

In the Orthodox Conscience
By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

When you approach matters of faith, information alone is not enough. You need a spiritual mindset to approach religious issues. This mindset is formed gradually, through your living connection with God and His Church. The more you experience life in the pure face of the Lord's Church, the more the "Orthodox conscience" takes root in you. This in turn shapes your mind to become truly Orthodox.

There is no school or textbook that can teach you how to acquire this conscience, mindset, or spiritual sense. The only school is your life in the heart of the Church, your humility, and the work of the Holy Spirit in you. If you pursue humility, it shapes your entire being, not just your mind, so that you are truly open to the Holy Spirit, to your brothers and sisters, and to those around you in the world. Then, the action of the Spirit appears in the way you approach every Church matter: with humility and detachment, seeking God's will and mind, not your own ideas or desires. His action toward your brothers and sisters shows itself in your dealings with them in love. This allows you to distinguish between individual persons and their opinions, enabling you to understand them, even if you disagree. Only then is real dialogue possible. Without it, you reject not only their opinions but also the persons themselves.

Let us make this clearer with examples. For centuries, there has been debate about frequent versus occasional communion. Both sides find canons, teachings, and practices to support their view. How do you discern the truest approach? If you rely only on theological studies, rules, and teachings, you will naturally gravitate to what fits your own thinking, preference, or desire. But the key question remains: How do you know God's will and mind? How do you discern what is best for you and the Church? Here, the Orthodox conscience is essential, for it helps you distinguish between your will and the Spirit's will, between Holy Tradition and local customs that shift with cultures and times, between what the Church has faithfully lived and what today's pressures try to impose.

In every matter of faith, God's mind must shape your churchly conscience alongside the spirit of the canons, the theological sciences, and their purposes. This only

happens when you live with a mindset enlightened by the Holy Spirit and His living action from the Church's foundation until today. In Orthodoxy, Holy Tradition means precisely "what has been handed down to us." Tradition is literally "the handing over." When you live in the spirit of this Tradition, your sense of it strengthens. Then the canons, teachings, and theology support you. But if you rely on them alone, you risk distortion, even while you seek the truth. It is no accident that our holy Fathers and Mothers taught that humility is the garment of divinity and the condition for receiving any grace. Clinging stubbornly to what you consider "the truth" can close your eyes to the fuller truth beyond you, and in this way, you harm your Church and your faith, even if you call your version of truth "theological."

Never forget: the Church does not call "theologians" those who study theology in universities, but those who know God through living experience with Him. From the beginning, the Church has said: the true theologian is the one who prays.

The same applies to today's debates about deaconesses. There is much confusion here. It is not enough to simply point to historical evidence of deaconesses and then interpret it to fit today's mindset, crafting a "new" form to suit modern thought. Scientific study requires objective research that seeks the truth. Only then can decisions be made upon it. For example, one must first know the role deaconesses played before their order disappeared, the reasons for their disappearance, and the reasons behind any movement to revive the order today. The discussion must be rooted in Tradition and a forward vision shaped by an Orthodox, patristic mind. To approach it through the lens of gender equality, or inequality, is mistaken, because this uses the spirit of the age, not theology. Likewise, treating ordination as a job of equal opportunity is wrong. Priesthood is not a business.

The Church is filled with many and varied gifts. Her Tradition has always affirmed that Christ did not choose women for the liturgical priesthood: they were not among the Twelve at the Mystical Supper where He instituted the Eucharist, nor when He breathed the Spirit upon them and gave them authority to bind and loose sins. Yet at the same time, He entrusted women as heralds of His Resurrection, sent the Spirit upon men and women alike at Pentecost, and made some of them equal to the apostles in preaching and witness. Women have served and continue to serve

in countless Church ministries, whether as deaconesses, laywomen, or married women.

For decades now, Christianity has faced the temptation to reshape its theology according to dominant humanist and secular thought. This is a dangerous path, because it bends theology, spirituality, and the mind of the Church to human ideas rather than to the Gospel and Tradition.

May God preserve His Church from the traps woven against her from within and from without.