

WOMEN DEACONS: WHY NOT NOW?

A Project to Restore Women Deacons in the Catholic Church

Introduction

Dionysia was a fourth century wife and mother whose story is recorded as details in the life of her son, St. Euthymius the Great (377-473). Ordained by the bishop, Otreius, Dionysia served as a deacon at the cathedral of Melitene in Armenia. Melitene was an ancient city located on the Melas River, a tributary of the Euphrates. Though the city does not survive today, the small village of Eski-Malatia sits atop one of its original walls, about five miles outside the modern day city of Malatia. In the fourth century, Melitene was an Armenian Catholic see and titular archbishopric. Though one of the ten provinces of Cappadocia, Melitene had its own cathedral and bishop.

Cyril of Scythopolis, a sixth century historian, provides the only documentation of Dionysia's life as part of *The Life of St. Euthymius*. As a young man Cyril met St. Sabas and left home for the eremitical life at the age of 18. Cyril spent some time in Jerusalem and lived as a hermit near the Jordan River. Within a year Cyril joined the monastery of Euthymius in the Judean desert and remained there for a decade before moving to the monastery of St. Sabas. His work, *The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, offers insight into the reality of monastic life during this period.¹

Struggle with Infertility

Dionysia's story begins shortly before the birth of her son, St. Euthymius, in 377 C.E. She lived with her husband Paul, both "of most noble birth and adorned with Godly virtue."² Her date of birth is not included, but the story tells us that she and Paul had been married many years without a child. Cyril goes so far as to refer to her as sterile. Dionysia was a devoted wife. She and Paul struggled with infertility and begged God for help.

They prayed fervently to be parents. At this time a woman's inability to have a child was grounds for divorce. Paul would have been within his rights to demand a separation from a woman who could not bear children. Though they did not divorce, the infertility strained their relationship. The stress of being childless in such a climate would have been more than many couples could bear. In support of their loving relationship with each other and God, Paul stood by Dionysia. He even accompanied her to the Church.

DIONYSIA of Melitene



Mirroring the experience of many biblical couples, Dionysia and Paul entreated God for a child. In the biblical record Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth, and many others are put forward as examples of women whose fertility was a point of contention. Dionysia's story fits this motif. Like these women, she was a faithful wife for many years and her

prayers were answered through an unanticipated conception.

Dionysia and Paul travelled to the nearby shrine of the martyr Polyeuctus where they remained in prayer for several days. They pleaded with God until they received an answer. Late one night they received a vision that advised them to “be confident; for behold God has granted you a child who will bear the name of confidence (*euthymia*), since at his birth [God] who granted you a child will give confidence to [God’s] Churches.”³ They left the shrine and went home, excited at the prospect of becoming parents. Soon they knew the vision to be true. When the baby was born they named him Euthymius, as they had been directed, and, like Hannah did with Samuel, promised to offer their son to the work of God.

Since she was devoted to God and the things of God, he ordained her Deacon of the Holy Church.

A Survivor of Her Husband’s Suicide

Dionysia, renewed by the birth of her son, was busy preparing him to be offered to the work of God. In Euthymius’ third year, Dionysia was visited by another crisis: her husband took his own life. Paul’s suicide would have meant danger for his family. After suicide the surviving family was vulnerable to acts of violence, hate, and general cruelty. To make matters worse the Church had condemned suicide and the Council of Braga denied burial rites to the victims, adding to the fear and shame that surrounded these acts. By issuing such penalties the Church sought to discourage martyrdom by one’s own hand. Though the reason for Paul’s act is not apparent, it is unlikely his motivations were of a religious rather than personal nature. Committing suicide for personal reasons had been specifically condemned at the Council of Carthage. Dionysia’s noble lineage may have saved her from some of the unsavory backlash to which families were often prey after a suicide. But now she was raising a baby alone. As a woman, even a woman of wealth and power, she needed to find guardianship for

herself and her child. Dionysia took her son to her brother, Eudoxius, who served as her advisor and intermediary. His guardianship kept her assets and son safe from seizure or harm.

Dionysia was now a widow of suicide and a mother of a young child. Eudoxius was an advisor to the bishop and assisted her in presenting Euthymius to the Church. He took the child to Otreius, the Bishop of Melitene, whose important role at the Council of Constantinople is noted by Cyril. The Bishop was fascinated by the story of the divine vision and the child’s conception. After meeting Euthymius he baptized him and made him a lector in the Church. Thus Euthymius was welcomed into the Bishop’s household and educated in the workings of the Church. The Bishop’s adoption of Euthymius would have been a tremendous aid in curtailing those who claimed that suicide destroyed the family’s relationship with God. By presenting Euthymius to Bishop Otreius, Dionysia kept the promise she had made to God and secured a safe upbringing for her only child.

Bishop Otreius baptized Euthymius and made him a lector even though he was only a toddler. This “motif of the prodigious child born to parents of advanced age and dedicated to God from childhood is, of course, modeled on 1 Samuel 1.”⁴ Dionysia completes this motif and becomes a second Hannah. Bishop Otreius’ reaction to the child and his link to Samuel, foreshadows Euthymius’ legacy in Palestine. He is credited with the reorganization and revitalization of monastic life, even founding the monastery where Cyril later took up residence. The character of her son shows the love and care of Dionysia. She laid the groundwork for his legacy as St. Euthymius the Great.

Assiduous Service of God

Now that her son was safe in the household of the Bishop, Dionysia devoted herself to the Church. Bishop Otreius took note of her service and “since she was devoted to God and the things of God, he ordained [her] deacon of the holy Church.”⁵ Cyril wrote that Dionysia was “ordained deacon” (*echeirotenesen diakonon*) because of her devotion.

We hear no more about her in the *Life of St. Euthymius*, though the account of her ordination

is also included in the *Life of Euthymius*, written later. In this account she is ordained “in order that she might assiduously serve the divine.”⁶

Without a husband or son to care for, and having lived for many years in marriage, Dionysia was welcomed into the community of deacons. As a deacon she worked in the community and the Church. Women deacons served the women: teaching, healing, baptizing feeding the poor; visiting the sick, widowed, orphaned, and imprisoned. “Many were actively involved in outreach to the poor, training and baptizing female catechumens, and preparing women to receive the sacraments.”⁷

She was a wife, a mother, a widow, a sister, a devoted Christian, and a deacon. Though she struggled against the pressures of society she persevered. When she found herself alone, she devoted herself to the work of God as a deacon.

In fourth century Armenia, “hostelries, hospitals, leprosaria, orphanages, and poor houses with their own revenues ministered to the poor, the abandoned, the stranger, and the sick under the supervision of deacons and bishops.”⁸ Women deacons served the women of these institutions and filled other roles in the Armenian Church. As a noble woman Dionysia was a two-fold asset to the community, offering her service and financial resources for the Church. In fact, many Church institutions, including monasteries were funded by the wealthy.⁹ Though Cyril does not offer any more information about Dionysia in the life of her son, she would have interacted with him often through her work in the Church.

Her Legacy

The story of Dionysia’s life is missing many details. It is unknown when she was born or died,

how she became a Christian, what her husband’s trade was, or how she came to Melitene. Though her story is sparse what is known about her character is substantial. She was a wife, a mother, a widow, a sister, a devoted Christian, and a deacon. Though she struggled against the pressures of society she persevered. When she found herself alone, she devoted herself to the work of God as a deacon.

Cyril’s account of the life of St. Euthymius, a figure for whom he had much reverence, provides an example of a woman whose life had meaning. He could have offered just her name, that she was a good person, and that she loved her son, but he includes a bit more. This story presents a glimpse into the expectations of women in the fourth and fifth century. Dionysia was a model wife and mother. Yet, she was more than a mother, a noblewoman, a wife, more than recipient of a divine vision-- she was remembered as being an ordained deacon.

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Dionysia served God assiduously, unrelenting. She was the model servant, and it was her example that her son knew as he began his work in the desert. As he brought a renewed spirit to the faithful, he was driven by the persistence he had learned from his mother. Her service is linked intrinsically to the memory of her son. Not the least among her accomplishments was the formation of a person who is remembered not only as a saint but also as “the Great,” and it is through his story that she became known as a deacon and also remembered.

References:

¹Madigan, Kevin and Carolyn Osiek. *Ordained Women Deacons in the Early Church: A Documentary History*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 2005, 30.

²Cyril of Scythopolis. *The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*. Trans. R.M. Price. Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI: 1991, 4.

³Ibid, 5.

⁴Madigan, 34.

⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁶As noted in Madigan, 33-34.

⁷Swan, Laura. *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*. Paulist Press, New York: 2001, 106-107.

⁸Garsoian, Nina. *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*. Edited by Richard Hovannisian. St. Martin's Press, New York: 1997, 88.

⁹ Ibid, 83.



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Dionysia of Melitene taught her son the virtues that led him to be remembered as the visionary leader St. Euthymius the Great, whose feast day is celebrated January 20. Consider using the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

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