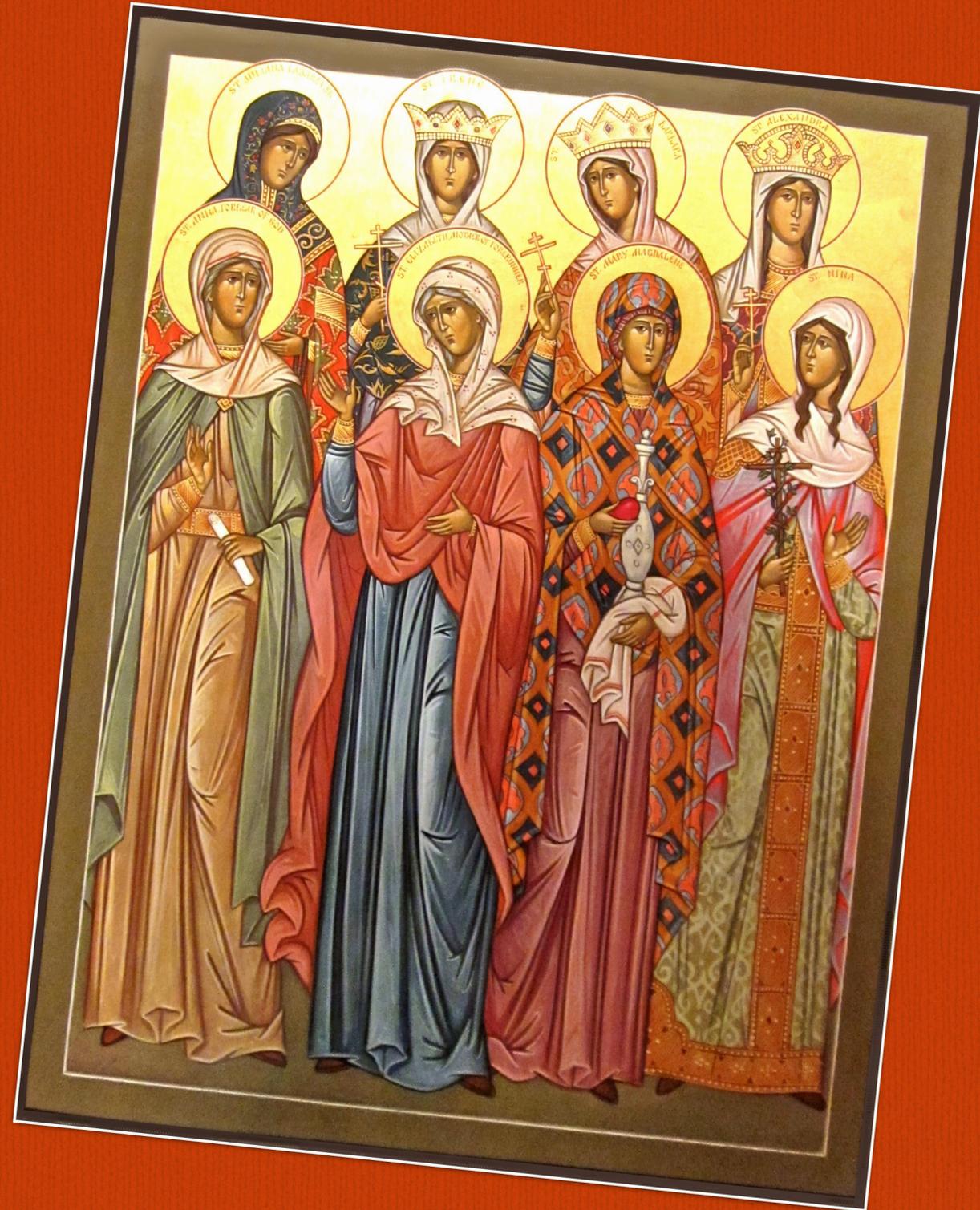


# Women in the Orthodox Church

---

A seminar organised by  
Greek Orthodox Parish and Community of St Paraskevi, St  
Albans  
&  
AIOCS  
Protopresbyter Dr Doru Costache  
30 December 2021



# Women in the Orthodox Church

---

- Christmas perspectives
- Personal backdrop
- Women in the Orthodox Church
- New Testament
- Patristic insights
- Paschal perspectives
- Remembering in order to learn

## Christmas perspectives

- **The festival that celebrates the birth of the Son also praises the Mother who gave him birth. This is the core of the Christian experience, the church's experience.**
- **Viewed through the lens of Christmas—which is the right lens to use, since the Orthodox understand the incarnation as the bedrock of salvation—the ecclesial experience is a celebration of the Son and his Mother that does not exclude masculine factors (Joseph, the shepherds, the magi).**
- **Aren't we supposed to learn something from the core of the Christian experience and to proceed accordingly in our theory and praxis?**
- **My challenge refers to the current absence of women from the Christian theory and praxis of the ecclesial life, which betrays an understanding of Christianity not as about the Son and his Mother, but as about the Son and a father. And the father-centred church has in time excluded feminine factors, despite venerating the Virgin-Mother.**
- **What father? And if there is no father to speak of, why do we have a father-centred church instead of a Mother-centred church? And what shape would take a Mother-centred church?**
- **Even though I cannot claim to be able to answer these questions, framing them against the backdrop of a complexity of perspectives is of the essence in our search for answers.**

## Personal backdrop

- **As an academic, I have written a couple of important pieces on gender, sexuality, and marriage from patristic viewpoints, but nothing about women in the church; what I discovered, however, is that when we understand Christianity from the vantage point of patristic spirituality there is no room for the “battle of the sexes”**
- **Also as an academic, I have become aware of archeological and documentary evidence from the early centuries of Christianity, where the gender dynamic of the ecclesial framework was not as father-centred as is today**
- **As a priest, I was given many opportunities to notice the overall attitude of the Orthodox to women, from my daughter being dragged away from the sanctuary by “pious” laypersons, men and women, to the shameful “purification prayers” read for women after giving birth**
- **No wonder the Facebook page of the little church to which I minister welcomes contributions by Christian women and hosts two strong columns, “Images of Feminine Holiness” and “Women in the Gospels,” entirely written by women**

**My detractors either ask me why only feminine holiness or tell me that womanhood is more complex than these examples of ascetic and martyr women. But beards you can get anywhere, denoting our father-centred church, as though women are invisible. And, of course, I encourage this exploration because I am interested in asserting feminine holiness, not womanhood. I find it strange that some Christians believe that Christianity is about either males or females, instead of holiness.**

## Women in the Orthodox Church: towards a Mother-centred church

- “Who we, Orthodox, are and how we truly think is on display within our calendar for all to see. What we see are male names upon males names. How did we get here? Are we a men-only religion, a boys’ club? Have we forgotten that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:27–28) and that our gifts complement each other (1 Corinthians 12:4–26)? It is true that we praise Most-Holy Mary, Birth-giver of God (Gr. Theotokos) and Ever-Virgin, above all the saints, even above the angels. But during the Byzantine era—while we established major and minor festivals in her honour—our appreciation for womanhood decreased exponentially. An inconsistency! On the one hand, unmatched reverence for one woman; on the other hand, less and less respect for any other woman. This is obvious in that during that era the number of acknowledged saintly women dropped at an alarming rate. The lists of holy lives count fifty-five women from the second and the third century, and only fourteen from the fourth and the fifth century. At the end of late antiquity, the numbers dropped steeply. There are only four holy women from the sixth century, none from the seventh, and eight from the eighth and the ninth century together. This trend continued: five holy women from the tenth century, and one each from every century from the eleventh to the fourteenth, with none recorded in the fifteenth century. I do not even wish to look closer to our time. This is hard data. This is our reality and we must understand what all this means. Simply put, this trend denotes the degradation of the ecclesial mindset, which was gradually replaced by androcentric and misogynistic drives. Just take note of the opposition with which the hardliners meet the idea of revitalising women’s diaconate! I am certain that no one can actually believe that women became less holy century after century, while men steadily achieved more sanctity. It is the church which has become more androcentric century after century, changing into something it wasn’t—to the extent that it lost its capacity to discern holiness which does not exhibit male attributes. And yet, every year we celebrate the Virgin Mother, several times annually. Why not doing so by drawing the right conclusions from our devotion? After all, the rule of faith teaches that we cannot believe in what we do not revere, and that we cannot revere what we do not believe in. What is, then, the significance of revering a woman above men and angels? What does it mean that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female? To think like Christ (Philippians 2:5) means to humble ourselves, not to promote androcentric messages. We must revisit our history in search for what we lost in its shadows. We must descend from the pedestal to the banks of Lethe, the river of oblivion—in order to retrieve aletheia, the truth, what must not be forgotten, and to collect the names we ignored first and then forgot. The names of our holy women, from the past as well as from the present. The multifaceted diaconate of our holy women. Meanwhile, the calendar still shows who we are, disclosing our misogyny. The time has come to change this definition.” D. Costache, *The Orthodox Spring: A Diary*, second edn (Sydney: AIOCS Press, 2021) 26–27.

## **New Testament**

- **Luke, the Gospel of women ( = the Christian revolution), somehow in contrast to Acts, the Gospel of men ( = back to the ways of the world)**
- **Unlike regular Hebrew genealogies, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus includes four women**
- **The Lord's ministry supported by Christian women who sponsored the entire undertaking and who accompanied him to the cross and to the tomb**
- **Jesus speaks to foreign women (Samaritan, Canaanite) and includes women into God's people (the symbolic number 12)**
- **The Church established at Pentecost included men and women**
- **Baptised Christians transcend the division between male and female (Galatians 3:27-28)**
- **Saint Paul mentions deaconesses (Saint Phoebe), but in Byzantium other women in ministry are known from that time until roughly the tenth century (see Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos' Book of Ceremonies)**
- **Women as church leaders in Acts and the Pauline letters**

## Patristic insights

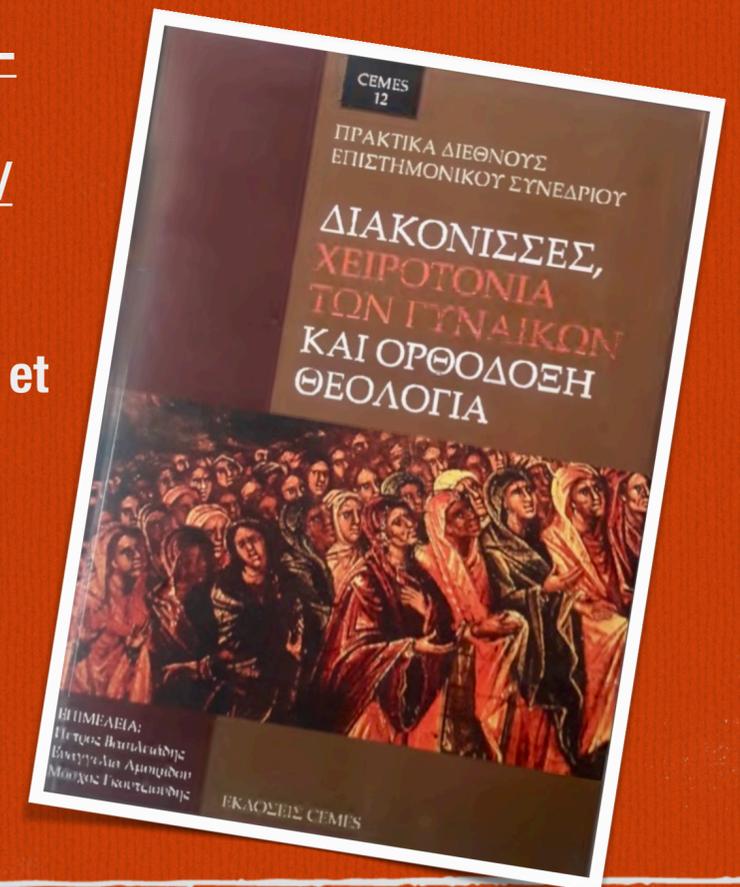
- **Christian martyrologies celebrate the courage of both men and women**
- **Saint Clement of Alexandria: men and women are equal in regard to virtuous achievements and perfection (The Pedagogue 1.4.10.1–11.2; Stromateis 4.1.1.1; 4.8.58.2–59.4; 4.8.62.4–63.1; 4.8.67.4; 4.19.118.1)**
- **Saint Gregory of Nyssa: the image of God in us is the divine definition of the human being, transcending the division of genders (On the Human Image of God 16)**
- **Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, Saint Gregory of Nysa, Saint Augustine: praising their mothers, sisters, and other women as virtuous philosophers and teachers in Christ**
- **Saint John Chrysostom: “So, after saying, ‘Male and female he made them’ as though to bestow a blessing on each of them, he goes on, ‘God blessed them in the words, Increase and multiply, fill the earth and gain dominion over it, and have control of the fish of the sea.’ Behold the remarkable character of the blessing! I mean, ... ‘Gain dominion and have control’ are directed to the man and woman. See the Lord’s loving kindness: even before creating her he makes her sharer in this control and bestows on her the blessing.” (Homilies on Genesis 10.9)**
- **Monasticism as a continuation of the early Christian view of women as endowed with leadership qualities (abbesses)**
- **Liturgical hymnography and iconography mention certain holy women as apostles or equal-to-the-apostles**

## Paschal perspectives: the Third Paschal Sunday

- **“A lasting issue which plagues humankind is gender discrimination. With the exception of the matriarchal societies of prehistory and antiquity, women have generally lacked social and political rights. Even in contemporary societies gender discrimination is rampant. Just think of the disparity between what a man is paid and what a woman is paid for performing the same work. Or how in “traditional” families men sit at the table waiting to be served by women. Or how in certain cultures brides are sold to their husbands in slavery. And so on. Today’s readings (ACTS 6:1–7; MARK 15:43–16:8) suggest that the paschal revolution entails a reversal in the social functions of the two natural genders. According to these readings, in the early Christian days men served, whereas women were sent out to preach. Joseph performed a task that usually fell on women, namely, to prepare the body of a deceased for burial. The seven deacons of the Church of Jerusalem took care of the distribution of food and other material goods to the community. In turn, women were sent by the anthropomorphic angel to preach the resurrection of the Lord as apostles (in the Greek of the New Testament apostle means someone “mandated” or “sent” to do something). This shows that discrimination is unthinkable in Christianity. Both men and women are clothed in Christ and elevated to a dignity which no social system on earth can secure for them—to be one in Christ, to share everything in Christ, to borrow from one another in Christ, to serve each other in Christ. The paschal revolution therefore entails the abandonment of idolatry, the old ways, the ways of the world, which certain Christians still uphold with blind devotion. The paschal revolution is gospel: good news to all, regardless of gender.” D. Costache, *Reading Scripture in the Orthodox Church: The Sunday Cycle* (Sydney: AIOCS Press, 2018) 22–23.**

## Remembering in order to learn

- Important research by Orthodox women in the area of women's ordination: Diana N. Angelova, Elizabeth Behr-Sigel, Eva Catafygiotou Topping, Christine Chaillot, Stavroula Constantinou, Andra Juganaru, Kyriaki Karidoyanes-FitzGerald, Leonie Liveris, Myrrha Lot-Borodine, Anca Lucia Manolache
- Painstaking scholarly research has resulted in important discoveries
  - “Byzantine Basilica With Graves of Female Ministers and Baffling Mass Burials Found in Israel” <https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/MAGAZINE-byzantine-basilica-with-female-ministers-and-baffling-burials-found-in-israel-1.10387014>
  - “Archeological discovery of Byzantine church in Israel reveals existence of Clergywomen” <https://greekcitytimes.com/2021/11/17/archeological-discovery-of-byzantine-church-in-israel-reveals-existence-of-clergywomen/>
- An important volume: *Deaconesses: Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology*, ed. Petros Vassiliadis et al, Thessaloniki: CEMES Publications, 2016.



## **Points for reflection**

- **While ignorance shapes Orthodox Christianity as a father-centred experience, serious research shows otherwise**
- **God-given equality of natural genders**
- **Feminine ordained, teaching, pastoral, and leadership ministries for many centuries**
- **What would a Mother-centred church look like?**