Alexandria, was asked his opinion by a brother bishop about a pastoral matter. He was asked: may women receive Holy Communion during the time of their menstruation? (The presence of the question shows that it was being done then and was even then something of a controversy and pastoral dilemma.) Dionysius gives his opinion: Certainly not! “Concerning menstruous women,” he writes, “whether they ought to enter the temple of God while in such a state, I think it superfluous even to put the question. For I opine, not even they themselves, being faithful and pious, would dare when in this state either to approach the Holy Table or to touch the Body and Blood of Christ...if one is not wholly clean both in soul and body, he shall be prevented from coming to the Holy of Holies.” (quoted in the Rudder, p.718). Dionysius does not spend much time giving a reason for his opinion. He makes quick reference to the woman with the flow of blood in Gospel (Mark 5:25ff), saying that as she dared not touch Christ Himself but only the hem of His garment, so the pious should refrain from touching Christ in the Eucharistic Gifts. But one senses that for him it was not really a question. It was, he thought, abundantly self-evident that menstruous women should not commune. It seems apparent that the text cited was brought in to support an opinion already arrived at.

Though sometimes quoted as a “canon”, this ruling is the opinion of but one man answering a letter from a brother bishop. It is more properly called a “canonical letter” than a “canon”. Nonetheless, it was a widely-held opinion and one that eventually prevailed in the Church.

It was, however, not the only opinion held in the Church at that time. In a document known to history as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (or “Teaching of the Apostles”) and dated around the late third century, one gets a contrary opinion. In dealing with this matter, the author says that women may indeed receive Communion during their monthly times “since the Holy Spirit is always in you”. He asks, “if the Holy Spirit is always in you, without just impediment do you keep yourself from Prayer and from the Scriptures and from the Eucharist? ...For if the Holy Spirit is in you, why do you keep yourself from approaching the works of the Holy Spirit [i.e. the Holy Communion]?...Therefore, beloved, flee and avoid such [legalistic] observances: for you have received release that you should no more bind yourselves and do not load yourselves again with that [yoke of the Jewish Law] which our Lord and Saviour has lifted from you. Do not observe these things, nor think them uncleanness, and do not refrain yourselves on their account, nor seek...purification for these things”.

We see that there was a division of opinion about this concern in the early church. On what basis are we to judge between them?

The Concept of Uncleanness and Christian Theology. Basic to all these discussions is the underlying concept of ritual uncleanness. It is a concept which is unfamiliar to our sensibilities today but which was well understood in the ancient world—both Jewish and pagan.

This concept of ceremonial uncleanness can be found in the Old Testament (e.g. Leviticus 12-15) but it is not peculiar to Judaism. It is a seemingly universal human intuition and insight that certain things make one unfit and unready for contact with the Divine power through sacrifice. Thus, if one had an issue of body fluid (either male semen, female menstrual blood or the blood accompanying childbirth or some other open flow, even from a minor accidental cut), one was not allowed to approach God through sacrifice. It was not a question of being considered “sinful” but simply of certain ceremonial disqualification for religious rites.

What was the reason for this? This insight and feeling was so deeply held by the ancients that no explanation was deemed necessary in the Old Testament. It seemed to involve the concept of integrity and entirety. Mary Douglas, in her book *Purity and Danger*, surmises that a body which was discharging was seen as temporarily as lacking wholeness and it was this lack that disqualified one for approaching the Divine. It was not that one had done anything ethically wrong for which one needed to repent, but simply that one had not yet recovered the requisite bodily wholeness. One was ceremonially unclean because one had come into contact with the power and judgment of God in such things as birth, disease and death. It was the combination of our fallenness and God’s holiness which produces and manifests in us this lack of wholeness.

Such a concept runs counter to the whole tenor of modern thought and it is customary to dismiss it by saying “Well, that’s the *Old Testament!*” Like Dionysius of Alexandria, we respond too quickly because, for us as for him, it is not really a question. It is so self-evident to us that such a view of uncleanness is wrong!—even as for *him* it was equally self-evident that it was right!

The fact is, this concept of uncleanness is contained in Holy Scripture and was God’s authoritative word to His Old Testament people. The Mother of God herself, as an obedient daughter of the Law, submitted to it. Indeed, the reply of all the ancients to us would be “What makes you think you can approach God when you lack bodily integrity?” We may reply that God cares only for the state of the soul, not for the body. This is indeed the view of the Enlightenment. But what is so authoritative about the secular Enlightenment? Especially when the Law says the opposite?

The fact is that the concepts of the Old Testament religion (such as the distinction between clean/unclean, Sabbath day/ common day, priestly/lay, holy ground/ common ground) no longer apply to us Christians, not because such concepts are wrong, but because *Christianity is not a religion of this age*. Rather, it is our participation if the age to come.

As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann says, “Christianity is, in a profound sense, the *end of all religion*.” (*For the Life of the World*, p 19). That is, human religion—with its concepts of clean/unclean—have been transcended in Christ. Insofar as religion is of this age, these distinctions remain valid. But in Christ we partake of the realities of the age to come, where such concepts no longer apply.

The modern secularist would reject these religious categories of clean/unclean because secularism does not rise to the truth of human religion. But we Christians are not bound by them because, in Christ, we *transcend* them.

We are now in a position to deal with the two rival views of uncleanness in the early church. Dionysius seems to have approached the matter from a *religious* point of view. Seeing the Christian Faith as a religion, he naturally saw that religious categories (such as clean/unclean) applied to it. According to religious categories, menstruous women were indeed unclean and should be barred from eucharistic participation.

The author of the *Didascalia* seems to have approached the matter from an *eschatological* point of view. That is, he saw the Christian Faith not as a religion but as our eschatological participation in the Last Day through the Holy Spirit. And as such, we all, women as well as men, transcend the categories of this age (such as the prescriptions of the Jewish Law with its categories of clean/unclean) so that women may of course receive Holy Communion anytime. The deciding factor is not their ritual cleanliness but the presence of the Holy Spirit within them, which causes them to transcend this age. (This, by the way, would apply to men also. Such things as nocturnal emissions do not render them unfit for receiving Holy Communion for the same reason.)

Living the Tradition Today. It would seem, therefore, that there is no reason why pious Orthodox women may not receive the Holy Communion at any time, “provided the Holy Spirit is in you”.

However, caution is called for. For though this knowledge sets one free from the legalistic observances of the Law, yet, as St. Paul reminds us, “not all have this knowledge” (1 Cor. 8:7). Some women, long taught by what they truly consider to be the authentic teaching of Orthodoxy, feel bound in their consciences to abstain from Holy Communion during their times. Unless and until their consciences are taught and liberated, it would be harmful for them to violate their consciences and receive Communion during these times. One must proceed slowly, lovingly and carefully. And, while preserving one’s own freedom in Christ in receiving the Eucharist week after blessed week, one must be careful not to scandalize one’s weaker sister. This is a private and personal matter, to be worked out before God and (perhaps) one’s confessor. As St. Paul, in his teaching about dealing with the “weaker brother”, says, “If your brother (or sister) is grieved, you are no longer walking in love...do not let your good be spoken of as evil” (Romans 14:15-16). In this matter, arrogance and judging one another has no place. We are not only called to freedom. We are to use our freedom to serve one another through love (Gal. 5:13). Women should indeed receive Communion, even during their monthly times. But they should also take care not to antagonize their “weaker” sisters by aggressive and judgmental argument and condemnation.

What of the customary requirement that a woman wait forty days after childbirth before entering the Church and receiving Holy Communion? This question, though related to that of women receiving Holy Communion during their monthly times, involves other considerations as well. Some have thought that women may not enter the Church or receive Holy Communion for forty days after childbirth because they are ritually unclean during this time. As we have seen, these worldly, religious categories do not apply to Christians. They are, in fact, “free” to enter the Church during that time and receive the sacramental Mysteries, since ritual uncleanness is no barrier between the Christian and the Lord. But does it follow that the women *should* in fact enter the Church during this time, just because they can? For the seclusionary period of forty days accomplishes other things as well. In fact, many other cultures and religions have a prescribed period of seclusion and retreat for the mother after childbirth, not just the

Judeo-Christian. This is perhaps a reflection of the ancient and universal insight that it takes about that amount of time for the new mother to heal internally and recover her full strength.

Admittedly, this runs counter to our modern secular tendency. In secular thought, childbirth is primarily simply a biological event (albeit a joyful one) which nonetheless disrupts the flow of “normal life”. In many places, the new mother is urged to return to a full schedule of activities as soon as possible. Indeed, hospitals send new mothers home within a few days and in certain circles a speedy return to full-time employment for the mother is deemed ideal.

Over against this, Orthodoxy views childbirth as a sacred event, one with theological significance, not simply biological. The woman, in giving birth, participates in the Creator-hood of God, as God uses her flesh to create new life. She becomes a co-operator with the Trinity, making a human being in the image of God. The seclusionary forty days following childbirth need not be viewed as her enforced absence from Church. Rather, it can be viewed and used by her as a time of spiritual retreat, of nurture, of leisurely reception of this new and wonderful gift of new life that God has given her. Viewed this way, the forty days is not so much her absence from Church as her presence, in quietness and peace, with her new baby. For she is blessed by the Church to drop out from the frantic and frenetic pace of life—freed from the race of societal obligations, freed to remain at home with her new and miraculous bundle. She temporarily drops out of the race to create at home a space of safety, warmth and nurture for the child and to enjoy this time of spiritual retreat.

Obviously, some “economy” will be required in implementing this time of retreat. Not all women will be able to make full use of the proffered forty days. Nonetheless, the unthinking and frantic pace of our secular society, with its disregard of a mother’s needs and the theological sanctity of birth, should not make us reject the ideal which the Church still upholds. Where possible, new mothers should take advantage of this time and “drop out”—not just from Church but from *all* frantic social obligations. Part of their spiritual retreat with their new babies may even include being brought Holy Communion by the priest. As well as being of spiritual benefit to the mother, this would also make clear that her absence from Church is not due to her being “unclean”, but due to her need for spiritual rest and seclusion.

For the fact of the matter is that Christians, women as well as men, are commanded by the Lord to “do this” in remembrance of Him, week by week. Reception of the Holy Communion is the act which re-constitutes the faithful as the Body of Christ. There is, of course, a legitimate pastoral concern for the “weaker brother” (or sister) in matters of indifference (St. Paul, in his words on this topic in Romans 14, mentions, as examples of such matters, the eating of meat and other observances of the Jewish Law). We can and should limit our freedom in such matters of indifference if this would scandalize our weaker brother. Nonetheless, receiving Holy Communion is not one of these “matters of indifference”—it is a command of the Lord, incumbent upon all. So it is that all the faithful, having diligently prepared themselves by the usual proper means, should receive weekly Communion. But in our relationships and conversation one with another, we should avoid condemnation and haughty argument. In this as in all things, we should strive for to walk in love, endeavouring to preserve “the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3)

CHAPTER 4: WOMEN AND THE VEIL

“The ruler, when he comes before the King, ought to have the symbol of his rule. As no ruler without military belt or cloak would dare to appear before the King, so neither do you pray before God without the symbols of your rule [the veil].”

--St. John Chrysostom, Homily 26, on First Corinthians

A parishioner asks, “Father, do we have to cover our heads in church? Women had to in the old days, but aren’t we suppose to be liberated now? What does it matter whether or not we wear a veil or hat?”

In the previous generation, all Christian women, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant, used to cover their heads in church as a sign of respect. This practice did not gradually die out—it fell out of fashion quite suddenly in the 1960’s. It would seem that the Roman Catholic Church, perhaps influenced by the secular pressures that rocked it in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, allowed pious Catholic women to uncover their heads in church—and many women in the Protestant world followed suit as well!

The Orthodox discarding of the veil seems to have been a direct result of modern North American secularism. Certainly in parts of the Orthodox world less touched by this western phenomenon, use of the veil persists, such as in large parts of Russia and in the rural areas of Greece.

But, the question persists, what does it actually matter? And for some women, the use of the veil smacks of a certain “old world” order in which the woman suffers, if not actual oppression, at the very least an ungodly and discriminatory marginalization. For these women, the discarding of the veil has a certain positive symbolic value—it expresses the egalitarianism in marriage and society which they find essential. For them, the use of the veil would image a return to a more oppressive societal culture. Faced with this division of opinion regarding the use of the veil, what is the modern Orthodox woman to do? Do the Scriptures give any sure direction for this contemporary issue?

The Teaching of the Apostles. The Scriptures do indeed speak of the use of the veil. St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 deals with a practice which had arisen in Corinth. In that city, certain women, impressed with their new-found liberation in Christ and their status as spiritually co-equal with their husbands, expressed this equality by discarding their head-coverings and by appearing in public (and in church assembly) with uncovered heads. This was all the more dramatic a “public statement” because the veil which they wore was not a small piece of cloth which covered a portion of their hair but a large drapery which covered pretty much their entire body. This veil was worn by all respectable women in Corinth at that time—only the prostitutes dispensed with it (for obvious reasons). That pious women, in godly order and submission to their husbands, would appear thus uncovered, was quite a scandal. It was only explicable and justifiable if these women were completely independent—not having their husbands for their heads.

St. Paul categorically forbids it. This discarding of the veil expresses a rejection of the headship of their husbands and this he disavows. Everyone has a head—the man’s head is Christ, the woman’s head is her husband. Indeed, even Christ Himself has God the Father for His head. (1 Cor. 11:3). Thus, women, having their husbands for their heads, should wear the veil—to discard the veil is to dishonour one’s head—it is shameful, the same as having a shaved head would be (v. 5). The proper spiritual order must be maintained: the husband stands under Christ as his head and glory and the woman stands under her husband as her head and glory (v. 7)—therefore she must wear the veil, which expresses this Divine Order. The angels, charged by God with preserving this order, might be offended were it not upheld.

(As St. John Chrysostom, commenting on this passage, exhorts the women “Although you despise your husband, yet reverence the angels!” And St. Cyril of Alexandria comments, “The angels find it extremely hard to bear if this law is disregarded.” From this it is apparent that the angels refer not to *fallen* angels, who might otherwise be tempted should they see the woman’s beauty, but rather to our *guardian* angels, who, safe from temptation, guard the created order.) St. Paul concludes his instructions by disallowing the innovation, saying that such is the universal practice of “the churches of God” (v. 16).

The Contemporary Application. This is the Scriptural teaching. But what does it mean for today? For the Scriptures’ truth is universal and timeless, but these timeless principles have to be applied in the changing cultures of each generation. The underlying principle in St. Paul’s instructions is this: that the woman should dress and comport herself in such a way as to express her godly order and submission. In St. Paul’s day, this was expressed by use of the veil. In his day, discarding the veil was a clear and public statement of rejection of proper order and authority.

But it is otherwise today. Rightly or wrongly, our culture has changed and a woman’s uncovered head no longer has this public significance. (We express our proper godly order by other things today: by modest clothing, by the wearing a wedding ring, by the taking of the husband’s surname.) It is possible today for one to obey the spirit and underlying principle enunciated by St. Paul and still to have one’s head uncovered in public—and in church, at least in North America and in western cultures. Thus, the modern disuse of the veil is certainly an option for the pious.

Creating True Culture: the Challenge of the Future. But is that the end of the issue? For the voluntary use of the veil is experiencing a resurgence in North American Orthodoxy—especially among women converting to the Faith from a more secular Protestantism. For these women, use of the veil seemingly does not have the negative overtones of oppression and marginalization that some women find in it. For these convert women, the veil is something they have freely chosen—not because anyone said they *had* to, but because they *wanted* to. For them, it expresses their peculiar calling as Orthodox women. It is something which separates and differentiates them from the men and proclaims their unique calling as women. It is, in fact, one aspect in a nascent, fluid and emerging Orthodox sub-culture.

That would seem to be the larger issue. Any real faith must be lived out in a culture. Indeed, the Church has a duty to inter-act with the culture around it and transform it, if it can. Modern western culture is intensely secular and hostile to the Orthodox Christian Faith. We cannot, however, run away from inter-action with this society. We cannot lock ourselves away in a safe cocoon like a cult or sect, denouncing the secular society from the safe distance of our own hermetically-sealed and ghetto-ized existence. In our inter-action, dialogue and debate with secular society, we must have an alternative culture to offer them. We must, in our communities, provide an example of how a loving, free, creative and just society *ought* to live. This new life will express itself in a variety of ways, theological, liturgical, social. And it will, inevitably, as all living communities do, produce its own culture.

The veil could well be (an admittedly small) part of this total culture. What this outward symbol *expresses* will depend of course upon what the inner values of the community *are*. If the church community oppresses its women, then the veil, symbolizing the difference between men and women, will symbolize that oppression. But if the church community does *not* oppress women, but treats them as respected and valued integral parts of it, co-equal in worth but different in calling and gifts, that the veil will symbolize *this* view of women. The convert women presently using the veil testify that, in their experience, they do not feel oppressed, but rather valued and respected. The veil, for them, expresses

experience. It is thus a positive thing for them, a protest against the feminism which would obliterate male-female differences and a celebration of their femininity.

This Orthodox culture, however, is yet to be developed and the experiences of Orthodox women vary considerably. What is called for at the present time, therefore, is patience and charity and a refusal to judge one's brother (or sister). Some women will refuse to use the veil—and this should not be interpreted as unbiblical rebellion. Some other women will use the veil—and this should not be denounced as unhealthy biblical fundamentalism. Each woman in the present day should freely choose for herself how she will express her femininity and engage our secular culture. While respecting prevailing local customs, unless and until there emerges a consensus and a consistent Orthodox counter-culture in all our communities, each should follow their own way and live in love and peace with all.

CHAPTER 5: DEACONESSES

**“The ministry of deaconesses is necessary for you, [O bishop], for many reasons”
--the Didascalia Apostolorum**

A parishioner asks: “Father, an Orthodox friend told me that our Church used to ordain women as deacons and that we’ll probably start to do this again. Is this true? What do you think of this?”

It is true, of course, that the Church used to ordain “woman deacons”. It was a true “ordination” (and not just a blessing, such as is given to a Reader): the deaconess was ordained during the Liturgy (not *before* it, as was the case with the blessing given to a Reader) and at the altar (not *outside* the altar, as with the Reader). At the ordination service, she was given an *orar*, the diaconal stole, as was the deacon and given the Chalice at Communion time. Indeed, all these liturgical parallels have led some to equate deaconesses with deacons and talk about how “the diaconal ministry of the Church has two branches: a masculine ministry and a feminine one” (Vagaggini, *The Ordination of Deaconesses*, p. 151). With all the talk about how women may not be ordained priests, some have focused on the Diaconate as the solution and pinned all their hopes for women’s ministry in the Church on the speedy restoration of the female diaconate. To this end, some have suggested that the diaconate be open to women regardless of age and regardless of marital status—that a woman may be married and still serve as a deaconess. It is further suggested that a theological education should be a requirement for these women before being ordained deaconesses—even as theological education is now a requirement for men before being ordained priests. This is self-evidently necessary, it is said, as the deaconesses would function in the parish doing much the same pastoral work as the priests—save that the deaconesses could not hear confessions or serve Liturgy.

What are we to say to this?

Deaconesses and Deacons. First, some note of historical clarification must be sounded. It is misleading to say that “the diaconal ministry of the Church has two branches”—male and female—as if deaconesses were the female exact equivalent of the male deacons. (To this end, the term “woman deacon”—though historical, is misleading in the present debate. The term gives the erroneous impression that a deaconess was equivalent to a deacon, only the gender being different. It would be much less misleading if one referred to members of the female diaconate as “deaconesses”, and not as “woman deacons”.)

In fact, the liturgical parallels between the ordination of deaconesses and the ordination of deacons are not as exact as would first appear. There were, in fact, significant differences between the ordinations of deacons and deaconesses. The deaconess received the Chalice as did the deacon—but this bestowal by the bishop was a simple gesture, for she returned it to the altar immediately and did not, as did the deacon, assist in the administration of the Holy Gifts. During the ordination, the deaconess did not kneel on one knee, as did the deacon, (or as did the priest, on both knees)—rather, she stood, indicating that her ordination was as different from the deacon’s as the deacon’s was from the priest. She did not rest her head on the altar as did the deacon (or the priest). She did not receive the liturgical fan to fan the Gifts, as did the deacon, for she was not present in the altar during the sanctification of the Eucharistic Gifts. She *did* receive the *orar*, as did the deacon. But she wore it differently than did the deacon. (Indeed, even sub-deacons received the *orar*.) Finally, the ordination prayer for deaconesses was completely different than that for deacons. The prayer for ordaining deacons hearkened back to St. Stephen, the first deacon; the prayer for ordaining deaconesses hearkened back to Old Testament

Miriam, Deborah, Anna and Huldah, as prototypes—not St. Stephen. For all these reasons, it is quite misleading to talk of “women deacons” as being simply female versions of male deacons.

They had a true and important function, but one that was quite different than that of the deacons.

The Rise of Deaconesses in the Early Church. What was their function in the early church and how did they come to exist in certain localities? (For in some places of the early church, such as Egypt and Ethiopia, deaconesses did not even exist.)

Some people have claimed that deaconesses existed from New Testament times, citing the example of Phoebe “a *diakonos* of Cenchreae” (Romans 16:1) and the “women” mentioned by St. Paul in his instructions about the diaconate (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

Concerning Phoebe being a “deacon”, Martimort, in his definitive work entitled “*Deaconesses: an Historical Study*”, says this: “More and more scholars are emphasizing that there is an anachronism in giving this word [*diakonos*] a meaning corresponding to [the later] ecclesiastical institution...” Phoebe was a *diakonos* [or *servant*] in the sense that she was “a helper or protectress...providing hospitality and assistance. This interpretation is especially plausible when we remember that Cenchreae was the port of Corinth facing east; it was from there that the Christian brethren from Syria or Asia Minor would normally have debarked in Greece.” (p. 19-20) Thus, Phoebe was a helper and benefactor of the church - not a deaconess in the later sense of the term.

Also, the “women” referred to along with the male deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11 were almost certainly, I would suggest, not deacons themselves, but rather the wives of the deacons who, without ordination or structured institution, helped their husbands in their diaconal functions. Once again, we do not see deaconesses as an established ministry in the first century New Testament. An order of widows existed (cp. 1 Timothy 5: 3ff) and these are referred to by St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Polycarp of Smyrna and Hippolytus, and Tertullian—but none of these writers made any mention at all of deaconesses. Deaconesses arose much later in the history of the Church.

In fact, we first see mention of deaconesses in the early third century. They are mentioned as a distinct order in the Church in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, a church order document dating from around 240, possibly written from eastern regions such as Mesopotamia.

In this document, we see Deaconesses as an ordained order established (probably from within the already-existing order of Widows) to help the bishop with certain pastoral and liturgical functions.

In some localities in which deaconesses arose, there was a concern with propriety and modesty. Certain functions were clearly inappropriate for men to do—such as visiting and ministering to sick Christian women in private in their homes, especially when their husbands were not Christian. Also, since baptism was administered to naked candidates, the pre-baptismal anointing of the woman candidate’s naked body just as clearly could not be done by a man. It was to meet such pastoral needs that the order of deaconess was established.

The *Didascalia* (in chapter 9) talks about the function of deaconesses in these words: “There are many houses where you may not send deacons, [O bishop], but to which you may send deaconesses. ..the service of deaconesses is [also] required in many other domains. In the first place, when women go down into the [baptismal] water, it is necessary that those going down into the water be anointed with the oil of unction by a deaconess...it is not good for women to be viewed by men...When the woman who has been baptized comes up out of the water, the deaconess should receive her and instruct and educate her so that the unbreakable seal of baptism will be preserved in holiness”.

From here it is apparent that the ministry and function of the deaconess was distinctly limited. She had charge of the women of the community, ministering in circumstances where the involvement of men would be pastorally problematic. Thus, she is sent into the homes of sick Christian women to care for

them—which care usually involved bathing the sick. (Obviously, male deacons could not perform this ministry.)

Also, she had care of the candidates for baptism, preparing them for their reception of the sacrament by giving them last minute instructions, anointing their naked bodies just prior to the actual sacrament and giving them post-baptismal instruction afterwards. Consistent with this, a deaconess had responsibility for keeping order in the women's section during church services (for at that time, the women and children sat in a different place in church from the men).

So, it would seem that in some places, an order of deaconesses arose perhaps at the beginning of the third century to meet the Church's need of a special ministry to women.

It was otherwise in other places. In other parts of the Empire at this time, it would seem that such ministry to women in baptism by men was not a problem. In Palestine, for example, it would seem that it was the priest who anointed the bodies of all baptismal candidates—women as well as men. John Moschus, in his book *The Spiritual Meadow*, reports the case of a priest-monk of Palestinian monastery who was responsible for performing all the baptisms at his monastery. "One day," John reports, "a girl from Persia came to be baptized. She was so beautiful and youthful and blooming that the priest could not summon up the courage to anoint her with the holy oil". When his archbishop, Peter, learned of it, he wanted to designate a deaconess for this task (no doubt suggested by the girl herself, since this was the tasks of deaconesses in her native Persia), but, continues John, "he did not do this because it was not permitted in that place."

From this anecdote, we learn that the function of deaconesses varied throughout the Empire. In eastern regions, they had a special liturgical, pastoral and baptismal function. Elsewhere, the title was more honorific and was given to women who were rulers of convents. Indeed, Severus of Antioch, around 500, wrote: "Especially in convents, ordination [of the deaconess] is performed less with regard to the needs of the Mysteries than exclusively with regard to doing honour". In other words, in some parts of the Empire, deaconesses were not required for any liturgical or sacramental work. Rather, the ordination was given as a way of honouring the woman—perhaps as a recognition of her dignity as abbess of a monastic community of nuns.

Deaconesses Today: When we see how deaconesses arose in the early church—as the answer to certain pastoral needs relating to women in certain localities—we can see also why the order died out. As adult baptism became rarer and rarer and the baptism of infants became the norm, the need for deaconesses simply ceased to exist. As the office became more and more simply honorific, it eventually fell out of use. Thus the Byzantine canonist Balsamon could write "Today [in the twelfth century], deaconesses are no longer ordained".

But this does not mean that the office should not be revived. Indeed, there exists a certain need for an exclusively feminine ministry in the Church—a ministry by and to women. Certain forms of crisis, rape and pregnancy counselling are areas of ministry most appropriately done by women. Men could do such work, but it would be far less problematic and effective if a female order of service existed which could perform these pastoral tasks. Similarly, ministry to women "on the street" could most effectively and safely be done by women.

It would be important and valuable for this work to be done by such women as deaconesses, rather than by any lay-woman of the parish. Deaconesses, as an ordained order, would have a certain accountability which would be essential in such ministry. Also, as a visibly ordained ministry (wearing, the *apostolnik* and/or veil of the monastic, for example), she would possess an authority and credibility in the eyes of the women to whom she was ministering. She would be seen by them, and by all, as an expression and arm of the Church.

What would be requirements be of such modern deaconesses? Certainly, the old canonical requirements for deaconesses remain in force. That is, a deaconess must be a minimum of 40 years old (as decreed by canon 15 of Chalcedon) and must be unmarried. That is, a deaconess is seen as belonging (like the order of widows) as exclusively to the Church—married, as it were, to the Church. In a modern setting, they might function as monastics ministering within a parish setting, performing a pastoral function as their monastic obedience.

Indeed, ordaining deaconesses from already-existing nuns would possess certain advantages:

- 1) It would be in conformity with our existing historical Tradition. In certain localities of the early church, as we have seen, deaconesses were precisely monastics and heads of monastic communities. Thus, it could be argued that we are not establishing a new, innovative and different order with an old name. Rather, we are continuing something that has truly existed before—indeed, in some limited way, nun-deaconesses have existed in every century. In this way, the acceptance of a restored order of deaconesses is more likely to win wide-spread approval.
- 2) It would make all the more clear that deaconesses were not the “thin edge of the wedge” and a spring-board to introducing women priests into the Church. This is an important consideration, since the restoration of deaconesses *did* function in this way in the churches, such as the Anglican Communion, which introduced women priests. In this church, first they had deaconesses, then declared these deaconesses to be true deacons, then moved to admit women to priesthood and then to the episcopate. By ordaining deaconesses only with such monastic requirements, it makes clear that a difference is made between deaconesses and the orders of deacons, priests and bishops.

Rocks in the Road: Dangers to Avoid. The restoration of deaconesses today could be of great pastoral value to the Church in its ministry in the world. But there are certain dangers.

First of all is the danger of provoking division and schism. If hasty and precipitous action were taken, certain parts of the Church would not accept it and schism could result. We all remember the hasty action of the so-called “Living Church” movement in Russia earlier this century. Certain actions—such as the re-introduction of married bishops—were taken and were universally repudiated by the Church. Even lesser actions—such as the introduction of the revised New Calendar—has led to schisms which to this day have not been healed. The Church should move slowly, prayerfully and thoughtfully on this matter, and only proceed after much conciliar consultation.

There is also the danger of exacerbating and confusing the issue of the ordination of women. It would be very unwise to restore and re-fashion the order of deaconess so that it functioned as a kind of substitute for women priests. If one radically changes the character of deaconesses—allowing married deaconesses, requiring seminary education, adding to their functions so that they can counsel, teach, visit all the parishioners and preach (a function which was specifically *excluded* from the work of deaconesses)—in short, if one makes the deaconess fulfil all the priestly functions except for hearing confessions and serving Liturgy—then one runs the risk of blurring the distinction between deaconesses and deacons/priests and of actually innovating an order which did not exist before. Then deaconesses will indeed function as the “thin edge of the wedge” for women’s ordination. This will not serve to satisfy those who seek to ordain women priests—on the contrary, such appeasement will only serve to increase the desire for women’s ordination. This was the experience of the churches who came to ordain women priests. They could do *everything but* absolve and serve the Eucharist! So near and yet so far! The restoration of deaconesses thus should not be seen as a way to “fob off” the questions raised by women’s ordination or to function as a kind of “Orthodox substitute” for it—as a kind of “Protestants have women priests; Orthodox have deaconesses”. The question of women’s ministry is too vital and

basic for such evasion. Rather, deaconesses, *if* restored, must be seen even as they were in the early church—as having a function and value all of their own.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Aime Georges Martimort, Deaconesses: an Historical Study, trans. K.D. Whitehead, Ignatius, San Francisco, 1986.

CONCLUSION

“I will build My Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

--St. Matthew 16:18

This work has been written as an act of faith in the ordinary Orthodox believer.

There are today many controversies, issues and questions with which the Church needs to grapple. In the years and decades ahead, the Church must deal with such issues as the Calendar, jurisdictional unity in North America, ecumenical relations with other Christian bodies and the need to indigenize its unchanging Faith and worship to make it accessible to those who do not speak such traditional Orthodox languages as Greek, Slavonic, Ukrainian, Romanian or Arabic. It will also have to deal with the questions and challenges of Feminism.

Theological Feminism (as distinct from the simple demand for just equality in the workplace) is *the* issue of our time—much as Arianism was *the* issue of the fourth century. Under this theological umbrella, challenges are being made to our traditional understanding of the nature of Man, the proper and godly functioning of husband and wife relationships and the nature of a “normal” family, the legitimacy or otherwise of homosexuality, the place of authority in the spiritual life, the authority of Scripture, Tradition, the Fathers and our history, the nature of the body in the resurrection, the nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and the ordination of women. Feminism is not about a single issue. It is a comprehensive challenge to our entire Orthodox Faith. As Fr. Thomas Hopko has said (in an interview with *Again Magazine*), the issue of the ordination of women “is kind of like our iconclastic controversy, our Arian controversy. It shows what a person believes about everything”. (vol.16, #1, p.7)

Similarly, in the fourth century, the Arian controversy was not simply a disagreement about whether or not Christ was true God. It was that, but it was much more. It revealed also how one stood about issues such as how to interpret Scripture, how to view Tradition, how one saw human nature and salvation and a host of other issues. It also was comprehensive in its challenge to Orthodoxy. It also showed what a person then believed about everything.

It is for this reason that this work has chosen to deal with pastoral questions which theological Feminism is raising. It is just these questions with which the Church must grapple and authoritatively answer in the years ahead—even as it authoritatively answered the Arian questions in the fourth century.

And these questions will be answered. Professional academic theologians will write, discuss and analyze. Hierarchs will consult and issue directives and guide-lines, fulfilling their God-given mandate to “rightly define the Word of Truth”. Monks will pray and give counsel according their wisdom. Harried parish priests will answer parishioners’ questions and preach according to their knowledge and ability. And at the end of it all, the humble man and woman in the pew will guard the Faith and accept only the Truth.

For, in the final analysis, the Faith is guarded by the entire Church, made up overwhelmingly of normal Orthodox Christian lay men and women. It is not guarded by its expert theologians or its bishops, though these each have their essential part to play. The Ecumenical Councils were finally considered and accepted as “Ecumenical” only because they were received by the universal Church at large. That is, by the mass of the lay men and women, of all ages, from all lands, with all their varying degrees of learning and piety. As the Orthodox Patriarchs said in their 1848 reply to Pope Pius IX, “the guardian of religion is the very Body of the Church, that is, the people (*laos*) itself”. Concerning this, Orthodox theologian Khomiakov wrote, one would be “greatly mistaken in supposing that we consider the church hierarchy to be the guardian of dogma. The case is quite different. The unvarying constancy and the unerring truth of Christian dogma does not depend upon any hierarchical order; it is guarded by the totality, by the whole people of the Church” (letter 66).

The people of the Church as the guardian of the unvarying, unerring Truth—the mass of lay men and women—with all their sins, stubbornness, infuriating conservatism, theological denseness and talent for doing the right thing for the wrong reason and the wrong thing for the right reason. The mass of lay men and women—with all their uneducated loyalty to their Church—and fervent love for their Lord. It is they who are the living stones which make up the Lord's spiritual House (1 Peter 2:5). It is through these that the Lord will ultimately and finally guide His Church to the Truth.

It is for them that this work was written—as an act of faith in them as the Body of Christ and as an offering for their deliberations in the future.

--Fr. Lawrence R. Farley

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH:

A Parish Priest Replies to His Parishioners' Questions

by

Fr. Lawrence R. Farley

To the women in my life:

Rhiannon and Magdalen

and to Donna, their mother, my wife, my best friend.

BIO.

Fr. Lawrence Farley, a former Anglican priest, converted to Orthodoxy with his wife Donna and their two daughters, Rhiannon and Magdalen. They live in Surrey, B.C., Canada, where they have an English language O.C.A. Mission parish, which itself consists primarily of converts from other faiths.

