

GOD AND GENDER: ARTICULATING THE ORTHODOX VIEW

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Whatever our earthly conditions and temporal circumstances, we Orthodox Christians live in the same ecclesial and spiritual world. We identify with the same tradition of faith and life. We worship the same God through the same Christ. We are inspired by the same Spirit in the same church. We celebrate the same liturgy, participate in the same sacraments and say the same prayers. We meditate on the same scriptures, which we believe to be God's Word inspired by God's Spirit, interpreting them within the same hermeneutical context. We accept the same councils and are guided by the same canons. We recognize the same teachers and venerate the same saints. We teach the same doctrines, defend the same dogmas, and employ the same symbols of faith. In our theology as well as our worship, we use the same words and images which we affirm to be "adequate to God" and proper to the experience which we share within God's covenant community which we identify in history from the time of Abraham.

Because of our convictions about what God has given to us in Christ and the Spirit in the church, we Orthodox Christians cannot endure disagreement on essential issues of doctrine, worship and ethical life. We rejoice in a variety of historical and cultural expressions of "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), and we recognize an unfolding and development in doctrinal formulation and liturgical

Christ's gospel which is not man's, but God's "who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (Cf. Gal 1:11-12, 1 Tim 2:4) For this reason when we reflect on the issue of God and gender we speak not about *an* Orthodox Christian view, but about *the* Orthodox Christian view. We use the definite article because our faith obliges us to come to complete agreement on this crucial issue which lies at the very heart of our doctrine, worship and witness as human beings and Christian believers.

1. Discovering a Common Mind

Orthodox Christians know very well, as apostolic scriptures testify, that there never was, nor ever will be, a time when all who claim to be of God are in complete agreement concerning the doctrines of faith. We also know that there never was nor ever will be a time when all members of God's church fully follow God's will. It is inevitable and even necessary, as the apostle Paul has written, that there be disagreements and divisions among those who consider themselves true believers, "so that the genuine may be recognized" (1 Cor 11:9).

We Orthodox Christians are clear about those through the ages whom we recognize as "genuine." Their images fill our churches. They are the men and women who prepared, wrote, read, interpreted and lived by the scriptures which the apostolic church has canonized: the four Gospels and the Acts, the twenty-one letters of the Apocalypse. They are those named in these writings, and those who preserved them and passed them on. They are those who defended them and developed their teachings in the midst of violent controversies at the expense of great suffering and even death. These people are our fathers and mothers in God, our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are the men and women (to use the wonderful expression of the book

offices, doctrinal definitions, canonical norms, and ascetical and mystical teachings.

The “genuine” believers in God were never the majority within the church when they were alive. They were always what the Bible calls the “holy remnant.” When they were not simply disregarded and disdained they were persecuted and even murdered. But they were always the people who were faithful to God and who kept the church faithful, even, and perhaps even especially, in those times when society falsely claimed to be governed by God and guided by his church. The life and witness of these men and women is the life and witness of the church itself in its divinely inspired life and teaching. Their unity is the church’s very own which is given and guaranteed by God.

History shows that it takes time for the unity of faith to appear among believers, including the “genuine.” It takes extraordinary effort and energy for the “knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4; cf. Jn 8:32) given to us by God, for which we continually pray in our liturgical worship, to be articulated in forms acceptable to the saints. Unity of mind, heart and mouth among Orthodox believers (to use the liturgy’s language), which is the unity of the church, is never easily, nor mechanically or magically, produced. It is never the result of some formal process of meeting and discussion. Still less is it the result of a decree of some ecclesial or secular power which all are bound to accept; for no such magisterial “power” exists in Christ’s church. And it is never a unity accepted by all who claim fidelity to God.

The unity of faith among genuine believers is the result of prayer and contemplation, of liturgical worship and sacramental participation, of ascetical striving and mystical insight. It is an illumination of the hearts and minds of men and women by God’s grace; an act of the Holy Spirit who governs and guides the church in freedom. As such, the unity of faith is revealed and articulated through the conciliar (the Slavs would say *sobornost*) activities of all the faithful, from the least to the great.

the mind of the church itself, and comes to be expressed in the church's official doctrine, liturgy and spiritual life.

Applying this perspective to the issue of God and gender, we can be confident that the Lord will lead us to one mind and heart on the subject, and enable us to produce an articulation of the faith which the church will one day recognize as of God and receive as its own. The process will take time. It will involve great effort and energy. It will require great patience and forbearance. It will be accompanied by great controversy. There will be passionate disputes. But it will be accomplished. Our faith compels us to this conclusion.

On this basis and with this hope I present the following theses on the question of God and gender for our common consideration.

2. *God Without Gender*

God is known and worshiped in the Orthodox Church as wholly without gender. Indeed God for the Orthodox is without anything that belongs to created reality, including being itself. "If God is," says St. Gregory Palamas, "than I am not; if I am, then God is not." This conviction sums up the entire tradition on the subject.

God in Godself is inaccessible to creaturely comprehension. Even when we say that God *exists* we spontaneously add that God does *not* exist, and that God even does not *not exist* if we conceive of God's existence in the same way that we think of created things existing.

Gender is a creaturely category. There is no gender in God. God is neither male nor female, nor a combination of the two. God is not even "beyond gender" since God is, strictly speaking, wholly incomparable to anything creaturely. In a word, God is in God's own category, altogether

tion he is known as unknowable. God may even be said to be known by the saints through faith and love by an act of “unknowing” which is radically different from any act which we would normally call “cognition” or “knowledge.”

By his grace and good pleasure God appears to us through his divine actions and operations, by his divine energies and emanations. We can experience his presence and power, and thereby affirm with utter certainty that He is indeed the Holy One who demolishes all categories of creaturely comprehension and cognition, and yet is known by faith in a “union of love” which He himself enables for the life and joy of his creatures. When God is thus known it is, as St. Maximus the Confessor has said (in what has to be the unsurpassable statement on the subject) as the supra-non-knowable who is supra-non-known in an act of supra-non-knowing.

3. The Tri-Personal Godhead

When God acts to make himself known he reveals himself as a person (hypostasis). The Holy One whom the Orthodox worship as “ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-existing and eternally the same” (Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom) is the uncreated I AM. He is a *who*; and not simply a *what*. He is the one who is, was and will be; the one who speaks and acts in the lives of his creatures. He is the living God. He can be known in an inter-personal communion which he initiates and enables for those whom he creates in his own image and likeness, male and female.

The personal God is always known through his *Word* (Da’bar/Logos/Verbum) and *Spirit* (Ru’ah/Pneuma/Spiritus). God’s Word and Spirit are personal as God himself is personal. They are perfect as he is perfect, holy as he is holy, divine as he

without whom God is not and could not be God—certainly not the God who is Love.

4. *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*

Orthodox Christians affirm that Jesus of Nazareth, the messianic king, prophet and high priest of Israel, is God's own divine Word incarnate as a human being. Jesus, the incarnate Word, is God's only-begotten Son. He is also God's uncreated image; and God's radiance, splendor, power, glory, wisdom, truth, beauty and life. In a word, he is the perfect hypostatic expression of who and what God is, not being the one God himself. He is the person who shows God to be, essentially and divinely, the eternal *Father* who is Love.

In addition to his Son and Word, God also eternally possesses his all-holy Spirit as a "necessary element," so to speak, of his supraessential divinity. The Holy Spirit proceeds from God's divine suprabeing and rests in God's Son and Word from whom he eternally shines forth. The Holy Spirit empowers God's free act of creation by and for God's divine Son and Word. He inspires the writing and reading of the church's scriptures. He speaks through the prophets, anoints Jesus as the messiah, dwells in Christ's disciples to guide them into all truth and enable their ministry, seals those who die and rise with Christ in baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and guides and empowers the church in every aspect of its divine worship, witness and service.

Christians are enabled to relate to God as Father because they share in the relationship which God's Son has with God in the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that God is to be conceived or imagined as "male." God is Father to his Son in the Spirit in a divine manner which absolutely excludes gender and sexuality,

includes being masculine in gender, reflects in a human form, within human conditions, that which God is in a uniquely divine manner. "I bow my knees before the Father," the apostle says, "from whom every fatherhood (*patria*) in heaven and on earth is named." (Eph 3:14) The teaching is consistent with that of Jesus who commanded us to "call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven." (Matt 23:9) The point here is that every human fatherhood images and expresses the unique fatherhood of God. For, as a rule, human beings are in every respect to understand themselves within their created conditions according to God, as God reveals himself through Christ and the Spirit within the created world; they are not to understand God according to their creaturely experiences. In a word, human beings are made in God's image and likeness; and not God in theirs.

5. Gender Imagery in the Bible and Liturgy

The names revealed to us by God in Christ and the Spirit, and the symbols and images which accompany these names in the divine *oikonomia*, are, for the Orthodox, the most appropriate possible names for worship and witness in spirit and in truth. They are the names which God provides for his glorification and participation within the messianic community. They are not the product of human cultural, social, political or economic conditions. They are rather intended by God to inform and inspire such conditions, as well as to evaluate and judge them, so that human beings might live and act in a Godlike manner.

The most high God wills to be Abba/Father to all men and women. His Son, personally incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, becomes their brother; as he also becomes their lord, master,

which existed "under the law" between men and women (as between Jews and gentiles, and slaves and freepersons) no longer apply. This appears to be the meaning in traditional Orthodox interpretation of the well-known words of the apostle Paul that for those who have been baptised into Christ and have put on Christ "there cannot be male and female" (as there can neither be Jew nor Greek, slave nor free) "for you are all one in Christ Jesus". (Gal 3:27-8; cf. also Col 3:11)

In this celebrated passage the apostle Paul is not teaching that the natural distinctions and differences between baptised men and women (not to speak of the unbaptised) no longer exist. Nor is he saying that the place and service of men and women become identical and interchangeable in the messianic community (not to speak of society outside the covenant of grace). He is rather proclaiming that by God's grace in Christ all distinctions and differences in relation to God which existed "under the law" no longer hold for believers in Jesus. Divine sonship is freely given in Christ to all human beings. By grace through faith everyone and anyone becomes a participant in God's kingdom. The pedagogical period is past; the substantial reality has come. The time of enigmas and shadows is over; the fulness of grace and truth is now given. (Cf. John 1:1-18)

In a clash of symbolisms, which testifies to the divine mystery being revealed, (and so, say the saints, is to be fully expected), Jesus is not simply the brother to his disciples, as well as their master, lord, servant and friend. He is also their divine bridegroom, husband and head. Jesus is the new Adam; his church is the new Eve. He is the bridegroom; the church is his bride. He is the head; the church in his body. In this sense, the messiah may be said to be incomplete in himself. Jesus alone is not the *whole Christ* (as St. Augustine boldly proclaimed). For those who are "members of Christ" are called to "complete what is lacking in their Lord's affliction for the sake of his body, that is the church" which is "the fulness of him who fills all in

of death, is the new Eve. She is the perfect “helper fit for him,” the true “mother of the living” who bears and nurtures children to God. (Cf. 1 Cor 15:42; Gen 2:18-21)

These gender-related names, images and symbols are so essential to the biblical story and the church’s faith, together with the liturgical worship and mystical life which they engender, that the story and the faith would not be what they are without them. The story of creation, fall and redemption, of the origin and destiny of the world, of the messianic age which already reigns in the church of Christ which is the “bride of the Lamb”; and the faith, hope and love which this story evokes in believers, with the worship and witness which it produces, cannot be told and celebrated in any other way. To change or replace its names and imagery is to change and replace its reality into something totally different from what it is. On this point the so-called “radical feminists” who call for the wholesale rejection of these traditional names and images as being destructive of authentic human being and life are in complete agreement with the Orthodox Christians who stand firm to retain them. And both disagree with the Christian feminists who say that they may be kept, but must be recast, corrected and completed by other names and images devoid of their particular kind of gender-related content.

6. Feminine and Maternal Imagery in the Godhead

The naming of God as Father with his divine Son and Spirit, and the gender-related imagery which these names evoke and require, particularly that which symbolizes the church as Christ’s body and bride, mother to God the Father’s numberless children, appear to leave little or no room for other ways of naming and imaging the divine realities known in the messianic community. In the Orthodox tradition this is certainly true

sive. And they have often been misunderstood, and misused and abused, by those who employ them.

Looking carefully at Orthodox tradition on this issue, as well as the history surrounding the tradition (which is most often deviant, and, in any case, must *never* be identified with the tradition itself), what is required is not the replacement of these names and images, nor their alteration on the basis of historical circumstances and cultural conditions, particularly those of the contemporary world, especially the modern secularized West. What is needed is rather their proper understanding and application.

There is no possibility for naming God "mother" in the biblical tradition and in the liturgical and mystical life which this tradition engenders. And there is no possibility for naming God's Word "daughter." The use of the generic terms "parent" and "child" for the Father and the Son are unacceptable since they are theologically inaccurate and destructive of the familial and conjugal imagery in the church's scripture, liturgy and mystical experience. The terms "creator," "redeemer" and "sanctifier" (or "sustainer") for the three divine persons are also unacceptable because they not only are not names, but are misleading even as titles when applied to the distinct persons of the Holy Trinity, since the one God and Father creates, redeems, sanctifies and sustains the world through his divine Son and Word, and his Holy Spirit. There is no divine activity which is not the common activity of the three divine persons originating in the Father, enacted by the Son and accomplished by the Holy Spirit in perfect interpersonal unity.

We must understand, however, as we have already mentioned, that the names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the imagery arising from their divine activity in the world, cannot be applied to God in terms of our human experiences in the fallen world. They are rather to be contemplated in their own right within the community of faith and so serve to inform and

cannot be applied indiscriminately to Divinity as such. They are not applied to the divine nature, i.e. to what makes the Godhead to be God in the fulness of the tri-hypostatic divine supraes-sence. (And we must remember that for the Orthodox the divine “essence” or “nature” is not the “one God” in whom the divine persons “subsist” and “relate”; for us the one God is personally the Father who is never devoid of his Son and his Spirit.) Nor are these names indiscriminately applicable to each of the divine persons. Nor are they applicable to the persons “taken as a whole,” so to speak, in their divine communion.

Thus, for example, our knowledge of the living God through his Word and Spirit tells us that to be God and to be Father are not simply the same. Fatherhood is not an attribute of the divine nature, nor a natural property of divinity as such. It is a hypostatic property of the one true God who is the Father of the Son and the source of the Spirit. Our experience of God is not exhausted by the person of God the Father, nor of *fatherhood*, alone. *Divinity is not paternity; and paternity is not divinity.* There is much more to the one living God than his being personally the Father. Or (to put it perhaps a bit more accurately) there is more to being the one God and Father than is contained in fatherhood alone; just as there is much more to the Godhead than what belongs to the Father alone.

The point of this example is to show that the matter of calling God *Father* is not as simple as is sometimes thought, and that greater nuance is needed in articulating the experience of God in the church, with greater care given to the interpretation of the significance of the names of the Tri-personal Godhead both for our understanding of God as well as for the application of the divine names and activities to the created, and sinful, conditions of this world.

The charge against the primacy, if not the absolute exclusivity, of the names and accompanying imagery of Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the divine hypostases is that there is no

it mean that there is nothing in the Godhead to ground and valorize the feminine in the created order.

It must be affirmed, first of all, that the three persons of the Godhead actualize within the divine supranature in a uniquely divine manner absolutely *everything* which belongs to the created order. God is not only the metaphysical *exception* in regard to "all things visible and invisible" which he creates; God is also their metaphysical *exemplar* in his divine self-actualization within the Godhead and in his self-revelation through his divine operations in the world.

The world "is" because it participates in the "being" of God which is, as we have said above, so far beyond being in the created sense that God can be said even not to exist. Nevertheless, all that "is" is, and is in its particular way, because in ways unimaginable and inconceivable to the created mind, both human and angelic, all that is exists in a divine way known to God alone within the fulness of divine suprabeing and life; for otherwise it could not exist at all. This means that while there is literally no such thing as a "divine masculine" or a "divine feminine," what we know as the human "masculine" and "feminine" within the created order (as everything else that is called into being by God) is actualized in a divine manner within the Godhead. And we would further claim that the naming of God as *Father* and the Word as *Son* does, as we have said, in this sense provide insight and guidance for our understanding of human "masculinity," particularly in what it means to be a human father, son, husband and brother.

But where do we find, if anywhere, insight into an understanding of human "femininity" in God, an illumination about what it means for a human being to be a woman, and particularly a mother, wife, daughter and sister? The answer here, in contemplating God within the Orthodox tradition, appears to be threefold.

First of all, such insight is discovered in the image and

covered in a special way in the hypostatic characteristics of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit acts within the Godhead (what the Orthodox traditionally call *theologia*), and as the Spirit participates in God's divine action in the world and in human history (what we call *oikonomia*).

When we look at what can be called the "feminine" and "maternal" symbols applied to God the Father, Christ the incarnate Son and Word, and the Holy Spirit, we must be careful to distinguish qualities which are authentically "feminine" and "maternal" from those which have been so designated by sinful people (mostly, but not exclusively, men) within the fallen conditions of the corrupted world. We can be guided in our decisions at this point by what the scripture and church tradition—particularly the liturgy, sacraments and lives of saints—provide as criteria for proper discernment. Nowhere in Orthodox tradition, for example, including the Bible, are weakness, passivity and carnality applied to God or to any godly human being; although meekness, receptivity and bodily existence are seen to be positive characteristics, even for the Son of God in his divine humanity. The point here is simply to note that great care needs to be taken to see what comes from God in the authentic church tradition, and what comes from "this world" in its fallen condition, which includes most of church history and plenty of perverted theological thinking and spiritual behavior.

Clearly applied to the persons of the Trinity, and to Divinity as such, are certain physical and spiritual properties and actions, which are undeniably "feminine" and "maternal," connected with birth and nurture. The Bible and the liturgy speak metaphorically of God's "womb" and God's "breasts," and attribute images and activities of birth, nurture, feeding, brooding and cuddling to the divine persons. The most central quality of God in the Old Testament, for example, his "mercy" or "steadfast

the creaturely actualization by grace of the same Son's divine birth in eternity "from a Father without a mother," also has implications for the "feminine" and "maternal" qualities in the Godhead. Many Orthodox saints (the majority being men) contemplate and articulate this mystery in this way in writings which have become integrated into the church's liturgical poetry and hymnography.

While "feminine" and "maternal" characteristics are attributed to God the Father and his Son in metaphorical and symbolical ways in Orthodox scripture and tradition, the Holy Spirit is the divine hypostasis to whom these attributes are most often personally ascribed in the Bible and in the writings of the saints. Although the liturgy does not make much of this, at least to my knowledge, a number of the church fathers do (and not only those of the early Syriac tradition where the Spirit was normally referred to in the feminine gender), as do some contemporary Orthodox thinkers (and not only those connected with Russian "sophiology").

Because the Holy Spirit is the "life-creating Spirit" who personally vivifies the Godhead as well as the whole of creation; the one who enables the birth and growth of the messiah and has come to be virtually identified with his churchly body and bride; the one who sustains and nurtures the bodily and spiritual life of the saints, the church, and the entire universe; the one whose personal presence makes the church in her sacramental being the foretaste of the cosmos transformed by Christ into the kingdom of God which is the heavenly Jerusalem, the "bride of the lamb" who "is our mother" (Gal 4:26, Rev 21:9) . . . the Holy Spirit naturally evokes images which may properly be called "feminine" and "maternal." This point, which will be repeated below, requires greater and deeper reflection by Orthodox Christians, particularly, I would think, by women.

Hebrew, and the actions of God's Wisdom, particularly as it is "hypostasized" and "personified" in the Bible's "wisdom literature," displays characteristics which are clearly feminine, it has become popular to see Wisdom as the "divine feminine" par excellence. This is done not only by Western writers, many of them outspokenly "feminist," but also, and more interesting for us, by a number of Russian thinkers led by the famous theologian Fr. Sergius Bulgakov to whom many within and without the Orthodox Church refer in their reflections and writings.

When we take the Orthodox tradition as a whole, and attempt to synthesize the witness of those who are recognized as "genuine," and that which they have left us in the canonical scriptures, liturgies, dogmas, canons and icons, as well as in those aspects of their life and teachings which have received universal reception by the church, we can, I believe, come to some tentative conclusions on the issue of divine Wisdom in relation to the question of gender.

We must admit first of all that there is a special quality to Wisdom in the Bible and church tradition which calls for particular attention and reflection. This is especially true because divine Wisdom came clearly to be identified with the divine Son, Word and Image of God incarnate in human form as Jesus Christ. We also observe that Wisdom came to be seen in the tradition as the particular attribute of God which somehow sums up and includes all others, the divine property which becomes the particular quality, together with the divine grace and truth which it embodies and expresses, distinguishing those who are "made god by grace" through Christ and the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of Wisdom. This leads to a conclusion clearly witnessed in the tradition, namely, that saints are always characterized by spiritual wisdom, in opposition to carnal foolishness; and that the Virgin Mary, the "least in God's kingdom" who is the greatest among the saints as the *panagia* who per-

stantinople is dedicated) came later to be personified through God's grace in the all-holy Virgin Mary—in whose honor certain early Russian churches were dedicated under the name of Sophia.

While we cannot say that Fr. Bulgakov's formulation of the place of Sophia in Christian theology and spiritual life (still less that of Soloviev and Florensky) is fully compatible with Orthodox tradition, we must confess that the great theologian has raised issues which are critical to the presentation of Orthodoxy in our time, particularly on the issue of gender. Fr. Bulgakov's great contribution, it seems to me, is his struggle with the burning issue of God's communion with the world which he creates, redeems and deifies to be by grace (as the church fathers have said) that which God himself is by nature. The communion between the "wholly other" God and his created world centered in the human person as microcosm and mediator, may legitimately be likened to a union of man and woman where the two become *one* yet remain distinctly *two* in a union (to use the words of the council of Chalcedon about the divinity and humanity of Christ the incarnate Word) that is without separation or division in any way, but is also without change in nature to either party, nor results in a fusion (or "confusion") between them which produces some radically "new thing" which is neither God nor creature.

Fr. Bulgakov struggled with the conception and articulation of how God and the world can be really *one* in a way which would overcome the various sorts of *pantheism* on the one hand and *dualism* on the other which he rightly saw to characterize most thought and speech on the subject, Christian and non-Christian. He introduced the concept of Sophia the Wisdom of God (in my view somewhat artificially and unnecessarily) to do this. He saw Sophia as having two aspects or forms: uncreated and created. Uncreated Sophia, identified with the divine essence (*ousia*), is eternally hypostasized in the divine

created Sophia becoming one with divine Sophia in a theandric unity, the fulfilment of divine Godmanhood realized from all eternity in Christ. Created Sophia which is one with divine Sophia by nature, and is reestablished as such in Christ and the Spirit in the church, and in all creation at the Lord's parousia, is hypostasized in the Virgin Mary, who is thereby the personification of the church as well as the deified cosmos to come at the end of history. In this sense, by the particular action of the Holy Spirit who is our "divine mother," Mary reveals the "eternal" and "divine feminine" which Sophia is as God's unhypostasized essence or nature (*ousia*), when she is united with Christ, the incarnate Word, who hypostasizes God's Wisdom in his divine person. Thus created Sophia (i.e. the whole of creation) is brought into perfect communion with uncreated Sophia (i.e. the divine essence) as God becomes "all and in all" through Christ and the Spirit at the end of time as we now know it . . . of which communion, we may add, the Theotokos is already now the personal realization.

While it does not seem necessary or proper to articulate the union of God and creation, particularly God and creation redeemed and deified in God's Son and Spirit, in a "sophiological" way, and while it is certainly not traditional to do so (as Fr. Bulgakov himself would be the first to admit), the obvious intention in his vision and work, it seems to me, is necessary and proper. The vision, and the experience underlying it, must be articulated much more carefully, however, and in some ways much more in keeping with the church's biblical, liturgical and mystical tradition. It is surely possible to do this. And to begin this work in earnest is undoubtedly one of the primary tasks, if not indeed the most urgent task, for Orthodox theologians today, especially (I would add for obvious reasons) Orthodox women.

church as Christ's body and bride: the new Eve for the new Adam; and the obvious femininity of the Virgin Mary who is indeed the creature supraeminently empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the perfect human being: the quintessential saint, the personal image of the church and the deified cosmos, and the ark, temple and throne of divine Wisdom . . . there definitely occurred in Orthodox Christian tradition, particularly in mystical contemplation and doxological poetry, a "conflation" of the Holy Spirit, Sophia, the Church and Mary in a complex of symbolisms and images which manifest what may indeed in some sense appropriately be called the "divine feminine." They do so in the sense that these images disclose aspects of divine and human being and action which all divine and human persons must have, but which in the order of creation and redemption belong especially to women.

This does not mean, as we have already said, that the Holy Spirit, or even Sophia, can be conceived of as a "woman" in contradistinction to the Son and Word who is a "man" imaging the "masculinity" of the God the Father. Nor can it be taken to mean that there is literally some sort of "masculinity" and "femininity" in the Godhead (which, of course, no Orthodox Christian, however speculative his or her thinking, would defend). What it does mean is that characteristics and qualities of personal being and behavior which are supraeminently those of women have a grounding and exemplification in the Godhead and in the actions of the Holy Trinity, and that they do so particularly in the personal activities of the Holy Spirit in making, redeeming, sanctifying and sustaining the world.

While some thinkers see this sort of interpretation of the Holy Spirit (and Sophia) as a type of "romantic feminism" which serves to "keep women in their place" by including the "feminine" in Divinity in a way which grounds the subordination of women to men because it removes women from any

greater and deeper attention in Orthodox theology, particularly in the work being done today by women.

9. In God's Image and Likeness: Male and Female

Orthodox Christian tradition has always affirmed that human beings are made in God's image and likeness, male and female. This means that humanity reflects and imitates divinity in its very structure. Human beings are persons who possess an identical human nature which mirrors the divine nature in a created way, and as such they can express God's uncreated attributes in a created manner. Men and women are created "I am's," self-conscious acting subjects, intelligent moral beings who can know, will, speak and act within the limited conditions of their createdness.

There is only one human nature which belongs identically to men and women; there is not one nature of man and another of woman. This one human nature, like the divine nature of the Holy Trinity, does not exist in abstraction. There is, in this sense, no such thing as humanity in general, just as there is no such thing as divinity. There are only concretely existing human beings, persons with names and faces who "enhypostasize" the human nature which is common to all, each in a unique and irrepeatable way; just as there is no "God-in-general," but concretely the one God and Father, and the divine Son and Word, and the all-holy Spirit—each of whom is uniquely "God" in a manner personally distinct from the others.

Like the persons of the Holy Trinity, human persons find and fulfill themselves in communion with other persons with whom they are "of one essence" (to use the technical theological term: *homoousios*). Because of their created character, there must be multitudes of human persons, male and female,

sons is, by God's grace, equally boundless and infinite. Thus, as the Orthodox saints say, human being is an "imitation of God," and the human person is a creature with the call to be by God's gracious power literally *everything* that God himself is, with his Son and Spirit, in the boundless fulness of divine being and life.

This means that human being and life is never complete. Its perfection consists in growth in perfection through an ever-more-perfect participation in God's supraessential perfection made accessible to creaturely communion by the uncreated divine energies which flow from the three divine persons of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In their call to unending growth in divine perfection, there is no difference at all between men and women, just as there is (as we have mentioned above) no difference in this respect between human beings of various nationalities, races and social positions. Women as well as men are persons imaging the person of God who is himself hypostatically imaged in Christ, with a human nature reflecting the nature of the Holy Trinity.

Also belonging to human being made in God's image and likeness, male and female, is the relationship and communion between the two sexes. Gender-differentiation for human beings is an essential element in their ability to reflect and participate in God's divine being and life whose content is love. Just as there is no such thing as humanity in general, but only actual people; so also there is no such thing as an abstract "masculine" and "feminine," or abstract "man" and "woman." There are only actually existing persons who are human beings either as women or men. And it is exactly as men and women, and in their intercommunion together, that human beings find and fulfill themselves as creatures made in God's image and likeness since their sexuality is an essential part of their humanity and, as such, must be integrated into their human behavior in a Godlike and God-befitting manner.

trinal articulation of the issue which can claim formal acceptance by the church. There are no conciliar definitions on the subject which enjoy universal recognition by the churches which acknowledge each other as Orthodox. (The only noteworthy exception would be the canons of the council of Gangra which condemn the heresy of *enkratism* and affirm the goodness of sexuality and marriage; though they do so without theological elaboration.) And no consensus has been reached on the question which has received universal ecclesial acceptance and affirmation in any other more organic way.

What has been said in church history on the subject by such fathers as saints Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Maximus the Confessor (not to mention certain influential figures in early Christian history whose doctrines the church has rejected, such as Origen and Tertullian), as well as by such modern thinkers as Soloviev, Florensky, Bulgakov and Evdokimov, has not found a place within the church's holy tradition. It has, on the contrary, been considered by most who have studied it to be at best questionable and confusing, and, at worst, mistaken and misleading. And it is not irrelevant to our present discussion to note that the questionable and clearly unacceptable teachings of Orthodox churchmen, including several canonized saints—particularly, though not exclusively, in the area of gender distinction and sexuality—have virtually always been in the areas of their thought most strongly influenced by philosophies outside the church's biblical tradition, particularly those deriving from various sorts of hellenistic and idealistic worldviews.

Much work is demanded of contemporary Orthodox theologians to assess what has been said on this issue, namely how sexuality and gender distinction contributes to human being made in the image and likeness of God, and how men and women image God's being and life in their communion with each other. We are obliged to try to articulate a position on the subject which the church may one day come to accept as its

10. Gender, Sexuality, Marriage and Celibacy

Reflecting on “the making of Man” within the mystical life of the new covenant community in which the risen Christ opens our minds to understand the scriptures (Lk 24:45), we find ourselves capable of making several assertions concerning human sexuality and gender distinction.

We affirm first of all that gender and sexuality belong to human nature as such. We humans are male and female by the express will of God. We were not created this way in preview of the fall, sin and death. We were created this way, and will be this way forever, because sexuality and gender are necessary for our being made in God’s image and likeness (even if we cannot now explain clearly and in detail how this is so).

We affirm as well that normal and godly human being and life requires spiritual communion between human persons of different genders. This communion is expressed in a unique way in marriage and the procreation of children, which are the express will of God and cannot be associated with sin, but is not at all limited to conjugal union. All relationships between human beings have a “gender” dimension. We are not angels, nor (as Fr. Florovsky writes) a combination of “ghosts” and “corpses.” We are, and always will be, embodied spirits who are either men or women. And our being women or men is an essential part of every relationship which we have as human beings: with ourselves, with God, with our neighbors, who include in the first place our parents and family members, and with nature.

As men and women within God’s final covenant community with creation in Christ we recognize only two ways of relating which involve (what has come to be called in our day) a “genital” expression of our sexuality. Only these two ways are “adequate to God” who is Love and to our human being male

munion in love. Marriage is the “sacrament of love.” As a “profound mystery” whose prototype is Christ and the church (and God and the world, and Yahweh and Israel), marriage brings two persons into a bond of unity which enhances the distinction and value of each person in direct proportion to the measure in which the “two become one” in God. The sexual act is an expression of this union in love. When godly, it includes every manner of love. It is an act of *eros*, the passionate yearning for union with the beloved. It includes *friendship* and *affection*. And it is motivated and crowned by *agape* which is the acceptance and affirmation of the other as the other really is through an act totally devoted to the other’s well-being and happiness.

When sane and godly, marriage also always includes the creation of new persons in the image and likeness of God, and in the image and likeness of the parents through whose union the new being is born. (Cf. Gen 5:1-3) It is surely the conviction of Orthodox Christian tradition that children are a normal part of marriage in God’s image. This does not mean that a childless marriage due to the fallenness of the world is ungodly. Nor does it mean that every act of sexual union in marriage must have procreation as its purpose and justification. (We Orthodox must come at some point to a common teaching about conception control in marriage.) Nor does it mean that marriage without sexual expression and procreation is incomplete and defective. What it does mean is that love between a man and woman who are united in marriage normally results in the creation of a family which functions (in St. John Chrysostom’s celebrated expression) as a “small church,” a sacramental actualization of the kingdom of God in the fallen world, a communion of many persons in truth and in love within a God-inspired order of relationships.

Truth and love may sometimes find other expressions in marriage than the creation of a family. Because of the fallenness

tradition, that married people who refrain from sexual communion because they consider sexual intercourse to be inherently sinful, just as those who refuse to marry at all for this reason, are insane and ungodly. And so also are they who refuse to have children in principle, whether or not they engage in sexual intercourse, when their refusal is due to a misguided spirituality or a graceless carnality.

There are also men and women, Orthodox tradition would insist, who are called to the single life. This vocation excludes from their experience any form of sexual expression which we would nowadays call "genital." This does not mean that single people turn into angels, or become "merely human" without a sexual dimension and expression to their being and life. Single people, including monks and nuns, remain men and women. Their gender and sexuality remain part of their physical and spiritual life. It is consecrated and integrated into their worship and witness. It is an integral element in their relationships with other people. But the ways in which single people love God and their neighbors excludes "genital" sexual activity and intercourse of any sort. Their lives because of this are not deprived of anything essential to human fulfillment—for love, including erotic love (which belongs even to God), need not be expressed in a genital manner. If this were the case, those called to consecrated celibacy, as well as those deprived of conjugal intercourse because of the conditions of their earthly lives (e.g. through sickness, death or separation due to duty or trouble) would be denied the fulness of human being and life. Among such allegedly unfulfilled and incomplete people would be the majority of the church's canonized saints, including John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary, and the Lord Jesus himself.

While the church's celibate saints are completely continent in regard to "genital" activity, they are, as we noted, fully sexual in their spiritual lives which necessarily include bodily

or the “three holy hierarchs” (celebrated on January 30) with the holy women, married and celibate, who inspired their doctrines and actions, and even authored some of their works. How many of the church’s “holy fathers” were sons and brothers of holy mothers and sisters? And how many of them had women co-workers with whom they enjoyed the deepest friendship and collaboration?

The only exception to the deep and significant interrelationships which are normally found in some form or other between men and women saints (which “exception” somehow proves the “rule”) would be the saints whose particular “cross” in this life is struggling with carnal lust. These are the wounded and victimized people who have proved unable to trust themselves sexually in relationships with people, whether of their own or the other sex. These heroic souls, like alcoholics who may never drink wine, find themselves compelled to give up normal relationships with others due to their sad and tragic, but wholly justifiable, fear of falling into abnormal relationships of sin. Such great saints are usually found among the desert-dwellers and penitents. For all of their difficulties, they still never fall into the trap of condemning sexuality as such. Should they do so, they would have to be excluded from the church’s communion—as large numbers of people with this view, and even entire ecclesial communities, actually were at some points in the church’s history.

11. Communion and Hierarchy

Communion among human beings requires order. God provides this order, according to Orthodox understanding, in creation; and brings it to fulfilment, within the conditions of this age, in Christ and the Church. The order is patterned after the interpersonal communion of the persons of the Holy Tri-

unlike some feminist authors, see as organically interrelated)—so there is an order in creation generally, and in human community in particular.

The communion of the three persons of the Godhead is rooted not only in the consubstantiality of the three hypostases, but more basically, so to speak, in the person of the one God and Father, the divine “source” and “cause” of the Word and Spirit who is the one God whose divine nature the Word and Spirit possess in an identity of being and life. The *monarchia* and *headship* of God the Father results in a *hierarchy* within the Godhead which provides for perfect order within the Trinity and perfect communion among the three persons, but which at the same time renders impossible any sort of inequality, hetero-substantiality or metaphysical subordination among the divine hypostases. In this view, resulting not from abstract speculations but from the experience of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their divine activity in history, hierarchy and equality are not mutually exclusive categories. Just the contrary. They belong together to ensure perfect order and communion.

The Son and Spirit are from the Father who, in his hypostatic mode of existence as “source of divinity,” is “greater” than they are. (Cf. Jn 14:28) Being “from” the Father in a divine manner, however, the Son and the Spirit are in no way inferior to him. They are not “lesser gods” (an absurdity). Nor are they creatures (a blasphemy). They are divine with exactly the same divinity as God. Yet all that they have is from God, and all that they are is due to him. In their activity in the world, which flows from their essential relationship within the Godhead and reflects it in history, the Son and the Spirit obey God and honor him. They listen to him and serve him. They submit themselves to him and are subject to him. And all this occurs to their divine honor and glory, being realized in ways that in no way degrade or demean their dignity as divine persons, each of whom is God with the other and with the one

an identical nature uniquely “enhypostasized” in personally distinct “modes of existence” in imitation of Divinity. When this communal order is perverted through sin, it turns either into some form of totalitarian collective with unavoidable oppression, exploitation and tyranny rooted in brute power and force; or it becomes a form of social arrangement where isolated and alienated *individuals* attempt to relate to each other on bases of mutual self-interest in which even a language of communion, community and the common good is rendered impossible. Such distortion sadly occurs not only in nations, states and cities, but in churches, monasteries and families, including those which are nominally Christian and Orthodox.

12. Headship in Church and Family

In regard to the issue of gender, the biblical tradition preserved in the Orthodox Church clearly posits a hierarchical understanding. Men are to be the “heads” of women, most specifically their wives, in the way in which Christ is the head of the church, and God is the head of Christ. Such “headship” is connected to the imagery in the creation story which says that woman was originally made from and for man, and not man from and for woman. Without woman, who is man’s “glory,” man could not be what he must be as the image and glory of God who is Love. Man and woman belong together. Each belongs to the other. And both belong to God. When they actualize their godlike being, men and women are not independent of each other. (Cf. 1 Cor 11; Eph 5; 1 Tim 2)

There is a special sense, however, according to the biblical story, in which man is in need of woman not only for the sake of his manhood, but for the sake of his basic humanity. Woman is needed to fulfill and complete man’s very being as human.

woman is "another" to man. She is not simply a part or aspect of himself existing in separation. There are really "two" who must "become one." This is the significance of woman being made by God as a "helper fit for him," or (as a modern writer has put it) a "companion accompanying him" (*ezer kenegdo*). (Gen 2:18) She is not man's "assistant" or "servant." Still less is she some sort of instrument or piece of property for his use (or abuse). She is rather (as we said about the church in relation to Christ) "another" of the very same nature, the specific "other" in whom man recognizes and completes himself as a person made in the image and likeness of God who is Love.

In this view the "headship" of the man in the family and in the church, which is quintessentially "familial," is a headship of love. As such, it always requires submission and service. Within the conditions of the fallen world it also inevitably requires sacrifice. Man is a source of life to the woman through his submissive service of love. He "names" her with the name of "life," and cleaves to her in a union of love through which the two become one. (Cf. Gen 3:20) He makes her to be a wife and a mother, and she makes him to be a husband and father. He submits himself to her and serves her as Christ submits himself and serves the church. He gives her all that he has and all that he is, his very substance and life, and that even unto death. And in doing this he becomes who and what he is as a human being and a man.

In the most basic sense man in relation to woman is made to be a *giver*. Giving is not simply man's function or role in regard to woman; it is the heart of his being as imaging God the Father and Son. The whole drama and pathos of the male in respect to the female is rooted in giving. Man's virtues and glories, as well as his vices and faults, revolve around this central factor of his masculine being. When man submits himself to woman, and gives to her lovingly and freely, without

Woman, in this perspective, is the accompanying *receiver*. She empowers man to be both human and masculine by inspiring and accepting his gift of love. She does this actively, with dignity, freedom and purpose. She is not “passive” in her reception of man’s gift of himself which she herself intentionally and actively evokes and enables. Nor is she a mere instrument for man’s use (not so say misuse and abuse). She is never simply acted upon by man as an object. Her submission to man is rather as one who gladly receives what man has to offer, and through her active reception enables the offering itself, and therefore, man’s very being *as man*. The whole pathos and drama of the female in relation to the male is contained in receiving. Woman’s virtues and glories, as well as her vices and faults, revolve around her ability to receive from man in a godly manner. When woman receives freely, with dignity and honor, without seduction or intimidation, she fulfils herself as a woman in a way congruous with her basic humanity made in the image of God.

Spiritual experience reveals that man’s anxiety is always somehow rooted in the fear that what he has to give will not be received, that he will be spurned and rejected, that he will not be good enough or do well enough. His temptation is always to feel somehow inadequate. This is, basically, what causes him to sin by refusing to give at all, or to subjugate and dominate with violence and tyranny. This renders man’s contemplation of “Christ and him crucified” radically important in regard to his specifically *masculine* form of existence.

Woman’s anxiety, on the other hand, appears to be rooted in the fear that she will not really be loved, but used and abused, taken advantage of and discarded. Her temptation is always to feel somehow oppressed and exploited. This then is why a woman may sinfully allow herself to be abused, or equally sinfully refuse to receive in any way at all, closing herself off from others, especially from men, in an edempt attempt “to be her

apostolic scriptures appeals to men to *love* their wives, and to wives to *revere* their husbands. (Cf. Eph 5:21-33: the epistle reading at the sacrament of marriage in the Orthodox Church.)

If we dare to offer a *theologoumenon* at this point, we might say that in inspiring and enabling man, woman images the activity of the Holy Spirit within the Godhead and in the divine *oikonomia*. She inspires, empowers and nurtures man to be man in a manner analogous to the Holy Spirit's inspiring, empowering and nurturing Jesus to be the Christ, the church to be his body and bride, and Christians to be God the Father's children. She allows man to be not only a father and husband, but also to be a son and image of God through the interpersonal collaboration and communion which they share. Without woman, man cannot be who and what he is, just as Jesus, and even the eternal Word of God, cannot be who and what he is without the Holy Spirit. As it is impossible to conceive of the divine Word in eternity and incarnate as Jesus, and to experience his presence and power, without the Holy Spirit (who speaks and acts not on his own authority, but takes what is Christ's and gives it to us—John 16:12-15), so it is impossible to conceive of man and to experience his masculine reality without woman.

In making this analogy, we see that there is no superiority or inferiority between Jesus Christ the Word and the Holy Spirit who always exist and act in complete unity, harmony and equality with each other, so there is no superiority or inferiority between men and women who are also to exist and act in this way. In the Orthodox perspective (whatever the value of the analogy) it is clear that the "male chauvinists" who exalt man over woman are as wrong and dangerous for human being and behavior as the "radical" and "romantic feminists" who exalt woman over man. It does seem possible, however, to make a certain comparison between the Word, Jesus, and man in his

The so-called “household codes” found in the New Testament scripture which, among other things, teach the headship of man in the church and in the “small church” of the family (e.g. Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:5; 1 Tim 2:8-3:15, 5:1-6:2) are not, according to Orthodox tradition, contradictory to what is given in the gospels. Their prescriptions are neither the acceptance by the church of unchristened rabbinic Judaism, nor the result of the influence of the secular Roman-Greek world of the day; either or both of which were allegedly brought into Christ’s body by “chauvinist” males intent on destroying the egalitarian teachings of the primitive “Jesus movement.” The relationship between men and women described in these letters is understood rather as the natural and proper application of the vision of reality revealed by Christ and the Holy Spirit to members of the church who still live in “this age” whose “form is passing away.” (Cf. 1 Cor 7:21)

In regard to their common humanity, men and women are identical. There are no natural virtues common to human beings which belong to one of the sexes, and not the other. This is demonstrated with undeniable clarity in the lives of Orthodox saints. In every possible category in the *Menaion*, where the form of sanctity has no gender-specific relevance, what is said of men is said equally, without any detectable difference, of women. Women disciples, apostles (or those “equal to the apostles”), prophets, teachers, catechists, deacons, missionaries, martyrs, monastics, ascetics, mystics, confessors, fools for Christ’s sake and secular rulers are glorified in what befits their calling in exactly the same way as men. No differences whatsoever can be discovered in this regard.

Nevertheless, like the hypostases of the Trinity, each human being actualizes his or her general human qualities in a uniquely personal way. For human beings, for whom gender is a necessary attribute, the sexual dimension of being a man or a woman is therefore essentially involved in the manner in which their

even compelled to pretend to be men by wearing men's clothing in order to complete their calling. And, as another example, men and women who fall into the traditional category of "righteous ones" (meaning that they have no *particular* category of sanctity, but express their holiness within the normal conditions of everyday family and social life—like Joseph the betrothed of Mary, or Mary's parents Joachim and Anna, or the Forerunner's parents Zacharias and Elizabeth, or Juliana of Lazarev, or the newly-canonized Ilya Chavchavadze in Georgia), are usually praised for expressing their holiness in gender-related ways.

The only category of saint in which women are absent in Orthodox tradition is that of *hierarch*. This has led the church, at least until now, to the conclusion that for whatever reasons (which are yet to receive adequate and convincing theological articulation and explanation), this particular office and ministry in the church is considered to be gender-determined, and as such can only be exercised by certain qualified men. (Cf. 1 Tim 3; Tit 1; and the church's canonical tradition generally.)

In relation to women, men exercise their Godlike humanity as "heads." They love as those who give life to women by giving themselves in sacrificial submission and self-emptying service. Women, in turn, in regard to men, love by enabling man's giving by freely receiving his gift, most basically the gift of himself and his life. "Headship" in this perspective is never dominance or tyranny, just as being the "receiver" (or the "body") is never humiliating or degrading—especially since it is through the active acceptance of the receiving person, and through her inspiration and power, that the "head" can be a head in a manner reflecting the headship of God the Father and the Son.

This view of reality is related to the church in Orthodox tradition in the sense that the body of believers is headed by a

ministry of “headship” in love. In this sense Christ’s church is a monarchical, patriarchal and hierarchical community. It is so not in any secular, tribal, national or imperial understanding, however much such understanding may have influenced and distorted church life at various stages of its history. Nor is it so on the basis of sophisticated philosophical or theosophical theories and explanations brought in from alien sources, primarily hellenistic and especially neo-platonistic, to create a sad and tragic “pseudomorphosis” (to use Fr. Florovsky’s term) of church order and life. The church is rather a monarchical, patriarchal and hierarchical community in imitation of the Trinity. We see such explanations of the church’s experience already articulated in apostolic times, in the canonical scriptures, and in the writings of the apostolic fathers and apologists.

The symbols and images used for “headship” in the church are inconsistent and clashing. There are historical questions, for example, about the office of bishop and presbyter, and the relation between the two. At different times, in different places, by different witnesses, different names, symbols and images were used in different ways. But there is no doubt that the pastoral office was everywhere and always in Orthodox tradition sacramentally joined to the persons of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ—and not, we must note, to God-in-general, or to Divinity as such, or to the Godhead, or to the divine nature, or to the Trinity “taken as a whole,” or even the person of the Holy Spirit. However, we also must note that both men and women were *deacons* from the earliest days, as this is witnessed already in the apostolic new testament scriptures. (Cf. Rom 16:1, 1 Tim 2:11)

In orthodox-catholic tradition, the mystical connection in the church is always between the presbyter/bishop and God the Father and Jesus. The presbyter/bishop is always the living icon of the Father, whose divine icon is his only Son incarnate in human form as Israel’s messiah. In the life of the church, and

feasts and presents (and not *re*-presents) God the Father through Christ to the flock, and the flock through Christ to the Father. At no time and in no circumstances is the presbyter/bishop ever sacramentally or spiritually presenting or imaging the ecclesial body *qua* body. Even when he stands forth on behalf of his church community at the altar, or at a synodical assembly, the presbyter/bishop is always the image of the church's "head" and "husband" who, of course, cannot possibly exist, speak and act without or apart from (not to mention *despite* or *against*) his own body and bride.

The ecclesial community *as community* requires no sacramental expression because, unlike its head and husband, the man Jesus Christ, the bride and body is itself always actually historically present in a way that Jesus is not. If there is a symbol or image for the church as *body*, it is not Christ or the Man, but rather the praying Woman filled with the Spirit, most particularly the Virgin Mary. It is for this reason that the arguments appear misconceived and misplaced within Orthodox tradition which contend that since men are within the body together with women, or since women are included within the humanity of Jesus the "head," that women ought also to be included in the sacramental office of presbyter/bishop.

It is also necessary to note that when Orthodox Christians use the terms symbol, image and icon (and even "sign," though this is much less common), we normally do so in the sense that these realities make present and actual the realities which they embody because of their natural competence and capacity to do so. For the Orthodox, a sacramental symbol, image or sign does not refer to a reality which is absent. Nor does it merely point to a reality that is not *really* there. Nor does it function as a "photocopy" or "indicator" in a formal or external way, by, for example, resembling physically that which it signifies. Just the contrary. A sacramental image—and the presbyter/bishop is certainly such an image in Orthodox church life—is the living

13. Gender, Sexuality and Sin

As virtue and sanctity for all human beings, both men and women, are essentially identical, so also are sin and vice. There is not one kind of evil for men and another for women. But, as in the case of holiness, each human being sins in a uniquely personal manner with his or her gender and sexuality being an essential factor in the evil action.

In their essential communion which cannot be broken no matter how hard they try to break it (with hell itself being the futile and always unsuccessful attempt to keep trying!), men and women are always factors in each other's lives for good or for evil. This is symbolized in the biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve which forever remains, at least for the Orthodox, the archetypal image of the dialectics of sin.

In Orthodox tradition, particularly in the church's liturgy, there is no evidence that either man or woman is more responsible than the other for the "original sin." Adam and Eve are equally responsible because they are "one flesh." They do what they do together. The church's liturgy generally blames each of the couple equally for their common fall (as does God in the story), although at certain times, to make certain particular points, the liturgical songs and prayers may choose one or the other for particular mention and attention. Thus Adam (when treated as a male, and not as generic Man) is contemplated as particularly culpable for being deceived by her whose "head" he was to be; while Eve is blamed in her specific womanhood for leading into sin him whose "helpmate" (in the sense described above) she was intended to be. The allegation that Orthodox liturgy places most, if not all blame for sin in the story on Eve cannot be demonstrated by a reading of the texts. And there is no indication in any liturgical prayer or song that

In Orthodox prayers and hymns referring to salvation, Eve is often mentioned together with Adam as rejoicing in the redemption of the human race which they together symbolize. It should be also noted at this point that in Orthodox tradition Adam and Eve are always treated symbolically as the representatives of the human race, and never as individual historical persons. They have no "name day" in the church's liturgical calendar, no *vitae* like actual historical persons, and no individual icons for veneration (though they do appear in frescoes). Some observers even note that on the paschal icon of Christ's descent into Sheol in which the historical personages have haloes or nimbuses, the figures depicting Adam and Eve are usually (and quite properly) without them.

There are any number of women saints, the "daughters of Eve," commemorated and venerated in the church's liturgy. Though women saints are much less in number than men, there may perhaps be as many women, if not more, among glorified lay people. And the Virgin Mary, the new and last Eve and true "mother of the living" stands forever in the center of Orthodox church life as the perfect human being, the leading Christian and the quintessential saint. She forever functions for the faithful (as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann so often said) not as "the great exception," but rather as "the great example" for all human beings in her essential humanity, as well as "the great example" for all women in her personal "mode of being" as mother, wife, bride, sister and daughter. This is why we Orthodox have problems with the Roman Catholic dogmatic decrees and explanations about Mary's conception from her parents in regard to sexual reproduction and the "original sin," as well as her "assumption into heaven," which appear to be significantly different from our understanding of her conception and dormition, both of which we liturgically celebrate. In a word, within the Orthodox Christian tradition the Theotokos is not "alone of all

tion, while being also the particular example for males as a son, husband and brother who images God the Father.

In reflecting on the “original sin” within Orthodox tradition we find that many explanations exist about what exactly this sin is and how exactly it affects us. What consensus exists seems to indicate that whatever the first peoples’ sins may have actually been in history, the sin described in the *Genesis* story symbolizes the very “mechanism” of the evil act. It includes the lack of faith and love for God, willful disobedience and rebellion against him through presumption and pride, enticement by the object of sin appealing to greed and lust, the surrender of freedom and self-control, and the instigation of the devil who tempts human beings to try to “be god” (which is surely our human calling) without God. In St. Paul’s short summation the “original sin” (like all sin) is the conscious suppression of the truth, the willful refusal of those who “knew God” to “honor him as God or give thanks to him.” (Cf. Rom 1:18-32) In Fr. Schmemmann’s interpretation, it is the rejection and destruction of the essentially *doxological* and *eucharistic* character of human being and life.

Whatever the interpretation, it appears clear in the tradition, surely in the scripture and church’s liturgy (whatever speculations exist among Christian authors, including some saints), that the primordial sin was not legitimate sexual intercourse between man and woman, though lust and greed are surely involved. And, as we have already said, it was not the sin of just one of the sexes.

That the serpent tempted Eve in the story, who in turn tempts her husband, is clearly part of the inspired biblical parable, and as such must have theological and spiritual significance. There are many theories about this. On the one side are speculations (favored by ‘male chauvinists’) which see the woman being tempted first as the “weaker sex” who is particu-

meet" and keep him safe from diabolical assault. In this latter view (one which "romantic feminists" would favor) the only possible way for Adam to fall would be through the surrender of his wife since, if the serpent's temptation and the tree's attraction could not conquer *her*, it could in no way conquer him.

Both types of theories seem unacceptable to Orthodox tradition because of the "one flesh" character of the couple. Equality, mutuality and complementarity are essential elements of man and woman's very being, and so of their actions as well. What appears more acceptable within the tradition would be an interpretation of the story which places responsibility on the couple together, but which also discovers and identifies disorder and distortion in their communion as being an essential element in their tragedy. In such an interpretation the disharmony that brings their common downfall may well be (as certain texts in the Bible seem to indicate) a failure of proper headship on man's part together with a presumptuous independence on the part of the woman. But whatever the proper theory and interpretation, there is little doubt that it remains an open issue without dogmatic decision in the Orthodox church and, as such, calls for further study and reflection by thoughtfully committed men and women.

14. Sexuality and Uncleaness

Sometimes the charge is made that women are particularly prone to evil because of their bodily functions in birthgiving, particularly their menstrual period which renders them "unclean." Some thinkers in Christian history have even considered women's monthly cycle of ovulation to be the result of the first couple's "fall"; part of the "garments of skin" in which they

menstrual period and for a fixed length of time after having given birth or miscarried.

When we examine this issue in the light of Orthodox tradition we see that no connection exists between menstruation, sexual intercourse, birth-giving and sin, except that in the fallen state of the world sin necessarily infects all of these sacred actions and virtually always (though not always, as, for example in the conceptions of Mary and John the Baptist) stains and pollutes them. This is the reason why every human being can confess with the psalmist: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sins (plural) did my mother conceive me." (Ps 50/51:5) If the sexual means of human conception and birth were sinful in themselves (as St. John Chrysostom and others have noted), then God himself would be the sinner since God created human beings this way.

There is no justification in Orthodox tradition for excluding women from public worship and sacramental participation during their time of menstruation. The early church did not do this. The practice most likely entered the church for pastoral and practical reasons. It may have been done (as St. Gregory the Great's answer to St. Augustine of Canterbury on the issue seems to indicate) because those being converted already had traditions concerning such things which the church did not, and perhaps even could not, easily change. Or it may have been done (as, for example, when large numbers of simple people were baptized and received holy communion infrequently) for reasons of decorum, convenience and hygiene. In any case there is no dogmatic justification for excluding women from liturgical worship and eucharistic communion during their menstrual period. And there is certainly no justification in using menstrual "uncleaness" as a reason why women should not be bishops or presbyters. The practice of women normally refraining from communion for forty days after childbirth (with *forty* being the symbolic number for "completion" which need not necessarily

life offers on the subject of ritual "impurity" it seems likely that actions such as menstruation in women and the emission of semen in men (as well as direct contact with blood and with death) were considered to render human beings "unclean" because these actions involved direct contact with the most sacred elements of human life. The ritual "uncleanness," ironically, came not from actions which are wicked or evil, but rather from actions which are sacred and holy. It was the result of the direct contact of sinful creatures with God, the source and cause of life and death. When mere creatures, and particularly *sinful* creatures (and all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory) have direct involvement with the most sacred and "numinous" aspects of their humanity, i.e. those involving life and death, they become "special" members of the community who require ritual "purification" in order to return to "normal" life. In the spiritual "pedagogy" of the Old Testament, for example, this even included a ritual "purification" of the priests who served in the temple sanctuary, and whose hands touched the sacred scroll and the holy objects. (To this day in some churches the washing of the eucharistic vessels is called "purifying.") And it even further included a "rite of purification" for the Theotokos who conceived by the Holy Spirit and gave birth to God's Son in human form without man's seed in a glorious and painless delivery in which she preserved her spiritual and physical virginity!

Orthodox Christian tradition witnesses to the conviction that Jesus Christ has "fulfilled all righteousness" and has freed those who have died and risen with him in baptism from all ritual practices belonging to this age which were prescribed "under the law" for pedagogical purposes. The church retains special prayers for mothers who miscarry and give birth, as well as the rite of churching mothers in imitation of the Virgin Mary who was "purified" on the fortieth day after Christ's birth according to the law. (Cf. The Feast of the Meeting, February

within the conditions of sin, and that as a pure matter of fact virtually every human being born into this world (as we noted above) has been “conceived in sins” and “brought forth in iniquity.” In any case, it is surely not the church’s teaching that there is anything demeaning about womanhood as such in these prescriptions and practices since semen and blood are as “defiling” for men as menstruation and blood are for women. And, it must be noted as well, that sins in sexual conduct such as fornication, adultery, homosexual acts, acts with beasts or birds, etc., are treated in both the Old and New Testaments with no distinction due to gender. According to the law men as well as women are to be put to death for such offenses, as they both are equally pardoned in the realm of grace by Christ’s bloody death on the cross. What has actually happened in history, however, particularly in regard to the interpretation and application of these rites in regard to women, is sadly another matter. The behavior of Christians, including the Orthodox, has often been in flagrant violation of both the letter and the spirit of the law of Christ.

15. Gender and Sexuality in the Age to Come

According to Orthodox doctrine, human gender distinction will continue to exist in God’s kingdom to come at the end of the ages when Christ comes in glory. What will not exist, according to Jesus himself, is any sort of “genital” sexual activity, particularly sexual intercourse for the procreation of children.

Christ taught that in the coming age men and women will be “like angels.” Parents will not give in marriage, nor will couples be married. (Cf. Matt 22:29, etc.) This means, in traditional interpretation, that in the transfigured bodies of the new age there will be a way of communion between persons,

the conditions of the age to come already here and now in the fallen world. In regard to gender and sexuality, people have tried, both in church and society, to live "like the angels." Marriage has been forbidden to Christians on this basis, together with appeals to a literal interpretation of the Lord's teaching that the "perfect" are to abandon marriage and family life completely. Even Orthodox monastic life, with its celibacy and ceaseless singing to God and ceaseless struggle with the devils, has been popularly called the "angelic life" anticipating the conditions in the age to come. But the church's experience in history shows that this issue must be treated with great care and caution.

Orthodox tradition is very clear that Christians, not to speak of those outside the messianic community, still belong to "this age" whose "image is passing away." (1 Cor 7:31) God's kingdom is really present in Christ's church by the Spirit's power in sacrament and mystery, and may truly be tasted and participated in by grace through faith. But God's kingdom is not yet here in the full power and glory of the universal, all-embracing epiphany of Christ which will come only at the end of history. Until the kingdom comes, men and women live in its anticipation, bearing bodies of flesh. They still may marry and bear children. And their marriages and families can be "eschatological signs" of God's future reign of communion and love. Though they may be called to a celibate life, human beings remain men and women with bodies to save, transfigure and sanctify by God's grace, and not to disdain, destroy and deny through the devil's deceit.

We do not know exactly what we shall be in the new age of God's kingdom when Christ will subject all things to himself, and subject himself to his Father, so that in the Holy Spirit God may be "all and in all." But what we do know is that even then human beings will be women and men, not angels or androgynes, and that our gender distinction will remain an essential

heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,' God has revealed to us through the Spirit." (1 Cor 2:9)

We count on God's revelation to us through the Holy Spirit in the church to bring us to a common understanding of what it means for human beings to be made in God's image and likeness, male and female; and to be so saved within the Christian church as men and women for unending life in God's kingdom to come.



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