

# Equality and Hierarchy between the Sexes and the Ordination of Women

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There is constant tension between the principles of equality and hierarchy in the continuing debate within Orthodoxy concerning the ordination of women to clerical rank. Advocates of the ordination of women stress the ontological equality of men and women as a strong argument supporting the ordination of women to the diaconate and the priesthood, while opponents of women's ordination argue that there exists a natural hierarchy between the sexes which bars women from ordination.

The doctrine of the ontological equality of men and women is firmly based on Scripture and patristic anthropology. Men and women partake of the same human nature and are thus naturally equal; both are divinely created in the image of God; both are children of God; both are called to achieve union with God (theosis). In this ontological perspective, sexual differentiation is relativized; men and women are not different "natures," one inferior or subordinate to the other, and "is secondary to the unity of men and women in their nature, destiny and vocation."<sup>1</sup> The sexual differentiation of male and female is a biological fact, a feature that humans share with most animals and plants. But in philosophy and theology, there is no "female nature" nor "male nature"; there is only human nature, in two expressions, male and female. "Men's nature" and "women's nature" may exist in popular literature, but not in Christian theology.

To treat sexual differentiation as superior to equality of nature attacks patristic anthropology. The ancient Fathers affirmed the ontological equality of men and women in no uncertain terms. Some Fathers were courageous and outspoken "feminists" of their times, as in these strong words of St. Gregory the Theologian:

The wife who takes wicked counsel against her husband's bed commits adultery, and thence flow the bitter consequences of the laws, but on the contrary the man who takes a prostitute against his wife suffers no sanction. *I do not accept this legislation; I do not*

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, "The Ordination of Women," in Elisabeth Behr-Sigel and Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church* (WCC Publications, 2000), 38-39.

*approve this custom. It is men who laid down these laws, and this is why this legislation is directed against women. ... God does not act thusly, but he says: "Honor your father and your mother" ... Notice the equality of the legislation: one and the same creator of man and woman; one dust for both; one image; one law; one death, one resurrection. ... Christ saves both through his suffering. Did Christ become flesh for the sake of the man? He did this also for the sake of the woman. He died for the man? The woman is also saved by his death.*<sup>2</sup>

In the masochistic, patriarchal Romano-Hellenistic world of the fourth century, even if partly Christianized, this was "feminism" fifteen centuries before the term was invented!

And similarly, St. Basil the Great writes:

The woman also possesses the creation according to the image of God, as indeed does the man. The natures are alike of equal honor, the virtues are equal, the struggles equal, the judgment alike. ... Since indeed that which is according to God's image is of equal honor, let the virtue be of equal honor, the showing forth of good works.<sup>3</sup>

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel succinctly sums up: "The image of God is present in women just as much as in their male partners, transcending sexual difference without denying or obscuring it. The Word, in becoming flesh, took on the whole of humanity in order to save the whole of humanity."<sup>4</sup>

Most opponents of the ordination of women concede the ontological equality of men and women and are hence obliged to rely on other arguments to support the idea of a "natural hierarchy." For Fr Lawrence Farley, the Fathers affirm both ontological equality and the subordination of women to men. Emphasis on differences between men and women, or the "charisms" or vocations specific to men or women, now becomes paramount. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware questions "how far this viewpoint can claim explicit corroboration from the Greek patristic tradition," since, he writes, "there is much evidence to support the view that, for Fathers such as the three Cappadocians and St. Maximus the Confessor, sexual differentiation is not a central theological concept."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discourse 37*, 6. Grégoire de Nazianze, *Discours 32-37* (SC 318) (Le Cerf, 1985), 282-287. (Our italics.)

<sup>3</sup> St. Basil the Great, *On the Human Condition*, 18 (SVS Press, 2005), 45-46.

<sup>4</sup> Behr-Sigel, "The Ordination of Women," 36.

<sup>5</sup> Kallistos Ware, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ," in Thomas Hopko, ed., *Women and the Priesthood* (SVS Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1999), 39.

The basic argument underlying the “natural hierarchy” between men and women is that men are inherently or “naturally” (by nature) superior to women, and hence women are unsuited to clerical office, since this would give them hierarchical superiority to men. The second account of creation in Genesis is often interpreted as proving that women are inferior to men, since man was created first and the woman is drawn from Adam (his rib) (Gn 2:21-22). Furthermore, the argument goes, God says to Eve after the transgression: “He [Adam] shall rule over you” (Gn 3:16). Paul invokes this reading of Genesis when he writes: “For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man” (1 Co 11:8-9). In biblical exegesis, Eve is often accused of having brought about the fall of Adam; woman is the “temptress” and man is the “tempted.” Most patristic exegesis does not focus on this interpretation of Genesis but rather highlights that God’s pact was with Adam and that it was his disobedience, not Eve’s, that led to the Fall. Paul’s admonitions concerning women in the Christian community are also cited in support of the natural hierarchy hypothesis: women should cover their heads in the assembly, but not men (1 Co 11:3-13); women should not speak in the assembly (1 Co 14:33-34); and wives should be subject to their husbands (Eph 5:22-24).

The logical argument based on the second Genesis account of creation is that since man (a male, *aner, vir*) was created before woman and woman was created from man, therefore man is superior to woman and hence a man can be a priest but not a woman. However we may interpret the biblical passages which seem to suggest a hierarchy between men and women – male superiority, – there is no direct logical link between the sequence of the creation of the sexes, a hierarchy between men and women, and the ordination of women. The accession of women to positions of leadership in most spheres of contemporary life undermines the premise of inherent or ontological or natural male superiority over women, so the basis of a natural hierarchy must be sought elsewhere.

Fr Lawrence Farley grounds his position against the ordination of women largely on the natural hierarchy argument. Farley concedes the ontological equality of men and women, but insists that the biblical record, the Fathers and the practice of the church all demonstrate the subordination of women to men. Farley concludes from the historical fact that Christ did not chose a woman among the apostles that this shows that Christ “recognized their [women’s] subordination.”<sup>6</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Farley, *Feminism and Tradition: Quiet Reflections on Ordination and Communion* (SVS Press, 2012), 66.

is an interpretation of the significance of Christ's action, not a logical conclusion. It is certainly much easier to support the contention of women as subordinate to men from the Pauline epistles than from the Gospels, where Jesus treats men and women as equally in need of teaching, healing and forgiveness. Farley goes on to argue that the Fathers and the church steadfastly maintain the teaching of "equality but subordination" and hence "since the pastoral office involves exercising authority over men in the church... this is inconsistent with women's subordination."<sup>7</sup>

Farley's argument leaves several questions dangling. One is the relationship between equality and hierarchy or subordination. Since he argues that women's subordination to men is built into God's intention in creation and is therefore ontological, he does not reconcile two seemingly contradictory ontological principles, equality and subordination. He tries to get around this problem by referring to the "loving and voluntary subordination of an ontological equal"<sup>8</sup> (the woman to the man), but this is more wishful thinking than sound biblical exegesis and good theology.

Does this "subordination" imply that all women are subordinate to all men, or, as the biblical and patristic witnesses mostly stress, wives to husbands. It is not clear where this leaves unmarried women: to which men are they to be subordinate? In any case Farley does not explain what this subordination really entails, other than excluding women from leadership roles in the family and the church. Since Farley concedes that women can exercise leadership over men in all domains except the church and the family,<sup>9</sup> this concession alone undermines ontological subordination or a natural hierarchy. Nonetheless, for him as for other Orthodox theologians, sexual differentiation, which includes women's subordination to men, takes precedence over ontological equality in the family and the church.

Commenting on the biblical passages relating to men and women, Metropolitan Kallistos recognizes that while the Pauline texts suggest a certain hierarchy between men and women, such a hierarchy "is not the same as subordination," using as a comparison the "order" (*taxis*) or hierarchy ascribed to the Persons of the Holy Trinity, which does not mean subordination.<sup>10</sup> He similarly qualifies patristic strictures against women occupying leadership roles in the family, the

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<sup>7</sup> Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 69.

<sup>8</sup> Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Farley, *Feminism and Tradition*, 109-113.

<sup>10</sup> Ware, "Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ," 36.

church and public life, questioning whether “we can treat every patristic statement as embodying eternal truth, while ignoring the structures of the society in which the Fathers were living.”<sup>11</sup>

Does any Father of the Church affirm the ontological subordination of women to men? What they do teach, following St. Paul and the social conventions of their times, is that wives should be subject to their husbands. This has nothing to do with ontological subordination. Can we reconcile an apparent inconsistency in patristic thinking on the relationship between the sexes? Not without doing violence to one or another of their premises. We could advance the proposition that the Fathers unambiguously asserted the ontological equality of men and women and yet maintained the social subordination of women to men, especially in marriage, *in their societies*. It is preferable to recognize a tension in patristic thinking on this score, between their theology and their social teachings, rather than distorting the patristic record by arguing that the Fathers really meant women to be ontologically subordinate (and hence inferior) to men.

Fr. Lawrence sees no opposition between the principles of equality and subordination.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, the Fathers of old saw the incompatibility of equality and subordination. In Trinitarian theology, this resulted in their univocal assertion of the ontological equality of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, enshrined in the term “consubstantial” (*homoousios*) of the Nicene Creed. Conversely, this meant that the Fathers, and indeed the entire Church, rejected theologies which expressed hierarchy or subordination within the Trinity.

Although the ontological equality of the sexes is sound patristic theology, it does not establish, any more than other arguments, an imperative for the Orthodox Church to ordain women. Rather, it removes a potential obstacle to ordination by confirming that in the eyes of God, men and women are equal. The subordination or hierarchical argument cannot be sustained against the ordination of women, nor can the ontological equality of the sexes be invoked to argue that the Orthodox Church must ordain women. It is for this reason that the issue of the ordination of women must first and foremost be considered a pastoral matter, as I have written elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ware, “Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ,” 36.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Farley, “Rejoinder to Dr. Ladouceur,” *SVTQ*, 62:1 (2018), 89.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ladouceur, “The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood: A Theological Issue or a Pastoral Matter?” In *Women and Ordination in the Orthodox Church: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, eds. Elena Narinskaya and Gabrielle Thomas (Cascade Books, 2020), 166-186.



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