

## ***ENCOUNTERING WOMEN OF FAITH***

### **The St. Catherine's Vision Collection**

#### **Volume 1**

Edited by Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald

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By Marilyn Rouvelas

Whether you know little about saints, or you know everything about saints, you must read *Encountering Women of Faith*. It is much more than a simple recounting of the lives and deeds of eight women saints and the Myrrh-bearing women. The book, written by twelve women graduates of Orthodox theological schools, provides two valuable perspectives: One perspective is an intimate encounter with our personal faith as we encounter these holy women. The other perspective is broader: We see anew the ways women have served in the Orthodox Church in the past and today.

Having been raised a Lutheran, I knew little about intimate encounters with saints. Although I converted to Orthodoxy, I was unsure how to relate to them, how to see their relevance, or how to think about them. (Wouldn't even asking questions about holy people be blasphemous? Actually, "No." One of the best features of this book is the "Informal Reflection Questions" section at the end of each chapter.) The authors help us engage with the saints by bringing new dimensions to the essays. Each author was asked to: "research responsibly. . . discern a particular spiritual prism, discipline or Christian practice to which the life of their subject of study gave witness. . . and reflect personally how this unique witness touched their own lives. . ." The results are rich and edifying.

For example, author Barbara Harris begins the chapter on the St. Xenia, Fool-for-Christ (c1719-30 – c1803) with a powerful explanation of the spiritual discipline of *kenosis*, the process of emptying oneself to become open to the Holy Spirit. "We are called to 'put on Christ,' not by divesting ourselves of our God-given humanity, but to voluntarily lay aside all those thoughts, words and deeds that separate us from God—to make room for Christ so that we may attain *theosis* (become like God) and become inheritors of His Kingdom . . . *Kenosis* acts as a passageway through which we move toward transformation. . . While every person is called to [transform to the holy person God has created us to be] we recognize the saints as having been granted this gift of transformation." St. Xenia was a saint who exemplified an authentic kenotic relationship with Christ. In glimpsing the process, we not only understand St. Xenia better, but are inspired to apply this discipline to ourselves.

Presvytera Valerie Zahirsky presents the life of St. Olympias (361- 419?) in the context of the Orthodox Christian practice of deaconess. For a long period of time qualified women were ordained to the diaconate in the Orthodox Church. They served by helping with baptisms and funerals, educating others about the faith and ministering to the sick. Orphaned at an early age, Deaconess Olympias inherited great wealth and became a benefactress of the churches in Constantinople, Asia Minor and Syria, ministered to the

needy, and established a monastery next to Aghia Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople. Living next door to the Cathedral, Deaconess Olympias became a close friend and advisor of St. John Chrysostom. Despite St. John's exile, they continued to correspond, and his letters to her are still in existence. "One Byzantine hymn writer compared the relationship of Chrysostom and Olympias to that of St. Paul and the deaconess Phoebe." It is encouraging to learn that these two women in the first and fourth centuries had the trust of such important men in the church, and some were ordained to the diaconate. The co-authors then asks in the Reflection Questions what we are also wondering: "How could recognizing and establishing this vocation within the life of the Church today, assist the Church generally? How could it assist in parish ministry, in spiritual care, educational, hospital, hospice ministries, in community outreach, philanthropy, and missionary activity?"

Each author was asked to describe how the saint's witness touched their lives. Author Kyriaki Kariodoyanes Fitzgerald, a therapist, focused on the "unspeakable pain and loss" that St. Melania the Younger (383-439) experienced early in her life after the death of her only two children. (The saint was the granddaughter of the well-known St. Melania the Elder.) Although inspired by her grandmother to devote totally herself to the Church, she married and had two children. After losing both their son and daughter, St. Melania turned to intense prayer, study, and fasting. From the author's personal and professional experience, she expresses intense empathy for St. Melania: "Great losses challenge every aspect of our relationship with reality: God, others, ourselves and creation. . . This is where the unimaginable hole in [St. Melania's] heart, the hole that seemed to have even replaced her heart, even her very self at times was presented to God as a kind of living sacrifice. This is where her work truly began. . ." St. Melania and her husband, St. Pinianus, then became celibate, devoting their lives to the Church. The author poignantly imparts the universality of pain a mother feels at the loss of a child, and suggests turning to the reality of abiding in God's love, like St. Melania, to bring healing and spiritual growth.

The other essays about St. Susanna of Palestine, the Righteous Susanna of the Book of Daniel, the New Martyr Elizabeth Feodorovna, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Catherine, the Myrrh-Bearing Women and a second chapter on St. Melania also help us encounter the saints and our faith in wonderful ways. But the book also gives a broad perspective on the ways women have served in the Orthodox Church in the past and today. By making these women saints, the Church recognized their extraordinary witness and contributions: philanthropy, education, ministering to the needy, founding monasteries, etc. The Church recognized the service of three of these eight women by ordaining them to the diaconate during their lifetimes: St. Olympias, St. Susanna of Palestine, and St. Melania the Younger. As explained in Zahirsky's chapter on Deaconess Olympias, deaconesses have served in the Orthodox church for centuries. In fact ordination prayers and the rite itself still exist and have not been expunged by the Orthodox Church. (For more information read: *Women Deacons in the Orthodox Church* by Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald. The book includes an appendix that provides the Greek ordination rite for the female deacon and the recommendations of church consultations at the highest levels starting in

1988 that have advocated the restoration of the order of women deacons.) The female diaconate is now being reinstated in Greece in a limited way.

Today many women serve the church--from the "saints" in the church kitchens to national boards. The authors and collaborators of this book, graduates and/or students of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, St. Vladimir's Seminary, School of Theology of the University of Iasi in Romania, and the School of Theology of the University of Thessaloniki serve and witness their Orthodox faith in various capacities: hospital chaplain intern, college professors, *presvyteras* (wives of priests), students of higher education, theologian, psychologist, authors, Church board members, registered nurse, and lecturers. The authors and collaborators are: Susan Arida, Iulia Corduneanu Curtright, Hilary Chala, Barbara K. Harris, Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, Deborah Hadjes Funti, Clara Nickolson, Alexandra Safchuk, Eleni C. Simmons, Nikki Stournaras, Victoria Trbuhovich, and Valerie G. Zahirsky.

These dynamic women came together at various retreats and formed St. Catherine's Vision, Inc. in 2003 "to study and support the many ways women (and men) are called to serve within the life of the Church today." The word "Vision" adds significantly to the group's choice of St. Catherine, the patron saint of education. St. Catherine's visions of Christ inspired her to use her "education and gifts to bring others to Him." It is fitting that these twelve women writers and collaborators working in a conciliar manner used their education and gifts to create a book that explains how the saints drew close to Christ and served Him and the Church. We look forward to a Volume II written in the same responsible and accessible manner. For more information about St. Catherine's Vision, go to [www.orthodoxwomen.org](http://www.orthodoxwomen.org).

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Marilyn Rouvelas is the author of *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs in America*.

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