Church of Whose Granddaughters?

Book Review by Protodeacon Brian Patrick Mitchell, PhD

The Rule of Faith
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How is one to understand a scholar—a theologian no less—who writes a book accusing the Orthodox Church of not living up to its own theology in its treatment of women while deliberately ignoring everything in Holy Scripture, Holy Tradition, and the Holy Fathers concerning both the natural order, according to which the man is made first and the woman from him (Gen 2; 1 Cor 11; 1 Tim 2), and the economic order, according to which the woman is "reasonably subjected to the man" on account of the Fall (St. John Chrysostom, Homily 26 on 1 Cor 11)?

That's what Carrie Frederick Frost does in her new book, *Church of Our Granddaughters* (Cascade, 2023). In revealing her vision of the future Church, she makes the barest use of Scripture and the Fathers in defining what she claims is Orthodox theology, taking what the feminist apostate Daphne Hampson derides as the "Golden Thread" approach to hermeneutics, by which snippets of Scripture like "justification by faith" are exalted above measure to become the standard by which everything else in Scripture and Tradition is judged, with all contradictory evidence either dismissed as cultural clutter or ignored altogether. Thus, Frost quotes Gal 3:28 ("neither male nor female") but neither 1 Cor 11:3 ("The head of the woman is the man") nor any other verse of Scripture or saying of the Fathers suggesting that men and women are not absolutely equal and un-ordered—except Gen 3:16 ("and he shall rule over you"), which Frost quotes only to use *against the Church* as a prophecy of the "oppressive structures" resulting from the Fall which the Church has imposed on women (4).

From beginning to end, the book is a bitter indictment of the Orthodox Church for its alleged sins against women. Though cradle Orthodox, Frost criticizes the Church as would an outsider, writing that the Orthodox need "to acknowledge that the Orthodox Church can get things wrong. The Orthodox Church is imperfect. The Orthodox Church has specifically failed to respect and care for women in accordance with its own teachings" (8).

The book's 130 pages are divided into acknowledgments, introduction, six chapters, conclusion, bibliography, and index, with a foreword by Vigen Guroian, Frost's mentor at the University of Virginia. The six chapters are titled "Woman and Man," "Menstruation," "Churching," "Miscarriage," "Leadership," and "Ordination." Each includes sections on "Past," "Today," and "Church of Our Granddaughters," mostly without the definite article *The*, as in the book's title. No reason is given for this omission, but it does seem apt, since what Frost envisions is "Church" but mostly definitely not "the Orthodox Church."

The book's back cover touts the book as a "visionary work of theology and ethics," but there is nothing really new in Frost's vision of the future Church and little or nothing new in her discussion of it, beyond perhaps an update on the "deaconesses" in Africa who were not "ordained" in 2017 but merely "consecrated." (Frost admits that they were not truly "ordained," and that bothers her.)

Models of Male and Female

In her first chapter, "Woman and Man" (it's always "woman and man," "female and male"), Frost contrasts two opposing models of male and female—the "edenic" model, which treats male and female as essential to human nature based on the Biblical accounts of creation, and the "eschatological" model, which denies the essentiality of male and female and treats them as "ephemeral" and "meaningless" in the next life based mainly on the speculations of St. Gregory of Nyssa. The former, she writes, is used to support "male-dominated families and society as well as heterosexual relationships and marriage," while the latter is used to support "acceptance of homosexual relationships and gender-less or gender-fluid norms" (26). She then quickly adds an obvious not-that-there's-anything-wrong-with-that disclaimer, saying she is "not expressing sanction or censure" of either of these usages, presumably to avoid offending homosexuals and transgenders, since much of what she writes in the book does in fact censure male domination.

Next, Frost offers her own model of male and female, dubbed "incarnational" because it concerns life "between Eden and eschaton—in the era of the Incarnation" (27). Unfortunately, the exposition of her own model is exceedingly vague. She tries to have it both ways, saying that male and female matter without saying *how* male and female matter, and while also saying many times that male and female *do not* matter. She writes:

- "Sex differentiation is real but cannot be, and does not need to be, defined or demarcated" (29);
- Christ's Incarnation "does not bind and reduce humans to narrow categories defined by their sex" (28);
- The incarnational model avoids "the trappings of biological reductionism that defines and limits sex differentiation and human experience to solely physical attributes" (29);
- It "rejects an essentialist quality to sex differentiation" yet somehow still "deeply values our experience of ourselves as humans differentiated into two sexes" (29);
- It "frees us to explore our own experience of sex differentiation" (30);
- "It neither limits us to essentialist qualities of each sex nor to cultural constructions of gender roles but instead allows us to explore our own realities and experiences" (30);
- It "appreciates each person as unique, precious, irreplaceable, called to eternity, and newly sanctified" by Christ's Incarnation (28);
- "Thus, in the incarnational model, everyone is appreciated for their person and their gifts" (28–29).

There is not much more in the book on the incarnational model than the above, and none of it is really new. Orthodox personalists have been talking like this for decades, sometimes

stressing the uniqueness and freedom of "human persons" to the point of denying all limitations on them.

Predictably, in Frost, such talk leads to the conclusion that we are all one in Christ but the Orthodox Church has not treated us all as one and has instead "diminished and ignored" the "incarnational realities of women" (31). Nowhere in the book does she admit any value to being male or any limit on being female. As in the case of feminists who object to men identifying as women, only female matters to Frost, and it only matters when it advantages women.

Frost's contrast of the "edenic" and "eschatological" models is also disappointing. The contrast is brief, superficial, and uneven, doing justice to neither, especially concerning their basis in Scripture and Tradition. Her presentation of the "edenic" model is little more than a caricature admitting no patristic basis for the model whatsoever, though one finds among Church Fathers far more support for it than for the "eschatological" model of St. Gregory of Nyssa (and St. Maximus the Confessor, and Evagrius Ponticus, and Origen, none of whom Frost mentions). A fairer and much more informative analysis of both models is found in my 2021 book, *Origen's Revenge*, which Frost appears not to have read. (Both books are published by imprints of Wipf and Stock.)

Ritual Purity

The next three chapters of Frost's book begin building the case for how the Orthodox Church has failed women, taking aim at the Church's traditional concern for ritual purity. The issues are menstruation, childbirth, churching, and miscarriage, to which we should add altar girls, which Frost includes in her chapter on "Leadership" but which raises some of the same concerns.

Why three whole chapters—nearly a third of the book's body—on ritual purity?

One reason is that ritual purity is sometimes cited as a reason for the disappearance of deaconesses and the exclusion of women from the altar. There are better reasons for both, but feminists often focus on ritual purity because it is easier to debunk, there being far less in Scripture and Tradition about ritual purity than about the natural and economic order of the man and the woman.

Another reason is that focusing on ritual purity is an exercise in the Marxist-feminist tactic of "consciousness raising," whereby women are taught to recognize their oppression and take offense at the means of that oppression, which in this case includes the Church's "ritual disparagement of women" (22).

A third and more obvious reason is that Frost is leveraging ritual purity in preparation for her main assault, on the advice of Samuel Adams: "Put your enemy in the wrong and keep him there." It is certainly easy for anyone today to see the wrong in prayers that treat miscarriage and abortion as morally equivalent, and Frost is on her firmest ground on that topic. But in her chapters on ritual purity she goes so far as to deny that there has ever been any basis in

Orthodox theology for our traditional prayers and practices relating to menstruation, childbirth, churching, and altar service.

In doing so, Frost herself loses touch with the "incarnational realities of women." Menstruation is sometimes odorous and also sometimes visible, as accidents do sometimes happen. I myself have witnessed such an accident at a funeral (thankfully, not an Orthodox funeral). I have also had women tell me that they can tell when another woman is menstruating, and I myself have suspected this on at least one occasion before ever hearing that others can tell. Such "incarnational realities" would have been much more of a problem for the Church before the twentieth century, in which the problem was not quite completely solved by our multi-billion-dollar industry in feminine hygiene products.

Frost also writes, "The concept of childbirth as defiling … has no sound theological basis" (44). Come now, childbirth is a messy business—messy and distressing, extremely so. No mother can claim to have been on her best behavior while in labor. Some even admit to being not in their right mind. The churching prayers acknowledge this without requiring the mother to confess it, asking God to "make her worthy" of the Body and Blood of Christ nevertheless, as Frost herself admits a few pages later (49).

Similarly, Frost writes that "there is no justifiable theological or pastoral reason for carrying only male babies around the altar" in the rite of churching (48). What about the need to manifest the divinely ordained difference between boys and girls? This would seem especially needful in these sexually insane days. And what about the need to make a point to parents about their different responsibilities as Christians to raise boys to become men who will head families and parishes and to raise girls to become women who will raise children to become saints? That's three reasons for churching boys and girls differently, both pastoral and theological (Gen 2–3, 1 Cor 11:3, Eph 5:22–33)—as well as justifiable, if one accepts the consistent teaching of the Orthodox Church about male and female throughout her history.

To her credit, Frost does not exaggerate the historical evidence to claim that the earliest practice was to church both sexes through the altar, as some people do today citing Fr. Ioannis Fountoulis. She writes instead that churching through the altar has a "mixed history," quoting Robert F. Taft saying that "the earliest manuscripts of the rite *do not preclude* the introduction of a female child into the sanctuary during the Churching" (48, emphasis added). Fountoulis himself, whom Frost does not mention, wrote of early service books "most of the time not distinguishing the sex," which means that *some of the time* they did, and as with Taft's words "do not preclude," Fountoulis's words "not distinguishing" do not quite prove that female infants were certainly treated the same as male infants. Service books do often leave out details not thought necessary to include because they are well known. But regardless of the antiquity of the practice, the pedagogical utility of distinguishing the sexes in churching argues in its favor.

As for girls serving in the altar, Frost writes, "There is no reason for a prohibition of girls serving at the altar alongside boys" (80). Really? Distraction is an obvious reason; girls will distract the boys, and older girls will distract the men as well. Menstruation is another reason; accidents most often occur among girls just beginning to menstruate. Calling is yet another

reason, unless one already believes that women are also called to the clergy. Like the churching of male infants through the altar, calling only boys to serve makes the point that altar service is a man's responsibility to which a boy might aspire later in life. Allowing girls to serve would do the opposite. Boys do not aspire to be women. Making altar service a girl's thing would make it not a boy's thing. To Frost, however, excluding girls "only perpetuates [the] misbegotten perception of girls (and therefore women) as unworthy and unfit for ministerial leadership in the local church and as second-class citizens in the church at large" (80). Judge for yourselves whose perception is misbegotten.

Leadership and Ordination

Only after putting the Church in the wrong on ritual purity, does Frost take aim at her main objectives in the chapters titled "Leadership" and "Ordination." By then, she has also already signaled her main complaint over and over again: The Church is ruled by men.

In the book's first few pages, Frost complains about the Church's "patriarchal ethos" that has "far too often diminished, degraded, and disenfranchised" women (3). She then complains about "limitations and imperfections" in Orthodox tradition that are the result of "male interests and perspectives," saying that "interpretive efforts within the Church have been executed largely by men, all accompanied with an underlying assumption that men are the rightful arbiters of tradition" (15). She also complains that the edenic and eschatological models of male and female were "both created exclusively *by men*" and that both "distinctly *benefit* men" (26–27, her emphases). She even complains that her desired corrections of prayers and practices related to ritual purity are "made and approved by men" (51).

To correct all this, she envisions women "engaged in every level and aspect of Orthodox Church governance and administration" and "abundantly present and involved in the day-to-day leadership of the church" (67). This includes the participation of women in councils and synod meetings as well as giving women "space to create new rituals that mark women's lives and integrate them into the life of the church" (66). It also means altar girls; women subdeacons, readers, and chanters; and "ordained deaconesses," all of which are part of the "minimum that is necessary" to achieve her vision of her church (100). She also advocates consideration of "new or restored tonsured roles" to be also open to women such as "catechist" and "homilist" (81).

Frost justifies women readers by denying any connection between readers and priests, contrary to the rite of tonsuring, in which the bishop says that "the first degree in the Priesthood in that of Reader." As usual for feminists, her argument in favor of "ordained deaconesses" greatly exaggerates the role of deaconesses in the early Church. It also strains at justifying deaconesses today on the basis of need. She stresses that deaconesses must be "ordained" because ordination confers authority (92), yet none of the needs supposed for deaconesses requires authority. She also seems to forget herself on this matter of authority, making her case for it after having argued five pages earlier that the diaconate is not about authority but about service, and saying, "the characterization of the diaconate wherein one group exercises authority over another misconstrues and subverts this truth" (87).

As for what her deaconesses would be and do, that's anybody's guess. Frost admits that reinstituting deaconesses will be a "creative" act in which history "will not be determinative; deaconesses for the twenty-first century will be different from deaconesses in the ancient church" (96). Her new deaconesses might also have different roles and responsibilities in different places. "Uniformity is not required," she writes (100); "consistency has never been an Orthodox priority" (15); "cross-jurisdictional or cross-church conformity is not necessary" (66). In that case, deaconesses would be an unheard-of exception to ordained clergy, for Church canons are quite strict and precise about what bishops, priests, and deacons can and cannot do, and the same rules apply everywhere.

Frost does not explicitly call for ordaining women as bishops and priests, but she does plainly say that ordained deaconesses will lead inevitably to demands for women priests. She writes that "it is absolutely true that while ordaining women deaconesses today will not inevitably lead to female priests, it *will* inevitably lead to *conversation* about women in the priesthood" (95, her emphasis). She then writes:

> If women are priests in the Orthodox Church at some point in the future, it will be because it arrived at this conclusion through a thoughtful process and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We ought to welcome this conversation about women in the priesthood (and the episcopate). (95)

Frost assures us the Church "will never hastily ordain women to the priesthood," but she cites no reason why the Church *should* not make women priests and just two reasons why the Church *might* not do so—the historical fact that the Church has never had female priests and "our reticence to change" (94–95).

This might be the best thing about *Church of Our Granddaughters*: It removes all doubt about where the advocates of altar girls, lectresses, and deaconesses are headed—without telling us when their revolution will end. In closing, Frost writes: "A friend recently asked how the Orthodox Church will change when women are fully welcomed. My answer was that we cannot possibly know—this is something that we have never experienced" (102).

I am reminded of the closing words of another book about welcoming people in church, Eve Tushnet's *Gay and Catholic* (Ave Maria, 2014): "The churches won't be exactly the same as before, only with more people. The churches themselves will change: new concepts of vocation, new questions, new challenges. Things will get weird. If you welcome someone, be ready for them to change you."

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