

## Reflections on Ministry and Liturgical Life

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The past issues of the *St. Nina Quarterly* have exhibited much creative reflection regarding the need for an authentic restoration of the role of women within the Orthodox Church. Much of this reflection has stemmed from a reexamination of historical and hagiographical data that can forge a path to a more comprehensive understanding and realization of the place of women in ecclesial life. The articles by Valerie Karras have made accessible the insights and discoveries of scholars and theologians who have been working, over the past decades, to uncover and restore the ministry of the female diaconate. Her own insights, supported as they are by her academic rigor and presented in a sober and forthright manner, certainly deserve the thanks and appreciation of all of us who desire to dialog about the ministry of woman in the Orthodox Church. Such a dialogue can lead to a more "catholic" vision of ecclesial life and its manifold ministries.

Yet dialoging requires more than an academic or scholarly forum. On the one hand, no one can dispute the need to delve into the Church's past. It is by examining and cross-examining the data of the past that one can discover continuity as well as discontinuity with what we Orthodox refer to as "living Tradition." However, on the other hand the restoration and development of ecclesial ministries cannot depend solely on the skill of the historian; the citing of texts and practices needs more than the past as a point of reference. When the past is the only point of reference, living Tradition is relegated to archaeology. And we all know that the archaeologist, as well as the paleontologist, examines not only what is past but also what is dead. The work of the historian, particularly the Church historian, needs to transcend the context of antiquity. But to accomplish this—to bring the past into a living context—requires immersion into the liturgical life of the Church. Without this living context which raises the findings of the past into the Church's *lex orandi* (rule of prayer) all discussion and dialogue will inevitably recede into the past, leaving little if any creative or edifying impact on the present.

If a more catholic vision of ecclesial life is to be restored, there needs to be a restoration of liturgical life in our parishes. If there is ever to be a restoration of the female diaconate or any other ministry, then there must be a re-orientation to the Church's worship. For it is in this living context that all ministries are revealed and defined. The words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann can serve as a reminder and guide for an organic restoration of ecclesial ministries:

Liturgical tradition is not an "authority" or a locus theologicus; it is the ontological condition of theology, of the proper understanding of kerygma [preaching], of the Word of God, because it is in the Church, of which the leitourgia [the corporate and official worship of the Church] is the expression and the life, that the sources of theology are functioning precisely as sources.<sup>1</sup>

We can extend this fundamental insight of Fr. Alexander to include the restoration of ecclesial ministries. Thus, within the context of the Church's *leitourgia* we find the functioning of all ministries that exist to build up the body of Christ so that it may properly offer service to the world. The Church's *diakonia*—its service carried out through its ministries—exists so that the ministry of Christ may continue here and now.

Within the context of worship, the ministries of the Church can be perceived as coming from Christ and ultimately belonging to Him. Yet it is at this juncture that we encounter one of the greatest impediments to recovering a catholic vision of ministry. That impediment is the poor and

feeble status of the liturgical life as it exists in many of our parishes. Unless there is a revival of liturgical worship, and thus of the Church's whole spiritual life, there can be no recovery and development of the ministries that arise organically from ecclesial life. Such a revival of ministries, including women deacons, depends on our knowing and participating in the necessary and irreplaceable liturgical legacy of the Church—a legacy rooted in the experience of God's Kingdom.

Unless the Church ceases to be a Sunday-only institution we cannot hope for an authentic recovery and uncontrived implementation of Christ's ministries. Only with the recovery of the Church's *leitourgia* will the divisions caused by the devil be exposed and ultimately expelled. Here I need only refer to those divisions relative to race, gender, and social status that have kept the Church from fulfilling its service to the world. Without the recognition that the Church's worship provides the context that sustains and fulfills all ministries, all dialoguing on the subject will remain theoretical and academic. Consequently, no matter how informed and passionate our talk of a catholic vision of ministry might be, it will have little if any role in building up the body of Christ.

The recovery of ministry, which is vital for the life and mission of the Church in America, calls for a return to the place where theology and ministry form an inseparable bond. It is this place—particularly in the celebration of God's inaugurated Kingdom—that beckons the attention of the *St. Nina Quarterly*.

**Note.**

1. Alexander Schmemmann's "Theology and Liturgical Tradition" in Massey H. Shepherd, ed., *Worship in Scripture and Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 165-78. Quoted by Aidan Kavanagh in *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York, 1978), xii.