God is spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). Christ spoke these words to a Samaritan woman by the well. The inspired poets of the hymns present a single, dominant image of God, Christ Philanthropos. God is portrayed as humankind’s friend, forever patient and forgiving, always loving unconditionally and without exclusions. Who else would have dined with sinners and talked theology with a Samaritan woman? In thousands of Orthodox hymns divine love or philanthropia recurs like a glorious refrain.

Related to this is a second major theme of Orthodox theology and hymnography, theosis or deification. Regardless of sex, race or social class, every person can realize the divinity within him or herself. Through many centuries theologians and hymnographers of Eastern Christendom have proclaimed that we can all become gods. In this teaching of the Greek Church lies more hope for progress from error to truth, from bondage to freedom, from the old to the new earth that was inaugurated when God was born of a woman.

In conjunction with the hymns, in order to understand them I had to read constantly the Scriptures and the writings of the Greek Church Fathers. Read together, the Scriptures, the Fathers and the hymns led me to appreciate an Orthodox tradition that was dynamic, creative and inclusive, and open-ended for spiritual growth.

More recently my hymnographical studies took an unexpected turn, opening up a new area of investigation. During Lent I was reading one day the Lenten hymn On Fasting, written in the sixth century by Christendom’s greatest liturgical poet, St. Romanos the Melodos. In it there is a miniature “paradise lost.” Romanos presents the all too familiar story of Genesis 3 in very lively and dramatic fashion. The wily serpent persuaded Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. She in turn, persuaded Adam. So both disobeyed God and were punished by exile from Eden. As had the author of I Timothy 2:13, the Byzantine hymnographer piles all the blame on Eve. In addition, he expresses sympathy for innocent Adam, woman’s first victim. The drama concludes with two verses in which Romanos calls Eve “a snake more dangerous and snaikier than the snake” (M-T, No. 51, §§3-4). The hissing sounds of these verses effectively turn Eve into a snake. The vehement attack on Eve shocked me, as well as the American translator of Romanos’ hymns.

At that point I began to wonder about the anti-woman prejudice of my favorite hymnographer, the singer of Christ Philanthropos. Was sexist prejudice an aberration on his part or did he reflect a tradition of the church? Thus from my hymnographical studies was born a new research interest.
that was not merely academic.

I began to take notes whenever in the hymns or the Fathers I ran across mention of Eve, women, or references to woman, the female sex. Without any effort on my part, the cards rapidly multiplied. Very soon the accumulated notes indicated that Romanos was far from being a lone voice. I had on my desk evidence of a widespread, fully developed anti-woman theology, complete with selected texts, appropriate imagery and exegesis. Common also to other branches of Christianity, androcentrism, patriarchal prejudice and pride lie deeply imbedded in Orthodox tradition. For almost two millennia this sexist theology has determined the attitudes and praxis of the church. Set down in the ecclesiastical books and inscribed in the experience of women as well, its existence cannot be denied any longer. Nor can we dismiss such a powerful and ancient tradition as either flights of rhetorical hyperbole or as an incidental current of monastic influence. Surely the time has come to discuss it seriously and openly.

Since the authority of the Fathers is often invoked in defense of women's subordination in and outside the church, it is instructive to review briefly their position. The proper place of women was succinctly stated in the fifth century by the influential dogmatic theologian, St. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria. This fervent champion of the Theotokos expressed patriarchic consensus with these words: "The male must always rule; the female must everywhere remain in second class" (PG 68. col. 1068C). No Father then or Orthodox theologian now disputed the view that cosmic order, taxis in society and church, requires second class status for women. Yet the Fathers knew and sometimes quoted Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28, texts which affirm women's creation in the image of God, and the equality of the sexes in the ekklesia of Christ. In constructing their theology of women they ignored these affirming texts in favor of those that sentenced the entire female sex, with only one exception, to segregation, silence and subordination. The preferred texts of androcentrism are well known from the four Gospels.

The learned and brilliant Greek founding fathers of Christianity justified women's subordination on two grounds. First, women possessed a special nature, divinely ordained. "Female nature" appears repeatedly in Greek patriarchic writings and in Byzantine hymnography. Weakness is said to characterize "female nature." Scriptural sanction for this description is provided by I Peter 3:7, where woman is called the "weaker vessel". Unlike males who reflect the glory of God (I Corinthians 11:7), females, descendants of a spare rib, are considered derivative, secondary beings without autonomy. Thus, "female weakness" forms a fundamental premise of traditional theology of woman.

Consider this example of patriarchic proof of female inferiority. St. Clement of Alexandria (ante 215) wrote that by removing a rib from Adam to create Eve God forever purged males of all weakness. Therefore he concludes that males are whole and perfect, females fractured and imperfect. The fact that man's beard is older than Eve further proves his 'superior nature' (PG 8. col. 581A-B).

The Fathers spelled out in great detail the various weaknesses of woman's alleged flawed nature. St. John Chrysostom (ob. 407) had a low opinion of women's intellect and capacity for reason. Hence, he declares, it is wise for women to be confined to the home, performing unimportant, undemanding domestic chores (PG 62. col. 500). The golden-tongued archbishop of Constantinople described the female sex as emotional, fickle, superficial, garrulous and servile in temperament (PG 47. cols. 510-511; 61. col. 316; 62. col. 548). Chrysostom held these conventional sexist prejudices despite his own personal experience of women. His mother was renowned in pagan as well as Christian circles. In Constantinople he had enjoyed the company of cultivated women deacons, who proved to be his most loyal supporters. St. Epiphanius of Cyprus (ob. 403) attributed these defects to the second sex: instability, weakmindedness, frenzy and vanity (PG 42. cols. 740D, 745B). St. Gregory the Theologian (ob. c. 390) believed that by nature women are "ostentatious and self-indulgent" (PG 35. col. 800A).

These and similar characterizations are repeated over and over in prose and poetry, in sermons and hymns. They created a demeaning and negative image of women. This monolithic caricature denies women individuality and autonomy, the possibility of growth and maturity.

By naming Eve as the source of sin and evil the Fathers further bolstered their sexist theology. Because of women Eden fell to grief. Scapegoating Eve and her daughters did not begin with my poet Romanos. Originally descriptive, the folktale of Genesis 2 and 3 became for the church prescriptive. Therefore, women deserve their fate, pain in childbirth and subservience to husbands (Genesis 3:16). Female subservience to males is divine punishment for the crimes committed by the first woman. Thus St. Gregory of Nyssa (ob. 394) sees the hand of God in the unequal relationship of husband and wife. It is, he writes, by divine commandment that a wife is "not mistress of herself." Without her husband the wife has no existence. Her dependence on him is total: "if she is separated from him even briefly, it is as if she has been
deprived of her head" (PG 46. col. 332C).

Second in the order of creation and first in the order of sin, women were doomed to inferiority and subordination in a patriarchal culture and church. This sexist theology sanctified patriarchal institutions and structures that oppressed women. It would be impossible to measure or to exaggerate the effect of this ideology on the lives of countless generations of women. To deny its existence or influence is an attempt to deny history, to stonewall. Acknowledged or not, it survives, surfacing in contemporary discussions of women’s “special ministries” befitting their “special gifts” and in drawing distinctions between “masculine” and “feminine” vocations. If indeed God is spirit and must be worshipped in spirit, one has to ask what gender has to do with Christian vocations, liturgy and service.

The daughters of Eve, the first sinner, have, nevertheless, been part of the church from the beginning. Before Pentecost a woman, St. Photine, brought Christ the first converts. The record of women’s contributions can be read in the lives of Orthodoxy’s galaxy of female saints. Across the centuries many women have proved faithful unto death, from St. Thekla, the first woman martyr, St. Paul’s mathe­tria who preached and baptized, to the neo-martyr Chrysa (October 13), martyred in the eighteenth century. Our hallowed heroines are listed in church calendars and their lives are recounted in the synaxaria. They include apostles, deacons, evangelists, prophets, missionaries, church mothers, ascetics, miracle-workers, builders of churches and convents, conveners of eumcumenical councils, confessors, as well as martyrs and great-martyrs. Because of their sex, however, women saints are less known and receive less honor than their brother saints. This was brought home to me dramatically when my parish church was dedicated. During the consecration (enka­n­nia) the female saint whose name the church bears was barely mentioned. No relics of a female saint were included among those placed in the altar of St. Katherine’s Greek Orthodox Church. And there was no female participation in the dedicatory ceremonies.

Orthodox’s women saints, moreover, did not entirely escape the stigma attached to their sex. The hymns written in honor of women saints document the vigor and durability of our sexist tradition. In the corpus of Greek hymns to women saints there is hardly one that does not denigrate the female sex. They contain innumerable references to “female weakness,” “the shame of women”, “the rottenness” of “female nature.” In their hymns the church poets faithfully echoed orthodox androcentric teachings and dogmas.

Like the Fathers, the hymnographers never fail to connect the female saints with their first mother who is also the first sinner. Adam and his delinquencies, however, are not mentioned in hymns to male saints. From hundreds of available examples one will suffice. The long hymn by Demetrios in honor of “Our Holy Father Andronikos and his wife Athanasia” (October 9) will illustrate how sexist prejudice tempers praise. The hymnographer praises Athana­sia for being a good wife. She is not a bad wife like Eve, whose disastrous advice led Adam astray. Next, Demetrios compliments her for not allowing the “emptiness” of her nature to weaken her determination to achieve holiness. Finally, he commends Athanasia for dressing like a monk. Male garb will aid her liberation from her female nature (MR I, 368,371). Backhanded compliments like these are a predicable feature of hymns to female saints, the most glorious and he obscure alike.

The highest compliment which the hymnographers can bestow on saints of the inferior sex is that they have succeeded in transcending their femininity and become men. In his hymn to St. Mamelcha (October 5), a Persian convert who was stoned to death, an anonymous poet honors her as theo­foros and staurophoros. At the same time he vividly evokes the standard perjorative image of women. Addressing Christ, he exclaims, “How great are your works, O incomprehensible Savior. For you gave her strength to escape completely from her rotten and weak nature.” (AHG II, 31).

St. Zenais (October 11), a kinswoman of St. Paul, did not get better treatment in the hymn by St. Germanos I (ob. 733), Patriarch of Constantinople. Zenais was a skilled physician, an apostle who “taught the world the truth,” and an ascetic. Her eulogist congratulates her for success in “mas­culine struggles” and for victories won by the “masculinity of her mind” (AHG II, 90, 100). Apparently, only males were blessed with minds.

In the androcentric scheme of things humanness meant maleness. Spirit, sanctity and goodness were identified with...
males; with females, body, corruption and sin. To be female was somehow to be less than human, to lack human wholeness. And so a desert mother, the Abbess Sarah, took offense when a desert father called her a woman. She responded to the insult, "A woman I am in sex, but not in spirit" (PG 65. col. 420D). Another time she returned the insult, calling the desert fathers women.

From Eve's oppressive legacy to women only one of her daughters was excluded. Mary, the human mother of God, escaped the "disfiguring shame" of her sisters. She is exalted above all creatures on earth and in heaven. Greek theologians and church from a single choir to sing her superiority, especially to all other women. She is likewise unique among women. In hundreds of hymns to the Theotokos she is proclaimed to be "beyond nature," "above women," "alone among all the generations of women."

In Eastern Christendom the Theotokos enjoys semidivine honor. She is celebrated on five major holy days. Byzantine hymnographers strain language and symbols to describe her "divine glory." Hymns and prayers to Mary occur in all of our liturgies. Icons and churches testify to her omnipresence in the Orthodox oikoumene. Sermons in praise of Mary, preached by emperors as well as patriarchs, fill thick volumes.

Orthodoxy's unlimited veneration of the Theotokos, it is true, has given the church a "feminine face." It is equally true that veneration of the Theotokos has not brought honor or full dignity to women. History shows that the "trickle down" theory does not work. Mary's "divine glory" has, in fact, isolated her from the rest of womankind. The chasm that separates the Mother of God from God's daughters is visible and palpable in the architecture and praxis of our church.

In the apse of many Orthodox churches a majestic and beautiful Theotokos occupies sacred space. The entire congregation, male and female, worships in her presence, conscious of her grace and power. The sacred space around the Theotokos and close to her is, however, accessible only to males. It is strictly off-limits to all women. Altar boys serve in the hieron, but no altar girls. Because of our sex, women are prohibited from serving and worshiping God at the altar. As a result of this separation and exclusion, women experience alienation from the body of Christ. The shadow of Eve has not vanished in the brightness of Mary's "divine glory."

Where can we look for a model to bring about a change, to turn away from the traditional sexism of the institutional church? Where else than to the founder of Christianity and to the community he gathered around him? The oldest of the four Gospels, Mark opens a window to the past, enabling some light to shine into the present.

In unvarnished prose St. Mark reveals Jesus' liberating vision of community and service. By word and deed the Son of Man challenges outworn creeds, conventions and rituals. Rejecting ancient regulations for fasting, Jesus advised against the futility of band-aid solutions and compromise: "but put new wine in new skins" (Mark 2:22). Traditional religious observances were less important to him than the physical and spiritual welfare of people. "The sabbath was made for the sake of people, not people, for the sake of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Jesus warned the religious establishment against confusing man-made traditions with divine laws. "You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions... How ingeniously you get around the commandment of God in order to preserve your own tradition" (Mark 7:8-9).

When he lived among us, taboos never hampered or restricted Christ's ministry. Ritualy unclean and untouchable for twelve years, the woman with the issue of blood was cured, restored to her community, when she touched Jesus' garment (Mark 5:25-34). The dead were also ritually untouchable. Contact with death caused defilement. But Jesus touched the dead daughter of Jairus, took the girl by the hand and restored her to life (Mark 5:39-42).

The iconoclasm of Jesus' life-style and ministry made him, as he bitterly remarked, a prophet without honor in his own country, among his own people (Mark 6:1-6). His relatives thought him crazy and once tried to take him into custody (Mark 3:21). Jesus, however, all the way to the cross based his diakonia on divine law, the two greatest commandments, love of God and love of neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:30-31).

Within the community gathered around Jesus, as described in the oldest Gospel, diakonia was the ruling principle, its only guideline. Leadership and discipleship depended on service to humanity and love of God. Christ himself exemplified diakonia, selfless giving of love, acceptance of redemptive suffering and death. "For the Son of Man," he explains, "did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The male disciples, however, did not understand the meanings of these words. They did not comprehend leadership as service, as Mark makes clear. Thinking in conventional patterns of power and domination, the disciples quarreled about who should be first among them (Mark
The brothers James and John indeed asked for positions of privilege when Jesus should enter into glory (Mark 10: 35-40).

Nor did Jesus' male disciples fulfill the requirements of discipleship. In the fourteenth chapter of his Gospel St. Mark records their failure. Individually and as a group the inner circle of male disciples failed to follow and to serve their teacher at the time of his passion and death. Peter, James, and John slept during Christ's agony in Gethsemane. Judas, another member of the twelve, betrayed him with a kiss. When Jesus was arrested, "abandoning him, they fled, all of them" (Mark 14:50). Finally, Peter denied him three times. With his demonstration of selfishness, lack of spiritual sensitivity, cowardice, to say nothing of perfidy, the paradigm of masculine superiority, of the stronger vessel, collapses. At the times of testing the male disciples proved not to be Jesus' true disciples.

In the same bleak chapter St. Mark begins to record the real discipleship of the female members of the community around Jesus. Their story begins with the anointing of Jesus by a woman disciple at the home of Simon the leper in Bethany (Mark 14:3-9). A contrast to the behavior of the male disciples is explicit.

Tradition has not preserved the name of the woman who alone had understood Christ's three prophecies of his death (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34), as well as the meaning of his messianic mission and kingship. This unknown woman disciple by her "good deed" assumed a traditional male role. In ancient Israel male prophets anointed the head of kings. In the new creation a woman anoints the heads of the King of Kings, who was soon to die on the cross for the life of the world.

With the end of the fourteenth chapter the male disciples disappear from the oldest account of Jesus' death and resurrection. And the female disciples enter Christian history, the only witnesses to the pain of Golgotha and to the joy of the first Pascha.

As Jesus died a brutal death, forsaken even by God (Mark 15:34), a loyal group of women disciples stood by, watching. "Among them were Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James the Younger and Joset, and Salome. When he was in Galilee, they followed and served him" (Mark 15-40). The two important words are "followed and served" since they define Christian discipleship. The faithful group also included many other women who had come up to Jerusalem with Jesus.

Step by step the women followed the drama, to the cross and beyond. When Joseph of Arimathea laid the body of Jesus in a tomb, "Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of Joset were watching and took note of where he was buried" (Mark 15:47).

Then early on Sunday morning Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of Joset and Salome went to the tomb, saw that the entrance stone had been rolled away. And the angel told them that Jesus had risen (Mark 16:1-8). Women were thus the first to learn of the resurrection. According to the Gospel of Mark, eye-witness testimony for the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus comes from the lips of the women disciples. Hence in Byzantine sermons and hymns they are called mathetriai and euangelistriai, titles that were also assigned to the Samaritan woman by the well.

Thus women, not men, proved to be the true disciples. It was Salome, and not her self-seeking sons James and John, who was the real disciple of Christ. The so-called "weaker vessel" turned out to be the stronger. By demonstrating strength, faith, understanding and loyalty these women refute the sexist stereotype of "female nature." Yet the stereotype never lost its hold on the attitudes and praxis of the church. It survives, albeit in somewhat muted and coded forms.

St. Mark also introduces into the history of the church a most remarkable woman disciple, Mary of Magdala, the first person to see and speak with the Risen Lord. "He appeared first to Mary the Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons..." (Mark 16:9-11). Like the Samaritan woman, she went to tell what she had experienced. But Mary Magdalen was less successful. When the male disciples heard that Jesus was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe her. All four Gospels attest the prominence of Mary Magdalen in the intimate circle around the Jesus and in the primitive church. All except Luke acknowledge her apostolic primacy (Mark 16:9-11; Matthew 25:9-10; John 20:11-18).

At a time when women counted for little or nothing at all, Mary found dignity and freedom in the movement led by Jesus. Fearlessly she defied conventional domestic female roles. She walked with Jesus all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, serving and being served, sharing a diakonia of love and liberation. To follow him was never easy and sometimes dangerous. And one day Jesus died on the cross. The male disciples deserted him. But Mary Magdalen, with other women, still followed him, grieving and watching.

On the third day grief turned to joy. God exalted Mary Magdalen above all his followers, when He appeared and spoke to her by the tomb. Commanding her to proclaim the resurrection, God empowered a woman to become the apostle to the apostles. "Go to my brothers and tell them... Mary the Magdalene went and announced to the disciples: I have seen the Lord. And that he had said these things to her" (John 20:17-18). From a woman's experience and lips first came the euangelion, the good news of life and liberation for all of God's children, of love's triumph over evil and death. A true disciple and first apostle, St. Mary Magdalen wears the brightest of haloes.

These remarks began with the Samaritan woman with whom Jesus discussed theology. They end with Mary Magdalen to whom he revealed the resurrection. In their names the Gospels record women's discipleship and apostolic leadership in the infant church.

It is my hope that in their memory women of faith will claim their heritage; that men and women together will turn away from androcentrism and sexist prejudices to equality. The male disciples heard that Jesus was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe her. All four Gospels attest the prominence of Mary Magdalen in the intimate circle around Jesus and in the primitive church. All except Luke acknowledge her apostolic primacy (Mark 16:9-11; Matthew 25:9-10; John 20:11-18).

At a time when women counted for little or nothing at all, Mary found dignity and freedom in the movement led by Jesus. Fearlessly she defied conventional domestic female roles. She walked with Jesus all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, serving and being served, sharing a diakonia of love and liberation. To follow him was never easy and sometimes dangerous. And one day Jesus died on the cross. The male disciples deserted him. But Mary Magdalen, with other women, still followed him, grieving and watching.

On the third day grief turned to joy. God exalted Mary Magdalen above all his followers, when He appeared and spoke to her by the tomb. Commanding her to proclaim the resurrection, God empowered a woman to become the apostle to the apostles. "Go to my brothers and tell them... Mary the Magdalene went and announced to the disciples: I have seen the Lord. And that he had said these things to her" (John 20:17-18). From a woman's experience and lips first came the euangelion, the good news of life and liberation for all of God's children, of love's triumph over evil and death. A true disciple and first apostle, St. Mary Magdalen wears the brightest of haloes.

These remarks began with the Samaritan woman with whom Jesus discussed theology. They end with Mary Magdalen to whom he revealed the resurrection. In their names the Gospels record women's discipleship and apostolic leadership in the infant church.

It is my hope that in their memory women of faith will claim their heritage; that men and women together will turn away from androcentrism and sexist prejudices to equal discipleship and diakonia. God is spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth.

ΕΔΑΤΕ ΜΑΖΥ ΜΑΣ
Στήν κρουαζιέρα που
οργανώνουν τα περιοδικά
GREEK-AMERICAN REVIEW
KAI ESTIATOR

DECEMBER, 1991