

Nadzeya CHERKAS

Can Women in Belarus Enjoy the Fullness of Life?

According to the Orthodox women's theological thought (which is still being formed), the Soviet variant of feminism differs from the Western one primarily in its Christian direction. As part of the former Soviet Union, Belarus was a typical example of a country that proclaimed full equality between women and men but failed to implement it in practice and failed to eliminate women's discrimination in public life and in the family.

The awful conditions under which Soviet women lived, gave birth to, and educated children is no longer a secret. Women were not considered feminine. They were just a working force in building a better future. That ideology imposed a semi-woman, a semi-man, someone who would be ready to work in the mine, factory or railways, to do the hardest work. Men and women were called and addressed just as tovarishch (comrade).

WOMEN'S RETURN TO FEMININITY

The feminist movement appeared and developed quickly at the end of the eighties. It is not in social critics, but in the contemplation of the virtues of purity, chastity, self-sacrifice (personified in God's Mother), that Russian feminists found the way of self-renewal. They rediscovered earlier ridiculed values and submitted to Christian God, because they found Life, Truth and Way in God. God helped them to overcome dazzling pain and sorrow and to defeat suffering with Love. Thus emancipation (as a return to femininity!) had paradoxical results: the most emancipated women were in Church.

"The prayers to Virgin Mary helped me to find, open, and resurrect my femininity in all its purity and perfection," one Russian feminist writes. Indeed, the position given to the Mother of our Lord in the Orthodox religiosity is next to the Lord himself. Mary, born as we are, gives all of us a fully realized and blessedly imitable example of how to use our human nature to glorify God in every moment of life. God's Son's embodiment through the Virgin Mary raised women into the highest stage of dignity. She is no longer a slave, a thing, but equal with man, with the same talents, the same immortal soul, and high meaning. She is not only a friend, but a co-heiress of eternal life in God's kingdom.

Jesus Christ's example of life, teaching, and suffering justified and ennobled women. He paid attention and respect women, sanctified her human virtues and moral powers, and he taught others to do this as well. Thus he elevated woman to her proper place in creation. Through his actions women were emancipated from rabbinic rigidity. "At the same time, gender distinction within the Christian community remained, though women and men enjoyed the fullness of union with God by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not come to deliver humanity from the distinction of being female and male, but came to restore primeval beauty of both forms".

APOSTLE OF THE APOSTLES

The idea of motherhood as a woman's sole mission was surpassed and the reliability of women was recognized. Consider

the mirth-bearing women and the apostles. When the latter hid and left their Teacher without support, the former ignored the danger of being caught and turned out to be more faithful and courageous than the apostles. Then they came to the empty tomb. Saint Mary Magdalena was the first to see the resurrected Christ and preached this to the apostles, and then they spread the message of resurrection in the whole world. Thus, she was "the apostle of the apostles". This term is a correction of any image of the Church, in which women are only supposed to listen, and preaching is to be done exclusively by men.

Unfortunately, it is not only people in other churches who are unaware of the rich history of women in the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox are also unaware and need to find ways to tap the tremendous energy lying dormant among their women and use this for strengthening their faith and ministry. It is due to women that the Orthodox religion has been preserved in our country, in spite of many years of persecutions. Today, when men are just awakening from spiritual sleep, women compose the majority of parish people. The idea of *spiritual motherhood* is well known: a woman makes a man not only with the act of physical birth, but she also gives birth to spirituality in him. Love (*Lubou*), Faith (*Vera*), Hope (*Nadzeya*) - these are all Orthodox names for females. In them lies the essence of humanity.

THE CALLING OF WOMEN

Church tradition tells us about the internal, essential difference in the calling of women and men. They cannot be replaced by each other. The callings of a woman, wife, and mother are completely different from those of a man, husband, and father. So they complement each other. It is in marriage that one fulfills their calling or mission because within the framework of one's human nature they realize God's way of life.

Marriage is a unique union of two human beings in love. These two human beings can surpass their own human nature and be united not only with each other (they become one body), but also in Christ. It is a mystery, in which a complete change of the human being is taking place, a renewal and rebirth into the world in a new fullness. It is in marriage that a complete knowledge of being is possible - the wonder of feeling, touching and seeing the other person. This enjoyment of real life makes us richer, wiser and gives us the feeling of fullness of life. This fullness is intensified with the birth of a child, united and reconciled.

If the marriage is based on love and faithfulness, it is chaste. It is interesting to mention the etymology of the Russian word *tselomudrie* (chastity): *tselo* means whole(ness), *mudrie* means wisdom, that is the word chastity expresses the unity of wholeness and wisdom. The marriage, deprived of chastity, loses its wholeness.

THE SEXUAL REALISATION OF MARRIAGE

When speaking from a Christian understanding of marriage, we cannot skip the sexual communication between

woman and man. Today we face desacralisation of love, dissection of life, where physical activity is detached from the life of the spirit or the life of the spirit is detached from the bodily experience. We must look at sexual life as an activity that involves the whole person, body and soul and spirit, rather than simply as an activity that involves our biological self. According to Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, our sexual actions involve not only ourselves, but also our relationships to those around us and to God.

When we see sexual activity simply as an action, we are reduced to an animalistic state. We are reduced to a series of parts instead of the unity, which is called a person. There must be a meaningful, committed relationship between two people if sexual activity is to be that which works for the betterment and not the degradation of the person. Therefore sexual activity must be placed within the full sacramental context of a personal relationship, this relationship being defined as a unity of thoughts and actions which take into consideration one's relationship with God, oneself and the other person.

In practice in the churches, the most common ways of dealing with sexuality is silence and censorship. This fact is closely connected with Russian culture, which was always marked by hyper bashfulness. Perhaps many people noticed a strange peculiarity of the Russian language (it is more common in present day Belarus after many years of its intrusion during the Soviet Union period). On the one hand, it is so rich, but on the other, there is a white spot in such an important sphere as love. There are no words for expressing physical love. There are either scientific terms, or indecent words. It is not accidentally so. This theme is evidently tabooed in the Russian language, and consequently in the culture. It is tabooed because they consider this sphere to be sacred.

IS THERE A WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN SOCIETY?

In Belarus, social equality between women and men is fully guaranteed by law. However, laws are often disregarded, and many provisions are not enforced. Women continue to face discrimination in the economy and labour relations. They have no economic independence. In today's society, many jobs are being perceived as unsuitable for women and certain occupations are being avoided by large numbers of men for fear of not fitting the image of "a true man". These are examples of gender stereotypes, which still have the better of us. As before, women's participation in decision-making and public administration at all levels remains limited. In fact, there are a lot of clever and intelligent women able to reveal their talents in any state or social activity. There is a growing number of women who not only have political or managerial aspirations, but are also in active search of opportunities to realise their leadership ambitions. The authorities, however, do not accept categorically protruding women, and people support such an attitude to them. Our state, led by men, manages to burden women with all possible problems of everyday life: children, school, shopping, hospital, etc., so that they cannot afford such a luxury – they cannot be social or political leaders.

Violence against women at home is also a serious concern that still remains hidden from public view. Belarus does not have laws against domestic violence. This type of criminal behavior is not even defined in the Criminal Code. The life of women in our country is not easy. Such a lump of prob-

lems fell on them, that they practically lie under it – squeezed, hardly alive, confused and expecting help from surrounding people. Support can hardly arrive.

THREE TYPES OF BELARUSIAN WOMEN

Those who have soberly evaluated the situation crawl out and take up the problems. Such advanced women gained university diplomas and entered business, laying household duties on others' shoulders. They earn their own income and can afford to look after themselves and to keep physically fit. Yet they often find their husbands carried off with other women.

Still most of the Belarusian women with scanty salaries can afford neither aerobic lessons, nor cosmetic salons, nor a household governess. They exhaust themselves physically and morally, working hard at work and at home. In spring they set up to work at dachas. They dig soil, plant potatoes, weed strawberries, water plants, and collect the harvest—all for the sake of family sustenance and surviving. Used to hard physical and moral commitments, they are able to save separated, depressed and dispirited society, but they should not keep silent, but they must act.

There is a third category of women in Belarus. These women do not change anything in their lives. They make no moves to business or dachas. They simply renounce from all problems, take to drinking, and voluntary degradation. They fill their lives with chaos, drunkard swearing and complete hopelessness. There is little hope that such women will make order in their houses and thoughts. It is unlikely that they will look upon themselves objectively and find a worthy way out from this desperate situation and become a whole person. Liberation of sexes should go hand in hand with the liberation of the person.

Suggested Readings:

BEHR-SIGEL Elizabeth, *Le ministere de la femme dans l'Eglise*. Paris, 1987.

FITZGERALD Kyriaki Karidoyanes (ed.), *Orthodox Women Speak. Discerning the "Signs of the Times"*. Geneva, 1999.

Nadzeya CHERKAS is a member of the youth group of the Belarusian Orthodox Brotherhood of Saint Vilnya Martyrs, and she is responsible for the youth projects. She studied foreign languages and dreamed of building bridges between her country and the rest of Europe and the whole of the world.

