

The Witness of the Church in the Post-Modernity and the Actualization of Her Members

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In our presentation we will discuss the need for an increase in the role of women in the life of the Church. By doing this, the gap between Orthodoxy and Orthodox Practice (Orthopraxia) is breeched. Simultaneously, the witness of our Church becomes more persuasive and more effective as it concerns the facts and demands of the modern world.

The participation of women in the liturgical life of the Church, in her pastoral, catechetical and philanthropic work, comprises a part of the broader issue concerning the participation of the laity in the life of our Church¹.

In this area the general finding is that there exists a need for an upgrade and for broader participation. However, continuing in the area of the diminished role of the laity, the place of women is even more subordinate. The reason is that this has become standard in the still existing cultural framework of the past and in the reluctance to face it critically.

This issue concerns all of the economic, social and cultural circumstances that have been in effect for approximately two thousand years in the Mediterranean basin, which for two centuries now have gone by the wayside and are not coming back. Despite this fact, they have left their footprints very powerfully in the way that men face women in the life of the Church. However, these attitudes are also not uncommon in these same women.

The Orthodox were pushed to concern themselves seriously with the so-called “women’s issues” in the final decades of the 20th century. The challenge came from the Protestant world within the context of the World Council of Churches, where the orthodox Churches were formally involved according to Inter-Orthodox conciliar decisions.

Since the beginning of the 20th Century, the dynamism of the feminist movement has led to the multiplying of the role of women in society and to the recognition of their many abilities. These important changes did not leave the Protestant and Anglican communities in Western Europe and in the United States intact at the start and, somewhat later, their communities in the rest of the world.

In these numerous Christian communities women obtained an equal role in administration, decision-making, teaching, preaching but also in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, due to the fact that the ordination of women to the level of the priesthood and episcopacy was accepted.

¹ See also, Dimitra Koukoura, *The Place of the Orthodox Women in the Church and other ecumenical studies*, Edit. Kornelia Sfakianaki, Thessaloniki, 2005.

In 1974 the theme "*the communion of men and women in the Church*" was adopted as a program of theological study by the Commission on "Faith and Order" of the World Council of Churches. Perhaps this initiative was influenced by a similar program entitled "*The Full Participation of Men and Woman in the Life of Human Society*" launched by the United Nations at the same time. However, maybe the two events just happened to coincide since the rights of women were truly a timely subject with international dimensions in that era.

That same year at the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at Chambesy Geneva, approximately thirty male delegates of the Orthodox Churches gathered together with the exclusive purpose of giving the first Orthodox common responses to a broad list of questions to the Commission on Faith and Order. These questions can be summarized as follows:

- a) What is the level of participation of women in the life of your Church?
- b) Why are women never included in the Orthodox delegations sent to inter-Christian dialogues?
- c) Why is the ordination of women rejected?

Obviously the answers given at Chambesy were not sufficient. However, the event was followed by successive meetings so that more complete answers could be given for all of the issues. This was done just as much for the specialist researchers as it was for the representative members of the Orthodox Churches: both men and women.

For those who know the practice of the World Council of Churches dialogue takes place between the members of the churches, both men and women, because theological viewpoints are not given simply as a result of theoretical academic research, but principally as the spiritual experience of the members of the ecclesiastical community.

For this reason the Orthodox were not acceptable, when, in their delegations there were only clergy people and male theologians. The Orthodox delegates used the following argument: in the Orthodox Church men and women have communion in the Holy Spirit and for this reason both of them state the same things about the Orthodox Faith.

This is indeed true. However, it was not certain that for this reason women were being excluded as delegates. Moreover, it was also true that in male-dominated cultural backgrounds women were publicly silent and only men had the right of public speech. Our fellow speakers, however, have expressed their questions more elegantly: given that you believe the same things why could we not listen to their voice?

For serious and responsible answers to be given and, due to the economic capability the programs on women's issues that the World Council

of Churches offered, the opportunity has been given for a series of conferences, from 1975 until July of 2010, concerning the role of women in the Orthodox Church and the ordination of women.

In 1975 at the monastery of AGAPIA in Romania, for the first time, Orthodox women discussed the related questions that had been put forth by the Commission of Faith and Order. For this precise reason, their findings were awaited with great interest.

In 1981, in Sheffield, England, there was the treatment of questionnaires that had been sent by the Commission of Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. (Three years earlier they had been sent to all of the churches/members.) These questionnaires comprised timely theological questions regarding the *“nature and place of women in the life of the church and the possibility of their ordination.”*

Additionally, all the papers dealt with the issue of 1974 on *“the communion of men and women in the church”*, were summarized. The dim Orthodox answers, as well as the responsibility of the Orthodox and, primarily, Ecumenical Patriarchate regarding the obligations of inter-Christian dialogue, led to the Conference in Rhodes in 1988.

This inter-Orthodox dialogue was historic for many reasons. It was significant, certainly for the first appearance of a meaningful contingent of women, 33%, who were named either official delegates or had been called as expert advisors. Primarily, it was historic, however, for the honest confrontation of the issues, without quibbling or sophistry; a fact that truly comprised an Orthodox witness in the modern world.

After Rhodes, other interesting theological consultations followed which featured a large number of Orthodox women and observers from the Protestant world. These encounters took place in Crete (1990), Damascus (1996), Constantinople (1997) as a part of another new program of the WCC, the *“Decade of solidarity with women”*, which was also possibly a response of another similar program of the United Nations.

At the beginning of the third millennium, in 2001 in Geneva, Orthodox women were called to advise a program on *Women’s Voices and Visions on Being Church* within the setting of a broader study program on ecclesiology under the title *“On Being Church”*, held by the Commission on Faith and Order of WCC.

Later in 2008 in Volos, Orthodox women once again conversed about the participation of women in the life of the church in relationship to modern challenges. Whereas, in 2010 at Saint Vlasios Monastery- Durres in Albania, the Orthodox witness of men and women in the modern world was discussed.

The general confirmations that were taken from all of these meetings, in general terms are as follows:

a) The ordination of women was not stated at any meeting as a request of Orthodox women nor was it expressed as an unfulfilled desire or secret hope. The opposite occurred dealing with the urgent request for the more complete participation of women in the life of the church; a subject that is the overriding issue of all of the meetings.

Concerning the Orthodox teaching on the ordination of women, what comprised the findings of Rhodes were various theological viewpoints supporting the negative stance of the Orthodox Church. This event, instead of closing the theological discussion, actually triggered the opportunity for a more sober theological approach to be developed, which included the preparation of special masters' and doctoral papers, as well as the writing of books and articles.

We owe it to ourselves to remember our teacher of blessed memory, Professor Nicholas Matsoukas, who unendingly emphasized the obligation of theological research to answer the questions of every age in the moment that these questions come up. Even if the various issues of the day do not directly concern the Church, Theology, according to professor Matsoukas, must always offer the truth of the Gospel and must be discussed among these issues. By doing this, it will be in a position to help the Church in the future, if at some point the Church is required to face these issues, or perhaps never! Nevertheless, the duty of Theology is its responsible and crystal clear word.

This view was not just expressed in students' research papers but also in his well-known presentation at the joint meeting of the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki with the Commission of Faith and Order. In that short paper with irrefutable biblical and dogmatic arguments, he arrived at the conclusion that the denial of ordination is due to the "argument of tradition" (*argumentum e traditone*). Also, in the ultimately negative effects that would follow women's ordination, or even a possible acceptance or implementation of such changes which are not necessary for the life of the church.

Specifically, a positive stance regarding ordination, without there being a source and inherent demand on the part of women or an urgent need on behalf of all of the Church's people, could cause great damage with an uncontrolled storm of reactions, from which the most beneficial result would be the recognition of a more full recognition of the participation of women in the liturgical life of the church.

b) In a more official way in Rhodes, clerics of all levels, academic professionals and expert male researchers recognized in their findings the deep injustices committed against women and, after two thousand years, asked for forgiveness: "It must, however, also be

confessed honestly and humbly that due to human weakness and sinfulness, Christian communities have not always and everywhere been able to effectively neutralize perspectives, customs and traditions, historical developments and societal circumstances which proved to be, in practice, discrimination against women. Human sinfulness led to this action, which does not reflect the true nature of the Church of Christ.”²

c) If anyone were to compare the findings of the conferences that were mentioned above, in all of them there would be listed the multiple possibilities of a more full participation of women, together with men, in the following areas:

- Instruction and Christian formation at all levels of Education
- Spiritual guidance concerning, marriage, baptism, the family, patients, etc.
- Societal concern for the elderly, orphans, the battered, etc.
- Youth work
- Direction of choirs, participation in chanting, reading etc.
- Communications and publications
- Ecclesiastical administration, participation in decision-making at all levels
- Participation in delegations for all of the inter-Christian dialogues and commissions

There are also references to human sexuality in the subjects “concerning clean and unclean women” within the broader evaluation of the service of female monastics and presbyteres- the wives of priests- in parish work and the revival of the order of the female diaconate.

Without a doubt, the official recognition of the numerous responsible roles of women in the life of the Orthodox Church on an equal, at least theoretical, basis with men is an encouraging result of the participation of the Orthodox in the inter-Christian dialogue in the frame work of the WCC.

The opportunity for this reflection came from the Protestant and Anglican churches, which, in turn, were called upon in time to adjust the roles of women in their communities, in accordance with the reality of the modern era.

As is well-known, some of the positive and irreversible values of modernity are human rights, democracy and the equality of men and women.

² “The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women”, Interorthodox Symposium, Rodos, November 1988. A collective volume edited by Gennadios Limouris, ed. TERTIOS, Katerini.

They are declarations that took on worldwide validity and affect lawmaking and the life of each and every human society³.

In the case of Orthodox communities, this societal framework offered the most favorable circumstances for the embodiment of the social dimension or salvific equality of men and women as well as for the variety of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which do not vary according to their evaluative scale but rather according to their quality.

It is indeed a contradiction between Orthodoxy and Orthodox practice (Orthopraxia), when someone enters into a sacred church and looks at the walls or the temple and sees men and women saints depicted without discrimination, yet looks at the chanters' stands and sees only men. Certainly under the influence of our time, frequently a woman is present in the areas of men. However, only when there are no men do women take their places. The hour is late for mixed choirs or even women only choirs in parish churches.

Salvific equality is an issue of the sanctifying grace of God, while the issue regarding the participation in the places of chanters or where women sit in church, whether it be in the old women's area on the loft or on the more recent ground floor left side, is an issue of variable social factors.

For example, the separate women's area on the loft is representative of male dominance in societal exclusion of women. Their place on the left side reflects the industrial age and the rights of women on the public stage, next to men, but separate from them. This happened with the division of schools into male and female, of elections into departments of men and women and, similarly, in the church buildings into men's seats and women's seats.

And while the members of the church venerate and reference the contribution of holy women, in their church councils, where decisions regarding the activities of the parish are made, even today, with the exception of a few cases, women have absolutely no place. Their place is in the charity councils, where with great willingness, dedication and effectiveness they carry out the decisions of the male members.

The question that comes up after so many inter- Christians and intr-Orthodox discussions and the, at least, theoretical recognition of the numerous and effective roles of women in the life of the church, is as follows: ultimately, what has been accepted by the Orthodox world, with what speed was it implemented and in which geographical areas.

From the outset, someone could state that all of the conversations that have taken place, the findings of worthwhile conferences, the research papers,

³ See more on modernity, post or rather late-modernity, their effects and globalization, John Petrou, *Social Theory and Modern Culture*, Ed. Vantias, Thessaloniki 2005 (in Greek), also for the effects of Globalization see Daniel G. Grooter, *Globalization Spirituality and Justice*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 10545

did not become known to the larger church community, who on behalf of and because of, all these conferences were organized. However, it is obvious that the dialogue took place more so as for us to appear consistent to the members of WCC, who have asked with intense interest about the Orthodox positions.

The results following these conferences, however, were disseminated minimally. There were many reasons. For example, at the time of the conference in Rhodes, the majority of the traditional Orthodox Community was under the control of totalitarian regimes, with limited religious freedoms and no possibility of taking initiative on behalf of the churches. Later, when the wind of democracy blew through, the churches, mostly fortified by conservative tendencies, saw the ecumenical movement and its questions with distrust. This adherence to de facto traditions was noticed at the exact moment when their societies and mainly their youth indiscriminately accepted everything from the western, and more precisely, the American way of life.

We can say with certainty as an example of progress the access of women to theological education, not to seminaries, but to where theological institutions were placed in the state universities as well as their participation in the ecumenical movement.

In the Middle East, at the end of the 1980s, civil war devoured the property as well as the lives of people. It was, therefore, natural within this climate that women struggled for peace and the protection of the goodness of life rather than for fuller participation in the activities of the church.

However, these needs were not the same as those of Orthodox women from Western Europe and the United States who are required to explain to their social context their every step inside the Orthodox Church. For example, they have to explain to the various heterodox who demonstrate interest and try to show them by the roles that members have in the life of their Church in order for them to advance further into the issues of the faith.

Moreover, these same women frequently have to offer up apologies to their children who are learning from the time they are in the western kindergarten about the equality of men and women. To a small daughter of an American Orthodox woman a persuasive answer has to be given as to why it was forbidden for her to enter into the altar and to hold one of the fans at the Great Entrance, while it was allowed for her small brother to be an altar boy.

Perhaps the general reluctance for the acceleration of change and the opposition to more roles for women is attributable to the fear of reaction by conservative circles. These small but zealous groups a priori condemn the ecumenical movement and the development of the role of women, since, in their view, the prototype of female piety is more in line with women of the agricultural and early industrial society.

By doing so, this small number of noisemaking groups is taken into account. These groups are unable to discern the changeable cultural aspects from the unchanging nature of salvation in Christ, while the many opportunities for a consistent Orthodox witness are silenced. Gregory the Theologian did not live in an age of beneficial laws concerning women, but he implicitly denounced the societal cruelty of his own age. His protest always remains important: "For men are lawmakers and for them the laws are made."

The facing of women's issues and the implementation of so many beautiful decisions were most likely left to the torture of time, to the method of "going slowly", so as for "things to ripen". Perhaps this stance betrays caution with the rapidly changing world which encircles us, with the new needs of people and the corresponding adjustment of pastoral approaches.

The following argument is frequently heard: the regular members of the church do not want changes. Women develop a plethora of activities within the life of the parish and they are thankful for the roles that they already have. We will not upset the stable members of the Church by suggesting new things, with the hope that we will attract those who are not coming and loose those who are there!

Here, however, is exactly the issue of Orthodox witness in the modern world. Today we can tolerate, without criticism, teaching about clean and unclean women, a teaching that has obvious Jewish overtones and is intensely related to the societal circumstances of the pre-Christian centuries in Palestine?

The issue was highlighted, justifiably, in inter-Orthodox meetings, however, it is more broadly discussed with great difficulty. And it is not only clergy who remain defenders of the uncleanness of women because of their monthly cycle or the duration of their post-natal period, despite the scientific proofs of biology and physiology of the human body. Many pious women, because of zeal, accept their "uncleanness", primarily because they have been taught and accepted these things from their mother or grandmother and a priest who certified it.

However could some similar cases influence modern young people? Do they offer the witness of a living faith that frees the person from the bonds of decay and death or encloses him and her in habits that have come from a remote era that created them?

Recent decades have been characterized by some sociologists as a post-modern era and by others as late modernity. The second option has been preferred after Professor Petrou. However, whatever era that we live in is called, its main feature is globalization. And the main feature of globalization is the rapid development of technology, which brought the entire world into our neighborhood and the world began to comprise one neighborhood.

In this neighborhood there circulate people with different cultural backgrounds, languages, religions, customs, traditions, personal objectives, needs and much pain caused by the destruction of the environment, the insensitivity of the economically powerful, heightened nationalism, the unending manipulation of the strong at the expense of the weak.

In this cultural context most Orthodox are also called to live their faith and to offer their witness. They are called to stand substantially and effectively beside innumerable sufferers and offer hope to the hopeless, the message of peaceful coexistence and creative cooperation, by the experience of the suffering, crucified yet also resurrected Christ. In this struggle of sacrifice and tears, participation is equal and full, without any discrimination against women. Rather, discrimination in sacrifice is for women!

Could anyone support, that within the agony that the world community is going through today, as it concerns the economic crisis which threatens developed countries and economic poverty which tortures the largest part of the population of earth, that the issue regarding the full participation of men and women in the life of the church is really important?

And who focuses in detail on this issue, when what most people are struggling with is an immediate solution to the problem of their survival?

Despite all of this, the globalization that dominates our times has other aspects and offers various possibilities to the members of the society. As is the basic right of choice, the plethora of choices, the free exchange of ideas, the dissemination of different religious beliefs, the “unchurched” people, as well as the tendency to move from one Christian confession to the other.

The desire for consistency between Orthodoxy and Orthodox practice (Orthopraxia) is urgent. This is linked to catechism, the pastoral, active participation in the needs of modernity and creative dialogue within the requirements of the times. It is also linked to the acceptance of increased roles for women within the life of the church, since things have certainly ripened after two thousand years. Such brave decisions comprise a crystallized Orthodox witness in our demanding age.