



GRAMMATA ON ORDINATION

As women have begun to be ordained in other churches, the question of why Eastern Orthodoxy has never raised the issue still presents legitimate reasons to address this question.

The issue of women's ordination has not gained a high profile in the Orthodox Church because of the different approach the Church addresses such questions. For instance, if the early church had been in agreement on a matter and if that consensus continued unbroken over the centuries, then it is perceived that the Holy Spirit has been and still is leading the Church. Jesus said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). Thus, the Orthodox Church has not ordained women priests for twenty centuries.

However, there always were women ministers of the Gospel. So-called non-sacerdotal ministry, such as preaching, is open to all people, regardless of gender, once they are trained and authorized to do so. Keep in mind that everything the Church does is sacramental. Can a woman be a missionary evangelist and preach the gospel in foreign lands? Yes, because we see the example of St. Nina of Georgia. She was just a young girl, 14 years old, when she was abducted and carried as a slave into the nation of Georgia. There she had the opportunity to speak to the Queen about her faith, then to the king. Eventually the whole nation was baptized. A woman can preach and prepare the faithful for baptism (St. Nina brought in a priest to accompany her to actually perform the baptisms), as well as pave the way for churches to be founded.

Women's ministries can be answered by looking at what Orthodox women have actually done. Can a woman be a theologian and liturgist? Yes, there is St. Cassiane. Can a woman be an apologist and debater, presenting the Christian faith against opponents? Yes, St. Catherine, St. Perpetua and others have done so.

Woman may even exercise authority over both men and women as well as rule an entire nation. A woman can call a Church Council that establishes church doctrine. We honor the valiant accomplishments of Empress St. Theodora. There are also many women, called "Equal to the Apostles", including St. Mary Magdalene, St. Helen and St. Junia.

In the Orthodox Church, women have exercised a vast range of ministries. History confirms that Orthodox women can be healers, missionaries, preachers, teachers, evangelists, spiritual directors, church-planters, miracle-workers, iconographers, hymnographers, pastoral counselors, debaters, writers of prayers and theology.

Though the Church has never spelled out reasons why she only ordained men, this does, however, not preclude women from the ministry of the Church that in itself is sacramental and well beyond the mere function of a priest. Thus, much if not most of Christ's work in the world is administered by those not ordained to serve at the altar. By focusing on formal ordination obsessively seems to undermine the general priesthood of the faithful and a kind of clericalism that exalts ordained ministry while dismissing the value of the work lay people undertake.

Let us realize that the question of female ordination to the priesthood is being raised for the first time in our history. Throughout all of Orthodox Church history, this matter has never been controversial. If God had intended women be ordained, one would conclude that the topic would have surfaced again and again, and perhaps brought tension and discussion throughout the centuries. If half the pool of possible priests were being excluded solely on the basis of gender, one would mourn the Church's visible damage by such loss. One may assume, based on God's dealing in the Old Testament, that He would have sent prophets and saints to change it. It appears that the all-male priesthood was never a point of argument.

There are some arguments used by our conservative Protestant and Catholic brothers that are not tenable and often illogical. For example, opponents of women's ordination tend to cite St. Paul's requirement that women be submissive and silent in church (I Tim. 2:11-15 and I Cor. 14:34-35). The real meaning is explained from the word "hesychia" in the Greek text, meaning "prayerful stillness". Paul honors many women in active ministry, such as the deaconess Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), and he hails Euodia, Synteche (I Cor. 4:2-3) and Prisca (Rom. 16:3) as synergoi (fellow-workers) in the gospel. Vocal prophetesses span the bible, from Moses' sister Miriam (Ex. 15:20) to the four daughters of St. Philip (Acts 21:9). The prophetess Anna spoke out in the temple, telling everyone about the child Christ (Lk. 2:36-38). When we read St. Paul's message in context, we know that St. Paul's primary concern is that worship be reverent and orderly which includes men, women and children.

Another faulty argument is that a priest must be a man, because he represents Christ. Christ was male but also Jewish, had a certain height and hair color. Why is only his maleness indispensable? Surely the fact that he was Jewish is even more significant, but it does not exclude men from ordination who do not have Jewish genes. Early Christians reflected very little on why Christ was male. Instead, they emphasized the fact that he was human. Christ's maleness is not even mentioned in the hymns appointed for the Feast of the Circumcision, which would seem the likeliest. There may be good practical and cultural reasons why Jesus was a man, but the early church did not explore them.

How blessed we are to have a *living* tradition, that sets scripture in a context of real people and real lives, so we can experience how Scriptures are lived rather than intellectually interpreted.

If the Holy Spirit were to lead us towards women’s ordination, it will become undeniable. We pray “Thy will be done” every day. If it becomes His will to ordain women priests, the Church will be unable to avoid recognizing it.

Brothers and sisters, we would never want to block the Holy Spirit. If indeed He is calling the Church to a new understanding of women to be ordained, it will be impossible not to heed this demand. The earmarks of such a change will be peace, humility and unity in Christ, not in getting honor and glory.

Since the 1980s, the Orthodox Church has been in the process of reviving the ancient practice of ordaining women deacons. Within this context, a balance of male and female is emphasized.

If we cannot or refuse to understand the difference between male and female, we sure will not comprehend what previous generations knew about the value of an all-male priesthood. We hope and pray that we and our future generations will regain peace and clarity and be able to once again recognize and enunciate this mystery.

**Given on the 24th day of October in the year MMXVI
Commemoration of the Great-Martyr Arethas and his companions**

**✠ Melchizedek
Patriarchal Exarch**

