

Women and Divine Service in the Ancient and Russian Orthodox churches

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The ecclesiastical ministry of women is a topical issue today. For one thing, eighty per cent of the active members of the Russian Church are women, many of them fulfilling the obediences of reader, chorister and candle-bearer. In this connection it is important to ascertain the degree to which these ministries are traditional for women and whether the ancient Undivided Church had women clerics,

For another, the increasingly wide-spread practice of women being ordained in Protestant Churches, which is more likely than not linked with world wide process of women's emancipation, requires a well argued response on the part of the Orthodox that would tell all inquirers that the sacrament of Holy Orders for women in Orthodoxy has neither dogmatic nor canonical foundations.

The following paper is an attempt to shed light on these issues

The 1st Century. Apostolic Divine Service

The Jerusalem Church was at the outset a united grace endowed family which under the apostles' guidance delved into all important matter of Church organisation and faith. At that time women were greatly involved in the functioning of Christian communities. The first Christian church in Jerusalem gathered at the home of Mark's mother, Mary (Acts 12: 15), and in Philippi, at the home of a certain Lydia (Acts 16:14- 15). Women like Syntyche and Euodias were co-workers of St Paul the Apostle in the endeavour of preaching. In Corinth, the domestic church of Aquila and Priscilla, whom the apostle repeatedly greeted in his epistles (Rom 16:3-4; 1 Cor., 16:19; 2 Tim.4:19), is well known.

The make-up of apostolic Divine Service takes shape from the words of the writer of the Acts of the Apostles: "And they (Christians) continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42), and "these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus" (Acts 1: 14).

M. Skaballanovich writes that "the divine services of the first Christians were of two types: on the one hand, they took part in the Hebrew, Old Testament service of the temple and, to be sure, in the synagogue housed at it, and, on the other, had their own domestic service as a supplement to it" (1.p.19). It was in the domestic service that Christians were able to perform the "breaking of the bread", which is a designation of common repasts; of a Eucharistic nature. Thus were inaugurated the suppers of love (agape) that existed in the Christian Church prior to the 4th century" (ibid.,p.20).

It can be confidently said that at that time women took part in prayer and hymnody during Christian Divine Service. This is all the more important since, "according to

Tertullian, the spiritual aspect of agape was of a hymnodic nature, with virtually each person in attendance taking part alternately in the singing (I. p.78).

It is appropriate to note that the singing of women during Divine Service has a tradition dating back to the Old Testament. In I Chronicles 25:6, we read "All these (sons and daughters of Heman) were under the hands of their father for song in the house of the Lord, with cymbals, psalteries, and harps, for the service of the house of God". The description by Philo of Alexandria of a service by therapeutae which had common points with Christian liturgy is also interesting. After supper they had an All Night Vigil" during which two choirs, men's and women's, sang; initially they sang separately, and then they combined into one. The men were directed by 'Moses the Prophet" and the women, by "Mariam the Prophetess".

According to Skaballanovich, the structure of Divine Service which was reflected in the Acts and in the epistle of St James the apostle is the "first stage" of the development of Christian divine services. In his epistles, in particular I Corinthians, St Paul the Apostle speaks already of the next stage of its formation. This stage is characterised by a "mutating of the institution of agape, on the one hand, and the development of the spiritual gifts and their broad application at Divine Service, on the other" (I.p.24)

In chapters 12- 14 of the first epistle to the Corinthians St Paul the apostle draws an inspired picture of Divine Service, where all the worshippers and clerics are truly united by the spirit of God. Metropolitan Filaret Drozdov wrote: "The grace of the Holy Spirit in the pre-eminent Church poured forth like the sea" (2,vol.2.,p.293) The apostle enumerates the bearers of spiritual gifts: apostles, prophets and teachers. Among the prophets there were also women. The Acts name, specifically the four daughters of Deacon Philip (Acts 21:9- 10). Prophetesses of early Christianity are the heiresses of the famous Biblical Deborah, Miriam, the sister of the prophet Moses, and, lastly, Anne the Prophetess who "... departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day", and when Our Lord Jesus Christ was brought into the temple and the Righteous Simeon took Him into his arms, Anna began prophesying in the temple, and she "gave thanks likewise unto the Lord and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36-38).

St Paul the apostle attaches extraordinary importance to prophetic ministry and urges that the gift of prophecy be used during divine Service. How significant the role played by the prophets was is evidenced by one of the earliest monuments of Christian literature. "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (1st Century) : "Do not allow the prophets to administer the eucharist at their discretion' (3)

Did prophetesses take part in early Christian divine services? On the one hand St Paul the apostle speaks in I Cor. I I of the inadmissibility for women to prophecy with an uncovered head. On the other hand, the apostle's categorical ban on women speaking in the churches (I Cor. 14:34) is well known. Does this mean that the apostle permitted women to prophecy outside the church and forbade prophesying inside the church? Myshtsin surmises that this ban applied solely to the women parishioners of the Corinthian Church in which they could have taken too much power (4,p.248). In any event, if we proceed from the rule of the contraries, the sheer fact of the ban attests that at some very early stage in the development of Christian liturgy women took an active part

in it as prophetesses. Myshtsin goes even further in his suppositions, maintaining that in early Christian times, women, on an equal footing with men, had spiritual gifts, taught, baptized, administered the eucharist and absolved sinners (ibid.,p.380)

2nd 3rd Centuries: The emergence of Church Offices . Church Widows

In the 2nd and 3rd centuries free ministries in the Church gave way to church posts, including those for women - widows and deaconesses. We find mention of both back in the writings of St Paul the Apostle (I Tim.5:1-16; Rom. 16:1)

Philo of Alexandria attests that the institution of 'pious widows' existed among the therapeutae. These were elderly women 'most of whom had grown old as virgins: they preserved their chastity not by force, as some priestesses in Hellas, but of their goodwill, out of a passionate zeal for wisdom' (5. p.146)

I Tim. 5:5-16 lists the requirements for a 'true widow', who, unlike widows in the usual sense of the word, should 'continue in supplications and prayers night and day'. The Syrian Didaskalia', a monument from the middle of the '3rd century, narrates that when a woman entered the rank of widow she would take a vow never to remarry and never to covet worldly things (6,col.172).

What, then, did the ecclesiastical ministry of widows consist in?. The 'Didaskalia' says that, like Judith, a widow should incessantly pray for the community, while at home, sing hymns, read Holy Scripture and observe hours of prayer and days of fasting (ibid). Thus, the point at issue is domestic prayer, not Divine Service in the church.

Of great importance is the testimony of the 'Didaskalia' to the effect that widows not only prayed for the sick but also imposed their hands on them with the aim of healing them (7,p.42), This bespeaks the fact that the widows' ministry was regarded as charismatic.

Unquestionably, widows partially accepted the service of the word which was intrinsic to the women assistants of the apostles. Widows preached the Gospel, but only to other women during visits to their homes, Hermas' 'The Shepherd', which dates back to the 2nd century, attests that a widow, who in all probability was Grapta, was able to admonish men as well. This monument contains an interesting detail: Grapta reads a book from the pulpit. Thus, widows had pulpits in some churches, This is borne out by images on ancient frescoes of elderly women sitting at pulpits. In performing their ministry of the word, widows prepared women for Baptism and possibly helped in administering the sacrament as well.

Definitive liturgical ministry of widows is evidenced by the 4th-5th century movement entitled 'The Behest of the Lord Jesus Christ'. It follows from it that a widow was designated for ecclesiastical service by a special prayer of the bishop. On the hierarchical ladder she occupied a place lower than the deacon and higher than the hypodeacon.

The monument contains the instruction that after paschal agapes the widows remain together with the clergy for all night prayer, at matins, among 22 petitions by deaconesses there is a petition for presvitidai. What is evidently meant is the senior widow, like Grapta. but what is most revealing is that the 'Behest' mentions a special

'widows' matins' and expounds its office.

A widow could conduct a service either at home or in church, but during the cleansing period she was not allowed to approach the sanctuary. The monument says that if a widow has pious girlfriends, it would be very good if they pray together with her so as to answer 'Amen'. Aside from matins, a widow had to perform a special service at night as well. Skaballanovich writes that 'these widow services are reminiscent of today's cell rules for the simplicity and monotony of their content' (I. p.94)

The conclusion can be drawn that the ministry of widows, which was virtually elbowed out by that of deaconesses in the 3rd century, was an upshot of the service of the first women Christians - the helpers of Christ and the apostles. This was charismatic ministry.

Their participation in the liturgy was defined by time and place and extended from receiving catechumens and assisting at Baptism to celebrating independent divine services, as is reflected in 'The Behest of the Lord Jesus Christ'

3rd and 4th Centuries The Ministry of Deaconesses

The first mention of deaconesses is found in St Paul the Apostle, In I Tim.3, after bishops and deacons, the apostle names some women (p.11) and demands that they be 'honest, not libellous, sober, and true in every respect'. The list of their virtues is close to that for deacons. This passage has long evoked disputes, Early interpreters St Clement of Alexandria, St Jerome of Strido, St John Chrysostom find in these words instructions for women vested with the title of deaconess. For their part, Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther are convinced that the point at issue here is the wives of deacons. The same viewpoint is reflected by the Russian translation, in which the word 'wives' is supplemented by the pronoun 'their' which is absent in the original. 'Wives of deacons' is the result.

We find yet more convincing evidence of deaconesses in Rom, 16: 1, Here the apostle recommends to the Roman Christians a certain Phoebe, who is called a 'diakonos'. In St Paul the apostle, this word has a very broad meaning and is used in the sense of a votary, servant, assistant, a person who has dedicated himself or herself to certain service. However, the apostle expresses himself very definitively with regard to Phoebe and he calls her the deacon of the church of Cenchrea.

Myshtsin says in connection with this that since such an expression is encountered only once in the apostolic epistles, 'we have no right to regard this designation as an indication of a certain ecclesiastical post- woman-deacon, or deaconess. Since in other sources of this and earlier times we have no indication of it, we most likely have here an embryo of the special ministry from which the women's deaconry subsequently emerged (4,p.135)

The word 'deaconess' in the proper sense of the term was first used in the 'Didaskalie' In this monument there are words that hurt the Orthodox ear, such as 'a deaconess must be revered in the image of the Holy Spirit'. We find virtually the same comparison in the Apostolic Constitutions in which the bishop, presbyter and deaconess are compared to God the Father, the Son of God and the Holy Spirit respectively.

Scholars give as the reason for this frightening comparison above all the female gender of the word 'Spirit' in Hebrew. What is more, a parallel is drawn to this passage in the words of Hippolytus of Rome who, according to Jerome, charged that Isaac was the image of God the Father, and Rebecca, that of the Holy spirit (4,p,70) However, Skaballanovich, commenting on these comparisons, calls them merely an expression of unorthodox and strange thoughts (I. p.70).

Troitsky describes in this comparison merely an indication of the fact that, like clerics, deaconesses were supposed to enjoy special esteem (7,p.70). However, since such comparison did exist, they evidently reflected a certain trend in some Christian societies. Was not this the reason why among heretics, in particularly the Montanists, that the role played by women was so great they were elevated to degrees of Holy Orders, up to one including that of bishop? Evidently out of fear for this phenomenon, the liturgical ministry of women in the West ended completely in the 3rd century, while in the East it continued to develop.

On the basis of the 'Didaskalia' we can piece together a notion of the duties of deaconesses: assistance in the Baptism of women; their catechisation; visiting, on instructions, pagan homes where there were women; aid to sick women. As we can see, the ministry of the deaconesses at that time was very reminiscent of that of the widows. It is not for nothing that the terms 'widow' and 'deaconess' were commonly confused at one time. All the same, this was already another ministry that was increasingly different from that of widows, We are interested above all in the assistance rendered at Baptism, The Apostolic Constitutions instruct: 'When women are being illuminated, let the deacon anoint their forehead with holy chrism, and after him let the deaconess anoint them' (Book 111)

And in Book VIII we read: 'The deaconess shall serve the presbyters at the Baptism of women for decency's sake'. Notably, the role played by the women at the font of the person being baptized, a little girl, is very considerable to this day. By the 7th century, when the custom of baptizing adults was in effect replaced by the baptizing of children, this foremost liturgical function of the deaconesses became almost unnecessary,

Regarding the catechisation of women by deaconesses, Rule 12 of the 4th Council of Carthage says very definitively: 'Widows or girls dedicated to God who are selected for serving at the Baptism of women should be prepared for their duties in such a way as to be able to teach with simple and pointed speech ignorant and uneducated women how to respond to the questions of the Baptizer when the Sacrament of Baptism is administered to them, and how to live after Baptism'.

It is appropriate to recall that there were a large number of women educated in theology among the deaconesses of the 4th and 5th centuries. Suffice it to point to the 105th letter of St Basil the Great which was addressed to the three daughters of the Comite Terenius, deaconesses of the Samosata Church. It is a highly involved treatise on the Blessed Trinity. There are also letters of St John Chrysostom to the deaconesses Olympiada and Pentadia, those of St Theodoret to the deaconess Celerina, and so on.

Beginning in approximately the 4th century, the activity of deaconesses was largely confined to serving hierarchical persons. Charity work became secondary. In the

monuments of that time the office of woman-votary was called not only 'diakonia' but also 'liturgia'. Her liturgical duties were broadening: deaconesses were being instructed to maintain the women's section of the church in good order. Initially men stood at the doors of the church. When women votaries appeared they were supposed to stand at the doors of the women's section as formalised in the Apostolic Constitutions. Great importance was attached to this obligation, which is evident from the words of the prayer at the ordination of deaconesses, where they are called 'guards of Thy holy doors'.

It was unclear as early as the 12th century, to Balsamon among others, whether deaconesses in early times had other liturgical duties. In his interpretation of Rule 15 of the Council of Chalcedon, which deals with deaconesses, he mistakenly believes that they fulfilled the same ministry in the sanctuary as the deacons. This error is convincingly rejected by the text from Book VIII of the Apostolic Constitutions, which says : ' A deaconess shall not bless and shall not perform what presbyters or deacons do. If we do not allow women to teach, how can we permit them, contrary to nature, to minister? For to provide priestesses to goddesses is an error of Hellenic atheism, not a commandment of Christ'. One can guess that the analogy to the priestesses of heathen goddesses was not drawn without a purpose. This analogy, together with the comparison of deaconesses to the Holy Spirit also possibly influenced the elevation of women to hierarchical degrees in heretic societies.

The conclusion can thus be drawn that the ministry of deaconesses was confined in early times to serving at the altar and then outside it. Furthermore, deaconesses sang at Divine Service, which is evidenced, in particular, by Cyril of Scythopolis in the Life of St Cyriacus. He narrates about a certain Maria who was a chorister at the Church of the Resurrection of Christ.

That great attention was attached in the Church to the service of deaconesses is evidenced from the solemn rite of consecration or investiture (both terms appear in the text) of deaconesses. Ordination of widows is mentioned only in the 'Behest' (7,pp 161-163), other monuments attesting to the selection of widows, not to their ordination.

The first testimony to consecration of deaconesses is contained in Rule 19 of the Ecumenical Council. Troitsky has amply shown that the translation of this rule into Slavonic, which is incorporated in our Book of Rules, gives an incorrect understanding of the text with regard to the ordination of deaconesses, and proposes his own translation, which confirms the existence of this office in the year of 325 (7,pp 163-165)

Initially the office is first provided in the Apostolic Constitutions and is greatly oversimplified there: it used to be conducted at the Liturgy and consisted solely of the consecration of a bishop and one prayer. Later on, for several centuries the office of investiture of female votaries was not to be found in any of the surviving monuments. Only 9th century manuscripts contain some offices of their consecration. They attest to the unquestionably great involvement of deaconesses in the Church's liturgical life.

A woman to be ordained would be brought over to a bishop for consecration at the same moment in the liturgy as the deacon to be, ie. after the exclamation 'And may there be mercies'. The bishop would exclaim: 'Divine grace'; and then he would bless the would be deaconess, making thrice the sign of the cross over her bowed head, and would place

his hand on her and read the prayer 'God Holy and Almighty'. It should be noted immediately that the hierarch utters the words 'Divine Grace' prior to the investiture, not during it, which does not allow these words to be regarded a sacrament-administering wording.

After the prayer 'O Holy God' is read, one of the deacons says the great ektene, which contains the petition 'For the salvation of she who is to be ordained', and 'May the Human-Loving God grant her unsullied and chaste ministry'. During the exclamation of the ektene the bishop, holding his hand on the head of the ordainee, would read the second prayer: 'Lord and Master, Who spurneth not women'.

After the prayer the bishop would place a stole on her neck, drawing both ends of it close, would hand her the Holy Chalice which she would place on the holy altar. The grace of ministry to be besought for the deaconess in both prayers read by the bishop is designated by the term 'liturgical ministry', precisely it being assigned to the deaconess as the most important thing, It is interesting to note another element from the second prayer of the hierarch, where it is said: '...grant her to be perfect that she, standing before the altar of Christ, might receive worthy recompense..!'

It should be noted that the Roman and Carthaginian Churches did not know of the institution of deaconesses. As far back as the 12th century consecration of deaconesses was out of the question, Troitsky considered as one of the reasons for this the change in views of women and their nature which occurred in Byzantium in the 11th and 12th centuries, possibly not without Moslem influence. The Council of Constantinople of 1143 regarded the consecration of deaconesses as a heretic practice (7,p.252)

The ministry of deaconesses was retained in the Jerusalem Church for a long time. The Jerusalem Rule of 1122 published by A. Dmitrievsky (8) contains a description of divine services on Passion and Easter weeks in the Resurrection Church. Among other things, the point is made that at matins on Easter two deaconesses; walked holding two candlesticks with lit candies.

What is more, in the Jerusalem Church there existed the office of the so-called myrrhophores, whose ministry was close to that of the deaconesses. Their participation in Divine Service had a peculiar character. During the Easter matins they would stand before the Holy Tomb awaiting the Patriarch, and when he came out of the Holy tomb they would fall prostrate, and after the greeting of the Patriarch to them of 'Rejoice! Christ is Risen!' they would announce the Gospel to be read in the Holy Tomb, the myrrhbearers would walk ahead of the deacons, holding lecterns for the reading of the Gospel, and would stand on the sides of the entrance to the Holy Tomb and would cense during the reading of the Gospel, and then they would enter the Holy Tomb and cense and anoint it (ibid.) The myrrhophores; who sang in the St Sophia's Church are described by a 12th century Russian pilgrim, Archbishop Antony of Novgorod (9,p.469)

The conclusion can be drawn that unlike the charismatic ministry of the widows, a deaconess holding an ecclesiastical post was something like an 'official of the Church' (4,p.282). The procedure for the ordination of deacons was the granting of the grace of Church rather than priestly ministry.

The Liturgical Ministry of Women in the Russian Orthodox Church

It is commonly believed that there were no deaconesses in the Russian Church. Only one researcher, academician, Ye. Golubinsky, thought otherwise. He described in the Russian prosphera bearers a remnant of the rank of deaconesses which, in his view, Rus had adopted from Constantinople (9,p.468) The scholar draws on the fact that prosphera-bearers in our early rules were ranked among the clergy, and this system was preserved until 1869. Great demands of moral purity reminiscent of the admonitions of St Paul the Apostle to the Church widows were made of prosphera-bearers.

Ye.Golubinsky also calls attention to the noteworthy passage in 'The Oration on the Translation of the Relics, which is of Historic importance' - a monument which was found in a copy of a 16th century Ghetti Minei and which deals with the invention of the relics of St Clement of Romen by Constantine the Philosopher. It says that after the relics were brought to a church in Chersonesus upon the archbishop's orders, an All night Vigil was conducted there: 'by the male sex until midnight, and by monks and Orthodox women, from midnight until morning'. The scholar calls this fragment from the 'Oration' not quite understandable (9,p.469)

Two attempts were made to revive the rank of deaconesses in Russia in the 19th century : by the famous Russian missionary, Archimandrite Makary (Glukharev), for the purpose of facilitating the development of missionary work, and by Fr Aleksandr Gumilevsky, in the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Community of Sisters of Charity in St Petersburg. Both these attempts did not imply ecclesiastical ministry of women.

In our century the issue of restoring the rank of deaconesses was raised only in 1906 at the Pre-Council Sitting. Archpriest F Uspensky submitted the 'Draft Rules for the Life and work of Orthodox Deaconesses'. Among other matters, it dealt with service in the church, which was to manifest itself in work to maintain cleanliness there, monitor the behaviour of women and children in the church, and to render help to mothers during the administration of Holy Communion to children and in the Baptism of adult women. It was proposed to conduct the ordination of deaconesses according to the ancient rite. The draft was discussed but no decision was taken.

In conclusion, I want to make the following points: never in the Orthodox Church was ministry of women regarded as hierarchical; at the same time, the current broad involvement of women in service to the Church cannot be assessed as a violation of the canons and it is a legitimate continuation of the tradition of the ministry of the deaconesses in Orthodox Church.

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