

The Vocation of the Presbytera: Icon of the Theotokos in the midst of the Ministerial Priesthood

Much has been written on the vocation of woman in the Church, expressing deep insights into the mystery of her continuous role in the history of salvation, which is lived out by God's design in various ways. One such vocation is that of a priest's wife (the *presbytera*), unique in that while it is entwined with her husband's ministry it is, at the same time, a vocation in its own right. Rooted in Scripture and Holy Tradition, this unique and apostolic calling (cf. 1 Cor. 9:5) developed within an ecclesial and cultural tradition that formed a woman for this specific role in the midst of the ministerial priesthood, preparing her to receive God's call and respond to it. This reflection will focus on the Mother of God as the model for this ministry that poses so many challenges, both spiritual and pastoral.

Responding to God's call

The dialogue between Mary and Angel Gabriel in Luke's Infancy Narratives reveals an important insight regarding God's call for humanity to participate in the work of salvation. Never forcing His will on His creatures, God waits for Mary's *fiat* before proceeding with His salvific plan for humanity. Her free choice to cooperate with God's plan is imperative. Unable to imagine how she is to become mother without a man and what this role would demand of her, Mary, because of her faith and trust in Him, submits completely to God's will.

Mary's trusting *fiat* opened the door to her intimate involvement with God in the salvific events that followed. Similarly, the wife of a candidate for ordination to the priesthood must also give her *fiat* to open the door to her husband's ordination, agreeing to wholeheartedly support his ministry. This age-old tradition reflects the intimacy between the marital couple and God's call. Already members of the Royal Priesthood of all baptized believers and having become one in the Mystery of Crowning, the call of the husband to the ministerial priesthood is simultaneously a call to his wife to intimately participate in this lofty vocation of spiritually parenting a Christian community. She is called not only to support her husband in his pastoral duties as spiritual *father*, but to complement his ministry with her own God-given gifts which are distinctly different from her husband's, the greatest of which is her *maternal* charism.

But Mary's *fiat* includes much more than an agreement to physically bear the Son of God. With it, she commits her entire life to doing God's will. *She hears the word of God and keeps it* (Lk.11:28) for the rest of her earthly life. Tradition teaches us that Mary grew up in a rich liturgical tradition in the Temple where her love of God grew so intense, that her whole being became open to the action of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the "soil" of her heart was prepared to receive the Word and the gift of God's grace to bear the challenges and crosses that accompany her *fiat*. The woman who has already made a

marital commitment faces the challenge of lifting that commitment to a higher level with her promise to be a “spiritual life-giver” and bear the unknown crosses of her ministry as a *presbytera*. She can only do that if her heart is prepared to confidently receive the grace needed to live this life of service to God.

Roles and Relationships

Through the Incarnation, Mary becomes the *Theotokos* – the God-Bearer. Her life is now defined by her relationship with Christ, one that encompasses not only the mother-child relationship, but also that of Bride and Bridegroom – a spousal relationship. With her *fiat*, Mary becomes the Bride of God. As symbol of the Church, she is the Bride of Christ the Bridegroom who will come to wed the Church at the end of time. It is their spousal relationship that becomes a model for the common ministry of the presbyter and *presbytera* and is mirrored so beautifully at the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. While the presbyter stands at the altar in the place of Christ the Bridegroom, his *presbytera* stands with the people, the Body of Christ, the Church, the Bride.

Mary’s interaction with Christ at the Wedding in Cana reveals beautifully the gift of complementarity in a spousal relationship. Typically, though not exclusively, it is the woman who intuitively perceives the needs of others. Mary senses the embarrassment the hosts will suffer for a lack of wine at their wedding. Her strength of character is evident when she brings this situation to Christ’s attention and in spite of His reluctance to take action, says to the servants “Do whatever He tells you.” (Jn 2:5) She is confident that He will act to avert the crisis, because she knows with personal experience that *nothing is impossible for God* (Lk 1:37), her very Son, and He responds accordingly. It is precisely out of her active receptivity that Mary intervenes and Jesus executes. She intercedes and He acts. Indeed, her sensitivity toward the human needs of the wedding feast actively engages (even prompts) the initiative of Christ to meet them. Their mutual love and respect for each other along with the complementary engagement of their inherent masculine and feminine gifts form the foundation of a cooperative effort in ministering to others. This is a beautiful example for all couples involved in ministry. When the priest and his wife each acknowledge and respect the charismatic gifts of the other, they are able to work together for the spiritual benefit of the community.

“Do whatever He tells you”. Nothing more of what Mary says is recorded in the Gospels, but her maternal presence throughout the events recorded “speaks” more than words. Luke specifically mentions Mary’s presence in the Upper Room with the Apostles as they prepared for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Mary who *is* “full of Grace” and the icon of its receptivity teaches the apostles *how* to receive the anticipated grace. Following the example of Mary the *presbytera*, fulfilling her role as *Icon of the Theotokos* can be that maternal presence in her community, complementing the paternal and apostolic ministry of her husband.

So galvanizing was Mary’s presence among the disciples, that (according to tradition) they came from all corners of the earth to be present at her Holy Dormition. The icon of

this feast depicts faithless Athonios (a zealous priest of the Old Covenant) who was struck blind and whose hands were cut off by an angel when he attempted to throw to the ground the body of the Virgin being carried by the Apostles. His faith was restored by a miracle of the Mother of God. Referring to this event, Evdokimov states the following: *To woman belongs the task of correcting the masculine zeal that blunders so frequently, deeper and deeper, into a profanation of the mysteries, to the detriment of spiritual values. (Woman and the Salvation of the World, 223)* This is a sobering thought for the *presbytera* and a reminder of the prophetic influence she has regarding her husband's pastoral ministry for good or ill.

Preparation and discernment

The portrait of the *Theotokos* that emerges in Scripture and is enriched with stories of the Virgin in tradition becomes a model for all women, but especially for the *presbytera* in her double commitment to both marriage and spiritual ministry and the unique challenges this vocation brings. Let us examine some of these challenges and their resolution in light of Mary's example.

The soil of a woman's heart needs to be prepared for her to hear and respond to God's call. This preparation took place very organically in past centuries and in cultures where married priests were the norm in parish ministry. A young woman who grew up in a priestly family was likely (and often expected) to marry the son of a priest, who would in many, if not most cases be entering the priesthood. In her parents, she observed first hand the life of the priest and his wife and developed a clear understanding of what would be expected of her as a *presbytera*. Ideally she would have had a solid liturgical life, learned basic cantoring skills and all that was needed to manage a household. Even knowledge of husbandry was essential for serving in a rural parish, where farming involved management of hired help and provided a living wage for the family, since the priest's stipends were rarely enough to live on. Thus, the preparation of a woman for her role as *presbytera* was passed from generation to generation in a kind of clerical sub-culture. The soil of her heart was prepared and open to receiving that call from God and her life at home provided her with all the necessary practical skills as well as confidence in meeting the familiar challenges.

Though some remnants of that "clerical sub-culture" still exist, most women married to priests today do not come from clergy families. In many cases, the thought of being married to a priest only comes to light when a woman begins a relationship with a man studying for the priesthood. She has the opportunity of contemplating the vocation of a *presbytera* before she responds to his marriage proposal, an awesome responsibility in view of the fact that the bishop will require her *fiat* before ordaining her husband. The wife of a "later vocation" does not have the advantage of forethought and faces a different challenge in her discernment. Her already established marriage relationship will be profoundly affected by the inclusion of her husband's ministerial priesthood and she must prayerfully discern whether she is called to participate in it. Her decision determines whether or not he will be ordained. In either case, the woman's *fiat*, like our Lady's, must not be merely 'for the moment' but rather all encompassing and permanent: it must

endure for her whole life and extend to its every aspect, for it involves nothing less than a commitment of her "whole life to Christ our God" the High Priest, in a daily and intimate *participation in and service of* her husband's ministerial priesthood.

The discernment of these women is significantly more complicated than that of the woman who grew up nurtured in her home for embracing the role of a *presbytera*. She had a fairly good understanding of the challenges she would face and likely had a network of relatives and friends to support her. Women today are not as fortunate, as the challenges are not as clear and can differ greatly, depending on the husband's assignment. They are less likely to have the same kind of support system. All of this means, that a woman discerning the vocation of a *presbytera* must be a person of deep and uncompromising faith and trust in God, for only God's Grace will enable her to respond confidently to the varying and ever changing challenges in her life. Like Mary, who could not have known all that awaited her as the Mother of God, she needs to be open to the action of the Holy Spirit in her and trusting in God's providence be able to say, ". . . let it be done to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) This is no easy task once faced with circumstances that challenge the faith, which initially inspired her to embrace the vocation of the *presbytera*.

Embracing the challenge

Challenges can be real or perceived and reasonable or unreasonable. The new *presbytera* may feel (or be made to feel) that she must be involved in every aspect of parish life, providing leadership in activities and organizations, and fulfilling the role of catechist, secretary, and social convener while tending to her primary role as wife and mother. Unable to fulfill these unreasonable expectations, whether they came from parishioners or were personally perceived as such, she finds herself unduly stressed, most surely resulting in a loss of self-confidence and feeling of inadequacy. The emotional and spiritual energy wasted on dealing with these kinds of delusions only weakens the *presbytera's* ability to respond to the many real and unavoidable concerns.

For one *presbytera*, the real challenge is dealing with the isolation of living in a remote parish far from her family and friends. For another, whose husband is assigned to a large, busy parish, it can be a different kind of isolation as pastoral duties take him away from home at all times of day and night, often with little notice. A *presbytera* may find herself very much alone in raising the children and managing the household. She may even come to feel like she is in competition with God for her husband's help and attention. Such an attitude is sure to be fatal to their marital relationship.

The lifeline for surviving, and even embracing these real challenges is prayer. Once again, our example is Mary. Her contemplative spirit is revealed in scripture with the words: *But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.* (Luke 2:19) Ironically, prayer is often the first thing to be "forgotten" when one is overwhelmed with responsibilities. Bitterness and emotional exhaustion follow, resulting in a dangerous descent into despair. Once the intimate link with God is ruptured, all other relationships (spousal, family and community) suffer. It can even end in a crisis of identity for the

presbytera who can feel betrayed by the circumstances that have prevented her from pursuing her vocation as spiritual life-giver to her husband, children and community. She cannot give what she does not have. Thus, her own spiritual life must be her priority and her first duty in this regard is to seek the help of a spiritual father or mother. This is not an option, but a must if she is to grow in her vocation and experience the inexpressible joy it brings.

So essential is experienced spiritual guidance for the *presbytera*, that it cannot be overemphasized. Her husband, who may himself be overburdened with other people's difficulties or experiencing his own spiritual crisis, may not be able to help his wife with hers. Turning to other clergy in neighboring parishes can be awkward. Although it is healthy for parishioners to know that their priest and his family experience struggles similar to their own, sharing details of personal trials with parishioners can be very unwise, resulting in awkward parish relationships. A *presbytera* needs someone she trusts without hesitation, to whom she can open her heart and from whom she can receive the kind of guidance and encouragement that strengthens her spiritually. Ideally, but not necessarily, it might be a priest who can also be her confessor. The spiritual father (or mother) who knows the family and is familiar with their home and work environment can best help the *presbytera* stay on track with her prayer life and progress in it. He can help her recognize her God-given gifts and guide her discernment on when and how to apply them in response to the various demands made on her life. In personal matters involving faith, family and marriage, he can be trusted to listen sympathetically and present an objective perspective on the issues at hand. Vulnerable to neglecting her need for spiritual renewal, the *presbytera* can depend on her spiritual father to remind her that she needs to take time to nurture her contemplative spirit, which maintains her intimacy with God and energizes her ministry. She must guard this peace and intimacy with God with all her might and respond quickly to recover it when she feels it slipping away, for this is the main source of her spiritual strength. With her own spiritual life in order, she is equipped to address her next most important responsibility: guarding the spiritual health of her husband and children.

Ministry in the family

A woman, of her nature, tends to reach out for help when she needs it. A man, who may fear this could be seen as a sign of weakness, tends to rely on his own devices. This can be very unwise when it comes to spiritual matters, especially for the priest whose spiritual house needs to be in order to pastor his flock effectively. With a full schedule of liturgical services to which he must attend, personal prayer is often neglected, especially during the very busy seasons of Great Lent and Pascha. The priest, who diligently reminds his parishioners of their need for confession, can easily forget his own need to avail himself of this healing sacrament in the fury of the season's demands. The *presbytera* is likely the first to notice the signs of spiritual burnout in her husband (impatience, depression, negativity). With the sensitivity of Mary at the Wedding Feast in Cana, she brings to her husband's attention the urgent need for attending to a looming crisis, in this case his own spiritual decline. A simple question posed lovingly, "When was the last time you went to confession or spoke to your Spiritual Father?" may be

enough to initiate the first steps toward healing the soul. For the *presbytera* married to a man who is tangled in the blunders of masculine zeal that Evdokimov refers to, rests the difficult task of helping her husband recognize the dangerous spiritual battle he faces. This is easier to accomplish in a healthy marital relationship with good communication, something that needs to be nurtured with time alone as a couple away from the parish. The *presbytera's* efforts in building a strong marriage is bound to bear fruit in her husband's spiritual wellbeing, effective pastoral ministry and a harmonious family life.

The same spiritual watchfulness the *presbytera* exercises over her husband must be extended to her children. One of the greatest pastoral challenges in a clergy family is raising spiritually and emotionally healthy children. Often unfairly placed on a pedestal by well-meaning parishioners and even teachers in parochial schools, the family is vulnerable to being judged: children on their behavior and parents on their parenting and pastoring style. Unlike children of doctors, teachers or other professionals working with the public, children of priests live in their father's work environment. As such, they are often witnesses to much of the activity surrounding parish life, including both the triumphs and the struggles which inevitably come with the territory. They may, for example, be well within earshot of a disgruntled parishioner verbalizing his or her dissatisfaction with their pastor's performance. Children cannot distinguish between someone's founded or unfounded complaint against their father. They simply see that their dad is under attack, and by extension feel personally attacked as well. Even hearing another priest or his family being criticized can cause children anxiety, for they envision the same happening to their family. The emotional pain and insecurity children experience in such situations can stay with them for a very long time. If their woundedness is not dealt with, the effect on their emotional and spiritual life can be devastating. It is no wonder children of priests so often shy away from involvement in the Church and in extreme cases reject their faith altogether.

Protecting children from this kind of destructive experience is no easy task, especially if the parish residence is located adjacent to the church, but it must be done at all costs. Though this is the mutual responsibility of both parents, the *presbytera*, is the one most often tending her children when they require the protective *omophor* (mantle) of a mother. Seen as intercessor by parishioners, she is frequently approached with questions and concerns of a controversial nature and must learn to steer such conversations in a different direction when her children are present. At the same time, she might gently educate them on the appropriate time and place to voice their concerns. The *presbytera* and her husband must also remember never to conduct their own conversations about difficult situations and other people in the presence of their children. Greek +Archbishop Anargyros, of blessed memory, while socializing with a group of clergy families in Canada, emphatically warned against ever discussing Church politics and controversies in the presence of children. Though the bishop's remarks were addressed to clergy, all parents would be wise to heed his warning.

In spite of every effort to protect children from the traumas that accompany life in the midst of a parish community, there will always be situations that call for some damage control. Loving parental support and guidance combined with stress-relieving humor,

can turn such occasions into excellent learning experiences in communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal dynamics. Children must be steered away from seeing themselves as martyrs, which can easily happen when they find themselves the only children in church along with the deacon's kids at Vespers or a weekday Festal Liturgy. Instilling in them the understanding that we come to worship on these occasions out of our love for God, not from obligation, is an ongoing process. With time, they may even come to recognize the special graces that come from their faithful participation in the liturgical life of the Church. A *presbytera's* positive attitude toward worship and involvement in parish life is contagious to her young children. Helping older children discover their gifts and how to apply them to the service of God and community, gives them a sense of belonging and accomplishment. Showing them appreciation for jobs well done with kind words and, when appropriate, with a material reward, goes a long way towards neutralizing any negative episodes they may have experienced. Finally, taking family time away from the parish, whether it be a few hours or weeks, is essential for the kind of family bonding needed to give children the sense of security they need to grow into spiritually and emotionally mature adults.

Aside from her foundational duty as guardian of her own as well as her family's spiritual well being, the *presbytera* has one more essential role to fulfill: to be *present* to her parish family, not to *do*, but to simply *be* her authentic self. Emulating Mary's galvanizing presence among the Apostles, she joins the community when it gathers to pray, for it is in liturgical prayer that a community builds a bond of mutual love and respect. From this common worship, flows a host of social and charitable activity. The *presbytera* may not be able to participate in the running of any of these activities, but even her brief presence at a meeting or an event lends a tone of peace and cooperation. Her humble presence "speaks" love to the people and they respond with love in their deeper commitment to the life of the parish family.

Reaching out

The roles of the priest's wife examined thus far are foundational to her broader ministry. Other pastoral opportunities arise throughout her life. Some may present themselves in her work outside the parish, whether in her career if God has led her to one, or in her involvement in the broader community. Often, the respect she receives as the wife of a clergyman puts her in a good position to gently evangelize and witness her faith in a secular environment. When pastoral challenges in the parish emerge, the *presbytera* must carefully discern her readiness to respond, as she must not be distracted from her primary responsibilities. She, like her husband, is also vulnerable to the kind of overzealousness that can be detrimental to her spiritual life and her pastoral ministry. She must wisely balance commitments to her husband and family with her desire to serve the community. As her children grow towards independence, the *presbytera* may have more time and energy to offer her unique gifts in service to others. Teaching, visiting the sick and elderly, ministering to young mothers, doing pro-life work, organizing retreats, leading marriage or baptismal preparation – the needs are many. Yet, perhaps the most rewarding is the ministry that she experiences in her more mature years and grows out of being present to her community. Having reached a comfort level with their *presbytera*,

women, especially, come to her with very personal struggles and pain: the loss of a child in the womb, the crumbling of a marriage, the pain of an abortion many years ago, the struggles with a spouse or child with mental illness, the news of terminal illness in oneself or a family member, the death of a dear friend. The list of crosses people bear is endless.

What a privilege it is for a *presbytera* to be trusted with such deeply personal experiences. In some cases, all that can be done is to listen and share tears, but in others, a *presbytera* can lead the wounded souls to the person that can best help them through the process of healing. She can offer a grieving mother her own motherly embrace and arrange for prayers to be said over her. She can answer questions a woman is embarrassed to ask her priest. She can encourage confession for someone burdened with sin. She can put a good book into the hands of a “seeker.” She can connect individual parishioners with each other, forming a network for mutual support in their common struggles. This kind of one to one ministry is a blessing and a joy. It is worth patiently enduring all the annoyances that accompany ministry in a parish, for the opportunity to share so intimately in people’s lives and walk with them as they journey toward a deeper relationship with Christ.

The blessings of these ministries can come with a significant emotional toll as *the presbytera* shares the deep pain and sorrows of others. Remembering Mary’s role in the Paschal Mystery is key to successfully living her vocation as Icon of the Theotokos. At the foot of the cross, we witness the fulfillment of Simeon’s prophetic words to Mary “and a sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Lk 2:35). Mary patiently bears the *travails and sorrows* of these dark days of her Son’s passion with complete faith in God’s providence. With His Resurrection she *no longer remembers her anguish*. The heart-rending pain Mary experiences which is common to all women in their maternal care of the suffering, does not embitter her or deter her from her mission which continues to unfold after the Resurrection. It is her life of deep prayer and contemplation and her receptivity to the action of the Holy Spirit in her life that is the core of her apostolic dimension and the reason she was able to maintain an unwavering commitment to the will of God from her initial *fiat* through the dark days of her Son’s passion and crucifixion and beyond His Resurrection.

Dealing with people’s complex and painful issues can be extremely demanding and intimidating. To the *presbytera* who may doubt her capacity to respond appropriately to the varied situations she encounters, Paul Evdokimov offers these encouraging words: *The fact that a woman gave birth to God, shows the power of every woman, when she is indeed a “new creation”, to bring forth God in devastated souls. . . . Above all, woman possesses this natural charism to bring forth Christ in the souls of human beings.”* (*Woman and the Salvation of the World*, 224)

The *presbytera* need not doubt that she is capable of meeting the challenges of her vocation as Icon of the Theotokos for through baptism she becomes that “new creation” which she nurtures through her life of prayer, contemplation and ascetic practice. Just as God provided Mary with all the necessary graces for her role in the salvation of the

world, He will supplement the inherent maternal and spiritual gifts of the *presbytera* with the grace she needs to accomplish whatever tasks He sets before her. From her contemplative spirit flows the grace to adhere faithfully to the commitment of her *fiat* and to nurture the apostolic dimension of her husband's ministry. Thus, the *presbytera* empowers the ministerial mission of her husband, the priest of God, and perfects her vocation as Icon of the Theotokos.

Lest this journey of perfecting her vocation seem simple, it is necessary to note that it is a life-long effort, one with which this *presbytera* still struggles and prays:

*Open the ears of my soul, O Mother of God, for thou hast borne the Lord who once
opened the ears of the deaf; enable us to hear the Word of God and keep it.
(Second Sunday of Lent, Theotokion of Canticle Four, Second Canon
The Lenten Triodion, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press)*

*IrynaGaladza
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