

Camera Obscura: Women and Church Leadership

Patricia Fann Bouteneff

"All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth." – Richard Avedon

Raise your hand if you knew that a priest in the Orthodox Church may not celebrate the Eucharist on his own. There must always be at least one other person present, in order to form a "congregation." I learned this in my catechumenate thirty years ago, and it still strikes me as beautiful that our church insists that the Eucharist always be a shared event. In practical terms, given that most of our parishes are headed by a lone priest, this means that clergy and laity—as men and women—are equally important to celebrating communion. It can mean that, if the only other person in the church is female, then that woman has become indispensable to the Eucharist.

It sometimes feels as if this ecclesiological point has faded out in lived experience in our parishes. I was recently at a Liturgy where the diocesan bishop was making his annual parish appearance. As is the custom there, he was met at the entry first by a four-year-old girl carrying a bouquet of deep blue gentians, and then—in a moment similar to the one in the photo on the next page—by the parish president, who greeted him with a formal speech and tray of salt and bread that she had baked herself. The parish priest helped celebrate the Liturgy, while a churchwoman as usual

directed the choir. After the dismissal, the priest called for a photograph with the bishop. Without thinking, he did what many Orthodox priests do, inviting only the deacons, the subdeacon, and the altar servers to join them. Half the congregation pulled out their phones to snap photos of a sea of ecclesiastical brocade, and thereby recorded what was—to me, at least—a truly inadequate portrait of that parish.

So, who should have been in the frame? At the very least, it would have been appropriate to call to the front everyone who played a role in the ceremony, which would have included not only the choir director, but also the choir itself, the parish president, and the flower-bearer. It would have been preferable to have included the whole congregation, without whom communion would have been incomplete and each of whom has the potential for being the indispensable one. We don't live up to our ecclesiology if we envision the Liturgy as celebrated only by the clergy (and those dressed like them).

Given that our parishes are microcosms of the Church, what does this mean for how we view participation in the wider Church? Clergy can't be the only people in the picture. There aren't enough priests and hierarchs, and asking them to shoulder the entire burden would disrespect the larger

principle of the Liturgy as a communion of clergy and laity.

The same principle pertains to other work in the Church. In any ordinary parish, there are any number of tonsurings and other rituals available to acknowledge men's place: altar server, reader, sub-deacon, deacon, protodeacon, archdeacon, presbyter, protopresbyter—each signaled by various types of garment, headgear, or pectoral cross, and each instance a photo opportunity (for someone ordained in the Russian Church, every three years brings the potential for a new award). The rituals that we perform to recognize a person's place can be as important as the actual things that he or she does. That there are virtually no blessings or rituals bestowed on women—not even on wives at the time of their husbands' ordinations—has helped us fade out of the picture.

The “visible absence” of women in many parish photos creates an entirely inaccurate impression of our beloved institution. After all, it isn't as if women aren't doing anything. We hold leadership positions with significant impact in most of our jurisdictions. These go well beyond the roles reserved exclusively for women, such as priests' wives, Philoptochos members, and ladies' guild participants. In fact, it is commonplace to find women participating at almost all levels in the Church, in non-liturgical roles that interlock with or overlap those of the clergy and lay men, and that are central to the Church's existence and functioning. Based on what is already happening here and now, it is time to discard our outdated images of church life.

This isn't just a matter of some misleading photographs. The point here is to call attention to what women are



actually doing, and to adjust our mental picture of the life of the Church, because that picture is skewed. Most of what we hear about women in the Church—given that without a special and extremely rare blessing, we cannot serve in the altar—focuses on our “domestic” roles as mothers, decorators and cleaners of the physical worship space, and providers of coffee hour provender. These misconceptions run broad and deep, among men and women of all ages. When my teenage son and daughter were discussing with their friends the need for women to attend the Council in Crete, many of those friends insisted that a woman's only role in the Church should be “sitting in the corner and praying.” Yet these teens did not realize that they belong to a jurisdiction with female church diplomats, heads of monasteries, and advisers who sit on its governing council. Most people are unaware of what women are already doing in the Church, and this blind spot makes it much harder than

Photo by Leanne Parrott.

it needs to be for a woman to realize her calling in the Church.

The fact that so many women *are* participating in such large numbers in the Church is important. Since women make up a majority of the congregation in most parishes, it shouldn't surprise us that, quantitatively, so many women are donating their labor to get so much of the work of the Church done, and have for many decades now. The simple fact of large-scale women's participation and leadership in the Church is crucial to recognize if we are to steward the Church effectively in the coming decades of dramatic social and technological change.

So, what is "normal" for women in the Church? Let's answer that question based on actual examples.

It is normal for women to be engaged in pastoral care. Female professionals in many jurisdictions are practicing **chaplains, pastoral counselors, spiritual directors, and heads of college ministries or family ministries.**

It is normal for women to be **church diplomats.** Women fill these roles at the World Council of Churches, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the National Council of Churches, and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. In these pages, Elizabeth Prodromou, a political scientist and professor of conflict resolution, recounts what it is like to work alongside primates such as the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Archbishop of Albania to create and refine the documents at the center of last summer's Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete.

It is normal for women to be administrative heads and advisers in a wide variety of church organizations. **Abbesses** oversee the business and spiri-

tual "operations" of their monasteries. Many women also serve as **founders, parish council presidents, wardens, and other officers,** as well as **trustees and directors** of seminaries and other organizations. In this issue, Geron-dissa Foteini and Sister Theonymphi, the nuns of All Saints' Monastery, talk about the founding not only of their convent but also of one of the few Orthodox social justice programs in a U.S. monastery. Professional youth program evaluator Jennifer Nahas and educator Jennifer Haddad Mosher discuss the clash between ecclesial work grounded in professional expertise and work based on good intentions, as well as the effect that fear has in undermining religious education and how we can overcome it.

It is normal for women with significant levels of professional expertise to act as **advisers** who sit on diocesan, archdiocesan, and even federal **councils, commissions, and committees,** on such topics as science and technology, canon law, family care, liturgy and church art, AIDS, social and moral issues, and foreign policy. Gayle E. Woloschak, profiled in this issue, is an example of someone deeply engaged in the secular world—in her professional life, she is a clinician and researcher in radiobiology and bionanotechnology—who combines that mastery with a second career in theology, and makes her expertise available to hierarchs across Orthodox jurisdictions.

It is normal for women to hold important finance positions. Women are **chief financial officers, treasurers, and auditors** at seminaries, and at the archdiocesan, diocesan, and parish levels.

It is normal for women to be **church musicians,** either teaching in seminary and university settings or directing lo-

cal parish choirs. In this volume, Jessica Suchy-Pilalis recounts her pioneering work in helping truly translate Greek hymns into English in a way that retains the meaning of the texts and the ability of chant to convey prayer.

It is normal for women to be teachers and academics with a church-oriented specialty. Women holding doctorates and professorships at universities and Orthodox seminaries are **theologians** (liturgical, dogmatics, and patristics scholars), **church historians**, **art historians**, **biblical and liturgical language scholars**, **religious education specialists**, and **church management and leadership professors**. Practitioners with master's degrees include seminary **librarians** and diocesan or archdiocesan **archivists**. In addition to their other work for the Church, Sister Vassa Larin, Jennifer Haddad Mosher, Elizabeth Prodromou, Jessica Suchy-Pilalis, and Gayle Woloschak hold these kinds of positions.

It is normal to find female ecclesiastical artists and craftswomen, among them **iconographers**, **graphic designers** and **illustrators**, **ecclesiastical tailors**, and **textile designers**, producing the ecclesiastical objects that surround us and express our beliefs. A mother-daughter pair—the prize-winning embroiderer Galina Tregubov and iconographer Anna Dumoulin—are featured in this issue and are the most recent practitioners in a long family line. The work that they skillfully and painstakingly produce is some of the most valuable in monetary terms in any given church, as the end note on the work of Olga Mikhailovna Mojaisky attests. These visual artists include photographer Leanne Parrott of Leanne Parrott Photography, whose photo essay appears in these pages and whose work is helping to return women to the picture of the Church.

It is normal for women to work as Orthodox **authors, speakers, translators, bloggers, podcasters**, and **homilists** who shape and convey our thinking. In this issue, Sister Vassa Larin tells us how she became one of just two Orthodox thus far to build an international ministry through social media. Like her, the recently departed Juliana Schmemmann wrote and spoke with authority and joy to a wide variety of audiences about living as a devout Orthodox Christian in our modern world.

Virtually everyone I speak to believes that the women leaders in their parishes are unique, breakers of new ground. But it is time to recognize that women filling all kinds of non-ordained roles throughout the Church is a usual practice: welcome to the not-so-new normal.¹ Recognizing this reality can have huge implications. Women won't have to fight to step into jobs for which they need church sponsorship, such as chaplaincies. The Church's life can grow through increased diversity, a factor that has been shown to be vital to thriving institutions.

And we want the Church to thrive. In an environment where religious organizations are under pressure from many directions, it is essential to foster, direct, and rejoice in all of the talent available in the Church, male and female. To find solutions to thorny problems, we need a wide variety of ideas and world experience. There's certainly no lack of work to be done. Once women realize that it is not only commonplace and acceptable but also desirable for them to step up, more may even seek and receive a seminary education. And their bishops may want to meet with them and take interest in their careers, as they do for their ordination-track semi-

¹ For specific roles in the Church, outlines of the requirements for filling them, and names of only some of the women who are currently performing them or have done so, see the detailed list in my blog article "Invisible Leaders in the Orthodox Church": <http://www.aphaiaresources.com/2016/09/05/invisible-leaders-in-the-orthodox-church/>.

narians. But all of this requires us to realize that women working in the Church is normal.

Given the increased attention lately accorded to the ordination of deaconesses, some may wonder why I haven't touched on that subject here. There are a couple of reasons. Although many women clearly feel called to this kind of ordination, and while the Church clearly needs far more diaconal service than our current complement of deacons can provide, I do not believe that it is wise for us to put all our eggs in the ordination basket. We don't need to act as though ordained work is the only valid kind within the Church. If this essay has shown nothing else, it is that there are so many more baskets that need filling! The majority of us will not be called to holy orders, but we all will be called to do our part. Most of us will find our callings in resolving difficult issues in committees, conducting pastoral therapy sessions, creating church school curricula, or poring over parish spreadsheets.

These are my own observations of the ways in which women are serving the Church in significant capacities. I think of these roles as only the tip of the iceberg; there are so many possibilities for women's leadership. Even within limitations, this survey shows clearly that women leaders in the Church are anything but rare. We are not tokens, and we are acting in the present moment.

Over the past year, these observations have inspired some of my own concrete actions. When I found out that the recent Pan-Orthodox Council, as originally structured, would include almost no women delegates, I drafted a petition that attracted more than 1,200 signatures from women and men, clergy and laity, around the world and across many jurisdictions. The response came, unexpectedly, not from the Secretariat organizing the Council to whom it had been addressed, but from the Ecumenical Patriarch himself. He wrote personally to say that, while in the remaining few weeks before the Council convened there would not be enough time to gather the agreement needed among the jurisdictions to create the delegation of women advisers that we were advocating, he nevertheless encouraged all of us to continue exploring ways for women to expand our roles within the Church. He emphasized his support by signing the document in his own hand.

Let his backing hearten us all, as we pursue our own callings within the Church. Women have been fulfilling some of the roles enumerated here for centuries, some for decades, and others only for a short time. This essay is a step on the way towards making visible the present reality of Orthodox women, bringing that service into the light, and helping us frame a more accurate picture of the Church's life. Let us keep moving into a future where, like the woman of Proverbs 31, we may set about our work vigorously. ✱



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