

Women Where Are You In The Life of The Church? **Called To God's Purpose In Ministry**

A Conference Focused on Lay Ministry for All Orthodox Women

September 10-12, 2004

Antiochian Village Heritage and Learning Center, Ligonier, PA

The Orthodox Church's call to holiness and ministry has continued unchanged through the centuries, but today finds itself in new situations in America. Although this offers many new opportunities, it also calls for spiritual discernment, gentle exploration, and patience. We face urgent challenges in the task of healing the world, and sometimes may wonder if anything can be done, and done soon enough. But when we cling to Christ, to His transforming grace, and to our saving faith, we know we need not rush or fear, for we are all under God's merciful care. As Orthodox Christians we must face these challenges, but we face them first and foremost on our knees, praying together as one Church.

The work of all the People of God is essentially a faithful response to the grace of God's call to holiness, revealed in Christ and alive in the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in each person baptized into His Church. Only by meeting the opportunity to follow our giftedness in service to Christ and the Church will Christ's Spirit be manifest in and among us, and in the works in which we engage. Fulfillment of calling is a life lived according to God's purpose, pouring our faith into action and our lives into the mold of the Church, in loving service to Christ and one another. As one contemporary Romanian nun has said, "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. What I can do, I ought to do, and by the grace of God, I shall do it!"

At this point in the history of the Church in America, more women than ever before are seeing the needs of people around them, and responding out of their dedication to Christ with the conviction to help. They feel called to put their faith and love for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into action according to His will, and are seeking clarity around

identifying their gifts and fulfilling their calling in His service. In addition, the thrust toward cooperative witness in the Church is becoming more urgent as diverse ministries flourish in our different jurisdictions and coordination of resources grows more attractive.

For Orthodox women to meet today's challenges means to maintain the traditional ministries of women while also supporting and broadening their ministries and ministry settings. Just as Orthodox Tradition changes in order to remain the same, the role of women in the Church, like all other aspects of our Tradition, remains focused on Christ yet can look different in different situations. Today women's callings and ministry settings are growing in response to people's needs and to the Church's life in America.

Of course the call to spiritual growth in a life of prayer and worship, and the daily ministry of kindness and charity to each individual we meet continue to be the touchstones of Orthodoxy. The long established roles of women's service as monastics and clergy wives, always central to Orthodoxy, are well understood and honored. The "parish mothers" too, who have for centuries taken responsibility to dye eggs, bake prosphoro, tie palms, decorate the Church for her seasonal feasts and celebrations, and generally provide philanthropy and care for the Church building and grounds, continue to be essential today as always.

With the immigrant periods of the Church largely completed, the American Orthodox community has stabilized, and in the last ten years has been moving rapidly toward meeting more social and community needs with organized ministries, plus has found time to develop in new areas such as translations, electronic media communications, and expanded catechetical and teaching resources.

Some remarkable women have been active pioneers in meeting the American challenge. Since the 1970's women in America have been earning degrees from Orthodox seminaries and many have been serving the Church in ministries as religious educators, youth ministers, council members, camp advisors, campus ministers, and administrators, at both diocesan and parish levels.

The success of these women in finding active ministry settings within the Church has been a blessing, and a precursor of things to come. As the Church continues its growth in America, ministry settings are continuing to broaden, bringing to light even more areas of service that can benefit from the gifts and callings of women.

Many women are ready to serve the Church but seeking to discover how to serve. Growing numbers of religiously educated laity, lay seminary alumni, plus the huge bubble of baby boomers approaching retirement, are significantly increasing the number of women available to serve the Church more fully. Also, many who have converted into Orthodoxy in the last twenty years bring years of community service and parish ministry leadership experience with them. They are seeking to grow in faith and humility but are also willing to benefit Orthodox ministries with their ministry experience.

As a result of all this, unprecedented numbers of Orthodox women in America are expressing a sense of calling for ministries with a broadened view of ministry settings, such as chaplaincy, pastoral care and counseling, crisis and social services, and some are already working professionally or as community volunteers in these areas. These women are looking to the Church for blessings, guidance and Orthodox resource materials.

The American jurisdictional women's philanthropic organizations, who have actively sponsored and funded charitable projects under the guidance of their respective hierarchs for over fifty years, are experiencing a graying of leadership. Philoptochos, Antiochian Women, ARFORA, and others, are each continuing to meet their responsibilities while working to attract younger women to leadership. They are launching service and outreach projects for the current generation of women, families, youth and children, projects that address new or broadened needs which the women themselves are identifying. These well-established women's groups have a history of energizing and building women's ministries, and are working to develop a new generation of Orthodox women's leadership.

Global awareness has also opened new opportunities for both women and men for Church service in philanthropy, mission and outreach over the past ten years, through the various activities of two major joint Orthodox ministries, International Orthodox Christian Charities, and the Orthodox Christian Mission Center. Numerous women have been among the first to embrace this call.

The Church has specifically addressed the study of women's concerns in global perspective as well. Since 1976 over ten international Orthodox consultations on women in the life of the Church have been called, with official representatives appointed by Bishops of the Orthodox Churches worldwide attending. Proceedings from these consultations repeatedly recommended areas for growth and renewed affirmation of women's service to the Church in the following areas: more theological education for the laity; more encouragement and education for women in Church leadership and ministries; re-establishing the female diaconate; examination of some liturgical language and practices toward women; and more participation in liturgical life. These recommendations are just beginning to be addressed in the American jurisdictions.

Having said all this, it is also true that some women called to ministry remain inactive, feeling confused by their calling, not understanding clearly how they fit into Orthodox Church life and tradition, or how they can respond to the changing needs of the people and the Church. A few suffer from misunderstanding God's call to holiness and ministry, translating it into polar extremes of either rights/entitlement or role-stereotypes/invisibility, and these women can become angry or discouraged. Frequently women rightly understand the call to holiness and to action in and for Christ, but are simply more isolated or more shy than the men.

A complicating factor is that encouragement for lay ministries is highly uneven in the Church's local settings: participation and leadership which is taken for granted in some parishes or dioceses might be unheard of in others. For these reasons many Orthodox women would benefit from extra encouragement by their clergy and their sisters and brothers in Christ to more actively contribute their gifts and leadership.

For all these reasons, it seems timely to be working together to support women's ministries throughout the Church. Toward that end, the WOMEN's network provides a clearinghouse of information on its website, sponsors publication of the *St. Nina Quarterly*, and publicizes conferences for women. *St. Nina Quarterly* has offered two major conferences for American Orthodox women, in Massachusetts in 2000 and in New York in 2003.

WOMEN's webpage, www.OrthodoxWomensNetwork.org, is an ongoing source of information, articles, news, books and resources compiled in one place and drawn from all the SCOBA jurisdictions. The **WOMEN** website supports united witness in women's ministries by publicizing already existing ministries, connecting women other women as mentors experienced in Church ministries, and working toward greater communication among jurisdictions in order to minimize duplication of effort and cost and to maximize effectiveness. We are convinced that any increase in united ministry at the grass roots level, especially among its women who have traditionally been the backbone of Church life, will serve to increase the vitality of Orthodoxy and contribute to bringing full administrative unity of the Church in America.

United witness in women's ministries can provide a significant contribution to the dynamic growth of Orthodoxy in America today, while encouraging more ministries that address the concerns identified both by the Church at large and by women themselves. The time seems ripe for creative ways to actively support united ministries of Orthodox women in America, to encourage fledgling ministries, and with increased communication and united action to provide a stronger base for their growth. The **WOMEN's** network is inviting the entire Church community to pray and work together toward reaping this harvest of lay enthusiasm in America for the glory of God and the good of the Church.

Toward these ends, a conference focused on lay ministry for all Orthodox women will be held September 10-12, 2004 at Antiochian Village, Ligonier, Pennsylvania, titled

Women Where Are You In The Life of the Church? Called to God's Purpose in Ministry. The conference is co-sponsored by the Antiochian Village Heritage and Learning Center, and the **WOMEN** network, and will feature sessions on *Discover Your Spiritual Gifts*, *Called to God's Purpose*, *Explore Ministry Settings*, and *Courage To Minister: Match Your Call with God's Purpose*. Keynote Speaker Dr. Helen Creticos Theodoropoulos, Ph.D., teaches at St. Sava's Serbian Orthodox School of Theology in Libertyville, Ill. and is on the *St. Nina Quarterly* Editorial Board.

The conference will revolve around Vespers Friday and Saturday evenings, a 9-11 Memorial Saturday morning, and will climax with the Divine Liturgy Sunday morning, all in Antiochian Village's beautiful Sts. Peter and Paul Chapel. Sessions will feature topic-focused discussion groups about ministries in ecumenical and community settings, in parish settings, and in liturgical arts and life. Social and crisis ministries, chaplaincy, pastoral counseling, parish pastoral care, parish nursing, monastic life, and the renewal of the order of permanent diaconess will be addressed. There will also be time for meditation, prayer stretches, and browsing in the bookstore and at the Ministries Fair, with displays about current ministries from around the country.

His Eminence Metropolitan Philip of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America has offered his "enthusiastic encouragement" for the gathering, saying, "A conference which deals with the call of women to lay ministry in the Church is both timely and vital. It is critical for us to remember that although the Orthodox Church does not ordain women to the orders of the clergy, She nonetheless recognizes and encourages the dynamic role that women have had, and should continue to have in the life of the Church."

The conference Co-Chairs, Fr. Michael Massouh, Executive Director of Antiochian Village, and Demetra Jaquet, **WOMEN** Chair, invite you to download flyers, Sunday bulletin inserts, and a short notice for your Church's monthly newsletter which are posted on the **WOMEN** website, to publicize this event in your own parish, and for friends in other parishes. Registration forms will also be available for download on the **WOMEN**

website at www.OrthodoxWomensNetwork.org. For more information call Antiochian Village at 724 238-3677 or E-mail womenusa@aol.com or avcenter@antiochian.org.

Many passionate perspectives exist about women in the Church. **WOMEN** works to maintain unity in the Body of Christ and uplift women's ministries by illuminating common ground and building united witness. **WOMEN** contributes to the work of the Church as a whole in coming slowly to a clearer understanding that God affirms lay ministry along the lines of giftedness, not according to gender, but in harmony with it. **WOMEN** is committed to exploring this understanding of lay ministry as a life of faith poured out into the mold of the Church, not in terms of dogmatized gender-prescribed roles, but as gift-based ministries characterized and expressed uniquely through each one's personhood in accord with God's purpose.

Christians who ascribe to the authority of the Orthodox Church understand that God created women as full co-workers with men in life and witness to Christ. Lives and relationships improve when women and men embrace this truth, which deepens intimacy in marriage and strengthens Christians for ministry. This is the patristic, historical, theological and Biblical witness of our Church Tradition, and this is what **WOMEN** supports. We ask for your prayers, and if you feel the calling, we invite you to join us at the upcoming **WOMEN** conference. Together we can discover how giving our gifts in lay ministry settings can help us dedicate our lives more fully to Christ, both by cautioning us to stay focused on Him while encouraging us to serve Him.