

WOMEN *and* ORDINATION
in the ORTHODOX CHURCH

Explorations in Theology and Practice

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The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood

A Theological Issue or a Pastoral Matter?

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THE ROLE OF WOMEN in the church has been on the Orthodox theological agenda since the 1960s. The broad issue concerns the place that women should have in the Orthodox Church, and the narrower question is the ordination of women to ministerial office. After a half-century of debate, is it possible that arguments for and against the ordination of women have been exhausted? In this article, I review and critique the arguments for and against the ordination of women to the priesthood. I contend that it is time to move beyond the now repetitive and increasingly sterile arguments over the theology to a more constructive posture: the ordination of women should no longer be considered a theological issue at all, but rather a pastoral question.

Over the decades, Orthodox personalities opposing the ordination of women include Fr. Boris Bobrinskoy, Paul Evdokimov, Fr. Lawrence Farley, Fr. Thomas Hopko, Metropolitan Georges Khodr, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (prior to 1999). Orthodox voices favorable to the ordination of women include those of Elisabeth

Behr-Sigel, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, and Petros Vassiliadis. Kallistos Ware, originally opposed to the ordination of women, in a 1999 revision of an essay originally published in 1983, wrote that ordination should be considered “an open question” for the Orthodox Church, to be approached “with an open mind and an open heart,”¹ for the reasons discussed in his contribution to this book.²

Arguments against the Ordination of Women

Most of the debate over the last half-century has taken place over arguments against the ordination of women, rather than over arguments in favor of ordination. The arguments against the ordination of women were originally developed from the prior assumption that women should not be ordained, and it was simply a matter of expressing the theological reasons for this foregone conclusion to conclude any debate on the subject.³ This attitude dominated the Inter-Orthodox symposium held at Rhodes in 1988 on “The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women.”⁴ Six major constellations of arguments against women’s ordination have emerged over the years.

1. Ritual Impurity

Ritual impurity is associated with contact with objects, places, or persons considered impure, and includes the loss of body fluids, notably blood. In ancient cultures, ritual impurity makes the subject unfit for contact with the divine. The argument with respect to the ordination of women is that a woman’s loss of blood during menstruation renders her impure and hence unfit for the celebration of the Eucharist and other sacraments.

1. Ware, “Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ,” 7, 52.

2. This is a revised and augmented version of a paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Orthodox Theological Society in America held at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology (Brookline, MA, USA), on October 18–20, 2018. See also Ladouceur, Review of Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*; Farley, “Rejoinder”; Ladouceur, “Christ, The Fathers and Feminism”; and “The Ordination of Women,” in Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology*, 378–404.

3. See Karras, “Theological Presuppositions,” 89.

4. See Behr-Sigel, “La consultation interorthodoxe de Rhodes”; and Limouris, *Place of the Woman*.

The simplistic notion of women's ritual impurity is based mainly on archaic taboos typical of prehistoric religious and social beliefs and practices, and is reflected in the Old Testament. It is not based on a Christian vision of women. Christ's teachings and the decisions of the Apostolic Council (Acts 15) make it "abundantly clear . . . that the Old Testament prohibitions concerning ritual impurity are not applicable within the New Covenant of the Church."⁵ The ritual impurity argument, first advanced by the Romanian Orthodox theologian Nicolae Chitescu at a meeting of the World Council of Churches in 1963,⁶ soon vanished from official Orthodox discourse on the ordination of women, although it still resurfaces from time to time, occasionally as objections to women receiving communion during menstruation,⁷ and in some of the prayers of the ritual for the "purification" of the mother after childbirth.

2. The "Natural Hierarchy" of Men and Women

The core of the "natural hierarchy" argument is that men are inherently superior to women, and hence women are unsuited to clerical office. The modern theological argument is more sophisticated and is generally based on Scripture. The second account of creation in Genesis is often interpreted as putting woman in an inferior position to man, since man was created first and since the woman is drawn from Adam (his rib) (Gen 2:21–22). Furthermore, God says to Eve after the transgression: "He [Adam] shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16). Paul invokes this reading of Genesis when he writes: "For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (1 Cor 11:8–9). The use of this and related Pauline writings as "proof texts" to support a natural hierarchy of the sexes is highly questionable. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware addresses this in relation to Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11 that "the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God [the Father]" (1 Cor 11:3). Noting the rhetorical parallel between Paul's use of "head," Ware points out that just as "headship" within the Trinity does not imply any form of subordination or inferiority (this

5. Ware, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ," 35.

6. Chitescu, "The Ordination of Women."

7. Lawrence Farley deals effectively with this issue in *Feminism and Tradition*, 161–77.

would be Arianism), so too “headship” within marriage “does not necessarily imply any intrinsic inferiority on the part of the woman.”⁸

The logical argument based on the second Genesis account of creation is that since man (*aner, vir*) was created before woman, and woman was created from man, therefore man is superior to woman and hence a man can be a priest but a woman cannot. But there is no direct logical link between the sequence of the creation of the sexes, a hierarchy between men and women, and the ordination of women. This is the logical fallacy of *non sequitur*—jumping to conclusions unwarranted by the premises.

The accession of women to positions of leadership in most spheres of contemporary life undermines the premise of inherent or ontological or natural male superiority over women, so the basis of a “natural hierarchy” must be sought elsewhere. Fr. Lawrence Farley concedes the ontological *equality* of men and women, but insists that the biblical record, the fathers, and the practice of the church all demonstrate the *subordination* of women to men.⁹ Farley concludes from the historical fact that Christ did not choose a woman among the apostles that this shows that Christ “recognized their [women’s] subordination.”¹⁰ This is an interpretation of the significance of Christ’s action, not a logical conclusion. Farley argues that “since the pastoral office involves exercising authority over men in the church . . . this is inconsistent with women’s subordination.”¹¹ Farley is saying that women’s subordination to men is built into God’s intention in creation and is therefore ontological. He does not reconcile two opposing ontological principles, equality and subordination. Instead, he tries to get around this problem by referring to the “loving and voluntary subordination of an ontological equal”¹² (the woman to the man). This looks more like wishful thinking than good theology.

Since Farley concedes that women can exercise leadership over men in all domains except the church and the family,¹³ this concession alone undermines ontological subordination. Nonetheless, for Farley as for other Orthodox theologians, in the family and the church, sexual

8 Ware, “Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ,” 36.

9. Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 30, 37, 66–67, 89–91. See also Ladouceur, Review of Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*.

10. Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 66.

11. Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 69.

12. Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 37.

13. Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 109.

differentiation, which includes women's subordination to men, takes precedence over ontological equality.

3. The Priest as Icon of Christ

One of the major arguments against the ordination of women is based on the symbolic significance of Christ's maleness, an argument first advanced by Fr. George Khodr (later Metropolitan) in 1963.¹⁴ Stripped to its essentials, the argument runs like this:

Christ was incarnate as a male.

The bishop or the priest acting for the bishop is the living image or icon of Christ.

Therefore to be an icon of Christ, the priest must be a male.

Therefore women cannot be priests.

Fr. Thomas Hopko further developed the argument, but he seeks to distance himself from a simplistic argument of "natural resemblance" of a human male to Jesus by adding other characteristics necessary for a priest: "a sound Christian, whole in body and soul, without scandal and of good reputation." These characteristics are, of course, applicable equally to men and women. But he adds an exclusively masculine criterion: "a once-married or celibate man . . . a masculine person capable of heading the body (of the faithful) with the compassionate wisdom and sacrificial love of a husband and father."¹⁵ Expressed in this fashion, the argument is circular: a woman cannot be a priest because only men can be priests.

The iconic argument has no basis in Scripture or in the fathers. On the contrary, the ancient fathers focused on the incarnation of the Son of God as *human* (*anthropos*, *homo*) and had only passing interest in the fact that he was male (*aner*, *vir*).¹⁶ It is the incarnation, the taking on of human nature (*ousia*, *physis*) that deifies human nature, not the fact that Christ was male, which would suggest that only males can be redeemed or sanctified. Thus the iconic position is theologically untenable. Second, the iconic argument is an argument from analogy, which is at best a weak basis for establishing a theological doctrine. An analogy is just that: an analogy only partially reflects or parallels the original; it is not exactly

14. Khodr, "The Ordination of Women."

15. Hopko, "Reflections on the Debate—1983," in Hopko (ed.), *Women and the Priesthood*, 243.

16. See Ware, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ," 50.

identical in all respects, which would make the analogy a clone or identical copy. A priest is not an identical copy or clone of Christ.

To derive a doctrine solely from analogy is to transform an essentially symbolic or poetic expression of a reality that remains a mystery, or is a didactic device, into an ontological reality. It equates the symbol with the reality that the symbol is intended to evoke. Certainly, there is a sense in which the priest represents Christ, but during most of the Divine Liturgy, the priest “speaks not *in persona Christi* but *in persona Ecclesiae*, as the representative not of Christ but of the church.”¹⁷ Thus the priest represents the church, the *bride*, in supplication before God and in offering praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware turns the iconic argument on its head: “If men can represent the church and the Bride (of Christ), why cannot women represent Christ as Bridegroom?”¹⁸

In summary, the notion of the priest as Christ’s icon does not “in itself exclude women from the priesthood.”¹⁹ The basic iconic argument also contains a logical fallacy, another *non sequitur*: from the fact that Christ was a male, it does not follow logically that a priest necessarily has to be a male. This is an inference or interpretation, not a logical necessity. There is nonetheless a profound sense in which the symbolism of a male officiating at the communal act of worship has a certain validity. For most of the Divine Liturgy, the “presider” (to use Afanasiev’s term)²⁰—the bishop, or in his stead, the presbyter (or deacon)—acts on behalf of Christian community signified by facing the altar, offering adoration, praise, or supplication for the community. But at certain moments in the liturgy, especially when the presider faces the community and extends the divine peace or blesses the community, he can be seen as symbolizing God the Father or Christ.

Although the iconic argument featured prominently in Orthodox discourse on the ordination of women in the late twentieth century, it faded in subsequent years as its inherent weaknesses became clear.

17. Ware, “Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ,” 47.

18. Ware, “Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ,” 51.

19. Ware, “Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ,” 49.

20. See Afanasiev, “Those Who Preside in the Lord,” in *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, 136–68.

4. The Different Charisms of Men and Women

A subtle argument against the ordination of women seeks to establish that there are qualities or charisms particular to men and charisms particular to women, which make women unsuitable for priesthood. Paul Evdokimov powerfully develops this argument. Evdokimov's principal concern was to develop a theology of the sexes, woman in particular, which would affirm simultaneously the ontological equality and ontological differences of men and women. Beginning with the principle of the natural or ontological equality of man and woman, he argues that sexual differentiation is also ontological and archetypal, and not merely physical. He then asserts that men and women have different roles or vocations in life, apart from the obvious physical roles of paternity and maternity. Men and women are not potential substitutes for each other in the essential roles that reflect their ontological differences. The crux of the argument lies in the specification of masculine and feminine charisms. Male charisms are typically those of initiative, activity, creativity, and rationality, with which the male penetrates and sanctifies the world. In contrast, female charisms are the reception, vivification, safeguarding, and protection of the holiness of being brought about by the actions of the man.²¹ Key words typically used to describe the role of women include maternity, service, self-effacement, modesty, "the daily service of the most humble, in silence, hearing the Word, inwardly receiving the whole deposit of the faith in adoration and in praise."²²

The implication of this line of thought is that priesthood is an actualization of male charisms but not of female charisms. As with the iconic argument, there is no support in Scripture or the fathers. Kallistos Ware considers that we should think primarily of men and women in terms of shared humanity: "Even if women do indeed possess, as a sex, distinctive spiritual gifts, it does not therefore follow that they cannot perform the same tasks as men; we are only justified in concluding that they will perform these tasks in a different way."²³

21. Evdokimov, *Woman*, 185, 215–16, 222–24.

22. Bobrinskoy, *Mystery*, 226, referring to the myrrh-bearing women in particular.

23. Ware, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ," 23.

5. The Absence of Women Apostles

The strongest historical argument against the ordination of women is that because Christ did not choose a woman to be an apostle, neither among the Twelve nor among the Seventy, he thereby gave an example that the church must follow. He could have chosen a woman, the argument goes, but he did not. Fr. Lawrence Farley draws the conclusion from the non-presence of women among the apostles “that He [Jesus] recognized their subordination.”²⁴ This is not a simple “restatement” of the biblical record, it is an interpretation, *a reading of the mind of Jesus*: What did Jesus intend by not selecting a woman apostle? Other interpretations are possible, for example, that Jesus was conforming to the social and cultural values of the time, when women were considered and were treated as inherently inferior to men; the selection of a woman as apostle would have undermined the credibility of Jesus’s teachings in Jewish society. This is the realm of speculation. Nowhere does Jesus say that women are to be subordinate to men. Nor does he, as Elisabeth Behr-Sigel points out, send his women followers back to their husbands,²⁵ children, and pots and pans. While it would have been unthinkable at that time for Jesus to have both men and women in the apostolic college, the social and cultural context has changed radically since New Testament times. Christ’s message must be applicable just as much now as then. In a similar vein, even though Jesus selected *only Jews* as apostles, the church never took this socio-ethnic characteristic as a model for the church to follow in the selection of clergy and church leadership.

The argument that Jesus selected no women apostles also neglects or downplays the full range of Jesus’s dealings with women. For Jesus, both women and men are equally in need of spiritual and physical healing, comforting, and instruction. Jesus made no distinction between men and women in conveying his evangelical message, and even broke social taboos, such as conversing alone with a Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42) and allowing a sinful woman to touch him (Luke 7:36–50).

The broader question is whether Christ’s example in not selecting a woman as apostle must be seen as mandatory for the church. To conclude that the fact that Jesus did not choose a woman as apostle shows that he considered women subordinate to men is an interpretation of the Gospels, a reading of the mind of Jesus; it is not what is written. Another

24. Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 66.

25. Behr-Sigel, *Discerning the Signs*, 97.

objection is that the invocation of Jesus's example in not selecting woman apostles is an argument from silence. Jesus did not select a woman as apostle, but neither did he instruct his followers not to allow women to occupy positions of responsibility and authority in the church, including sacramental and liturgical functions. This is an argument from silence, but an argument from silence is at best a weak argument, not a definitive one.²⁶

6. The Tradition of the Orthodox Church

Since the beginning, the Orthodox Church has not ordained women to the priesthood, and there are ancient canons and patristic writings opposing the ordination of women.²⁷ The opponents of the ordination of women conclude from the historical evidence that nearly two millennia of tradition cannot be wrong and to change this would destroy the integrity of the church. Not all is of equal value in the writings of the fathers of the church. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware reminds us, "Patristic wheat needs to be distinguished from patristic chaff."²⁸ The church canonizes the fathers as holy persons; it does not canonize everything that they wrote.

Similarly, the canons of the Orthodox Church are intended to deal with particular issues at particular times. Canons from ecumenical councils and other councils of the Orthodox Church dealing with organizational and disciplinary matters, together with commentaries on canons and compilations made over the centuries, do not constitute a fixed code of canon law, nor can they be equated with dogmatic pronouncements of ecumenical councils, such as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the christological pronouncements of the Council of Chalcedon. Certainly there are numerous ancient canons forbidding the ordination of women to priestly office—not systematically to all clerical offices, though, since women were ordained to the diaconate, as other essays in this book discuss. Canons are intended to facilitate, not hinder the church in the accomplishment of its mission. Over time, many older canons have been

26. See Ware, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ," 30.

27. For an overview of patristic writings and canons against the ordination of women, see Ware, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ," 31–32; and Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 71–83.

28. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 204.

superseded by newer ones, many are simply no longer relevant, and many are ignored in practice without ever having been formally abrogated.

The main difficulty with an appeal to tradition—in this instance to the practice of the church and ancient canons—to argue against the ordination of women is that it views Orthodox tradition as rigid and immutable: whatever has been done in the past, especially on a continuous basis, must be divinely ordained and therefore is absolutely correct and must forever be repeated in the future. Modern Orthodox theology views tradition as more dynamic than the mere repetition of the past, seeing it rather as “living tradition,” or, as expressed by Vladimir Lossky, tradition is “the life of the Holy Spirit in the church.”²⁹ This living and vibrant rather than static view of tradition does not preclude change in non-dogmatic elements of Orthodoxy, for example, those relating to the organization and functioning of the church. In this perspective, the non-ordination of women priests in the past is not an insurmountable obstacle to a change in the church’s practice. It is on the basis of this dynamic view of tradition that Kallistos Ware considers the ordination of women “an open question.”³⁰

In his appeal to tradition against the ordination of women, Fr. Lawrence Farley writes that “the ordination of women involves a complete denial of our tradition and of our experience of Christian salvation.”³¹ This may be good rhetoric but an indefensible theology. If we were truly to “deny our tradition,” we would deny the Holy Trinity, the incarnation, the two natures of Christ. These beliefs, enshrined in the dogmatic declarations of ecumenical councils, are the core of Christian tradition, and *none* are at stake in the ordination of women. Would salvation be threatened, the gates of heaven be closed forever, if women were ordained?

A New Argument?

Is there a new argument against the ordination of women? Fr. Lawrence Farley has advanced a “newish” argument in the form of a variation on the now largely discredited iconic argument. Farley rejects the original iconic argument of the priest as icon of Christ, but he immediately recasts it in a new form. For him, the priest “functions as an icon of God”; “God

29. Lossky, “Tradition and Traditions,” 152.

30. Ware, “Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ,” 7.

31. Farley, “Rejoinder,” 91. Cited from Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 181.

is not male," he writes, "yet He is Father, and masculine."³² From this, it follows that to image "this masculine God," the priest must be male, an icon of "divine rule and fatherhood," of a God who is revealed as "masculine" but not "male."³³

There are, of course, considerable scriptural, patristic, liturgical, and historical references to a masculine image of God. But to say that God is "masculine" yet not "male" sounds more like a semantic sleight of hand than solid theology. The conventional (but not exclusive) use of masculine language to refer to God has to be weighed in the light of Christian theology that God transcends sexual differentiation and is neither male nor female, masculine nor feminine, even if human language typically obliges us to use the masculine gender to refer to God. It is incorrect to sublimate imperfect human language into an ontological principle. The use of male-gender language to refer to God or the persons of the Trinity says more about the poverty of human language than about divine nature. There is no personal non-gendered pronoun, which would be more appropriate to refer to God. A humble apophatism concerning God must always underpin our necessary use of gender-based language to refer to the divinity. God is neither male nor masculine, female nor feminine. Sexual differentiation and linguistic gender exist in creation and human language, not in God. We must not confound the created and the uncreated, nor human language and God's being.

Fr. Emmanuel Clapsis, after a detailed review of the principal patristic sources concerning human language to refer to the divine, concludes that

no human concept, word, or image can circumscribe the divine reality since they all have their origins in human language. Nor can any human concept express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God, who is ineffable. The very incomprehensibility of God demands a proliferation of images and a variety of names, each of which acts as a corrective against the tendency of any one to become reified and literal.³⁴

32. Farley, "Rejoinder," 90.

33. Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 89–91, 102.

34. Clapsis, "Naming God," 84. Similar reflections are found as early as Pseudo-Dionysius (early sixth century), leading to apophatism: God is beyond human compression and language; he is all names yet none. See especially *On the Divine Names* 1.4–6 and *The Mystical Theology* in Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, 53–56, 134–40.

The refurbishing of the iconic argument into the priest as an “icon of God” is even shakier than the original model of the priest as “icon of Christ,” where at least one can point to the unquestioned maleness of Jesus. The unequivocal patristic teaching on the incomprehensibility of God³⁵ overshadows reductionist and anthropomorphic attributions of human gender designations to God’s being, even if human language obliges us to use such gender designations.

Arguments in Favor of the Ordination of Women

Six principal groups of arguments are advanced in favor of the ordination of women.

1. The Ontological Equality of Men and Women

The strongest argument is the ontological equality of men and women, a doctrine firmly based on Scripture and patristic anthropology. Men and women partake of the same human nature and are thus naturally equal; they are both divinely created in the image of God. In this ontological context, sexual differentiation is relativized—men and women are not different “natures” (one inferior or subordinate to the other)—and, as Behr-Sigel observes, is secondary “to the unity of men and women in their nature, destiny and vocation.”³⁶ Many of the ancient fathers of the church affirm the ontological equality of men and women in no uncertain terms. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, commenting on the unequal legal treatment of men and women committing adultery, writes:

The wife who takes wicked counsel against her husband’s bed commits adultery, and thence flow the bitter consequences of the laws, but on the contrary the man who takes a prostitute against his wife suffers no sanction. I do not accept this legislation; I do not approve this custom. It is men who laid down these laws, and this is why this legislation is directed against women. . . . God does not act thusly, but he says: “Honor your father and your mother.” . . . Notice the equality of the legislation: one and the same creator of man and woman; one dust for both; one image; one law; one death, one resurrection. . . . Christ

35. See notably John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*.

36. Behr-Sigel, “Ordination,” 38–39.

saves both through his suffering. Did Christ become flesh for the sake of the man? He did this also for the sake of the woman. He died for the man? The woman is also saved by his death.³⁷

And similarly, St. Basil the Great writes:

The woman also possesses creation according to the image of God, as indeed does the man. The natures are alike of equal honor, the virtues are equal, the struggles equal, the judgment alike. . . . Since indeed that which is according to God's image is of equal honor, let the virtue be of equal honor, the showing forth of good works. . . . Do not cling to the outer human being, it is molded (like clay). The soul is placed within, under the coverings and the delicate body. Soul indeed is equal in honor to soul; in the coverings is the difference.³⁸

No father of the church affirms the ontological subordination of women to men. Several do teach, following St. Paul and the social conventions of their times, that wives should be subject to their husbands. This has nothing to do with ontological subordination. From their trinitarian theology, the fathers were the first to recognize the incompatibility of ontological equality and subordination.

Can we reconcile an apparent inconsistency in patristic thinking on the relationship between the sexes? Not without doing violence to one or another of their premises. The fathers unambiguously assert the *ontological equality* of men and women and yet maintained the *social subordination* of women to men, especially in marriage, *in their societies*. This is not a universal principle, valid for all times and all societies. There is undeniable tension in patristic thinking on this score, but it is necessary to distinguish between what is ontological and what is socially determined in certain societies at certain times.

2. Christ Deifies Human Nature

Christ does not save just men by his masculinity or maleness; rather, by assuming human nature, Christ saves both men and women. Men and women are one in Christ, as St. Paul asserts (Gal 3:28). The fathers of the church developed the theology of the incarnation and salvation on the basis of Christ as human (*anthropos*) rather than as male (*aner*), and his

37. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discourse 37* (SC 318) 282–87.

38. Basil the Great, *Human Condition*, 45–46.

incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven deify human nature, not just men. While this argument is sound theology, we cannot conclude that therefore women should be ordained. The argument only establishes that Christ saves all humans, both men and women, and that there is no *soteriological* reason for not ordaining women.

3. Spiritual Gifts are Accorded to both Men and Women

In St. Paul's writings on ministries within the church, and on gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, he does not attribute different ministries and gifts to men and to women.³⁹ The gifts of the Spirit are given, "not to a group defined by their sex, but to persons, unique persons," a "mysterious uniqueness" which "cannot be reduced to any male/female cultural stereotype."⁴⁰ This approach to ministry and service in the church stands in opposition to the "charisms" argument. And even if we were to admit that women possess distinctive spiritual gifts, this does not exclude women from performing the same tasks as men, but only that they will perform these tasks differently.⁴¹

4. The Royal Priesthood of the Faithful

The equality of all faithful as members of the church, the body of Christ, is reflected in the doctrine of the royal priesthood of all, clergy and laity, men and women, monastics and those "in the world." All share in the one priesthood of Christ, the sole high priest of the New Testament.⁴² The Orthodox tradition accepts the royal priesthood of believers, although many members of the clergy accord it scant attention, because they consider that it can be misunderstood, and that it seems to downplay the importance and role of the ordained priesthood, or result in confusion between the two types of priesthood.

39. See also 1 Cor 12:28–31 (ministries in the church); and Gal 5:22–23 (the fruit of the Spirit).

40. Behr-Sigel, "Ordination," 36.

41. Ware, "Men, Women and the Priesthood of Christ," 23.

42. Major references to the royal priesthood are Afanasiev, "The Royal Priesthood," in his *The Church of the Holy Spirit*; Bobrinskoy, *Mystery*, 202–12; 216–20; and Evdokimov, "The Universal Priesthood of the Laity," in *The Ages of the Spiritual Life*.

If men and women are equal as members of the royal priesthood, the argument in favor of ordaining women goes, they should also be equal in terms of accessibility to the ordained priesthood. Again, this argument does not determine that women *should* be priests. It only affirms that both men and women, as members of the body of Christ, the church, participate in the royal priesthood of all believers and hence on this basis can be considered equally eligible for ministerial priesthood.

5. The Church as a Communion of Persons

This argument is based to some extent on Paul's affirmation of the equality of all the faithful in Christ (see Gal 3:28), and it also relies on the notion of *sobornost* and eucharistic ecclesiology, the church as a community of those who follow Christ. Within this community of ontological equals under the headship of Christ, there is no justification for restricting access to ministries based solely on a distinction of sex. This argument extends the ontological equality of men and women explicitly to the church.

6. Women as "Equal to the Apostles"

The Orthodox tradition bestows the title "equal to the apostles" (*isapóstolos*) to certain saints in recognition of their outstanding service in the spreading of Christianity, comparable to that of the original apostles. These include many women, such as Mary Magdalene and women who have been instrumental in bringing Christianity to their nations, such as St. Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, St. Nina of Georgia, and St. Olga of Kiev, grandmother of Prince Vladimir of Rus'. In liturgical texts, Mary Magdalene is in fact referred to as "apostle to the apostles," as the first, in the Gospel of John (20:14–18),⁴³ to see the risen Christ, and in the light of her commission from Christ to bring the message of his resurrection to the apostles (John 20:17). Since the church considers such women as "equal to the apostles," they should also be eligible for the priesthood.

43. This account does not feature in any of the other Gospels.

“Women’s Rights”

The argument for the ordination of women based on secular notions of women’s rights developed in Western countries in the second half of the twentieth century is rarely heard in the Orthodox context. Lawrence Farley attempts to discredit the ordination of women in the Orthodox Church by associating its advocates with the feminist movement, as suggested in title of his book *Feminism and Tradition*. But he has difficulty coming up with examples where Orthodox have drawn on a feminist conception of women’s rights in the ordination debate. The best that he does is a long out-of-print book by Eva Catafygiotu Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy: Women and the Church* (1987). The book is a collection of occasional pieces highlighting the role of women in the Orthodox tradition, drawn from both Scripture and hagiography. Topping clearly shows her colors, as in the introductory “Reflections of an Orthodox Feminist.”⁴⁴ She points to numerous biblical, patristic, and liturgical texts denigrating women, and refers to the duality in patristic writings on women, on the one hand created in the image of God, and on the other weak, inferior, and subordinate to men; the fathers “ignored these affirming texts in favor of those that sentenced the entire female sex, with only one exception, to segregation, silence and subordination.”⁴⁵

Farley’s attempt to associate Elisabeth Behr-Sigel with the women’s rights argument is decidedly less successful. Farley cites passages in which Behr-Sigel identifies “tensions and discontinuities” in the epistles of St. Paul and some fathers of the church concerning women, and he concludes that for Behr-Sigel, “the injustice can only be remedied by the ordination of women.”⁴⁶ Farley here overstates Behr-Sigel’s argument: neither she nor other prominent Orthodox proponents of the ordination of women draw on the notion of “injustice” inspired by now-classical twentieth-century Western feminism to present their case.

44. Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy*, 3–11.

45. Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy*, 5.

46. Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 23.

The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: A Pastoral Matter

Two general conclusions emerge from over a half-century of debate concerning the ordination of women:

- first, there is no decisive and irrefutable argument against the ordination of women;
- and second, there is no decisive and irrefutable argument why the Orthodox Church must ordain women.

The arguments for and against the ordination of women serve primarily to eliminate potential obstacles to ordaining women. For example, from the ontological equality of men and women, we can conclude that both men and women *can* be priests. But it does not follow that therefore women *should* be ordained; the argument simply demonstrates that there is no *ontological* reason for not ordaining women. Some Orthodox theologians opposed to the ordination of women still maintain that one or another argument against ordination is absolute and unassailable. But they fail to admit the strength of critiques of the arguments against ordination of women and in most cases simply ignore them in their own writings, repeating the same arguments in different words.

If then, the question of the ordination of women cannot be resolved decisively either in favor of ordination or against ordination, is there another way of looking at the issue to move beyond the gridlock? To transcend this theological stalemate, it is time to recognize that *the ordination of women is not a theological issue at all, but rather a pastoral or an "economic" one*. This opens the door to more irenic and productive discussions than inconclusive debates over a "natural or divine order" between women and men, a priest as an "icon" of Christ or of God, "male charisms" and "female charisms," or considering that ancient organizational canons and practices of the Orthodox Church have the status of immutable divine ordinances; or that the ontological equality, the transcending of sexual differentiation in Christ, or the royal priesthood of all believers somehow obliges the church to ordain women.

A pastoral approach starts from the conclusions that there is *no absolute theological obstacle* to the ordination of women to the priesthood, and that there is *no absolute imperative mandating* the ordination of women. This shifts the focus of discussion to another level, with its own set of questions and criteria. As an example, questions and criteria

for assessing the desirability of ordaining women to the priesthood could include the following:

- Would the ordination of women to the priesthood facilitate the accomplishment of the mission of the Orthodox Church—first and foremost, providing the means of salvation for the greatest number?
- Is the Orthodox Church ready for such a move?

Many Orthodox churches and jurisdictions, especially in Western countries with large numbers of immigrants from countries of Orthodox tradition and growing numbers of converts, are facing important shortages of qualified and committed candidates for the priesthood. One solution adopted by many jurisdictions is the “importation” of priests from the “mother church.” While these “imports” may be young and committed, their frequent weak linguistic capacity in the language of the host country, and their lack of familiarity with Western European and North American cultures, so radically different from countries of long Orthodox tradition, often act as severe handicaps in carrying out pastoral functions effectively. A common result is a strong focus on the ethnic community, a continued or even increased “ghettoization” of the local Orthodox church: local parishes end up functioning more like ethnic social clubs than as manifestations of the church of Christ and universal Orthodoxy. Admitting women to the priesthood would certainly increase the potential pool of “homegrown” candidates for ordination, with the required linguistic abilities, and the cultural knowledge and experience, to enable them to function effectively in secularized societies where Orthodox are a small minority even in the decreasing Christian communities of Western Europe and North America.

The permissive sexual culture of most Western societies, and increasingly in countries of Orthodox tradition, raises a host of issues for Orthodox (and many other Christian denominations) who wish to live their Christian spirituality to the fullest. In this context, women parishioners may feel more at ease in discussing issues related to sexuality with a woman priest than a male priest: there is often an underlying solidarity among women which facilitates openness, empathy, and understanding, keys to survival in secularized cultures.

In the light of these and similar lines of reflection, the accession of women to the diaconate and the priesthood would facilitate the accomplishment of the prime mission of the Orthodox Church, to bring the

“good news,” the gospel of Christ, to today’s world, and to witness to the continuing presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit among us.

Is the Orthodox Church ready for such a move? It is all too easy to answer a resounding “no.” This manifests a lack of vision and courage, a surrender to the familiar path of the known. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, the most articulate exponent of an expanded role for women in the Orthodox Church, was well aware of this problem. She preferred to advance cautiously, focusing on critiquing arguments against the ordination of women, rather than issuing strident calls for the ordination of women.

Caution is necessary, but also courage. There are several possible lines of development. Perhaps the first ordinations of women to the priesthood could be nuns in monasteries, which could be a way of easing into the practice of women priests in Orthodoxy, without introducing women priests directly and from the start into parish life. An early opening in this direction for the diaconate was in fact the ordination of two women deacons by St. Nectarius of Aegina in 1911.⁴⁷

Another factor to consider is ordinations of women in countries of large Orthodox immigrant populations, which are already familiar with the presence of women priests, pastors, and ministers in many Western Christian denominations.

Follow-up questions concerning the ordination of women under the pastoral umbrella could be:

- In what circumstances could the ordination of women assist the church to carry out its mission more effectively?
- What social, educational, pastoral, and liturgical roles could be assigned to women?
- Is it necessary that all local Orthodox churches adopt the same approach to the ordination of women simultaneously?
- Should the ordination of women be subject to the same constraints as for men?
- For parish ministry, should women either be married or widowed, or, exceptionally, a nun assigned to a parish?
- Should non-monastic single women be ordained?

47. FitzGerald, “Commentary,” 154. The women were nuns in the monastery that St. Nectarius founded on the island of Aegina.

To conclude, it is time that discussion in Orthodox circles concerning the ordination of women move away from a narrow and now exhausted theological approach to the ordination of women, to one based on pastoral considerations. The resources of women are under-utilized in the Orthodox Church, and in an increasingly secular and materialistic age, the church must mobilize all available resources to enable it to fulfill its mission more effectively.

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