

Women and the Orthodox Tradition

Brad Jersak with Archbishop Lazar Puhalo

The following interview took place over several days via email and in person. In it, Brad Jersak queries Archbishop Lazar Puhalo on the role of women and the Orthodox tradition. The conversation was triggered by a statement from blogger and theologian, Derek Flood (www.therebelgod.com), who observed, "So often, even where women are not acknowledged, they are the real spiritual backbone of the church."

Archbishop Lazar:

Interestingly, several women are classed as "Equal of the Apostles" in the Orthodox Church. All of them publicly preached the Gospel; most of them were martyred for preaching the Gospel. One of these Equals of the Apostles was St Nina, a slave girl who converted the Kingdom of Georgia (Iveron) to Christianity, and the nation remains to this day the oldest of the Orthodox Catholic Christian nations.¹

Among the others, Mary of Magdala and Photini (the Samaritan woman at the well) were martyred. St Helen the Empress (mother of Constantine) and Saint Olga of Russia are also "Equals of the Apostles." Both had a great deal of authority over men, and both taught the faith publicly. Both had much to do with their sons' conversions.

Brad Jersak:

Vladika, I've always loved your teaching on the great women of Christian tradition, and especially these precious martyrs. I remember the above examples from talks you've given.

I am also particularly fond of St Macrina the Teacher, who taught her brothers Basil (the Great Hierarch) and Gregory of Nyssa (Father of the Fathers). Clearly Paul's supposed injunctions against women teaching or authority over men are ignored in her case. And it is profound that the Church officially regarded Macrina as 'Teacher' to her brothers, Gregory and Basil, given that they were towering figures in finalizing our 'symbol of faith,' the Nicene Creed. So here you have two Bishops (indeed, true 'Fathers') very much under the tutelage and in submission to the teachings of a female Teacher.

So too in the West, the English mystic Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) was officially recognized as a 'Doctor' of the Church, which is a stunning acknowledgement for medieval churchmen.

But even more so, Mary the Mother of Jesus is honoured above all the apostles, from whom the God incarnate received His flesh, whose womb He chose as the new Ark of the covenant, and who certainly taught and exercised authority over the Son of God in raising Him!

¹ Church tradition also acknowledges the sisters Mary and Martha, along with Junia (Rom. 16:7) as apostles and fellow-prisoners with Paul. Junia and Andronicus were apparently a couple and are regarded as 'of the seventy' whom Jesus sent out as evangelists. Andronicus became bishop of Pannonia, but the two took the Gospel far beyond that diocese.

Moreover, you mentioned Mary Magdalene, who is to be recognized as the “proto-witness” of the resurrected Christ. Citing Chesterton, the Gardener comes to meet Mary, the New Eve, the first witness, in the cool of the morning of the New Creation, the second Eden. I say, if Eve was the first to be deceived, Mary was the first to be enlightened. Adam received Eve’s report while the apostles resisted Mary’s report. We are disciples of the second garden.

Still, because of my egalitarianism, I’ve been challenged in my journey toward Orthodoxy because of the male-only priesthood. Clearly the Orthodox Church doesn’t resist women in the priesthood because they are weak and easily deceived, etc. But I understand it has something to do with a prophetic picture of various roles. Vladika, what can you tell us about that?

Archbishop Lazar:

St Gregory tells us that as Macrina lay dying, he bent down close to her mouth so that “I could hear the last words of our teacher.”

Perhaps a problem is in focusing on the ordained priest and bishop as possessing the priesthood in and of themselves. The priesthood belongs only to Christ, or perhaps, although I don’t like the dichotomy, we have to distinguish between the ordained priests and the “royal priesthood” of the laity. The ordained Bishops serve the priesthood of Christ visibly in the Church. The priest is, in fact, the “finger of the bishop” in the local parish. The bishop is the Apostle; the presbyter is his assistant because the bishop cannot be in every parish at once.

Since it is the priesthood of Christ that is being served—that is, He has extended His priesthood so that it can be served visibly in the Church—the bishop (and his presbyters), like the husband is a *type* of Christ. In the Hebrew Scripture, the male prophets reveal the Messiah, while the female prophets reveal the nature of the Church. This is why marriage (in Paul’s time, a common law cohabitation) is a type and likeness of Christ and the Church. He understood the creation of male and female and their union in a bond of love and procreation, to be a revelation and prophecy about redemption, about the relationship between Christ as his “pure, spotless bride.” The male is the type of Christ, the female the type of the Church. It is ultimately because of this concept of prophecy and revelation that women were not ordained to the presbytery, the priesthood.

So regarding the ordained priesthood, it is not a matter of spiritual superiority or exclusive gifting, but principally typology of the office. St John Chrysostom, Theodoret and others remind us that menstruation does NOT make a woman unclean, and the holy New Testament Prophet Kosmas of Aitolia reminds us “one and the same Christ died for the woman as for the man.”

We have a number of examples where often quite young women were the mainstay of a Christian community during the persecutions, after the local Bishop had been martyred. They exhorted, preached and led in martyrdom.

I must suggest that we take Paul’s words that seem to forbid women from teaching or having authority in some particular context. Hermione, the daughter of Philip the Deacon

was a holy prophet, as well as being the founder of the Xenodokion programme—the hostels for travellers, with medical treatment included.

In the *Acts of the Martyrs*, we find many women preaching in public, before emperors and judges. Sts Zenais (cousin of Apostle Paul), St Pelagia the Repentant and St Sara of Egypt in the East, as well as St Hulda in Orthodox Britain all heard the confessions of men, including monastics.

Now, all these people deeply believed the Scripture and were profoundly Christian, so there must have been some dynamic by which they understood Paul's words in a contextual manner.

Brad Jersak:

A respected friend put this question to me: "Yes, we have this smattering of stories about the role these exceptional woman, mainly in the early centuries of the church. These are given to indicate that all the Church Fathers weren't hide-bound male chauvinists. Fine. But what about today?! What about right now, AD 2013? What roles can women assume in contemporary Orthodoxy?"

Archbishop Lazar:

Starting more recently, in Russia, the New Testament Prophet St Seraphim of Sarov (1754-1833) had a spiritual mother, rather than a spiritual father. The nun Dorothea was his teacher.

There were also some holy martyrs of note in Eastern Europe, such as St. Lydia the New (1901-1928), whose martyrdom is deeply moving. In 1928, the secret police arrested her for distributing booklets on the lives of Saints, prayers, and homilies. They traced her typewriter because it had a defective letter K.

The police knew that Lydia was privy to the Catacomb Church in the region. They interrogated her for ten days, and then proceeded to torture her for over an hour and a half, but without success. When the four torturers finally decided to gang-rape her, her guard, Cyril Ataev intervened to stop them. Both he and Lydia were shot to death, but as he lay near her, he asked, 'Saint, take me with you,' and the Holy Martyr Lydia replied, 'I will take you with me.'

Brad Jersak:

These women were clearly exceptional martyrs, mentors and teachers. Now we're still removed from them by at least a century. But now let's talk more explicitly about women in the Orthodox Church today.

If women cannot today serve as priests, then where and how are they exercising the freedom to use their gifts ... and specifically, to 'teach and exercise authority'? Could you give me some examples?

Archbishop Lazar:

First, among the *great* modern teachers, in the 1980's I remember Matriona, who lived on the Isle of Aegina. She was already in her 90's at the time, but young people from the greater Athens region would take the ferry to go see her for advice and to sit under her teaching. The quality of her counsel and wisdom made her preferable to the local priests. She became a bit of an object of pilgrimage.

Among the other great modern teachers, I also hold great respect for the public teaching of Siluana of Romania.²

Brad Jersak:

Why aren't there more women like these?

Archbishop Lazar:

Well, perhaps there aren't many so capable or so inclined as them.

Brad Jersak:

All right, but in terms of 'normal' women in these kind of roles ... is there something about the Orthodox Church that incapacitates gifted women?

Archbishop Lazar:

Oh no. Of course there are many women teaching in our seminaries, especially in Eastern Europe. In fact, among seminary students now, women may outnumber the men.

Brad Jersak:

But if women can't be priests, why are they in seminary?

Archbishop Lazar:

To become teachers.

Brad Jersak (addendum):

After the interview, I did a quick search of faculty lists for Orthodox seminaries. By way example, I note that Velvet Sidires is currently the President of the Department of Theology at the Theological School of the University of Athens, a Greek Orthodox institution for higher learning.

Thus, while I am still trying to understand the tradition of an all-male ordained priesthood, clearly the Orthodox Church has no problem acknowledging a female senior leader, mentor and teacher—a practice which they affirm as perfectly in line with St Macrina of old or Siluana today. Thus, the argument from typology and traditions for a male-only priesthood cannot be rejected outright as a disingenuous excuse for

² Cf. <http://valahia.wordpress.com/2011/05/28/afraid-of-freedom/>

patriarchal sexism. The Orthodox Church teaches and practices the role of women to both teach and have authority over men—even men on the path to priesthood!

Thus, a male-only priesthood is a *liturgical role*, but unlike most evangelicals until very recently, Orthodox tradition has historically been wide open to women in terms of *ministry roles*. They endeavor to be faithful to tradition and typology, but the idea of excluding a woman from engaging in any *spiritual gift* because her gender is inferior or vulnerable to deception, etc. is alien to them. Women could, can and do lead and teach, exercise authority as theologians and missionaries, and are honoured as saints and martyrs.

There is also something to the fact that Jesus had both male and female disciples, but initially only 'appointed' males to His official 'twelve' (again, as a typological reflection on the 12 sons of Jacob, and 12 tribes of Israel). Even so, within a generation, you had women acting as teachers, evangelists, apostolic missionaries and deacons.

The more lively in-house discussion in the Orthodox Church is the call for a restoration of the diaconate of women. The original seven deacons appointed were men (Acts 6), but in Romans 16:1, we see Paul commending the deacon Phoebe to the Christians in Rome. Then, for over one thousand years, the Church ordained women to the 'holy order' of deacon.

Teva Regule, in her article "Restoring the Diaconate of Women,"³ traces the history of the diaconate, the type of ministries involved, the apparent reasons it was lost to women, and the move to restore female ordination as deacons over the last century. She cites these words from the prayer of ordination in the Byzantine rite—who knows, they may represent a portent for Orthodoxy in the twentieth century:

“Master and Lord, You do not reject women who offer themselves, and by divine counsel, to minister as is fitting to your holy houses, but you accept them in the order of ministers. Give the grace of your Holy Spirit to this servant of Yours also, who wishes to offer herself to you, and to accomplish the grace of the diaconate, as You gave the grace of Your diaconate to Phoebe, whom you called to the work of the ministry...”

While some Evangelicals are again retreating from permitting women to teach or have authority on the dubious grounds that Eve was weaker and more easily deceived, the Orthodox Church is pondering re-opening ordination to women. If that happens, I have no doubt they will not only assist with baptisms, wait on tables and serve the poor—they will excel in emulating the teaching, evangelism, miracles and martyrdom of the great New Testament deacons, Stephen, Philip and Phoebe. And in fact, they haven't waited for ordination to do so.

³ <http://www.incommunion.org/2008/12/10/restoring-the-diaconate-of-women/>