

Demetrios J. Constantelos

In the more than three thousand year history of Hellenism several women have been recorded as paradigms of virtue, faithfulness, sacrificial love and philanthropic activity. Whether we study archaic, classical, hellenistic, byzantine or modern Hellenism, the beliefs and culture of the Hellenic, the Greek people, we find that women played leading roles in family, social, national, and religious life. Here we are not concerned with the Clytemnestras, the Medeas, and the Circes of Greek mythology, but with more historical persons.

It is true that we do not know much about women written by women. Most of the information we possess about them, whether in pre-Christian or Christian Hellenism, comes to us from the writings of men. And the evidence they present sometimes is contradictory. For example, whereas literature, both poetic and narrative, assigned women a prominent role, historical and legal sources indicate that women were second class citizens.

The study of several women in antiquity reveals that at least some women were literate, that they could read and write. From as early as the seventh century before Christ, women wrote beautiful poetry. The quality of the lyric poetess Sappho of Lesbos, made ancient authors in the sixth century proclaim her as the tenth muse. Later, in the sixth century, Corinna, a lyric poetess from Tanagra in Boeotia, was considered a rival of the celebrated lyric poet Pindar. Erinna of the fourth century, whose poem of 300 hexameters was highly praised, was compared with Homer and Sappho; Nossis, too, of the late fourth century, a poetess from Epizepheros in Locris, central Greece, was highly praised for her epigrams and love poetry.

In addition to women who wrote poetry, there were several who have come down to us as philosophers. Among the disciples of Pythagoras and Plato we find several women. Theano, Pythagoras' wife and Myia his daughter; Melissa and Axiothea disciples of Pythagorean philosophy; Axiothea and Lastheneia were Plato's students. Hipparchia the Cynic, Arete the daughter of the philosopher Aristippos and Hypatia of late antiquity were some of the best known women philosophers.

As a whole, however, the main role of women in Greek antiquity, but also in Christian or Byzantine Hellenism, was to be wives and mothers, bearers of legitimate children. They lacked political rights, could not vote in political assemblies, and they could not hold office. But whether in ancient Greece or in the Byzantine Empire women could exert influence through men, husbands, sons or lovers.

That women in the history of Hellenism were kept in "oriental seclusion" is totally inaccurate. A variety of sources, such as literature, philosophy, history, legal and law court orations confirm that women could leave their houses to visit relatives and friends, to work in the fields, to draw water, attend weddings, work as market-traders and craftswomen, midwives, wet-nurses and even physicians.

Again, whether in pre-Christian or Christian Hellenism down to the present day, women have played a prominent role in the public religious life. In the pre-Christian era cults of a female deity such as Demetra, Artemis and Athena Polias were served by women, some of whom were designed as priestesses. In Christian Byzantium women were ordained to the rank of deacon and were greatly engaged in philanthropic activity, the main subject of this article.

The work of the Philoptochos Societies in the Church today reminded us of the social ethos and the enormous philanthropic work of the Greek women and ancient and medieval, as well as of the late and contemporary times of Greek history. And I speak of Ancient, Medieval and Contemporary Hellenism, because the Hellenistic heritage is marked with continuity and it possesses diachronic dimensions. Greek tradition with its various enactments and forms is a continuous and irresistible stream which in its course and development makes turns and detours, passes lakes and creates water routes and waterfalls, but is never cut off, or stops, or vanishes. Yesterday is alive in the present. Pre-Christian and Christian Hellenism come together not only in language, in laic civilizations, in beliefs and customs, but also in social ethos and comprise a unity.

Greek tradition, from remote ancient times until today has some permanent and stable characteristics, which first appeared in Homeric times, and they have never disappeared completely, neither under Roman and Frankish conquest nor under the Ottoman Turkish rule. And this, because the Greek never liked the abrupt innovations and thoughtless and radical changes. The history of our nation verifies that the Greeks respect their traditions even when conditions demand that they surpass them, they continue under another mantle. "One of the most noteworthy characteristics of Greek genius is the manner in which Hellenism has preserved the ancient next to the new" writes a specialist who has studied Greek civilization.[1] And this is true of many other virtues, but also of evils, advantages and disadvantages of Hellenism especially of the virtues of hospitality, philanthropy, of honor and social morals generally.

There are many examples, from every time period of Greek history, that confirm the aforementioned situations. Time, however, does not allow for itemized analysis of the life and the service of the examples which we mentioned. Therefore we shall simply mention and comprehensively refer to the philanthropic and social work of only a few women, who stand out like boundary marks and as inspiration for today's Greek women. And there is no better beginning than the examples we find in Homeric epics the bible of ancient Hellenism and the source of social ethos. There we find the basis of Greek ethics, of philosophy and the justification of philoxenia, of philanthropy, of civility. "The stranger and suppliant are like your brother. And stranger you are welcome. Our house is yours." [2] And these words are not a Homeric stereotypical password, but a principle and a way of life of Hellenism for three-thousand years. Nausica and her mother Arete are the first classical examples of feminine philanthropy of Pre-Christian Hellenism. Naked and exhausted from his struggle against the waves, the long-suffering Odysseus is lying on the beach. And Nausica, who was first to see him, was not ashamed, because of his nakedness nor did she become frightened seeing his buffeted by the sea body. Immediately she felt that a fellow human had need of help. And spontaneously, with true sympathy and affection she called her friends and handmaids who were playing ball on the shore.

*"Come this unfortunate came here shipwrecked
and we must save him. Because Zeus
sends the poor and foreigners" shouted Nausica.
"Well come girls give him to eat water for the stranger
and wash him in the river, in a place sheltered from the wind."
And the girls stood and one pushed the other
and to a shady place they led the divine
Odysseus they placed clothing near him
a cup full of oil and they invited him
to wash in the river stream.," Homer adds:
"And Nausica emphasized: Cheerful must be
the little that you give."[3]*

Nausica carried out a divine order and in a spontaneous manner, natural, disinterested, and cheerful. This same kind of philanthropy was shown by her mother Arete when Odysseus arrived at their home dike. This kind of philanthropic ethos was inherited by the classical age and later centuries women like Isodike, wife of the most philanthropic Kimon; Agariste, the mother of the famous Pericles; Elpinike, wife of the peacemaker Kallias, found prototypes in the persons of Nausica and Arete.

Centuries later, in the drama "Alkistes," Euripidis makes philoxenia-philanthropy a presupposition of salvation and emphasizes that the heroic Alkistes sacrifices herself in order to save her husband and to secure the happiness of her children. Alkistes is projected as a prototype of a devoted wife and affectionate mother, whose philanthropy is considered by Plato and a series of sepulchre epigrams and an example worthy of imitation.[4] For this reason centuries later Christianized Hellenism did not reject, but adopted many of the spiritual and moral values of ancient Hellenism. The Homeric aforementioned advice "be like a brother to the stranger and suppliant" finds its echo in "I give hospitality to the stranger so that God will not become a stranger." "A stranger and a poor person are God's bread (*kolourion*)" the Greek Christian Fathers will say later. And the ancient Greek moral principle that "man resembles God when he does the good" will be repeated later by Gregory the Theologian and other Fathers with the words: "nothing relates man more to God than the benevolent acts."

In the later Greek antiquity the so-called Hellenistic, following the death of Alexander the Great there was not a scarcity of women who devoted their personal time and money for the common good and philanthropic purposes. Under the influence of Stoic philosophy, and also better economic conditions, the place of women, improved to the degree that many women acquired personal wealth. And as Plutarch, as well as other sources assured

that philanthropy arose to become a social virtue and a new spirit of benevolence began to prevail. Here are a few prototypes of feminine philanthropy during the period under consideration.

An inscription of the second century before Christ praises the generosity of one Euxenia, probably the granddaughter of the great Philopoimen, general of the Achaean federation from Megalopolis. Euxenia not only built a temple in which she served as a priestess, but the temple also served as a hostelry for visitors and strangers to rest. Furthermore she used much personal wealth for the benefit of her other country of Megalopolis.

In the same category of benefactors of cities and citizens also belongs Menodora from Silliounta of Pisidia. Menodora is praised because she distributed great amounts of wheat to her fellow citizens and donated 300,000 dinarii for assistance and support of orphaned children. Atalanta also, from Termessus of Asia Minor had promised to distribute wheat annually for the "Mass of people," a promise which she kept in the time of famine. Besides this generosity Atalanta had benefited the city and its citizens in many ways with gifts to the poor, loans, stores in the city, etc. And one Artemis from Sardis, wife of Platonianos, was honored by its citizens with a statue, because she had spent her personal wealth for establishments for the common good. And all these concerning the Greek women in pre-Christian Hellenism.

But what can one begin to say about feminine philanthropy in our Greek-Christian tradition? In very few nations have the women played a greater role than that which they played in the political, administrative, cultural and social life of medieval Christian Hellenism, known as Byzantine or Romaic. The place of women "was one of the most surprising characteristics of Greek history during the middle ages," writes the French historian A. N. Ramboud.[5] The examples are many of women of the Greek middle ages, who dedicated their lives to works of philanthropy and social betterment.

The deaconess Olympias, a pupil of St. Chrysostom gave all her wealth and spent her life in the service of the poor, the orphans, the aged, the sick, the widows and social outcasts. And Olympias was so open-handed, a squanderer, one might say, in her philanthropic gestures that her spiritual Father was forced to reproach her and teach her, that in philanthropy it is necessary to use discretion and measure.[6] And yet Olympias was not the only one who carried out the command of Christ. St. Makrina, sister of Basil the Great, St. Synklitike, Nikarete, Melania, Theodora of Justinian, Theophano, Irene, Xenia of John Comnenus and many other auspicious and even known women of Greek Christian Byzantium practiced great philanthropy.

I must, however, add two more words about the well-loved Athenais, the non-Christian Athenian woman who became a Christian in Constantinople. Athenais was baptized taking the name Eudokia, became the finest prototype of harmony of Greek education and the Christian faith and a select example of a woman who used education, social position, wealth and service for people especially for the sick, the hungry, the unclothed, the poor and the neglected. Among the many philanthropic institutions that Athenais-Eudokia established was a great poorhouse for 400 indigents. Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem benefited from the philanthropic generosity of Athenais. Her example became an inspiration for other prominent queens and ladies of Christian Hellenism.[7]

The celebrated Theodora started out as a poor girl from a village of Paphlagonia and finally ended up in Constantinople to become the wife of the great Emperor Justinian. As Empress Theodora took a leading role in the many benevolent acts. However, that which honored her more than anything else was the Reformatory "Of Repentance," which she established for wayward girls. Unfortunately, every period has exploited the undefended girl. Theodora used her personal wealth to build the Reformatory, in which she gathered 500 wretched girls, who had sought refuge in the Capital to find work, and had ended up in houses of prostitution, which is repeated even in our times in the large cities like New York, London, and Athens. Girls who have been exploited by greediness and lascivious desires of some unscrupulous men found affection, protection, home and food in the philanthropic establishments of Theodora. There, they were prepared to be able to face the difficulties of life, either as wives and mothers or as nuns and social workers. How many modern "great ladies" leave the endless receptions and their luxurious lives in order to be concerned with such "humble works?" And yet, the powerful queen Theodora did this because it was dictated by the law of God.[8]

As we said earlier, during the thousand-year period of medieval Hellenism, the Greek women took important positions in various sectors in national and public life, in education and in science. Some became distinguished in philosophy, in poetry and writing history, as Hypatia, Kassia and Anna Comnena. Others in nursing and medicine. However, most were distinguished as mothers and social workers, and even as deaconesses in the service of the Church. Irene-Xeni wife of John II Comnenus, as recognized as a Saint, because she dedicated her life to public benevolent works. Her most important work was the erection of the complex of pantokrator in Constantinople, which included a model hospital with five fully organized clinics, and a medical school.[9] In this work indeed, she had the cooperation of her husband.

St. Philothei Bemizelou is the most amazing example of feminine philanthropy during the hard years of the Ottoman occupation. Philothei became a pioneer and inspired a revolution of social welfare for the enslaved Greeks of the 16th century. In the Parthenon-Monastery, which she founded in Athens, there were gradually built an old-age home, a hospital, a hostelry and an orphanage. In her hostelry, many women, who had gone astray, who were pregnant found refuge there and were protected from the Turks. The Book-of-Saints does not overstate when it praises her with the following beautiful words:

*You were seen to be mother and nurse of orphans
and the understanding of all those who were wronged
the cure of those in sickness
the deliverance of prisoners
and to those in sorrow the most modest joy.[10]*

The topic of feminine philanthropic activity during the Turkish occupation remains unexplored, even though one might get some idea from various brief studies.[11]

The more recent Greek history includes many names of women whose philanthropic ministry rivals the Greek women of earlier centuries. The tragedy of hunger during the German-Italian occupation of 1941-1944 found the Greek women on the ramparts of the Country and Church. The women in the Ministry of Welfare for Soldiers of the Archdiocese of Athens (to limit our remarks solely to the life of the Capital), undertook an enormous effort for the survival of the Nation. As many of the Greek women of the entire Country who were not carrying munitions, food and clothing for the soldiers who were fighting in the mountains of Northern Epirus, they knitted and sent stockings and gloves to thousands of soldiers, who were fighting the neo-barbarian "civilized" invaders. The women of the Society for the Welfare of Veterans and Their Families carried out the correspondence with thousands of soldiers families that were illiterate. They cared for the orphans and illegitimate children, they had them baptized and counseled them. They visited poor families and consoled those who had lost someone on the battlefield.

In Athens and Peiraieus alone there were 173 chapters that took great efforts for the families of the soldiers, they took tender care for the indigent and transported the sick to hospitals.

The National Organization for Christian Mutual Support, which succeeded the first, was under the presidency of Archbishop Damaskenos (just as the previous was under the leadership of Archbishop Chrysanthos), and included many officers among the men, but it fulfilled its mission of salvation by women such as Ioanna Tsatsou, the martyred Lela Karagiannis, Lena Zaphyris, Photini Argyropoulou, Dora Stratou, the poor Katina Doussis and many others. This organization included over 2,500 women in Athens and Peiraieus who had undertaken the responsibility for children, soup kitchens, which fed 70,000 children between the ages of 2-7 each day. Indigent families, prisoners, hungry, unclothed, sick, persecuted (Greeks, Englishmen, Australians, etc.) became acquainted with the assistance of the Greek women's self-sacrifice, carried out in sacrifices and a martyr's death, during the occupation.[12]

Besides these two organizations there existed other groups of brotherhoods or groups of women serving in the army in the capital and the provinces, which offered much in the service of love. Mothers, women students, aged women and girl pupils served in hospitals for the wounded, visited poor families to distribute food and clothing, and generally to serve the bitter and suffering people. One organization which must be mentioned was the sisterhood "Evniki," which attained a membership of almost 600, and whose activities were limited only to Athens.[13] But the registration of philanthropic activities of Greek women in the history written in blood of the decade of 1940 is "the work of History," and not for a brief talk.

The philanthropic and social work of Greek women of the Diaspora is a great and unexplored topic. The Greek women of the Diaspora usually, organized in the "Philoptochos Ladies Societies" assist in the needs of the poor and disabled immigrants and respond to the appeals of the martyred Church of Constantinople, donate generously for the needs of the homeland (Epiros, Cyprus, Ionian Islands, the great catastrophes caused by earthquakes, etc.). From the thousands of women who assisted with zeal and faith the philanthropic work of the Church, it is sufficient to mention only a few that were

active in the United States Olga Kallimachos (wife of the late Fr. D. Kallimachos), Aglaia Polyzoides, Despoina Vrahopoulou and Katie Vlavianou. All of these ladies were distinguished for their leadership role in the collective work of the Philoptochos Societies and their dedication to the work of service and philanthropic activity beginning from the difficult decade of 1920 up to the recent years of martyrdom.[14]

Therefore during its centuries-long history Hellenism has exhibited many Nausikas, Penelopes, Alkestes, Olympiades, Arthenaides-Eudokies, Irenes, Philotheis, and Leles, who names are written in the "Book of Life." The sector of benevolence, philanthropy as philosophy and expression of life, is the most characteristics mark of the Greek woman. Truly, Greek history is replete with women with the characteristics those of its Antigones, and its Klytemnistres, its Phrynes and its Aspasia, its great sinners, but also of its great Saints and heroines. And surely, as we attribute a debt of honor to the unknown soldier, the symbol of freedom, in the same way we must erect an altar to the unknown Heroine of (Christian) Love.

Every time we honor great men of ancient Hellenism and the great Fathers of the Church as pioneers in the formation of the Hellenic Christian tradition, we also honor their mothers for the upbringings they gave them, the mother-love with which they surrounded them and their extensive philanthropic social activity. However, we also honor every Greek woman, especially the Greek women of the Diaspora, who often struggled alone as a wife, a mother, and a social worker. And these three interwoven identities remind us of the great heritage that we have shouldered and the duty that we have to preserve and to perpetuate, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, whatever is virtuous, whatever is praiseworthy" (Philip. 4:8) that we have inherited from our most ancient to our most recent progenitors.

With "such a cloud" of ministers and witnesses of Hellenistic Christian philanthropy, we the Greek Orthodox of the Diaspora, must intensify greater efforts for the implementation of the advice of the ancients: "It is good for all, to honor but also preserve the best of our heritage."

Notes

[1] W. K. C. Guthrie. *The Greeks and their Gods* (Boston, 1955), p. 28.

[2] Homer. *Odysseus*. IX, 546-547.

[3] Ibid. VII, 206-216.

[4] D. I. Iakovou, Alkisti of Euripides. An Interpretation. *Ellinika*, vol. 36-2 (1985), pp. 244-245.

[5] A. N. Ramboud, "Imperatrices d' Orient," *Revue des Deux Mondes*, vol. 10 (1891), p. 829; Charles Diehl, *Byzantine Empresses*, (London, 1964), p. 6.

[6] Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare*, (Athens, 1986) p. 127.

[7] Ibid, pp. 180, 223, 330. John Tsatsou, *Athenais Ailia Eudocia Augusta* (Athens, 1970).

[8] Constantelos, *ibid.* pp. 339-341.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Zoe Genakou. *The Revolution of One Woman, Philothei Benizelou* (Athens, 1985) cf. related bibliography.

[11] L. Alexiou, D. Kiulchatzi, N. Logiadis, et al., "Social Concern during the Turkish Occupation" in the series *What did Christianity Contribute?* vol. III (Athens, 1980).

[12] John Tsatsou, *The Sword's Fiery Edge*, trans. by Jean Demos, (Vanderbilt University Press, 1969). Elias Venezis, Archbishop Damaskenos (Athens, 1952) Part II, ch. 6 and 14. John D. Sarambelas, *Damaskenos Archbishop of Athens and All Greece*, (Athens, 1984), pp. 55-66.

[13] Cf. contributions by N. Logiadis, M. Logiadis, G. Borovilos and Stella Papadakis, in *Social Concern in Orthodox Areas 19th-20th Century* (Athens, 1982), p. 118.

[14] For a general overview of the work of the Philoptochos Society in the USA cf. Stella Coumantaros, "The Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos society and the Greek-American Community" in *The Greek-American Community in Transition* ed. by Harry J. Psomiades and Alice Scourby (New York, 1982) pp. 191-196. For various encyclicals of the Archbishops relative to the work of the Philoptochos cf. vol. *Agones and Agonies of the Greek Orthodox Church in America*, ed. Demetrios J. Constantelos (Thessalonica, 1976) pp. 110-115, 135, 295-296, 297-298.

8/14/90

Tags:

1990