Women in the church- past and present

You may wonder why you see me standing in front of you today and why you see women of our church participating in the liturgy. This is because the month of March in the Antiochian orthodox church is designated as “Antiochian women month”.

This was founded by Metropolitan Philip Saliba of Thrice-Blessed Memory back in 1973.

In this month we remember the many events in the Old Testament and mainly in Christ’s life were women played a major role.

Women throughout the history are responsible for the conversion of tens of thousands of people to Christianity and women have been every bit as important as men to spread the gospel.

So, today I will only briefly talk about the different roles that women played in the bible, in the history of church and in the present time.

From the very first chapter of the Bible (Genesis 1:27) we learn that both men and women were created in his own image meaning that we were created equal. Eve was the first woman.

Then, who is greater than our Theotokos, Mary mother of Jesus. How can we claim that women do not hold an important role in our church, when we believe that the mother of God is holier than the most holy and powerful of all angels?

**There are many important women in the Old testament**. Through the faithfulness of those women the Lord worked to bring about men that did his will.

I will mention only few of them:

- **Huldah** a teacher and a prophet. She spoke to the kings and high priests regarding the interpretation of the scriptures (Deut 29: 25-27)

- **Miriam** the prophetess sister of Aron and Moses (exodus 15-20-21)

- **Deborah** a judge, a prophetess and a military leader. (Judges 4; 5)

- **Mother of Samson** (judges 13:23)

- **Ruth** who showed obedience and courage and from her family line came David. (Book of Ruth)

- **Hannah** mother of Samuel. Who taught us to never give up, to continue to pray and to praise God for his wisdom and kindness. (Samuel 1: 9-18, 24-28).

- **Sarah** wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac (Genesis 11:29-31)

- **Rebecca** wife of Isaac, mother of Jacob and Esau. (Genesis 22; 24; 25; 26; 27)

- **Rachael** wife of Jacob and mother of joseph and Benjamin (Genesis 29:9-12)

**Now the New Testament**: we see teachers, prophets, deacons, pastors, disciples and martyrs.

* Let’s start with Elizabeth mother of John the Baptist.

Then we also notice that Jesus had **women disciples**:

* The Bible says that when Jesus was traveling through cities and villages he was accompanied with men and women. Such as **Mary Magdalene, Joanna and** **Susanna**. Those women also supported him financially. (Luke 8:1-3). Mary Magdalene was the first witness of the resurrection. (John 20:17)
* **Martha and Mary**- (sisters of Lazarus)-In Luke 10:38, we are told that Mary sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teachings. To sit at the feet of a Rabbi meant to become a disciple of the Rabbi. We are also told that Mary poured perfume on his feet and wiped them with her hair. (John 12:1-8).
* We should not also forget the women who went early to the grave: “**Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and other women”** who then went and told the apostles what they have seen.
* The Samaritan woman (**Photini**) was the first non-Jewish evangelist. She was chosen to be the one spreading the word to non-Jews.
* **Andronicus and Junia**. Prisoners and among the Apostles who were Christians before Paul. And this was told by Paul himself in Romans 16:7.

We also learn about **teachers in the gospel**:

* **Priscilla**: we are told that she taught Apollos the scriptures and instructed him in the way of the Lord. Apollos then preached in the synagogues at Ephesus and he showed by the scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. (Acts 18:24-26).
* In Paul’s letter to Timothy, he tells us that the Apostle Timothy followed the faith of his **grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice**. Timothy became Paul’s closest assistant, he followed him in his travels and then became bishop of Ephesus. (II Timothy 1:5).

We are also told about **prophets** such as **Anna** a prophetess who was in the temple with Simeon when Jesus was brought into the temple for the first time. (Luke 2:22-40)

**As an example of Deacons, pastors and leaders we have:**

* **Phoebe** a deaconess with Paul (Romans 16:1-2)
* **Lydia the seller of purple**. She was the first Christian convert in Europe. She was baptised by Paul and she opened her house to the Apostles. Acts 16:13-15, 40
* **Chloe**. A Christian whose family informed Paul about the divisions in the church of Korinthos, (Corinthians 1:11).
* **Euodia and Syntyche**. They worked with Paul to spread the gospel in Philippi. (Philippians 4:2-3). اٌ
* **Tryphena and Tryphosa** they were also preaching with Paul. (Romans 16:12).

We should also not forget the **women martyrs**. We are told in Acts 8:3 that Saul of Tarsus” made havoc of the church, entering into every house and arresting men and women, committed them to prison”. In Acts 9:1-2 Paul “went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus that if he found any of this way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” these women could have protected themselves by keeping quiet, but they did not. They proclaimed Christ in the face of torture and death.

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**Saints at later times:**

* We cannot forget **Helena mother of Emperor Constantine**. She searched and found the cross. She had a great role in the history as a Christian, her son the emperor legalized Christianity across the Roman empire and he converted to Christianity. Almost every church in the Holy land was established by both.
* We can also talk about **St Tekla** who was influential in spreading Christianity.

اAnd among many others we have **Mary of Egypt, Saint Katerina, St Barbara,** **St Theodora** and many many more.

Finally, who are the Antiochian women? Quite simply they are each and every woman in the Antiochian Orthodox church of North America, whether you are in your 20s, 30s, 40s, middle age or a senior. Please remember from the talk today that the role of the women in our church is not confined to the kitchen. Look around you and see Arabic Workshops and Sunday school teachers, choir members, women reading the epistle, women serving in parish council, youth leaders and members of the ladies auxiliary committee “the Myrrh Bearers”. This committee consists or 26 members. This committee has many activities such as organizing the trips to the Holy Land, lunch for the seniors, welcoming new comers, visiting the sick and an elderly. As well as several fund-raising activities such as the festivals, dinners and parties, they also participate in organizing the annual golf tournament and has been able to raise in the last 2 years around $50,000. why? because We are “a sisterhood serving Christ through servicing others”

So, we urge every woman to join and contribute to the church. We hope that the icon that was given to you from the Myrrh Bearing women of St Mary, will remind us to follow the steps of the Saints in spreading the faith.

I close with Paul’s words: “There is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28)