



Angelo Nicolaides

A reflection on the past and present role of women in the Greek Orthodox Church

Abstract

In terms of the Christian faith, men and women are called to be the servants, (*diakonoi*) of Jesus Christ, because the Lord was a *diakonos*. Pious serving of others is to be modelled on Jesus and certain denominations allow the ordination of women while others, relying on Holy Tradition, are resolute in their stance that only men should be ordained into the ministry. The article touches on arguments that were raised in the past and at the present time, for or against an ordained female diaconate. This brief examination thus attempts to provide at least some insights into, and is an exposition and analysis of what the Eastern Orthodox Church has to say on this somewhat delicate subject and what the image of women was in the Early Church and what is could be today.



Prof. Angelo Nicolaides
(PhD) Department of
Philosophy and Applied
Ethics University of
Zululand, KwaDlangezwa,
South Africa

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1 Introduction

One typically tends to attribute the role of a priest to a man. Priesthood is an area which was previously the domain of only men in many denominations. It is now an area of “equal opportunity” in many Christian Churches. The Eastern Orthodox Church or *Ekklesia* however, remains resolute in its stance on the issue of priesthood and allows only males to become ordained as per its interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and Holy Traditions. The Holy Scriptures which were Divinely inspired writings and Holy Tradition which was an oral transmission of Divine Truth, are for the adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy and the *Ekklesia*, nothing less than the Revelation of the Triune Godhead. The important questions to consider are what was and what currently is the role of women in clerical orders in Orthodoxy and how likely is the church to change its traditional stance? There are diverse opinions on this issue. There are those who support the notion of women serving in clerical roles in the Orthodox Church because this was in fact a practice that was allowed albeit it being of limited scope¹. Another opinion is that the issue of women serving in roles such as deaconesses or priests is superfluous because it allows feminism to infiltrate the church and would in essence be a precarious advance since this would likely alter the fabric of Orthodoxy. Where women to be accepted as priests, this would be a reversal of the traditional roles and functions taking place in which Pneumatology and Christology are altered.

¹ V. A. Karras, *Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church*, *Church History*, 73(2), 2004, pp. 272–316.

2 The Church - *Ekklesia*

The *Ekklesia* is an institution which is “Catholic” in that it is universal and promotes unity and freedom. It is an instrument of God’s which helps to control, direct and purify mankind. The Orthodox Church is a conservative *Ekklesia* and yet offers her adherents enormous freedom which is embedded in the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition which serve as her guides. She is guided by the Paraclete or Holy Spirit. She has a definite outlook on life and clearly understands the interdependence of men and women whose relations with the Triune Godhead can never be seen in isolation from their relationships in society². The *Ekklesia* embodies Divine Sofia or wisdom and is the conscience of her adherents. Men and women are embraced equally by her, but it is only men who may become ordained as priests. Why is this so given that women were also deaconesses for a couple of centuries?

The Apostles who were endowed with the *charis* (Gifts) of the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete (Comforter), were able to continue the redemptive work of Jesus Christ through their priesthood which they obtained from Him. Jesus led them to “glory” (Hebrews 2 :10) and they became “the fathers in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (1 Corinthians 4: 14-15) of all those who received their teachings. They established the early communities of the Church and spoke with authority which was God-given. Paul explains that the Apostles are the spiritual fathers of all believers. The Apostles were unable to deal with everything in their lives and thus entrusted many of their pastoral duties to *Presbyteroi* who acted on their behalf. These men were appointed by ordination and were responsible for worship and administration but gradually allowed women to help them in the latter regard. Bishops, priests and deacons are ultimately all stewards of Christ’s Holy Mysteries.

² N. Zernov, *The Church of the Eastern Christians*, New York, 1947, pp. 68-70.

The *Ekklesia* as it spread in the Graeco-Roman world and indeed today, is a body made up of separate and unique individuals each of whom has a particular talent that can be utilized for the benefit of the entire ecclesiastical community irrespective of the race, nationality or socio-economic standing in society of its individual members.

No one person is considered to be superior to another or have a greater role or function to fulfil. In 1 Corinthians 12: 25, we see the reason for the *Ekklesia* : “that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another”. Even Jesus Christ as the Head of the *Ekklesia* which is His body serves: “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22: 27). Every believer has to mould his/her life to conform with God’s Word and must work out his/her “own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2: 12). God desires that mankind including both men and women must be saved and to this end: “you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3: 28). Men and women have very distinct responsibilities within the *Ekklesia*. Contrary to what many believe, the woman’s role and function is no less than the man’s but it is clearly different. Men are called to lead worship according to Paul: “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling” (1 Timothy 2: 8). Women on the other hand are ordered to keep silent and are not permitted to have authority over men or to teach (1 Timothy 2: 9 – 12). The *Ekklesia* has faithfully maintained this tradition in terms of priesthood and it is attested to in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Christ clearly chose those whom He willed (Mark 3: 13 – 14; John 6:70). He did so in conjunction with the Paraclete and God the Father (Acts 1:2) after intense prayer (Luke 6:12). Male priests became intimately associated with the mission of Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Logos (Mark 16: 14 – 15). The Apostles also prayed before selecting and appointing their assistants (1 Timothy 3: 1 – 13; 2 Timothy 1: 6).

From its original position in Jerusalem, the role of a deacon gradually infiltrated gentile churches. In Philippians 1:1, deacons are

listed alongside bishops. However, in Ephesians 4:11, deacons are not mentioned at all. When Paul orders Titus to appoint elders in the cities there is no mention whatsoever of deacons (Titus 1:5). The role of deacons is explained in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, where their role is outlined within a church hierarchical structure. Deacons were called to live firmly in the faith and have spiritual lifestyles.

3 Priests

Modern-day priests, as the successors of the Apostles, share in the priestly office and not women. No women were among the Twelve Apostles or amongst their successors. This was a contrast to what was occurring in other early religions however, where the idea of priestesses was not uncommon in the Levant. In Rome one would come into contact with the Vestal Virgins while in Delphi there was an oracle served by priestesses. In the early Church women were not denied priesthood because of sexism or chauvinism but by the plan of the Triune Godhead.

Divine priesthood is a “functional imaging of the divine priesthood of God the Father through Jesus Christ”³. It can thus only be imaged by man who is connected to the imaging of divine fatherhood. A woman’s role differs in that she images functionally the role of the Paraclete who is the assistant of Jesus Christ in His work in the *Ekklesia*. Both men and women are considered in Orthodoxy, to be harmonious and mature persons with a sense of great personal responsibility. Each of the sexes has a deep gnosis or knowledge of their total dependence on the Triune Godhead for their salvation by the Grace of God the Father. Holy Scripture teaches us that Salvation is the task of the entire Triune Godhead. The Father wills that certain things happen. The Son fulfils the will of the Father and the will is then perfected in each individual

³ C. Voulgaris, *The Sacrament of Priesthood in Holy Scripture*, Athens 1996, p. 35.

believer by the Paraclete. This is the foundation upon which the teachings of the early Church were based concerning priesthood as a specifically masculine function. Men and women thus have distinct roles and functions within the Church. There is expected to be synergy in what men and women do in the Church in the same way that Jesus Christ and the Paraclete co-operate.

In analysing this typological reference, it becomes clear that the *Theotokos* (Mother of God), because of her total commitment to God becomes the cause of the salvation of mankind. It was through the *Theotokos* that the Paraclete was able to creatively incarnate the Son of God. The *Theotokos*, of all the people ever born is the person closest to God as she became the Mother of the Incarnate Saviour of mankind. Jesus was able to become the “first” Adam again, and also the “last” Adam and thus made the salvation of mankind possible. Mary was thus “the Mother of all creation”, a “second Eve who repaired the fault of the first woman”⁴. Her special function in relation to the work of the Paraclete proved that she was indeed *kecharitomeni* (the most gifted of women)⁵. The fact that the Theotokos was not a priestess shows that even if women are not ordained as priestesses this by no means suggests any sexism or chauvinism, neither are they to be construed as having lesser dignity than men.

4 The notion of *diakonia*

The Greek word *diakonein* relates to ‘service’ while *diakonos* refers to a male who serves. In John 2: 5, 9, the word indicates a waiter serving a meal.

5 His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it. 6 And there were set there six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three

⁴ N. Zernov, *The Church of the Eastern Christians*, p. 60.

⁵ C. Voulgaris, *The Sacrament of Priesthood in Holy Scripture*, pp. 34-36.

firkins apiece. 7 Jesus saith unto them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. 8 And he saith unto them, Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast. And they bare it. 9 When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was: (but the servants which drew the water knew;) the governor of the feast called the bridegroom,...

This later also included one serving as a domestic employee or a caregiver. John 12:26 exhorts us to be *diakonoi* and emulate Christ who served as a minister or *diakonos* (Galatians 2:17; Romans 15:8). The formal instigation of the diaconate is evident from Acts 6: 2-4.

2 Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. 3 Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. 4 But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

During the patristic era, the office of deacon was formalised (1 Clem. 42:4; Herm. *Sim.* 9, 26:2). Araneus describes seven people in Acts 6 as been deacons. From the early 4th century, there was a ruling by the Greek Council of Neo-Caesaria that a city would only be allowed to have seven deacons. In each of the roles in church organisation, those who serve were a visible community and were granted their proper administration from Jesus Christ. Their role was to fulfil the mission of His Church in the world and so church members were from the outset classified as either clergymen or laymen. Thus, in terms of Orthodoxy spiritual authority was given to the Holy Apostles and this passed through them to the Elders of the Church including the positions of deacons, priests or presbyters and then bishops. The aim of the various positions was to serve and build up the church in the True

Faith in Christ and unit the shepherds and the flock as one undivided Body of Christ⁶. The Holy Apostles observed the Spiritual Authority as being inspired by God and as direct disciples of Jesus ordained deacons and presbyters at the outset and then bishops in every city where they happened to preach. The Bishops of the Catholic Church are considered to be the direct successors of the Holy Apostles and through them they become the representatives of Christ inside the Church⁷. Consequently, Apostolic succession is maintained for one generation to the next without any break in the line of Canonically Ordained Bishops from the Apostles to the present time. It should be noted that in the Orthodox Church the Order of Priesthood is not a special individual body from that of laypeople. The apostles performed the Divine Mysteries and bestowed *charismata* of the Holy Spirit and the Authority of Ecclesiastic *diakonia* (St Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily* 32).

5 Feminine as opposed to masculine roles

There are numerous Christian Feminists who have adopted a stance on feminist positions from a Christian perspective. Consequently, between 1977 and 1986, there was a fifty percent increase in number of ordained female clergy but these were mainly Protestant denominations⁸. In addition there have also been noteworthy laity attitudinal changes concerning the ordination of women in Catholicism⁹ and also in Protestantism¹⁰.

⁶ P. Lampadarios, P. (2006). *Orthodox Teachings*. Archbishop of Pelusium, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Port Said: Egypt, 2006.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ C. H., Jr. Jacquet, *Women Ministers in 1986 and 1977: A Ten Year View*. New York, Office of Research and Evaluation, National Council of Churches, 1988.

⁹ R. A. Wallace, *Women administrators of priestless parishes: Constraints and opportunities*, *Review of Religious Research*, 32. 1991, pp. 289-304.

¹⁰ E. C., Jr. Lehman, *Women Clergy*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1985.

The Christian feminism movement has an increasing bearing as it is challenging traditional fundamental Christian interpretations of Holy Scripture when it comes to the role of women in churches¹¹. The movement also supports very liberal attitudes for life and LGBT rights and it is generally also pro-abortion¹², ideas which are anathema in Orthodoxy. Feminists generally maintain that patriarchy subsists, in Orthodoxy and they find this situation to be inherently immoral.

In Orthodoxy, both the Church and the Virgin Mary the Theotokos receive the Paraclete whose *energeia* (energy) is able to bring forth Jesus Christ. In the same way, believers are born into the *Ekklesia* as a revitalized and saved community. The typology of women is thus pneumatocentric as it is they who receive distinct gifts from the Paraclete. Men on the other hand have a Christocentric typology. It is men who receive the three offices of Jesus Christ including priesthood. Women on the other hand have a function corresponding to the Paraclete. Neither man nor woman, however, lose their consubstantiality as equal “images” of the Triune Godhead. At an Inter-Orthodox Symposium held in 1988, it was specified that while there had not been any major theological divergences of opinion over the Orthodox tradition regarding the unfeasibility of women becoming priests, it was nonetheless recognised that women should and could play a wider role in the Church’s service and spiritual endeavours¹³. Many Christians today consider gender based on the idea of “neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28), but generally speaking, today much is still based on 1 Corinthians 11:3: “The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, and

¹¹ J. Piper & W. Grudem (eds.), *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, Crossway, Katerini, Greece: Tertios, 1991.

¹² Cochrane, 2005.

¹³ G. Limouris (ed.), *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*. Report of the Inter-Orthodox Symposium held in Rhodes, Greece, 1988. Greece: Tertios Publishers, 1992, p. 12.

the head of Christ is God.” This is viewed as being the natural order and the divine economy. The man is the “head” *kephalē*, of the woman which in Greeks also means “source” or “origin.” Various giants of the Church including St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexander, and Theodoret of Cyrus understood this verse, as expressing a source rather than subjection (St. John’s *Homily 26 on 1 Cor.*, St. Cyril’s *Commentary on 1 Cor.*, and Theodoret’s *Commentary on 1 Cor.*)¹⁴.

6 Roles of women in the early Church

It is clear that prior to middle of the fourth century women were allowed to exercise certain definite roles in the Church and that they were referred to as *diakonoι* or *diakonissai*. However women were only invested with the duty of *diakonissa* or deaconess as an innovation in caring for other women who were infirmed or to assist in the baptizing of women in the Ekklesia. Even this was not without some measure of difficulty for example a woman who was recently widowed had to be dokimazein or placed on probation before been appointed as a deaconess. By the third century widows became an order of the Ekklesia and became part and parcel of the hierarchy of the Church. The Church Father Origen, stated in his commentary on Romans 16: 1 that: “with the authority of the Apostle that even women” are made deaconesses (PG 14, 1278 A-C).

There is no clear official recognition of deaconesses as an institution of sanctified women assisting the clergy in the New Testament. Nonetheless, Phoebe (Romans 16:1), is called *diakonos*, but this may merely infer that she was in the service] of the Church, and in essence enjoyed no formal standing. We may infer

¹⁴ V. A. Karras, Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church, *Church History*, 73(2), 2004, pp. 272–316.

that the "widows" who are referred to in 1 Timothy 5:3-10, may have been deaconesses.

3 Honour widows that are widows indeed. 4 But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God. 5 Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day. 6 But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth. 7 And these things give in charge, that they may be blameless. 8 But if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel. 9 Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man. 10 Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work.

The *Didascalia Apostolorum* which was written in Syria in the first half of the first century as an Apostolic Constitution¹⁵ emphasised that the office of deaconess was a valuable position to have in assisting male priests. This *Didascalia* also suggested that there should be an "order of widows"¹⁶. Widows had to spend their time praying for those who gave charity for the church¹⁷. By the fourth century women deaconesses could welcome other women at the doors of the church but they were by no means part of the clergy. By the start of the fifth century women were ordained as deaconesses but only if they were virgins or widowed of one husband and at least forty years of age as determined by the Council of Trullo in 692 CE. The limit for deaconesses was initially set at sixty years of age, and this was mainly prescribed for widows, but later it was reduced to forty years of

¹⁵ J. V. Bartlet, "Fragments of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* in Greek" in *JTS-Journal of Theological Studies*, XVIII, 1917, pp. 301-303.

¹⁶ *Ibidem* 314.

¹⁷ *Ibidem* 337.

age in certain localities. Additionally, deaconesses were not allowed to marry if they were widows. John Chrysostom believed that certain women had *ton to axioma tes diakonias echouson* "dignity of the diaconate"¹⁸.

Tertullian expressed his discontent of a girl of twenty in *viduatu ab episcopo collocatam*, and she appears to have been an ordained deaconess. There is no doubt that the deaconesses in the fourth and fifth centuries included widows and they had a role in the holy sanctuary during the celebration of the divine liturgy. They essentially "... stood at the anaphora behind the presbyters and they communicated after the deacons, and before the readers and Subdeacons. They were in charge of other deaconesses and a ritual was performed in the ordination of deaconesses including the laying on of hands, which was similar to the formal ceremony for the ordination of male deacons"¹⁹.

Orthodox theologians concentrate on 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16, where Paul warns women against teaching in the *Ekklesia* during worship because woman is created in man's image and not in God's image. This reasoning is flawed as there is an ontological unity between male and female and Jesus and His *Ekklesia* that cannot be accepted if one believes that man and woman were created in different "images". In any event, it is only Paul who reiterates what is stated in Genesis 1: 26-27 i.e. God "from the beginning made them male and female".

Why is it that Paul objects then to women teaching in the *Ekklesia*? What is more important to Paul in the function and role of men and women in the divine Economy is that men and women possess peculiar and unique qualities and thus are suited to distinct roles and functions. Each has a "unique talent"²⁰. The Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches believe that the Apostles

¹⁸ PG 62, 553, Homily 1 Timothy.

¹⁹ New Advent website: Catholic Encyclopaedia.

²⁰ M. Ashton, Women Priests? The Bible Answer to the Current Debate. United Kingdom, 2003, p. 2.

transmitted to their successors, the priests and Bishops, the fullness of the priesthood. This implies an uninterrupted chain of succession in ordinations from the time of the Apostles. Some Protestant churches on the other hand repudiate this doctrine. They remain convinced that either men or women obtain a call to serve in the ministry directly from God. In the Eastern Orthodox *Ekklesia*, the Bishop has no power to create priests. He simply sanctions an ordination of a priest performed by the work of the Paraclete who works in a mysterious way through the unanimous decision of a local *Ekklesia* which thus greatly values its bond of love or agape with the early Church of the Apostles.

7 The role of women in the time of Jesus

Jesus was accompanied by a number of women while going out to preach. This was not well received by the Jews many of whom accused Jesus of making women neglect Jewish purification rights (Luke 23:2). In fact Epiphanius of Salamis explains that Jesus was leading women and children astray. He tells us in *Adversus Haereses* 42 that: “*kai apostrephonta tas gynaikas kai ta tekna...*”.

Orthodoxy venerates women who played fundamental roles during the time of Jesus as well as in the early church. After all, the most important female figure in Orthodoxy is the *Theotokos* Mary, the Mother of God. She is considered to be the ‘new Eve’ due to her role in restoring a fallen humanity²¹.

Mark tells us that after Christ went to cities or villages and preached he was accompanied by Mary Magdalene and Susanna, and Joanna amongst many others (Luke 8: 1 –3). Furthermore, when Jesus was crucified there were women looking on from

²¹ P. Kollontai, Contemporary Thinking on the Role and Ministry of Women in the Orthodox Church, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 15(2), 2000, pp. 165-179.

“afar”. (Mark 15: 40 –41). That the names of women are mentioned at all demonstrates that women played an important role in the community. Jesus had numerous women disciples among his followers including inter-alia Mary Magdalene, Susanna and Joanna. However, despite this, Jesus did not commission any women to become Apostles.

It was women who discovered the tomb of the resurrected Christ on the Easter morning and met the resurrected Christ first. Clearly women were enthralled just as much as the men by the sight of Jesus performing miracles. Our Lord bucked the trend of His milieu and deliberately had a different attitude towards women than was expected. He conversed in public with the Samaritan woman (John 4: 27) and allowed a sinful woman to approach Him in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7: 37). More importantly, He affirmed the equal status of the rights and duties of married couples (Matthew 19: 3 – 9).

When people waited and prayed for the coming of the Paraclete after the Ascension, there were undoubtedly women amongst them (Acts 1 : 14) but on the day of Pentecost, the Paraclete filled them all, both men and women (Acts 2: 1; 1-14). And yet it was only “Peter and the Eleven” who proclaimed the fulfilment of the Prophecies in Jesus (Acts 2: 14). According to Acts 12: 12, it was Mary the mother of John-Mark who allowed gatherings of Christians to take place in her home. Kollontai asserts that the First letter of Peter is used in Orthodox teaching as confirmation of the spiritual influence of women in enabling others to find salvation and she also argues that Paul’s letter to the Romans is used to demonstrate that women were co-workers with Paul (e.g. Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis) and some of these were even serving as deaconesses. For example, Phoebe was a deaconess in the early Church²². In Romans 16: 1-2 Paul commends Phoebe. He says: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *diakonos* (minister) of the church at Cenchreae, that

²² Ibidem.

you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints". The masculine noun *diakonos* in Hellenistic Greek is preceded by a feminine article and can thus be given a female usage as well irrespective of noun or the context. In the third century the formal position of deaconess appeared (*diakonos*) with that special reference to Phoebe. The order of deaconess thus appears to go back to the time of the Apostles²³. A wife of a deacon was also called a 'deaconess' because of the status of her husband.

In First Corinthians we read of a certain Stephanas and his household who were the first converts to Christianity in Achaia who: "*eis diakonian tois hagiois etaxan heautous*" (1 Corinthians 16:15). The word 'deaconess' as used as in the case of Phoebe demonstrates that she: "has been a helper of many". Phoebe clearly gave support to the less fortunate in her community where there was great sorrow and distress. In Romans we also read about Aquilla and Prisca whom Paul describes as: "*tous synergous mou en Christo Iesou*". This description indicates that Phoebe's charismatic role as an assistant is gradually becoming an official position²⁴. Interestingly Paul uses the same description in speaking about Timothy (Romans 16: 21), Titus (2 Corinthians 8: 23) and others in the Epistle to Philemon (1: 24). In Philippians, Paul speaks of Euodia and Syntyche, who "have laboured side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers"(Philippians 4: 2-3). Mary the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12) and Lydia (Acts 16: 14 – 15) did not have a ceremonial function as deaconesses. Their roles and functions were purely administrative.

²³ J. Leipoldt, *Der Frau in der antiken Welt und im Urchristentum*. Leipzig 1959, p. 133.

²⁴ A. Oepke, "Gyne," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, I, 1933, p. 787.

8 Diaconate roles

The role of a *diakonos* evolved into more than an administrative function and as it did so, so too did the roles and functions of male and female deacons. The masculine role became distinctly a liturgical one. From the fourth century onwards, deaconesses assumed the role and function of pastoral care givers and administration. Strauch assumes that because the seven deacons in Acts 6 were put in charge of benevolence, caring for poor members was likely the only responsibility deacons should have²⁵.

In terms of prophesying, both men and women prophesied under the inspiration of the Paraclete as was the case in Corinth. But women had to cover their head when prophesying, unlike men who had no need of a head covering (1 Corinthians 11: 4 – 5). Although men and women were equal in God’s eyes, a man was a man and a woman should thus remain a woman. Each of the sexes had a specific function to fulfil in terms of God’s plan. Women had to wear a veil so as not to dishonour their head who is man. Furthermore, according to 1 Corinthians 14: 1 - 40, Paul insists that order must be maintained during worship and that “the woman should keep silence in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak (*lalein*)” but rather “keep silence” (*sigan*), (vs. 34 – 35). If women wish to know anything they should ask their husbands at home. This probably arises due to the habit of women to ask questions of those who were functioning in the Gifts which resulted in worship being disturbed and disrupted. Timothy backs this up in Timothy 2: 11, where he asserts “let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness”. In both 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 11, we see that male and female have distinct divinely appointed places in the order of Creation. This

²⁵ A. Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon: The Church's Minister of Mercy*, Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1992.

mode of thinking was very much in line with the Jewish mentality which according to Mosaic Law did not give great value to the witness of women in terms of religious issues.

In 1 Corinthians 1, 2 – 16, Paul refers to the appropriate behaviour in worship²⁶. God is the model of the sexes who are created in His image (Genesis 1, 26-27).

In Greek custom, women attended worship without a veil on the head and with short hair and men attended with long hair (Chrysostom, in Homily XXVI on 1 Corinthians). Paul according to Theodoret's Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11: 11-35, undoubtedly frowned on this as it was an affront to the order of creation.

As women were not allowed to teach or have authority over men they were unable to become an *episkopos* or *presbyter* who would instruct a community of believers (1 Timothy 3: 2 – 5). Just as the order of the Triune Godhead and their mutual relationship cannot be altered, so too cannot be altered the order of humanity and the mutual relationship of women and men in the order of creation which is restored in the *Ekklesia* (Voulgaris 1996 : 40). If male and female reverse their exclusive roles then they are also reversing their personal qualities and therefore also their mutual relationship. This is intolerable for Paul who recognizes the specific role and function of each of the sexes just as each of the members of the Triune Godhead have a specific role and function. On a human level, man "reflects what God is on the divine level" (Ibid. 40-42). The order of Creation goes back to God the Father (Ephesians 3: 14 – 15) who is the source of all existence. Man's ascendancy over women goes back to Creation where man was created first (1 Corinthians 11:8). Furthermore, woman was created for man as a helper (Genesis 2:18). Nonetheless, woman is of the same *ousia* (nature) as man as she originates from him just as by analogy, Jesus Christ and the Paraclete emanate from God the Father: "God the Father is Christ's head as

²⁶ A. Conzelmann, Commentary on the First epistle to the Corinthians, Philadelphia, 1975, p. 182.

his generator and projector and is *homoousios*; man is woman's head because he, too, is her generator and projector and *homoousios* with her. The analogy is consequent and proper..."²⁷. According to Karras²⁸ the fact remains that ordination rites existed for deaconesses, as is evidenced in a number of Byzantine-era *euchologia* (service books) and deaconesses were ordained in the sanctuary during the eucharistic liturgy in a rite practically undistinguishable to male deacon ordinations rite. Hefele-LeClerc²⁹ states that there were restraining steps in place in the 11th canon of Laodicea, and also in the 19th canon of the Council of Nicaea, which particularly stated that deaconesses were to be viewed only as lay persons and not as ordained clerics thus renouncing the idea that women could obtain a sacramental order. It is also asserted that among the Greeks the ecclesiastical position of deaconesses was seriously overstated³⁰. A deaconess had far less to do in her role than her male counterpart and she was thus far less important than a male deacon although her pastoral care and administrative abilities were greatly valued by the communities in which she served. Karras (2004) asserts that there were distinct functions, such that female deacons were only allowed to help baptize female converts and distributed the Eucharist to women only in their homes. In addition, deaconesses were not permitted to chant petitions, read the Gospel, or preach any sermon. The ordination rites, canonical and civil legislation of the early and Byzantine age, and also hagiographic and epigraphical evidence manifestly demonstrate that deaconesses were in fact properly ordained³¹. Despite this, adherents were acutely aware that Jesus Christ did not authorize women to preach His Word with any apostolic au-

²⁷ Photius in Cramer, ed., CGP, Vol.V : 208.

²⁸ V. A. Karras, *Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church*.

²⁹ Hefele-LeClerc, *Conciles I*, Paris, 1907, 618.

³⁰ Hefele-LeClerc, *Conciles II*, Paris 1907, 448.

³¹ V. A. Karras, *Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church*.

thority. The Eastern Orthodox Church is thus faithful to the example set by Jesus concerning only male priesthood. It was the main task of the Apostles to preach the gospel, kerygma and Didache: "in public and from house to house" (Acts 20: 18 -1). Paul asked Timothy: "what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2 :2). By the sixth century, Severus of Antioch stated that the order of deaconess was largely honorary, and that there was very little if any real need for them³².

In the *Didascalia Apostolorum* we also encounter a description of a deaconess as a woman who is appointed to minister to women. She was expected to take communion to the ill and anoint women (the nudity of women should not be seen by men) but was not allowed to invoke Divine names in the water as this was the function of a male *diakonos*. Deaconesses were also to take a vow of continence if widowed and pray dutifully³³. A male deacon on the other hand had to perform: "a number of things that are necessary"³⁴. A male diakonos was the "right arm of the bishop"³⁵ whereas a woman was not. Tertullian in *De Prescriptione Haereticorum* and Irenaeus in his *Adversus Haereses* demonstrate great disapproval of a Gnostic practice to allow women to serve as priests³⁶. It is clear that deaconesses were envisioned to discharge the same benevolent roles, associated with the well-being of the poor, a role generally performed by deacons³⁷. In the Byzantine Church, only bishops, presbyters, and deacons were permitted to read the petitions of the liturgy and receive the Eucharist at the altar as well as distribute it³⁸.

³² Severus, Letter 62.

³³ *Didasc.* 3, 1, 1-2.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Didasc.* 2, 28, 6.

³⁶ E. D. Theodoros, "*He Cheirotonia e cheirothesia ton diakonisson*", in *Theologia*, XXV. Thessalonica, 1954, pp. 576 – 601.

³⁷ P. F. Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West*, New York: Pueblo, 1990.

³⁸ L'Huillier, *Church of the Ancient Councils*, 24.

By the end of the fourth century the Apostolic Constitutions dictated that women no longer baptize as this was now considered the function of a priest. Deaconesses would serve as a go-between, intermediating between other women and officials of the *Ekklesia*. Deaconesses served as 'ushers' for the women's section of the *Ekklesia* (this was usually on the left side of the centre aisle in the Church building). By the ninth century, both male and female deacons wore a stole. There was however a marked difference in that the type of stole worn by each sex. The male *diakonos* wore an orarion which went around one shoulder and under the other shoulder and later wore an *epitrachelion* or priestly stole which covered his entire back. The deaconess on the other hand wore an *orarion* which only went around her neck and hung in front occasionally with tassels dangling down.

Matthew Blastares (1335–1346 CE) a 14th-century Byzantine Greek monk in Thessalonica and early scholarly adversary of the notion of reconciliation with Rome wrote the *Syntagma Canonum* and declared that the civil legislation regarding deaconesses, which ranked them among the clergy rather than the laity had been abandoned³⁹. In any event, the role of the male was very distinctly liturgical when compared to the female. It is clear that the New Testament provides much evidence as to the essential and important role and function of women in the *Ekklesia*. Women have been and are true disciples of Jesus Christ. They witness to Christ in their families and in society at large and are mothers of children. They bear witness to their faith and pass on the faith of the *Ekklesia* and its Holy Tradition and observe Holy Scripture. Women played and do play a decisive role in the life of the *Ekklesia* but priesthood cannot be validly conferred on them. They do however have a great mission in the renewal of society. The Eastern Orthodox Church may appear to be archaic in its interpretations but is true to the Holy Scripture and to her

³⁹ Migne, P.G., CXIX, 1272.

unbroken Holy Tradition in ordaining only men into the priesthood.

The Apostolic Constitutions specifically stated that women were to guard the doors and maintaining order amongst other women during a church service and they could additionally serve as mediators between the clergy and the women of the congregation⁴⁰. Importantly, the deaconess was not permitted to give any blessing or fulfil the function of a priest or deacon⁴¹. In some jurisdictions, women performed tasks beyond the scope of their calling which was against the canons. These were eventually curtailed. They included for example, women presiding over meetings of other women, reading the Epistle and Holy Gospel, dispensing the Eucharist to nuns, lighting candles, burning incense, adorning the sanctuary, and anointing the sick⁴². Interestingly, affluent and well-connected women such as St. Olympias, were ordained by St. Gregory the Theologian at the age of 29. By means of contrast, married men could be ordained to the diaconate, at age 25, this showing differences in practice⁴³. There were thus cultural biases and seemingly double standards when it came to ordination for male deacons and female deaconesses. For females, the diaconate was far more restrictive. and the consequences for any transgression by female deacons were viewed in a far more serious light than for male wrongdoers⁴⁴. By contrast with the male clergy, married women could not become deaconesses except they were separated from their husbands⁴⁵. If the Holy Eucharist were conducted by a woman there would be no resemblance between Christ and His minister and it would be thus difficult to see the image of Christ in the minister as

⁴⁰ Apostolic Constitutions, II, c. 26.

⁴¹ Apost. Const. VIII, 27.

⁴² Hefele-LeClercq, Conciles II, 448.

⁴³ V. A. Karras, *Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church*.

⁴⁴ J. Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme ai Byzance (4e -7e siecle)*, vol. 1, *Le droit imperial. Travaux et memoires, Monograph 5*, Paris: De Boccard, 1990.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

Christ was a man. In any case the Incarnation of the Logos took place according to the masculine gender and this fact can in no way be separated from the Economy of salvation. Christ is the 'groom' of His bride who is the *Ekklesia* and in this lies the Mystery and revelation of the Triune Godhead. The Priest represents the entire *Ekklesia* and offers sacrifice for her and prays for her in her entirety.

In the current Orthodox debate on women and their roles in the church, it is early Church documents that are considered to be vitally important in providing indispensable insights into the role played by women in the Church and their noteworthy. In fact, some women in the early Church, some women were and are still recognised as being '*isapostoloi*' (equivalent in status to the Apostles). These include *inter alia* Thekla and Nina, who were linked with important ministries. When it comes to spiritual writing prowess, the works of three spiritual women Theodora, Sarah and Synkletika are placed together with the teachings of the Desert Fathers⁴⁶ ().

There are of course those argue that there is indeed no scriptural basis for bestowing on men as priests the image of Christ. They argue that Jesus was never referred to as a priest. Neither did the Lord downplay the role of women. Topping⁴⁷ quotes Galatians 3:27-28 and maintains that God does not at all differentiate between the sexes on the basis of social status, ethnicity or even gender and she questions if we truly believe that the Holy Spirit first looks at gender before calling souls to enter God's service.

⁴⁶ P. Kollontai, *Contemporary Thinking on the Role and Ministry of Women in the Orthodox Church*, pp. 165-179.

⁴⁷ E. C. Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy*. Minnesota: Light & Life Publishing, 1987.

9 Justinian the Great

Justinian I (482 – 565 CE), also known as, the Great was the Byzantine emperor who deemed it necessary to restore the Empire⁴⁸. Justinian delimited everything in religious affairs as well as legalistically. His religious policy as well as his non-spiritual administrative controls had somewhat of a despotic nuance for example heretics faced severe consequences for their utterances and actions and all those deemed to be threatening orthodoxy were liable to face legal challenges⁴⁹. It was Justinian who made the Nicene creed the symbol of the Church⁵⁰. Despite his seemingly despotic stance, he was somewhat of a "nursing father" in the Orthodox Church such that the deaconesses still held a position of standing. It has been stated that at the church of St. Sophia in Constantinople the staff comprised of sixty priests, one hundred deacons, forty deaconesses, and ninety Subdeacons⁵¹. The legislation of Justinian delivers undeniable evidence that female deacons in the Byzantine Church were not only was regarded as members of the clergy but were in fact ranked with the major orders of clergy⁵².

⁴⁸ J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the seventh century*, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 17–19.

⁴⁹ M. Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians. Kontingenz Erfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im . Jahrhundert n. Chr* (in German), Gottingen, 2003.

⁵⁰ J. Meyendorff, *Imperial unity and Christian divisions: The Church 450–680 A.D. The Church in history*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989.

⁵¹ L. Garland, *Byzantine empresses: women and power in Byzantium, AD 527–1204*, London: Routledge, 1999; Cameron, et al., 2000.

⁵² A. G. Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, trans. Whitehead, K. D., San Francisco: Ignatius 1986.

In his Novel 3, Justinian included female deacons among the clergy and he controlled their numbers for the Great Church of St Sophia in Constantinople⁵³.

Pheidias (1992) rejects the notion that deaconesses in the Byzantine Church were affiliates of any of the major orders. Irrespective, there were very few deaconesses except in some larger cities of the Eastern Roman Empire like Constantinople. Nonetheless, the situation gradually changed. Theodore IV of Antioch (Balsamon), Patriarch of Antioch (1070 CE) was a *Nomophylax* "Guardian of the Laws" and thus an ardent canonist of the Greek Church in Constantinople. He became Greek Patriarch of Antioch in 1193 CE. In his *Scholia*, or commentary on the *Nomocanon* of Photius, asserted that deaconesses ceased to exist in the Church but their title was used by certain orders of nuns⁵⁴.

10 Priests as a sign

The priest becomes a sign in a sacramental sense and is a sign of Christ or *mimema* Christou. Priesthood is a special office set by the Triune Godhead in the context of the plan of God the Father and the priests are servants of the *Laos tou Theou* (The nation of God)⁵⁵. A plan of salvation which aims at restoring His own image and likeness in mankind which became distorted by the Fall. God the Father is thus the source of the priesthood. It is from Him

⁵³ CIC, Justinian - The Enactments - Concerning the number of Ecclesiastics attached to the Principal Church and other churches of Constantinople, The Novels III (Novellae), eds. Schoell, R. and Kroll, G., Berlin: Weidmann, 1959; R. Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. Laporte, J. and Hall, M.L. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1976.

⁵⁴ H. Thurston, Deaconesses. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908; C. D. Robinson, *The Ministry of Deaconesses*, London, 1898.

⁵⁵ A. Nicolaides, "The *Laos tou Theou* – an orthodox view of the "people of God", HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies 66(1), 2010.

“from whom are all things” (1 Corinthians 8: 6). Jesus Christ obtained His *Vasileion Ierateuma* (Royal Priesthood) “not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life” (Hebrews 7:7) through His Passion, death and Resurrection. Christ’s priesthood is thus inherent in His essence, *ousia*. His office is eternal and perfect unlike that of Moses⁵⁶, who’s office was imperfect and directed towards purifying the flesh (Hebrews 9 : 13).

Despite the many qualities needed to serve as priests existing in women, they were not mandated by Jesus Christ to preach with any Apostolic authority. Deaconesses did not receive *cheirotonia* (Holy Orders) upon their ordination as in the case of men. Orthodox theology positions that male and female in essence provide diverse dimensions of one common humanity which is the created expression and reflection of the Trinitarian Godhead⁵⁷. The issue of the subjection of woman to man was common practice in the paternalistic societies of the past and accepted by Christians and accounts for the stance taken to an extent. This is likely the reason for the early Church Fathers excluding women from the priesthood and restricting the duties of deaconesses and ultimately not appointing them universally⁵⁸. To view a deaconess as equal to a deacon, would elevate her standing above subdeacons, readers, chanters, and all laymen, and this was averse to maintaining apostolic principles concerning the role of a man and that of a woman⁵⁹.

In the final analysis, When Christ returns His work will be seen in all the earth. His servants the *iereis* (priests) will share with Him in bringing the world to a full gnosis (knowledge) of God’s ways: “They shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall

⁵⁶ PG 68, 805.

⁵⁷ T. Hopko, On the Male Character of the Priesthood, in: idem (ed.), *Women and the Priesthood*. New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983, p. 99.

⁵⁸ V. A. Karras, Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church.

⁵⁹ Ibidem; J. Dearie, Orthodox move for women deacons is 'revitalization' not 'innovation', National Catholic Reporter, Nov 30, 2017.

reign with Him a thousand years” (Revelation 20: 6). In those days all, male and female alike will be “a Chosen Race, a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation (*Laos*), God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light” (1 Peter 2 : 9).

11 The current position in the Orthodox Church on the role of women

Belonick is a woman who entirely rejects feminism on the notion of having a female priesthood in the Church⁶⁰. She blames radical views such as having female priests on the current view point which emanates from the global women’s movement and feminism and calls on the Church to remain resolute in its stance⁶¹. In fact, feminist theology is considered to be totally at odds with the Christological and Trinitarian theology as communicated by Holy Scripture and Orthodox Church Tradition. Feminist theologians continue to dissect the structures of Orthodoxy and other denominations, and also their dogmas and theology, and have determined that all Christianity has been manipulated by male bigotry and prejudice⁶². Thomas Hopko concurs with Belonick when he argues that Orthodoxy cannot allow its enduring and sound position on women priests to change as this in any case based on solid tradition and dogma⁶³. The Orthodox church has and continues to demonstrate resistance to the equality of women in ecclesial roles that necessitate ordination⁶⁴. In any

⁶⁰ D. M. Belonick, *Feminism in Christianity: An Orthodox Christian Response*. New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983.

⁶¹ D. M. Belonick, *The Spirit of the Female Priesthood*. In Hopko, T., ed. *Women and the Priesthood*. New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983, p. 137.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ T. Hopko, *On the Male Character of the Priesthood*.

⁶⁴ M. Fiedler, *The Orthodox Church’s move on women deacons is a baby step forward*, *National Catholic Reporter*, 2017.

event, if deaconesses are appointed today, it will be exceedingly difficult to justify not appointing them to the rank of priest or even bishop.

There is some division in opinions on the issue of deaconesses and female priests. Karmiris argues that a male diaconate has a priestly character, but a female diaconate does not.

He argues that women were never deacons or priests in the ancient Church⁶⁵. Women in deaconess roles were only there as auxiliaries as were women who supported the Apostles, and this role is still valid today in lay spirituality. Theodorou diverges with this view and he maintains that deaconesses performed some liturgical and catechetical roles and were ordained as a low order clergy to perform certain tasks by bishops and were not lay ministers⁶⁶.

It is however currently increasingly considered acceptable to allow women to serve as readers and chanters⁶⁷. In 1988 a Pan-Orthodox Consultation at Rhodes, Greece, resulted in a document entitled *The Place of Women in the Orthodox Church*. It stated that the "apostolic order of deaconesses should be revived."⁶⁸ Today we find many women serving the Orthodox Church in roles such as administration and catechesis. Some are also involved in roles supporting pastoral work⁶⁹. The wives of ordained priests are automatically expected to play a role in supporting them in their parishes. Monks and also nuns in play im-

⁶⁵ J. Karmiris, 'Η Εκκλησίασωμα Χριστου', in: *The Greek Orthodox Review*, 39, pp. 563-586, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Boston, MA. 1962.

⁶⁶ E. Theodorou, 'The Ministry of Deaconesses in the Greek Orthodox Church. *World Council of Churches Studies 4*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1966.

⁶⁷ J. Dearie, 'Orthodox move for women deacons is 'revitalization' not 'innovation'.

⁶⁸ M. Fiedler, 'The Orthodox Church's move on women deacons is a baby step forward.

⁶⁹ G. Limouris (ed.), *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*.

portant roles in Orthodoxy. Monastic men and women in Orthodoxy are for the most part restricted to living in monasteries and do not generally contribute to the active ministry of the Church. Kollontai states that nuns still play a vital role in Orthodoxy as they support the life of the Church⁷⁰. Nuns and monks vows to dedicate their lives to religious service, and characteristically living under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in a monastery or convent. The abbess or head-nun, is generally the spiritual leader of the convent and her authority is unconditional such that no patriarch, bishop or priest can supersede her authority within her monastery or convent. There has always been spiritual equality between men and women in the Orthodox Church. Galatians 3:28 indicates that there has continually been spiritual parity between men and women in the Orthodox Church.

The Greek Orthodox Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa, Theodoros II and the Greek Orthodox Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Alexandria contemplated the notion of reinstating the order of deaconesses. Such a step was viewed as positive and also desirable and since it is a move towards gender justice⁷¹. Nine theologians emanating from theological schools and seminaries in the United States and also Greece expressed support for the Patriarch Theodoros II, in a statement made in Oct. 31, 2017: "We respectfully support the decision of the Patriarchate of Alexandria to restore the female diaconate, thus giving flesh to an idea that has been discussed and studied by pastors and theologians for decades... The reinstatement of the female diaconate does not constitute an innovation, as some would have us believe but the revitalization of a once functional, vibrant, and effectual

⁷⁰ P. Kollontai, *Contemporary Thinking on the Role and Ministry of Women in the Orthodox Church*, pp. 165-179.

⁷¹ M. Fiedler, *The Orthodox Church's move on women deacons is a baby step forward*.

ministry"⁷². Consequently, five women were selected to assist with missionary work as there are not sufficient priests, to teach, catechize and lead liturgical services in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Orthodoxy still needs to ask the fundamental query about its perspicacity of the work of the Holy Spirit concerning women fulfilling their spiritual calling in any and every way conceivable⁷³.

There is however still resistance to the notion of deaconesses in the Orthodox Church as adherents are cautious of breaking with tried and tested traditions - what has worked for two thousand years should still be practicable today. Thus, despite the ordination of some women to deaconess rank, this should not be viewed as a phase towards the major orders of priesthood and higher ranks in the Orthodox Church, as it is a vocation of its own⁷⁴ (). Orthodox men and women, should strive to create a society in which they both display the image of the divine calling that Christ calls us to. Groothuis is a Christian egalitarian who contends that God is not gendered and that males and females thus image God equally and without having any dissimilarities⁷⁵. In any case both male and female were created in the *imageo dei*,⁷⁶ so woman also partakes in the divine image through man because she was fashioned out of him, and is his "glory" (1 Corinthians 11:7-8). We should however not forget that Jesus taught us to pray the 'Our Father'.

⁷² Ibidem.

⁷³ P. Kollontai, *Contemporary Thinking on the Role and Ministry of Women in the Orthodox Church*, p. 177.

⁷⁴ J. Dearie, *Orthodox move for women deacons is 'revitalization' not 'innovation'*.

⁷⁵ R. M. Groothuis, *Good News For Women: A Biblical picture of gender equality*, Baker books, 1997.

⁷⁶ M. A. Gonzales, *Created in God's image. An introduction to feminist theological anthropology*, Orbis Books, New York, 2007.

Conclusion

The question is should we as Orthodox adherents reject the notion of having women in the ministry or do we maintain our tried and tested traditions which have lasted for 2000 years. The call to be a Christian is a call for one to be humble and humility emanates from obedience to Christ and the Church on earth. Priesthood is clearly what no man can assert to be a right of worthiness and no woman can claim by right. God's mercy, is poured out on all, males and females, and while tradition is important, we always need to have a consciousness of our own biases and personal eccentricities. The beloved early Church Fathers inherited their traditions and beliefs on women from Judaistic practices and arguments regarding the place of women in society. There is no clear explanation why priesthood is for only males, and the Church Fathers in their many writings assume that priesthood is a masculine role. There is clearly a desire to maintain the social and spiritual status quo. Irrespective of the role one plays in a church, the role is God-given through His grace. While the Church leadership and the laity in the Orthodox countries find the concept of a female priesthood preposterous, some individuals and groups such as the feminist movement will argue that this has no theological basis at all. Thus the debate continues. What is critical is for the church to make life feel more unrestricted for the fairer sex. Providing a ministry to believers, and service to the Church in general do not belong to the demesne of sexual otherness, but the emphasis must rather be on the spiritual and eternal aspects of life and be based on Holy Scripture.

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