

## **Women in the Early Church: A Radical Equality**

MIKE AQUILINA

Christianity brought a seismic change to the lives of women in the first century and thereafter

In fact, in all of history, there has been no force nearly as successful as Catholic Christianity in making positive change for women—and it was Catholic women themselves who made all the difference.

### **Women in the Greco-Roman world**

Pagan and Christian sources agree that the Church grew at an astonishing rate in the first three centuries of its existence. The modern sociologist Rodney Stark estimates a steady growth rate of forty percent per decade during centuries of intermittently intense persecution when the practice of the Faith was a capital crime. Pagan and Christian sources agree that women made up the majority of converts.

The most effective opponent of Christianity from this period, the Greek philosopher Celsus, mocked the Church for this. Around A.D. 178, he accused Christians of not daring to evangelize women when their sensible husbands and fathers were present but rather getting hold of them privately and filling their heads with “wonderful statements, telling them to pay no attention to their father and to their teachers.”

What kind of statements were those? They no doubt involved the principle of equality of the sexes before God. “There is neither Jew nor Greek,” said St. Paul, “there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

The apostle wasn’t denying sexual differences, nor was he claiming there should be no difference in the roles that men and women played. Rather, he was claiming for women—and slaves and foreigners—a dignity that no one in his world, not even a philosopher as brilliant as Celsus, could recognize.

A woman in that world was seen as having little intrinsic value. She derived her identity from the males in her life—first her father, and then her husband, and then her sons. The law recognized little for her in the way of natural rights or protections. Women were not permitted to testify in a court of law because their testimony was considered unreliable. The law treated them like children.

The value of their sex was nowhere more evident than on the day of their birth. Infanticide was common in the Greco-Roman world. It was practiced mostly for economic reasons, to limit family size and to maximize the future return on the father’s investment in childrearing.

Thus, children who were “defective” in any way—i.e., disabled—were usually drowned in a bucket of water at birth or left exposed at the town garbage dump. There they might be claimed as carrion by vultures and dogs or taken up by pimps to be raised as prostitutes. All the documentary and archaeological evidence indicates that the most common “defect” for which children were abandoned was femaleness.

Nowhere is the matter expressed more shockingly than in a “love letter” found in the excavations at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. The husband, Hilarion, closes his missive to his wife, Alis, by saying: “If you happen to be pregnant again, if it is a boy, leave it; if it is a girl, throw it out.”

In the economy of antiquity, a girl was an expense, an economic liability in ways that a boy was not. A boy would one day be an earner. A boy might provide for his parents in their old age. He might even improve their status by his accomplishments.

A girl, on the other hand, would need to be fed and clothed for more than a decade before she was married off—and upon marriage her father would have to pay a sizable dowry. For these reasons the Roman playwrights referred to girls and young women as “odious daughters.” It’s likely that the dialogue in their works is an accurate reflection of common turns of phrase.

The ideal daughter, for pagan Romans, was physically beautiful, for the beautiful would be married off the soonest. The typical age for her arranged marriage was twelve, theoretically at puberty, but many girls were given in marriage at eleven to a man much older. And the marriage, it seems, was consummated whether the girl was physically ready or not.

It appears there was little expectation of a loving relationship. Adultery was common, as was divorce. Abortion was common, as was infanticide. Marriage was a transaction established for the continuation of the customs of family and society for another generation.

A woman’s role was to produce a son to be heir. If she suffered the misfortune of widowhood before bearing a son, she might live the rest of her life in poverty.

The laws and traditions of the Greco-Roman world had been refined over centuries to communicate the value that society placed on women. It was very low.

### **The Christian difference**

The Christian difference was evident immediately to discerning observers such as Celsus. It had been obvious from the beginning. The apostle Paul had traveled not only with men but with women. He treated them as co-workers. They spoke with authority. The dazzling preacher Apollos received correction and instruction not only from Aquila, who was a man, but also from Aquila’s wife, Priscilla (Acts 18:26).

In the Church described in the Pastoral Epistles, widows—and indeed all women—held an honored position (1 Timothy 5:1-3f). In St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, unmarried women are seen not as accursed but rather as exalted (1 Corinthians 7:34).

Among Christians, the status of unmarried women had suddenly and radically changed, and this was a clear indication of a new status for women in general. Justin and Athenagoras, Fathers of the second century, indicate that there were “many” women in the church who had consecrated themselves to lifelong virginity. St. Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to St. Polycarp (A.D. 107), counseled such women (and men) against boasting and pride for the position they occupied in the Church.

To the Romans, who worshiped many gods, these Christian innovations were worse than absurd: they were an affront. Because of the practice of female infanticide, the empire was suffering a severe shortage of marriageable girls, and Christian families were permitting their daughters to waste their lives in an unmarried state. Some Christian widows were making the decision not to seek a second marriage.

In the late second century, in fact, Clement of Alexandria—a convert from paganism renowned for his classical erudition—condemned the custom of arranging the marriage of daughters early in life. It was a violation of the girls' vocational freedom, and it was a sin, he said.

This, again, was revolutionary, and pagan Rome clearly saw this as a threat to social order and traditional Roman family values. What would happen to the world if all women began to behave like Christian women? If they rejected their fathers' choice of a spouse? If they had freedom to commit their lifetime to prayer and service? If they refused a husband's demands for immoral sexual practices? What would happen if society at large allowed women to emerge as spiritual leaders and teachers? If women were permitted to found institutions?

Many of the early martyrs were women and girls, and often they were denounced—sometimes by suitors or husbands—for their uppity independence of mind. They were publicly humiliated, tortured, and executed. And yet the Church was not ashamed of them. In fact, it preserved their names in its ritual worship and told their stories in epic literature: *Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia*.

In ancient Greece and Rome, the epic heroes had been men who fought with other men. They brutalized their enemies, and readers were spared no detail of the viscera that came pouring out of the losers' mortal wounds.

In Christianity, however, the heroes were often heroines—specifically those who had suffered violence rather than submit to a patriarchy that despised them for what they were. What would happen if a society looked at women with respect? The world was about to find out.

## Where strong women thrive

An account from A.D. 177 tells the story of St. Blandina of Lyon, who had died only recently during an upsurge in persecution. She was one of many martyrs, male and female; yet she is clearly the star of the account. The torturers scourged her, burned her on a grate, and exposed her to wild beasts. She endured it all over the course of days and repeatedly affirmed her faith. Eventually she exhausted her tormentors' patience, and they finished her off with a dagger blow. Again, this is an unusual instance in ancient literature: a woman emerges as a real character—and not only that, but as the central character—in a work of literature.

A few years later, in A.D. 203, we meet St. Perpetua of Carthage, who is interesting for many reasons. She was a young woman with a newborn baby, and a recent convert, imprisoned along with other converts who were nearing the day of their baptism. We know her because she kept a diary, and she recorded her experiences with fervor and exquisite style. Her account is distinctively feminine, and so it is an extreme rarity in ancient literature.

Perpetua wrote in detail—and in the first person—about childbirth, breastfeeding, and weaning. If the pagans despised a woman's testimony in law, they thought even less of it in literature, and so Roman literature preserved us little that we can call firsthand accounts of these experiences. Yet Perpetua, a new Catholic convert, could set down her account freely and casually. In the Church she knew a freedom that her neighbors in Roman North Africa clearly did not.

It is clear from her account that Perpetua, in spite of her youth and inexperience in the Faith, emerged as the leader among her cellmates. Eventually they were joined in prison by men who were Christians of long standing. Yet Perpetua remained the one to whom they looked for guidance and comfort. It is unlikely that pagan literature in the year 203 would show a woman occupying such a place in any social group.

Perpetua's diary makes no argument for this circumstance. It never even asserts it or overtly recognizes it as a fact. It simply presents life as Christians lived it, and a woman was there to lead her little flock through a crisis—and winsomely record the matter for posterity.

## Each one teach one

Perpetua was not the last of the Church's literary women. Proba, a noblewoman and a believer, emerged as one of the leading poets in the following century. She took one of the received verse forms of the Roman tradition, the *cento*, and bent it to Christian purposes.

The *cento* was a quirky form. It required the poet to take lines or half-lines from Vergil's *Aeneid* and rearrange them to tell an entirely different story. As far as we know, Proba was the first to use such fragments to tell the story of Jesus Christ—a sublimely

symbolic activity, accomplished at the time Christianity was emerging as the dominant cultural force in the empire.

With the end of persecution came freedom for the Church, and soon women came to the fore in academic research and teaching. St. Jerome of Stridon was one of the leading lights of the fourth century, but all of his most prominent students were female. He taught Hebrew and Scripture to a group of well-educated consecrated women in Rome.

They drove his research by raising textual questions he could not answer. He commented that they surpassed him in language skills as well, speaking and singing in unaccented Hebrew. It was his students Paula and Eustochium who accompanied him to the Holy Land, where they made possible his prodigious work in biblical scholarship and in their “spare” time founded communities of religious women.

Christian women upset the expectations of Rome. And it was not only Christians who noticed this. Ardent pagans—thinking pagans, such as Galen and Libanius—were astonished by what was happening. Galen, the greatest physician of antiquity, was usually disdainful when he spoke of Christianity, but he had to acknowledge that Christian women often “attained a pitch not inferior to that of genuine philosophers.”

Christian intellectuals were even more appreciative. St. Augustine of Hippo may be one of the ten most influential thinkers in human history, but he said that in philosophy he was no more than the disciple of his mother, St. Monica. St. Gregory of Nyssa, the intellectual heir of Plato and Philo, said the same about his sister, St. Macrina, who had homeschooled him.

### **Brick, mortar, and women**

Freedom of religion also enabled the emergence of distinctively Christian institutions. There had never before, in all of history, been anything resembling a hospital. But in the third century, [Christians began organizing communities for medical care](#), and in the fourth century these flourished. Within fifty years of the legalization of Christianity, no self-respecting city was without a hospital, and some cities had as many as a half-dozen.

Again, they were Christian institutions, and many of them were founded by women: St. Fabiola in Rome, for example, and St. Olympias in Constantinople. So, women emerged as leaders in the rising field of medicine. They had the courage to deal with infectious disease, the organizational skills to assemble teams for effective care, and the religious zeal to energize them through times of epidemic.

Women also were experimenting with new forms of religious community — monastic enclosures, hermitages, and urban residences for consecrated singles. Whereas once it was considered shameful for women to live apart from men, it was now a mark of a special divine calling. As there were Desert Fathers, so there were Desert Mothers. As there were abbots, so there were abbesses. The liturgy came to praise Gregory and Benedict as “Fathers” and Macrina and Scholastica as “Mothers.”

## In light of history

Church life turns on the work of women, today as it did in the third century. Ordinary women, like the vast majority of men, do not feel shortchanged because they're not called to priesthood. For such women, now as then, holy orders would be nothing but a distraction from the real work. Our brief glimpse at early Church history makes the matter even clearer.

### Sidebar 1

#### Were Women Ordained in the Early Church?

**The short answer is no**, and there's no evidence that any expressed the desire for [ordination](#).

In the past half-century, there has been a movement to reinstate the role of [deaconess](#) from ancient times. St. Paul refers to a woman named Phoebe by this title (Romans 16:1). And many early Church Fathers use the term to refer to women who exercised certain duties on behalf of the Church.

Deaconesses were prominent especially in the East. (The Western Fathers and liturgies do not employ the term.) They prepared women for baptism and took part in the ceremony. For the sake of modesty, this was extremely important. Adult converts were baptized naked—washed and anointed. The clergyman stood behind a screen and poured the water and the oil, but the deaconess applied both to the woman.

Deaconesses also visited the homes of widows and single women in need, delivering food or money from the Church. This avoided the scandal of a man alone visiting a woman alone.

When there was no longer a need for this role—when everyone was Christian, and no one was baptized naked—the title largely disappeared from the historical record.

Some modern scholars have claimed that ancient deaconesses received the sacrament of holy orders and were recognized as clergy. The argument rests mostly on one text: the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions*, whose authority was local and whose redactors may have subscribed to the Arian heresy.

Since the 1970s several popes have explored the question and commissioned historical and theological studies, all of which have been inconclusive. Pope Francis said in early May 2019 that the most recent, most extensive study has not produced evidence that women were once ordained for Church office.

## Sidebar 2

### Marriage Made Liveable for Wives

**St. Paul sparked a revolution** not only in women's rights but in their practical experience of marriage. He did this when he said: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

What he prescribed had never been the norm in the pagan world. Greek and Roman girls were married off in childhood to men much older. Love probably did not rank high among their expectations for spousal life. The descriptions of married sex from antiquity seem predatory by today's standards.

But all evidence indicates that the Church encouraged Christians to live by St. Paul's standard. This made a better life for most of the women in the Christian world, especially as compared to their pagan neighbors, who were physically abused, forced to abort their babies, and often abandoned to poverty through divorce.

We may allow for a certain degree of idealism in Tertullian's description of Christian marriage, but it's likely that he was writing what his co-religionists (and his wife!) could recognize as true:

How can I come up with words to tell the happiness of that marriage which the Church cements, and the sacrifice confirms, and the benediction signs and seals—of which angels carry the news, and which the Father ratifies? . . . What a union! Two believers, sharing one hope, one desire, one discipline, one and the same service! Both are brethren, both fellow-servants, no difference of spirit or of flesh; they really are two in one flesh. Where the flesh is one, the spirit is one, too. . . . When he sees things like these, Christ rejoices. He sends his own peace to these two. Where two are together, he is with them himself. And where he is, the evil one cannot be (Tertullian, *To His Wife*, 2.8).