

Women in the Orthodox Church
Brief Comments from a Spiritual Perspective
by Archimandrite [now Archbishop] Chrysostomos

Anyone reading the sublime words of the Orthodox Church Fathers is immediately struck with a number of overwhelming impressions. First, there emanates from their words a certain sense, by which all that is written seems intuitively true—as though some inner cord were struck in the reader, resounding harmonically with the tone of what the Fathers have written. Then, the more one reads of the Fathers, the more one feels, despite notable differences in their writing styles, modes of expression, and subjects of attention, that they are making one single statement, saying the same thing; although the content of that statement be elusive and more warm the heart than stimulate the mere intellect. And finally, though at times there is apparent hyperbole (an impression that comes to us because we are too often cold to the impulse of holy zeal), and though one cannot find in the Fathers the lack of commitment and detachment from moral absolutes which we today so wrongly call "objectivity," the Fathers reveal a sense of moderation; they convey, amid their concerns for pure truth and undiluted veracity, a knowledge which is neither to the "right" nor to the "left," which is perfectly balanced by that mystical and universal equilibrium which is truth itself.

It is precisely these characteristics of the patristic writings which define that subtle cornerstone of Orthodox life: spirituality. Transferred from written word to personal life, they describe the holy person. Raised from image to experience, they portray the inner life of every Christian. The Fathers shared, in every way, the fullness of the Orthodox life, and it is this completeness which permeates their writings. They express the experience to which each of us is called, and inwardly we see this, if we are attentive and moderate in our own views. It is this spirituality, alas, that is absent in the discussion of the role of women in the Orthodox Church today. So, the discussion has become extreme (immoderate), secular, and worldly—detached from the inner life and spiritual experience. There have developed opposition parties, diametrically opposed views, warring factions, and intemperate antagonists, the latter expressing profound, spiritual issues in the arena of counter-spiritual emotions and dispositions.

Let us look at the general reaction among Orthodox thinkers to the modern discussion of the role of women in the Church. On the one hand, we have the very "traditional" view, expressing a conservative attitude toward the social role of women in general. I have often read of, and heard expressed, images of women that are in almost total concord with the old German expression, "Kinder und Küche"—women are essentially for child-bearing and for cooking. In Greek we think of the notion of "oikokyrosyne," the woman of the house." It is argued, from this point of view, that women have an essential "nature" such that they appropriately belong to the home. The things of the home are fundamentally and somehow appropriately suited to the female gender. One senses, in the more extreme advocates of this view, the notion that the social roles of females are perhaps dogmatic, that women are universally relegated, by a God-given command, to the home and its concerns.

On the other hand, we find ample evidence, in all of the media in American society, that women are willing to sacrifice every notion of their separate and unique identity in order to break the bonds of the presumably man-made social roles which constrain them in their actions and behaviors. It is not unusual for women to deny even their physiological distinctions from the male and to advocate the most extreme form of "sexual equality." In the frenzy of this denial process, they paradoxically often claim for themselves the right to the same abusive characteristics which men have ostensibly exhibited in exercising their prejudicial authority over women. And often, from the psychological standpoint, the intemperance of these women leads them to crises in

sexual identity, further resulting in behavior of such an abominable kind that it bears little protracted comment.

In lecturing at several Orthodox parishes, I have been shocked at times (and, needless to say, saddened) at the growing popularity of extremist feminist views among Orthodox women. I have actually heard St. Paul, in view of his statements regarding the role of women in the Church, described in modern rhetorical terms that no casual, let alone pious, Orthodox Christian would ever have used in times past. I have been asked quite bluntly by some of these same women how I could feel that I was somehow worthy of the priesthood and yet had the audacity to support the notion that women are unworthy. Is this not, I have been asked, an arrogance inappropriate to the humility of the priesthood? In yet another instance, a woman declared to me that, as a human being and as a Christian, she had every right to the priesthood. She referred to the Holy Fathers of the Church (who, contrary to her mistaken thought, include the Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy) as a band of "male chauvinists" who had tried to maintain the power of their offices by the constant denigration of women! (If I offend the reader with the repetition of these sentiments, it is a necessary evil. The true Christian apologist must be aware, however painful the facts, of the content and of the gravity of what he intends to combat.)

Indeed, both of these arguments regarding women are faulty. In the first place, there is nothing at all truly "traditional" about assigning a certain "nature" to women. True it is, many of the great ascetic Fathers warn monks about the wiles of Eve that exist in the female character, but the counterpart of this is the submission of the male counterpart of Adam in sinning monks. Yet in no sense do we attribute to males a certain "nature," as such, which defines their social roles. Indeed, these images are meant for male and female monastics and are, rather than statements of blame for this or that sin or temptation against one or another of the sexes, practical advice in the pursuit of the angelic life which, after all, transcends human "nature." In addition, when we, as Orthodox, speak of fallen men and women, we speak, as compared to the heterodox Westerners, in relative terms. From St. Maximos the Confessor to St. Seraphim of Sarov, the Fathers of the Church have emphasized that, while we are spotted by the ancestral sin (by the ancestral curse, etc.), we have never lost the divine image. Were this not so, St. Seraphim argues, what of the great and divine Prophets? From whence their holiness? It is Christ Who restored us (potentially) to our full and true natures. He fulfilled what lingered within us, what enlightens every man coming into the world. As for the fallen "nature," it is not a fixed, universal characteristic of man. It is typical of his fallen state.

The very message of Orthodoxy, then, is that men and women are called away from the erroneous "natures" which they have taken to themselves, away from the labor and pain, to deification, to union with God, through the grace of Christ. The very task of the Church in the world is to preserve this notion of salvation, to protect the vessel in which rests this great and sacred potential. If, then, the Church exalts the woman as child-bearer, it is to lift her nature, to emphasize her unique social role. But should she choose to be called to the higher "nature" Of holiness, the Holy Church even more greatly honors her. In that higher calling, she gives birth to Christ, as did the Blessed Theotokos, bearing "asomatos" ("in an unbodily way"), as St. Maximos says, God within her. And this potential is not that of women alone, but of men, too. The spiritual child-bearing of the human is a male and female role.

Thus it is that we must not speak too boldly about women in society. If "Kinder und Kuche" are our banner words, we discredit those holy women who surpassed human nature. We dishonor the Holy Mothers and women saints of the Church. We impose on women a role which must never be overemphasized or placed above the higher spiritual calling of man and women. Moreover, in a

certain sense we fail to understand that the worldly role of women in the Orthodox Church, as evidenced by the Byzantine empresses who stand as saints in the Holy Church, is not dogmatized and fixed. There are, as always, exceptions, paradoxes, and unique circumstances which a rigid view can never capture. Indeed, the liberty to fulfill the role to which God calls us must never be compromised by those roles which we preserve as salutary for the correct ordering of society.

Our goals together, as Orthodox men and women, are to make society, as much as possible, an image of the divine. To do this, the family must be sacrosanct and the parents must fulfill the roles necessary to the preservation of social order. But this means that men and women must be caretakers in the home together, that they must be what they are because a greater goal than fulfilling social roles or would-be "natures" calls them. This is not the denigration of the man or woman, but the calling of each to serve ultimately spiritual goals. And if these roles are violated and the spiritual welfare of the family and the children are compromised, then we can speak of duty and assigned responsibilities. (And so St. Paul chastises the women of the Church when they introduce disorder into its life. Thus he tells women to be obedient to their husbands, if they disturb the spiritual welfare of the family. But these chastisements are as much for males who violate these rules of order as they are for women. The question is one of practical living, not one of "natures" and so on.) But this is the lower life; in the higher life, there are neither men nor women nor the obedient and disobedient. Rather, one provokes not the other, as with parents and children, and harmony is born.

We run the risk, if we become rigid in our views of social order, of ruling out the inner fulfillment which makes a mother what she is and a father what he is. Things done in fulfillment of the laws are dead; those done in spirit are enlivening and vivifying. We must not build an Orthodoxy of prescriptions and proscriptions, but an Orthodoxy in which God expresses through us the Kingdom of Heaven and in which that which is worldly reaches up to its more heavenly image. Each of us is chastised by the famous Amma in the desert who hastened to inform a monk (who had crossed to the other side of the road when she and her disciples passed) that had he been a perfect monk, he would not have known that they were women. If we live our Orthodoxy appropriately, we need not define with rigidity the nature of our relationships, men and women, to one another. We will live within that perfect peace by which each knows his role, not out of the imposition of another's will, but out of humility before God. And in this humility, how dare any man think that he is above a woman or a woman above a man, anymore than a priest might think himself, superior to the royal priesthood of the people whom he serves.

As regards the so-called "feminist" position (of which we hear so much today), there are certain issues on which the Orthodox Christian (if not, perhaps, the rational individual) cannot yield. We do affirm and recognize an order, meaning, and functional differentiation in created things. Thus our Faith teaches us that the female is endowed by God with certain characteristics and tendencies that differ from those of men. (And this, rather than detracting from her, elevates her as part of the divine scheme. By no means does this teaching suggest, or tolerate the relegating of women to some lowly status.) Moreover, our intellects and senses teach us that women and men differ. We border on the insane (not an unusual thing in these bizarre times) if we deny the biological roles of men and women in procreation. These roles are verified by the external, physical distinctions of gender. And even the most radical psychological portrayals of men and women readily admit to fundamental differences between the sexes in cognitive style and mental functioning. (Paradoxically enough, it is part of the feminist movement itself that psychological profiles and categories standardized on males are not appropriate in the assessment of female behavior.)

Again, however, these rudimentary statements cannot be overstated. They "characterize" a role;

they do not dogmatize it. They have reference to the redeemed individual and should not necessarily be applied to the human in his fallen state. And it is here where both extremes regarding the image of women go similarly astray. On the one hand, the fallen "nature" of the woman is assigned to her by the would-be traditionalist as the character of her entire being, forgetting the divine image of the female. On the other hand, the feminist position overemphasizes the divine image of the female, thereby wishing to free its proponents of the necessity of conquering human "nature"—a task, as we have repeatedly stated, that belongs to man and woman alike. It is, then, aside from the blasphemy of extreme rhetoric, foolish to speak of St. Paul's view of women. He speaks from practical experience of the weaknesses of the female—the counterparts of which can be found in men (imagine the reaction of the Cretans, both men and women, to the blessed Apostle's statements regarding that people). He also speaks of the spiritual nature of women. If we make no distinction regarding the spiritual and fallen natures of women, we simply fail to understand St. Paul in an intelligent way. We come to extreme views.

Something must be said, now, of the way in which we should learn to understand the words of St. Paul. We must approach them with spiritual sobriety, asking that the power within the words (en to logo, within the word itself) reveal their ultimate truth. Otherwise, we become students of the Bible, joining those unwise and foolish Orthodox who wildly rush to analyze and, thereby, distort the meaning of Scripture by making the mere words understandable to their intellects. If we properly understand Biblical exegesis in the Church, we know that the modern "Bible study" is, quite simply, "un-Orthodox." For us to glean notions and images of women, then, from Biblical statements is fruitless and not within the Church's Tradition. If we fulfill the Orthodox life (with fasting, prescribed prayers, services, and the pursuit of humility), the icon of the words of Scripture will be revealed to us and its grace will flood our minds. We will know, noetically and mystically, precisely what St. Paul wrote and what he meant, for his words will be our own, joined to us in our common source in Christ.

We cannot, here, overstate the absolute necessity of understanding how we are to read Scripture—for the improper reading of St. Paul has led both to the errors on the "right" and those on the "left" in the assessment of women in the Orthodox Church. The late Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky has left us some keen insights into the nature of Scripture in the Church. In so many ways, he hearkens repeatedly back to St. Irenaeus' vision of Scripture. St. Irenaeus, in his well-known dissertation against a certain heretical sect, compares the person who uses his intellect to understand Scripture to an artist, who wrongly uses stones to create a mosaic portrait of a dog, when in fact the components of the mosaic might rightfully create the portrait of a king. In short, the final portrait depends on the vision of the artist when he begins his project. If he knows that it is a king that he is to portray, he does so. If he does not, he might neatly fit the stones together and create a hideous image. And so, one who attempts to understand Scripture without first being enlightened by the very content and spirit of Scripture itself (envisioning it as the perfect icon of theological grace), will likely hideously distort what Scripture means.

In a more specific sense, St. Paul argues for the proper ordering of the Church in his statements regarding women. And, as we often fail to recognize, he makes distinctions between function and nature. Anyone schooled and experienced in the subtle paradox of spiritual life recognizes this sense in St. Paul. Not to recognize it leads to overstatements that yield either a non-Orthodox view of the spiritual potential of women or a wholly secular reaction against spirituality that dooms one to eternal ruination.

To speak to the issue of women in the priesthood is to recognize that on this issue, too, extreme voices have distorted the truth. Let us return to the moderation of what the Fathers teach us. No

man, St. John Chrysostom tells us, is worthy of the priesthood (and here we mean "men" as males and females). Yet for the functioning of the Church, we have a priesthood. It is, therefore, not a "right" which one holds, but a burden which one takes upon himself with the greatest fear and trembling—the archpriesthood epitomizing this deep fear in the human soul. Somewhere in the moderation between knowing oneself unworthy of the priesthood and trembling before the fact of its reality, the priest exists. If he moves away from this delicate understanding, he imperils his soul. Enough, then, of any person, be he man or woman, claiming "rights" to the priesthood. This is spiritual folly and a total misunderstanding of the visible manifestation of Christ's Church. It is foolishness inviting internal death.

It follows that in the early Church, the priesthood should have been restricted in every possible way. It is a fact that we received some traditions from the Jews, and that the Jewish priesthood was male. The Church is real, existing in reality, expressing the life of real people. It should not be strange, therefore, if we see the priesthood restricted to males. And yet, the Church manifested its supra-historical nature to us. Females, too, within the limits of the great regard the Church showed toward the priesthood, shared in priestly grace. Have we forgotten, perhaps, that the diaconate has been held by females, that social order, Church law, and human nature" at times yield to the spiritual? We have forgotten. We have so formalized the priesthood, so "Westernized" our understanding of it, that we have somehow reduced the grace and magnificence of the diaconate to a secondary position. We have come to think of the deacon and deaconess as "half-priests," as though ordination could be measured and quantified in terms of the "amount" of grace bestowed. Who dares to assign greater grace to St. John Chrysostom (a patriarch) than to St. Stephen the First Deacon and Martyr? Where does one find a sober Father speaking in such terms? Woe to us Orthodox if we forget that even in the priesthood, in a subtle way, the spiritual role of the female and male made one in Christ triumphs.

Do we, as Orthodox, finally, deny the ministry to women? No! Nor do we guarantee it to men. Nor do we minutely define it, as though it were under the microscope of the scientist. Nor do we violate its beauty by reducing it to a mere position or role. It is much more. And what it is no man can claim with worthiness and no woman can claim by right. It is held by God's mercy and fails to burn and consume the unworthy holder, only because he is "girt with the grace of the priesthood." This economy, this mercy, is extended to males and females, in the most technical sense, and to speak of the male or female character of the priesthood is to misunderstand this extension and to distort and change the nature of the priesthood. Any true servant, be he archpriest, presbyter, deacon, or deaconess, stands where he is precisely because he is neither man nor woman and precisely because God has granted him the grace to set aside his own, sinful nature in this one instance. Understanding this, the issue of the priesthood transcends social roles. It is wrong to speak of it in such a context. The priesthood, ministry to the people, and service in the Church do not belong to the realm of sexual distinction, declarations of differing natures, or human prattle. Their focus is eternal, spiritual, and noumenal. They are the wards of a dimension where extremes do not exist, where all truth is witnessed in the royal way, in the mystical truth encompassed only by moderation.

Moderation in thought and attitudes manifests itself to us also in flesh and blood, so that we can see in sober Orthodox men and women exactly what is wrong with our present intemperate thinking about men and women in "roles" dictated by their "natures." Where, indeed, are such thoughts in the tear-evoking sweetness of the encounter of the Elder Zossima with our wondrous Mother, Saint Mary of Egypt? Can one imagine the holy elder saying to himself, "Being a priest, I shall bless -this saint, for I am, by nature, worthy of that which she, by nature, is not"? God forbid! Rather, the holy elder fell before our beloved Mother and asked that she bless him. And could it be that the wondrous woman among God's saints said to herself, I will bless

this man, since he, indeed, must know that I have a right to the priesthood"? Indeed, no. Which of us can forego tears thinking of what truly happened? Falling prostrate before the holy elder, St. Mary begged his forgiveness, the two remaining for some time thus prostrated before one another, each saying, "Eulogeite," or "Bless." As we all know, the Holy Mother, deferring to Father Zossima's priesthood, wished his blessing. And what a lesson to learn from the result. She cried out, "Blessed is our God, who watches over the salvation of souls and people." And the holy elder responded, "Amen."

Shame, hence, to each of us who proclaims either the man or the woman superior, or pretends to know the proper role and nature of each. This is arrogance, immoderation, intellectual pomposity, and the usurpation of judgments which only God can make. In true spirituality, distinctions, both formal and informal, disappear. This is not to say that we should, in any way, allow our social responsibilities to go unheeded in the name of human freedom and illusory, worldly liberty. Certainly we must not in any sense feel akin to movements which threaten social and spiritual order. But neither should we decide that there are clear offices and stations in life which, gleaned from an improper understanding of the spiritual world, absolutely fix the role of any person, whether Lord or serf, freeman or slave, man or woman. We live between the two antipodes of our future existence: separation from God, the fruit of our mortal way, and union with God, the fruit of the spiritual way—between Hell and Heaven. We must correctly envision ourselves in this middle state, reflecting as it does, our notions of men and women. If we are too extreme in the mortal sense, we lower the image of God in man. If we are too extreme in the spiritual sense, we suffer from the delusion of aspiring to what we are without proper transformation of our fallen selves.

In some ways, perhaps, I have been immoderate in my statements about women in the Orthodox Church. Certainly this must be so, for I, more than the reader, know that the sublime beauty of the moderation of the words of the Holy Fathers is not to be found in my own words. But if I have erred, it is error, not in my counsel, but in the manner in which I have expressed some ideas. And if I can be rightfully condemned for counseling temperance, I have done so with immoderation. This forgiveness I ask of the reader.

From *Orthodox Life*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan-Feb, 1981), pp. 34-41.