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**THE PLACE AND ROLE OF WOMEN
IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY
(AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE)**

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Abstract

The Orthodox theological understanding of women is rooted in the Divine Revelation. It does not rely purely on our limited minds, for they are incapable of fully grasping God's mystery of creation. Therefore, Orthodox theology emphasizes the following features as essential to understanding the calling of a woman. First and foremost, God, who as the Creator of humankind, is the Creator of both men and women. This Christian teaching is reaffirmed in our knowledge of Christ, who came to save both men and women and restore the communion with God. Equally valuable to the Orthodox Church is the teaching presented and expressed in the Holy Scriptures and Patristic writings on the difference between masculinity and femininity. It is a difference established with the act of the creation of humankind. This difference does not imply the subordination of women to men. On the contrary, this distinction was established by God as part of His Divine plan.

The biblical creation narrative in Gen 1:26-28 and St Paul's statement in Gal 3:28 establish the full equality of males and females in terms of status, worth and dignity. Complementary roles in marriage and church leadership are not thought to contradict this principle of ontological equality.

Introduction

The empirical posing of “the woman question” and basing its determination solely on her real position in the world is one of the most common methodological flaws. This reasoning implies making the human being – a living being existing on multiple levels – a sociological or biological category. It also means that human life is poured into moulds: a young girl, a wife, a widow, a social worker, a single woman or a devoted woman. Women are often defined only by comparison with men, and such a definition is inevitably a negative one. However, there is little research on men in comparison to the vast literature written on women. Could we use the same method to talk about men as virgins, husbands or widowers?

This positioning of women leads to leaving the essential question unresolved. Are these types of women created by history true? Do they correspond to women’s metaphysical truth? Are they normative? The empirical method, limited to historical data, does not provide answers to these questions. It can only by bringing into sharper focus present the deviations that have taken place over the centuries.

Drawing on this methodology in the study of “the woman question,” we should start our research from the very beginning – from the fall of man – and subsequently follow the fate of women throughout history. In this case, the Bible reading would begin with the first pages of the Book of Genesis and end with the New Testament recount of the Last Judgment.

A woman has a form of her own; an existence of her own. She has intuition and judgment of her own; a world of her own; a unique way of weaving her entire being through her relationships with others and self. The woman, psychologically and sociologically determined by the world, is also determined by the mystery of her being. Consequently, she is not only a man’s partner, a child’s mother or a social worker. This leads us to the following question: Is there a clear connection between the Holy Scriptures and the world that especially speaks about the vocation of a woman?

Paul Evdokimov, in his daring work, entitled *Woman and the Salvation of the World*, contemplates the spiritual vocation of women. He denounces the long-standing alienation of women both in society and in the Church. In his view, the feminist aggressive and atheistic reactions is a modern response to this condition of women. However, can such an answer only

contribute to a new alienation, since feminism often confuses gender equality with gender identity and denies the differences between women and men? Evdokimov believes that by melting into the masculine world, the woman risks “losing her nature.” Paul Evdokimov proposes a new methodology of studying the place and role of women in the Church and society: “We must start from anthropology and show its close correspondence with the joint service of the imperial priesthood and thus to be able to understand its essentially eschatological orientation. This means that we must examine the historical existence in the light of Alpha and Omega.”¹ This research examines the place and role of women in the Church and society by drawing on Evdokimov’s recommendations and conclusions and adopting the Christian anthropological approach.

Christian discourse is continuously written in the cultural context and bears its imprint echoing the Word of God. But this is only partially, gradually and always imperfectly assimilated in people’s minds. Christians seek this word primarily in the Holy Scriptures which have been preserved and handed down by the Church. The word is not to be sought in the letter that can kill, but in the spirit, in the dynamic intention that animates this letter. It is about a spirit, an intention, assimilated by each generation so that the Word becomes dear and familiar to all people in their historical and personal existence.

This effort of assimilating the eternal word spoken about women also determines our research. The first three chapters of the Book of Genesis are the starting point for digging deeper into the Biblical texts. The Book of Genesis is the theological foundation for exploring gender roles and equality. Christ Himself, also, referred to these fundamental texts when He opposed the distortion of the message recorded in the Holy Scriptures by saying: “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” (Matt. 19:8).

The commentary provided in this paper does not refer to the field of scientific historical-critical exegesis, although it finds this field very valuable. In its essence, my analysis is mainly existential and compliant with Orthodox Christian theology, whose aspirations, as the father of

¹ Pavle Evdokimov, *Ženata i spasenieto na svetot, hristijanska antropologija za darovite na ženite*, Veles, 2001, 20. [Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women*, Veles, 2001, 20]

Orthodox neopatristics Vladimir Lossky² emphasized, always remain practical and aim not only at acquiring knowledge but at communion with God.

In the beginning...

It is crucial to return to the universal, to the overall plan for human destiny in analysing the differences between masculine and feminine. Without the metaphysical and without returning to the very beginning, we can never fully understand the human being. There will always be something that cannot be reduced to history and pure phenomenology. Men and women have to be observed in the fullness that arises from their mutual complementarity.

According to Evdokimov, the creation of Adam (in Hebrew *'adam* is to be understood in a collective sense, “mankind”) is the creation of man as both male and female (Gen. 1:27) that is, the creation of male and female entities in their original, still indistinguishable unity. The biblical narrative clearly shows that these two sides are inseparable to such an extent that the male or female human being, taken separately and seen as themselves, do not represent a complete human being, but only the half that is separated from its complementary element.³ Therefore, the creation of Eve proves to be a great confirmation of the one essence of the complementary principles of the human being: man-woman, the first archetype of every human.⁴

The first words addressed by the man to his female companion, the first statement uttered by the husband to his wife: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23) indicates that Eve has been separated from Adam. This means that when Adam was called to life by the act of God, Adam already contained his constituent part, his “other half” – Eve. According to Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, God created a complete indivisible man (anthropos), containing

² Лосский Владимир Николаевич, *Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви*, Москва 1991, 3 [Losskii Vladimir Nikolaevich, *Ocherk misticheskogo bogosloviia vostochnoi tserkvi*, Moskva 1991, 3]. Retrieved from <https://avidreaders.ru/read-book/ocherk-misticheskogo-bogosloviya-vostochnoy-cerkvi.html?p=3>.

³ Pavle Evdokimov, *op. cit.*, 31, 204-205.

⁴ Carl Jung’s archetypes are called “organs of the soul”. They reside in the subconscious of the soul and antedate our individuality since they essentially belong to the “collective unconscious” of the soul. The archetype of the “Mother” in terms of formal structure (the Gestalt of modern Gestalt psychology) precedes all forms of “motherhood”. Thus, the man-woman archetype, animus-anima, today remains intact and identical in the depths of our subconscious, just as it was in the most remote times.

both male and female. Such a person, having reached maturity, is divided into two essences for a more perfect blossoming, which is expressed in the birth of Eve.⁵

The man identifies himself in complete integrity within the woman, but at the same time, he recognizes himself as different from her. She is the other who is similar to him. They are different, but of one flesh (Gen. 2:21), humankind called to dialogue and creativity in mutual love and obedience to God. The woman raised man's awareness of his loneliness felt among the inhuman creatures he had named. That is why God said: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." (Gen. 2:18). According to these words of God, the man was called to contribute to the humanization of the earth by relying on the help of the woman. Without such help, he would not have been able to fulfil his assignment. The word "helper" (in Hebrew, *'ezer*), which here defines the woman's position in relation to man, does not imply inferiority or subordination at all. This is evident from the many usages of this expression in the Old Testament. Namely, in the Old Testament the word "*'ezer*" or "helper" is often used in reference to Yahweh as the helper of the chosen people.

After the Fall...

The fall of man instilled the poisons of sad knowledge. Separation from God caused a rift in the human being. The chasm breaks through the original oneness, the totality of "face-to-face." It dissects the unity and externalizes its components.

From the moment of the fall, the male-female unity became polarized and filled with attraction or rejection. The terms conveying *community* transform into expressions of *polarization*: "I am my own person, and he is his own." The distortion of the relationship objectifies everything and turns everything into an object. As soon as the community breaks, the mentality of the superior and the subordinate takes form. The human being falls away from the sight of God, so when compared to God, man is in the shadows. He enters his shadowy night. God called to the man: "Where are you?"

⁵ Элизабет Бер-Сижель, *Служение женщины в церкви*, Библейско-Богословский Институт св. апостола Андрея Москва, 2002, 7. [Jelizabet Ber-Sizhel', *Sluzhenie zhenshhiny v cerkvi*, Biblejsko-Bogoslovskij Institut sv. apostola Andreja Moskva, 2002, 7.]

(Gen. 3:9).⁶ All relationships now bear an element of alienation and distance. The “face-to-face” interaction is forever lost now. From that moment on and throughout human history, man would start asking his fellow human beings the same question over and over again: “Where are you?”

The words of God, addressed to each one individually, attest to this change in the deep structures of the human nature: “To the woman he said” (Gen. 3:16) and “And to the man he said” (Gen. 3:17). The statement of this Biblical revelation indicates that the distinction between masculine and feminine is not only a physiological or psychological problem but also a spiritual one. It stems from the fundamental mystery in which the entire human being is shrouded.

An ontological view on equality between man and woman

Gen. 1:26-28 and Gal. 3:28 establish the full equality of males and females in terms of status, worth and dignity. Complementary roles in marriage and church leadership are not thought to contradict this principle of ontological equality. There is no longer male and female, there is no longer Jew or Greek in Christ (Ecce homo, “behold the man”) (Gal. 3:28). It means that there is no exclusion in Christ, but all humankind and every individual find themselves again in Christ. According to Evdokimov, “this is the universal Archetype of humanity, the second Adam, Who embodies the totality of mankind, just as the first Adam, before the creation of Eve, embodied both male and female indistinguishably.”⁷ Furthermore, complete equality between man and woman can be seen through the general vocation to worship. Man (human being) is created to transcend himself in communion with God. No virtue can identify God’s image in man. It determines the dynamic orientation of a person in the direction of transcendence, in which a person finds their goal. The Church Fathers resolutely extended this vision to all humankind as a whole. It refers to the anthropos, created in the image of God: “One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (Eph. 4:6). The original nature of the human couple is completely revealed in the fullness of the grace of Christ the Saviour to both men and women. All human beings, both men and women, are called to strive to rise to the level of God. They are called to be in communion in the Holy Spirit with the God-Man, Who through His incarnation received in

⁶ Pavle Evdokimov, *op. cit.*, 214–215.

⁷ Pavle Evdokimov, *op. cit.*, 336.

Himself all humankind, without excluding any human hypostasis, but opening the possibility for all human beings to regain their unity in Him. This spiritual and eschatological perspective underlines the unity and primary identity of men and women.

The Church Fathers, including St Basil the Great, St Gregory the Theologian and St Clement of Alexandria, reject any hierarchical understanding of the relationship between men and women. For example, St Gregory the Theologian expressed this conviction in his famous dictum: “One Creator of man and woman, one clay, both one image; one law for them both, one death, one resurrection.”⁸ St Basil the Great expressed a similar opinion on this issue, saying: “the natures are alike of equal honour, the virtues are equal, the struggles equal, the judgment alike.”⁹ St Clement of Alexandria stated that “beings who have the same life, grace and salvation are called to the same manner of being.”¹⁰ Because these saints lived and worked in an extremely patriarchal society, their statements were nothing short of radical. However, for some Church Fathers the subordination of women in the family and in society corresponds to the law of nature. Of course, the mutual love shed in the radiance of God’s mercy softens the rigidity of this rule. In their view, the spiritual order can be transformed and a Christian woman can spiritually lead and bring her husband to faith. Finally, by choosing to be completely devoted to God and putting herself in an eschatological perspective, the woman establishes a pious and dignified relationship with her father or husband.

In addition to the abovementioned, in his Preface to Elizabeth Ber-Siegel’s book, entitled *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom responds to those who dispute the biblical teaching on equality between men and women, saying: “In society and in the Church, we are used to giving women a secondary place, thus making their social condition, in antiquity as well as in our own time, the basis of a theology that, it seems to me, has its roots in Genesis 3. We forget, is it a Freudian slip, the creation of the total Man, undifferentiated, which contains all masculinity and all femininity. In this unique Man (anthropos), masculinity and femininity attain a maturity that requires for the perfect development and fulfilment the separation into two entities at the moment of Eve’s birth. We too easily forget that God created Eve for Adam

⁸ Григорий Назианзин, *Беседы*, 37, 6. [Grigoriĭ Nazianzin, *Besedy*, 37, 6.]

⁹ St Basil the Great, *On The Human Condition*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005, 45.

¹⁰ Климент Александрийский, *Педагог*, 1, 4. [Kliment Aleksandriĭskii, *Pedagog*, 1, 4.]

so she would be a “partner”, not a subordinate. She was to be his “half”. [...] When he saw her, Adam proclaimed both his difference from her and the fact they were one. The Churches that call themselves “traditional” never cease referring to the fact that in Christ God showed himself as man (male) and they forget that he is the total and perfect Man (anthropos) who contains and reveals the totality of the human being and not just the “virile” side for “what he did not assume, He did not save.” As for the continual reference to the humility of the Mother of God, to her absence, always “standing back,” this reference makes us easily forget that without her giving of herself the incarnation would have been as impossible as without the will of God. Twice, Mary had a properly priestly ministry: once when she carried her son who was destined to be sacrificed to the Lord and once when, at the foot of the cross, she completed the offering by uniting her will, in a heroic abandoning of self, to the will of the heavenly father and to that of the Son of God who by her had become the Son of Man and the sacrificial Lamb.”¹¹

The calling of a woman is not on the level of society but of humanity

Destined to procreate, protect, and be the source of life and the wellspring of holiness, the woman sees at her side the man from whom she is bride, wife and mother. As “the glory of man,” according to St Paul (1 Cor. 11:7), she is, in her luminous purity, like a mirror that reflects the man’s countenance, reveals it to himself, and thereby corrects it. Through an intuition, woman has the gift of entering directly into the life of another. She has the spontaneous, immediate ability to grasp the intangible in the human person. Through this ability, she helps man to understand himself and actualize the meaning of his own being.

This is the entire dialectics of spiritual motherhood. St Peter’s words (1 Peter 3:4), spoken to women, embody the gospel of femininity. They accurately define her essential charism: to give birth to the “hidden person (man) of the heart.” Man is more likely to be interested only in his own cause. The maternal instinct, on the other hand, like the one shown at the wedding in Cana, immediately reveals that the spirit of human beings is thirsty, and the woman finds the Eucharistic source to quench their thirst.

¹¹ Jelizabet Ber-Sizhel’, *op. cit.*, 7.

The mysterious relationship between “mother and child” excludes any objectification and makes us realize that the woman is the one who nourishes her human form as her own child. Woman sees an absolute value in the human form, and through this, she humanizes and personalizes the world.

Most Holy Theotokos – “the Mother of All the Living”

Although Eve is known as the “mother of all the living,” the writer of Genesis, who gave her this particular name in a prophetic vision, foresaw infinitely more than just a biological extension, much more than “the seal of promised grace” and the expectation that from this seed “the queen in gold of Ophir” (Ps. 44:9) would be born. Just like Adam, the Mother of God, the new Eve, embraces all humankind. Her flesh, which she gave to her Son, is that of “the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20). “Here is your mother,” Christ said to the apostle John, and thus humanity rediscovered its mother. She embraces the entire universe with the grace of her motherly care because she carries the universe within herself and gives birth to it for the ages of the Holy Spirit. “And one only is the Virgin Mother. I love to call her the Church,” said Clement of Alexandria.¹²

The second Eve was proclaimed “Theotokos” at the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431). The one who gave birth to the Eternal God, the one who gave human life to the Eternal Living, is herself immortal. This is why Eve is magnificently called Life (Gen. 3:20). We can now understand why the woman received the message of salvation. The good news message is given to a woman; the risen Christ makes His first appearance to a woman, and “a woman clothed with the sun” (Rev. 12:1) signifies the New Jerusalem.

The Holy Scriptures elevate women as a religious element of human nature. The woman represents the mouth of humanity through which the humble response of “let it be with me” of the servant of the Lord becomes the answer to the creative “let there be” of the heavenly Father. The woman is this liberating exclamation “Amen” of all humankind that in the act of incarnation became the necessary human foundation.¹³ This is a Christian response to the woman question.

¹² PG 8: 300.

¹³ Pavle Evdokimov, *op. cit.*, 228.

Here the woman is absolutely in the foreground. And it is in this sense that we understand Berdyaev's words when he speaks of "the infinitely important leading role of women in the history of tomorrow, in the religious revival of our time."¹⁴

In his Homily on the Annunciation, Nicholas Cabasilas sums up the patristic teaching: "The incarnation of the Word was the work not only of the Father, of His Power and His Spirit but also of the will and faith of the Virgin. For, just as, without those Three, it would have been impossible for this question to be implemented, so also, if the All-Pure One had not offered her will and faith, this design could not possibly have been brought to fruition. Having in this way taught and persuaded her, God made her His Mother and borrowed flesh from her with her knowledge and consent, so that, just as He was conceived voluntarily, it might equally come about for His Mother that she should conceive voluntarily and become His Mother willingly and by her own free decision."¹⁵ It implies that the Virgin Mary does not have a passive role in the Incarnation. She represents the people of God from both the Old and New Testaments, who, filled with faith, hope and love, accept the Word of God. Therefore, the Mother of God does not appear as a model only for women and an archetype of female humility. Ontologically, yet not psychologically, her humility is the humility of humanity before the face of God.

The liturgical epithets (titles) given to the Mother of God express the "fullness" of grace that she had assumed: "Queen of Heaven," "Heavenly Gate," "Heaven," "the Temple of God," "the one who broke the chains of sin." "The world was created to be sanctified in the Virgin Mary and this universal destiny has already been fulfilled. She is the arch-image of the world."¹⁶ This universal dimension is strongly emphasized in the hymns of the Church. The Virgin Mary is "the Gate of salvation to the world." "You are exceedingly blessed, O Virgin Theotokos, for Hades has been taken captive by him who was incarnate of you. Adam was recalled, the curse was abolished, Eve was delivered, death was put to death and we were given life." (Divine service, Doxology). By giving flesh to Christ, His mother became his "family."¹⁷ The liturgical texts constantly repeat

¹⁴ Cit. Pavle Evdokimov, *Ženata i spasenieto na svetot, hristijanska antropologija za darovite na ženite*, Veles, 2001, 230.

¹⁵ Cit. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York; St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 141.

¹⁶ Pavle Evdokimov, *op. cit.*, 315.

¹⁷ While every believer is of the same blood as Christ in the Eucharistic unity, the Virgin Mary is more intimately connected through her motherly relationship.

that in the flesh she had given to Christ, all human beings began to participate in the divine nature of the Word. The Virgin Hodegetria (She who leads)¹⁸ leads the Church into the human sphere; she is “Our lady of the Way.”

The woman is called into the world to fulfil her kingly priesthood according to her charism

In the concrete human existence, it is the individual gifts and charisms that determine the specific reality of each person – his or her calling. These gifts and charisms place each individual in their typological act. Both man and woman were created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). And “to be in the image” indicates our original charismatic nature and dynamism: the image contains the indestructible presence of grace, inherent to the essence of humans. This implies that both man and woman are charismatic, spirit-bearing creatures who are to respond to this call as liturgical beings.¹⁹

The tradition referring to the different charisms of the two forms of priesthood (the common priesthood of believers and the ministerial priesthood)²⁰ is deep-rooted and never subject to confusion. It affirms the natural equality of all: all are, above all, equal members of the people of God. Within this equality, functional differentiation is created in regard to the specific gifts and services. Christ is the High Priest, but everyone else is also a priest by partaking of His priesthood. Within the framework of the priesthood of believers, some of them are ordained as bishops and presbyters. The common priesthood of the believers and the ministerial priesthood are internally dependent and represent the two ways of participating in the unique priesthood of Christ. The divine origin of these two forms of priesthood places each one of them in the sacramental charismatic economy.

¹⁸ Virgin Hodegetria (“she who leads”) is an iconographic depiction of the Virgin Mary as the one who shows the way (Our Lady of the Way).

¹⁹ Every individual enters the service of the whole community according to the measure of his or her gift: “Now there are varieties of gifts [...] and there are varieties of services [...] To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Cor. 12:4-8).

²⁰ While the body of the Church is composed according to the church order and each function is regulated by disciplinary canons, there is also an invisible part, incapable of form and organization (kingly priesthood). So, the Church has two aspects: an institution and an event. Both are internally dependent and complement each other. The Church, as an event, happens continuously but always within the Church as an institution.

Chrismation consecrates every believer and, following Christian tradition, integrates each believer into the priesthood, into the priestly ministry as a mediator with the cosmos, the world outside the Church.²¹ St Macarius of Egypt spoke of the dignity and nobility of priesthood of all believers in his homilies: “Christianity, then, is no ordinary thing. This mystery is great. Recognise therefore thy nobility, that thou art called to kingly dignity, a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation.”²² In terms of salvation, St Theodore the Studite stated that everyone becomes their own priest.²³ St John of Damascus called the Theotokos “a precious ointment, when it is poured out upon the garments” and saw the charism of her humility as a form of her kingly priesthood.²⁴

Hence, the solution to the question of the priesthood of women lies in the charism. In Orthodox iconography, Virgin Mary is often represented wearing an omophorion,²⁵ but that is only a sign of her maternal protection, without any trace of priestly powers. She does not look like a bishop in any way. According to Orthodox teaching, the priesthood of orders is part of the masculine function of witnessing. Bishops attest to the validity of the sacraments and have the power to celebrate them. They possess the charism of watching over the purity of the tradition, and exercise pastoral authority. But the ministry of woman does not lie in functions; it resides in her nature. The ministry of orders does not belong to her charisms.

The call of woman to marriage as a sacrament

If a woman is ontically²⁶ aligned to the Church, this relationship requires universal value and meaning, but only if the man is similarly ontically aligned to Christ. They both achieve the proposed task in a mutually internal connection. Thus, what a woman is called upon to do in the world is not just a cooperative or supportive effort that is pragmatically useful and justified: what forms the body

²¹ M. Lot-Borodine, La grâce défiante des Sacrements, in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, vol. 24 (1935), 696, note 1.

²² Homilia XXVII,4, PG 34:696BC; *Fifty Spiritual Homilies* (Willits, Calif, Eastern Orthodox Books, 1974).

²³ Antirrheticus I, adversus icono machos, PG 99:328sq.

²⁴ Homilia II in nativitate B. V. Mariae, PG 96:693B.

²⁵ *Omophorion* derives from *omos* (shoulder) and *phero* (carry). It is the image of the Good Shepherd who carries the lost sheep (human nature) on his shoulders. Having nothing to do with the bishop’s priestly powers, the Virgin Mary, dressed in omophorion, protects human nature and covers it with her motherly protection.

²⁶ Ontic (*Onta*, plural participle, gender neutral of *eimi*, “the things that really exist, reality”). It refers to the being as real.

of the kingly priesthood is the creation of a whole new reality of masculinity and femininity.

Therefore, the unity of matrimony cannot be justified by itself, because it is not a unity that is completed only in the earthly life. It is a unity that transcends the conditions of this world and opens up to the ages to come. Because of this openness, St Paul said that “marriage is a great mystery” (Ephesians 5:32). Or as St John Chrysostom said: “When a husband and wife are united in marriage, they no longer seem like something earthly, but rather like the image of God Himself.”²⁷ Marriage represents the Kingdom of God, and only the anticipated presence of the Kingdom justifies it. According to the Bible, a woman is not a “helper” but the one who “corresponds” to man. The daughter of God stands before the Son of God, face to face. They complement each other. “In the Lord,” said St Paul, “woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman.” (1 Cor. 11:11).

However, there is no use of applying the analogies of the complementarity of man and woman without considering the opposites. As human beings, created in the image of God, men and women do not “complete” each other like the parts of a whole, the parts of a mechanism, or entities of one body. Ultimately, this last example that the apostle Paul used to point out the unity in the Church of those baptized in Christ must be complemented and put in perspective of Christian personalism. From this perspective, every human being, man or woman, represents the unique totality and virtuality of a complete intimacy with God.

The difference between men and women is impossible to define in a quantitative psychological sense: it is the absence or presence of one or another degree of development of certain abilities or behaviour styles. The presence or development of one quality does not interact with the absence of another quality and vice versa. This means that we cannot claim that men and women “complement each other” because women are more intuitive and sensitive than men, and men are more thoughtful and courageous than women – stereotypes that are present in modern society. Created by the Logos and within Him, men and women are primarily verbal beings. They communicate with God and among each other. They communicate with God and among each other. They are called to cooperate and help each other develop their personalities, and this

²⁷ PG 61: 216; 62: 387.

dialogue, in a moment of grace, when “the hearts speak to each other,” reaches its peak in the silence of inexpressible unity. This unity is neither a union of parts, nor an intertwining denying all differences, but a mutual gift and a complete acceptance of the other.

Hence, the marriage bond is human to the extent that in it and through it there is a meeting of individuals who respect and love each other and acknowledge equal dignity: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). Adam’s eschatological cry before Eve’s eyes reflects the identity of the nature of man and woman. Through a unique destiny and equal dignity, identity does not mean denial, but a recognition of gender differences in personal relationships.

In order to understand a woman’s call to marriage, we need to keep in mind that faith is never just an intellectual consent, but also the loyalty of one person to the other Person. When I love and completely surrender, I do something utterly different from submission. I hear the voice of my own inner depth, and the question of “submission” is no longer applicable. For instance, Christ did not submit himself to the Law, He fulfilled it, and by fulfilling it, He transformed it. For the marriage to be called a sacrament, it must have this fulfilling and transformative quality.

We can now better understand Paul’s famous “submission” of women to men – an idea that has been so often abused throughout history. It is not a matter of pure and simple submission when the physically weaker woman is submissive to the physically stronger man (a general factual statement set as a norm). St Paul suggests a mutual submission when he says that wives should submit to their husbands as the Church submits to Christ (Eph. 5:22-24) only when the husband, “out of reverence to Christ,” is ready to give himself up for his wife.

Here “submission” occurs only when there is a complete, mutual self-surrender, and this ought to be understood from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, when relationships reach such a heavenly echo, they are no longer subject to the letter of the law. In this spirit-bearing (*pneumatophoros*) love, submission as law no longer means anything. Once it is overcome, he or she becomes “totally the other” in the Kingdom, for “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (2 Cor. 3:17).²⁸

²⁸ Pavle Evdokimov, *op. cit.*, 21-22.

The relationship of the Lord Jesus Christ to women during His earthly life

During His life on earth, the Lord Jesus Christ did not act as a reformer of the traditional social practices. He did not waste his time and energy on disrespecting the local traditions. He was much more concerned with the inner change of humans and the purification of the heart that open the Kingdom's gates. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2) – these words are the essence of His message. Christ demonstrated a certain freedom from prejudices and taboos, especially with regard to women. He did not look at women through the prism of tradition and culture, but as God sees them. He encouraged women to take on roles and lifestyles that at the time were considered to be "masculine." The women he met were mainly engaged in housework. For example, Christ praises Mary of Bethany, who left her household to listen to His instruction (Luke 10:38-42). There are also examples of brave women who followed him into Galilee.

Christ's instructions sometimes contain admonitions addressed to the rich, or scribes and Pharisees, but there is not a single admonition recorded in the Gospel that is addressed directly to women. Such admonitions would appear later with St Paul, who was busy organizing the church life in the early Christian communities. Christ was concerned with only one important thing – the call given to all, both men and women, to enter the kingdom of heaven. There is no difference between the confession of Martha, which precedes the resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:27), and the confession of Peter, which is recorded in the other Gospels.

Christ fully accepted the socially constructed demands upon men in this particular historical epoch. However, the values He cherished most high, like meekness, humility (Matt. 11:29), forgiveness and non-violence (Matt. 5) were deemed feminine within the cultural context. He sought these values in his followers, both men and women. Unlike men, who were usually taught to show courage and suppress their emotions, Christ did not try to suppress his own emotions. He cried over the loss of His friend (John 11:34-35). Deprived of any attempt at dominance and governance, His relationship with women is also unusual. To the hypocritical praise of female chastity, which is only required of women but not of men, and to the cruelty and contempt shown for harlots and adulteresses, Christ, reminding all mankind of their sinful condition, responds by saying: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7).

Christ heals all people making no difference between the crippled woman (Luke 13:10-13) and the paralyzed man (Matt. 9:2). What is more incredible with regards to the cultural context is his serious conversations with women. He allows women to ask him questions as in the story about the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well (John 4) or the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15: 21-28). His dialogue with these women proved to be fruitful. Jesus reveals to the Samaritan woman the revolutionary secret of worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24), and in His slightly ironic conversation with the Canaanite woman, one can sense the message that the Gospel shall be revealed to the Gentiles.

Christ's attitude towards women shows that He did not support the prevailing patriarchal stereotypes. At times his attitude towards women even shocks his audience; people respond with resentment, bitterness and a touch of irony. For example, Christ did not reject the woman sinner who was washing His feet with her tears, wiping them with the hairs of her head and kissing His feet. He accepted this woman's faith and love, unlike the cold-hearted Pharisee Simon, the host of the house where this event took place. Christ simply said to the woman: "Your faith has saved you, go in peace!" (Luke 7:36-50).

Both men and women are Christ's closest friends. Among his disciples "whom Jesus loved," like Peter, Jacob and John, there are also Martha and Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene, who on the first resurrection morning would recognize the sound of His voice at the utterance of her name.

In Christ's final words to His disciples, to further comfort them about His leaving them, He relates their personal suffering to the joy of childbirth (John 16:21-22). This is the image of joy that shall come after the present sorrow in the ages to come. Just as the call to enter the Kingdom through the Lord Jesus Christ as its door, so the promise of the Spirit is given to all, both men and women. "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers." (Acts 1:14). This is how the first Christian community and the beginning of the Church is depicted in the Gospel. The fulfilment of Joel's prophesy is embraced in Peter's usage of it on the Day of Pentecost: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy [...] Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." (Acts 2:17-18, Joel 2:28-29).

The apostle Paul's teaching on the place and role of women in the Church and society

The apostle Paul is often quoted by those who accuse the Christian Church of preaching the subordination of women to men and to a certain extent, of canonizing such submissiveness. The accusation is based on several passages from his epistles, which are taken out of context and contradict the apostle's general perception of the Church as a *koinonia* – a community of all men and women who through the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Baptism are baptized in Christ's death in order to become participants in His Resurrection.

The main subject of the "accusation" is the Epistle to the Ephesians (5:22-32), where St Paul makes an analogy between the communion of spouses and the communion of Christ with the Church. Also, references are made to the First Epistle to the Corinthians (11:3-15), particularly the verses about the hierarchy descending from God to man and from man to woman, and about his infamous command: "women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says." (1 Cor. 14:34). This is, also, reproduced in the First Epistle to Timothy: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man. For Adam was formed first, then Eve." (1 Tim. 2:11-13). A detailed exegesis of these biblical verses is beyond the scope of this paper, although the specificity of these verses needs to be underlined. It is very likely that these verses served as a pastoral encouragement for the local community that St Paul intended to evangelize. These men and women were baptized into Christ, but they still had to learn how to lead a life worthy of the calling to which they have been summoned by Christ "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). This is especially true in terms of marriage and matrimonial unity. This sphere of a Christian life, like any other, should be illuminated with the radiance of Christ's mystery. That is why, marriage counselling is preceded by a general admonition which should be understood in the light of the following verses: "but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves [...] giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Eph. 5:19-21). By omitting this introduction, we risk distorting the entire teaching of St Paul about marriage. In an atmosphere of joy and praise of the entire community in the Holy Spirit, Who fulfils and unites all, the apostle

invites Christians to Eucharistic communion in which believers would express their gratitude to God and mutually subject to one another in reverence for Christ, Who, also, called for mutual respect among people.

According to the apostle Paul, this mutual respect does not imply a perfectly harmonic relationship between men and women. But should we not take into consideration the cultural environment in which Christians lived at that time? It is a Judeo-Hellenistic environment in which a woman's subordination to her husband was at the core of family hierarchy. The preaching of the Gospel brought a whole new spirit to that society. At the same time, the Gospel needed to harmonize with that particular culture without disturbing it – a problem which was familiar to all missionaries. St Paul had to consider all the specifics of the local tradition, public opinion and historical conditions. The early Christians, often without reason, were accused of disturbing the public peace, and the apostle Paul himself acted cautiously to avoid anarchy and violence, carefully showing that God is love “for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.” (1Cor. 14:33).

But the “economy” of people's way of thinking to whom the apostle Paul addresses in his letters, usually and necessarily presupposes a hierarchy. Hence, his counsel, “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.” (Eph. 5:22). Here the phrase “be subject to” is a reminder of the newly adopted doctrine. However, the analogy with Christ's mystery introduces a new dynamic: He gives the newly formed union between God and His people a form of marriage and makes demands on men that were unthinkable among the Hebrews and the Greeks. Man must look to Christ Who sacrificed Himself for the Church. In other words, man – “the superior being in relation to the woman,” according to ancient culture, must be prepared for self-denial for the sake of his wife. He is obliged not to be a self-confident oppressor, but a liberator like Christ. Penetrating to the core of male egoism and the conviction that men belong to the first sex, the apostle Paul expects men to act like Christ in adopting the role of saviour. St Paul's analogy with Christ does not imply that men are the saviours of women. In order to be clearly understood, St Paul adds: “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.” (Eph. 5:32). Both husband and wife have one Saviour – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Regarding the apostle Paul's teaching about husbands and wives as recorded in 1 Corinthians 11:3-15, it is clear that this is a matter of respecting the customs accepted in the local community.

The wife is required to cover her head so as to preserve the honour of her husband. This socially conditioned requirement is difficult to understand and undergoes a variety of interpretations that establish the following hierarchy: “a man is the image and reflection of God” (1 Cor. 11:7), and his calling is to radiate this glory to those of his own kind for whom he appears as a mediator. However, in order to balance and correct this hierarchical structure in accordance with Christian teaching, the apostle adds: “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man [allusion to Gen. 2], so man comes through woman; but all things come from God.” (1 Cor. 11:11-12). Thus, the need for mutual support between man and woman is proclaimed, and their mutual complementarity in differences is like a circular motion that excludes any thought of ontological subordination.²⁹

The apostle Paul’s words addressed to women, “to be silent in the churches” (1 Cor. 14:34), are not intended to force women to remain silent in the congregations of believers, as it was often claimed in prevailing interpretations because this statement would be in contradiction to the eleventh chapter of this Epistle. How could the apostle Paul, on the one hand, encourage women to dress appropriately when praying or prophesying in the church (1 Cor. 11:5) but on the other hand prevent them from speaking? St John Chrysostom believed that the instructions in verses 34-35 were designed to prohibit nuisance chatter from the women during church gatherings.³⁰

It seems that in the sermon of the apostle Paul there are moments of pedagogical adaptation and unwillingness to violate the social norms of the local community “in order to deny an opportunity to those who want an opportunity” (2 Cor. 11:12). In this context there was no prohibition on women to engage in literary creativity in the field of worship. Many biblical hymns were sung by women and became an integral part of the church service. For example, the hymn of the Most Holy Theotokos: “My soul glorifies the Lord,” recorded in the Gospel of Luke, is sung daily in the Orthodox Church. The Song of Miriam, Moses’ sister, which was sung after the crossing of the Red Sea, is an integral part of the Holy Saturday Divine Liturgy of St Basil the

²⁹ Jelizabet Ber-Sizhel’, *op. cit.*, 71.

³⁰ Ibid.

Great.³¹ The hymns written by a ninth-century abbess Kassia are also included in Orthodox Church liturgical books and are sung on Christmas and during the Passion Week. Hymns are often identified as anonymous, but Kassia is one of the few Byzantine women known to have written in her own name.³²

In order to fully understand the abovementioned instructions of the apostle Paul, it is necessary to put all his pastoral teachings revealed in his epistles in the context of his instruction on the great enlightenment in the Church. First, he perceives the Church as the Body of Christ whose members are equal in dignity and are one Body, and second, as a communion, the *koinonia* of persons, united by the gift of the Holy Spirit which is received by every person. The Holy Spirit unites the believers with Christ and with each other. They are different persons, but they complement each other according to the economy of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. These two definitions of the Church lead to the vision of triune unity and find their most perfect expression in the proclamation of the Epistle to the Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” (Eph. 4:4-7). This is the true *sobornost* (togetherness, catholicity) of the Church: oneness in Christ through the Holy Spirit of different persons and callings of everyone, men or women.

In the spirit of this Trinitarian and personalistic perspective, one can understand the baptismal hymn recorded in the Epistle to the Galatians: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:27-28). In Christ, through the Holy Spirit, all differences that exist between people cease to be divisions that lead to inequality and enmity. In the Church, the disunity of mankind that occurred as a result of falling away from God has been overcome. Filled with the life-giving energies of the

³¹ See Объяснение богослужения Страстной седмицы. Пасхальные богослужения, доступно на: <http://www.troiza.org/?p=19410>. [See Ob’jasnenie bogosluženii Strastnoj sedmicy. Pashal’nye bogosluženiya, dostupno na: <http://www.troiza.org/?p=19410>.]

³² Монахиня Игнатия, *Церковно-песнотворческие труды инокини Кассии*, Богословские труды. Сб. 24. Москва, 1983. [Monahinja Ignatija, *Cerkovno-pesnotvorčeskie trudy inokini Kassii*, Bogoslovskie trudy. Sb. 24. Moskva, 1983.]

Holy Spirit, the Church represents a new society where both Jews and Greeks, men and women, masters and slaves are re-connected in dialogue with one another through the Holy Spirit, enabling all to speak and understand each other's languages.

However, the Church, which has received the first fruits of the Holy Spirit, can only exist in the blessed hope (Tit. 2:13). The apostle, aware of this conflict of two natures, concludes in agony: "For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." (Rom. 7:22-23). It means that in our world, torn between the old and the new, the Church is built as a society of new values; a society where social status becomes secondary and ultimately irrelevant. It is a society where interpersonal relationships are established, where each person realizes himself/herself through the other person. These relationships must be developed according to the Spirit of Christ both between spouses and between masters and slaves.

In socio-political terms, the apostle Paul is neither a conservative nor a revolutionary. He calls on Christians, both men and women, to be free in Christ in the bosom of the eschatological community. This raises a very challenging question: do these values of the Kingdom of God, which transform interpersonal relationships in the Church and affect the conscience and knowledge of Christians, also affect the changes in society? It seems that the apostle Paul does not bring up this question. He neither addresses the legal status of women nor the more sensitive issue – the status of slaves.

Vladimir Lossky believes that the vision of the apostle Paul for the Church has a personalistic nature:³³ the Holy Spirit, who unites the baptized in one Body, is given "to each according to his ability" (Matt. 25:15). Man, according to his ability of spiritual growth, which is different for everyone, is called "to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). The difference lies in the capabilities of the human being to attain "the full stature of Christ" and not in their gender.

Analogously, the charisms, which form the structure of the Church and determine the various ecclesiastical services, represent the gifts given to individuals, not to social or biological categories. The receiving of the spiritual gifts is absolutely foreign to the modern-day criteria of distribution of titles and responsibilities like gender, nationality or social status. The apostle Paul

³³ Vladimir Lossky, *op. cit.*, 122.

never makes a difference between a female or male charism in his epistles. The idea of these “female charisms,” which is so dear to some of the modern women’s rights defenders and the practical implications of their analysis, can be considered a mystification. Nevertheless, their interpretation of charisms is not based on the apostle Paul’s concept of charism.

In the apostle Paul’s view, there have been both men and women in the Church who had received various personal charisms: prophecy, teaching, healing, guidance. He urges not to “quench the Spirit,” but to examine everything and “to hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess. 5:19, 21). At the same time, he instructs us that “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Cor. 12:7). This calling for the common good and order is for every person who receives the gifts, man or woman. Priscilla and her husband Aquila, who are greeted in the Epistle to the Romans, are a typical example of such fellowship (Rom. 16:3).

The Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of St Paul contain plenty of examples of women involved in the work of the apostles. The apostle Paul described them as his fellow workers in Christ, blessed by God to work together with him for the common good and the spreading of the Christian teaching. They all worked hard to build the Christian communities. Acts 16 describes a woman called Lydia of Macedonia, who was living in the city of Philippi when she met St Paul and was soon baptized becoming the first Christian woman in Europe (Acts 16: 14-15).

Saint Lydia, a successful merchant of purple dyes and fabrics, was a pious woman with an open heart and certainly a very determined woman who insisted on giving hospitality to the apostle Paul and his companions in Philippi. It is believed that the church in Philippi was built in honour of her home. Her hospitality and encounter with St Paul were crucial for the establishment of the church in Philippi.

The apostle Paul also mentions the deaconess Phoebe of the church at Cenchreae. He sent her as his emissary to deliver, read and interpret his epistle to the Romans. In his letter, St Paul recommends the Roman Christians “to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from [them], for she has been the benefactor of many people, including [him].” (Rom. 16:1-2). She was clearly a great authority in the first Christian community because St Paul also refers to her as *prostatis* (Greek: *προστάτης*), which indicates an influential or leading position in a community. The term *prostatis* originally meant a lord-master, leader,

guardian or protector and was often used in a religious context but in later translation works it was applied as an equivalent to the Roman concept of patron.³⁴ Other women mentioned in St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, who have "worked hard in the Lord," are Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis and Julia (Rom. 16:6, 12, 15). To this list of women who are "of the same mind in the Lord" he adds Syntyche and Euodia (Phil. 4:2).

Patriarchal prejudices about the nature and role of women in the Church and society

Reading the Leviticus laws, one might get the impression that a woman is seen as an inferior creature, a creature of less value and without equal rights.³⁵ For instance, the purification of the mother lasted twice as long after the birth of a female child (Lev. 12:1-5). The Jewish Daily Prayer ("Eighteen Blessings") reads as follows: "Blessed are you, Lord, who has not created me a woman." Numerous works of the great Jewish teachers stimulate contempt against women, at times even hostility bordering on misogyny.

"In the history of Christianity, we encounter a phenomenon that is quite disturbing: the legalist theological principle of Jewish thought has infiltrated Christian thought, it has even penetrated to such an extent that the latter at times is in danger to be sitting on Moses' throne and turn into transposed Rabbinism," concludes Paul Evdokimov.³⁶

³⁴ Liddell, Scott & Jones, *Lexicon*, s.v., 1882.

³⁵ The woman was not treated any differently in the laws of other patriarchal societies. With a mathematical clarity Pythagoras' statement expresses the prevailing notion about women: "There is a good principle that created order, light, and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness, and woman." In a similar fashion, Aristotle stated that matter was feminine and the principle of motion was masculine. He added that "woman belongs to another dimension and is not a constitutive element of human reality which is masculine." He claimed that "woman is feminine because of a deficiency of qualities." She is different, "of another kind," and in Plato's view, otherness is a negation and evil. He thanked the gods for being born free and a man. We understand now why Pandora was the one who unleashed all the evil. To punish men, the gods invent women, and with that they introduced passivity, diversity, matter and disorder. Women in Ancient Greece were confined to the gynaeceum and forbidden any intellectual pursuit. In his *Politics*, Aristotle, speaking about the weakness of women, says: "Silence is a women's glory." Women in Ancient Rome were not regarded as equal to men on the account of their weaknesses and shortcomings. Perceived as a thing (res), the woman was passed on to men to fulfil their needs. Treated as a portion of his estate, the husband had the right over the life and death of his wife. According to certain traditions, Australian Aboriginals allowed only one girl out of every two boys to survive. Nakka Mongols are known to have once murdered almost all their daughters at birth, thus doing them a favour in the hope to be reborn as boys in their next reincarnation.

³⁶ Pavle Evdokimov, *op. cit.*, 249.

On the other hand, Christian thinkers of the patristic period preoccupied themselves with dogmatic issues. Christian anthropology was not fully developed and marriage and love were often studied from a social perspective.

There have been discussions in the past about whether a woman has a soul, and some of the theologians doubted the possibility of a woman's direct relationship with God.³⁷ Even those who honoured and glorified the Mother of God believed that it was through men that women could assent to God. Such a Mariology deprives the Mother of God of her femininity and places every woman in the chasm between ontological levels.

During this period, the book *Domostroy* was considered to be an ideal set of rules according to which women were considered to be completely submissive to men. Corporal punishment was advised, and in order to increase the husband's authority, the book instructed fathers never to smile at their children. In order to clearly point out the distance and the difference between a man and a woman, the man-master always remained inaccessible.³⁸

"Some theologians have constructed an entire hierarchy built on 'submission' and 'authority' and have endlessly discussed whether man was the leader or the head. These discussions covertly contained a sinister call for silencing women," Evdokimov concludes.³⁹ However, this kind of request for silencing women, if taken literally, would condemn all those women in the history of Christianity who had been respectfully called Saints and Equal-to-the-Apostles in various liturgical texts.

It seems that patriarchy presents women as "relational beings." Consequently, her privilege lies in her being united with man's destiny. This leads to the question of whether the inferiority of a woman stems from her nature or the sociological conditions that have not changed for thousands of years.

Hence, it is easy to understand the deep anxiety caused by many prominent figures in the history of the Church.⁴⁰ There is no third option between the Virgin Mary, the crown of humanity,

³⁷ Among other things, this issue was discussed at the Second Macedonian Church Council in 585. For more on this see in Grigorij Turskij, *Istorija frankov*, translated by V. D. Savukov, Moscow, 1987, Volume VIII: Chapter 20.

³⁸ Evdokimov, *op. cit.*, 262.

³⁹ Evdokimov, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁴⁰ Tertullian declares "You are the devil's gateway" (*De cultu feminarum*, I, 1, PL 1: 141A). "The kingdoms of the heavens to eunuchs," (*De monogamia*, III, 8). St Ambrose said: "Married people should be ashamed of the condition in which they live" (*Exhortatio virginitatis*, PL 16: 346). According to St Clement of Alexandria, "Every woman should be overwhelmed with shame at the thought that she is a woman." (*Pedagogus*, II, 2, PG 8: 429). For St

“glorified by the seraphim,” and this creature that is defined as “incomplete” and submissive to the man. This led to a growing feeling of alienation during the period of patriarchy in the history of humankind, which presented itself as a normal condition despite St Paul’s statement in 1 Cor. 11:11 or St Peter’s observation: “Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honour to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life” (1 Peter 3:7).

The Orthodox Church holds that any act that denies the dignity of the human person and any other discrimination against women and men on the basis of sex is a sin. However, the Church also acknowledges that there have been examples throughout history that confirm discrimination against women. These observations are contained in the conclusions of the Inter-Orthodox Symposium on the Place of Women in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women that was held from October 30 to November 7, 1988 on the island of Rhodes. The symposium was initiated by the Ecumenical Patriarch and attended by hierarchs and eminent theologians from autocephalous churches. Among the conclusions of this symposium is the following statement: “Although we acknowledge the facts that testify to the existence of equality in dignity between men and women in the Church, we must also admit that as a result of human weakness and sinfulness, Christian communities have not always been able to suppress bad ideas, customs, traditions and social conditions that have practically contributed to the discrimination of women. Consequently, human sinfulness has created a practice that does not reflect the true nature of the Church... The Church must re-examine potential data, views and actions, which do not agree with her unshakable theological and ecclesiological principles, but have intruded from outside and, being in fact perpetuated, may be interpreted as demeaning toward women.”⁴¹

The place and role of women in modern Orthodox parishes

Thomas Aquinas, the copula is always associated with a certain loss of reason (cum quadam rationis jactura) (Summa theol., I-II, Q 34, art. 1, ad 1).

⁴¹ Inter-Orthodox Symposium, Rhodes, Greece 30 October – 7 November 1988, *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women*, Katerini: Tertios 1992, 24-26 conclusions.

Today more than ever, advanced theological thought seems to have been moved inward, out of a compelling need to open its field and break its boundaries by incorporating all the positive results of anthropological, psychological, sociological, and historical research. It presupposes that these results are to be interpreted in the light of tradition and integrated within the Church. But integration is more than just adding. Each element introduced into the organic whole represents a qualitative change, finding its complement, the pleroma (πλήρωμα), which is the only feature that gives its true meaning.

The issue of women's subordination and their inferior position to men is superfluous in the Orthodox Church. The focus is on the otherness, on the differences between men and women and their complementarity, social role, and spiritual ministry.

In modern parishes, women theologians hold important church offices, from central church administration to church media. Women are iconographers, teaching at Orthodox seminaries and holding professorships at universities.⁴² They are members of church choirs and are engaged in the parochial humanitarian work. Patricia Fann Bouteneff, in her article, *Invisible Leaders in the Orthodox Church*,⁴³ highlights a long list of women – Orthodox theologians and abbesses, who hold important positions in the church today. She enlists a variety of women's roles in the church, including pastoral counsellors,⁴⁴ church-endorsed chaplains, family counsellors,⁴⁵ spiritual mothers,⁴⁶ church diplomats,⁴⁷ heads of college ministries, members of church councils, commissions and committees, treasurers and auditors, church choir directors, university professors, icon painters, fresco painters, graphic designers, writers, translators, etc.

⁴² Father Andrej Kuraev in the article "Woman in the Church" points out that at St Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary even the subject of liturgy is taught by a woman: Prof. M. C. Krasovitskaya. Retrieved at: <https://www.mgarsky-monastery.org/kolokol/3536#10>.

⁴³ Patricia Fann Bouteneff, *Invisible Leaders in the Orthodox Church*, Holy Trinity, Yonkers NY; St Gregory the Theologian, New York, 2016.

⁴⁴ Pastoral counsellors are licensed in the field of psychological counselling or psychotherapy and are sensitive to spiritual perspectives, believing that they can invoke spiritual life to help heal emotional damage and resolve conflicts in order to pave the way for life transitions in the light of Christian values.

⁴⁵ Women theologians who are specially trained in the field of family psychotherapy and care for the well-being of Christian families.

⁴⁶ Abbesses who have acquired their wisdom in the "school of life."

⁴⁷ Many women do this service today. To work in the field of intra-Orthodox and ecumenical ministry, a person needs to have a good understanding of the Orthodox theology and way of life, to be open to learning from others, and to have skills in diplomacy.

Hence, the return of the order of deaconess, which existed in the first centuries of Christianity as a social service and helping those in need, has come into question. We especially remember: St Phoebe, “a deacon of the Church of Cenchreae” and “Equal to the Apostles” whom Saint Paul referred to as “a benefactor of many and of myself as well” (Rom. 16:1-2); St Olympias, a fourth-century deaconess and friend and confidant of St John Chrysostom; St Macrina, who was the sister of St Basil the Great; St Nonna, a fourth-century deaconess, the wife of St Gregory of Nazianzus. Their daughter and sister of St Gregory the Theologian – St Gorgonia, who was also a deaconess. St Gorgonia is praised for her love of Christ and study of Scriptures. After raising her family, she developed a ministry to the needy by opening her home to the poor. St Theosevia, the wife of St Gregory of Nyssa, was ordained to the diaconate right after her husband was consecrated a bishop in 371. We also remember St Irene, who was ordained as a deaconess of the Church St Sophia in the 9th century by St Methodios, Patriarch of Constantinople.⁴⁸ The example of St Nectarios of Aegina, who ordained two women as deaconesses in 1911 at the monastery on the island of Aegina, is also particularly significant.⁴⁹ Furthermore, one of the conclusions of the Inter-Orthodox Symposium, which was held on the island of Rhodes in 1988, stated that the apostolic order of the deaconess should be revived. The Rhodes statement says: “It was never altogether abandoned in the Orthodox Church though it has tended to fall into disuse. There is ample evidence from apostolic times, from the patristic, canonical and liturgical tradition, well into the Byzantine period (and even in our own day) that this order was held in high honour. The revival of this ancient order would represent a positive response to many of the needs and demands of the contemporary world. This would be all the more true if the diaconate in general (male as well as female) were restored in all places in its original, manifold services (diakoniai) with extension into the social sphere, in the spirit of the ancient tradition and in response to the increasing specific needs of our time. It should not be solely restricted to a purely liturgical role or considered to be a mere step on the way to higher ‘ranks’ of clergy.”⁵⁰ The ministry of women ordained to the diaconate would benefit the life of the Church in areas such as pastoral care, education, mission, and philanthropy. The ministry

⁴⁸ *A Call for the Rejuvenation of the Ministry of the Ordained Deaconess Addressed to His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I*, Submitted by Saint Catherine’s Vision, November, 2014.

⁴⁹ Evangelos Theodorou, The “Ordination” or “Appointment” of Deaconess, *Women Deacons*, Athens, FitzGerald: 1954, (151-152), p.96.

⁵⁰ Conclusion, Inter Orthodox Symposium *op. cit.*, 32–36.

would also expand to the care for the sick and destitute, and the increasing need for the Church to minister to parents who experience the loss of a child, domestic violence, human trafficking and other forms of trauma, addiction or affliction. The revival of women deacons in the Orthodox Church would emphasize in a special way the dignity of woman and give recognition to her contribution to the work of the Church as a whole.

The heavily masculine world of patriarchy where the charism of women played no role has overcome today. However, the vigorous return to the spiritual sources remains to be imperative. They remind us of the complementarity of man and woman: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18) and “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman.” (1 Cor. 11:11).

Conclusion

We could conclude that the Orthodox Christian teaching indicates complete equality of men and women in status, worth and dignity. Throughout the centuries the Church has supported Christian women in performing a wide range of services according to their nature, personal preferences, and calling. They have participated in liturgical, pastoral, catechetical, missionary and social services in the Church. In our reflections on the modern role of women in the Church, we repeatedly remind ourselves of the example of the Most Holy Mother of God and many other holy women whose testimony, courage and piety reveal the presence of God in the world.

However, the Orthodox Church has revealed that there have been examples of discrimination against women caused by patriarchal cultural stereotypes over the centuries. It is unfortunate that in some Christian communities, by force of inertia rather than persuasion rooted in faith, there have been discriminating demands and prohibitions against women. Such practices are the outcome of local customs and traditions and do not comply with Orthodox teaching. Orthodoxy categorically affirms the dignity of every human being: both female and male. Any act that denies the dignity of the human person and any other discrimination based on gender is considered a sin in Orthodoxy. The mission of the Church is to affirm the dignity of every human person before the world because God created Man (human being) in His image and likeness (Gen. 1:26).

Despite this kind of perceptions in the modern Orthodox Church regarding the place and role

of women in the Church and society, the recent Pan-Orthodox Council held in Crete (2016), as originally structured, did not include female delegates. This act resulted in a petition from more than 1,200 women and men, both clergy and laity from various jurisdictions around the world.

Although this move did not increase the number of women in the Council, His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch, responded to the petition in writing, saying among other things that: “Nevertheless, your constant effort and encouragement within your churches for greater openness towards women in the canonical borders of tradition will immensely enrich the life of our Church.”⁵¹

I hope that the women in the Orthodox Church will continue to be inspired by the many positive examples of Christian women, saints and equal-to-the-apostles who have courageously worked for the good of the Church over the centuries, and by the many examples of women theologians and abbesses working in the Orthodox Church today. I believe that women in their work within the church service should be guided by the feeling of their calling, which is given by God to everyone. As daughters of God the Father, as followers of God the Son, and as persons crowned with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate goal of women in the Church is to be holy so as to glorify God, now, always and forever.

⁵¹ Patricia Fann Bouteneff, *op. cit.*, 4.