

What Is an Orthodox Woman?

by Katherine Hyde

Being a woman has never been an *easy* task, ever since God said to Eve, “In pain you shall bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16). But up until this century, it was at least a fairly straightforward one. Every little girl grew up knowing exactly what was required of her in life, and learned, if not to like it, at least to accept it.

In the twentieth century, all this has changed. Not that being a woman has gotten any easier, in spite of multitudes of “labor-saving” household devices and the rather dubious advantages of “having it all.” (What nobody told my generation, the later baby-boomers, when we were embarking on our careers and families was that “having it all” really only meant having twice as much work!) But while hard work is still with us, modern women have lost their clear direction for life. We are confronted with a cacophony of voices and choices, each beckoning us onto a different path that promises “fulfillment.”

The world gives us many options, ranging from the ultra-conservative image of the cowering, mouselike wife living in total subjection to her overbearing husband, to the upwardly mobile business or professional woman who can’t be bothered with annoying distractions such as children. On the farthest fringe, we hear the radical feminists calling every woman to become a (preferably Lesbian) manifestation of the earth-goddess.

Although the world offers these and countless other choices, it fails to provide any satisfactory means of determining which of these paths (if any) is really the right one. Even the various churches have not been able to present a united front or to give women any clear, reliable direction as to how we ought to order our lives or what sort of model we ought to follow.

Indeed, most churches seem to be just as confused as individual women are as to how to respond to rapidly changing social conditions and the demands of feminism.

So where does all this leave us? Must we choose between equally unacceptable extremes, or is there another way? Is there a way that offers peace amidst chaos; that speaks of balance and right proportion; that offers eternal rather than temporal regards; that promises true fulfillment, not of passing earthly desires and ambitions, but of the deepest longings of our souls?

There is indeed such a way, and it is to be found within the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox model of womanhood is based upon the wisdom of the ages rather than the shifting sands of philosophical fads. The Orthodox way sees woman as God sees her – as a creature of honor and dignity, with gifts and responsibilities uniquely her own, with her own essential role to play in the salvation of mankind.

To flesh out that vision and see it more clearly, we must look first at the historical development of the place of women within the community of faith.

IN THE BEGINNING

To understand the history of women in the Church, we have to go back to the very beginning: to Eve. Church Fathers and scholars have expressed a variety of opinions about Eve, about the nature of her relationship with Adam before the Fall, and about the true significance of the “curse” laid on her after the Fall. But beyond all the controversy, several things are clear:

1. Eve was created in the image of God, just as was Adam. “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). In their essence as created beings, men and women stand with equal worth and honor before God.
2. Eve was created to be Adam’s “helper” (Genesis 2:18). This does not mean she was to be his servant, still less his slave. The Hebrew word used here (*ezer*) is often used of God Himself as the Helper of His people. Clearly, the relationship intended is one of mutual cooperation, not of domination. Adam, on the other hand, was given the task of naming the animals before Eve was made from his rib: so the work of “subduing the earth” was primarily his.
3. Eve, as we all know, made a dreadful mistake. She listened to the seductive words of the serpent and, *without consulting her husband*, ate the forbidden fruit, thus condemning herself and all her progeny to a life outside Paradise. Some have speculated that Satan chose to tempt Eve rather than Adam, not because she was weaker, but because he knew that Adam would follow her in her sin (making him equally guilty). The righteousness of the world was entrusted to Eve’s keeping, but she did not keep the trust.
4. As a result of her sin, Eve was condemned to sorrow and pain in childbearing, and to a life of subordination to her husband (Genesis 3: 16). The wording of this curse (“you shall have sorrow... he shall rule”) suggests that God was simply predicting what would happen to women living in a fallen world, rather than deliberately laying a punishment upon them. Certainly the curse is an accurate description of what happens to women when they are left at the mercy of fallen men.

So we have a picture of God’s intention for men and women—a relationship of loving cooperation between two people equal in value and honor, but differing in roles. And we have a picture of that relationship perverted by sin: women bound by their own desire and their need for children to men who wrongfully dominate and belittle them. But in that very hour when God pronounced the fate of fallen woman, he also pronounced her hope: the Seed that would bruise Satan’s head.

THE SECOND MOTHER

The next great epoch in the history of women is embodied by the one who has been called the second Eve, as Christ is the second Adam: Mary, the Mother of God. As it was given to a woman to exercise her free will to banish all humanity from Paradise, so it

was given to a woman to provide, by her own will, the means of man's restoration to his blessed state. Without Mary's willing and complete surrender to the will of God, there could have been no Incarnation, and thus no crucifixion and no Resurrection—in other words, no Savior and no salvation for mankind.

As Eve was the mother of all mankind, so it was through motherhood that Mary gave this most precious gift to all humanity. Thus Mary became the Mother of all those who would become the children of God. In Mary we see the epitome of all that redeemed woman can become— a state even more glorious than that Eve held before her Fall. Consider some of the qualities that make Mary, the Mother of God, the ultimate model around which our lives, even in this modern, frenetic day and age. can and must be molded:

1. *Mary willingly submitted to the will of God.* Although she was chosen, she was not forced: her obedience was voluntary and wholehearted. Later, as Joseph's wife, she also submitted willingly to her husband—she who had known God more intimately than any other human being as she carried Him within her womb.
2. *Mary responded to God in faith.* What was asked of her must have been frightening and was certainly dangerous; but Mary trusted the love of God for her protection.
3. *Mary risked everything for motherhood.* In her society, for a young woman to become pregnant outside of marriage was the ultimate degradation. Had Joseph been a hardhearted man, Mary could have become a complete pariah, ostracized by her neighbors, unable to marry, with no means of supporting herself and her child. How many women in our society have chosen abortion rather than face circumstances less difficult than these? But Mary chose rather to risk her own life to give life to another.
4. *Mary took on the role of interceding for men and of leading them to Christ.* At the wedding at Cana, she first made known the people's need to her Son, knowing in spite of His protests that He would fill that need; then she said to the people, "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5). She thereby exhorts us all, her spiritual children, to respond to Christ with the same loving, trusting obedience she herself showed.

Paul Evdokimov, in his book *Woman and the Salvation of the World* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. 1994), sums up the spiritual role (or "charism") of women, as exemplified by Mary, thus: to give birth to Christ in other people. We may be called to physical motherhood, to pass on our faith to our children: or we may be called to spiritual motherhood, to show forth the image of Christ to all men and call them to Him.

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Christ showed, through His own behavior to women and through His teaching to His disciples, that while the place for proper headship and divinely established authority remained a constant both in the home and in the Church, a significant shift had occurred in the old order of male/female relationships which had prevailed since the Fall. Christ

treated women with dignity, respect, and compassion. In His teaching on marriage (Matthew 19:3-9), He restored their marital rights to what they had been “in the beginning,” before allowances had to be made for the hardness of men’s hearts. Through the redemption accomplished by His death and Resurrection, Christ made it possible for men and women once again to strive for the ideal established in Paradise: a loving cooperation between equals with different, complementary roles.

This ideal was largely upheld in the first few centuries of the Church. Women swelled the ranks of the saints and martyrs, giving their lives to God in a variety of roles, including those of prophetess, teacher, and deaconess as well as the more traditional ones of wife, mother, and performer of charitable works. When men began to seek the desert as a place to live out a more radical commitment to God, women—beginning with Saint Mary of Egypt, to whose holiness even Saint Anthony the Great deferred — were not far behind.

Within the family, the position of women was better among Christians than it had ever been before. While Saint Paul exhorted wives to submit to their husbands—which was nothing new—he also, even more strongly, exhorted men to love their wives “as Christ also loved the church” (Ephesians 5:25)—in other words, to the point of giving their lives for them. This was something new. The ancient curse was beginning to crumble.

At the same time, however, there were teachers in the Church who held to a view of women more in keeping with the views of their Jewish forebears (succinctly expressed in the traditional male prayer, “Thank You, Lord, that You did not make me a woman”). Some blamed women entirely for the Fall and claimed that they were inherently evil, to be avoided by any man who would seek righteousness. Some insisted that marriage and sexuality came into being only after the Fall and were nothing but a necessary evil for the propagation of the species. One cannot but suspect that these men—mostly celibates— were misplacing the blame for their troublesome bodily passions, assigning that blame not to their own fallen nature and the temptation of the devil, but to the unfortunate and inadvertent object of those passions. woman.

As the centuries went by, this distorted view began to exert a greater influence over the Church’s attitude toward and treatment of women. Women gradually came to be excluded from the diaconate and from other ministries in which they had previously taken an equal part with men. Women who achieved sanctity were praised as having “overcome” their weak and evil feminine nature and become as righteous as men.

Women never completely lost their champions, however. In the nineteenth century in Russia, feminine spirituality began to come into its own again. Several notable elders, including Saint Seraphim of Sarov and Saint Theophan the Recluse, made it their business to encourage women, both in the world and in the monastic life. Both of these men founded and directed women’s monasteries, and offered spiritual direction to countless laywomen, in person or through correspondence. These godly men had the prophetic insight that it would be primarily through women that the Faith would be preserved in Russia during the seventy years of communist persecution, and they wanted women to be prepared.

ORTHODOX WOMEN TODAY

Not surprisingly, the position of women in the Orthodox Church today reflects both sides of this history—that which would abase them along with that which affirms their dignity.

On the one hand, it cannot be denied that there are parishes in which women are permitted to do only those tasks which the men consider “women’s work” and therefore “beneath” them—cleaning the church, taking care of the children, baking the *prosphora*. In fact, of course, these traditionally female tasks are just as honorable and just as essential to the life of the Church as any of the more public or glamorous tasks which these men reserve to themselves; nevertheless, they do not exhaust the spectrum of women’s gifts and therefore should not circumscribe their contribution.

On the other hand, there are many parishes in which women serve in every capacity except those of the ordained clergy—as chanters, readers, choir directors; as teachers, administrators, parish council members; as helpers to the clergy in all sorts of works of mercy.

While Orthodox practice in some places reflects the overmasculinization of our culture as a whole, the solution to this problem is not to be found in feminism, even of the so-called “Christian” variety. The fundamental error of feminism is the same as that of the male-dominated culture that feminism is reacting against: the error of believing that masculine qualities, such as leadership, physical strength, analytical thinking, and strict justice, are inherently superior to feminine qualities, such as nurturing, gentleness, intuition, and mercy. Instead of striving to win men’s respect for feminine qualities, feminists tried to empower women by transforming them into imitation men.

“Christian” feminism, while less vehement in some respects than the secular variety, still attempts to raise the position of women in the Church by placing them in roles traditionally reserved for men, such as the priesthood, instead of by exhorting the Church to accept and honor women in the ministries for which they are naturally and/or spiritually gifted. The masculinization of women which inevitably results from this mistaken approach is one of many reasons that the Orthodox Church has steadfastly maintained its traditional stance against the female priesthood and the “feminization” of God.

In spite of those weaknesses which characterize every human institution, the Orthodox Church still provides, in her Tradition and very often in practice, the strongest witness to be found in the modern world to the godly model of womanhood that we have been trying to define. We as Orthodox women have the responsibility to help restore our society to balance by living out those godly feminine qualities which have often gotten short shrift, both in the world and in the Church.

LIVING OUT OUR CALLING

What, then, are some of these godly feminine qualities we need to cultivate? It is impossible to give an exhaustive list, but here are several that seem especially important.

1) The greatest of these is love. Of course, all Christians are called to love; but women have a special gift for loving. We should love, first of all, those closest to us—our

families or those who are like a family to us. But we should not stop there; our love should reach out to our neighborhood, our parish, our community, our world. The love demanded of us is not just a sentimental good feeling toward other people. We're talking about *sacrificial* love—love in action—love that puts our own interests second to those of the beloved. It's not an easy task.

2) We should give ourselves in joyful *service*. Again, all Christians are called to serve; but it seems to come more naturally to women. Our service should follow our love, starting at home and spreading outward, always guided by God's will for our individual lives.

Our service should also follow our individual gifts. If you can't bake a fluffy pastry to save your life, go ahead and say no when the festival committee asks you to make baklava. But if, on the other hand, you have artistic talent, perhaps you should study iconography or illustrate lives of saints for children. Don't let your gifts go to waste. If you don't know what your gifts are, or can't think of a way to use them for God, talk to your husband or priest or to an older, wiser woman you know. They may know you better than you know yourself.

3) The essence of womanhood is *motherhood*. Not all women are called to be physical mothers, but all are called to be spiritual mothers, guiding and nurturing and teaching others to follow Christ. Those who work in the world should seek vocations that allow these qualities their full expression, rather than trying to compete in the dog-eat-dog business world of men. Those of us who are mothers in the physical sense must take this responsibility very seriously. The world would have us believe that mothering is just one aspect of life, that it can be done quite adequately in the few hours a day we have left over from our careers or other activities we have chosen to "fulfill ourselves." But we mothers really, in our heart of hearts, know better. We know that children are a sacred trust; they need and deserve the very best we have to give. If we cannot pass on our faith to them through our example of devoted love and service, how can the Church survive? And how can we stand before God and claim to have accomplished *anything* of any value in this world?

4) Women have a unique capacity to *respond to God* with all our hearts and souls. This is the essence of spirituality, and it comes more easily to women than to men, because responsiveness characterizes our human relationships as well as our relationship to God. Men, being called to leadership in the human realm, often find it more difficult to surrender that role and to meet their Creator in humility. We women can set an example in simple, faithful piety that is ultimately more influential in the life of the Church than the most inspired teaching or the most glorious martyrdom.

5) Our proper response to God is to strive for *holiness*. Only by pursuing holiness will we become capable of all that is required of us. Only by deepening our relationship with God can we come to understand, accept, and live the life He has designed for us. Only through loving, trusting obedience to God can we find our true calling, as women and as human beings. Only so can we begin to fulfill the vocation bequeathed to us by Mary of giving birth to Christ in other people. This is our proper contribution to the salvation of the world.

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