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The Issue of Women Ordination A Challenge for Orthodox Theology in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The paper proposes a theological answer to the issue of the women's ordination in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its main goal is to present the current level of discussions on the topic and to offer an anthropological approach to the ordained priesthood. Therefore the paper presents a short overview of the history of the women's ordination, of the biblical and theological arguments against it, and of the critiques of the theological argumentation against the ordination of women. It suggests the introduction of the archetypal and ontological theory on the theme and proposes a *phenomenological methodology* to analyze the women's ordination in specific contexts.

Keywords

Women, ordination, gender, ecumenical dialog, deaconess, Tradition, diversity of gifts, archetype theory, anthropology

I. Introduction

In 2012, the World Council of Churches Publications opened Doxa&Praxis series with a book by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, entitled *Orthodox Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, in which, in just a few pages, the well-known Eastern Orthodox theologian tries to identify the topics which will challenge the Church in the 21st century. In his opinion, “there will be a shift in the central focus of the theological inquiry from ecclesiology to anthropology. [...] The key question will be, not only, «What is the Church?» but also [...] «What is the human person?»”.¹ Just before K. Ware, in another context, the American theologian John Behr underlines the fact that the most critical issue of our time is “the fact that human nature exists in two consubstantial forms: male and female”.² In the context of contemporary ecumenical dialogue, anthropology is again an important subject when identifying the role and the mission of women in Church and the moral discernment.³

Referring to the ordination of women in the Eastern Orthodox Church, in 1998, J. Behr points out that this subject has not been properly treated in the past, but it cannot be avoided anymore.⁴ Since then, the topic has been discussed in various conference talks and research papers, such as the volume edited by *Pantelis Kalaitzidis and Nikos Ntontos* in 2004, *Gender and Religion: The Position of the Woman in the Orthodox Church*, and Maria Gwyn McDowell’s research papers.⁵

Women’s right to become priests remains a controversial issue. Lately, there have been some voices claiming the legitimacy of consecrating women as priests. Some of the Orthodox theologians reject the possibility of women being ordained, claiming that, although there are no theological arguments against it, according to the Orthodox Tradition, priesthood

¹ Kallistos Ware, *Orthodox Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, an edition by Pantelis Kalaitzidis, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 2012, p. 25.

² John Behr, *A Note on the “Ontology of Gender”*, in “St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly” 42, 3-4 (1st of January 1998), p. 363.

³ see: *Moral Discernment in the Churches. A Study Document* (Faith and Order Paper 215), WCC Publications, Geneva, 2013.

⁴ John Behr, *A Note on the “Ontology of Gender”*, p. 363.

⁵ Maria Gwyn McDowell, *The Iconicity of Priesthood: Male Bodies or Embodied Virtue?*, in “Studies in Christian Ethics” 26, 3 (August 2013); Maria Gwyn McDowell, *Seeing gender: Orthodox Liturgy, Orthodox Personhood, Unorthodox Exclusion*, in “Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics” 33, 2 (1st of September 2013).

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is accessible to men only. Others, however, bring theological arguments against women's ordination.

The purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of the issue regarding women's ordination within the Orthodox Church, and, secondly, to suggest an anthropological approach to the issue and to present its implications for the contemporary ecumenical dialog.

I. Women's ordination in the Eastern Orthodox theology. The current level of discussions

I.1. Short history of the issue regarding women's ordination

The issue of women's ordination was first brought up in 1961 at the third assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi. This was the moment when the Orthodox Church was challenged to express its position regarding the role and the place of women in the Church, and to formulate a theological response to the question.⁶ So far, there is no pan-Orthodox statement and, in the words of Kallistos Ware "the nearest approach to such a statement is probably the declaration submitted unanimously by the Orthodox delegates at the meeting of the Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission held in Athens during July 1978 which firmly rejects all possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood".⁷ In 2006, the Cyprus Agreed Statement was published concluding the third phase of the Anglican - Orthodox international theological dialogue. According to this document, "the Orthodox Churches have not ordained women to the priestly ministries, and have posed substantial theological questions to their ecumenical partners who have. [...] At the same time, the Orthodox members [...] are aware of a small but not negligible minority of Orthodox who are in favour of the ordination of women, or see no theological reasons against it".⁸

⁶ Philip Kariatlis, *The Role of Women in the Orthodox Church: A Historical Overview of Consultations and Conclusions Reached in the Twentieth Century*, in "Phronema" 21 (1st of January 2006), p. 31.

⁷ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, WCC Publications, Geneva, Switzerland, 2000, p. 51.

⁸ International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue et al., *The Church of the Triune God: The Cyprus Agreed Statement of the International Com-*

Two other events remain important to this day: the two consultations which were held in Agapia (Romania) in 1976 and in Rhodes (Greece) in 1988. After Rhodes another two international Orthodox women's conferences took place in Damascus (1996) and Constantinople (1997), both organized by the WCC in cooperation with different Orthodox Churches.⁹ The ordination of women was discussed within various meetings and theological events ever since, the theme remaining until today "an open question".¹⁰ The first two consultations still remain referential because the majority of theologians who deal with the women priesthood issue make reference to the resolutions proposed there, especially to the Rhodes consultation.

Both Rhodes and Agapia consultation propose that female diaconate be revitalized, outlining the fact that "according to the canons of the Orthodox Church, the order of the female deacons, although distinct from the priesthood and episcopate, constituted an ordained ministry".¹¹ Very important to notice that in 17th of February 2017 the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria consecrated women as deaconesses.

Obviously, in the Orthodox tradition women do not get ordained as bishops or priests, but at the same time, Orthodox theologians cannot help wondering *why* not.¹² Thus, we can identify some biblical, historical, patristic, and theological arguments against the ordination of women, but we will try to see to what extent such arguments stand.

1.2. Biblical and canonical arguments

According to the Holy Scripture¹³, Jesus Christ entrusted his priesthood not to women, not even to His Mother, the Virgin Mary, but only to

mission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue 2006, Anglican Communion Office, London, 2006, p. 83.

⁹ Philip Kariatlis, *The role of women in the Orthodox Church*, p. 32.

¹⁰ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, p. 50.

¹¹ Philip Kariatlis, *The role of women in the Orthodox Church*, p. 37; See more about the Order of the Deaconess in: Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess*, in Thomas Hopko (ed.), "Women and the priesthood", St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood N.Y, 1983, pp. 75-96.

¹² Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, in Thomas Hopko (ed.), "Women and the priesthood", St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood N.Y, 1983, p. 19.

¹³ For the biblical understanding of the role of the women in the Church see: Christos Voulgaris, *The Sacrament of Priesthood in the Holy Scriptures*, in Gennadios Limou-

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His twelve Apostles, who were all *men*. From the point of view of the Orthodox theology, there are a few fundamental questions: Was Christ mistaken when he didn't do that? Did He avoid speaking about the ordination of women just because of the Jewish context? How can that be true, taken into consideration the Jesus' other "scandalous" teachings during his activity on earth? All these questions have one answer only: since we cannot answer any of the above questions, we can only say that in the Holy Scripture we cannot find arguments to support women's priesthood.

The canonical discipline of the primary Church mentions the variety of ministries which were entrusted to women, but there is no reference to the consecration of the Eucharistic gifts. The *Apostolic Church Order*¹⁴ (about 300 AD, Egypt) is very clear about it. Similarly, the *Nomocanon* of Photius (883) states: "The deacons who are women do not become priestesses"¹⁵, or "women should not enter in the sanctuary"¹⁶. In the last sentence, the entering in the sanctuary is understood as an entrance for the celebration of the Sacraments.

I.3. The appeal to Tradition

The appeal to Tradition in the Orthodox Church, "is the first fundamental argument"¹⁷ against the ordination of women. Tradition is the life of the Church based upon the testimony of Christ's eyewitnesses. They testified the complete, unique and unrepeatable work of God accomplished in the ministry of Christ. So, no new revelation can add to what Christ

ris (ed.), "The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of the Women: InterOrthodox Symposium, Rhodos, Greece, 30 October - 7 November 1988", "Tertios" Publ., 1992, pp. 67-101; Georges Barrois, *Women and Priestly Office According to the Scriptures*, in Thomas Hopko (ed.), "Women and the priesthood", pp. 39-60; Bishop Irenej of Moravica, *Male and Female in the Bible with Special Reference to the Gal. 3: 28 "There Is Neither Male nor Female: For You Are All One in Christ Jesus"*, in Gennadios Limouris (ed.), "The Place of the Woman...", pp. 35-37.

¹⁴ Adolf von Harnack, *Sources of the Apostolic Canons, with A Treatise on the Origin of the Readership and Other Lower Orders*, trans. John Owen, London: F. Norgate, 1895, pp. 19-21.

¹⁵ Photius Constantinopolitanus, *Nomocanon*, transl. Henricus Agylaeus, an edition by Theodor Balsamon, Lutetia Parisorum, 1615, p. 1: 37.

¹⁶ Photius Constantinopolitanus, *Nomocanon*, p. 13: 27.

¹⁷ Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, p. 14.

did. Thus, “«the historical conditioning» which characterizes the Gospel of Christ is, in a sense, *normative for us*. The twentieth century is not an absolute norm; the apostolic age is”.¹⁸ If in the apostolic age there was no ordination of women, then it has to be the same today. The refusal to consecrate women has nothing to do with the perception of women as being inferior to men, or with a patriarchal way of thinking, but with the meaning of Tradition. “Tradition is nothing else than the *internal continuity* that exists between the New Testament and the [...] life of the Church”. In consequence, “the ordination of women as priests is excluded precisely because it conflicts with this living continuity”.¹⁹ The appeal to Tradition remains the referential point to take into consideration when dealing with women priesthood. And by “Tradition”, we mean here the Traditional interpretation of the Bible, the understanding of Tradition as a way of Revelation of God, the Traditional patristic theology and the Traditional practice to not ordain women as a priests or bishops.

I.4. The iconic argument and liturgical symbolism

Perhaps influenced by the Roman-Catholic argumentation against women’s ordination²⁰ in the seventh and eighth decade of the last century, the Orthodox theologians used the iconic character of Christ’s priesthood²¹ as an argument for an exclusivist male ordination.

“According to the Rhodes conclusions, the reason for this was the following: Christ as High Priest presents Himself to us necessarily and exclusively in male form... therefore the bishop and the priest, who are his iconic representatives, must also be male.”²²

In general, this argument has as a central point the role of the priest as a celebrant *in persona Christi* during the Liturgy. Because Christ became

¹⁸ Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, p. 15.

²⁰ See: *Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html, data accesării: 9th of December 2014.

²¹ See: Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, pp. 23-29.

²² Philip Kariatlis, *The role of women in the Orthodox Church*, p. 40.

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not only man, but also male²³, the celebrant priest has to be a man, since in the Holy Liturgy he is the icon of Christ. “The purpose of an icon is not to remind us of someone who is absent but to *render that person present*”.²⁴ K. Ware tried to reveal the weakness of this argument which he himself had supported before. First, in the moment of the consecration of the gifts, the priest is an icon of the *community* as the Body of Christ. To K. Ware’s arguments, we may also add that the priest’s position is eastward and all the prayers recited by him take the plural form, representing the voice of the community. Then, the Holy Fathers never interpreted the liturgical typology in exterior and materialistic terms.

“A painted icon is indeed intended to bear a visible resemblance to its prototype; but the priest is not a painted icon”.²⁵ Thus, what matters is not that Christ became a *man*, but the fact that he became *human*, and if we remember Saint Athanasius’s treatise about the incarnation, the Greek title could be translated “About the in-humanising of the Logos”. So, it is about the work of Logos to become *human* not a *man*. “The same point is underlined in the creed: «for us humans and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, and was incarnated from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became *human*»”.²⁶

I.5. Universal and ministerial priesthood

Another argument against the ordination of women is the difference between universal and ministerial priesthood. According to K. Ware, there are three connected types of priesthood “interdependent truth”²⁷ which need to be kept together and in balance: Christ’s priesthood, universal priesthood, and ministerial priesthood. Jesus Christ is a priest in a unique way that is actualized by both universal and ministerial priesthood. In universal priesthood, women have the same rights and the same obligations

²³ Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, p. 26; See also: Nonna Verna Harrison, *The Maleness of Christ*, in “St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly” 42, 2 (1st of January 1998).

²⁴ Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, p. 25.

²⁵ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, p. 86.

²⁶ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, p. 87.

²⁷ Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, p. 20.

as men. It is an ontological priesthood, and its essence is to be a hieratic self-offering by virtue. The human person expressing most perfectly this essence is Virgin Mary. Her act of self-offering is the true vocation of us all.²⁸ The ministerial priesthood is a functional one, and it is depending directly on “the power of Christ the eternal priest”. Jesus Christ gives this power to the apostles, who were all male, so, through expansion, so do the bishops until today.²⁹ Again, we notice the influence of the Roman-Catholic thinking in this argumentation. We are not against the influences from another tradition, sometime western theology can be very “Eastern” in its content, but the meaning of priesthood power is not developed enough in this context. There is a need to explain why manhood is linked with ministerial priesthood. The answer can be found in the role of priesthood in the work of salvation. Christ as a priest saved humanity through His sacrifice. Because in the Orthodox thinking the work of salvation presupposes a continuous actualization of this sacrificial act, so, the celebrant priest has to be a man. That is because Christ as the new Adam restored in himself the human nature of the old Adam, and the old Adam was the generic man. Still, we wonder, didn’t Adam embody in himself the entire human nature in its differentiated structure (male and female)? If the answer is yes, we think that priesthood is neither male nor female; it is beyond gender and it holds deeper meaning.

In the history of the Orthodox Church, we cannot find women as priests or bishops, but only women who were ordained deaconess. The ordination rite of the Byzantine deaconess³⁰ shows that it was a real ordination, not a simple blessing of women for special religious services. While for Evangelos Theodorou, the ordination of women as deaconesses was a real *cheirotomia*, for John Karmiris it is a *cheirothesia*³¹. E. Theodorou’s position is accepted by the majority of Orthodox theologians who deal with this topic. Still, for women, becoming deaconesses was the highest point acceptable, which means they didn’t represent directly Christ, the way priests did, because the deacon just *helps* Him in service.

²⁸ Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, p. 21.

²⁹ Kallistos Ware, *Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ*, p. 23.

³⁰ Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess*, pp. 93-94.

³¹ Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *The Characteristics and Nature of the Order of the Deaconess*, pp. 84-89.

*The Issue of Women Ordination...***I.6. Diversity of gifts**

Orthodox delegates in Athens in 1978 stated that the functions and gifts received from God in creation aren't interchangeable. "In the life of the Church, as in that of the family, God has assigned certain tasks and forms of ministry specifically to the man, and others - different, yet no less important - to the woman".³² However, the question regarding the reasons that make it impossible for women to be priests still remains unanswered. K. Ware's opinion is that the "femaleness, as gift from God, has dimensions that are not only biological but spiritual". And he agrees with Kyriaki FitzGerald that the difference between men and women "is a difference of being which is rooted in the very essence of creation manifested in the particular expression of personhood". However, he is "not sure how far this viewpoint can claim explicit corroboration from the Greek patristic tradition".³³ So, the anthropological arguments are not sufficient to say that women cannot become ministerial priests and the "Orthodox theology of human personhood needs to be much more fully elaborated before it can provide us with a definite answer on this point. [...] In view of this uncertainty in our understanding of the human person, it would indeed be foolish to proceed immediately to the ordination of women priests. But, for precisely the same reason, is it not also unwise to presume that any such ordination is totally impossible? Let us «not be in haste» (Isa. 28,16)".³⁴

I.7. Critiques of the theological argumentation against the ordination of women

In spite of all the critiques of the theological arguments used against the ordination of women, the Orthodox theologians who make this critique don't support directly the legitimacy of women's ordination. K. Ware's position is illustrative in this sense:

³² Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission, *Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue: The Dublin Agreed Statement, 1984*, St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, Crestwood, N.Y., 1997, p. 58.

³³ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, pp. 77-78.

³⁴ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, pp. 76-78.

“In 1978, I considered the ordination of women priests to be an impossibility. Now I am much more hesitant. I am far from convinced by many of the current arguments advanced in favor of women priests; but at the same time a number of the arguments urged on the other side now appear to me a great deal less conclusive than they did twenty years ago. What I would plead is that we Orthodox should regard the matter as essentially an open question.”³⁵

We can also find positions which claim the possibility of women’s ordination. Two articles written by Maria Gwyn McDowel³⁶ are worth mentioning. In the first one, she criticizes the binary division of human personhood (male and female) on which the refusal of women’s ordination is based, sustaining that this division has liturgical implications that involve “destroying and possibly invalidating the Eucharist”.³⁷ The second one presents the iconicity of priesthood as an embodied virtue or as an icon of the deified humanity to which all people are called. In her opinion, “this theological structuring allows the participation of women in the sacramental priesthood”.³⁸ We haven’t got enough space here to present in greater detail M. G. McDowel’s position, but it is evident that the women ordination is an issue which requires special attention from the Orthodox theology.

If we had to formulate a short conclusion for this part, we would say that the arguments against the ordination of women which could be placed in two categories, biblical and traditional arguments. Both can be contested, and many of them have already been contested within Orthodox theology itself. Therefore, the question regarding women’s ordination in the Orthodox Church is far from being answered.

II. Anthropological approach

What we can notice in this short overview of women’s ordination is that in the Orthodox theology there is an inconsistency of theological argu-

³⁵ Behr-Sigel and Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, p. 50.

³⁶ She is an independent scholar and wrote a PhD dissertation on women priesthood: *The Joy of Embodied Virtue: Toward the Ordination of Women to the Eastern Orthodox Priesthood*.

³⁷ Maria Gwyn McDowell, *Seeing gender...*, p. 87.

³⁸ Maria Gwyn McDowell, *The Iconicity of Priesthood*, p. 364.

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ments on this topic. In spite of the fact that the official Orthodox theology is against the ordination of women in ministerial priesthood, important theologians consider this question to be an open one which needs further investigations. As far as we are concerned, we consider that anthropology should play an important role in the next theological debates, including in the issue of women's ordination.

Next, we will try to show how anthropology is related to women's ordination and how different developments of anthropology influenced the possibility to ordain women in the ministerial priesthood. I think also that the understanding of this can play a role in the ecumenical dialog regarding women's ordination.

II.1. Archetype theory and anthropology

The theological arguments against women's priesthood are related to the theology of the archetypes and to gender philosophy. For T. Hopko, the issue of ultimate justification of man priesthood is of an archetypal nature. In his understanding, "there is no gender in God. God is neither male nor female, nor a combination of the two. God is not even «beyond gender»".³⁹ Even if He reveals himself as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, that "does not mean that God is to be conceived or imagined as «male». God is the Father to his Son in the Spirit in a divine manner which absolutely excludes gender and sexuality, as it excludes everything which belongs to created nature".⁴⁰ But, it is about the *principium* within the Godhead. According to K. Ware, "within the Trinity there is an «order» (*taxis*) or «hierarchy», in the sense that the Father is the first person, the Son is the second, and the Spirit is the third; and this order is not reversible." The Father is "the *arche*, the source, cause and fountainhead. But, at the same time, there is no subordination or inferiority within the Trinity; for the three persons are totally and entirely equal".⁴¹ In a similar way, this internal order within the Holy Trinity is present in human beings.

The human beings are, at the same time, both equal and different. There is something profound that is common to all, but then there are dif-

³⁹ Thomas Hopko, *God and Gender : Articulating the Orthodox View*, in "St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly" 37, 2-3 (1st of January 1993), p. 144.

⁴⁰ Thomas Hopko, *God and Gender...*, pp. 145-146.

⁴¹ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Kallistos Ware, *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church*, p. 75.

ferences in the roles that we play. The order in creation is not accidental, but complimentary.

All these are theological intuitions which lead us to the classical discourse about the relation between *nature* and *person* in humanity and the concrete existence of human nature in males and females. But this issue needs a more serious approach. Even T. Hopko who is one of the theologians who develop their arguments against the ordination of women, using this type of argumentation, claims that human nature is created by God as male and female and the question why this is so and how sexes are to interrelate in order to be reflective of divine Prototype has not been yet sufficiently explain in the Christian Tradition.⁴² In our view, this anthropology needs to consider the gender theory and its connection with the divine archetypes and the correlation between the archetypes and the Names of God (Divine's Names). Why this? Because the Orthodox theology sees the Names of God interrelated with the nature of God. The Names of God have an indicative role to the nature of God. According to the Orthodox theology, God can never be known in His very essence, but He reveals himself through uncreated energies expressed in factual, phonetic or graphic⁴³ expression of the divine reasons (*logoi*) which reach the entire creation. In Orthodox theology there is a certain correspondence between the natures of the linguistically conceptualized or defined subject/object, though this correspondence is not definitive and all-inclusive. To a certain extent, language establishes a connection and is indicative even if we accept it to be conventional or arbitrary. Nevertheless, we would like to emphasise that we cannot talk about gender in God, but about the *principium* within God, about the order within the Trinity.

II.2. Ontology of Gender

Fr. John Behr speaks about the “ontology of gender” too and notes that we can identify two basic positions in theological thinking. The first holds that God created human beings as “sexual” beings, differentiated into male and female, while the second argues that “sexual differentiation was only provided by God in his foresight of the Fall; prior to this, we

⁴² Thomas Hopko, *On the Male Character of Christian Priesthood*, in Thomas Hopko (ed.), “Women and the priesthood”, p. 100.

⁴³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Revelația prin acte, cuvinte și imagini*, in “Ortodoxia” XX (1968), nr. 3, pp. 347-377.

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would have multiplied «as the angels». This sexuality and sexual differentiation was originally only latent; it became active in and through the Fall, and is represented by the garments of skin, which will be removed in the Resurrection.”⁴⁴ Thus, sexuality belongs “to the human beings’ «biological hypostasis» their biological mode of being, which should not define his or her (‘its’?) existence”.⁴⁵

Apparently, this “ontology of gender” has nothing to do with women’s priesthood, but if we start to analyze the consequences of those two positions we will understand the correlation. Following the first position, the personhood of the human being is reduced to gender. “If one accepts that sexual differentiation is real, part of God’s vision for mankind, then it entails that one *is* either male or female, and this reality of human *nature* is then perceived as a denial of the *person’s* freedom.” Freedom is a property of nature; therefore the person has to act according to his/her nature. The other alternative is that sexual differentiation is a part of the biological hypostasis. “That such an alternative can be posed seems to derive from the modern tendency to think of freedom as a property of the person, and in this context a freedom of the person with respect to their nature, rather than as a property of nature”, as the Christology of St Maximus and the Sixth Ecumenical Council would claim.⁴⁶

We note that the Western world placed freedom in person which led to an easier change in the theology of ministerial priesthood. If freedom is at the level of the person, the person can decide upon his/her role in church. In this case, the question of diversity of gifts or the iconic argument and liturgical symbolism in relation with ministerial priesthood have no importance.

Eastern theology places freedom in the human nature, so men and women have specific roles which are not interchangeable. In the created world human nature manifests itself in both men and women in a mysterious unity. Men and women are human persons who manifest themselves in time and history by the image of the Holy Trinity, unity and diversity, but not confusion. The ministerial priesthood is represented by Christ as a great priest, but the presence of Virgin Mary in the work of salvation is also fundamental, even though she doesn’t play the role of a priest. Maybe

⁴⁴ John Behr, *A Note on the “Ontology of Gender”*, p. 364.

⁴⁵ John Behr, *A Note on the “Ontology of Gender”*, p. 364.

⁴⁶ John Behr, *A Note on the “Ontology of Gender”*, p. 370.

the argumentation against women's ordination could be based on this "dialog" between divine and human which took place in Virgin Mary, who accepted the work of God in her for the sake of all human beings. However, in our view, both Jesus and Virgin Mary bear in themselves the entire human nature – men and women alike – while the masculinity of Jesus Christ and the femininity of Virgin Mary, as well the relationship between them, are preserved in the *iconic* and *symbolical* representation of the Church.

III. Women's ordination and the ecumenical dialog. A few concluding remarks

Women's ordination is a controversial issue within the Orthodox Church and a turning point in the dialog with other Churches. We will conclude by summarizing the main points of the discussion that have an impact on the life of the Church and also on the ecumenical dialog:

1. The restauration of the women deaconate should be accepted. This has already happened in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa. On 17th of February 2017 the Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria consecrated women as deaconesses.

2. The theological argumentation against women's ordination in the Orthodox theology is based on an ecclesial traditional way of thinking and it needs more profound research. In the spirit of patristic thought, theologians have to give an answer to this issue which has to be accepted by all Orthodox Churches.

3. There is a need to emphasize the connection between ecclesiology and priesthood from an ecumenical perspective. How can the Orthodox Church give a valid answer to the recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Churches which ordain women? If the Orthodox Church recognizes the presence of the grace of God in the sacraments done by a woman priest (even when this recognition is one made by economy) that means the Orthodox Church recognizes women's ordination by economy. If Orthodox Church will not recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in those Churches that means that the organizations cannot be named Churches anymore and the ecumenical dialog is pointless.

4. A new or a different methodology of research could be applied when treating this issue. It could be called the *phenomenological approach*

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which would start from the *given reality* or from the pastoral needs. Then this given reality must be *challenged* to overcome a theology of repetition or a fundamentalist attitude. Then the *spiritual experience* follows, in which love connects our mind with God and thus our mind will be able to embrace the entire creation in a single act, beyond time and borderless and to give an inspired answer. After the spiritual experience, the *theological reflection* follows, in which “to have the mind of Christ” is essential. And because of this entire process, *the pastoral solution* appears as a spiritual and theological process.

5. Assuming that after an enlightened, honest and serious research the Orthodox Church will give an acceptable theological answer on this issue, for the sake of the visible unity, will the Churches be able to adopt unanimously the theological decision? Will the Orthodox Church be able to accept women’s ordination or will the Churches who ordain now women be able to give up women’s ordination?

All these unanswered questions indicate that women’s ordination is still a challenge for the Orthodox theology in the 21th century.